Reverse Engineering Chinese Government Information Controls

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Institute for Quantitative Social Science
Harvard University

Harvard Weatherhead Center Distinguished Faculty Lecture in Global Affairs, 10/3/2018

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

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul
Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Speculation of Policy Reversal at NPC

Count Published  Count Censored

Jan  Feb  Mar  Apr  May  Jun  Jul

0  10  20  30  40

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Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Power shortages
Gov't raises
power prices
to curb demand

Count Published
Count Censored
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!
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

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 ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)

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

8/16
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- Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)
  - Taunting of foreign countries (prevailing view)
  - Argumentative praise or criticism
  - Non-argumentative praise or suggestions
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- Separate analyses — from Zhanggong to China:
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Cheerleading
- Factual Reporting
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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Proportion

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Leaked accounts, Weibo

- Cheerleading
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Leaked accounts, Weibo
- Leaked accounts, ordinary

Proportion

- Cheerleading
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
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- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing the content of leaked and predicted 50c Party posts.](image-url)

Legend:
- ● Leaked e-mails, all sites
- ▲ Leaked accounts, Weibo
- ❌ Leaked accounts, ordinary
- ★ Leaked accounts, exclusive

- Cheerleading
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Leaked accounts, Weibo
- Leaked accounts, ordinary
- Leaked accounts, exclusive
- Within county prediction, all posts

- Cheerleading
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Factual Reporting
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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- Leaked accounts, Weibo
- Leaked accounts, ordinary
- Leaked accounts, exclusive
- Within county prediction, all posts
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- Cheerleading
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)
Number of social media posts in China:
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- Number of social media posts in China: >80.4 B
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- Number of social media posts in China: \( >80.4 \text{ B} \)
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

- Number of social media posts in China: >80.4 B
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  - 53% on government sites (a noticeable proportion of all)
Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

- Number of social media posts in China: $>80.4 \times 10^9$
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  - 53% on government sites (a noticeable proportion of all)
  - 47% on commercial sites (1 of every 178 posts)
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. A clear measure of government intent.
43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated

- Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential
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A clear measure of government intent.
How Can We Validate 50c Party Membership Predictions?

Let's ask them(!)

Not your optimal survey respondents:

Their job:
to 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
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Ask same question of random sample of
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Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions
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The percent yes for the Predicted 50c status is significantly different from the known 50c status but not significantly different from the random sample status.
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The percent yes values for Predicted 50c, Known 50c, and Known “Not” 50c are 59%, 57%, and 19%, respectively. These are significantly different.
Validation by the Chinese Government
Validation by the Chinese Government

- Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues...
Validation by the Chinese Government

- Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues... does not last
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- The Chinese government responds with an editorial in the nationalist, CCP-controlled *Global Times*:
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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%

Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%

Results indicate:
- Figures are accurate,
- The regime has a problem
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  - Editorial: “Chinese society is generally in agreement regarding the necessity of ‘public opinion guidance’” — a testable hypothesis!
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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%
  - Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%
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  - 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.
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For more information

GaryKing.org

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