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Headline: Chinese app called Tuber provides a still-censored look over Beijing's 'Great Firewall'

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Tuber 浏览器

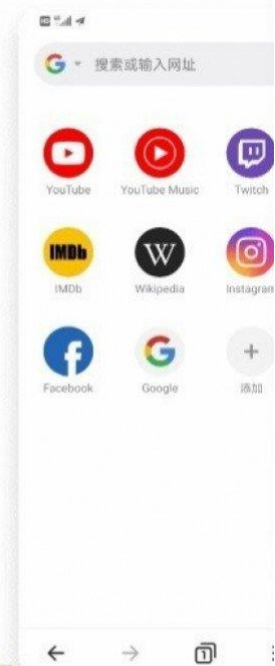
流畅看 YouTube 视频



Android



iPhone
敬请期待



A Chinese app has begun allowing limited and heavily censored access to some US social media sites that are normally blocked on the mainland, including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. The browser, called Tuber, grants some access to innocuous overseas content like entertainment news while still blocking all material Beijing's censors deem politically sensitive.

Tuber is the latest development in one of the many fronts on which Beijing and Washington are squabbling: the level of access each country's residents have to each other's social media platforms.

Chinese authorities have blocked nearly all American social media websites over the last decade, and the Trump administration has moved in recent weeks – unsuccessfully so far – to ban the Chinese apps TikTok and WeChat from the US market.

The browser, which is available on Android devices, is 70 per cent owned by a subsidiary of the biggest cybersecurity company in China, Qihoo 360, according to TechCrunch. Qihoo 360's founder, Zhou Hongyi, is a political adviser to the Chinese Communist Party.

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Tuber was celebrated on Twitter on Friday by some Chinese state media writers who said it was a sign that China's internet was opening up, but experts and people who tested the app in China said that was not the case.

"It's fake," said one person who tried using Tuber to view materials on the bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown and on the Falun Gong, a quasi-religious group that is banned on the mainland and called an "evil cult" by Beijing, but found nothing.

"There's not a single sensitive thing there," the person said, adding that it was no different from the rest of China's "castrated" internet.

Users must register for Tuber, which starts the process with a warning that they must not violate the Chinese government's "seven baselines", a set of self-censorship guidelines pertaining to the "socialist political system, the state's interests, citizen's legal rights, public order, morality, and facts and accuracy".

The warning also includes violations that users must avoid when using the US platforms, including "harm to the national reputation and interests" and "spreading rumours, disturbing social order and damaging social stability".

One internet freedom advocate and cybersecurity expert, cautioning that he had not yet conducted an audit of the app, said Tuber "sounds like a CCP-run honeypot".

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Yaqiu Wang, a researcher at Human Rights Watch who specialises in Chinese internet censorship, said there already were ways to access the internet beyond China's "Great Firewall" through virtual private networks (VPNs). She said the government has punished people for using unauthorised VPNs.

"If it's legit, if the government can monitor what you view and listen to or watch through this VPN, there's a way they can control the situation," she said. "So I think it could be a possibility that if you log onto those websites that are not allowed, they can later come back to you and punish you for doing that."

"What's the real purpose of having this? We don't know," she added. "My inclination is to at least not consider this as a sign of opening up. But in terms of whether it's a fishing mechanism, I don't know."

While it is unclear whether internet regulators were involved in the app's development, Tuber would at the least have been given government approval, said Sarah Cook, a Chinese media expert at the democracy watchdog Freedom House.

The app could further one of Beijing's objectives of drawing those looking for overseas entertainment away from VPNs, through which they might encounter politically sensitive content, said Cook.

A Global Web Index study from 2018 found that for most VPN users in mainland China, their primary reason for circumventing the firewall was to access entertainment.

The app, said Cook, was saying to such people: "You want to see YouTube, you want to watch videos of furry cats ... we'll let you do that. And this way, we're protecting against you, on the way, broadening your views and accessing this type of information we want to keep from you."

Andrew Mertha, director of the China studies programme at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, agreed that Tuber is likely a way to give Chinese users looking for US content a conduit other than VPNs, "thus monitoring normal user behavior more effectively".

"The cynic in me would say that it could be a way to get individuals to self-identify with having Western-centric tendencies that the regime could use against them," Mertha added.

Not everyone assessing Tuber was suspicious.

Henry Gao, an associate law professor at Singapore Management University, said the introduction of the app "might signal that the Chinese government is now reconsidering its approaches to internet blocking".

"There's a good chance that this app is sanctioned by the Chinese government," said Gao, speaking on Friday at a webinar on Chinese social media sponsored by Georgetown University Law Centre's Institute for Technology Law & Policy.

"Maybe the positive side effect of TikTok and WeChat ban is that the Chinese government now realises that bans do not work. If they started to ban other people, the other people would also ban them, maybe they will start to loosen up and then maybe we will end up in a better world."

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It is unclear if any of the US tech companies whose content is available on the app have coordinated with Chinese authorities on Tuber. Facebook and Google did not respond to an inquiry, and Twitter declined to comment.

Also on Friday, China restored access to another source of American entertainment: the NBA.

Chinese state-run broadcaster CCTV said it would resume broadcasting NBA games this weekend, one year after it pulled coverage of the league over a team official's Twitter post expressing support for Hong Kong protesters.

Announcing the move, a CCTV representative commended the NBA for sending holiday wishes to basketball fans during the Mid-Autumn Festival, along with its support of China's pandemic response.

CCTV noted the league's "continued expressions of goodwill", the representative said, "especially the NBA's active efforts since the beginning of this year to help the Chinese people in their fight against the coronavirus pandemic".

In February, the league provided donations worth US\$1.4 million – including medical equipment – to Hubei province, where the virus first emerged.

Almost one year ago to the day, CCTV suspended all programming of NBA games after the league's commissioner came to the defence of Houston Rockets general manager, Daryl Morey, who had tweeted a message reading: "Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong."

The decision was met with both applause from patriotic fans and some limited criticism of the government's stringent response.

The CCTV official acknowledged on Friday the sport's wide audience base in China and the high demand for broadcasts.

"To deny [Chinese fans] the final NBA game would be an instance of the authorities cutting off their nose to spite their face," said Mertha. "Most folks in mainland [China] already have a dim view of the protesters in Hong Kong, and they likely won't be swayed by any outspoken NBA players, regardless of how much they are beloved for their physical prowess."

But those fans face the prospect of very little basketball – possibly only one game.

Game 5 of the finals between the Los Angeles Lakers and Miami Heat will be played on Friday night in Florida. The Lakers lead the series four games to one and would wrap up a championship with a victory.

Some US tech companies have tried unsuccessfully over the years to re-enter the Chinese market after being blocked.

In 2018, leaked documents showed that Google was developing a censored version of its search engine for use in China, called Project Dragonfly, but the project was scrapped after heavy criticism in the US.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has also tried to curry favour with Chinese leaders – he reportedly asked Xi Jinping to choose a Chinese name for his child in 2015 – to allow his site back in the country. Zuckerberg struck a different tone this year, when he called China's internet controls "dangerous".

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Tuber's service closely echoes that of a short-lived browser launched in China last November. Called Kuniao, it purported to offer users access to otherwise blocked websites, but – like Tuber – cherry-picked what content was available on the platform.

After a burst of popularity, Kuniao vanished from the internet, suggesting that it had not won the blessing of internet regulators.

Additional reporting by Jodi Xu Klein and Robert Delaney