UC RIVERSIDE

POLITICAL SCIENCE SPEAKER SERIES



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MOBILIZING THE DEVOTED: HOW CELEBRITIES MOTIVATE PROPAGANDA ENGAGEMENT OF FANS IN CHINA

Digital technologies have introduced unprecedented challenges for authoritarian regimes in reaching their audiences. In response, these regimes have increasingly co-opted non-state actors, particularly celebrities, to amplify state propaganda. Yet less is known about the effectiveness of such co-optation. This talk highlights the concept of "performative propaganda engagement," to explain how celebrity fans engage with state propaganda through celebrity mobilization. Combining BERT-based computational text analysis of 254,746 Weibo posts, time series analysis, and causal inference methods, this research investigates propaganda engagement within Chinese online celebrity fandom, an increasingly influential force on social media. The findings show that when celebrities engage with state propaganda, their metrics-driven fans are motivated to promote the same content. However, this engagement is largely performative, driven by a primary goal to support the celebrity, with fans contributing in an instrumental way. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of authoritarian information control by highlighting the opportunities and limitations of mobilizing civic societal forces for propaganda dissemination.

TIME

Monday, November 23, 2026
12:10PM-1:20PM

LOCATION

INTS 1113