

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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October 12, 2021

Shou Zi Chew
Chief Executive Officer
TikTok
5800 Bristol Parkway
Culver City, CA 90032

Dear Mr. Shou Zi Chew:

I am writing to request information regarding TikTok's policies on monitoring and removing extremist and conspiracy content that advocates violence, its actions to address the increase in use of its platforms to promote acts of domestic terrorism and violent extremism, and its use of targeted advertising to reach individuals and groups that engage in these activities.

In recent years, domestic extremist groups' use of social media platforms, including TikTok, for communication, organizing, and planning has expanded. Over time, this has included dissemination of digital manifestos, manuscripts, or magazines, participation in online forums, and posting or streaming videos of violent acts.¹ Online platforms continue to be used to fundraise, recruit, organize, train, and plan for acts of domestic terrorism. In the lead up to the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, domestic extremists reportedly used TikTok to recruit, organize, and communicate.² Since January 6th, domestic extremist groups have used TikTok to continue to spread their messages through content supporting white supremacists, extremists, and terrorist organizations.³

¹ Robert O'Harrow Jr., Andrew Ba Tran, and Derek Hawkins, *The rise of domestic extremism in America*, Washington Post (Apr. 12, 2021) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/>); Ben Collins, *Instagram account connected to Gilroy shooter pushed staple of white supremacist internet forums*, NBC News (July 29, 2019) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/instagram-account-connected-gilroy-shooter-pushed-staple-white-supremacist-internet-n1035926>); *Racist, Violent, Unpunished: A White Hate Group's Campaign of Menace*, ProPublica (Oct. 19, 2019) (<https://www.propublica.org/article/white-hate-group-campaign-of-menace-rise-above-movement>).

² Olivia Little, *Far-right militias are using TikTok to organize and recruit new followers*, Media Matters for America (Jan. 12, 2021) (<https://www.mediamatters.org/january-6-insurrection/far-right-militias-are-using-tiktok-organize-and-recruit-new-followers>); Digital Citizens Alliance and Coalition for a Safer Web, *The Domestic Extremist Next Door* (Apr. 2021) (https://www.digitalcitizensalliance.org/clientuploads/directory/Reports/DCA_The_Domestic_Extremist_Next_Door.pdf).

³ Tina Nguyen and Mark Scott, *Right-wing extremist chatter spreads on new platforms as threat of political violence ramps up*, Politico (Jan. 12, 2021) (<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/12/right-wing-extremist-social-media-458387>); Ciaran O'Connor, *Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (Aug. 2021) (<https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/24/ISD-TikTok-Hatescape-Report-August-2021.pdf>).

Recent reports have identified that on April 19, 2021, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS's) Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) produced a document warning federal, state, and local counterterrorism and law enforcement partners about the spread of domestic extremist content through TikTok.⁴ The document detailed federal officials' concern over domestic extremists' use of TikTok "to recruit adherents, promote violence, and disseminate tactical guidance for use in various terrorist or criminal activities." DHS' I&A determined that TikTok's algorithms and processes "can unintentionally aid individuals' efforts to promote violent extremist content."⁵

Social media platforms can rapidly spread extremist content through their algorithms. TikTok's algorithm suggests content to users based on the time users spend engaging with similar content and on what content has the greatest overall engagement, through likes and follows, on the platform.⁶ A recent Wall Street Journal investigation, using multiple automated accounts, identified that TikTok's algorithm directed accounts with "a general interest in politics" to videos "about election conspiracies and QAnon."⁷ These algorithms increase user engagement, which in turn increases the amount of time users spend on these platforms, and by extension, the amount of advertisements that can be shown. There is a financial incentive for social media platforms like TikTok to keep users engaged on their platforms and viewing content, including extremist content.⁸

⁴ Betsy Woodruff Swan and Mark Scott, *DHS: Extremists used TikTok to promote Jan. 6 violence*, Politico (Sep. 16, 2021) (<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/16/dhs-tiktok-extremism-512079>); Office of Intelligence and Analysis, *Some Domestic Violent Extremists and Foreign Terrorist Organizations Exploiting TikTok*, Department of Homeland Security (Apr. 19, 2021). (This document was made public by Property of the People. See, *19 April 2021 DHS Intelligence re TikTok & Terrorism*, Property of the People (Sept. 13, 2021) (<https://propertyofthepeople.org/document-detail/?doc-id=21061577>).

⁵ Office of Intelligence and Analysis, *Some Domestic Violent Extremists and Foreign Terrorist Organizations Exploiting TikTok*, Department of Homeland Security (Apr. 19, 2021).

⁶ *Investigation: How TikTok's Algorithm Figures Out Your Deepest Desires*, Wall Street Journal (July 21, 2021) (https://www.wsj.com/video/series/inside-tiktoks-highly-secretive-algorithm/investigation-how-tiktok-algorithm-figures-out-your-deepest-desires/6C0C2040-FF25-4827-8528-2BD6612E3796?mod=hp_lead_pos5&mod=article_inline).

⁷ *Investigation: How TikTok's Algorithm Figures Out Your Deepest Desires*, Wall Street Journal (July 21, 2021) (https://www.wsj.com/video/series/inside-tiktoks-highly-secretive-algorithm/investigation-how-tiktok-algorithm-figures-out-your-deepest-desires/6C0C2040-FF25-4827-8528-2BD6612E3796?mod=hp_lead_pos5&mod=article_inline).

⁸ *Investigation: How TikTok's Algorithm Figures Out Your Deepest Desires*, Wall Street Journal (July 21, 2021) (https://www.wsj.com/video/series/inside-tiktoks-highly-secretive-algorithm/investigation-how-tiktok-algorithm-figures-out-your-deepest-desires/6C0C2040-FF25-4827-8528-2BD6612E3796?mod=hp_lead_pos5&mod=article_inline); Liza Lin, *TikTok Owner ByteDance's Annual Revenue Jumps to \$34.3 Billion*, Wall Street Journal (June 17, 2021) (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-owner-bytedances-annual-revenue-jumps-to-34-3-billion-11623903622>); Sara Morrison, *TikTok surprises users by making personalized ads mandatory*, Vox (Mar. 16, 2021) (<https://www.vox.com/recode/22334086/tiktok-privacy-policy-personalized-ads>).

TikTok's tools that allow advertisers to target advertisement based on user demographics, interests, and behaviors present additional concerns.⁹ Prior to this year, TikTok had allowed users to opt-out of receiving targeted ads, but as of April 15, 2021, TikTok reportedly removed this option, making targeted advertisements mandatory.¹⁰ Paid advertising is reportedly "responsible for the lion's share of TikTok's revenue," at around \$1.3 billion annually, and concerns have been raised over the use of targeted ads on social media and their potential for abuse by domestic extremists.¹¹

Under current law, with some exceptions, online service platforms are generally protected from legal liability resulting from user-generated content.¹² As a private company, TikTok generally has the right to decide, through policies and user guidelines, what is and what is not allowed on its platform. Using that right, TikTok has established policies that prohibit content that promotes violence and extremism.¹³ However, in the aftermath of recent domestic extremism events, questions remain about the effectiveness of these policies and TikTok's willingness and ability to enforce them.¹⁴

I appreciate that TikTok has taken actions in response to the increased use of social media platforms to promote domestic extremist violence, including inviting other platforms into a "global coalition to protect against harmful content."¹⁵ I also appreciate TikTok's steps to ban

⁹ Business Help Center, *Ad Targeting*, TikTok (<https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article?aid=9600>) (accessed Sep. 28, 2021).

¹⁰ Sara Morrison, *TikTok surprises users by making personalized ads mandatory*, Vox (Mar. 16, 2021) (<https://www.vox.com/recode/22334086/tiktok-privacy-policy-personalized-ads>).

¹¹ Tiffany Hsu, *TikTok Wants More Ad Dollars, and It Has a New Plan to Get Them*, New York Times (Sep. 28, 2021) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/28/business/media/tiktok-advertising.html>); Rae Nudson, *When targeted ads feel a little too targeted*, Vox (Apr. 9, 2020) (<https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/4/9/21204425/targeted-ads-fertility-eating-disorder-coronavirus>); Ryan Mac and Craig Silverman, *Facebook Has Been Showing Military Gear Ads Next To Insurrection Posts*, BuzzFeed (Jan. 13, 2021) (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/facebook-profits-military-gear-ads-capitol-riot>); Joe Tidy, *Twitter apologises for letting ads target neo-Nazis and bigots*, BBC (Jan. 16, 2020) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51112238>); Leon Yin and Aaron Sankin, *How We Discovered Google's Hate Blocklist for Ad Placements on YouTube*, The Markup (Apr. 8, 2021) (<https://themarkup.org/google-the-giant/2021/04/08/how-we-discovered-googles-hate-blocklist-for-ad-placements-on-youtube>).

¹² The Communications Decency Act of 1996, as amended (47 U.S.C. §§ 223, 230). *See also*, Congressional Research Service, *How Broad a Shield? A Brief Overview of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act* (LSB10082) (Feb. 21, 2018).

¹³ TikTok, *Community Guidelines* (<https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en>) (accessed on September 28, 2021). These policies include policies on violent extremism, hateful behavior, illegal activities and regulated goods, violent and graphic content, and harassment and bullying.

¹⁴ Digital Citizens Alliance and Coalition for a Safer Web, *The Domestic Extremist Next Door* (Apr. 2021) (https://www.digitalcitizensalliance.org/clientuploads/directory/Reports/DCA_The_Domestic_Extremist_Next_Door.pdf); Ciaran O'Connor, *Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (Aug. 2021) (<https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/24/ISD-TikTok-Hatescape-Report-August-2021.pdf>).

¹⁵ TikTok, *TikTok proposes global coalition to protect against harmful content* (Sep. 22, 2020) (<https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktok-proposes-global-coalition-to-protect-against-harmful-content/>).

extremist and conspiracy groups, remove content promoting violence and extremism after January 6th, and remove over 61 million videos from January 1, 2021 to March 31, 2021 that violated TikTok's policies.¹⁶ However, TikTok removed some extremist content only after continued reports from outside parties, and TikTok extremist content has been allowed to return and continue operating on its platform.¹⁷ I am also concerned that TikTok was reportedly prevented from joining the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism due to concerns from other platforms regarding TikTok's "data collection and censorship practices."¹⁸

Moreover, TikTok's Chinese owned parent company, ByteDance Ltd., is subject to China's own data disclosure laws. Former President Trump issued two Executive Orders, including an August 6, 2020 Executive Order directing additional steps – including prohibiting transactions with ByteDance – to address national security concerns based on the company's ownership, finding that ByteDance's ownership of TikTok "continues to threaten the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States."¹⁹ While these orders have since been revoked, concerns remain regarding the Chinese government's influence over TikTok and the potential national security threat, including use of platforms like TikTok to carry out misinformation campaigns in the United States.²⁰

In light of recurring concerns about advertising and content policies related to domestic extremist threats and to better understand what TikTok is doing to address the proliferation of domestic extremism online, for the period dating from January 1, 2019 to present, I respectfully request that you provide the following documents and information:

1. TikTok's guidelines and parameters for determining how content violates TikTok's policies prohibiting content that promotes violence and extremism, including without

¹⁶ Bobby Allyn, *TikTok Tightens Crackdown On QAnon, Will Ban Accounts That Promote Disinformation*, NPR (Oct. 18, 2020) (<https://www.npr.org/2020/10/18/925144034/tiktok-tightens-crackdown-on-qanon-will-ban-accounts-that-promote-disinformation>); Sarah Perez, *TikTok bans videos of Trump inciting mob, blocks #stormthecapital and other hashtags*, Tech Crunch (Jan. 7, 2021) (<https://techcrunch.com/2021/01/07/tiktok-bans-videos-of-trump-inciting-mob-blocks-stormthecapital-and-other-hashtags/>); TikTok, *TikTok Transparency Report 2021 Q1* (accessed on Sep. 28, 2021) (<https://www.tiktok.com/safety/resources/tiktok-transparency-report-2021-h-1?lang=en>).

¹⁷ Betsy Woodruff Swan and Mark Scott, *DHS: Extremists used TikTok to promote Jan. 6 violence*, Politico (Sep. 16, 2021) (<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/16/dhs-tiktok-extremism-512079>).

¹⁸ Emily Birnbaum, *TikTok seeks to join tech fight against online terrorism*, The Hill (Nov. 9, 2019) (<https://thehill.com/policy/technology/468884-tiktok-seeks-to-join-tech-fight-against-online-terrorism>).

¹⁹ Exec. Order No. 13942, 85 Fed. Reg. 48637 (Aug. 11, 2020); Exec. Order No. 13873, 84 Fed. Reg. 22689 (May 15, 2019).

²⁰ Adam Chan, *CFIUS, Team Telecom and China*, Lawfare (Sep. 28, 2021) (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/cfius-team-telecom-and-china>); Salvador Rodriguez, *TikTok insiders say social media company is tightly controlled by Chinese parent ByteDance*, CNBC (June 25, 2021) (<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/25/tiktok-insiders-say-chinese-parent-bytedance-in-control.html>); Edward Wong, Matthew Rosenberg, and Julian E. Barnes, *Chinese Agents Helped Spread Messages That Sowed Virus Panic in U.S., Officials Say*, New York Times (Apr. 22, 2020) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/coronavirus-china-disinformation.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>).

limitation information on how TikTok’s artificial intelligence (AI) moderation software finds such content.

2. Information identifying TikTok’s terms of service and what actions have been taken to enforce and comply with these terms of service, including without limitation, policies for removal of content that violates the policies prohibiting the promotion of violence and extremism.
3. Information on the content covered by the guidelines and policies referenced in question 1, including content related to the promotion, recruitment, and advocacy of events leading to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol that was removed from TikTok’s platforms in the three months preceding the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.
4. Strategies and actions, planned or taken, by TikTok in coordination with federal, state, local, and tribal governments and agencies to detect and prevent extremist violence online, including without limitation, in relation to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.
5. TikTok’s guidelines and parameters for recommending content, including without limitation a description of how their algorithms identify and decide how to recommend content.
6. TikTok’s guidelines and parameters for targeted advertising, including without limitation a description of how their algorithms identify advertisements’ intended targets.
7. TikTok’s guidelines and procedures in place to ensure that the advertising parameters in question 6 align with its policies on hate speech, violence, and domestic adversarial threat policies.
8. A description of TikTok’s actions to ensure its terms of service and targeted advertising policies are enforced.

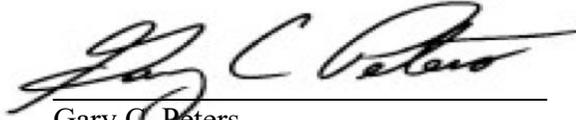
The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is authorized by Rule XXV of the Standing Rules of the Senate and Section 12(e) of S. Res. 70 (117th Congress) to investigate the “efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of all agencies and departments of the Government” and “processes as tested against the requirements imposed by the rapidly mounting complexity of national security problems... [and] legislative and other proposals to improve these methods, processes, and relationships.”²¹

²¹ S. Rule XXV, S. Res. 70 (117th Congress).

Shou Zi Chew
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Please provide these documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than October 27, 2021. Thank you for your prompt attention and cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary C. Peters", written over a horizontal line.

Gary C. Peters
Chairman