

Apple's China ties under Congressional scrutiny after Jon Stewart cancellation

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Lawmakers apparently balked after learning that Apple canceled the critically acclaimed weekly streaming talk show, *The Problem with Jon Stewart*, last month—reportedly over issues with the show's planned programming related to both China and artificial intelligence.

In a letter to Apple CEO Tim Cook, the Republican and Democratic leaders of the House of Representatives' Select Committee on Competition with the Chinese Communist Party urged Apple to explain its decision to end production of *The Problem with Jon Stewart* and “accelerate its efforts to reduce its dependence on” China. These steps, lawmakers wrote, are critical to help address “broader concerns about indirect Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence over the creative expression of American artists and companies on CCP-related topics.”

While lawmakers acknowledged that Apple has “the right to determine what content is appropriate for their streaming service,” they argued that “the coercive tactics of a foreign power should not be directly or indirectly influencing these determinations.”

According to lawmakers, “previous incidents involving

production companies other than Apple” have shown that “fear” of the CCP’s retaliation—as well as the “lure” of China’s market and financing opportunities—“have significantly chilled the creation of American content that could be perceived as critical of the CCP.”

On top of requesting that Apple provide a briefing on its decision to cancel Stewart’s show by December 15, they also want Apple to explain matters regarding its dependency on China. Lawmakers wrote that Cook’s “recent trip to Beijing” makes it appear as if “maintaining a positive relationship with the CCP may be a priority given ongoing supply chain and financial dependencies.”

“We support the ability of artists, writers, studios, and streaming services alike to create content without fear of potential CCP retaliation and punishment,” lawmakers wrote. “We similarly encourage American technology companies to diversify their supply chains, reduce their potential susceptibility to CCP pressure, and decrease their overall dependence on” China.

According to Reuters, the letter was released on Wednesday before a dinner where “top US business leaders” will be dining with Chinese President Xi Jinping in San Francisco, as Xi “seeks to court American companies and counter his country’s recent struggles to entice foreign investment.” That dinner follows a summit between President Joe Biden and Xi, where the leaders reportedly hoped to ease tensions and restore military communications between the two countries.

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“I think it’s paramount that you and I understand each other clearly, leader to leader, with no misconceptions or miscommunication,” Biden told Xi as their talks kicked off, CNN reported.

“Planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed,”

Xi told Biden.

One of Biden's goals with the summit is to ensure that competition between the US and China does not boil over into conflict. That is the primary focus of the House's Select Committee on Competition with the Chinese Communist Party, and in the lawmakers' letter to Cook, they said that "potential decisions to not renew shows, or not produce a film or show in the first place, due to anticipated CCP objections to particular content deny US viewers and global audiences access to important information" about China that "reflects a broader variety of perspectives" and "speaks to an important geopolitical challenge of our time."

As China seemingly seeks to deepen financial ties with US companies, the committee's letter pointed out that Apple's reliance on China as a market and manufacturing hub may be a prime example of what could be an increasingly common situation that "may raise concerns over the impacts of the CCP's coercive tactics." Lawmakers noted that if a major star like Jon Stewart can be censored, there can be little hope for "an aspiring comedian who wants to use satire to make broader points about human rights and authoritarianism."

Last month, a person familiar with the matter told The New York Times that Stewart told his staff that the cancellation came after "potential show topics related to China and artificial intelligence were causing concern among Apple executives." Sources told The Hollywood Reporter that Stewart felt "hamstrung" by Apple's requests to be "aligned" regarding topics on the show.

Lawmakers confirmed that they would also reach out to Stewart to hear his side of the story.

To ensure that no Americans will be censored due to the tech giant's ties to China, lawmakers now expect Apple to "publicly commit that content that could be perceived as critical of the

CCP or [China] is welcome on Apple TV+ and other Apple services.”

Apple did not immediately respond to Ars’ request to comment.

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