

Buffett Undergraduate Research Fellowship Opportunity

Authoritarian International Propaganda in the Age of Digital Media

Faculty Mentor: Yingdan Lu, Assistant Professor, School of Communication

Project Synopsis: Authoritarian regimes have long relied on propaganda to shape how citizens understand politics, evaluate rulers, and interpret world events. Digital platforms have reshaped who carries authoritarian international propaganda and how it circulates. Beyond central broadcasters such as CGTN and RT, researchers identify a wider set of actors: state-affiliated intermediaries like local media studios and international communication centers, quasi-independent news sites and front organizations, foreign and domestic influencers who act as “state endorsers” or “China defenders,” and ordinary user channels that amplify or contest regime narratives (Brockling et al., 2023; Fan et al., 2024; Hanley, 2025; Tian et al., 2025). However, existing scholarship leaves several gaps that motivate this project. First, most empirical work starts from lists of official outlets or known operations, which risks overlooking intermediaries and grassroots actors that extend the system’s reach. Second, studies often focus on particular campaigns or organizations rather than mapping the broader actor ecology and its internal structure in a comparative way. Third, while experimental work shows that soft formats and specific persuasive techniques can influence foreign attitudes, we know less about how different kinds of actors use soft versus hard content in practice and which parts of the system attract the most attention or engagement. This project addresses these gaps by conceptualizing authoritarian international propaganda as a multi-actor, platform-embedded system and by studying its operation in English-language video content about China and Russia. Empirically, we analyze China- and Russia-related content on YouTube during periods of heightened outward-facing communication and crisis, using keyword-based sampling to construct country-specific corpora, identifying actor types inductively from channel metadata and content, and comparing how these actors differ in visibility, collaboration patterns, and use of soft and hard formats as well as their effectiveness.

Project Term: Summer and Academic Year 2026

Project Location: Remote

Job Description:

1. Manual coding of videos and video creators: Students will review batches of YouTube videos, apply the coding scheme to record variables such as content, actor, and strategies.

2. Help refine the coding process: The student will provide feedback on the clarity of the coding instructions, suggest improvements to the manual, and help adjust the workflow to reduce ambiguity or errors.
3. Quality checks and reliability testing: The project PI will compare the students' coding results with the automated outputs from the large language model, note any disagreements, and flag examples that need further review. In this process, the students will engage in discussions with the PIs.
4. Team meetings and mentorship check-ins: the students will join regular research meetings and lab meetings to discuss progress, troubleshoot challenges, and learn how project decisions are made, from refining variables to interpreting findings.

Literature review: the students will help conduct literature review on international propaganda.

Time Commitment: 5-10 flexible hours a week

Number of available positions: Two