How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument

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Harvard University

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1 Based on joint work with Jennifer Pan (Stanford) and Margaret Roberts (UCSD)
2 GaryKing.org
Empirical Results:

How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression (APSR)

Reverse Engineering Chinese Censorship (Science)

How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument (Today's talk; in press, APSR)

Automated Text Analysis Methods:

General Purpose Computer-Assisted Clustering and Conceptualization (PNAS)

A Method of Automated Nonparametric Content Analysis for Social Science (AJPS)

Computer-Assisted Keyword and Document Set Discovery from Unstructured Text (in press, AJPS)

Copies at GaryKing.org
Papers

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What Could be the Goal?

Stop collective action

Implications: Social Media is Actionable!

Chinese leaders: measure criticism: to judge local officials;
censor: to stop events with collective action potential.

Thus, we can use criticism & censorship to predict:

- Officials in trouble, likely to be replaced
- Policies that generate dissent (& interest of leaders)
- Government action outside the Internet
- Dissidents to be arrested; peace treaties to sign; emerging scandals
- Disagreements between central and local leaders
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Censorship Reveals Government Goals
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Ai Weiwei arrested
Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Collective Support for Environmental Lottery

Count Published
Count Censored
Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Speculation of Policy Reversal at NPC

- **Count Published**
- **Count Censored**

![Graph showing speculation of policy reversal at NPC with counts for January to July.](image-url)
Power shortages
Gov't raises
power prices
to curb demand

Censorship Reveals Government Goals
Goal of China’s 50c Party

Does not argue; does not engage on controversial issues
Distracts; redirects public attention from criticism and central issues to cheerleading and positive discussions of valence issues
Goal of China’s 50c Party

- Prevailing view of scholars, activists, journalists, social media participants:
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  It’s antidisestablishmentarianism!
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Evidence?
Goal of China’s 50c Party

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Evidence? A few anecdotes; “no ground truth”; “no successful attempts to quantify” 50c party activity;
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**Evidence?** A few anecdotes; “no ground truth”; “no successful attempts to quantify” 50c party activity; even several analyses with made up dependent variables!
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First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party

Leaked emails: Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office (网宣办)

Workers claiming credit for their 50c posts on the web, but overlooked and ignored.

Large, unstructured, messy data systematized (hard to do!)

2,341 emails (covering 2013 & 2014)
1,245 contained 50c posts
43,797 known 50c cent posts

Survey 1: 50c party members
Survey 2: the Chinese regime
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The Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Operation

Prevailing view: ordinary citizens getting paid 50c to make each post. In fact: 99.3% of posts made by government offices. No evidence of 50c (or any piecemeal) payments; probably part of their jobs.
The Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Operation

Who is posting?

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Diagram:
- Higher Level Offices Reported To
- Commentators Reporting to Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office
- Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office
The Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Operation

- Who is posting?
  - **Prevailing view:** ordinary citizens getting paid 50c to make each post

![Diagram showing network of higher level offices and evaluators reporting to Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office]
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- **Who is posting?**
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Categories and Analyses of 50c Party Posts

1. Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
2. Leaked Zhanggong 50c weibo accounts: 167,971 posts
3. Partition accounts for extrapolation (using Bayesian falling rule lists) into ordinary (59%) & exclusive (41%)
4. Accounts that engage with Zhanggong weibo ≤ 10 followers
5. Unleaked posts from Zhanggong exclusive 50c weibo accounts
6. Unleaked posts from exclusive 50c weibo accounts across China
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- Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories (“readme,” Hopkins & King 2010)

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  - Cheerleading

- Separate analyses — from Zhanggong to China:
  1. Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
  2. Leaked Zhanggong 50c weibo accounts: 167,971 posts
  3. Partition accounts for extrapolation (using Bayesian falling rule lists) into ordinary (59%) & exclusive (41%)
     - Accounts that engage with Zhanggong weibo
     - ≤ 10 followers
  4. Unleaked posts from Zhanggong exclusive 50c weibo accounts
  5. Unleaked posts from exclusive 50c weibo accounts across China
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
  - Argumentative Praise or Criticism
  - Taunting of Foreign Countries
  - Cheerleading
  - Factual Reporting
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Proportion

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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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- Within county prediction, all posts
- Out of county prediction
Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)
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- Number of social media posts in China:
  - 80.4 billion
  - 154,216 in Zhanggong
  - 10.65 million in Jiangxi Province
  - 448 million in China

53% on government sites (noticeably proportion of all)
47% on commercial sites (1 of every 178 posts)
Number of social media posts in China: >80.4 B
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43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated
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- China Dream (May)
- Shanshan riots (July)
- 3rd plenum CCP 18th Congress (Nov)
- Two meetings (Feb)
- Urumqi rail explosion (May)
- Gov’t forum, praise central subsidy (Jul–Aug)
- Martyr’s Day (Oct)
43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated

- Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential

![Graph showing coordinated bursts in post counts](image)

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Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential
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How Can We Validate 50c Party Membership Predictions?

Let's ask them(!)

Not your optimal survey respondents:

Their job: intentionally mislead, about the subject of the survey

Take orders from an uncompromising government

Their employer: The government

Potentially at stake: their job, or more

The Survey:

Random sample of predicted 50c accounts

Follow extensive literature on asking sensitive questions

Carefully study local social media context

Administer double blind survey via direct messaging

Specially designed, pre-tested survey question:

"I saw your comment, it's really inspiring, I want to ask, do you have any public opinion guidance management, or online commenting experience?"

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Ask same question of random sample of known 50c (from Zhanggong)

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Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues... does not last

The Chinese government responds with an editorial in the nationalist, CCP-controlled Global Times:

- Published only in Chinese, revealing a focus only on their own people
- Admits to the existence of the 50c party
- Confirms veracity of our leaked archive
- Summarizes our results, takes no issue with any of our conclusions
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≈ posing a survey question to the government, "Do you agree with our results?"
And the government, effectively said: "yes"

Why would they do this?
Editorial: "Chinese society is generally in agreement regarding the necessity of 'public opinion guidance'

— a testable hypothesis!

Supportive comments on the nationalist website:
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Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo:
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Results indicate:
figures are accurate,
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Validation by the Chinese Government

- Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues... does not last
- The Chinese government responds with an editorial in the nationalist, CCP-controlled *Global Times*:
  - Published only in Chinese, revealing a focus only on their own people
  - Admits to the existence of the 50c party
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Why would they do this?
- Editorial: “Chinese society is generally in agreement regarding the necessity of ‘public opinion guidance’” — a testable hypothesis!
- Supportive comments on the nationalist website: 82%
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- Supportive comments on the nationalist website: 82%
- Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%
- Results indicate: figures are accurate, the regime has a problem
Theoretical Implications

For China:
- Do not engage on controversial issues:
  - No censoring of criticism
  - No 50c posts arguing against criticism
- Stop collective action:
  - Respond to grievances to prevent collective action
  - Censor discussion of real-world collective action
- Distract with cheerleading and positive valence

For authoritarian regimes:
- Scholars have thought autocrats want to...
  - Common knowledge of grievances
  - Cost of coordination
  - China has two versions of common knowledge
    - Grievances (allowed) - no problem, already well known
    - Collective action (not allowed) - big problem, emergency action required

Arguments never end arguments; but distraction does

For future research:
- When studied at scale, Chinese government information controls leave big footprints.
Theoretical Implications

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For authoritarian regimes:

Scholars have thought autocrats want to lower the common knowledge of grievances to reduce the cost of coordination. We find: China has two versions of common knowledge:

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For more information

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