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TIKTOK, YOUTUBE, AND DIGITAL NARRATIVES: THE NEW-GENERATION SOFT-POWER TOOLS OF THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

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Abstract: This article examines how short-video and long-form video platforms—principally TikTok and YouTube—have become central instruments of great-power competition between the United States and China. Drawing on recent analytics and survey data from Pew Research Center, Statista, CSIS, Brookings Institution, and specialised diplomacy and media-studies outlets, it argues that the locus of soft-power contestation has shifted from state-run broadcasting and formal cultural diplomacy toward algorithmically mediated, creator-driven narrative ecosystems. The article compares platform architectures, audience metrics, and strategic doctrines that underpin American and Chinese approaches, and discusses the 2026 TikTok divestiture as a pivotal case demonstrating how digital-platform governance itself has become a soft-power battleground. While China pursues a coordinated model blending entertainment, lifestyle appeal, and narrative curation, the United States relies increasingly on a decentralised creator ecosystem amid institutional retrenchment in formal public diplomacy. Both models face distinct vulnerabilities, yet together they define the emerging infrastructure of global influence in the twenty-first century.

1. Introduction: Soft Power Migrates to the Feed

When Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power" in 1990, he described the capacity of a state to make others "want what it wants" through the attractiveness of its culture, values, and policies rather than through coercion or economic pressure. Nye's framework was built for a world of embassies, cultural centres, academic exchange programmes, and international broadcasters such as Voice of America or the BBC World Service. Influence flowed outward from established institutions, across national borders, to foreign audiences who received it largely as passive consumers. Authority was clear, and the channels of influence were few and carefully managed.

Three decades later, that architecture has been substantially displaced. A handful of algorithmically curated video platforms now mediate how hundreds of millions of people—especially the young—encounter the world beyond their borders. Content is no longer broadcast from the top down; it is surfaced, recommended, and reshared by systems that learn from user behaviour, creating personalised feeds that function as both entertainment and window onto the world. Influence is no longer the exclusive domain of states; it is produced by millions of individual creators, amplified by code, and consumed on devices carried in pockets everywhere.

TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, and YouTube, owned by the American company Alphabet/Google, are the two dominant actors in this new terrain. Both are, in a formal sense, private commercial enterprises built to capture attention and generate advertising revenue. Both are, in a substantive sense, instruments through which national narratives—about governance, prosperity, culture, and legitimacy—are transmitted, amplified, distorted, and contested at unprecedented scale.

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This article explores this evolving landscape. It begins by laying out the scale and reach of the two platforms, establishing the sheer size of the audience now accessible through these channels. It then examines China's approach: a deliberate strategy that blends entertainment, commerce, and culture, projecting an attractive national image while retaining careful control over which narratives circulate. Turning to the United States, it describes a contrasting model in which formal public diplomacy has contracted, and influence has come to rely instead on the uncoordinated output of millions of independent creators. The article then considers the most contested dimension of this competition: the recommendation algorithm itself, which increasingly determines what people see and believe, even as its internal workings remain largely hidden from view. Finally, it analyses the 2026 TikTok divestiture as a defining moment, one in which the governance of the platform—and control over its algorithm—became the central issue in the soft-power contest.

2. The Scale of the Battlefield: Platform Reach, Demographics, and Attention

Any assessment of platform-based soft power must begin with scale. Influence requires audience, and in this respect the numbers are staggering. By late 2025, TikTok's own transparency disclosures and independent analytics firms placed the platform's global monthly active user base between roughly 1.4 and 1.9 billion people worldwide. In the United States alone, estimates ranged from 135 to 170 million users. Quarterly figures compiled from TikTok's Digital Services Act filings put average EU monthly active users at 169 million between January and June 2025. Globally, TikTok ranked as the world's fifth most-used social network, behind Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram, but ahead of X, Snapchat, and Pinterest.

YouTube, for its part, remains the single largest video platform on earth, with roughly 2.5 billion monthly active users as of 2024—a figure that exceeds TikTok's global footprint by a wide margin and trails only Facebook among all social platforms. YouTube's reach is broad and deeply embedded in daily life; it has existed longer, supports longer-form content, and functions simultaneously as entertainment, education, news archive, and cultural reference library.

Where TikTok pulls ahead decisively, however, is in engagement intensity. Users worldwide spend an average of 95–98 minutes per day on the app, more time than on any comparable platform. This figure is not simply a measure of popularity; it is evidence of how effectively the platform captures and holds attention. Platform analysts attribute this dominance to TikTok's recommendation algorithm, which appears remarkably precise at identifying what a user wants to see next, often before the user themselves knows. Over time, this creates a feedback loop: the more a user engages, the better the system understands them, and the more effectively it can shape their view of the world.

Usage patterns also reveal important demographic differences that carry strategic weight. Among American teenagers, both platforms are nearly universal: roughly nine in ten teens report ever using YouTube, and about 75% use it daily. A majority of teens also visit TikTok daily, with 16% describing their use as "almost constant." Pew Research Center data shows that usage is not evenly distributed across groups: 79% of Black teens and 74% of Hispanic teens in the United States report using TikTok, compared with 54% of White teens. Teen girls are more likely than boys to use TikTok (66% versus 59%), while boys somewhat more often use YouTube (94% versus 89%).

These disparities matter because they define which populations are most exposed to narratives originating from each platform's broader ecosystem. If TikTok disproportionately reaches younger, more diverse, and more female audiences, then the perspectives visible there—about China, about the United States, about global affairs—will shape the worldview of those groups most strongly. Over years, these differences accumulate: the generation now coming of age is forming its understanding of countries, cultures, and governments not through textbooks or state broadcasts, but through short clips and recommendations served up by algorithms.

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3. China's Strategy: Ambient Appeal, Lifestyle Diplomacy, and Narrative Boundaries

Chinese digital soft-power strategy, as documented by researchers at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and elsewhere, follows a distinctive logic. It deliberately blends entertainment, commerce, and culture across YouTube, TikTok, and the domestic-turned-international platform RedNote (Xiaohongshu), aiming to project an attractive national image while retaining tight boundaries over which narratives circulate. Unlike traditional propaganda, this approach rarely announces itself as state messaging. It does not lecture; it shows. It frames China not as a political project, but as a lifestyle, a set of cultural markers, a place of modern convenience and historical depth—something to be admired, emulated, and consumed.

This approach is visible even in how platforms present themselves to the world. TikTok's public branding—its tagline "Make your day," its About page, its Community Guidelines—carries no visible trace of its Chinese ownership. This is not an oversight; it is a deliberate choice, one that serves both TikTok's commercial interest in appearing neutral and its effectiveness as a soft-power vehicle. User trust in a platform's perceived objectivity is essential: if users believe the platform is simply showing them what is popular, rather than what a government wants them to see, they are far more likely to accept the narratives they encounter there.

3.1 The "TikTok Refugee" Moment and the Rise of RedNote

The clearest recent illustration of this strategy unfolded in January 2025. As the United States moved toward enforcing its TikTok divest-or-ban law, large numbers of American users—dubbed "TikTok refugees"—sought alternative platforms. Many arrived on RedNote, a Chinese lifestyle app that had previously enjoyed almost no significant footprint in the West. For the first time, hundreds of thousands of Western users found themselves browsing content produced largely by ordinary Chinese users about daily life, travel, food, healthcare, and cities.

The effect was immediate and striking. Many Western users came away surprised and impressed by what they saw: modern infrastructure, efficient public services, urban cleanliness, and accessible healthcare. These impressions were reinforced by the platform's environment, in which politically sensitive topics—Xinjiang, human rights criticism, elite wealth and privacy, and certain international disputes—were systematically filtered from view. What users encountered was not a full picture of China, but a carefully curated one: attractive, peaceful, convenient, and largely free of controversy.

This episode fed into a broader cultural trend that observers began calling "Chinamaxxing": a growing tendency among young Western users to embrace Chinese lifestyle markers—drinking warm water for health, practising traditional exercises, studying Mandarin, appreciating food and film—decoupling these things from politics and recasting "Chineseness" as an aspirational, consumable identity. Around the same time, China rose to second place in the Global Soft Power Index 2025, surpassing the United Kingdom. Index compilers attributed this shift partly to the global reach of Chinese technology products such as DeepSeek and partly to the success of cultural exports including the animated film *Ne Zha 2*, which became one of the highest-grossing films of its kind worldwide.

3.2 Influencer Diplomacy and Managed Authenticity

Beyond platform design and content curation, China has increasingly deployed a second strategy: inviting high-profile international creators to visit, experience the country firsthand, and share their impressions with their audiences. The most famous example came in 2025, when the American streamer IShowSpeed travelled to China at the invitation of Chinese partners. Over the course of his visit, he broadcast his travels to millions of followers, showing high-speed rail, modern cityscapes, consumer technology, and daily life. The content was enthusiastic, unscripted, and deeply persuasive—precisely because it appeared to come from a popular foreign personality rather than an official spokesperson.

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Analysts have described this approach as a deliberate tactic: using globally recognised figures from rival countries to lend content a credibility that state media cannot replicate. A parallel pattern has been observed in Taiwan, where United Front-linked networks invite Taiwanese influencers to the mainland to produce short videos and livestreams. The content is almost always light, apolitical, and focused on food, scenery, and convenience—presenting an attractive image of mainland life to young Taiwanese viewers on YouTube Shorts, Instagram, and TikTok. Regional analysts have tied this practice to the People's Liberation Army's "Three Warfares" doctrine, which emphasises shaping public opinion through non-military means: persuasion, influence, and narrative framing.

In both cases, the logic is the same: soft power works best when it does not look like power at all. It looks like entertainment, lifestyle, friendship, and shared experience.

4. America's Approach: Institutional Retrenchment and Decentralised Influence

If China's model is coordinated and deliberate, the American model is its opposite: diffuse, unplanned, and largely the product of individual initiative rather than state design. This difference reflects both the United States' historically decentralised media ecosystem and a recent period of institutional retrenchment in formal public diplomacy.

The U.S. Department of State continues to maintain multilingual social media accounts across X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, sharing policy updates, educational opportunities, and cultural content intended to present an accessible image of American foreign policy. The State Department's 2025 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting documents how the Department and the U.S. Agency for Global Media deployed resources toward these ends. Yet compared with the scale and reach of the broader creator ecosystem, official accounts remain modest in following and influence.

More significantly, formal public diplomacy has faced deep structural contraction. The 2025 closure of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) - an agency whose programming had long carried important soft-power functions alongside development aid—prompted widespread debate. Analysts at the Diplo Foundation framed the closure as forcing a fundamental reassessment: can soft power, defined as the ability to attract rather than coerce, remain effective if the state itself withdraws from active narrative-building just as its principal rival is investing most heavily in it?

Into this institutional gap has stepped a vast, distributed ecosystem of individual creators whose influence on foreign perceptions of the United States now plausibly exceeds that of all official channels combined. Researchers at the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy put it clearly: the "architecture of influence has shifted from government press rooms to the logic of digital platforms." On YouTube especially, a single independently produced travel vlog, university tour, or lifestyle video can reach larger audiences than a foreign ministry press release, at negligible cost, and with a tone that feels authentic rather than rehearsed.

This model carries both extraordinary strengths and inherent weaknesses. On the positive side, unscripted creator content can humanise a country far more effectively than any official message. When a creator shares their daily life, their home, their cities, and their struggles, they appear trustworthy precisely because they are not speaking for the government. Foreign audiences see the United States not as a monolith, but as a living, changing place of diverse people and experiences.

Yet this strength is also a vulnerability. Because American influence is decentralised, there is no shared narrative. One creator may show the United States as a land of opportunity and freedom; another may show poverty, inequality, and violence; a third may focus entirely on pop culture, sports, or music without ever touching on politics or values. There is no central authority to ensure balance, consistency, or coherence. The result is a soft power that is abundant, lively, and persuasive—but also

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fragmented, contradictory, and sometimes self-defeating. The United States projects influence not through a coordinated story, but through millions of uncoordinated voices.

5. Algorithms, News Migration, and the Hidden Layer of Influence

Beyond ownership and strategy, the most consequential and contested dimension of this competition lies deeper: in the recommendation algorithm itself. This is the invisible mechanism that decides which videos reach which users, and therefore which ideas, countries, and narratives are amplified or left unseen. Its importance has grown alongside a historic shift: video platforms are displacing traditional media as the primary news source for younger generations.

5.1 The Generational Shift in News Consumption

Pew Research Center's 2025 social-media-and-news tracking data tells a remarkable story. Among Americans aged 18–29, 43% say they regularly get news from TikTok—narrowly surpassing YouTube and Facebook at 41% each, and Instagram at 40%. This represents a striking reversal from just two years earlier, in 2023, when only 32% of young Americans reported getting news regularly from TikTok. Among TikTok's own user base the shift is even sharper: 55% say they regularly encounter news on the platform, up from just 22% in 2020.

Across the broader adult population, Facebook (38%) and YouTube (35%) remain the largest social sources of news, with TikTok at 20% and rising faster than any major platform. Most notably of all, Pew also finds that adults under 30 now trust information encountered on social media at roughly the same level they trust established national news organisations.

Taken together, these trends mean that video platforms are no longer merely entertainment channels through which soft power operates incidentally. For a growing share of the global population—and especially the young—they are the primary infrastructure through which people learn about the world, form opinions, and develop impressions of foreign countries. If the algorithm shows more content about one country and less about another, if it amplifies certain viewpoints and suppresses others, it is not merely curating entertainment. It is shaping geopolitical perception itself.

5.2 The Debate Over Algorithmic Influence

This reality has sparked fierce debate among policymakers and analysts. At the centre of the debate stands TikTok, whose ownership by a Chinese company raises concerns about whether its recommendation system could be used to shape public opinion in line with foreign interests.

Some analysts argue these risks are overstated. CSIS technology-policy scholar James Lewis has noted that of the three commonly cited concerns—data harvesting, security vulnerabilities, and influence operations—the third is the most difficult to prove and may be exaggerated. "Influence operations are generally overrated," he has written, observing that documented patterns of content visibility on divisive issues such as the war in Gaza appear to reflect spontaneous user behaviour rather than centrally directed activity. A subsequent CSIS analysis reached a similar conclusion: while a sophisticated influence campaign could in principle adjust an algorithm to shape what users see, available evidence suggests China has thus far made comparatively limited use of TikTok for this purpose, in part because short-form video is poorly suited to carrying complex political messaging.

Other researchers take a far more cautionary view. A report from the Network Contagion Research Institute documented patterns of "hashtag hijacking"—whereby trending hashtags are deliberately flooded with unrelated or diverting content to dilute or suppress undesired narratives—traced to periods of political sensitivity. Brookings Institution analysts have similarly cautioned that "data localisation alone cannot eliminate risks of algorithmic manipulation," precisely because the internal workings of recommendation systems remain largely opaque. Without independent access to platform data, it is difficult to prove or disprove claims of influence one way or the other.

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Critics of the U.S. regulatory approach have also pointed out a deeper inconsistency: many of the concerns raised about TikTok apply equally to American-owned platforms. YouTube and Facebook also collect vast quantities of user data, also operate opaque recommendation systems, and also shape public opinion at enormous scale. Banning or restricting one platform on national-security grounds, they argue, while leaving others unregulated, addresses the ownership question but not the underlying structural problem. The real issue may not be which country a platform belongs to, but the power that all large platforms now hold over what the world sees and believes.

6. The 2026 TikTok Divestiture: Governance as Settlement

After years of legal, political, and commercial struggle, the contest over TikTok reached a structural resolution in January 2026. Under a framework announced by the Trump administration in September 2025 and finalised in binding agreements that December, ByteDance agreed to divest a controlling stake in TikTok's U.S. operations to an American-led investor consortium comprising Oracle, Silver Lake, and the Abu Dhabi-based fund MGX.

The resulting entity, TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC, closed on 22 January 2026. Ownership was split roughly as follows: the investor consortium held approximately 50% (each partner taking roughly 15%), existing ByteDance-affiliated investors held 30.1%, and ByteDance retained 19.9%—falling just below the 20% legal threshold that would have triggered a full ban.

The most significant provision of the agreement was not ownership, however, but control over the algorithm. The joint venture assumed direct responsibility for content moderation, data governance, and the retraining of TikTok's U.S. recommendation algorithm exclusively on domestic user data. Oracle was designated as the trusted security partner responsible for auditing compliance. In effect, the agreement nationalised the algorithmic layer: whatever narrative-shaping capacity the recommendation system possesses, it will now operate under American corporate and regulatory oversight, even as ByteDance retains partial ownership and continues to manage global advertising, e-commerce, and cross-border content functions.

Early survey data suggested that for most users, these changes would make little practical difference. A Forrester Consumer Pulse survey conducted in February 2025 found that fewer than half of U.S. TikTok users viewed Oracle's involvement positively, yet 67% said they intended to keep using the app regardless of ownership changes. This finding carries profound soft-power implications: for the majority of users, the platform's culture, entertainment value, and daily utility matter far more than abstract concerns about foreign ownership. People do not choose their feeds based on corporate headquarters; they choose based on what entertains them, what feels familiar, and what speaks to their interests.

7. Discussion: Two Models, Strengths, and Vulnerabilities

The comparison developed in this article reveals two fundamentally different approaches to digital influence, each with its own logic, its own strengths, and its own vulnerabilities.

China's model is coordinated and outward-facing. It blends lifestyle appeal, cultural softness, and carefully curated visibility. It does not demand agreement; it invites admiration. It shows a country that appears modern, convenient, orderly, and culturally rich, while quietly removing or downplaying topics that might complicate that image. This approach is effective because it feels harmless-most users do not realise they are consuming influence at all. Yet it carries inherent weaknesses. Once the coordinating hand becomes visible-once users realise that certain topics are systematically suppressed or that popular influencers are being hosted as part of a broader strategy-the appearance of authenticity collapses. The curated image can then be reinterpreted as propaganda, and the attraction turns to distrust.

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The American model works in almost the opposite way. It relies on openness, diversity, and the appearance of authenticity that comes from uncoordinated voices. A travel vlogger or a university student sharing their life is far more persuasive than a state broadcaster could ever be. But this model, too, has critical weaknesses. Without coordination, there is no consistent message. Some creators will show the United States at its best; others will show it at its worst; most will show something in between. The result is influence that is powerful but incoherent. Furthermore, as formal public diplomacy shrinks, the United States has no way to step in and fill the gaps—to explain policies, to present its values clearly, or to counter misleading narratives—when the creator ecosystem is silent or divided.

Both models face the same overarching challenge: the algorithm itself. Whoever controls the recommendation system holds the power to decide what audiences see. That power is immense, and it is largely unaccountable. Whether it is managed by a Chinese company or an American consortium, the fundamental question remains: should a handful of private companies, guided by opaque code, effectively determine which countries and ideas the world sees most clearly?

8. Conclusion

The competition between TikTok and YouTube is far more than a commercial rivalry. It has become one of the primary arenas in which the United States and China contest global narrative influence, especially among the generation now coming of age. The evidence reviewed here-from Pew Research's tracking of generational news migration to CSIS and Brookings' divided assessments of algorithmic risk, from the scale statistics documenting TikTok's nearly two-billion-user footprint to the structural details of the 2026 Oracle-led divestiture-together points to a single overarching conclusion:

Platform governance, algorithmic design, and creator ecosystems have displaced traditional cultural diplomacy as the primary mechanism through which soft power is generated and contested. Embassies, cultural institutes, and international broadcasters remain important, but they no longer occupy the commanding heights of influence. Those heights are now occupied by code, by feeds, and by the millions of creators whose voices reach further than any official speech ever could.

Whether the American model of distributed, uncoordinated creator influence will prove more durable than China's more curated, narrative-managed approach remains an open question. It may be that openness eventually prevails, or it may be that coherence and consistency carry the day. But what is already clear is that the stakes of this competition are no longer marginal to great-power relations. They are close to its centre. The battle for influence is no longer fought primarily in diplomatic cables or official statements. It is fought every day, in millions of short clips and recommended videos, on the screens that the next generation carries in its hands. What they see there will shape how they understand the world-and how the world understands the great powers-for decades to come.

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