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

Gary King

Institute for Quantitative Social Science
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Issues and Methodological Challenges in the Study of Contemporary Chinese Politics,
National Taiwanese University and Harvard

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)

Copies at GaryKing.org
Papers

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Summary of Our Prior Work on Censorship

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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- 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

Count Published
Count Censored
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

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

0

10

20

30

40

Count

4/16
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?
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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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- **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 $\rightarrow$ 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

6/16
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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%) → Accounts that engage with Zhanggong weibo → ≤ 10 followers
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5. Unleaked posts from exclusive 50c weibo accounts across China
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  1. Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts

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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
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

Proportion

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

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

![Graph showing the content of leaked and predicted 50c Party posts. The x-axis represents different types of content: Taunting of Foreign Countries, Argumentative Praise or Criticism, Factual Reporting, Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions. The y-axis represents the proportion of each type of content. The graph includes multiple types of content, such as leaked emails, leaked accounts, and leaked accounts by exclusive sites.]

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

Proportion

Cheerleading

Taunting of Foreign Countries

Argumentative Praise or Criticism

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Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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- Leaked accounts, exclusive
- Within county prediction, all posts

- Cheerleading
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- Out of county prediction
Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)
Number of social media posts in China:

- 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)
Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

- Number of social media posts in China: $>80.4 \text{ B}$
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- Number of social media posts in China: $>80.4 \times 10^9$
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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.
43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated

- Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential
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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 misleading

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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- Validating the *Validation*
  - Ask same question of random sample of *known* 50c (from Zhanggong)
  - Ask same question of accounts *known not to be* 50c
Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

- Predicted 50c Across China: 59%
- Known 50c Leaked Zhanggong Archive: 57%
- Known "Not" 50c Random sample: 19%

Note: The comparison indicates that the known 50c in the Zhanggong Archive is not significantly different from the predicted 50c across China.
Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

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The percent yes values are not significantly different.
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**Note:** Significantly different
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
- 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

The 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
Validation by the Chinese Government

- Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues...
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- Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues... does not last
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Why would they do this?
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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

- We find: China has two versions of common knowledge:
  - Grievances (allowed)
    - no problem, already well known
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For future research:

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