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PROPAGANDA OR PARITY? TIKTOK'S ALGORITHM AND PRO-CHINA MESSAGING

Does TikTok's recommender system advance the interests of the government of China? We collect multiple large data sets of China-related TikTok videos and longitudinal metadata to examine two potential mechanisms for platform influence: (1) high-salience interventions like video removal and (2) more subtle reductions in reach---shadowbanning or downranking, which we model using engagement growth curves---specifically when they unexpectedly flatline. We pair these signals with annotations from human coders and an open-weight reasoning LLM (GPT-OSS-120b) on stance toward China, topics the Chinese government considers sensitive, and collective action, as well as ``control" annotations such as hateful, harmful, and copyright-violating content. Our preliminary findings suggest platform differences by language: first, in English, anti-China videos are more likely to be removed or see engagement flat-line; in Chinese, if anything the opposite is true. Similarly, our community-guidelines controls predict flat-lining engagement in English but not in Chinese, perhaps aligning with TikTok's locale-based moderation practices. We emphasize that these results are preliminary, cover a period of heightened U.S. regulatory pressure, and may mask other underlying mechanisms. Our hope is that the multilingual audit framework we've outlined, combining removal checks, trajectory analysis, and content annotation---can be replicated and extended to other geopolitical topics.

TIME

Monday, November 3, 2025
12:10 PM-1:30 PM

LOCATION

INTS, 1113