

DIALOGUE, TECHNOLOGY

# Should Canada ban TikTok?

## A Dialogue Between Adam Zivo and Robert Diab

BY ADAM ZIVO AND ROBERT DIAB    APRIL 1, 2026

### ADAM ZIVO **SAYS YES**

*National Post* columnist

Good evidence suggests that TikTok manipulates its algorithms to promote China's political interests. This is unsurprising, considering that parent company ByteDance is based in China and beholden to that country's authoritarian laws, which permit no real private-sector independence. ByteDance denies it engages in censorship, but it refuses to grant researchers access to its algorithms for verification. And several studies have used public data to find indirect signs of manipulation.

A 2023 study by the Network Contagion Research Institute, for example, compared posts associated with certain hashtags across TikTok and Instagram. Their data strongly suggested TikTok heavily suppressed content supportive of Taiwan, Ukraine and Israel, among other subjects. Searching “#Tiananmen” yielded 70,727 posts on Instagram and only 466 on TikTok—a difference of 15,180 per cent. This chasm can’t be plausibly explained by natural differences between platform users. Tellingly, TikTok disabled hashtag searches for most politically sensitive subjects days after this study was published.

Another study from Cornell University, in 2024, which created sock-puppet TikTok accounts and measured the content they were recommended, concluded that TikTok favoured Republican content during the US presidential election.

In light of these findings, TikTok is better understood as a propaganda tool than a neutral social media platform. Combined with its considerable popularity (some 44 per cent of Canadians under age 18 are users), this is sufficient to justify a ban. We simply cannot give China the power to hijack our nation’s political discourse at its discretion.

Our government has a duty to protect its citizens from foreign interference. A fair marketplace of ideas is essential to democracy, but this forum is degraded when foreign adversaries bestow artificial advantages upon certain ideas. The solution is not to ban the associated beliefs, which would be illiberal, but to force them to compete without distortionary patronage.

When the federal government removed *Russia Today* from Canadian airwaves in 2022, for example, that didn’t entail a ban on pro-Russian beliefs. Similarly, TikTok users can migrate to other social media platforms and continue expressing their beliefs without the interventions of Beijing’s invisible hand. In this way, liberal values are maximized, not diminished, while national security and sovereignty are strengthened.

Although TikTok’s competitors have their own flaws, they’re often an improvement. Meta (parent company of Facebook and Instagram) and Reddit are foreign-owned, but they’re publicly traded. Their executives are bound by fiduciary duties to a diversified set of risk-adverse shareholders. This functionally prohibits them from using overly politicized algorithms.

In contrast, X is privately owned by Elon Musk. While he allegedly tweaked his platform's algorithms to favour Republicans and his own self-promotion, these distortions appear to be far weaker than Beijing's censorship. Should they worsen, however, then that platform could simply be banned too. This is an ever-evolving battle, after all.

## **ROBERT DIAB SAYS NO**

### **Thompson Rivers University law professor**

Roughly a third of Canadians are now on TikTok, relying on the platform for news, entertainment and connection. The platform gathers massive amounts of personal information and shapes our political conversations through its algorithm. The Chinese government has influence over TikTok through its Beijing-based parent company, ByteDance Inc. Under Chinese law, authorities can demand that companies hand over data and support state intelligence or security requests, and ByteDance is believed to have done this with US journalists and protesters in Hong Kong. Concerns that China will use TikTok to interfere in our elections or carry out espionage here are real.

But a ban on TikTok in Canada would be unlawful and excessive. We can address our concerns effectively without it.

Canadians enjoy freedom of expression under the Charter. This includes both a right to speak and a right to hear what others have to say. Newspapers and social media companies also have expressive rights—to curate content. Yet no right is absolute. Free speech is subject to reasonable limits. But banning TikTok would be unreasonable.

Our Supreme Court has held that “a complete ban on a form of expression is more difficult to justify than a partial ban. The government must show that only a full prohibition will enable it to achieve its objective.” The question is whether anything short of a total ban on TikTok would address our security interests.

US lawmakers recently faced the same issue. Their response was instructive. They shared our government’s main concerns. TikTok gathers information China could use for espionage. And with 170 million Americans on the platform, the US citizenry is vulnerable to political interference through content manipulation. Congress’s simple solution: ByteDance must divest of its US subsidiary or be shut down. A conditional ban.

TikTok challenged the law at the US Supreme Court and lost. The court’s reasoning helps us see why a total ban in Canada wouldn’t likely survive Charter scrutiny. Speech advocates argued that Meta and other platforms collect similar user data and that China could easily spread disinformation through other platforms. But in the court’s view, “TikTok’s scale and susceptibility to foreign adversary control” justified treating it differently. And the conditional ban didn’t limit “substantially more speech than was necessary” to address national security.

Canada’s Supreme Court would likely agree that China’s control over ByteDance raises “pressing and substantial” concerns. But, again, a total ban would be a reasonable limit on free expression only if there were no other viable way to protect security. The possibility of ordering ByteDance to divest ownership of TikTok Canada points to one such alternative.

Expressive rights are vital to a free and democratic society. Our concern isn’t with TikTok itself; it’s a platform that provides millions of Canadians a vital source of connection and a livelihood for many through sponsorships. Keeping TikTok on our own terms would allow us to regulate both the platform and the company behind it, striking the right balance between security and freedom.

## **ADAM ZIVO RESPONDS TO ROBERT DIAB**

Robert Diab argues that, although TikTok poses a threat to Canada’s security, a total ban isn’t necessary—or indeed would be unlawful—because the federal government could simply regulate the platform instead. He cites the US as an example: Washington successfully pressured ByteDance to transfer its US operations to American corporate partners, so why not do something similar in Canada?

I actually agree with him that regulating TikTok in Canada—*if possible*—would be preferable to an outright ban. Where we differ, though, is on whether such regulation is realistic. When I submitted my opening argument, the Trump administration hadn't yet negotiated a divestment deal with ByteDance, and doing so seemed unlikely. While circumstances have changed since then, I remain pessimistic about Canada's capacity to replicate this solution.

The Trump administration's deal requires ByteDance to create a new subsidiary to oversee US operations, to be called the TikTok US Data Security Company ("USDS"). Ownership of the USDS will be sold off to diverse American investors, with ByteDance being limited to a minority stake of below 20 per cent. TikTok's content algorithm will then be leased to the USDS, allowing the subsidiary to produce a new copy of it from the ground up.

While the details of the arrangement remain unclear, it appears the deal will essentially create an American clone of TikTok, with its own parallel content algorithm and US-based data hosting, which will be seamlessly connected to ByteDance's version. This should prevent China from using politicized content algorithms to directly control what American users see. Yet, as such users could still consume international TikTok content, which would still be shaped by ByteDance's invisible hand, Beijing would likely retain other, less direct avenues of influence over American opinions.

Let's take the Tiananmen Square massacre as a case study. While USDS discourse on the topic would be unconstrained, American users could still conclude that Tiananmen was unimportant, because international TikTok posts on the event are—thanks to ByteDance's censorship—largely absent. ByteDance could also algorithmically nudge international users into producing more posts in support of particular views, causing those perspectives to be overrepresented to Americans even if USDS content algorithms remain politically neutral. In this way, TikTok could still be considered a security risk. While I'm agnostic on whether this risk would be tolerable—mostly because so much of this conversation is currently speculative—this is important to flag.



## **Could we force ByteDance to divest? Could we use the US version of TikTok? Both options seem unlikely.**

But the more relevant issue to this dialogue is whether Canada could either replicate this solution or transition to using the USDS version of TikTok. Both options seem unlikely, although the latter seems more plausible.

The US, despite being a superpower, was able to wrangle the USDS agreement only after years of fraught negotiations and ultimatums. I can't see how Canada, being much weaker, could secure similar concessions. Further, if Ottawa could carve out its own subsidiary from ByteDance's global empire, this would set a precedent for other middle powers to do the same. Beijing would oppose having its prized soft-power machine divided up like this. Balkanizing TikTok into a federation of subsidiaries would also likely reduce operational stability, lowering the value of the TikTok ecosystem as a whole.

A proposal to transfer Canada's TikTok operations to the USDS could find support in Washington, as absorbing the Canadian market would benefit US investors. Canada's information space would be less sovereign, and would—much like Meta and Reddit today—be substantially controlled by US regulators and corporate interests. This would still represent a significant improvement over the status quo. But Beijing has no reason to voluntarily cede an international market to a US-controlled subsidiary. Perhaps the US could force such a concession, but given the relative unimportance of the Canadian market it's hard to imagine there being an appetite for such a move. Why would Washington expend finite political capital on this?

With the information currently available to us, I don't see how Canada could realistically regulate TikTok for the foreseeable future. That could eventually change, because the situation is dynamic and the implications of the USDS are still unclear. For now, though, the choice is between maintaining the status quo or moving towards a ban, with the former option being clearly unacceptable.

## **ROBERT DIAB RESPONDS TO ADAM ZIVO**

The thrust of my interlocutor's argument is that TikTok is a propaganda organ like *Russia Today*, and if the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) was justified in banning *RT* in 2022, we should ban TikTok as well. TikTok, he argues, is a propaganda organ because it manipulates its algorithms in China's interests by boosting or suppressing content in ways that Instagram or Reddit don't. And since roughly half of young Canadians are on TikTok, anything short of a total ban would "give China the power to hijack our nation's political discourse."

This argument fails on three counts. Protecting democracy wasn't why we banned *RT*; it was hate speech. We couldn't have a version of *RT* without hate speech. There was no reasonable means of accommodation. And if Instagram and Reddit—in being more neutral platforms—are proof that TikTok is a propaganda organ, then TikTok doesn't pose a serious threat to our democracy, since roughly the same number of Canadians are also on Instagram or other platforms where other voices can be heard.

But even if we couldn't have had a less harmful version of *Russia Today*, we can with TikTok. And Tiktok poses far less of a threat to begin with.

The details matter. The CRTC's decision called *RT*'s content abusive, since "it tends or is likely to expose the Ukrainian people to hatred or contempt on the basis of their race, national or ethnic origin." *RT*'s content was also contrary to the policy objectives of the Broadcasting Act: "Most notably, it would not serve to safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of Canada." So, yes, it was about sovereignty in part, but primarily about social harmony.

The CRTC conceded that a ban is a form of censorship. But it held this to be a reasonable limit on our Charter right to free speech, since Canadians can still access *RT* online. We never got to see whether a court would agree; no one challenged the ban. I suspect it would have survived a court challenge, because nothing short of a ban would suffice to address the harm at issue. Broadcasters could have been forced to play a “viewer advisory” when airing *RT*. But this wouldn’t make the content any less hateful or divisive. The choice was to take *RT* or leave it.



**Rather than ban TikTok, we could insist that it meet conditions, e.g., make its algorithm more transparent.**

The same isn’t true of TikTok. Rather than banning the platform, we could insist that it meet certain conditions. Make its algorithm more transparent. Follow rules about data collection, and keep user data in Canada. TikTok’s compliance would largely address our concerns. Unlike *RT*, we can have TikTok on our terms—at least in theory.

But how serious are these concerns to begin with? Adam Zivo sees TikTok’s main threat as its power to manipulate algorithms so as to shape opinion at scale in Canada as China sees fit. Does it really have this power?

TikTok is no doubt popular among young Canadians, but it's neither their exclusive nor their primary source for news and opinion. A study in 2023 of media consumption patterns in Canada found that Gen Z got its news mainly from YouTube (41 per cent), followed by Instagram (38 per cent) and TikTok (33 per cent). Some 46 per cent of all generations surveyed still reported television news as being a trusted source, and 27 per cent still rely on radio. Other studies confirm the staying power of traditional news media, even noting a trend among Gen Z to watch *more* broadcast news.

No single platform or channel has the power to “hijack” our media, because none of them has a captive audience. TikTok might claim 53 per cent of Canadian teens as monthly users, but Snapchat (42 per cent), Instagram (40 per cent) and Facebook (37 per cent) aren't far behind. Gen Z and Millennials are also well aware of the power of algorithms to influence what they see, with roughly a third reporting that they fact-check what they see on social media by cross-referencing to other sources or consulting family and friends.

It's telling that neither the Canadian nor the US government has framed its primary concern with TikTok in terms of its power to hijack our political discourse. When Canada ordered TikTok to close its offices in Vancouver and Toronto in 2024, the only rationale it gave was that allowing TikTok personnel to remain would be “injurious to national security.” The platform was fine; the offices weren't. In the challenge at the US Supreme Court to Congress's order for ByteDance to divest from TikTok, the government cited concerns about data collection and blackmail, not the fear of propaganda.

If a platform tries to manipulate us through its algorithms, the solution is not to ban it but to make it play by the rules.

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