Fabricating News In Chinese Social Media

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University of Quintana Roo, Cancun, Mexico, 9/17/2017

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

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)

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Summary of Our Prior Work on Censorship

What Could be the Goal?

1. 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 (and 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

Count Published
Count Censored
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
Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Power shortages
Gov't raises power prices to curb demand
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:
Goal of China’s 50c Party

- Prevailing view of scholars, activists, journalists, social media participants: 50c party argues with & debates against those who criticize the government, its leaders, and their policies.
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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;
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  Evidence? A few anecdotes; “no ground truth”;
Goal of China’s 50c Party

- Prevailing view of scholars, activists, journalists, social media participants: *50c party argues with & debates against those who criticize the government, its leaders, and their policies*

  **Evidence?** A few anecdotes; “no ground truth”; “no successful attempts to quantify” 50c party activity;
Goal of China’s 50c Party

- Prevailing view of scholars, activists, journalists, social media participants: 50c party argues with & debates against those who criticize the government, its leaders, and their policies

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

- Prevailing view of scholars, activists, journalists, social media participants: 50c party argues with & debates against those who criticize the government, its leaders, and their policies. \textit{Wrong}
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- **Distracts**; redirects public attention from criticism and central issues to **cheerleading** and positive discussions of valence issues
First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party

Decipher leaked emails to: Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office (网宣办)

On the web, but overlooked and ignored

Workers claiming credit for their 50c posts

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

Map patterns of 50c workers: who, what, where, when, why

Extrapolate to the rest of China

Build model based on patterns we found

Identify 50c workers outside of Zhanggong

Validate (and validate the validation)

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

Who is posting?

Prevailing view: ordinary citizens getting paid 50c to make each post

In fact: 99.3% of posts made by > 200 government offices

No evidence of 50c (or any piecemeal) payments; probably part of their jobs
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Categories and Analyses of 50c Party Posts

Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories

- Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
- Leaked Zhanggong 50c weibo accounts: 167,971 posts
- Partition accounts for extrapolation (using Bayesian falling rule lists) into ordinary (59%) & exclusive (41%)
- Accounts that engage with Zhanggong weibo ≤ 10 followers
- Unleaked posts from Zhanggong exclusive 50c weibo accounts
- Unleaked posts from exclusive 50c weibo accounts across China
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Separate analyses — from Zhanggong to China:

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  - Factual reporting (our evidence)
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  1. Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

Number of 50c Posts in Zhanggong: 154,216
Number of 50c Posts in Jiangxi Province: 10.65 M
Number of 50c Posts in China: 448 M

53% on government sites (a noticeable proportion of all)
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- Two meetings (Feb)
- Urumqi rail explosion (May)
- Gov't forum, praise central subsidy (Jul−Aug)
- Martyr's Day (Oct)

Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential. A clear measure of government intent.
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Let’s ask them(!)

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Their employer:
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Potentially at stake:
their job, or more

The Survey:
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- Follow extensive literature on asking sensitive questions
- Carefully study local social media context
- Administer
  double blind
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- Specially designed, pre-tested survey question:
  "I saw your comment,
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- Ask same question of random sample of
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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
- Acknowledges the purpose of public opinion guidance is to stop the spread of "grassroots social issues" with collective action potential

≈ 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: 82%
Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%

Results indicate:
figures are accurate,
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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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- \(\approx\) 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: 82%
  - Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%
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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
- We find: 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 common knowledge of grievances to increase the cost of coordination.
  - We find: China has two versions of common knowledge:
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Theoretical Implications

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For more information

GaryKing.org

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