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Opinion: On Chinese app ban, UT can comply with state law and protect individual rights

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Ericksen Gomez-Villeda / The Daily Beacon

SB 0843 was filed for introduction on Jan. 30 to prohibit a public institution of higher education that provides internet access to students, faculty, staff or the general public from allowing an individual to access a video platform using the institution's network if the video platform is owned by a company headquartered outside of the United States.

Then, Amendment 1 was made to the bill on March 2 to specify the range as social media platforms operated or hosted by a company based in the People's Republic of China.

UT's Swift Response to TikTok Law

Following the signing of the law by Gov. Bill Lee on April 13, Ramon Padilla, CIO and Vice Chancellor for IT and Innovation, on behalf of the University of Tennessee, sent out an email on April 14 to inform the University of Tennessee system on the newly implemented "TikTok Law."

With zero prior notice to students, UT blocked access to WeChat, Sina Weibo, Tencent QQ, Tencent Video, Xiao HongShu, Douban, Zhihu, Meituan and Toutiao on campus Wi-Fi.

Potential Inappropriate Aspects of the Policy

While the policy of blocking access to certain social media platforms may have been implemented with good intentions, there are potential aspects of the policy that could be deemed inappropriate or concerning.

The policy was put into effect without prior notification or discussion with the entire university community, which has led to confusion and frustration among students, faculty and staff.

The lack of transparency and inclusivity in the decision-making process for implementing the policy has raised concerns about the university's commitment to engaging all members of the community in issues that affect them.

In order to foster a more inclusive and transparent decision-making process, it is imperative that the university actively engages with all members of the community, especially international students and scholars, during policy development and implementation. This will ensure that the university takes into account diverse perspectives and promotes a culture of inclusivity and fairness.

Disproportionate Reaction to the Law

The law in question pertains specifically to social media platforms, yet the university's ban encompasses a broad range of apps without providing detailed justification. For example, WeChat is primarily a private messaging service for person-to-person communication rather than a social media platform.

As guided by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, the social media platforms from China are listed as Douban, Qzone (QQ), Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo and Youku.

Further, it guided the applicants by saying, “Please provide the name of the platform and the associated unique social media identifier (username or handle) for each social media platform you would like to list. This does not include private messaging on person-to-person messaging services, such as WhatsApp.”

UT’s ban seems to be a disproportionate reaction to the law that only concerns social media platforms. This is especially concerning because WeChat is primarily a private messaging service and not a social media platform like those listed on the DS-160 form. Furthermore, the lack of clear reasoning for the selected apps raises concerns about the negative impact on individuals who rely on these apps for personal communication.



Jinning Wang presents CURENT Large-scale Testbed at Industry Conference, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Courtesy of Jinning Wang

Appeal to UT

Following an examination of the concerns raised by the university community in response to the recent policy of blocking certain social media platforms, I, as a Volunteer, strongly urge the University of Tennessee to take action and reevaluate the policy.

It is crucial to listen to the voices of the community members and address their concerns in a transparent and inclusive manner. A reevaluation of the policy may involve refining or modifying it to ensure that it aligns with the university's values of promoting inclusivity, respect and diversity.

While the university has a duty to comply with state law, it is equally important to safeguard individual rights, ensuring that the rights of all Volunteers, including specific groups, are not infringed upon.

The university can explore a better action to follow the coexistence of the university's duty to comply with state law and its obligation to safeguard individual rights.

Mitigating Negative Effects

Moreover, the author appeals to the university to actively work on mitigating the negative consequences resulting from the policy's implementation.

This may involve revising the policy to determine a reasonable list of banned apps on campus. To achieve this, the university should proactively engage with affected students and scholars to understand the extent of the impact and address their concerns accordingly.

Additionally, the university should explore offering alternative resources and support to those affected by the policy, such as providing supplementary assistance and access to other social media platforms.

By taking these steps, the university can demonstrate its unwavering commitment to fostering a welcoming and inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of their country of origin.

Acknowledgment

As a proud Volunteer, the author would like to express gratitude to UT for its ongoing support in promoting a safe and inclusive academic and study environment for all members of the university community.

Further, the author would like to express his appreciation for the help from other Volunteers, including but not limited to the timely report from The Daily Beacon and the Center for Global Engagement's upcoming Listening Session to Support the Chinese Community.

As we strive for a more balanced approach in addressing various concerns, we acknowledge and appreciate the university's steadfast commitment to fostering a diverse, equitable and inclusive community through its policies and initiatives.

The Center for Global Engagement will host a listening session to support the Chinese community on campus this Friday, May 5 from 3-4 p.m. in Student Union room 362A. Those who wish to attend may fill out this form on the center's website.

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