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

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DARPA, 7/11/2016

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

Empirical Results:
Reverse Engineering Chinese Censorship (Science)
How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression (APSR)
How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument (Today's presentation)

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

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China’s Highly Contested Social Media Landscape

Compared to contested physical spaces (e.g., South China Sea), social media:
- is more consequential for the regime & its people,
- has more intrusive government controls,
- and is more contested.
China’s Highly Contested Social Media Landscape

- > 1,400 diverse sites, fast changing, technological arm's race
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China’s Massive Propaganda Effort

A huge organization: obviously designed to suppress, distort, and control information we find, paradoxically reveals the goals, intentions, and actions of the Chinese leadership

Well known media controls:
High level of control over traditional media
“The Great Firewall”
Automated keyword-based filtering
Human post-level censorship
Search filtering
⇝ The largest selective suppression of human expression in history

(Rumors of) as many as 2M government “astroturfers”:
Post fabricated social media comments, as if they were opinions of ordinary people
Official name: “Internet commentators”
Common name: “50c Party” members
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The Regime’s Goals make Social Media Analysis Actionable

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 (& interest of leaders)
- Government action outside the Internet
- Dissidents to be arrested; peace treaties to sign; emerging scandals
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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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“posting information favorable to the regime and chastising its critics” (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010)
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

"undercover pro-government Internetcommenters"  (Foreign Policy)
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  "neutralize undesirable public opinion by pushing pro-Party views" (Far Eastern Economic Review)
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- 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

“If you oppose the US and Japan [online], you are a member of the 50 cents army” (artist-dissident Ai Weiwei)
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

“Combat hostile energy [which should be] resolutely resisted, proactively refuted, and eagerly reported to Internet authorities” (Haley, 2012)
Goal of China’s 50c Party

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We collected people accused on social media of being 50c:
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.

We collected people accused on social media of being 50c: 65% argue with critics of the regime.
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  It’s antidisestablishmentarianism!
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Evidence?
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  **Evidence?** A few anecdotes;
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- 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 **Wrong**
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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 mostly 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

7/17
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Survey 1: 50c party members
Survey 2: the Chinese regime
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 ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)

1. Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
2. Leaked Zhanggong 50c weibo accounts: 167,971 posts (some 50c)
3. Partition accounts for extrapolation (using Bayesian falling rule lists) into ordinary (59%) & exclusive (41%) accounts that engage with Zhanggong weibo ≤ 10 followers
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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Proportion

10/17
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![Graph showing the content of leaked and predicted 50c Party posts.

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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts](image)
Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

- Number of social media posts in China: 80.4 B
- 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 sizable proportion of all)
47% on commercial sites (1 of every 178 posts)
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43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated
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1. Qingming festival (April)
2. China Dream (May)
3. Shanshan riots (July)
4. 3rd plenum CCP 18th Congress (Nov)
5. Two meetings (Feb)
6. Urumqi rail explosion (May)
7. Gov’t forum, praise central subsidy (Jul–Aug)
8. Martyr’s Day (Oct)

Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential.
43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated

Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential
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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Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions
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- Known 50c: Leaked Zhanggong Archive - 57%
- Known "Not" 50c - 19%
- Predicted 50c Across China - 59%

Predicted v. known: not significantly different
Predicted v. not known: significantly different
### Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

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Validation by the Chinese Government

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
- Gives their first open admission to the existence of the 50c party
- Offers tacit confirmation of the 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?
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— a testable hypothesis!

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Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo:

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  - No censoring of criticism
  - No 50c posts arguing against criticism
- Stop collective action:
  - Censor discussion of real-world collective action
  - Distract with cheerleading and positive valence

Implications for authoritarian regimes:
- We usually think autocrats want to:
  - Common knowledge of grievances
  - Cost of coordination
- China differentiates 2 versions of common knowledge:
  - Grievances (allowed) [no problem, already well known]
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Implications for future research:
- When studied at scale, government information controls leave big footprints.
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For more information

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JenPan.com

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