

Understanding TikTok and WeChat beyond the fearful headlines

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About six in 10 Australians, or 59 percent, agree TikTok and WeChat should be banned nationwide, according to an upcoming UTS poll. This figure is very close to the result in the [2023](#) poll, where 61 percent of respondents expressed the same view, which was, in turn, up from 47 percent in 2022.

The poll also shows that older Australians (66 percent of respondents aged 55 or over) tend to prefer a nationwide ban on these two apps. More conservative respondents — those who voted for the Liberal-National Coalition in the 2022 and 2019 federal elections, and who nominated the Coalition as best placed to handle Australia's China policy — have also been consistently in favour of a ban.

But if TikTok and WeChat hadn't been clumped together in the polling question, would respondents have answered differently? And perhaps more importantly, do most Australians understand the differences and similarities between them?

What the apps have in common

TikTok and WeChat are Chinese apps. The video-sharing platform TikTok is owned by ByteDance, with its headquarters in Beijing, and the 'super app' WeChat is owned by Tencent, based in Shenzhen.

ByteDance and Tencent both adopt a domestic/international dual-operation business model. Tencent offers [two versions](#) of the same app — domestic Weixin and global WeChat — whereas [ByteDance](#) has a domestic app, Douyin, and a global app, TikTok. Both tech companies base their international operations in Singapore, and these overseas operations [are not](#) subject to Chinese law.

TikTok and WeChat have faced bans in the West at different times over the past few years. In 2020, then US president Donald Trump issued an executive [order](#) banning nationwide the use of both apps, an order that was later [revoked](#) by President Joe Biden.

In the West, both apps have been at the centre of concerns about national security. That was the main ground cited by Trump in defence of his executive order. In Australia, shadow Home Affairs minister James Paterson has claimed that [WeChat](#) and [TikTok](#) pose national security risks. Critics also point to the existence of Chinese national security laws that demand data from private companies and individual users for purposes of intelligence gathering.

Such security concerns are more about the potential for future problems rather than what has happened so far. To date, no public evidence is available pointing to the Chinese government spying on people using [WeChat](#) or [TikTok](#).

Based on these concerns, Australia and many states in the US have banned the use of TikTok and WeChat on government phones. But both apps are still used by politicians to campaign during elections.

Both apps are also regarded by some as vehicles for Chinese government propaganda. US Republican Senator Jim Risch described TikTok as being ‘built like an indoctrination machine’ for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); on our shores, [Paterson](#) is fond of echoing this with the claim WeChat is ‘effectively a narrative machine’ for the CCP. However, recent [research](#) on WeChat in Australia shows this claim is simplistic, exaggerated and misleading.

In the US, the First Amendment presents itself as the most logical and compelling legal weapon for the tech companies themselves and for individual users wanting to fight the ban. This was the case in the lawsuit against Trump’s [attempted executive ban](#) on WeChat in 2020, and in the current [lawsuit](#) launched by TikTok against the US Congress’ most recent legal stab at banning the platform, which could take effect after the next US election if ByteDance doesn’t divest TikTok’s US business.

Some people advocate a ban based on a principle of [reciprocity](#): i.e. since China does not allow Western platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Google) to operate in China, why should the US — and its allies, for that matter — let similar Chinese apps operate within their nations?

Those in the US and other Western countries who are against bans would say that both individual content creators and business owners would stand to lose. This sentiment is evidenced in [another legal suit](#) against the US Congress from eight TikTok content creators.

Now to some of the differences

A key difference between TikTok and WeChat is platform affordances. TikTok is mainly a video-sharing app that allows users to create, share and stream short videos; WeChat is an ‘[all-in-one](#)’ app combining many features of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as providing a space for e-commerce and e-payments.

Another obvious difference is their user bases. TikTok is popular with mainstream users, especially younger individuals, whereas WeChat is mainly used by Mandarin-speaking Chinese diaspora communities. WeChat is thus seen as a possible means of extending China’s influence to the Chinese diaspora; TikTok is feared because it may help have an anti-democratic influence on young people in the West.

Although both apps adopt dual-platform business models, WeChat and Weixin are [interoperable](#). In contrast, Douyin and TikTok are separate entities tailored for different markets, with no overlap and no interoperability. In other words, Tencent’s model is ‘one app, two systems’, whereas ByteDance’s modus operandi is ‘two apps, two systems’.

WeChat is more vulnerable to China’s [censorship](#), since its users — including [media organisations](#) outside China using WeChat to push content — are subject to Chinese government scrutiny and censorship. Also, [individual Weixin users](#) sometimes cannot see messages posted by WeChat users, even though they can communicate with each other both individually and in groups.

TikTok and WeChat have in the past sued the US government for attempted bans, but their legal cases adopted different approaches. The lawsuit against Trump’s order was launched by the [US WeChat Users Alliance](#), which was keen to distance itself from Tencent, and the associated legal costs were covered by donations from Chinese-American WeChat users. In the more recent case of TikTok, it is ByteDance itself that has taken the US Congress to court.

Chinese diaspora communities [reacted](#) to the threats of a WeChat ban with alarm, anxiety and even anger. The 2020 US lawsuit is a good case in point. WeChat is a key platform for users to keep in touch with their families in China, to expand their social networks in their new country of residence, to access Chinese-language news and information from both mainstream media and from China, and to conduct [micro-](#)

[business](#) activities. By comparison, such WeChat users are much less concerned about the proposed TikTok ban.

While they see the ban of both WeChat and TikTok as evidence of the West's tendency to distrust China, people in China seem to [react](#) to the proposed TikTok ban in a much more nationalistic vein. They see the proposed TikTok ban as yet another example of the ongoing stoush between the US/West and China, as old economic and technological rivalries are played out. Similar to their reactions to the banning of Huawei, forcing ByteDance to divest TikTok or face a ban threatens to become a [trigger](#) for anti-American sentiment in China.

Despite their differences, their most obvious common ground is a shared origin as offspring of Chinese companies. This has led them to become catalysts in the aforementioned economic and technological contest between the US and China – as well as ideological battlegrounds on which increasingly polarised geopolitics continues to unfold.

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