

*Note: this was written March 21, 2023 during a congressional discussion of a nationwide TikTok ban. This editorial was not published; however, it still captures key arguments about the value of short-form video.*

Dear Editor,

TikTok may be a legitimate threat to national security. Banning it may be a bigger one.

While some US states are restricting access to everything from drag to Black history to women's healthcare, TikTok is amplifying the voices of people on the margins and promoting critical thinking.

I'm not Gen-Z (or cool at all)—I'm an awkward elder millennial pastor and teacher from New Mexico. Yet my videos in church costume-closet wigs have ended up reaching millions. It's not because I'm doing trendy dances either—I'm talking about feminism, anti-racism, trans rights and the Bible.

It would be a mistake, as we enter more serious discussions of a pending ban or sale of the platform, to continue referring to TikTok as a "dance app for teens."

The educational side of TikTok has grown exponentially since the app began, and there's no other platform with the same level of diversity or reach. I wish I could show you my "for you page" (the TikTok term for the stream of videos TikTok sends viewers based on their interests). You won't find lip-syncs, but you will find videos about Black and LGBTQ+ history, economics, religion, community organizing, women's rights, and calls to action for environmental justice.

The primary reason for the growth of this type of content: Gen Z. Gen Z is hungry for knowledge and eager to participate in their communities. They may enjoy dance challenges, but they also enjoy showing up and standing up for what they believe in.

TikTok has also grown beyond the short-form video format. Creators 18 and older with over 1000 followers can go "Live," enabling them to talk with users in real time. Viewers can interact through the comments or join as "guests" and speak to hosts directly.

Yesterday, I listened to a woman share her experiences as a Black woman living in the South. Later, I was treated to a tour of a Kenyan village by Lake Victoria. Scrolling on, I found a man from the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming talking about his recent bison hunt, along with the impact of colonialism on his family.

It's difficult for those of us who've built up the educational side of the platform not to feel skeptical about the renewed push for a ban. While the threat of other nations stealing American data takes center stage in political discourse, corporate interests are largely ignored. Meta clearly stands to gain from a ban—the Washington Post even reported last March that Meta hired the Republican-affiliated firm, Targeted Victory, to undermine TikTok's reputation and paint the app as dangerous.

Meta aside, can you imagine a world in which large groups of community leaders organizing for change might be perceived as a threat?

As laws continue to be passed in the United States restricting public life, healthcare, and education, TikTok has not only become a tool for entertainment. It's become a lifeline: a place where isolated people can discover new ideas while also resting in the reality that they are not alone.

The threat of our data being used against us is worth consideration; however, any conversation on national security ought to consider the impact of shutting down a platform that's given young people unprecedented access to education, community, and global perspectives.

Respectfully,  
Rev. Sarah TevisTownes  
@disorganized.religion