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The Illusion of an Internet Utopia: RedNote's Crossroads in Digital Migration and Data Sovereignty

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SYNOPSIS

This paper argues that "RedNote", a Chinese social media platform gaining popularity among US "TikTok refugees", represents both the potential for global cultural exchange and the risk of becoming a geopolitical tool amid the US-China rivalry. Despite its momentary fulfilment of the utopian vision of a borderless internet, RedNote faces challenges in balancing state intervention, user agency, and cross-border data sovereignty, making its future as a genuine platform for intercultural dialogue uncertain.

COMMENTARY

Amid the looming TikTok ban, the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu, internationally known as "RedNote", has recently seen an influx of US users. These users, self-styled as "TikTok refugees", have migrated to RedNote in search of an alternative platform for digital interaction and protesting US government actions against TikTok.

Much of the content generated by this influx portrays China positively while criticising the United States or downplaying references to it, leading Chinese netizens to view RedNote as an effective medium for the export of Chinese culture and influence. On the surface, RedNote appears to offer a space for international dialogue and cross-cultural interaction, momentarily fulfilling the utopian vision of a borderless internet that echoes the Californian Ideology of the last century.

An intriguing question arises: Can this unexpected surge of international users help evolve from a platform focused on domestic audiences into one that genuinely fosters global cultural dialogue, or will it ultimately be coerced into serving geopolitical interests?

Many "TikTok refugees" have migrated to RedNote, a popular Chinese lifestyle app, in response to the looming TikTok ban in the United States. *Image from Pexels.*

Can RedNote Survive Chinese Regulatory Power?

If RedNote seeks to expand its reach through this massive support from American users, it must navigate a delicate dual identity: catering to a broader global audience while adhering to stringent Chinese regulatory guidelines. Features like the translation tool, released within three days of the user influx, signal RedNote's willingness to appeal to a more international user base, highlighting its potential to facilitate broader cultural exchange. While China has welcomed the migration of TikTok refugees, the introduction of foreign users and content that extends beyond the platform's original moderation framework raises uncertainties about how the government will respond. Will Chinese authorities intervene, and if so, how? Will they adopt a softer approach or leverage RedNote as a political tool for cultural propaganda? These decisions will significantly affect the platform's trajectory, especially in content curation and algorithm design.

Challenges from the US-China Rivalry

The tension between platform mediation and state intervention is exacerbated by the US-China rivalry, particularly in light of the looming TikTok ban. The uncertainty surrounding the ban initially presented RedNote with a brief but strategic opportunity to capitalise on the influx of US users as a potential growth avenue. If RedNote can retain these new users and attract more global users, it might carve out a niche in the competitive landscape of major tech companies.

However, this shift is fraught with challenges. Amid escalating US-China tensions, RedNote's broader reach is constrained by cross-border jurisdictional issues. US users, by entrusting their data to the platform, inadvertently raise several questions: Will RedNote face scrutiny from the US government? Does the United States have the authority to intervene? In an ironic twist, US users fleeing the TikTok ban have rebelliously handed over their data to China, using RedNote as a form of protest against their government. Should the United States attempt to intervene, RedNote may encounter the same dilemmas TikTok faced, adding further uncertainty to its

future. As a national platform constrained by data sovereignty issues, RedNote's ability to navigate this complex scenario may be limited.

User Agency Unlikely to Significantly Shape Global Digital Governance

As US-China competition over data control intensifies, the TikTok-to-RedNote migration could accelerate discussions on global data protection policies and platform governance reforms. The shifting international regulatory landscape, exemplified by the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), underscores growing concerns about how digital platforms handle data and align with both national and international interests.

Beyond geopolitical navigation, another overlooked complexity lies in user agency within the broader structure of digital capitalism. Over the last decade, the increasing concentration of power among a handful of big tech companies has sparked widespread critique and raised significant concerns about user autonomy. Some analysts believe that the unpredictable, bottom-up mediatory actions of users may hold the key to breakthroughs in global digital governance, which may help mitigate geopolitical conflicts over social media platforms at the national level.

Indeed, the unplanned and likely short-lived digital migration to RedNote has briefly reignited the illusory hope of reconnecting humanity and culture, challenging the boundaries we have created. There are, however, more profound issues associated with user agency when state power is at stake. If users can challenge the legitimacy of digital platforms and shift from being exploited, passive participants to active agents, this could further complicate geopolitical power dynamics. In this context, RedNote's rise transcends the issue of digital migration, becoming emblematic of the conflicts over national digital sovereignty sparked by TikTok. RedNote could, consequently, become the next battleground in the global tech wars, where platform governance, state power, and user agency collide — making it even less likely to remain a meeting point for different cultures.

Conclusion

The future of RedNote as a bridge for intercultural communication hinges on its ability to navigate platform responsibility, user agency, and state intervention. While it holds the promise of fostering global dialogue, it risks being swept into geopolitical conflicts. Whether RedNote can transcend these challenges to truly connect cultures remains to be seen.

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