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Opinion: To protect people from TikTok, don't ban it. Study it.

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Like it or not, TikTok has become a major means of communication, with giant influence on culture and politics worldwide. Since there's no putting this genie back in the bottle, it behooves us to learn how the app works and how it's affecting individuals, societies and public discourse. Recent academic research has yielded findings about the app's impact on mental health, its influence on teenagers' vaping and e-cigarette use, and its possibly addictive properties, for example. But even as this kind of research is more urgently needed, it is becoming harder to do.

This is especially true in Texas. Last December, Governor Greg Abbott imposed a TikTok ban, forbidding all state employees from using TikTok on any state-owned or state-issued equipment. The ban covers faculty at state universities who study the app, and Texas has allowed no exception for them. Researchers like Jacqueline Vickery, an associate professor at the University of North Texas who studies how social media is used for political organizing and self-expression, can no longer do their work.

After the ban took effect this spring, Vickery had to suspend research projects and abandon some of her teaching methods. Though some of her students report using TikTok more than Google, Vickery can no longer ask them to look at TikTok's privacy policy, scrutinize its data collection or study how its algorithm works. Nor can Vickery and other Texas researchers investigate these vital matters themselves.

In a lawsuit brought by the Coalition for Independent Technology Research and the Knight First Amendment Institute challenging Texas' TikTok ban, the groups argue that the ban violates the constitutional rights of public university professors. (We helped start the coalition which has hundreds of researchers, including Texas employees like Vickery, among its members.). This week, we asked the court to block the ban while the case is pending.

As we explain, the ban compromises academic freedom and impedes vital teaching and research, including research on the very risks that Texas says it wants to address. In imposing the ban, Gov. Abbott suggested that China, where TikTok's parent company ByteDance is based, is using the app to "infiltrate" the United States and to threaten "our way of life." Abbott wasn't more specific and he was jumping on a bandwagon – at least 34 U.S. states have some form of a TikTok ban.

The best way to protect people from harms engendered by TikTok (and other social media platforms) is to unleash researchers so they can build up knowledge collectively. That's the way we have long tackled other problems that harm people at scale, from smoking to infant mortality. As the sociologist Robert Merton famously observed, science is a communal public good. Each study draws from previous work, and contributes to a collective body of knowledge.

Our lawsuit asks that Texas preserve researchers' freedom to do their crucial work. There are many ways to do this while achieving the ban's ostensible objective. At minimum, there should be a carveout so that Texas academics can join journalists, activists and academics around the world learning what TikTok does and doesn't do. Whatever means they select, Texas must preserve academic freedom, to protect both the Constitution and the public good. Independent research isn't the problem, it's a vital part of the solution. We hope the courts understand that.

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