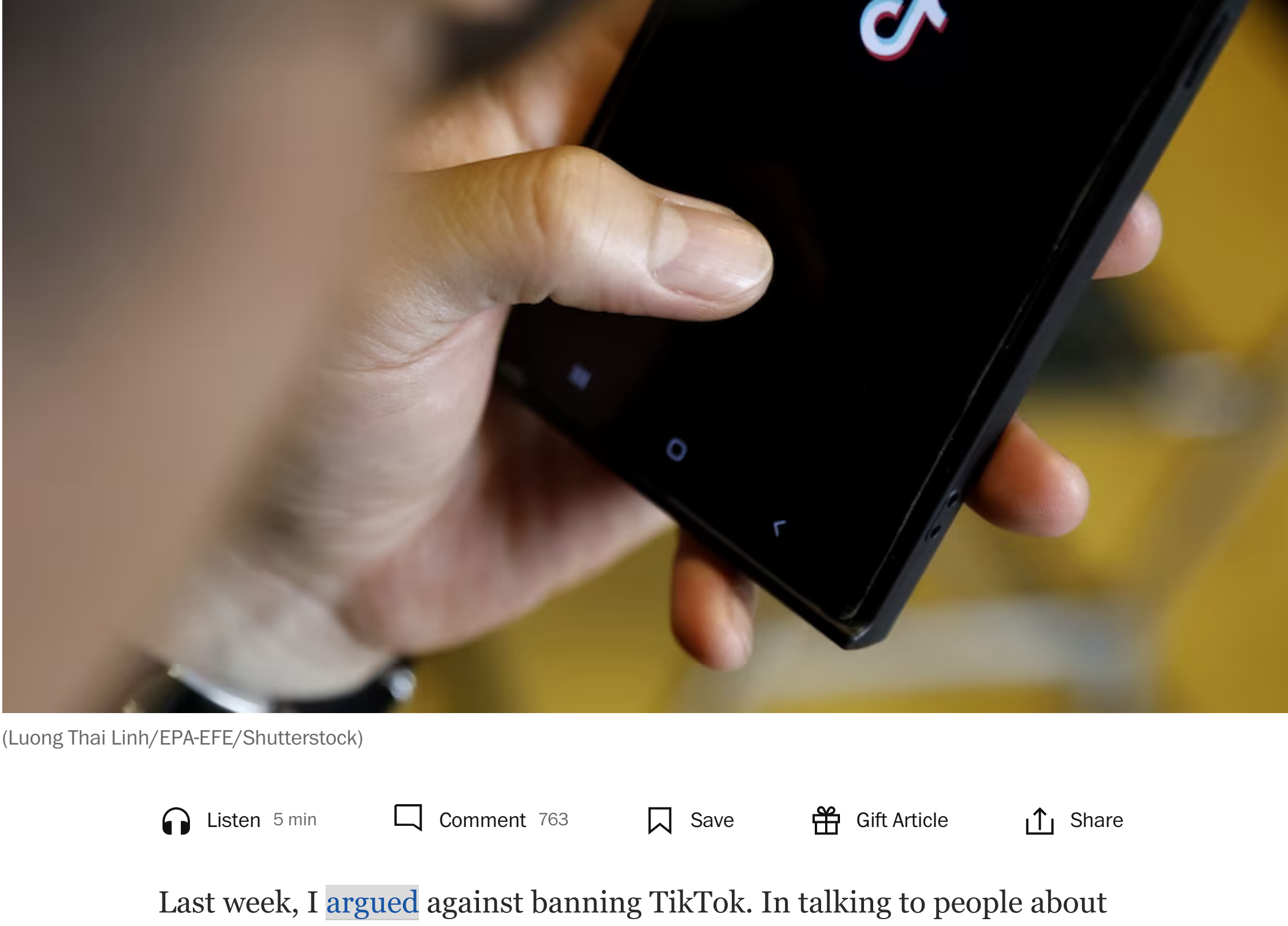


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Opinion | TikTok is dangerously addictive. We should regulate it now.

By **Fareed Zakaria**
Columnist | + Follow

April 14, 2023 at 7:15 a.m. EDT



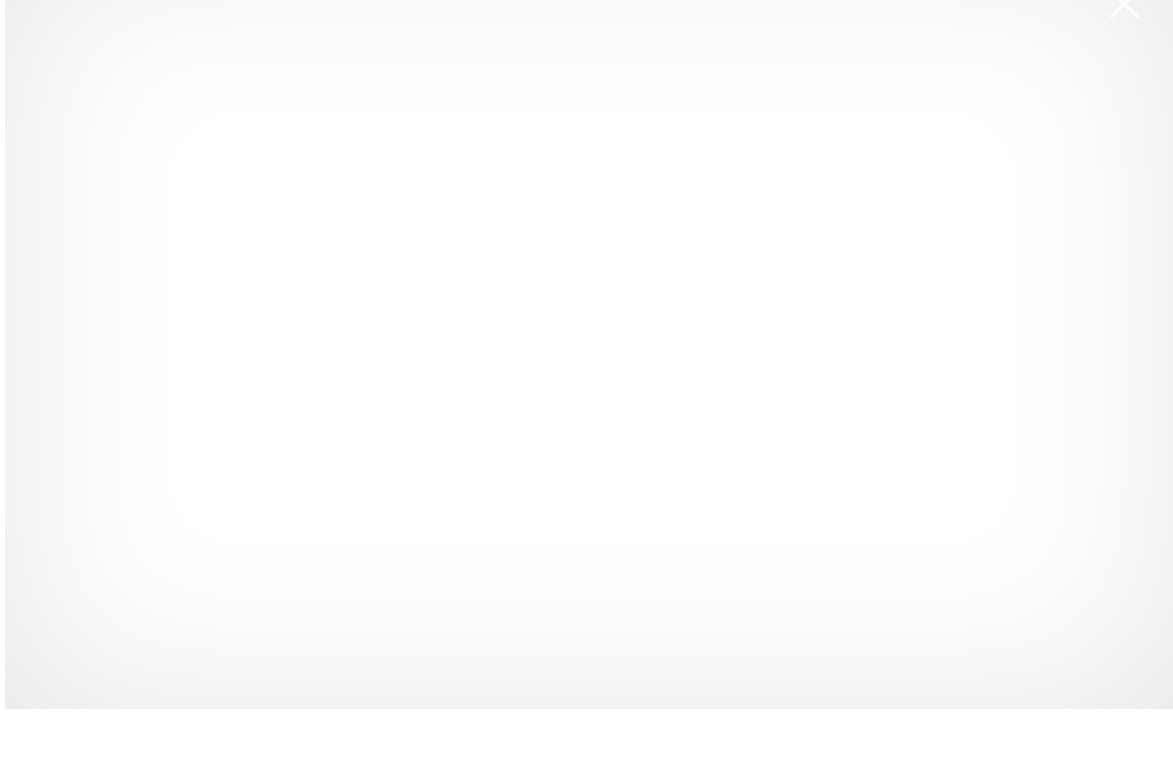
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Last week, I [argued](#) against banning TikTok. In talking to people about the platform, I came to see that the real concern most had was not about TikTok’s Chinese ownership, but rather just how scarily addictive it — and much of social media — is. That’s true and deeply worrying, and we should do something about it — and soon.

TikTok is the dominant [app](#), by 2022 downloads, in the United States, and has about 150 million users nationwide. The Post’s [Drew Harwell](#) nicely summarizes the data: In 2021, its website was visited more frequently than Google. Two-thirds of American [teens](#) use it, with 1 in 6 saying they use it “almost constantly.”

It is also wiping the floor with the competition. Harwell quotes a Bernstein Research report that found that between 2018 and 2021, the time Americans spent on the app surged by 67 percent, while hours on Facebook and YouTube grew by less than 10 percent.

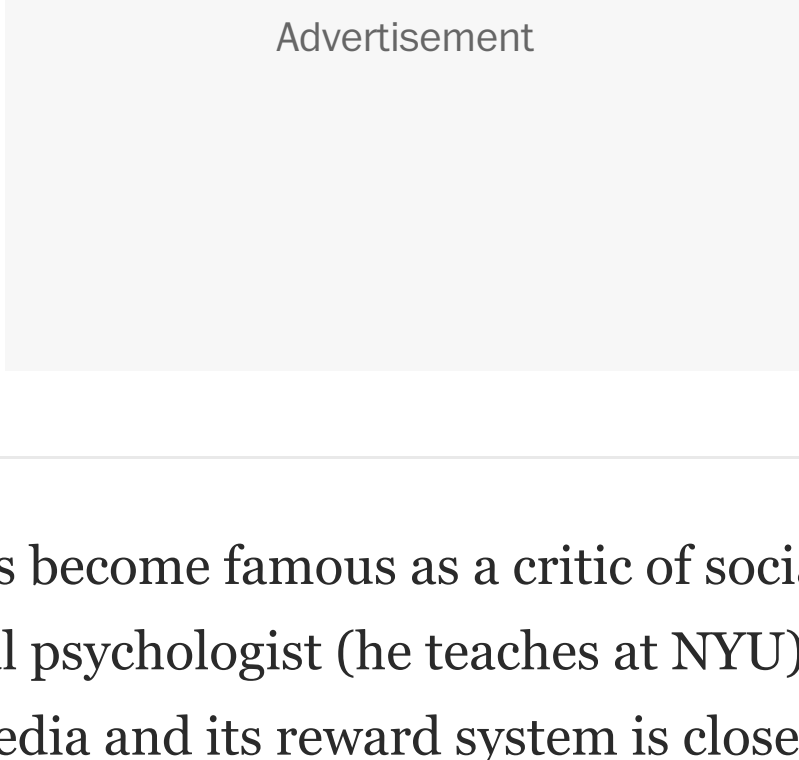


What is it that TikTok does that is so distinctive? No one quite knows. “It’s embarrassing that we know so little about TikTok and its effects,” Philipp Lorenz-Spreen, a research scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, [told the Guardian](#). Partly this is because TikTok is relatively new and partly because its algorithm is highly sophisticated. Instead of an image or a post chosen by a friend, TikTok presents you with a stream of videos and gauges what you like to give you more of it, replacing “the friction of deciding what to watch,” the Bernstein researchers [explain](#), with a “sensory rush of bite-sized videos ... delivering endorphin hit after hit.”

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Most psychologists would characterize it as also delivering [dopamine](#), the chemical secreted in the brain when it expects a reward, such as food, drugs or sex. Anything that connects us to others triggers this sense of [pleasure](#), because it is an evolutionary response — we survive better in groups than as individuals. Social media apps capitalize on this survival mechanism for profit. And TikTok provides this dopamine hit perhaps faster, better and more pleasurably than other popular apps.

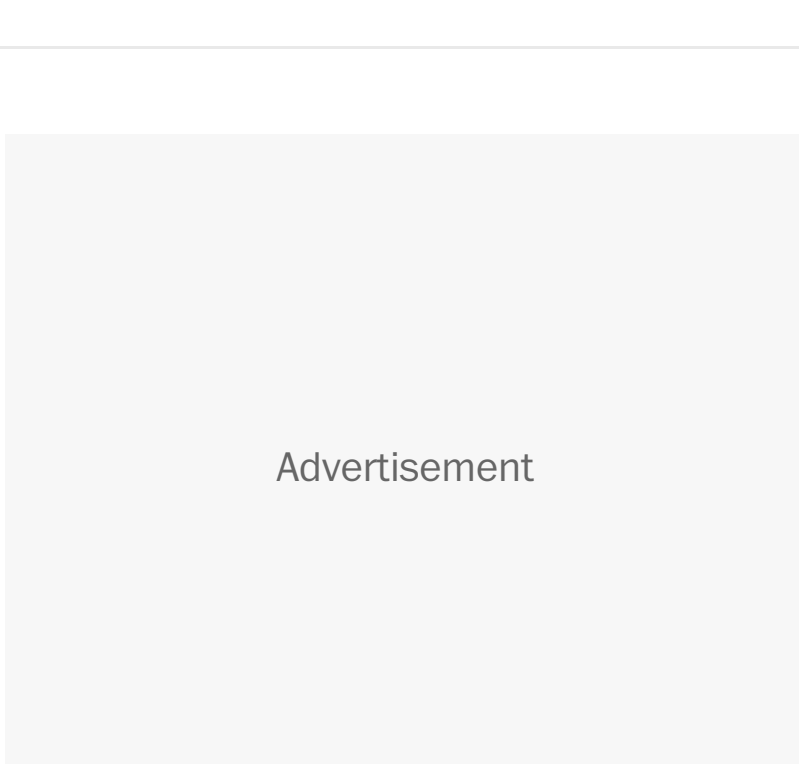
The best way to understand how social media is affecting our brains is to go back to Psychology 101. B.F. Skinner, one of the foundational scholars in the field, [demonstrated](#) how “operant conditioning” works by using a simple system of continual rewards for pigeons, and taught them how to fly in circles, guide missiles, even play ping-pong. The simplest version is to watch a dog trainer, who will give the pet a stream of small treats to reward it for following directions. Social media apps provide those small dopamine hits just as reliably.



Jonathan Haidt has become famous as a critic of social media. A distinguished social psychologist (he teaches at NYU), Haidt [argues](#) that the rise of social media and its reward system is closely correlated with staggering declines in teenagers’ mental health. Around 2012, he argues, you begin to see all kinds of [indications](#) of declining mental health, from self-reported feelings to hospitalizations to suicide attempts. He says this has happened in the United States, Britain, Canada and several other countries with widespread use of social media. The rise in anxiety, depression and attempted suicides among teenage girls is particularly frightening. And these numbers are getting worse by the year.

The timing makes sense when you consider that the early 2010s is when teens were trading in their flip phones for smartphones loaded with social media apps — and that 2009 is when Facebook [introduced](#) the “like” and Twitter introduced the “retweet” feature that mimic the dog trainer’s treats. So by 2012, the year Facebook bought Instagram and its user base exploded, a large number of teens were “hooked.”

Haidt, who is working on a book on this topic, maintains an ongoing database of scholarly studies and related commentary on his Substack, [After Babel](#). I came away from it utterly convinced that he is right, and we need serious rules and laws surrounding this technology.



He argues that the age at which social media companies can collect children’s data without parental consent should be [raised](#) from 13 to 16, thereby protecting the most vulnerable years of early puberty. (The initial [Senate bill](#) setting the age had chosen 16, he told me, but media company lobbyists were able to push it down.) There could be federal laws requiring more notifications when the app has been used for too long, automatic turn-offs at night, and more. For those worried about this kind of legislation, bear in mind that social media companies are largely protected from lawsuits by an extremely generous provision in the law, [Section 230](#) of the Communications Decency Act. They can reasonably be asked, in return, to make their products safer for children.

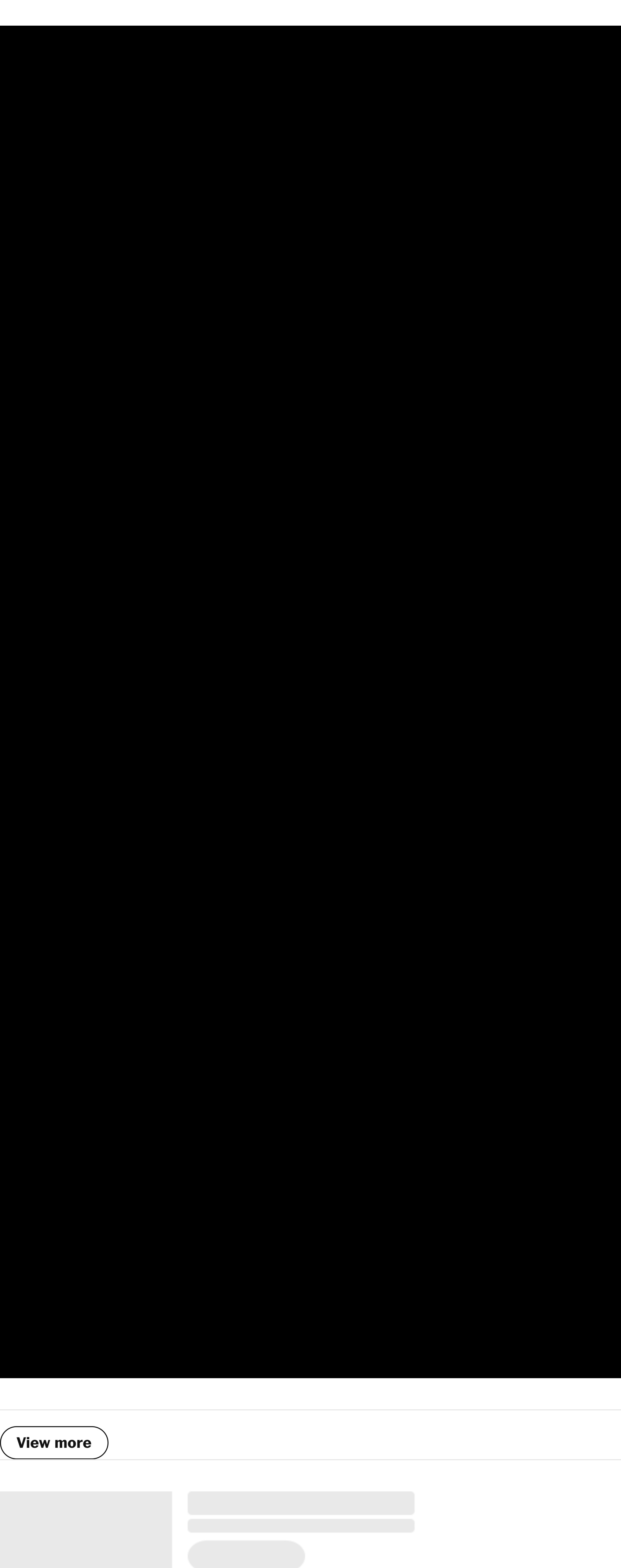
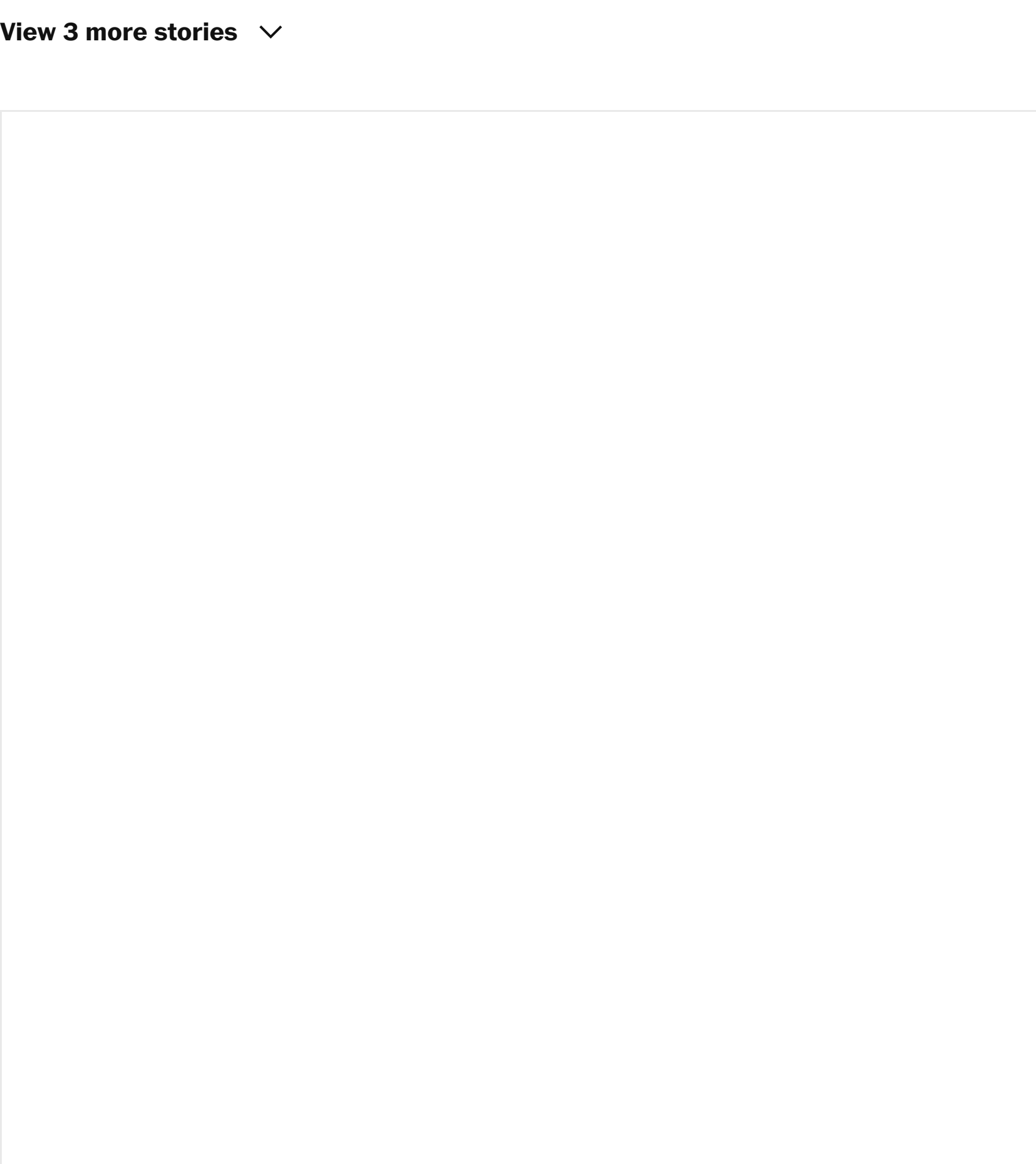
The next technological leap is generative artificial intelligence. Once that is fully married to social media, those companies will have a superhuman capacity to create addiction machines of astonishing power that could hook us permanently, perhaps even rewire our brains with devastating consequences. We should act now, while we have the time — and the attention span.

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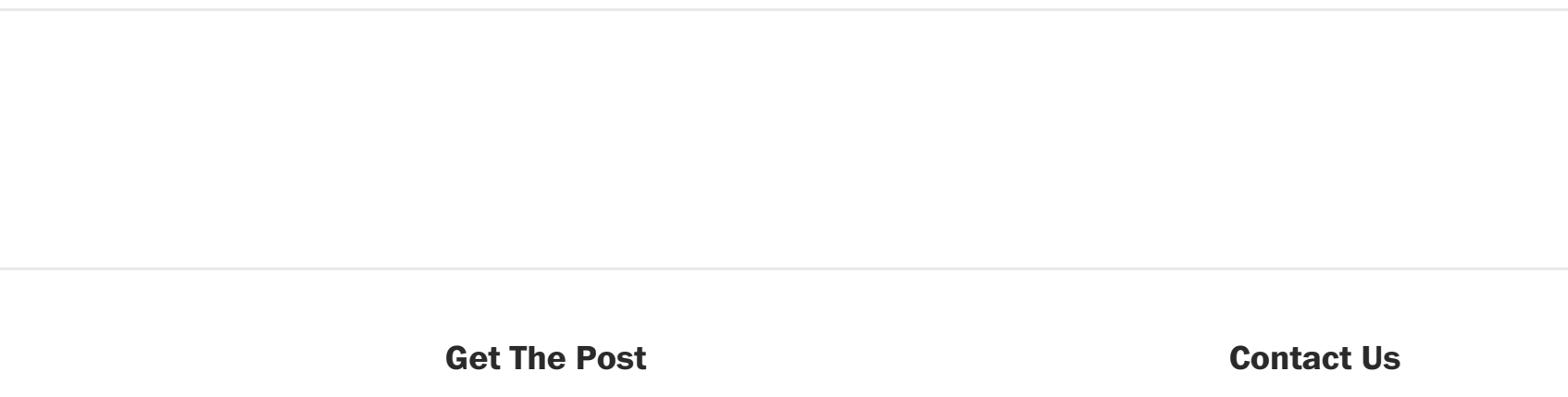
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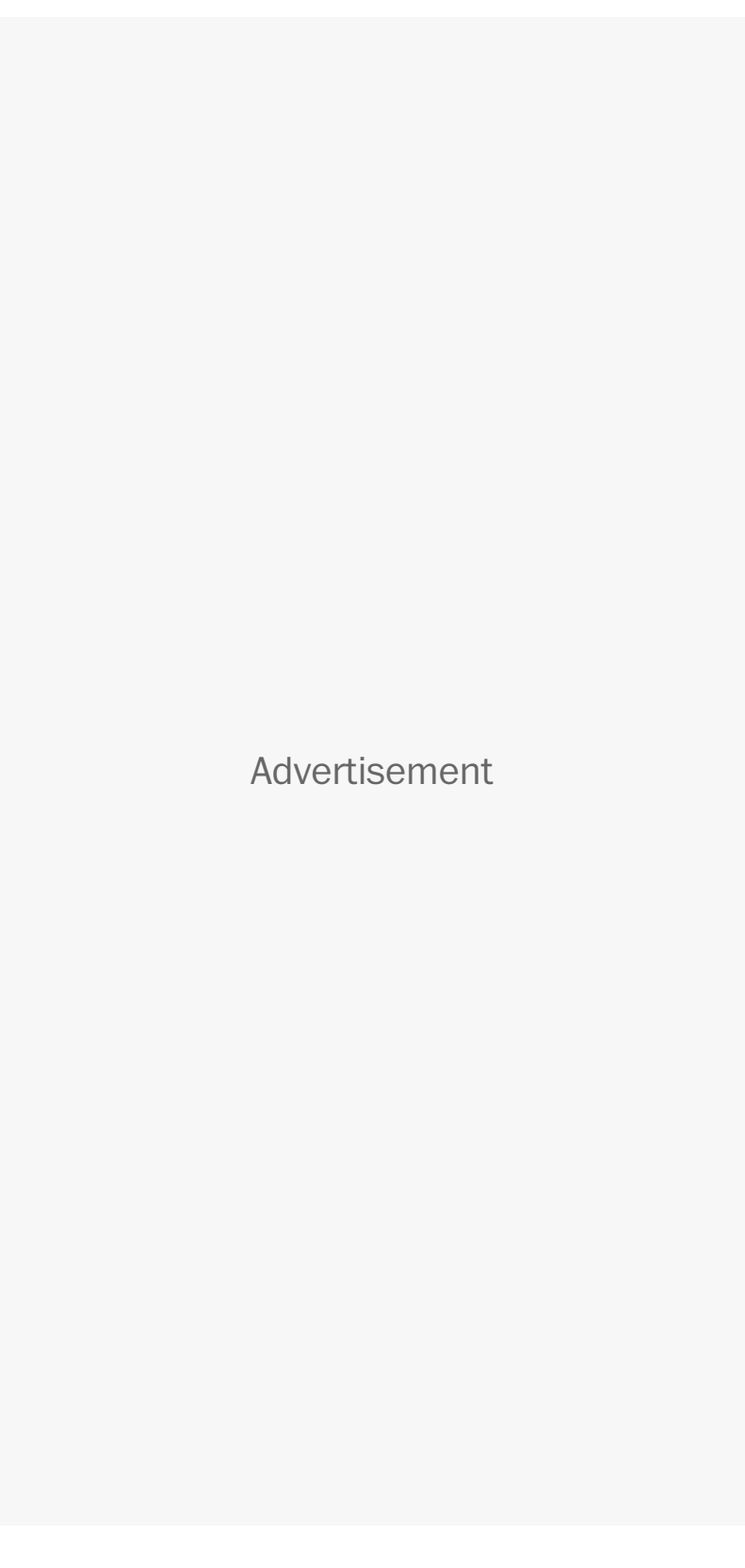


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