Imagine it's the Cold War in the 1960s, and imagine the Soviet Union put itself into position to run television programming for the entire western world, of more than a billion TV viewers. We would've never, in the west, let that happen during the Cold War. So while this might sound like science fiction, this is actually the world we’re living in right now with TikTok being influenced by the Chinese Communist Party. TikTok is projected to have 1.8 billion users by the end of 2022. And a Pew research study just showed that TikTok is the most popular app for teens in the United States, who now spend more time watching and posting to TikTok than YouTube.

Hey Aza.

Hey Tristan.

So today I think we wanted to do a bonus episode to talk about TikTok. If you didn’t know, TikTok recently surpassed Google and Facebook as the most popular site on the internet in 2021, and is expected to reach more than 1.8 billion users by the end of 2022. So imagine the analogy that the US didn’t just allow the Soviet Union to run 13 hours a day of children’s TV programming in the US, but we allowed the Soviet Union to run 1 billion TV sets in the entire western world, except they had an artificial intelligence who could perfectly tune what propaganda each person in the US or western world across a billion TV sets would see.

Now before we go any further, we should make very clear. TikTok is not run by China. TikTok is the flagship app of a company called ByteDance, which is headquartered in China. So ByteDance and China are two distinct entities with different motives, but sometimes those motives come into conflict. And the Chinese government does sometimes force its tech company's hands. The CEOs of Chinese tech companies have notoriously been abducted on several occasions. So the Chinese government does not control TikTok, but it has massive influence over it.

Now, congressional activity against TikTok is picking up. Recently the commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission, Brendan Carr, wrote a public letter to Apple and Google asking them to remove TikTok from its app stores. And this is citing a recent BuzzFeed news report that Chinese ByteDance staff had accessed US TikTok user data on multiple occasions. And then last month, in July, in a more powerful move, bipartisan leaders on the Senate Intelligence Committee asked the Federal Trade Commission to investigate TikTok’s data practices and corporate governance over concerns that they pose privacy and security risks for Americans. The request was signed by Senators Mark Warner and Marco Rubio.

Meanwhile, TikTok is starting to go in the defensive. For example, in its recent announcement about its commitment to election integrity, and that it’s creating
an election center to be a hub for authoritative election information. So congressional activity is picking up, and TikTok's response is also picking up.

Aza Raskin: So Tristan, let's talk about what are the harms? I think the two obvious ones are, of course, surveillance and data gathering and that was the target of the recent Biden executive order of protecting Americans' sensitive data from foreign adversaries. Just so listeners know what kind of surveillance we're talking about, there's a very alarming revelation in August by security and privacy researcher Felix Krause. What he discovered is that TikTok is running code that tracks and captures every single keystroke when you're using their in-app browser. So that means any search term, your password, credit card information, it's all being tracked by TikTok when you're using the browser built into the app.

Now, TikTok admits it has this code, but says it's using it for debugging and troubleshooting. Which is sort of like when a CEO says that they're resigning to spend more time with their family. They say they're not tracking users online habits. But here's the question; how do we ever know? Do you want to talk about the other ones?

Tristan Harris: So I think a lot of people look at TikTok and the US government has basically said, "Let's focus our attention on the data that it gathers on US citizens." It's all about the data. What if they know a user's location? What if they know the location you're accessing the app from and they can figure out your address? What if they know the videos or times of day that you post? What if they know which videos you're browsing late at night? These are the kinds of things that get our concern, but I actually think the TikTok threat is so much bigger than that because I can actually manipulate per person the information that gets risen to the top in everyone's newsfeeds.

Now, we've actually seen this before. In 2014, it was exposed that Facebook did experiments where its users were shown happier or sadder content, and then it found that it actually shifted the content that those users shared. And TikTok could do the same thing, but instead of for happier or sad content, it could actually shift to pro China content or anti Taiwan content in an event that they were to say, start a war with Taiwan.

Think about it this way. We saw that Russia invaded the Ukraine, and when they did that, while they had propaganda channels online like Sputnik and RT, Russia Today, those were certain propaganda channels. But RT and Sputnik didn't influence all of Facebook, all of Twitter, all of YouTube, all of Instagram and all of all the platforms to influence what they thought, right? I mean, Putin didn't influence all those platforms, but if China were to be invading Taiwan tomorrow, they could take the most popular information app in the world called TikTok and selectively amplify Western voices who said, "Well, Taiwan was always a part of China. There's really no problem here. Look at all the things that the US did and all these wars that didn't go anywhere." And they wouldn't necessarily be wrong.
in some of the things they'd be calling out, but they would be influencing not the propaganda, but what our friend Renée DiResta calls ampliganda or what we sometimes call amplifaganda, which is the ability to selectively amplify and influence people's attitudes by focusing their attention on the things that you want them to focus on, like a magician.

And when you just think about the amount of power and control, especially because Taiwan, for those who are not as aware, holds TSMC, the Taiwan semiconductor manufacturing, which is basically all the chips that are in every single product in cars and television, microphones, computers, cell phones. If you had China invade Taiwan and that took over the semiconductor factory for the whole world, this would be a massive, massive problem. And this is the kind of thing that China could influence people's opinion of.

Now, we've also talked on this podcast about the ability to influence and manipulate language. We talked about polling. We had Republican political pollster, Frank Luntz on this program. And Frank Luntz is famous for doing dial testing. You can test people's sentiments on various topics. So if I say, The Affordable Care Act versus if I call it Obamacare, I can get different reactions out of people. And he did that in a room where he would actually say the words and then watch what people's responses were. Well, if I'm TikTok I can do dial testing at scale. I can do that in every voting district in my number one geopolitical adversaries countries, and I can actually see what do they think about various topics? Which way is it trending? I can focus my attention on the swing states. I could do more dial testing than Frank Luntz could have ever dreamed of. And if I do that at scale and I can see how things are trending, and then I selectively amplify what people are seeing, I can turn up and down the dials and potentially choose the next president of the United States.

Now, a lot of this might sound like a conspiracy theory or xenophobic or arbitrarily picking out China when you know lots of other countries doing various things, but I think we actually have to look at the nature of this threat. Now, when we looked earlier at Huawei, for those who don't know, Huawei built the kind of cell phone infrastructure for 5G network. So they were actually building out 5G cell towers all across the world, and Huawei was found to have back doors to the Chinese government. And within the last couple years, India has banned about 200 Chinese apps because they accurately assess the threat, given that India is actually involved in a rivalry with China. So they banned apps like WeChat, UC Browser, Share It, Baidu Map. And up to a third of TikTok global users, up until that time, were actually based in India. So this was a big move.

Now, granted, the Modi government may have ulterior motives here as well. It can be using national security as an excuse to ban various apps and even Twitter posts. And the Indian Supreme Court is reviewing many of these cases because the national security threat hasn't been made clear. Still, we do see the Indian government taking action against Chinese apps. So this has been done before.
We did it with Huawei. We've done it in India. Why wouldn't we do it with TikTok?

Aza Raskin: In the same way that Huawei would enable backdoor access to all the information of our country, TikTok is sort of like cultural infrastructure. It gives you access not only to the data, but direct access to influence the mind's information and attention of first our youth culture and then the entirety of our culture.

Tristan Harris: And not to mention influencing the values of who we want to be when we grow up. We mentioned the survey of what do kids in the US and Gen Z most want be when they grow up. The number one most aspired career is an influencer. And in China, I think in this particular survey, it was an astronaut or a scientist. And keep in mind that inside of China domestically, they regulate TikTok to actually feature educational content. So as you're scrolling, instead of getting influencer videos and all of that, you actually get patriotism videos, science experiments you can do at home, museum exhibits, Chinese history, things like that.

And domestically for kids under the age of 14, they limit their use to 40 minutes a day. They also have opening hours and closing hours so that at 10:00 PM it's lights out for the entire country. All of TikTok goes dark and no kids under 14 can use it anymore, and then at six in the morning, it opens up again because they realize that TikTok might be the opiate for the masses, and they don't want to opiate their own kids. Meanwhile, they ship the unregulated version of TikTok to the rest of the world that maximizes influencer culture and narcissism, et cetera. So it's like feeding their own population spinach while shipping opium to the rest of the world.

And you could argue that's the West's fault. The West should be regulating TikTok to say, "Well, what kind of influence do we want? If we want not an influencer culture, we should actually say we want to pass laws that feature educational material or bridge building content that actually shows people where they agree in a democracy." But so far we're not doing those things.

Aza Raskin: I want to make one point about amplifaganda and free speech, because whenever we start to talk about regulating attention, we will always get into the conversation about free speech. And we need to return to the episode we did about Elon Musk and Twitter. What is the point of free speech? Free speech is a kind of immune system of protection for democracies that both protects your individual ability to express, of course, but also for the ability of a nation to make good sense and good decisions.

What we see with amplifaganda is a kind of zero day exploit against the value of free speech as it was written in 1791, because the Chinese government does have influence over TikTok and the algorithm that chooses what goes viral. I want to zoom out for a second because amplifaganda is an example of how a
technological change can change the context in which a value is adequately expressed. Right? Free speech worked as written in 1791 because there was no tech that could do amplifaganda, but this kind of thing has happened before, and we've had to update our philosophy to safeguard what we really value.

I'm thinking of the first mass produced camera, the Kodak camera. There was no right to privacy written into the Constitution, and you did not find the founding fathers discussing privacy. So where did it come from? Well, the right to privacy came from Lewis Brandeis, who would later become one of the most influential Supreme Court justices who's reacting to the mass produced camera. He wrote, "Instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life." That is, because of the invention of the camera, we needed to invent the idea of privacy in a way we didn't have it before.

So for amplifaganda and free speech, we are going to need to update our philosophy of what we think free speech is so that the security and protections we have can serve open society.

Tristan Harris:

It makes me think that we're obviously very familiar with security, but we're not familiar with psycho security. How do we secure our minds or the culture that we want to be not influenced by outside forces? I think it actually even goes even deeper. We have a friend who knows some of the insights of TikTok and who told me that we need to actually see TikTok as a parallel incentive system to capitalism. Now, that might sound like a bold claim, but imagine that there's this other currency in the form of TikTok, which is paying people in the currency of likes, followers, comments, and visibility. Now, just like a central bank has control over the money supply, TikTok has control over the engagement supply. They can tune the dials and say, "We're going to give you more likes, more followers, more comments, more influence, more visibility if you say more things like this and less things like this."

So for example, if you said, "Hey, Taiwan was always a part of China. This is just China taking back what it already had in the past." They could just add a little subsidy that anybody who speaks in that way can get 10% more likes, followers, comments and influence. Now, other influencers on TikTok are doing social learning. They're looking at, "Well, who is popular on TikTok?" And if the Chinese government had picked certain topics where people were more successful because they spoke in one way over another, then people would actually learn, "I'm going to copy the TikTok influencers who speak positively about China." And so over time, it sort of tilts the floor of humanity into the direction of cultural influence that you want the whole culture to go.

This is an alternative incentive system. Instead of paying you in dollars, which takes money out of bank accounts, I can pay you in this infinite currency. And actually in the early days of TikTok, they were known when they had the app
Musically of artificially inflating the number of likes that it looked like you got because then it would convince people that they were getting more attention than they actually got, and it caused them to come back more often. And again, there’s no check and balance. There’s nothing that stops them from artificially inflating the number of likes you get, a number of views or lying about the numbers because people are really influenced by that. And as a user, you want to post your video onto the platform, whether Instagram reels or TikTok, based on the one that gives you the most reach, the most visibility. So when they inflate the number of likes, that’s going to alter which platforms you’re going to be posting on.

Given the threat of all this, what are some of the solutions? Now, some people might be saying, “Why don’t we wait for the US government to just regulate that? I mean, obviously it’s the US government’s job to regulate this. It’s not tech company’s job or it’s not whistleblower’s job, it’s not someone else.” But keep in mind that every day social media operates, every day that Twitter goes on, engaging and outraging people, personalized polarization, it actually makes government less capable of regulating because people live in constant disagreement. It breaks down the shared political will to do anything. So we’re living in the cacophony in which government cannot regulate almost anything because the business model of social media is breaking down consensus.

Aza Raskin: Just like oil companies have oil spills, TikTok and Facebook and all of these attention companies have polarization spills. And the thing about a polarization spill is when it pours all over your society, it makes you more polarized, less able to govern. That’s what you’re saying.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. And so whereas an oil spill happens, it’s awful. The birds get screwed up, the oceans, the water, the land, the biodiversity, but at least the oil spill didn’t directly make the government less able to regulate oil spills each time there’s an oil spill. But a polarization spill directly makes the government less able to regulate because a polarization spill is breaking the culture that would be necessary, the coherence, the consensus that would be necessary to actually regulate that thing. So while it’s true that the longer social media goes on in general, it makes the government less coherent. That’s actually why we’re trying to highlight attention on this issue. The government can still pass legislation. And in fact, Aza, do you want to talk about what the Biden administration executive order recently called for?

Aza Raskin: So Biden’s executive order, the Protecting Americans’ Data from Foreign Surveillance Act, actually repealed three of Trump’s executive orders. Those three orders were aimed at prohibiting transactions with TikTok, WeChat and eight other Chinese communications and financial technology apps. What Biden is replacing them with is one executive order that’s broader. So it doesn't specifically target TikTok or China. Instead, it focuses on the sensitive data of US citizens, including personally identifiable information, health information,
genetic information, and then creating a review process so that foreign adversaries can't get access to that data. So this new executive order would also encompass, for instance, Russia and other platforms owned by adversaries.

Now, we've already talked about the limitation of that model because it's very data focused and it doesn't really deal with the aggregate data that can be used for harm or anything around amplifaganda or the tuning of culture. So I think of this executive order as almost facing backwards in time, solving the old problems, but not really dealing with the current or new problems.

Tristan Harris:
Right. TikTok still has dials on what people see, the incentives, how many likes and followers you get. It doesn't handle that part, which is part of why we want to draw attention to this issue. And so let's just keep exploring what are some of the other solutions. I mean, one idea is to just ban TikTok outright. Many people would note that if you do that, what's to stop a different company from doing the kind of three second video thing? And by the way, it's actually worth mentioning to link this episode with past conversations with say, Daniel Schmachtenberger, that one of the biggest problems in society that's driving all the problems are what we call multi-polar traps. The "If I don't do it, the other guy will" tragedy of the commons arms race. If I don't do three second videos that when you swipe, I'll show you the immediate next maximum dopamine hitting thing, then I'll lose to the guy that does.

And so what we've actually seen is that because of TikTok, YouTube had to start a product called YouTube Shorts where they actually do a same interface of maximizing these immediate three second videos, short videos that auto scrolled the next one. Instagram had to copy this with Reels. And my understanding is that time spent on Reels overall has more than doubled year over year in the US and globally with 80% of the growth since March coming from Facebook. This is because companies like Facebook and YouTube have to continue to copy this race to the bottom of the brain stem and match TikTok in the form of maximum dopamine satisfying thing.

It was actually sad to me because I met people since The Social Dilemma came out who said, "Oh, I'm so glad you made The Social Dilemma film. Now I just use TikTok." And I'm like, "Oh no, I don't think you got the message." It's not about whether Facebook and Instagram are bad. It's about this collective arms race on whoever will go lower into the brain stem for human attention.

Aza Raskin:
And what we're saying actually is that there are two major categories of harms here. The one you're talking about now, it's the race to the bottom of the brain stem causing polarization spills.

That doesn't really matter whether the company who's running it is US based or foreign based. That's the same either way. The second form of harm comes from putting that cultural infrastructure in a business that's influenced by a foreign
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**Bonus: Addressing the TikTok Threat**

adversary. So that foreign adversary suddenly has, to some degree, influence over our culture. And those two harms are not unrelated. Data is what powers the TikTok algorithm, which is then used to manipulate our thinking. And so the first harm around data feeds into the second harm around manipulation. So a ban would stop that, but it would have a lot of side effects, geopolitical. Just think about the backlash from American youth when you take away the thing that they spend all their time on.

Tristan Harris: Right. And if I'm China, that's exactly what I would want. I have created the perfect addictive drug that now your own population will rebel against your government because you want that drug so badly. And so I can continue to hook you, influence you and say, "Here's why you should hate the US government. Here's why you should hate all the US institutions." And I'm not saying, by the way, that all the institutions are trustworthy or the US government is great or perfect. Just to notice that the ability to influence the fundamental attitudes, beliefs, habits, behaviors, culture, identity and values, all the things that make our culture, can now be influenced by our number one geopolitical adversary.

One thing to notice here too is that Apple is not in a position to easily make this action happen because how much of Apple's business comes from China? So much of their revenue comes from China, their supply chains come from China. So it's going to be very hard for Apple to unilaterally take a position against TikTok. They're going to need some kind of outside support for something to happen.

Aza Raskin: Now I'll propose a different kind of solution here. And this is inspired by actually when I first went to China, which I think was over 15 years ago now, and I was really surprised I'd heard so much about the Chinese firewall that I was able to go to the BBC. I couldn't get to Gmail, but I'd go to the BBC and it just would load really slowly and sporadically. Sometimes not at all, sometimes. And I noticed my own emotions getting really annoyed at the BBC and being like, "Oh, what a crappy website." Versus getting annoyed at China. And then I had to do a little find and replace in my head and be like, "No, no, no, this is the firewall."

But there's a really interesting finding from user experience, which is the faster a page loads, the more retention you get. Amazon famously found that for every hundred milliseconds the page loaded faster, they'd get 1% more revenue. And I think this gives us some really interesting more nuanced dials where imagine there's a risk assessment against TikTok. They're deemed to be a big national security risk and so we just slow down TikTok except for a couple times in the day, sort of like maybe three days a week, one hour after school for kids where they could use, it'll be fast. And every other time it's like it's slowed down and the worse that TikTok is as an actor, the more slow down you get. We sort of actually have all of this infrastructure already with quality of service. So it's a different way of starting to think about restricting bandwidth, the surface of harm, based on how harmful an actor they are.
Tristan Harris: It is one solution that I think that would be effective in the sense that it's true. Instead of a screen time feature on Apple iPhones that just says, "Hey, you've hit your limit." Or "Don't use this anymore." That's like talking to the prefrontal cortex of the brain but the prefrontal cortex has been lobotomized from people after five hours of scrolling. So it's not really going to work very well. If you instead talk to my reptile brain, the part of my brain that's getting the dopamine hits, that's continuing to scroll, and if you gradually slow it down, it actually is effective at basically slowing down our desire to continue. We're like "I'm getting frustrated with this, I'm going to go do something else." And it's really important to think about that, whether it's at an Apple level in the operating system or at a regulation level, slowing things down talks more to our reptile brain and makes us think about, "Well, what do I actually really want to be doing right now?"

Aza Raskin: And note, of course, it would be very scary if anyone had the ability, or if the government had just had the ability, to willy nilly make sites go slower or faster, then you just make your opponent in the runoff's site go slower and suddenly they're just losing voters. So we'd have to think really carefully before implementing anything like that about what would be a hard to capture process that could keep up with the speed at which technology moves and that's a topic for another conversation.

Tristan Harris: We just wanted to kick off a conversation with all of you because it is definitely a major issue that is defining the future of national security and geopolitical power and just want to have all of you think about it.

Aza Raskin: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology. Thank you so much for giving us your undivided attention.