Reverse Engineering Chinese Government Information Controls

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Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 12/31/2019

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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; APSR)

Automated Text Analysis Methods: General Purpose Computer-Assisted Clustering and Conceptualization (PNAS)
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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

January 2016 to July 2016
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:

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It’s antidisestablishmentarianism!
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   Evidence?
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  **Evidence?** A few anecdotes;
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”;
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- 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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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

\((\text{"readme," Hopkins & King 2010})\)

Separate analyses — from Zhanggong to China:

1. Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
2. Leaked Zhanggong 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
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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)
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing the content of leaked and predicted 50c Party posts. The graph compares leaked emails, all sites, and leaked accounts, Weibo. The categories include argumentative praise or criticism, taunting of foreign countries, cheerleading, factual reporting, and non-argumentative praise or suggestions.]

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

Proportion

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

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

Proportion

- Cheerleading
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
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Proportion

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Graphical representation showing the proportion of different types of content in leaked and predicted posts.
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

- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
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- Factual Reporting
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Proportion

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Leaked accounts, Weibo
- Leaked accounts, ordinary
- Leaked accounts, exclusive
- Within county prediction, all posts
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- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)
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- Number of social media posts in China:

  - 80.4 B
  - 154,216
  - 10.65 M
  - 448 M
  - 53% on government sites (a noticeable proportion of all)
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43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated
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#### Events of Interest:
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)

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

Let’s ask them(!)

Not your optimal survey respondents:

Their job:

to intentionally

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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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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
- 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, the regime has a problem
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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

\[ \downarrow \]

common knowledge of grievances

\[ \Rightarrow \]

\[ \uparrow \]

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.
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- For authoritarian regimes:
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to coordinate common knowledge of grievances but face high coordination costs.
  - We find that China has two versions of common knowledge of grievances: allowed for grievances but not collective action.
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For authoritarian regimes:
- Scholars have thought autocrats want common knowledge of grievances
  - This helps them coordinate actions
  - But China has two versions of this common knowledge:
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For more information

GaryKing.org

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