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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,  
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

WARREN GUNNELS, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR  
AMANDA LINCOLN, REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR

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December 13, 2023

TO: Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
FR: Ranking Member Bill Cassidy, M.D.  
DT: December 13, 2023  
RE: Investigation into TikTok and other social media platforms and how these platforms perpetuate hateful content, leading to the increase in violence in schools including the rise in antisemitism

Dear Fellow Committee Members:

I, like many of you, have expressed serious national security concerns about widespread use of the Chinese-owned social media platform, TikTok.<sup>1</sup> Last Congress, I raised concerns about TikTok's blatant attempt to gather information on our intelligence community as a sponsor of the U.S. Cyber Games,<sup>2</sup> and co-sponsored the *No TikTok on Government Devices Act*, which became law last December. This Congress, however, I am increasingly concerned about the impact TikTok has on our nation's youth and, most recently, the spread of antisemitic violence in the United States.

On May 3, 2023, I sent letters to 64 Louisiana school superintendents to request information regarding TikTok's impact on the physical and mental health of Louisiana students and whether schools experience acts of vandalism or violence which are traceable to use of TikTok and other social media platforms.<sup>3</sup> I have since expanded this inquiry by gathering feedback from other industry leaders and mental health professionals.

During the course of the investigation, 35 respondents shared information with my office in connection with this investigation, including: 25 superintendents, three principals, one school counselor, three mental health professionals, and three student welfare officials. Based on the information collected, an overwhelming majority of these respondents raised serious concerns that social media platforms, including TikTok, cause considerable damage to our children, teens, and young adults' ability to know right from wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> Press Release, Senator Bill Cassidy, MD (R-LA), Cassidy, Cotton Force Chinese-Rune TikTok Out of U.S. Cyber Games Sponsorship (Oct. 26, 2021), <https://www.cassidy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cassidy-cotton-force-chinese-run-tiktok-out-of-us-cyber-games-sponsorship/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Press Release, Senator Bill Cassidy, MD, Ranking Member Cassidy Requests Information on Impact of TikTok on Louisiana Students (May 4, 2023), <https://www.cassidy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/ranking-member-cassidy-requests-information-on-impact-of-tiktok-on-louisiana-students/>.

For example, 12 of the 25 superintendents acknowledged an increase in behavioral issues in Louisiana schools since 2020 which they attributed, in part, to the substantial uptick in the use of TikTok and other social media platforms following the COVID-19 pandemic. Several of these officials explained that fighting begins during student-to-student online interactions which take place after school hours, and eventually leads to altercations on school grounds. Many times, footage of violent acts are shared on either Instagram or TikTok for “likes.” The most severe example of violence at a Louisiana school directly relates to a TikTok challenge that made national headlines in October 2021. In a video uploaded to TikTok, an 18-year-old female in Covington, Louisiana took part in the “Slap a Teacher Challenge,” violently beating a wheelchair-bound, 64-year-old female teacher immediately after class was dismissed.<sup>4</sup> The teacher suffered multiple physical and psychological injuries from the attack and has not returned to the classroom.

Earlier this year, Louisiana’s Livingston Parish school board joined a growing number of schools nationwide to file a lawsuit against TikTok and Meta. The lawsuit states: “Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, with design elements that intentionally keep children engaged for as long as possible — to the exclusion of all other activities — harm their users emotionally, developmentally, and physically.”<sup>5</sup>

Mental health professionals interviewed during this investigation were also asked about TikTok’s impact on children, teens, and young adults’ developing brains. Dr. Jessica Griffin, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at The University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, stated: “Platforms like TikTok, with short rapid-fire videos may have dangerous repercussions for the still developing brain.” In her clinical work, Dr. Griffin has heard from parents whose children struggle to watch a full-length movie since they’re so used to being presented new topics in short order. Dr. Griffin also believes the personalized TikTok algorithms present users with some of their deepest worries and fears. Citing a previous interview, Dr. Griffin told committee staff: “If your child has concerns about an eating disorder, anxiety, or depression, they may look to social media for answers. In doing so, this affects their algorithm and they are more likely to have content related to those topics show up in their feed, which could provide needed support at a vulnerable time, but if given the wrong information, has the potential to be very damaging.”

Dr. Tracie Pasold, a psychology professor at LSU-Shreveport, fears these psychological issues will not correct themselves as the child matures. She told staff: “The brain continues to develop into the mid-20’s; we’re already seeing signs that addiction to TikTok videos, much like any other drug, affects the development of the brain’s frontal lobe, which is responsible for reasoning, impulse control, and the ability to know right from wrong.”

Since the Hamas-led October massacre in Israel, there has been a disturbing rise in antisemitic incidents, including targeted harassment and violent attacks, directed at Jewish students on campuses in the United States, including in my home state of Louisiana.<sup>6</sup> In regard to the Israel-Hamas War, Dr. Griffin explained to staff: “Images of war have been viewed by kids since before

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<sup>4</sup> FOX8 Staff, *Louisiana student who attacked wheelchair-bound teacher to serve one year in prison*, FOX8 (Sept. 22, 2022), <https://www.fox8live.com/2022/09/22/louisiana-student-who-attacked-teacher-tiktok-challenge-pleads-guilty/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Livingston Parish Board v. Meta Platforms, Inc., et al.*, No. 23-00807 (2023).

<sup>6</sup> Haley Cohen, *Pro-Palestinian protesters assault several Jewish students at Tulane, witnesses say*, JEWISHINSIDER (Oct. 27, 2023), <https://jewishinsider.com/2023/10/pro-palestinian-protesters-assault-several-jewish-students-at-tulane-2/>.

Vietnam. However, a child watching the news is likely doing so with their parents present in the home or alongside a parent or caregiver, allowing [the parents] to decide when it's too much and change the channel, or frame what kids are seeing within a framework of their own values." As children are typically scrolling social media alone or with their peers, Dr. Griffin believes a child watching a TikTok video about the war or other troubling subjects alone, without any parental oversight or opportunities for conversation with their parents, is more likely to take the video at face value, even if it is misinformation, which may also be disturbing and psychologically distressing for a child.

I am extremely concerned about the rise of antisemitism in the United States. This is why, on November 9, I led a bipartisan roundtable with members of this Committee to examine these issues.<sup>7</sup> The Committee heard from five expert panelists, including Jewish students, professors, and other esteemed members of the Jewish community. For example, Ms. Julia Steinberg, a Stanford student, testified that her fellow classmates "posted on their Instagram stories 'settlers are not civilians'" and chanted the genocidal threat, "from the [R]iver to the [S]ea Palestine will be free" at a pro-Palestine rally on campus.<sup>8</sup> Mr. Eli Shmidman, a law student at Columbia University, testified that over 20 student groups signed a joint statement entitled "oppression breeds resistance," blaming Israel for the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack.<sup>9</sup> He himself faced antisemitic remarks when a fellow student yelled across to him in the library, "F the Jews."<sup>10</sup>

Similar troubling instances were discussed during a recent U.S. House Education & Workforce Committee hearing on December 5, where the presidents of Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and the University of Pennsylvania testified about the rise of antisemitism on their campuses. During the hearing, and in response to questions about social media's role in rising antisemitism, Harvard President Claudine Gay testified with an observation of the "social-mediafication" of campus dialogue in times of crisis, saying: "It's intemperate, its ahistorical, and just mean." Ms. Gay further offered that this type of communication is "reflexive" for some students on Harvard's campus. MIT President Sally Kornbluth agreed with Gay, saying: "Social media is like a drug: It's addictive, and it reinforces over and over again messages regardless of their truth. And so, as educational communities, we need to strive for making sure our students know truth and speak to each other as human beings."

While social media was not the focus of this Committee's November 9 roundtable, antisemitic speech on social media platforms has increased exponentially since the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre, and is a contributing factor in the increase in antisemitic behavior on campus. In a report dated November 9, the American Defamation League (ADL) found a surge in antisemitism on X (formerly Twitter),<sup>11</sup> and in a later report dated November 20, ADL also found that "bad actors are sidestepping TikTok's moderation policies to spread antisemitic content through slideshows

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<sup>7</sup> Press Release, Senator Bill Cassidy, MD, Ranking Member Cassidy Leads Bipartisan Roundtable on Rising Anti-Semitism on College Campuses (Nov. 9, 2023), <https://www.help.senate.gov/ranking/newsroom/press/ranking-member-cassidy-leads-bipartisan-roundtable-on-rising-anti-semitism-on-college-campuses>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBIKnGbsNDg>.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> ADL Center on Technology and Society, *Online Antisemitism Increased after Hamas Attack*, ADL (Nov. 9, 2023), <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/online-antisemitism-increased-after-hamas-attack>.

(Photo Mode) and hashtags.”<sup>12</sup> ADL further notes that: “[w]hile [TikTok] remains difficult to study due to the lack of data it shares with civil society organizations, [ADL] was able to identify a concerning problem that, at a time where antisemitism and online hate are particularly concerning, warrants enforcement fixes from the company.”<sup>13</sup>

In the case of October 7<sup>th</sup>, TikTok’s algorithm has allowed “trolls and extremists to find—and spread—disturbing and virulent content, including outright slurs” concerning the Israel-Hamas war.<sup>14</sup> As a result, more than 40 Jewish tech leaders reportedly met with TikTok’s CEO to discuss their concern that TikTok’s algorithm favored pro-Palestine content over pro-Israel content as well as to convince TikTok to reexamine its algorithm.<sup>15</sup> However, based on reports, even these leaders believe that TikTok “doesn’t appear to be poised to act on any of their concerns,” and that they have to “look to the U.S. government to act.”<sup>16</sup>

In short, the use of TikTok and other social media platforms are a contributing factor in the rise of violence in our schools. Its use affects children, teens, and young adults’ ability to know right from wrong, especially when it comes to the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre. It is imperative that TikTok and other social media platforms take meaningful steps to address these matters. For these reasons, I wanted to share the most recent results of this inquiry with my Fellow members, and will continue my review of TikTok, and how its failed moderation policies further perpetuate violence in our schools.

*Bill Cassidy, M.D.*

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Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Ranking Member

U.S. Committee on Health,

Education, Labor, and Pensions

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<sup>12</sup> ADL Center on Technology and Society, *Sliding Through: Spreading Antisemitism on TikTok by Exploiting Moderation Gaps*, ADL (Nov. 20, 2023), <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/sliding-through-spreading-antisemitism-tiktok-exploiting-moderation-gaps>

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> Michal Lev-Ram, *Jewish tech leaders met with TikTok’s CEO to raise concerns that the platform is biased toward Pro-Palestine content*, FORBES (Nov. 30, 2023), [https://fortune.com/2023/11/30/40-tech-leaders-founders-bonobos-tinder-gusto-meeting-tiktok-ceo-israel-palestine-content/?utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=fortunemagazine&xid=soc\\_socialflow\\_twitter\\_FORTUNE](https://fortune.com/2023/11/30/40-tech-leaders-founders-bonobos-tinder-gusto-meeting-tiktok-ceo-israel-palestine-content/?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=fortunemagazine&xid=soc_socialflow_twitter_FORTUNE).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*