

U.S. launches a national security investigation into TikTok



Washington, November 2 (RHC)-- After two years from the \$1 billion transaction of Musical.ly to Beijing ByteDance Technology Co, U.S. lawmakers have been calling in recent weeks for a national security probe into TikTok, concerned the Chinese company may be censoring politically sensitive content, and raising questions about how it stores personal data.

TikTok has been growing more popular among U.S. teenagers in parallel to the growing tensions between Washington and Beijing over trade and technology transfers. About 60% of its users in the United States, 26.5 million monthly are between the ages of 16 and 24, the company declared this year.

The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) has started to review the Musical.ly deal, reported Reuters. TikTok did not seek clearance from CFIUS when it acquired Musical.ly, which gives the U.S. security panel scope to investigate it now.

TikTok allows users to create and share short videos with special effects. The company has said U.S. user data is stored in the United States, but the senators noted that ByteDance is governed by Chinese laws. However, the Asiatic nation does not have jurisdiction over content of the app, which does not operate in their national territory and is not influenced by any foreign government.

“While we cannot comment on ongoing regulatory processes, TikTok has made clear that we have no higher priority than earning the trust of users and regulators in the U.S. Part of that effort includes working with Congress and we are committed to doing so,” a spokesperson from the company said.

Last week, U.S. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senator Tom Cotton asked for a national security probe in a letter to Joseph Macguire, acting director of national intelligence. They said they were concerned about the video-sharing platform’s collection of user data, and whether China censors content seen by U.S. users. They also suggested TikTok could be targeted by foreign influence campaigns.

Schumer welcomed news of the probe in an emailed statement, calling it a “validation of our concern that apps like TikTok... may pose serious risks to millions of Americans and deserve greater scrutiny.”

In October, U.S. senator Marco Rubio asked CFIUS to review ByteDance’s acquisition of Musical.ly. After the Reuters story of the CFIUS investigation appeared, Rubio tweeted: “Any platform owned by a company in China which collects massive amounts of data on Americans is a potential serious threat to our country.”

U.S. Senator Josh Hawley said in a tweet that TikTok should testify at a hearing scheduled next week about technology companies putting consumer data at risk in China. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, whose product competes with TikTok particularly for younger users, has also criticized the app over censorship concerns.

The United States has been increasingly scrutinizing app developers over the personal data they handle, especially if some of it involves U.S. military or intelligence personnel.

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