



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 2, 2023

How Communist China Uses TikTok to Undermine America

SINGAPORE — In December 2022, Gordon Chang, a senior fellow at the Gatestone Institute and author of *The Great U.S.-China Tech War*, said that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is relying on [TikTok](#) to incite social chaos in the United States in a bid to weaken America's system of government.

In replying to comments from Fox News host Jason Chaffetz about China's assertions that it has legitimate fears that it hopes the U.S. can take seriously, Chang said:

Well, first of all, China doesn't have legitimate concerns. It's not a legitimate state. And we should stop treating it as such, because as you say, it is committing genocide, crimes against humanity, it deliberately spread Covid-19 beyond its borders — that 6.7 million people outside of China who have died from a disease that should have never left the central part of that country. You know, we can go on and on. But clearly, China is engaging in a series of acts which are destructive not only toward the United States, but the international community as a whole.



Later in the interview, Chaffetz alluded to [a report that ByteDance](#), the Chinese parent company of TikTok, spied on various U.S. journalists.

“It is actually more serious that it is using the TikTok algorithm to disseminate Chinese propaganda, glorifying drug use, promoting violence on American streets, and this year, disseminating Russian narratives about the Ukraine war,” he added. “So this really is an attempt to undermine and actually even overthrow the U.S. government. And why do we permit it? I don't know. India banned TikTok, we should do the same thing.”

TikTok, an application developed by Chinese multinational internet technology company ByteDance, has billions of downloads to date, with over one third of its daily users being kids younger than 14. Powered by cutting-edge artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, TikTok was designed to be addictive as it offers customized content based on users' behavior. (Notably, TikTok does not operate in China, as ByteDance offers a different application to users in the communist state.)



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The application skyrocketed in popularity in the U.S. in 2017 after ByteDance acquired Chinese-owned social media company Musical.ly and combined its Santa Monica office with TikTok. Yet the application failed to notify U.S. officials about the Musical.ly-TikTok merger notwithstanding both companies' links to China, investigative journalist Geoffrey Cain [told](#) *The Epoch Times*' "American Thought Leaders."

"There are many red flags, but the biggest red flag about this acquisition is that TikTok did not notify the U.S. government about the acquisition," Cain said. "That should sound alarm bells. Why did TikTok decide not to do that review? It's as if they kind of snuck into the market and placed their software in the hands of the next generation."

AI enables Beijing to study and categorize a user before surmising his or her motivations. Data is power, and TikTok taps into data to curate content. This curated content then propels people to behave in specific ways. TikTok's influence is greater among the impressionable, young user demographic base. "If you want to know a person, all you have to do is look at their TikTok feed," Jonathan Bass, CEO of PTM Images, told the Gatestone Institute.

TikTok is a potent platform for swaying users' behavior. If users were, say, to engage in innocuous behavior like selling their collections of bric-a-brac, TikTok would likely benefit their sales immensely. But the application could be a double-edged sword if hostile actors are attempting to undermine the U.S. government, or any government in question.

Paul Dabrowa, an Australian national security specialist, told Gatestone, "My team discovered that TikTok can be used to trigger desired responses and behaviors."

According to Dabrowa's private note, "weaponized propaganda," particularly when run by AI, "can trigger wars, economic collapse, riots, and protests of all kinds."

"It can," he added, "also destroy the credibility of government institutions and turn a population against itself."

Some analysts think that the communist regime of Beijing altered TikTok's algorithm to provoke the George Floyd riots, which spread like wildfire across the U.S. in hours.

For instance, Bass posited that TikTok persuaded college-going white women to sympathize with poor black males, as it advanced the narrative that both groups had been deprived of opportunities.

It is evident that China has the ability to engineer desired behavior among TikTok's users. After all, engineers working for Douyin, TikTok's sister site in China, run [TikTok's algorithms](#), such as those deciding which videos are depicted to users. Therefore, Beijing enjoys the power to "boost the signal," that is, to curate content with powerful AI to spur people to behave in ways that the communist state wants.

For instance, many American teenagers used TikTok to considerably reduce [attendance](#) at then-President Donald Trump's Tulsa rally by reserving seats without any plan to show up. "Actually you just got ROCKED by teens on TikTok who flooded the Trump campaign w/fake ticket reservations," socialist Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez boasted in a Twitter post.

Dabrowa also divulged to the Gatestone Institute, "My team discovered that a foreign actor may come in the backdoor and change the feed." Such a revelation has prompted interest in the safety of TikTok.

FBI Director [Christopher Wray](#) also singled out major threats posed by TikTok, and said that U.S. officials were deliberating on how to tackle the application's national security concerns.



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“[TikTok’s] parent company [ByteDance] is controlled by the Chinese government and it gives them the potential to leverage the app in ways that I think should concern us,” Wray declared to an audience at the University of Michigan’s Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. He added that TikTok enables the CCP to manipulate the recommendation algorithm, which “allows them to manipulate content, and if they want to, to use it for influence operations.”

China could also possibly tap into TikTok to garner data on its users to be used for traditional espionage operations, said Wray. “They also have the ability to get access [via] the software through devices,” he said. “So you have millions of devices and that gives them the ability to engage in different kinds of malicious cyber activity through that.”

“All of these things are in the hands of a government that doesn’t share our values and that has a mission that’s very much at odds with what’s in the best interest of the United States,” the FBI director warned. “That should concern us.”

Wray’s remarks seem to echo those he [made to Congress](#) when he was asked if the CCP was proactively depending on ByteDance or TikTok to snoop on Americans.

In response to Wray’s speech, TikTok spokesperson Brooke Oberwetter said, “As Director Wray has previously said, the FBI’s input is being considered as part of our ongoing negotiations with the U.S. Government. While we can’t comment on the specifics of those confidential discussions, we are confident that we are on a path to fully satisfy all reasonable U.S. national security concerns and have already made significant strides toward implementing those solutions.”

“TikTok Inc., which offers the TikTok service in the United States, is a U.S. company bound by U.S. laws,” she pointed out.

In 2021, *The Epoch Times* reported that Beijing used TikTok to exert influence over Americans and the Chinese diaspora. “It’s essential to remember that all Chinese tech companies are subject to the control of the Chinese Communist Party [CCP],” Wang Yaqui, a senior researcher at New York-based Human Rights Watch, remarked during a [hearing](#) organized by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC).

Wang said that TikTok was not an ordinary social media application but instead placed users at risk. “There is no way for outsiders to know what information is being suppressed or promoted on TikTok that is due to the Chinese government’s influence,” she said. “What you see on TikTok is not so much decided by who you follow, but by the company’s algorithm.”

“If you search the hashtag Xinjiang, you will find many videos with smiling and dancing Uyghurs, but not so many videos that [are] about the camps and surveillance and human rights violations,” Wang continued. “Why is this the case? We don’t know.”

“There’s a lot we don’t know about what Chinese tech companies are doing in the U.S., what is being censored, promoted, and suppressed, and how data is being accessed, used, and shared,” she said. “And to what extent is the Chinese government ... telling them to do these things?”

Although TikTok has testified in the past that all U.S. user data was kept within the country, it has since acknowledged that such statements were false. One congressional hearing witnessed TikTok executives refusing to pledge to halt the transmission of U.S. data to China.

Also in question is whether the ambiguous wording in TikTok’s privacy policy would give ByteDance and its affiliates access to user data.



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The Federalist also reported that TikTok is being used as a “tool of cultural control” by China to weaken the U.S. by influencing its youth.

That report claimed that in its own country Beijing relies on a similar platform called Douyin, which is being used as a propaganda tool for Chinese youth. Douyin is tightly controlled by the state, as users under 14 can only use it at specific times of the day and for a limited duration. Chinese users may use Douyin to view “interesting popular science experiments, exhibitions in museums and galleries, beautiful scenery across the country, explanations of historical knowledge, and so on.”

However, TikTok feeds its users a series of videos and recommended clips according to what the user views. Critics have said that the recommended clips have been “sometimes extreme, anxiety-producing, and flat-out toxic.” *Christianity Daily* posited that TikTok can also be risky for kids who have mental health problems, as they may be able to view content that promotes harmful behavior. “All in all, harmful content on TikTok and other platforms can push children and teenagers further into their illness.”

Even the left-leaning media outlet CNN reported on the platform, noting that TikTok received a heavy fine in 2019 for collecting data on children. The application had to pay \$5.7 million to settle allegations that it unlawfully gathered personal information from children below the age of 13, such as names, email addresses, and locations. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) contended that Musical.ly, the video-sharing application that merged with TikTok, realized it was breaching the U.S. Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA.

Musical.ly, which had more than 65 million registered users in the United States before it merged with TikTok, received thousands of complaints from parents saying their underage children had created an account without telling them. However, COPPA mandates that internet companies obtain “verifiable parental consent” before collecting, using or revealing personal information from children.

All in all, TikTok definitely is a long-term threat to America’s sociopolitical fabric. Its handling of content and data could weaken U.S. influence at home and abroad. Worse still, it could engineer the thinking and actions of its human targets.

“If I can over time change your mindset, I can program you,” said Bass.



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