

Algorithmic cosmopolitanism, and platform nationalism: From the paradox of the TikTok ban

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journals.sagepub.com/home/dds**Jian Lin** 

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Abstract

TikTok's short video culture confirms the idea of algorithmic cosmopolitanism (Elkins, 2019). It involves the algorithmic promotion of local identities and place-making practices as a symbolic representation of multi-culturalism, which nonetheless is also constrained by its "flattened, one-dimensional, and consumerist approach" (Elkins, 2019: 385). At the same time, the impending TikTok ban in the US seems to suggest the rise of platform nationalism as an emerging approach to platform governance (Craig et al., 2021). This paradox between algorithmic cosmopolitanism and platform nationalism demonstrates the political nature of today's digitalization and its promised transformation of society. It raises a renewed question about how technological practices and imaginations are prone to state and economic power. In the complex entanglement between the technical and the political, we must first of all be wary of any simplistic discourses of politicization and governance.

Keywords

Platform nationalism, TikTok ban, algorithmic cosmopolitanism, The U.S. and China, platform governance

The success of *Squid Game* and Netflix's recent adaptation of the award-winning Chinese Sci-fi novel *The Three-Body Problem* exemplifies, to a certain extent, the idea of algorithmic cosmopolitanism (Elkins, 2019). This notion involves the promotion of local identities and place-making practices as a symbolic representation of multi-culturalism. Such cultural strategies cater to a cosmopolitan culture that seems humanistic, underpinned by global, diverse taste communities. These taste communities, formed by recommendation algorithms, aim to transcend traditional demographic and geographical boundaries, yet they successfully mask the faceless, mathematical, and consumerist technical and business operations intrinsic to today's platform economy.

From a techno-cultural analysis perspective, our recent research (Lin et al., 2023) concerning TikTok's cultural and technical logic resonates with Elkins' examination of algorithmic cosmopolitanism on platforms like Netflix and Spotify. The algorithmic moderation of user-generated content on platforms such as TikTok resembles a quasi-automated cinema, endlessly capturing everyday lives not to condense desires and tastes into a singular, coherent structure

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but to expose, liberate, and encapsulate them within its extensive database and interfaces, thereby leading to a fluid and modulating categorization of identities. In theory, this algorithmic categorization, coupled with the prevalent production of affects, revitalizes the rhizomatic nature of human subjectivity, which is multifaceted and inherently unstable, yet often constrained and simplified by existing institutional and cultural forces.

However, the looming TikTok ban in the U.S. renders such argumentation about platform or algorithmic cosmopolitanism more or less futile. Noted above, TikTok's technical infrastructure and its management of global business do not significantly deviate from the Silicon Valley model, characterized by capital-driven consumer markets, and the logic of datafication and algorithmic individuation (Srnicek, 2017; Prey, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018). The app's primary distinguishing feature lies in its Chinese ownership, suggesting a potential, though unproven, connection between its parent company, ByteDance, and the Chinese State. Consequently, U.S. politicians have presented ByteDance with an ultimatum: to either "separate from your parent company ByteDance, which is beholden to the CCP (the Chinese Communist Party), and remain operational in the United States, or side with the CCP and face the consequences" (Freking et al. 2024).

This ongoing dispute offers an excellent case to examine today's digitalization and its political entanglement. Evidently, the core issue at stake is China's expanding geopolitical power in the digital information sectors, as represented by TikTok. Joanne E. Gray notes (2021: 10) that some U.S. politicians believe that "TikTok might be used to further empower China in geopolitical relations between the two states." It seems that in opposition to algorithmic cosmopolitanism and its hidden datafication and digital imperialism, we are now witnessing platform nationalism as an emerging approach to platform governance (Craig et al., 2021). This nationalist approach recalls historical warnings from political philosophers for centuries, "nationalist regimes, although they may start out as democratic, rarely remain so, tending to slide down the slippery slope toward authoritarianism" (Bowden, 2003: 239). To take a step back, a more imminent danger is that platform nationalism may overlook some real challenges in today's platform

governance. Forcing the sale of TikTok may alleviate some American's geopolitical anxieties about China, but will it address the remaining issues of data security, misinformation, labor inequality, and data imperialism (Couldry and Mejias, 2019)?

The irony is that China, now the target of this platform of nationalism, was once the first nation to embrace and practice a nationalist approach to digital economy and governance (Plantin and De Seta, 2019). In less than two decades, China has banned nearly every dominant global platform and successfully cultivated its own platform ecosystem, creating equivalents like Baidu for Google, WeChat for Facebook., Xiaohongshu for Instagram, Bilibili for YouTube, and iQiyi for Netflix. Unlike their counterparts in Silicon Valley, which are supposedly born global, the Chinese internet applications all contributed to the establishment of a "walled garden" (Craig et al., 2021) or a parallel universe, harnessing great digital prosperity and great digital insulation. When TikTok was introduced in the U.S. in 2017, it marked a turning point, setting the stage for Chinese platform companies like ByteDance, JOYY, Shein, and Temu to expand globally. Unlike their predecessors (Alibaba and Tencent), these companies downplay their Chinese roots, explicitly brand themselves as global tech companies with headquarters outside China (most in Singapore), and target users beyond the Chinese diasporic communities. Like it or not, global Chinese apps like TikTok and Shein today align with their American competitors in promoting the above-mentioned algorithmic cosmopolitanism.

Here we arrive at a paradox facing today's global digital economy: algorithmic cosmopolitanism and neoliberal governmentality intersect with platform nationalism and geopolitical anxieties. Apparently, this paradoxical encounter highlights the politicized and structured conditions of today's digital technologies and the promised transformation. Echoing this journal's editors, it is thus crucial to unpack "the complex and politicized entanglement of digital technologies with all dimensions of society, culture, and economy" (Jarrett et al., 2024: 2). The complexity of TikTok thus lies not only in its being digital, platformed, or algorithmic but in the ways in which

these technologies are imagined, shaped, and constantly adapted to real-life politics and cultures. It raises a renewed question about governance (of the digital): not only a question of how to govern but also the consequence of a particular way of governance. If the success of the Chinese platform ecology hinges on a nationalist appropriation of Silicon Valley's globally oriented innovation, what are the implications of the US potentially adopting similar protectionist and nationalist policies? How will such shifts affect global platform governance and digital culture?

It is still premature to provide definitive answers to these queries. However, such a dilemma brought us to the long debate about nationalism and cosmopolitanism. As Brett Bolden pointed out in the early 2000s, "neither nationalism nor cosmopolitanism alone provides satisfactory solutions to all of humanity's questions and needs" (2003: 246). Widely spread nationalism can easily incite political violence toward differences and marginal cultures. A ban denotes a drastic cancelation of accessibility, difference, and diversity. Yet, colonial history also shows how the discourse of cosmopolitanism becomes well-suited or an unwitting accomplice to (Western) imperialism (Pagden, 2000). In the realm of today's global digital society, the wide application of recommendation algorithms contributes to the formation of diverse taste communities beyond demographic identity, thereby fostering cross-cultural understanding. But their cosmopolitan self-branding is also constrained by their own commercial interests, leading to what has been described as "a flattened, one-dimensional, and consumerist approach" (Elkins, 2019: 385).

The pivotal question is how we can navigate the pitfalls of digitalization and its situated politics, either in the name of algorithmic cosmopolitanism or platform nationalism. The answer, I believe, cannot be sought merely from the technical nor any simplistic approach of politicization: to blindly politicize or weaponize the digital as puppets of state power. For better or worse, this dichotomy reflects a fundamental divergence rooted in our human culture: our yearning for community and our need to affirm the individual as an end in itself. These two ideologies are constantly appropriated by algorithms and platforms, as well as

the surrounding political and economic discourses. When these two trends compete against each other, as we see in the TikTok ban, we have to examine to what extent today's digitalization and digital governance really accommodate our human nature rather than alienating it.

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