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TikTok's local moderation guidelines ban pro-LGBT content

Saturday 16 November 2019, by [HERN Alex](#) (Date first published: 26 September 2019).

Chinese-owned social media app bans such content even in countries where homosexuality has never been illegal

TikTok's efforts to provide locally sensitive moderation have resulted in it banning any content that could be seen as positive to gay people or gay rights, down to same-sex couples holding hands, even in countries where homosexuality has never been illegal, the Guardian can reveal.

The rules were applied on top of the general moderation guidelines, [first reported by the Guardian on Wednesday](#), which included a number of clauses that banned speech that touched on topics sensitive to China, including Tiananmen Square, Tibet and Falun Gong. ByteDance, the Beijing-based company that owns TikTok, says the moderation guidelines were replaced in May.

As well as the general moderation guidelines, described as the "loose version" to moderators, [TikTok](#) ran at least two other sets.

One, the "strict" guidelines, were used in countries with conservative moral codes, and contained a significantly more restrictive set of rules concerning nudity and vulgarity, which ban, for instance, "partially naked buttocks", exposed cleavage with "a length of more than 1/3 of the whole cleavage length", and lengthy depictions of sanitary pads.

The other was a set of guidelines for individual countries, which introduced new rules to deal with specific local controversies - but also further restricted what can be shown. For instance, the Guardian has seen Turkey-specific guidelines in which TikTok explicitly banned a swathe of content related to Kurdish separatism, and adds the country's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to the list of political leaders who cannot be criticised, defamed or spoofed on the platform.

But the local guidelines also barred a host of behaviours which are both legal and accepted in [Turkey](#). Depictions of alcohol consumption were barred, for instance, even though 17% of Turks drink. So too were any depictions of statues of "non-Islamic gods", with examples given of "Jesus, Maria, angels".

And an entire section of the rules was devoted to censoring depictions of homosexuality. "Intimate activities (holding hands, touching, kissing) between homosexual lovers" were censored, as were "reports of homosexual groups, including news, characters, music, tv show, pictures". Similarly blocked was content about "protecting rights of homosexuals (parade, slogan, etc.)" and "promotion of homosexuality". In all those guidelines, TikTok went substantially further than required by law.

The country-specific guidelines took on a new relevance following the Guardian's initial reporting on TikTok's censorship, in which ByteDance said that the guidelines had been retired in May in favour

of “localised approaches, including local moderators, local content and moderation policies, local refinement of global policies”.

The Turkey and Strict versions of the moderation guidelines suggest those localised approaches may not be less censorious than the previous centralised approach.

In a statement, TikTok said it was “a platform for creativity, and committed to equality and diversity”.

“Our platform has experienced rapid growth in Turkey and other markets, and as we grow we are constantly learning and refining our approach to moderation. The referenced guidelines regarding LGBTQ content in Turkey are no longer in use, and we have since made significant progress in establishing a more robust localised approach. However, we recognise the need to do more and we are actively working with local third parties and independent advisers to ensure our processes are appropriate.”

The Guardian also reported that TikTok took the unusual approach of erring on the side of risk when it came to sexualised content featuring children: videos of them wearing “sexy outfits” or “dancing seductively”.

The platform’s guidelines advised moderators to treat subjects as though they were over 18 if their age was unclear, while other platforms instead recommend their moderators take the side of caution, particularly if the content has been reported as underage.

Andy Burrows, the NSPCC’s head of child safety online policy, criticised the approach, and said: “These guidelines demonstrate that TikTok has woefully failed to grasp the seriousness of child abuse imagery.

“Furthermore, TikTok is taking a cavalier approach by telling moderators that if they aren’t sure whether someone is a child or not, to assume they are an adult.

“Ultimately, TikTok needs to fundamentally reassess its attitude to handling inappropriate images of children on its site. The fact that they use wholly unsuitable language like ‘underage pornography’ and ‘sexy outfits’ to describe this horrific content speaks volumes.”

TikTok says it has since reversed the policy, and now requires moderators to treat people as under 18 if there was any doubt.

Alex Hern

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P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/26/tiktoks-local-moderation-guidelines-ban-pro-lgbt-content>

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Here we are with our annual appeal for the ESSF solidarity fund. We've already used almost all of our resources for 2019, and we need to prepare for 2020.

Over the last 12 years, ESSF has built unique solidarity relations in Asia. The calamitous situation in many countries is going to get worse. On October 29th, *Nature Communications* reported on a new study suggesting that the rise in sea levels will claim three times more victims than previously thought; mostly in eastern Asia. [1].

In the face of the increasingly urgent needs, **we are determined to increase the number of our donors, recognising that no donation is too small.** The number of donors is politically important. Each new donor is a confirmation of our solidarity with those facing disasters, a welcome encouragement. And taken together, “small” donations have enabled us to provide significant support to grassroots initiatives.

If you can contribute large sums, all the better! But do not give up the solidarity fund because you would judge the amount of your contribution too insignificant. Our minimum solidarity commitment is €500 - that's only 10 donations of €50. A basic standard bank transfer to our partners amounts to €1,000 - that's only 10 donations of €100.

ESSF works on a completely volunteer basis. **It means that 100% of the donations received are actually transferred to our partners abroad.** The costs related to these transfers are mostly bank charges and reduced to a minimum (less than 5%).

Each year brings new ad hoc solidarity campaigns in response to urgent developments. But we also have ongoing engagements in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines. ESSF doesn't 'export' know-how, we don't manage our own projects. Instead, we support our movement partners in their response to local humanitarian, social and democratic crises. They take the lead in defining the needs, and the strategy to be followed. Our partners include the MiHands coalition of civil society groups in Mindanao, southern Philippines, the Free Women movement in Indonesia, the BKF-BKS peasant movements in Bangladesh and a network of popular movements in Pakistan.

These partners are facing increasingly difficult conditions, ranging from martial law in Mindanao to the violence of labour and social relations in Bangladesh, growing threat of Islamist aggression against progressives in Indonesia (particularly women and LGBT+ activists), and attacks from fundamentalists and from the secret services in Pakistan...

The conditions under which our partners act are increasingly difficult: martial law in Mindanao, extreme violence in social relations in Bangladesh, the rise of aggressive Islamism in Indonesia (particularly targeting women and LGBT +), crossfire Special Services and Fundamentalists in Pakistan ... So we need to fully consider the issue of the security of our partners.

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We warmly thank all those who are renewing their donations, as well as all those joining us for the first time!

Pierre Rousset and Adam Novak
ESSF

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We keep you regularly informed via our website of the situation and use of the solidarity fund.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-019-12808-z>