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Trump's Partial TikTok And WeChat Ban Tip-Toes Into Chinese-Style Censorship

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The Trump administration's enemies list now officially includes two apps. Friday morning, the Commerce Department released details of a partial ban on the TikTok and WeChat apps, fulfilling a Trump pledge August 6 to prevent the Chinese government from collecting and controlling the information of Americans via those Android and iOS programs.

Where the executive orders issued then about the video-clip social network TikTok and the messaging-and-transactions platform WeChat left some mystery about which transactions might be forbidden, Friday's developments make things official and specific.

Starting Sunday, Sept. 20, app stores cannot host these two apps or updates to them. That may itself goose downloads from Apple's AAPL -2.7% App Store and Google's GOOGL -3% Play Store.

"I do expect an uptick (no idea how much) in downloads today and tomorrow before the ban starts on Sunday," emailed Adam Blacker, vice president for insights and global alliances at Boston-based app-analytics firm Apptopia.

Internet infrastructure firms also cannot enable these apps via hosting, content-delivery, or efficient-routing deals. And other developers can't include TikTok or WeChat code in their apps.

Those additional provisions apply to WeChat Sunday but don't hit TikTok until Nov. 12, a delay that would let Oracle ORCL -0.6% complete a still vaguely-defined transaction meant to ordain it as TikTok's U.S. partner.

These regulations do not, however, ban you from using either app. Regulations now on the Federal Register for TikTok and WeChat specify that users can still "exchange... personal or business information" in them.

They also don't specify that basic internet routing, such as domain-name-system lookups to connect users to sites, fall under their definitions of "internet hosting services."

But the sight of the Trump administration moving even farther to regulate the internet has digital-rights advocates outraged—and unsettled by how this resembles China's own "Great Firewall" online.

“We’re getting there,” said Rebecca MacKinnon, director of Ranking Digital Rights initiative, a group hosted by the Washington think tank New America. Her forecast in a call Friday: “Welcome to the Great Firewall of America.”

MacKinnon, who has spent years decrying China’s attempts to lock down information, called a government ban on one app’s distribution “unprecedented” in a democratic society.

“This certainly isn’t the Great Firewall, but I think you could quite reasonably call it the first brick,” wrote Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, in an email.

While the order doesn’t require internet providers to block traffic to these apps, he noted that banning common measures to manage traffic at widely-used apps will make them harder to use.

“American content creators are going to lose access to the audiences they’ve built up, and American users are going to lose access to speech, both domestic and foreign, on these platforms,” he predicted.

“The ban of TikTok and WeChat announced today is an extreme measure that fundamentally undermines the foundation of the Internet,” said Joseph Lorenzo Hall, senior vice president for a strong internet at the Internet Society, in an emailed statement.

Hall, MacKinnon and Sanchez all questioned the security arguments behind the Trump administration’s move.

“There are all kinds of ways that you could be taking action to protect American users in a way that does not bring First Amendment concerns,” MacKinnon said. For example, passing effective privacy legislation could help curb the widespread collection of data by apps that then gets resold to any willing party.

(The New Yorker’s Sue Halpern reported Sunday that the Trump campaign spent \$4 million buying mobile data from a broker called Phunware.)

That’s a much larger risk than that posed by TikTok in particular. That appears relatively meek in its info appetites compared to WeChat and its wide range of capabilities.

Sanchez called the administration’s security rationales “totally unpersuasive handwaving” and said it can always ban these apps from government devices if it thinks there are real risks without telling other Americans how to live their digital lives.

MacKinnon wasn’t willing to trust these apps that much: “I don’t use TikTok, I would never put WeChat on my phone for security reasons.”

Ranking Digital Rights’ assessments of how internet and telecom firms protect their users regularly put WeChat developer Tencent near the bottom. “There is no evidence of Tencent standing up to the government,” she said.

The Internet Society’s Hall also noted the direct effects of cutting WeChat and TikTok users off from bug fixes.

“This ban is dangerous if only for the security vulnerabilities that will be created for American users,” Hall said. “Given that apps upgrades and patches will be unavailable from Sunday onwards, this poses significant security concerns.”

Since the ban doesn't affect either company's web site, both could also offer direct downloads of their apps to Android users. Google, in distinct contrast to Apple's tight control, lets users "sideload" apps outside of its app store—but going that route risks leaving an Android phone open to malware.

Both the Commerce Department's announcement and the enabling regulations allow for further steps by the administration to police use of these apps.

Worry about that, advised Cato's Sanchez: "I think there's a good case that what the Commerce Department is ordering already exceeds the limits of statutory authority as well, so I don't think we can be too sure what extraordinary powers this administration might suddenly 'discover' it enjoys."