

U.S. Rep. Gallagher: Joins Krishnamoorthi in sending letter to ESPN over TikTok sponsored halftime shows

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WASHINGTON, D.C.- As first reported by [Semafor](#), Reps. Mike Gallagher (R-WI) and Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL) today sent a letter to the CEO of ESPN, James Pitaro, expressing concern that ESPN has allowed TikTok to sponsor halftime shows of recent NCAA college football bowl games.

In part, **the lawmakers wrote**, *“As recognized by numerous members of the Biden Administration, including CIA Director William Burns, FBI Director Christopher Wray, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, TikTok poses a significant threat to U.S. national security. Because of this threat, TikTok is now banned on federal government devices, including in Congress. ESPN’s decision to allow TikTok to sponsor halftime shows watched by millions of Americans raises serious questions about ESPN corporate decision-making and the risk analysis it conducts when soliciting sponsorships.”*

The letter requests answers to three questions about ESPN’s corporate decision-making and risk analysis for sponsorships, including:

1. What vetting procedures does ESPN conduct when reviewing potential corporate sponsors of its programming, including halftime shows? To what extent does this process include consideration of potential national security risks? Were these procedures followed in ESPN’s decision to allow TikTok sponsorship?
2. At the time of its decision to allow TikTok sponsorship, was ESPN aware that

TikTok is, through ByteDance, effectively controlled by the CCP and that the U.S. government has determined that it is a national security threat?

3. Will ESPN commit to ending its commercial relationship with TikTok, ByteDance, and other Chinese companies determined by the U.S. government to pose national security threats?

TikTok, which is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, is required by Chinese law to share user data with the Chinese Communist Party. Rep. Gallagher, Rep. Krishnamoorthi, and Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) recently [introduced legislation](#) to ban TikTok from operating in the United States, citing the [grave national security risk](#) the app poses.

Click [HERE](#) to see the letter or read the text below.

Dear Mr. Pitaro,

We write today to express our concern over ESPN's decision to have TikTok sponsor the halftime shows for recent NCAA bowl games. As recognized by numerous members of the Biden Administration, including CIA Director William Burns, FBI Director Christopher Wray, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, TikTok poses a significant threat to U.S. national security. Because of this threat, TikTok is now banned on federal government devices, including in Congress. ESPN's decision to allow TikTok to sponsor halftime shows watched by millions of Americans raises serious questions about ESPN corporate decision-making and the risk analysis it conducts when soliciting sponsorships.

The U.S. government considers TikTok a national security threat because it is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, which is subject to the direction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). No Chinese company is truly private, because under China's 2017 National Intelligence Law, all citizens and businesses must assist in intelligence work, including sharing data. Moreover, the company's editor in chief, who is also the secretary of its internal CCP committee, stressed that the committee would "take the lead" in "all product lines and business lines" to ensure that ByteDance's products have "correct political direction."

TikTok poses a two-fold danger. First, the app can track cellphone users' locations, internet-browsing history, and other key personal data—even when users are on other websites. The CCP could also collect sensitive national security data from government officials and develop profiles on millions of Americans to use for

blackmail, espionage, or targeted influence. Despite years of denying that ByteDance's Chinese employees can access U.S. users' data, ByteDance last month admitted that employees used TikTok's data to track U.S. journalists' locations.

Second, TikTok's algorithm and content moderation is a black box that the CCP could use to propagate videos that support party-friendly politicians or exacerbate discord in American society. The Party can leverage enormous amounts of data to increase domestic division. Due to the rising number of Americans who use TikTok for news, the platform influences which issues Americans learn about, what information they consider accurate, and what conclusions they draw from world events. This places extraordinary power in the hands of a company that is subject to CCP direction.

TikTok has already censored references to politically sensitive topics, including the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the CCP's crackdown in Hong Kong, and the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square. TikTok has replaced with asterisks terms such as "reeducation camp" and "labor camp" in some videos. The app even temporarily blocked an American teenage activist who criticized the CCP's treatment of Uyghur Muslims.

Furthermore, TikTok's parent ByteDance collaborates with government entities in Xinjiang to censor and surveil Uyghurs. This collaboration is especially concerning given the CCP's ongoing genocide of ethnic minorities, as determined by two consecutive U.S. administrations.

We are concerned that despite these widely known issues with the app, ESPN has allowed TikTok to sponsor NCAA bowl game halftime shows. In light of the serious national threat posed by TikTok and the Chinese Communist Party more broadly, we respectfully request answers to the following questions by January 31, 2023:

1) What vetting procedures does ESPN conduct when reviewing potential corporate sponsors of its programming, including halftime shows? To what extent does this process include consideration of potential national security risks? Were these procedures followed in ESPN's decision to allow TikTok sponsorship?

2) At the time of its decision to allow Tiktok sponsorship, was ESPN aware that TikTok is, through ByteDance, effectively controlled by the CCP and that the U.S. government has determined that it is a national security threat?

3) Will ESPN commit to ending its commercial relationship with TikTok, ByteDance, and other Chinese companies determined by the U.S. government to pose national security threats?