

# Journalism and Media Studies Speaker Series

## How Social Media Creators Shape Mass Politics: A Field Experiment During the 2024 US Elections

Speaker: **Dr. Eunji Kim from Columbia University**

Wednesday, February 18, 2026

12-1 p.m. SC&I Room 222

Political apathy and skepticism of traditional authorities are increasingly common, but social media creators (SMCs) capture the public's attention. Yet whether these seemingly-frivolous actors shape political attitudes and behaviors remains largely unknown. Our pre-registered field experiment encouraged Americans aged 18-45 to start following five progressive-minded SMCs on Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube between August and December 2024. We varied recommendations to follow SMCs producing predominantly-political (PP), predominantly-apolitical (PA), or entirely non-political content, and cross-randomized financial incentives to follow assigned SMCs. Biweekly quiz-based incentives markedly increased consumption of assigned SMCs' content, civic engagement, and overall social media use. These incentives to follow PP or PA SMCs led participants to adopt more liberal policy positions and grand narratives around election time, while PP SMCs more strongly shaped partisan evaluations and vote choice. However, PA SMCs were seen as more informative and trustworthy, generating larger effects per political video. Participants assigned to follow non-political/placebo SMCs instead became more conservative, consistent with right-leaning online currents at the time. The magnitude of these effects—exceeding the impacts of traditional campaign outreach and partisan media—establishes the importance of SMCs as opinion leaders in today's attention economy and highlights the volume- and trust-based mechanisms of political persuasion.

### Meet the Speaker: Dr. Eunji Kim

Eunji Kim is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. As a political communication scholar, she primarily studies the impact of seemingly non-political media content on citizens' political beliefs and behavior. Her book, *The American Mirage: How Reality TV Upholds the Myth of Meritocracy* (Princeton University Press, May 2025), examines how Americans' consumption of entertainment media distorts their belief in upward economic mobility despite growing wealth inequality. This project won APSA's Best Dissertation in Political Psychology. Kim's work has been published in leading journals, including the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. She has received several prestigious awards, such as the Walter Lippmann Best Published Article Award, AJPS Best Article Award, and the Kaid-Sanders Best Political Communication Article Award. The Russell Sage Foundation and Facebook have funded her research. Kim holds a Joint Ph.D. in Political Science and Communication, M.A. degrees in Statistics and Communication from the University of Pennsylvania, and a B.A. in Government from Harvard University.

