

TikTok is a New Kind of Superweapon

The ultimate weapon of mass distraction



Gurwinder ✓
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For thousands of years, humans sought to subjugate their enemies by inflicting pain, misery, and terror. They did this because these were the most paralyzing emotions they could consistently evoke; all it took was the slash of a sword or pull of a trigger.

But as our understanding of psychology has developed, so it has become easier to evoke other emotions in complete strangers. Advances in the understanding of positive reinforcement, driven mostly by people trying to get us to click on links, have now made it possible to consistently give people on the other side of the world dopamine hits at scale.

As such, pleasure is now a weapon; a way to incapacitate an enemy as surely as does pain. And the first pleasure-weapon of mass destruction may just be a little app on your phone called TikTok.

I. The Smiling Tiger

TikTok is the most successful app in history. It emerged in 2017 out of the Chinese video-sharing app Douyin and within three years it had become the [most downloaded](#) app in the world, later [surpassing](#) Google as the world's most visited web domain.

TikTok's conquest of human attention was facilitated by the covid lockdowns of 2020, but its success wasn't mere luck. There's something about the design of the app that makes it unusually irresistible.

Other platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, use recommendation algorithms as features to enhance the core product. With TikTok, the recommendation algorithm is the core product. You don't need to form a social network or list your interests for the platform to begin tailoring content to your desires, you just start watching, skipping any videos that don't immediately draw your interest. Tiktok uses a proprietary algorithm, known simply as the For You algorithm, that uses machine learning to build a personality profile of you by training itself on your watch habits (and [possibly](#) your facial expressions.) Since a TikTok video is generally much shorter than, say, a YouTube video, the algorithm acquires training data from you at a much faster rate, allowing it to quickly zero in on you.

The result is a system that's unsurpassed at figuring you out. And once it's figured you out, it can then show you what it needs to in order to addict you.

Since the For You algorithm favors only the most instantly mesmerizing content, its constructive videos—such as “how to” guides and field journalism—tend to be relegated to the fringes in favor of tasty but malignant [junk info](#). Many of the most popular TikTokers, such as Charli D'Amelio, Bella Poarch, and Addison Rae, do little more than vapidly dance and lip-sync.

Individually, such videos are harmless, but the algorithm doesn't intend to show you just one. When it receives the signal that it's got your attention, it doubles down on whatever it did to get it. This allows it to feed your obsessions, showing you hypnotic content again and again, reinforcing its imprint on your brain. This content can include [promotion](#) of self-harm and eating disorders, and [uncritical encouragement](#) of sex-reassignment surgery. There's evidence that watching such content can cause mass psychogenic illness: researchers recently identified a new [phenomenon](#) where otherwise healthy young girls who watched clips of Tourette's sufferers developed Tourette's-like tics.

A more common way TikTok promotes irrational behavior is with viral trends and “challenges,” where people engage in a specific act of idiocy in the hope it'll make them TikTok-famous. Acts include [licking toilets](#), [snorting suntan lotion](#), [eating chicken cooked in NyQuil](#), and [stealing cars](#). One challenge, known as “[devious licks](#)”, encourages kids to vandalize property, while the “blackout challenge,” in which kids purposefully choke themselves with household items, has even led to several deaths, including a [little girl](#) a few days ago.



Two unfortunate victims of TikTok-induced brain damage.

As troublesome as TikTok's trends are, the app's greatest danger lies not in any specific content but in its general addictive nature. Studies on long term TikTok addiction don't yet exist for obvious reasons, but, based on what we know of internet addiction generally, we can extrapolate its eventual effects on habitual TikTokers.

There's a substantial body of [research](#) showing a strong association between smartphone addiction, shrinkage of the brain's gray matter, and "digital dementia," an umbrella term for the onset of anxiety and depression and the deterioration of memory, attention span, self-esteem, and impulse control (the last of which increases the addiction).

These are the problems caused by internet addiction generally. But there's something about TikTok that makes it uniquely dangerous.

In order to develop and maintain mental faculties like memory and attention span, one needs to practice using them. TikTok, more than any other app, is designed to give you what you want while requiring you to do as little as possible. It cares little who you follow or what buttons you

click; its [main consideration](#) is how long you spend watching. Its reliance on machine learning rather than user input, combined with the fact that TikTok clips are so short they require minimal memory and attention span, makes browsing TikTok the most passive, uninteractive experience of all major platforms.

If it's the passive nature of online content consumption that causes atrophy of mental faculties, then TikTok, as the most passively used platform, will naturally cause the most atrophy. Indeed many habitual TikTokers can already be found complaining on [websites like Reddit](#) about their loss of mental ability, a phenomenon that's come to be known as "TikTok brain." If the signs are becoming apparent already, imagine what TikTok addiction will have done to young developing brains a decade from now.

TikTok's capacity to stupefy people, both *acutely* by encouraging idiotic behavior, and *chronically* by atrophying the brain, should prompt consideration of its potential use as a new kind of weapon, one that seeks to neutralize enemies not by inflicting pain and terror, but by inflicting pleasure.

Last month FBI Director Chris Wray [warned](#) that TikTok is controlled by a Chinese government that could "use it for influence operations." So how likely is it that one such influence operation might include addicting young Westerners to mind-numbing content to create a generation of nincompoops?

The first indication that the Chinese Communist Party is aware of TikTok's malign influence on kids is that it's forbidden access of the app to Chinese kids. The American tech ethicist Tristan Harris [pointed out](#) that the Chinese version of TikTok, Douyin, is a "spinach" version where kids don't see twerkers and toilet-lickers but science experiments and educational videos. Furthermore, Douyin is only accessible to kids for 40 minutes per day, and it cannot be accessed between 10pm and 6am.

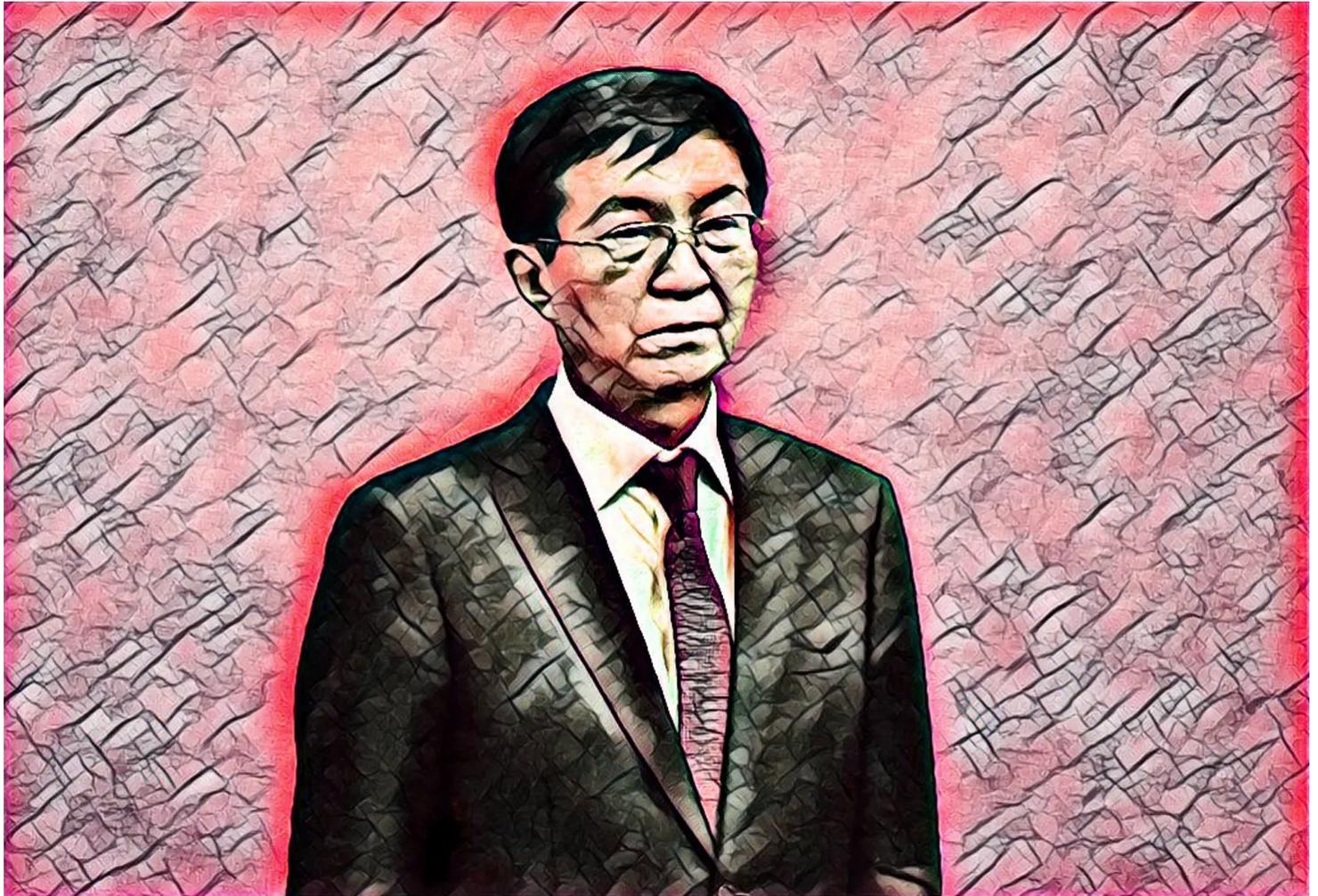
Has the CCP enforced such rules to protect its people from what it intends to inflict on the West? When one examines the philosophical doctrines behind the rules, it becomes clear that the CCP doesn't just believe that apps like TikTok make people stupid, but that they destroy civilizations.

II. Seven Mouths, Eight Tongues

China has been suspicious of Western liberal capitalism since the 1800s, when the country's initial openness led to the Western powers flooding China with opium. The epidemic of addiction, combined with the ensuing Opium Wars, accelerated the fall of the Qing Dynasty and led to the Century of Humiliation in which China was subject to harsh and unequal terms by Britain and the US.

Mao is credited with eventually crushing the opium epidemic, and since then the view among many in China has been that Western liberalism leads to decadence and that authoritarianism is the cure. But one man has done more than anyone to turn this thesis into policy.

His name is Wang Huning, and, despite not being well known outside China, he has been China's [top ideological theorist](#) for three decades, and he is now member number 4 of the seven-man Standing Committee—China's most powerful body. He advised China's former leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and now he advises Xi Jinping, authoring many of his policies. In China he is called “guoshi” (国师: literally, “teacher of the nation”).



Wang Huning

Wang refuses to do press or to even speak with foreigners, but his worldview can be surmised from the books he wrote earlier in his life. In August 1988, Wang accepted an invitation to spend six months in the US, and traveled from state to state noting the way American society operates, examining its strengths and weaknesses. He recorded his findings in the 1991 book, [America Against America](#), which has since become a key CCP text for understanding the US.

The premise of the book is simple: the US is a paradox composed of contradictions: its two primary values—freedom and equality—are mutually exclusive. It has many different cultures, and therefore no overall culture. And its market-driven society has given it economic riches but

spiritual poverty. As he writes in the book, “American institutions, culture and values oppose the United States itself.”

For Wang, the US’s contradictions stem from one source: nihilism. The country has become severed from its traditions and is so individualistic it can’t make up its mind what it as a nation believes. Without an overarching culture maintaining its values, the government’s regulatory powers are weak, easily corrupted by lobbying or paralyzed by partisan bickering. As such, the nation’s progress is directed mostly by blind market forces; it obeys not a single command but a cacophony of three hundred million demands that lead it everywhere and nowhere.

In Wang’s view, the lack of a unifying culture puts a hard limit on the US’s progress. The country is constantly producing wondrous new technologies, but these technologies have no guiding purpose other than their own proliferation. The result is that all technological advancement leads the US along one unfortunate trajectory: toward more and more commodification. Wang writes:

“Human flesh, sex, knowledge, politics, power, and law can all become the target of commodification... Commodification, in many ways, corrupts society and leads to a number of serious social problems. These problems, in turn, can increase the pressure on the political and administrative system.”

Thus, by turning everything into a product, Western capitalism devours every aspect of American culture, including the traditions that bind it together as a nation, leading to atomization and polarization. The commodification also devours meaning and purpose, and to plug the expanding spiritual hole that this leaves, Americans turn to momentary pleasures—drugs, fast food, and amusements—driving the nation further into decadence and decay.

For Wang, then, the US’s unprecedented technological progress is leading it into a chasm. Every new microchip, TV, and automobile only distracts and sedates Americans further. As Wang writes in his book, “it is not the people who master the technology, but the technology that masters the people.” Though these words are 30 years old, they could easily have been talking about social media addiction.

Wang theorized that the conflict between the US’s economic system and its value system made it fundamentally unstable and destined for ever more commodification, nihilism, and decadence, until it finally collapses under the weight of its own contradictions. To prevent China’s own technological advancement leading it down the same perilous path, Wang proposed an extreme solution: neo-authoritarianism. In his 1988 [essay](#), “The Structure of China’s Changing Political Culture,” Wang wrote that the only way a nation can avoid the US’s problems is by instilling “core values”—a national consensus of beliefs and principles rooted in the traditions of the past and directed toward a clear goal in the future. Such a consensus could eventually ward off nihilism and decadence, but cultivating it would in turn require the elimination of nihilism and

decadence. This idea has been central to President Xi's governance strategy, which has emphasized "[core socialist values](#)" like civility, patriotism, and integrity.

So how has the push for these socialist core values affected the CCP's approach to social media?

The creator of TikTok and CEO of Bytedance, Zhang Yiming, originally intended for the content on TikTok and its Chinese version, Douyin, to be determined purely by popularity. As such, Douyin started off much like TikTok is now, with the content dominated by teenagers singing and dancing.

In April 2018, the CCP began action against Zhang. Its media watchdog, the National Radio and Television Administration, ordered the removal from Chinese app stores of Bytedance's then-most popular app, Toutiao, and its AI news aggregator, Neihan Duanzi, citing their platforming of "improper" content. Zhang then took to social media to offer a groveling public [apology](#), stating: "Our products took the wrong path, and content appeared that was incommensurate with socialist core values."

Shortly after, Bytedance announced it would recruit thousands more people to moderate content, and, according to [CNN](#), in the subsequent job ads it stated a preference for CCP members with "strong political sensitivity."

The CCP's influence over Bytedance has only grown since then. Last year, the Party acquired a "golden share" in Bytedance's Beijing entity, and one of its officials, Wu Shugang, took one of the company's three board seats.

The CCP's intrusion into Bytedance's operations is part of a broader strategy by Xi, called the "Profound Transformation", which seeks to clear space for the instituting of core socialist values by ridding China of "decadent" online content. In August 2021, a [statement](#) appeared across Chinese state media calling for an end to TikTok-style "tittytainment" for fear that "our young people will lose their strong and masculine vibes and we will collapse."

In the wake of that statement, there have been crackdowns on "[sissy-men](#)" fashions, "[digital drugs](#)" like online gaming, and "[toxic idol worship](#)." Consequently, many online influencers have been forcibly deprived of their influence, with some, such as the movie star [Zhao Wei](#), having their entire presence erased from the Chinese web.

For Xi and the CCP, eliminating "decadent" TikTok-style content from China is a matter of survival, because such content is considered a herald of nihilism, a regression of humans back to beasts, a symptom of the West's terminal illness that must be prevented from metastasizing to China.

And yet, while cracking down on this content domestically, China has continued to allow its export internationally as part of Xi's "digital Silk Road" ([数字丝绸之路](#)). TikTok is [known](#) to

ensor content that displeases Beijing, such as mentions of Falun Gong or Tiananmen Square, but otherwise it has free rein to show Westerners what it wants; “tittytainment” and “sissy men” are everywhere on the app. So why the hypocritical disparity in rules? Is the digital Silk Road intended as poetic justice for the original Silk Road, whereby the Western powers preached Christian values while trafficking chemical TikTok—opium—into China?

Since Wang and Xi believe the West is too decadent to survive, they may have opted to take the Taoist path of *wu wei* (無為), which is to say, sit back and let the West’s appetites take it where they will. But there’s another, more sinister and effective approach they may have adopted. To understand it, we must consider one final piece of the puzzle: an amphetamine-fueled philosopher who lived in my hometown.

III. The Matricide Laboratory

At first glance the British philosopher Nick Land could hardly be more different from Wang Huning. Wang rose to prominence by being dour, discreet, and composed, while Land rose to prominence by ranting about cyborg apocalypses while out of his mind on weed and speed. In the late 1990s Land moved into a house once owned by the Satanist libertine Aleister Crowley (half a mile from where I grew up), and there he [apparently](#) binged on drugs and scrawled occult diagrams on the walls. At nearby Warwick University where he taught, his lectures were often bizarre (one [infamous](#) “lesson” consisted of Land lying on the floor, croaking into a mic, while frenetic jungle music pulsed in the background.)



Nick Land

Wang and Land were not just polar opposites in personality; they also operated at opposite ends of the political spectrum. While Wang would go on to be the top ideological theorist of the Chinese Communist Party, Land would become the top theorist (with Curtis Yarvin) of the influential network of far-right bloggers, NRx.

And yet, despite their opposite natures, Land and Wang would develop almost identical visions of liberal capitalism as an all-commodifying, all devouring force, driven by the insatiable hunger of blind market forces, and destined to finally eat Western civilization itself.

Land viewed Western liberal capitalism as a kind of AI that's reached the [singularity](#); in other words, an AI that's grown beyond the control of humans and is now unstoppably accelerating toward inhuman ends. As Land feverishly wrote in his 1995 essay, "Meltdown:"

"The story goes like this: Earth is captured by a technocapital singularity as renaissance rationalization and oceanic navigation lock into commoditization take-off. Logistically accelerating techno-economic interactivity crumbles social order in auto-sophisticating machine runaway."

Land's drug-fueled prose is overwrought, so to simplify his point, Western capitalism can be compared to a "[paperclip maximizer](#)," a hypothetical AI programmed by a paperclip business to produce as many paperclips as possible, which leads it to begin recycling everything on earth into paperclips (i.e. commodities). When the programmers panic and try to switch it off, the AI turns them into paperclips, since being switched off would stop it fulfilling its goal of creating as many paperclips as possible. Thus, the blind application of short term goals leads to long term ruin.

Land believed that, since the runaway AI we call liberal capitalism commodifies everything, including even criticisms of it (which are necessarily published for profit), it cannot be opposed. Every attack on it becomes part of it. Thus, if one wishes to change it, the only way is to accelerate it along its trajectory. As Land stated in a later, more sober writing style:

"The point of an analysis of capitalism, or of nihilism, is to do more of it. The process is not to be critiqued. The process is the critique, feeding back into itself, as it escalates. The only way forward is through, which means further in."

—A Quick-and-Dirty Introduction to Accelerationism (2017)

This view, that the current system must be accelerated to be transformed, has since become known as accelerationism, and it's become popular among anti-liberal revolutionaries of all stripes, but particularly among the far-right NRx, who follow Land due to his [embrace of neo-fascism](#) (he came to believe that authoritarian regimes can accelerate nations toward prosperity, but all democracies accelerate toward ruin.)

Land's own life followed the same course he envisioned for the West; following years of high productivity, he fell into nihilism and the decadence of rampant drug use, which drove him to a nervous breakdown. Upon recovering in 2002, he moved to Shanghai and began writing for Chinese state media outlets like *China Daily* and the *Shanghai Star*.

A few years after Land moved to China, talk of accelerationism began to emerge on the Chinese web, where it's become known by its Chinese name, *jiasuzhuyi* (加速主义). The term has caught on among Chinese democracy advocates, many of whom view the CCP as the runaway AI, hurtling toward greater tyranny; they even refer to Xi as "Accelerator-in-Chief" (总加速师).

Domestically, Chinese democracy activists try to accelerate the CCP's authoritarianism *ad absurdum*; one [tactic](#) is to swamp official tip-off lines with reports of minor or made-up infractions, with the intent of breaking the Party by forcing it to enforce all of its own petty rules.

As for the CCP itself, it's known to have viewed former US president Donald Trump as the "Accelerator-in-Chief," or, more accurately, "Chuan Jianguo" (川建国: literally "Build China Trump") because he was perceived as helping China by accelerating the West's decline. For this reason, support of him was encouraged. The CCP is also known to have engaged in *jiasuzhuyi* more directly; for instance, during the 2020 US race riots, China used Western social media platforms to douse [accelerant](#) over US racial tensions.

But the use of TikTok as an accelerant is a whole new scale of accelerationism, one much closer to Land's original, apocalyptic vision. Liberal capitalism is about making people work in order to obtain pleasurable things, and for decades it's been moving toward shortening the delay between desire and gratification, because that's what consumers want.

Over the past century the market has taken us toward ever shorter-form entertainment, from cinema in the early 1900s, to TV mid-century, to minutes-long YouTube videos, to seconds-long TikTok clips. With TikTok the delay between desire and gratification is almost instant; there's no longer any patience or effort needed to obtain the reward, so our mental faculties fall into disuse and disrepair.

And this is why TikTok could prove such a devastating geopolitical weapon. Slowly but steadily it could turn the West's youth—its future—into perpetually distracted dopamine junkies ill-equipped to maintain the civilization built by their ancestors.

We seem to be halfway there already: not only has there been gray matter shrinkage in smartphone-addicted individuals, but, since 1970 the Western average IQ has been steadily [falling](#). Though the decline likely has several causes, it began with the first generation to grow up with widespread TVs in homes, and common sense suggests it's at least partly the result of technology making the attainment of satisfaction increasingly effortless, so that we spend ever more of our time in a passive, vegetative state. If you don't use it, you lose it.

And even those still willing to use their brains are at risk of having their efforts foiled by social media, which seems to be affecting not just kids' abilities but also their aspirations; in a [survey](#) asking American and Chinese children what job they most wanted, the top answer among Chinese kids was “astronaut,” and the top answer among American kids was “influencer.”

If we continue along our present course, the resulting loss of brainpower in key fields could, years from now, begin to harm the West economically. But, more importantly, if it did it would help discredit the very notion of Western liberalism itself, since there is no greater counterargument to a system than to see it destroy itself. And so the CCP would benefit doubly from this outcome: ruin the West and refute it; two birds with one stone (or as they say in China, 箭双雕: one arrow, two eagles.)

So, the CCP has both the means and the motive to help the West defeat itself, and part of this could conceivably involve the use of TikTok to accelerate liberal capitalism by closing the gap between desire and gratification.

Now, it could be argued that we have no hard evidence of the CCP's intentions, only a set of indications. However, ultimately the CCP's intentions are irrelevant. Accelerationism can't alter an outcome, only hasten it. And TikTok, whether or not it's actively intended as a weapon, is only moving the West further along the course it's long been headed: toward more effortless pleasure, and resulting cognitive decline.

The problem, therefore, is not China, but us. *America Against America*. If TikTok is not a murder weapon, then it's a suicide weapon. China has given the West the means to kill itself, but the death wish is wholly the West's. After all, TikTok dominated our culture as a result of free market forces—the very thing we live by. Land and Wang are correct that the West being controlled by everyone means it's controlled by no one, and without brakes or a steering wheel we're at the market's mercy.

Of course, democracies do have *some* regulatory power. Indian lawmakers banned TikTok in 2020, and US lawmakers are now [considering](#) the same. However, while this may stop the theft of our data, it won't stop the theft of our attention; if TikTok is banned then another short-form video site will just [take its place](#). Effortless dopamine hits are what consumers want, and capitalism always tries to give consumers what they want. Anticipating the demand, YouTube has added its own TikTok-style “YouTube Shorts” format, and Twitter recently implemented its own version of TikTok's For You algorithm. The market is a greater accelerator than China could ever hope to be.

So what's the solution?

Land and Wang may be right about the illness, but they're wrong about the cure. It's true that we in the West have little left of the traditions that once tied us together, and in their absence all that unites us are our animal hungers. But Wang's belief that meaning and purpose can be

miraculously imposed on us all by a strongman leader is just a fantasy that has littered history with failed experiments.

Sure, democracies are vulnerable because there's no one controlling their advancement, but autocracies are vulnerable precisely for the opposite reason: they're controlled by people, which is to say, by woefully myopic apes. China is currently suffering from the myopia of Xi's zero-covid policy, which has ravaged the country's economy, and from the disastrous one-child policy that's led to China's current population crisis. For all our problems, we'd be unwise to exchange the soft tyranny of dopamine for the hard tyranny of despots.

That leaves only one solution: the democratic one. In a democracy responsibility is also democratized, so parents must look out for their own kids. There's a market for this, too: various brands of parental controls can be set on devices to limit kids' access (though many of these, including TikTok's own controls, can be [easily bypassed](#).)

But ultimately these are short term measures. In the long term the only way to prevent digital dementia is to raise awareness of the neurological ruin wrought by apps like TikTok, exposing their ugliness so they fall out of fashion like cigarettes. If the weakness of liberalism is its openness, then this is also its strength; word can travel far in democracies.

We'll surely sound like alarmists; TikTok destroys so gradually that it seems harmless. But if the app is a time-bomb that'll wreck a whole generation years from now, then we can't wait till its effects are apparent before acting, for then it will be too late.

The clock is ticking.

Tik. Tok...

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I taught guitar lessons 10-15 years ago. It was during the apex of the guitar hero video game craze for those of you who remember. Students were signing up like crazy for lessons, often egged on by parents who were ecstatic that their kid might be showing some musical promise. There's just one problem. Guitar Hero games were (like most video games) designed to be mastered in about two weeks time with a little focused effort. Learning to play an actual guitar is a slow, methodical, awkward, painful, years-long process. Once students realized playing an actual musical instrument was going to be much harder than mastering the video game version, they usually came to a rapid conclusion along the lines of, "this just isn't my talent." Students quit in droves as even more hopefuls were signing up. I did end up with a handful of long-term quality students from the guitar hero batch, but the attrition rate must have been over 90%.

This was the thing that got me thinking about the effect of digital media on the human brain. Well-meaning parents who just wanted their kids to be happy were paying game companies to reprogram their kids' cognitive development for the worse. The discipline needed to develop actual skills, to learn, to exercise, to mature is at best the collateral damage of reckless digital media consumption. Tik Tok and services like it make the consumption even more mindless and broadly addictive than digital games. It's very interesting to ponder how this dynamic might be weaponized, and how else it might fit into the geopolitics of our age.

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