

Propaganda from the Bottom Up: How Government Messaging in China Reaches Fragmented Social Media Audiences

Yingdan Lu, Jennifer Pan, Xu Xu, and Yiqing Xu (2025). **Decentralized propaganda in the era of digital media: The massive presence of the Chinese state on Douyin.** *American Journal of Political Science*.

Digital media has produced an explosion of content, fragmenting audiences into niche online spaces. Unlike broadcast-era media, where China's government could capture attention via a few channels, people now choose from countless content sources tailored to specific interests. A viral video for cat lovers or coders may go unnoticed by everyone else. China's censors on social media can suppress dissent, but they cannot guarantee audience engagement or message uptake. How does China's government reach online audiences with centralized messaging in an era of ever more decentralized content production?

The data. The authors collected a dataset of over 5 million videos posted by more than 18,000 "regime-affiliated accounts" on Douyin, China's version of TikTok, between June 2020 and June 2021. Regime-affiliated accounts are run by government bodies or Party organizations, such as local branches of the Communist Youth League or local fire departments. The researchers classified the accounts by administrative level (central, provincial, city, county) and function (e.g., media outlets, propaganda departments, police). They used video similarity algorithms (ViSiL) to measure content overlap, human coders to categorize a sample of videos by theme (e.g., party-line propaganda, nationalism, moral society, entertainment), and engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) to assess audience response.

Douyin: China's TikTok. Short-form video-sharing platform Douyin (developed by ByteDance) had over 750 million monthly active users in 2023, making it the fastest-growing social media platform in China and one of the largest globally. The average user in China spends 73.6 minutes per day on the app, and for many users in China — especially in non-coastal, lower-tier cities — Douyin serves as a primary source of news and information. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has explicitly prioritized Douyin as a key propaganda channel. It has promoted the "media convergence" strategy to occupy digital spaces, and Douyin now ranks alongside WeChat and Weibo as a critical platform the CCP aims to harness. Douyin has offered training to state-affiliated account operators on how to grow and engage their audiences.

INSIGHTS

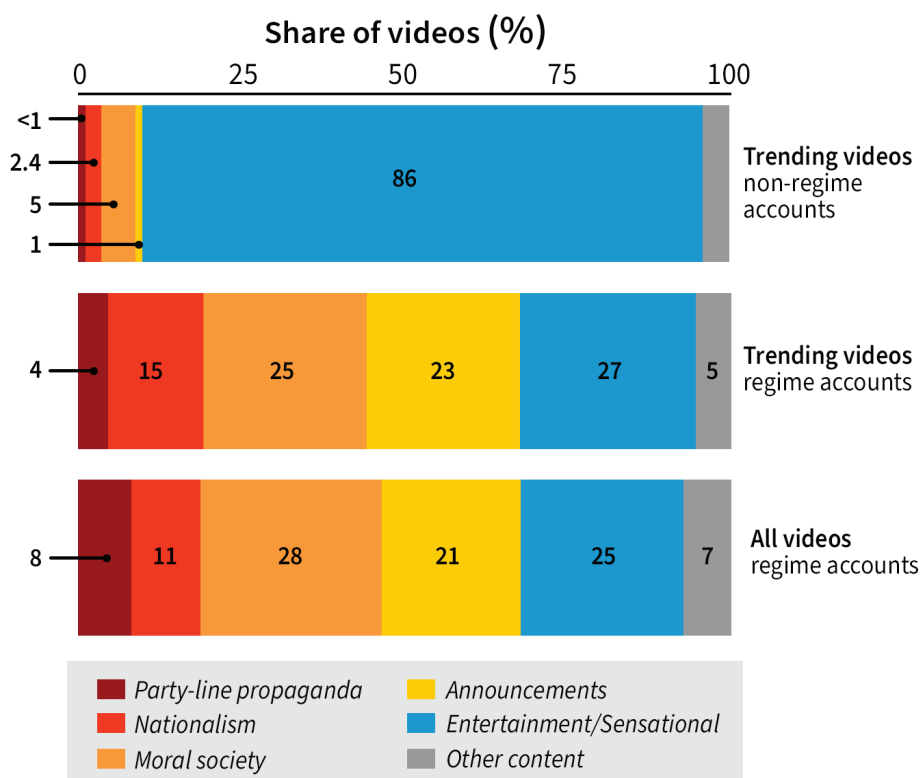
■ Researchers identify over 18,000 central or local government accounts on Douyin, China's version of TikTok, that produce 5 million videos per year (275 videos per account per year).

■ The largest share of these accounts belongs to the public security apparatus (34%), followed by state media (24%) and propaganda organs (12%) at the county, city, provincial, or central level.

■ Among central-level videos that match local-level videos, most (55%) were first posted by local-level accounts, then recirculated by the central accounts.

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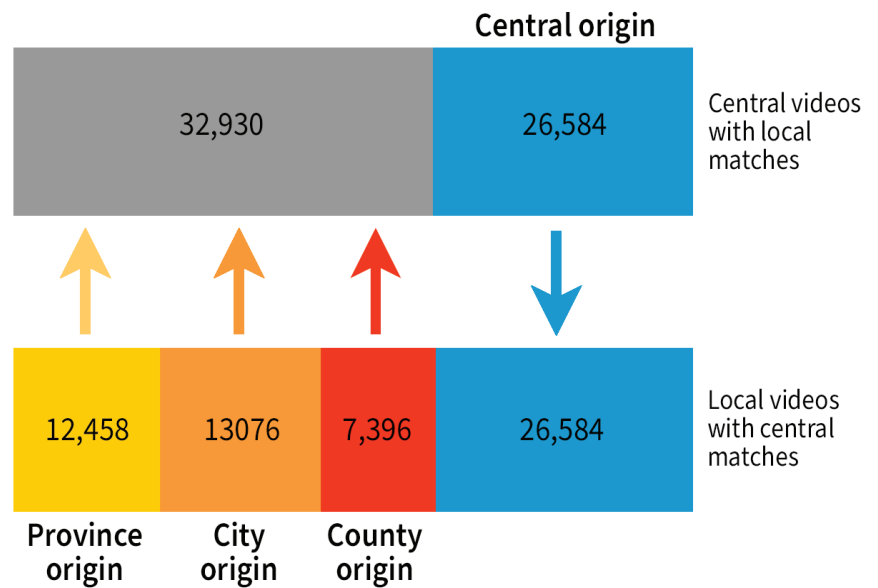
Content categories for regime and non-regime accounts



■ Local government videos focus more on everyday public virtue (rather than ideology or nationalism) and achieve more likes, shares, and comments than centrally produced content.

■ This decentralized propaganda model, where tens of thousands of government workers are content creators, appears more effective than a purely top-down propaganda system in reaching fragmented social media audiences.

Number of matched videos and their origin (central vs local)



An explosion of propaganda accounts, led by the public security apparatus. The study found 18,684 regime-affiliated accounts on Douyin that produced over 5.14 million videos annually, averaging 275 videos per account per year. While many regime-affiliated accounts belong to state-controlled media outlets (24.1%) and propaganda departments (11.5%) at all levels of government (county, city, provincial, central), the functional bureaucracy with the largest presence on the platform is the public security apparatus with 6,099 (32.6%) accounts across different levels of government.

Propaganda from the bottom up. Researchers compared the timing and content of videos in their sample that appear on both central and local government-affiliated feeds to trace the origin of each video. Only about 10% of videos produced by county- or prefectural-level regime-affiliated accounts were copies of videos produced by accounts at the central level. Thirty-one percent of videos posted by central-level accounts were also posted by accounts at the county or prefectural level. The remaining 69% were not copied by local levels at all. Among central videos with matching local-level videos, the majority (55%) were first posted by local levels, especially by city- and provincial-level accounts. Likes, comments, and reshares were higher when central accounts had recirculated content originating from local levels. These results show that while some propaganda content flows from the top down, bottom-up information flow, where central-level videos are of local origin, is the predominant pattern and generates more appeal.

Local governments promote everyday public virtue, while the center promotes ideology and nationalism. The study found clear differences in the types of content produced by regime-affiliated versus non-regime accounts. Among trending videos from non-regime accounts, the vast majority (86%) were entertainment or sensational in nature (e.g., “Who wins? Rat vs. squirrel,” or “disco dancing man in Hebei park”), with only 2.4% focused on nationalism and less than 1% on party-line propaganda. In contrast, regime-affiliated accounts posted much less entertainment (25%) and a much larger share of party-line propaganda (8%), nationalism (11%), and especially videos emphasizing moral behavior and civic virtue, known as “moral society” content (21%). These videos capture ordinary people as well as those holding government-affiliated jobs, such as healthcare workers, firefighters, and police, often paired with captions and evocative music. This focus on everyday life and public values was especially strong among local-level accounts, while central-level accounts tended to produce more ideological and nationalistic material.

Propaganda optimization for the social media era. The analysis suggests China’s government has adapted to digital media by altering the organizational structure, personnel, information flow, and content strategies of its propaganda system. Thousands of regime-affiliated accounts on Douyin actively produce a large volume of diverse content, much of which is propaganda-oriented, with a substantial portion focusing on moral society, as well as ideological propaganda and idealizing of top leaders. While these accounts also generate entertainment and sensational content, perhaps aimed at increasing audience traffic, it is much less than the content of non-regime creators. Local-level accounts produce large amounts of original videos, and central accounts often recirculate this local content. Notably, user engagement is higher for central-level videos repurposed from local content compared to those originating directly from the center. This suggests that a decentralized propaganda model may be more effective than a purely top-down distribution system, allowing government content to better reach fragmented social media audiences.