

HEATING UP / FUTURE SOCIETY

Employees at TikTok Apparently Have a Secret Button That Can Make Anything Go Viral

Are we surprised?

YESTERDAY by MAGGIE HARRISON

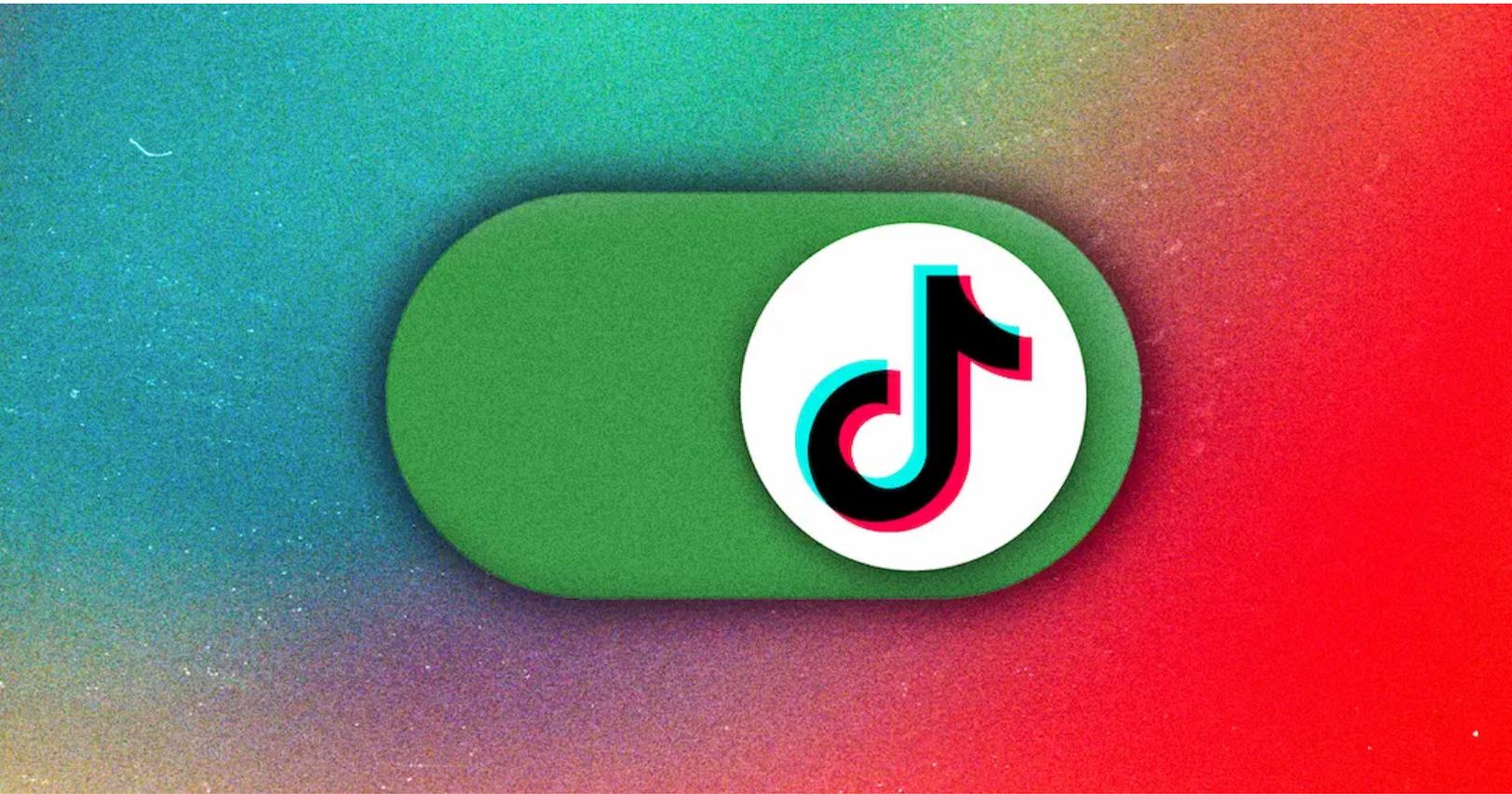


Image by Getty / Futurism

A new [Forbes investigation](#) has revealed that TikTok's algorithm isn't nearly as democratic as the app and its parent company, ByteDance, have been happy to let users believe.

Per the report, TikTok employees have access to a secret "heating" feature, which is essentially a big red button for virality. Hit that button, and content gets boosted — unbeknownst to the TikTok users who might be consuming the "heated" videos.

"The heating feature refers to boosting videos into the For You feed through operation intervention to achieve a certain number of video views," reads an internal TikTok document called the MINT Heating Playbook, which was reviewed by *Forbes*. "The total video views of heated videos accounts for a large portion of the daily total video views, around 1-2 percent, which can have a significant impact on overall core metrics."

If there's any defense for TikTok here, it's true that social media companies generally have a similar big red button. That said, platforms also generally let users know if and when that button has been used. TikTok has failed to offer the same transparency, which isn't a great look for a company that's [currently under national security review](#). (To that end: the *Forbes* report was notably led by reporter Emily Baker-White, who in a [separate investigation](#) discovered that the app had been spying, or least [keeping the door open](#) to spying, on herself and several other journalists, politicians, and otherwise public figures.)

You'd also think that a button like this would be reserved from higher-ups, but apparently, a lot of lower-level TikTok employees — in addition to workers at ByteDance and even *contractors* — had access to the feature, and were given a lot of leash regarding where and how to use it.

Another document reviewed by *Forbes*, aptly titled the TikTok Heating Policy, instructed employees to use the button to "attract influencers" and "promote diverse content" as well as to "push important information" and "promot[e] relevant videos that were missed by the recommendations algorithms." These are some shockingly loose guidelines, and on the whole, the existence of the heating button, along with the secrecy surrounding it, certainly casts a grim shadow over TikTok's self-avowed "[magic](#)" algorithm, which has been widely applauded for its alleged fairness and ability to cut through rival [Instagram's apparent oversaturation](#).

"We think of social media as being very democratizing and giving everyone the same opportunity to reach an audience," Evelyn Douek, a professor at Stanford Law School and Senior Research Fellow at the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, told *Forbes*, warning that social media success isn't always as fair as it often seems.

"To some degree, the same old power structures are replicating in social media as well," Douek added, "where the platform can decide winners and losers to some degree, and commercial and other kinds of partnerships take advantage."

For its part, TikTok admitted that the button exists. But its use, a spokesperson says, is pretty harmless.

"We promote some videos to help diversify the content experience and introduce celebrities and emerging creators to the TikTok community," TikTok spokesperson Jamie Favazza told *Forbes*, reportedly in response to a "detailed set of questions" regarding "how and by whom" heating had been applied. "Only a few people, based in the US, have the ability to approve content for promotion in the US, and that content makes up approximately .002 percent of videos in For You feeds."

That said, those at the company refused to comment on whether employees in China had ever heated content, or if content generated by the Chinese government or state media had ever been heated, according to *Forbes*. (But it wouldn't be surprising, given, as *Forbes* points out, that TikTok employees have previously claimed that the app has previously both [boosted pro-China messaging](#) and [suppressed content](#) related to China's horrifying treatment of its Uyghur population.)

All in all, the feature isn't the worst of TikTok's transgressions, but it's one in a long line of [general sketchiness](#), demonstrating once again that the public and political scrutiny that the app has garnered has well and often been earned.

Now, we have to know: who at TikTok HQ boosted [NyQuil chicken](#)?

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