

Why Do Young Americans Support Hamas? Look at TikTok.

The app is digital fentanyl made by China. And it is brainwashing our youth against the country and our allies, argues Rep. Mike Gallagher.

Rep. Mike Gallagher Saturday, November 4, 2023



Chinese President Xi Jinping. (Photo by Xie Huanchi/Xinhua via Getty Images)

According to a Harvard/Harris [poll](#), 51 percent of Americans ages 18–24 believe Hamas was justified in its brutal terrorist attacks on innocent Israeli citizens on October 7.

I read that statistic at a time where I thought I'd lost the capacity to be shocked. For weeks, I've seen the clips and read the firsthand stories documenting Hamas's atrocities: burned bodies, decapitated babies, raped women, children tied together with their parents, mutilated corpses. I'd seen the rallies on elite campuses celebrating Hamas's murderous cause, the faculty letters excusing the terrorists. I thought I had grasped the extent of the moral rot. I thought I had seen the bottom.

But I hadn't.

How did we reach a point where a majority of young Americans hold such a morally bankrupt view of the world? Where many young Americans were rooting for terrorists *who had kidnapped American citizens*—and against a key American ally? Where were they getting the raw news to inform this upside-down world view?

The short answer is, increasingly, via social media and predominantly TikTok. TikTok is not just an app teenagers use to make viral dance videos. A growing number of Americans rely on it for their news. Today, TikTok is the top [search engine](#) for more than half of Gen Z, and about six in ten Americans are [hooked](#) on the app before their seventeenth birthday. And it is controlled by America's foremost adversary, one that does not share our interests or our values: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, is Chinese, and in China there is no such thing as a private company. As if to underscore the point, ByteDance's chief editor, Zhang Fuping, is [also](#) the boss of the company's internal Communist Party cell.

We know of TikTok's predatory nature because the app has several versions. In China, there is a safely sanitized version called [Douyin](#). That version, using much of the same technology, shows kids science experiments and other educational content, and [its use is limited](#) to forty minutes per day. Here in America, the application's algorithm is exquisitely tuned to prioritize polarizing outrage and addictive, brain-

numbing nonsense (at best) and dangerous propaganda (at worst). Put differently, ByteDance and the CCP have decided that China's children get spinach, and America's get [digital fentanyl](#).

And we are absolutely hooked, with 16 percent of teens using it “[almost constantly](#).” Today, [69.7 percent](#) of Americans aged 12-17, [76.2 percent](#) aged 18-24, and [54 percent](#) aged 25-34 use TikTok. By tweaking the TikTok algorithm, the CCP can censor information and influence Americans of all ages on a variety of issues. It can shape what facts they consider accurate, and what conclusions they draw from world events.

If you doubt that the CCP would introduce bias—against Israel, against Jews, against the West, or anything else—into apps under its de facto control, consider that on October 31 [The Wall Street Journal reported](#) that Chinese web platforms Baidu and Alibaba have wiped Israel off the map—literally. The two most widely used mapping programs in China show the outlines of Israel's territory but do not label it as Israel, and may not have for some time.

We know for a fact that the CCP uses TikTok to push its propaganda and censor views that diverge from the party line. Reports have confirmed that TikTok [spied on journalists](#) who wrote negative stories about TikTok. Via TikTok, [Chinese state media pushed](#) divisive information about U.S. politicians ahead of midterm elections. Numerous reports have found TikTok censoring and suppressing content about [Xinjiang](#), [Tibet](#), [Tiananmen Square](#), and other issues sensitive to the CCP. TikTok has also suppressed content about [LGBT issues](#), and even [temporarily blocked](#) a teenage American Muslim activist who criticized the CCP's treatment of Uyghur Muslims.

For those who know the Chinese Communist Party, this comes as no surprise. Propaganda and censorship are core features of its governing philosophy. In fact, the very word *brainwashing* originated as a [literal translation](#) of the Chinese term *xiniao*, used by early Chinese Communists

to describe their system for realigning the beliefs of their reactionary enemies.

Xi Jinping understands the importance of information warfare—or the “smokeless battlefield,” as he’s called it. In a text regarding “military political work,” Xi declared, “The crumbling of a regime always starts in the realm of ideas. . . changing the way people think is a long-term process. Once the front lines of human thought have been broken through, other defensive lines also become hard to defend.”

ByteDance leadership has made it [clear](#) that it can manipulate content, and therefore minds, at the behest of the CCP. In 2018, the CCP suspended ByteDance platform Toutiao because it “post[ed] content that goes against socialist core values.” In a fit of groveling self-criticism, the founder of ByteDance [apologized](#) for failing to respect “socialist core values,” “deviat[ing] from public opinion guidance,” and “fail[ing] to realize that socialist core values are the prerequisite to technology.” Following this, ByteDance announced a new strategy to [hire](#) 4,000 extra censors and integrate “socialist core values” into its technology.

To cover their tracks in the U.S., TikTok and ByteDance have [hired](#) an army of lobbyists, including former congressmen and senators, who are working overtime to stall legislative efforts to ban TikTok or force a sale to an American company. (Also helping the effort—the fact that powerful American investors have hundreds of billions of dollars [invested](#) in ByteDance’s success.)

Notwithstanding the complexities of regulating cross-border data flows, the House and Senate took overwhelming bipartisan action to ban the app on federal government devices. A growing number of [Democratic](#) and [Republican](#) governors have done the same. Australia, Canada, and the EU have enacted similar bans on government devices, while pioneering democracies like [India](#) have banned the app altogether.

In the best-case scenario, TikTok is CCP spyware—that's why governments have banned it on official phones. In the worst-case scenario, TikTok is perhaps the largest scale malign influence operation ever conducted.

CIA Director William J. Burns, FBI Director Christopher Wray, and our intelligence chiefs have all [warned](#) about the national security threat posed by TikTok. These warnings, combined with the rampant pro-Hamas propaganda on the app, should serve as a wake-up call for Americans.

Some have argued that there is a [constitutional right](#) to TikTok, that banning it would violate Americans' rights under the First Amendment. But the First Amendment surely does not require us to allow social media apps controlled by foreign adversaries to dominate the U.S. market.

Indeed, Congress has a long history of preventing foreign-controlled companies from operating in sensitive sectors of the U.S. economy, including in the media. For a century, the Federal Communications Commission has blocked concentrated foreign ownership of radio and television assets on national security grounds. Various laws and regulations today [restrict Beijing-controlled Huawei](#) from building telecommunications infrastructure in the U.S. market, even as such infrastructure serves (like TikTok) as a platform for transmitting speech.

The point is that neither banning Huawei nor banning TikTok restricts the speech of Americans. To the contrary, doing so protects our public square from the surveillance, malign influence, censorship, and propaganda of a foreign adversary.

Allowing a CCP-controlled entity to become the dominant player in America would be as if, in 1962, right before the Cuban Missile Crisis, we had allowed *Pravda* and the KGB to purchase *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, ABC, and NBC.

So long as TikTok—and control of its algorithm—remain in the grip of the Chinese Communist Party, we are ceding the ability to censor Americans' speech to a foreign adversary. Time for Congress to take action. Time to ban TikTok.

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