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

Gary King

Institute for Quantitative Social Science
Harvard University

Northeastern University, 9/26/2016

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

Empirical Results:

Reverse Engineering Chinese Censorship

How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression

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

A Method of Automated Nonparametric Content Analysis for Social Science

Computer-Assisted Keyword and Document Set Discovery from Unstructured Text

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- **Empirical Results:**
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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?

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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[One Page Summary of our Prior Work]

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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:
Goal of China’s 50c Party

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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 Internet commenters” (Foreign Policy)
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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

“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)
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

“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:
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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.

  We collected people accused on social media of being 50c: 65% argue with critics of the regime.
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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

  It’s antidisestablishmentarianism!
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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*

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”;}
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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

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- 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
First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party
Leaked emails: Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office (网宣办)
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.
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![Diagram showing the network of higher level offices and commentators reporting to the Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office](image)
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
Categories and Analyses of 50c Party Posts

- Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories

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%)
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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
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- Factual Reporting
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions
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- **Leaked e-mails, all sites**
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Leaked accounts, Weibo
- Leaked accounts, ordinary

Proportion

- Cheerleading
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Factual Reporting
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions

Graph showing the content distribution among leaked and predicted 50c Party posts.
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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

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

![Graph showing the distribution of content types from leaked emails and accounts, including argumentative praise or criticism, taunting of foreign countries, factual reporting, non-argumentative praise or suggestions, and cheerleading.]

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

---

0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0
Proportion

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

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

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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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Count of Posts

Date (Jan 2013 − Dec 2014)

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?"

**Validating the Validation**

- **Ask same question of random sample of known 50c (from Zhanggong)**
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<th>Known 50c</th>
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Predicted v. known: not significantly different
Predicted v. not known: significantly different
# Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

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Predicted v. known: not significantly different
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Predicted v. known: not significantly different
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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. It gives their first open admission to the existence of the 50c party, offering tacit confirmation of the veracity of our leaked archive. The editorial summarizes our results, takes no issue with any of our conclusions, and acknowledges the purpose of public opinion guidance is to stop the spread of "grassroots social issues" with collective action potential.

The government, effectively said: "Do you agree with our results?" The regime has a problem and felt the need to explain its behavior to its people.

Editorial: "Chinese society is generally in agreement regarding the necessity of 'public opinion guidance'."

Supportive comments on the nationalist website: 82%
Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%
Results indicate: figures are accurate, the regime has a problem & felt the need to explain its behavior to its people.
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China’s strategy:
- Do not engage on controversial issues:
  - 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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- When studied at scale, government information controls leave big footprints.
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GaryKing.org

JenPan.com

MargaretRoberts.net