Special Issue: TikTok and the platformisation from China

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TikTok and the platformisation from China: Geopolitical anxieties, repetitive creativities and future imaginaries

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Abstract

In this special issue, we explore the geopolitics, aesthetics and future potentiality surrounding TikTok to assess the possibility and implications of a new phase of digital globalisation. A phase in which China-based innovative platform technologies, infused with state power, generate and potentially disrupt digital cultures in places outside China. We will further explore this in the next part of this introduction, showing how the global rise of TikTok is feeding into increasing geopolitical anxieties worldwide. At the same time, we argue for the need to diversify our approaches to TikTok and platform studies – the latter field is very much dominated by questions around production, monetisation, data and political economy. More approaches, focusing on aesthetics, visual culture and users, are needed. In the second part of this introduction, we mobilise the notion of repetitive creativities as a way to engage with the aesthetic affordances of TikTok. This brings us to our conclusion, in which we allude to the possibility that TikTok can be seen as a kind of silly archive, offering glimpses of a future that is not yet here, but that may well come.

Keywords

China, future, geopolitics, platformization from China, repetitive creativity, TikTok

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Introduction

The phenomenal global popularity of TikTok has aroused grave concern in the West over issues of privacy and surveillance, especially due to the app's kinship with China. Domestically, the Chinese platform economy represents an alternative ecology that is deliberately nurtured by the Chinese state to counteract the global, silicon-valley based platform ecosystem (de Kloet et al., 2019; Keane and Su, 2019). Evidenced by TikTok, which in China operates under a different name Douyin, this 'parallel universe' now aspires to expand its system and exert greater influence on the global stage. By developing two versions (TikTok and Douyin) of the same app, ByteDance, TikTok's parent company, manages to establish its business in two highly distinctive platform ecosystems, representing what Kaye et al. (2021) term a 'parallel platformisation'. Compared to the normal strategies of localisation and regionalisation adopted by western platforms including Facebook, Google and YouTube, TikTok and Douyin's parallel platformisation is distinguished by their identical affordances, shared technical and financial resource but different 'infrastructure, governance and market' (Kaye et al., 2021: 17).

Just as Facebook and Google failed to enter China, most of the Chinese platforms (e.g. WeChat, Alipay or Didi) in the past decade failed to reach the global audience except Chinese-speaking communities (Negro, 2017). However, TikTok's worldwide popularity seems to advance a new phase of internet globalisation – 'the platformisation *from* China' (Craig et al., 2021), which refers to the penetration of platform logics that are largely developed in the techno-political economy of contemporary China into the global society. China's uncanny system of governance fosters a highly agile and commercialised platform ecology, in which platforms like Douyin must constantly innovate its platform affordances to meet with regulatory requirements of the authorities, the financial interests of capital and the monetary and expressive expectations of the users. As a result, Chinese platforms seem to have developed a more advanced system of monetisation, content moderation and algorithmic operation, which outperforms its western competitors when entering the global market.

The global success of TikTok raises a plethora of questions concerning this platformisation from China. Does China represent a new form of platform imperialism? Alternatively, following 'success' of Chinese platforms and the backlash from countries such as the United States and India, will nation-states and platform nationalism revive as a solution to the updated challenges facing global internet society? Aside from these geopolitical concerns, how will the integration of 'short videos', e-commerce and live streaming in the platform interfaces and affordances redefine our conception of social media logics (van Dijck and Poell, 2013) and platformisation (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018)? In light of the new affordances and creator practices, what kind of digital culture is produced and nurtured on TikTok? To what extent does TikTok culture differ from the participatory digital culture on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook (Burgess and Green, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2015; Leaver et al., 2020)? As a platform originating from the Chinese wanghong (influencers) industry (Craig et al., 2021) and deeply entangled with the music industry, what does TikTok's presence in the global social media entertainment mean for international creators and for popular musicians? How will the aforementioned affordances generate opportunities as well as precarities for creator communities?

In this special issue on *Media, Culture and Society*, we explore these broad questions about TikTok to assess the possibility and implications of a new phase of digital globalisation. A phase in which China-based innovative platform technologies, infused with state power, generate, and potentially disrupt digital cultures in places outside China. We will further explore this in the next part of this introduction, showing how the global rise of TikTok is feeding into increasing geopolitical anxieties worldwide. At the same time, we argue for the need to diversify our approaches to TikTok and platform studies – the latter field is very much dominated by questions around production, monetisation, data and political economy. More approaches, focusing on aesthetics, on visual culture and on users, are needed. In the second part of this introduction, we mobilise the notion of repetitive creativities to engage with the aesthetic affordances of TikTok. This brings us to our conclusion, in which we allude to the possibility that TikTok can be seen as a kind of silly archive, offering glimpses of a future that is not yet here, but that may well come. In pointing at these three directions, geopolitics, repetition and futurity, both this introduction as well as the contributions of this special issue aim to steer away from an all-too common narrative that platforms are bad, neoliberal, surveillant, numbing and addictive. Here we are inspired by Foucault (1983: 231), who stated that 'My point is that not everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do'. Indeed, platforms like TikTok may be dangerous, but not necessarily bad, and this means that we always have academic work to do.

Geopolitical anxieties

The 2023 TikTok hearing in the US congress seems to perfectly demonstrate the dilemma faced by ByteDance and the related platformisation *from* China. Concerns about privacy, youth safety and data security may not sound unfamiliar in the first place, as these accusations have also been frequently levelled to the dominant Silicon Valley based platforms. In the hearing, the contentious questioning targeted predominantly the app's relationship with the Chinese state. Similar to the TikTok ban narrative raised by the previous Trump administration, what really worries the US policymakers is the rising geopolitical power of China in the digital information sectors represented by TikTok, which poses a threat to the global hegemony of the United States in the field. As Gray (2021) states,

> Evidently, it was the Trump administration's position that TikTok is not simply a platform for connection and entertainment but a tool the Chinese state might wield for strategic security and ideological influence within the US. In other words, TikTok might be used to further empower China in geopolitical relations between the two states. (p. 10)

If platforms developed in the American-centric ecosystem can easily identify themselves as global (Cunningham and Craig, 2019), then the challenge for Chinese platforms going global lies on their figurative 'Chineseness', which is not necessarily defined by the content and culture, but by the techno-politico-economic logics embedded in the platform's globalising practices. Domestically Douyin needs to fit into the

Chinese State's aspiration to economic restructuring through its Internet Plus policies (Keane and Chen, 2017) as to secure social and political stability. This propels a platform logic that encourages participatory online culture while also circumscribing it within the scope of being financially profitable and politically secure (Chen et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021).

Internationally, however, a discursive call for an open internet contradicts the 'Chinese' platform logics, constantly questioning the content moderating practice of TikTok, which has been forced to distance itself from the supposed 'Chineseness' both discursively and in content moderation and data policy (Craig et al., 2021). TikTok and the 'platformisation from China' thus creates a new agenda for global platform governance. In the past decade western policymakers and media scholars have been grappling with the undermining of public values caused by the infrastructural dominance of American platforms (Jin, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2021). This feeds into calls for a platform regionalism, if not parochialism, it makes van Dijck (2020), for example, argue for the need to safeguard European norms and values into the European platform ecology. In this special issue, Anilesh Kumar and Daya Thussu mobilise the notion of digital sovereignty to discuss the TikTok ban in India, aiming to steer away from all too easy accusations of protectionism. They show how international relations underpin and steer platform governance. Moving to China, Su and Kaye show how Douyin allows for borderline practices, referring to 'infringing practices that cross physical and virtual boundaries (. . .) facilitated via algorithms and practiced by corporations, platforms or users'. These include the building of fake accounts and the use of regulatory loopholes to transfer content. They show how this happens on Douyin, but also spills over to TikTok.

With TikTok emerging as a new dominant platform that is rooted in China, its mysterious global operations, and non-transparent data policy (Jia and Liang, 2021) easily stir up geopolitical anxieties about the implications and consequences of the platformisation from China. These geopolitical anxieties amplify in a world in which cold-war narratives are rebounding, and the image of China has become increasingly negative in Western media.

Whatever narratives these geopolitical concerns are based on, we must be wary of the dominance of geopolitical motivations in platform governance and policy making. 'It is important to identify and isolate pertinent geopolitical motivations', as Gray (2021: 2) warns, 'because they can work to obscure other factors relevant to platform politics, such as the value of competition in a highly concentrated international platform market'. Banning might be an effective tool to alleviate geopolitical anxieties temporarily, but its techno nationalism cum parochialism and cold war mentality can be equally dangerous. Such discourses not only ignore the efforts of platform companies in conducting self-governance and adjustment (Ebenstein, 2019; Jia and Liang, 2021), but also overlook the agentic and dynamic creator and user practices on TikTok, which nurture new potentials to online activism and digital politics (Southerton, 2021; Zeng and Abidin, 2021; Zeng et al., 2021).

Relatedly, geopolitical anxieties implicitly speak to the dominance of critical political economy in today's platform studies. Critical political economy provides important insights into the macro power structures and political, industrial and economic factors

shaping the organisations and industries in the platform economy (Hardy, 2014; Murdock and Golding, 2005). But as critics often raise, this approach runs the risk of reductionism, which neglects the dynamics and agency of individual participants and organisations in negotiating platform powers with both large companies and the states. Small enterprises, public organisations and platform users are equally important as the state and capital in conceiving the so-called platform co-governance (Gorwa, 2019; van Dijck and Lin, 2022). Next to reflections upon platform power and its (geo-)political economy, we should also include the dynamic processes and agentic practices of various subjects, including new technologies, content creators and platform end users, in co-producing contemporary digital cultures.

Repetitive creativities

Our point is, what defines a platform is not so much of its geographic origin as of the circulation of cultures if affords. TikTok cultures, just as cultures of YouTube and Facebook, vary from region to region. As Boffone (2022: 3) raises, though with identical interface, the experience of TikTok in Melbourne could be largely different from its user experience in San Francisco, not even to mention the experience of its parallel app Douyin in China. This is not a new insight, nor is it exclusive to digital cultures. In globalisation studies, the localisation of global culture has been studied extensively. A Big Mac in Delhi is not quite the same as a Big Mac in Amsterdam (Appadurai, 1996), just as Chinese punk is different from its UK counterpart (de Kloet, 2010). With its surging popularity and inclusive user base, TikTok cultures have become a definitive part of locally specific everyday cultures. It is urgent to unpack the media specifics and cultural practices on the platform to examine the ways in which TikTok becomes a space 'as a critical site to shape and perform communal identities and cultures' around the globe (Boffone, 2022: 4).

More specifically, scholars have accentuated the memetic nature of TikTok, which underscores the logic of imitation and replication in contemporary participatory culture. The built-in features such as duet and stitch, together with its vast music repertoire and scrolling interfaces successfully turn TikTok into a hotbed for memefication. Following Kaye et al. (2021), creativities on TikTok are prominently characteristic of being social, vernacular, distributed and circumscribed. TikTok makes space for a creative spirit that no longer appears as individualistic and disruptive in the Schumpeterian sense, but always entangles with repetition, sociality and community building. Politically, the platform's memetic nature harnesses what Zulli and Zulli (2022) term the imitation publics, which generates both new potentials and obstacles for online activism (Hautea et al., 2021; Literat et al., 2023; Subramanian, 2021). For example, Zeng and Abidin (2021) show how the OkBoomer hashtag on TikTok feeds into an intergenerational politics around issues such as populism and climate change. Knowledge, ranging from queer theory to quantum physics, becomes popularised through TikTok (Zeng et al., 2020).

These studies raise important questions about the aesthetics and politics of evolving TikTok cultures. In this special issue, we follow their pioneering research to further analyse the cultural significance of TikTok and its political implications. Schellewald shows how young TikTok users in the United Kingdom integrate scrolling through the For You

Page into their everyday life routines. The escapist pleasures of TikTok change over time. The article also shows the continued importance of situated audience research if we are to grasp the meaning of TikTok for its users. Tintiangko, Fung and Liu show how TikTok is used by Filipino musicians in their performances, promotion and related endeavours. While TikTok imposes its limitations on the making of music, musicians also find ways, as the article shows, to override TikTok's platform logic. But the advantages are at best ambivalent, given the new and multiple demands the platformisation of music entails. Finally, the article by Lin, Swart and Zeng theorises, drawing on the Deleuzian film theorist Patricia Pisters, TikTok's algorithmic cultures as constitutive of the neuro-image. The digital baroque and profoundly affective aesthetics of TikTok turns everyday life into a creative endeavour, opening a site of emergence for its users. The article can be read as an attempt to address the medium and cultural specificity of TikTok and related platforms, characterised by repetition and the inherently schizoanalytic.

Together, our special issue suggests that the prism of TikTok, pointing to a platformisation *from* China, helps to understand and hopefully critically interrogate the escalation of a global geopolitical crisis. But we argue that aside from geopolitics, we need to bring cultural studies into platform studies, in order to shed light upon the vibrant cultural practices, the everyday aesthetics, and related power dynamics propelled by TikTok.

Future imaginaries

The contributions in this special issue attest to the multivocality, the creativity and complexity of TikTok cultures that have proliferated outside China. We hope they will inspire further studies on the aesthetics and creative affordances of TikTok. Elsewhere, we coined the short videos on Kuaishou, a like-minded platform in China that targets rural audiences and second and third tier cities, as a silly archive, drawing on the work of Laurent Berlant (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). Following Berlant, we read short videos on TikTok as materials, which

> use the silliest, most banal, and erratic logic imaginable to describe important things, like what constitutes intimate relations, political personhood, and national life. (. . .) Its very ordinariness requires an intensified critical engagement with what had been merely undramatically explicit. (Berlant, 1997: 12)

Not only do the aesthetics of mimicry and repetition allow for a different mode of creativity, one that seems more collaborative and less individualised, they may also offer glimpses of a future yet to come. A future in which we dance on silly music, in which we find a temporary escape out of reality by immersing ourselves in the flow of personalised content on TikTok, a future in which we share, duet, and stitch, and in which we comment, lip-synch, and mimic.

This brings us, finally, to a more speculative conclusion, drawing upon the work of the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz. What if we take this silly archive, the vernacular and ubiquitous aesthetics that make up such a large part of TikTok, as an archive that points to a possible different future? How to see the future in the present? Is there a way we can rescue the future from the platform? In his book *Cruising Utopia* (2019),

Muñoz moves back to the past in search for moments of queer potentiality. For him, 'the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity' (p. 16). Cruising through the affective and cognitive maps that emerge on TikTok, is there a way to get a glimpse of utopia, to 'feel hope and to feel utopia' (p. 18)? This requires an imaginative leap forward, a queer sensibility towards this silly archive called TikTok, and a deliberate move to the 'old' questions of pleasure and affect, of belonging and longing. Maybe Foucault was still too negative in pointing at the dangers confronting us. Aside from the dangers of platforms like TikTok, we also need to engage with their potentiality, read them as repositories of educated hope, helping us to 'see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present' (p. 1). For that, we may end our enquiry but call for more research about futurity on TikTok with the lyrics of Prince's 1989 song *The Future*:

> *I've seen the future and it will be.*
>
> *I've seen the future and it works.*

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