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)

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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
- censorship: to stop events with collective action potential

Thus, we can use criticism and 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
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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

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul

0 20 40 60 80 100
Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Speculation of Policy Reversal at NPC

Count Published

Count Censored

0 10 20 30 40
Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul
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; “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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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 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
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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

The Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Operation

higher level offices reported to

commentators reporting to zhanggong internet propaganda office

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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
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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
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions

Proportion
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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

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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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Proportion

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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing content types and proportions]

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

Legend:
- Cheerleading
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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

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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 noticeable 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.
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: 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
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The percent Yes values for Predicted 50c and Known 50c are not significantly different.
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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,
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  - Editorial: “Chinese society is generally in agreement regarding the necessity of ‘public opinion guidance’” — a testable hypothesis!
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
  - Confirms veracity of our leaked archive
  - Summarizes our results, takes no issue with any of our conclusions
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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%
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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
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 common knowledge of grievances
- 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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    - 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)
    - Collective action (not allowed)
  - Arguments never end arguments; but distraction does

For future research:

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

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
    - No censoring of criticism

- For authoritarian regimes:
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to lower the cost of coordination, but the common knowledge of grievances does not pose a problem, already well known.
  - Collective action is a big problem, requiring emergency action.
  - Arguments are not effective in ending arguments, but distraction is.

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

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
    - No censoring of criticism
    - No 50c posts arguing against criticism
Theoretical Implications

- For China:
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
    - No censoring of criticism
    - No 50c posts arguing against criticism
  - Stop collective action:

For authoritarian regimes: Scholars have thought autocrats want common knowledge of grievances, which increases the 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

- For China:
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
    - No censoring of criticism
    - No 50c posts arguing against criticism
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Theoretical Implications

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For authoritarian regimes:

Scholars have thought autocrats want to

↓

common knowledge of grievances

⇝

cost of coordination

↑

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
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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 common knowledge of grievances
  - This reduces the 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

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

- For China:
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
    - No censoring of criticism
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- For authoritarian regimes:
Theoretical Implications

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
    - No censoring of criticism
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- **For authoritarian regimes:**
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
Theoretical Implications

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
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- **For authoritarian regimes:**
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
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Theoretical Implications

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- **For authoritarian regimes:**
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
    - ↓ common knowledge of grievances \(\sim\) ↑ cost of coordination
Theoretical Implications

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  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
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- **For authoritarian regimes:**
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to:
    - ↓ common knowledge of grievances $\sim\uparrow$ cost of coordination
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Theoretical Implications

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- **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*)
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For more information

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