Reverse Engineering Chinese Government Information Controls

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National Taiwan University, 5/30/2018

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

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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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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)
- Government action outside the Internet
- Dissidents to be arrested; peace treaties to sign; emerging scandals
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- What Could be the Goal?
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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

Count
Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul
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Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Speculation of Policy Reversal at NPC

Count Published

Count Censored

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:
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.
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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;
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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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First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party

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
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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  - “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

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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%)
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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- Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)

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8/16
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  - Non-argumentative praise or suggestions
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  - Factual reporting

Separate analyses — from Zhanggong to China:

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- Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)
  - Taunting of foreign countries (prevailing view)
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  5. Unleaked posts from exclusive 50c weibo accounts across China
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing the proportion of different types of content in leaked e-mails.]

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

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

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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing the content of leaked and predicted 50c party posts. The x-axis represents the proportion, while the y-axis has categories such as leaked emails, leaked accounts on Weibo, leaked accounts on ordinary sites, leaked accounts on exclusive sites. Different markers represent different types of content, such as argumentative praise or criticism, taunting of foreign countries, factual reporting, non-argumentative praise or suggestions, and cheerleading. The graph illustrates the distribution and frequency of these content types across different leaked data sources.](image-url)
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing content distribution of leaked and predicted posts. The x-axis represents different categories such as 'Taunting of Foreign Countries,' 'Argumentative Praise or Criticism,' 'Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions,' and 'Factual Reporting.' The y-axis represents proportion.]
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
- Out of county prediction

Leakage and prediction categories include:

- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Cheerleading
- Factual Reporting
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions
Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

- Number of social media posts in China:
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)
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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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- Qingming festival (April)
- China Dream (May)
- Shanshan riots (July)
- 3rd plenum CCP 18th Congress (Nov)
- Two meetings (Feb)
- Urumqi rail explosion (May)
- Gov’t forum, praise central subsidy (Jul–Aug)
- Martyr’s Day (Oct)
43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated

- 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
- 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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<td>Predicted 50c Across China</td>
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Leaked Zhanggong Archive: 57% Known “Not” 50c, Random sample: 19%

The results are not significantly different.
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The percent yes for Predicted 50c is significantly different from the percent yes for Known “Not” 50c.
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

Why would they do this?

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
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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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  - 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%
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  - Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%
  - Results indicate:
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  - Acknowledges the purpose of public opinion guidance is to stop the spread of “grassroots social issues” with collective action potential
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  - 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 to
  ↓
  common knowledge of grievances
  ⇝
  ↑ 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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For authoritarian regimes:
- Scholars have thought autocrats want to
  - common knowledge of grievances
  \[ \downarrow \]
  - cost of coordination
  \[ \uparrow \]
  - 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

- For authoritarian regimes:
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want common knowledge of grievances, thereby reducing the cost of coordination. We find: China has two versions of common knowledge—grievances (allowed) and collective action (not allowed) with 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:
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    - No 50c posts arguing against criticism
Theoretical Implications

- **For China:**
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- Scholars have thought autocrats want to
  - common knowledge of grievances
  - cost of coordination
  - We find: China has two versions of common knowledge
    - Grievances (allowed)
    - Collective action (not allowed)
  - Arguments never end arguments; but distraction does

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Theoretical Implications

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
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Theoretical Implications

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    - 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

- For authoritarian regimes:
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to decrease the 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; 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
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  - Respond to grievances to prevent collective action
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Theoretical Implications

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
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    - Censor discussion of real-world collective action
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- **For authoritarian regimes:**
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
Theoretical Implications

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
    - No censoring of criticism
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    - Distract with cheerleading and positive valence

- **For authoritarian regimes:**
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
    - ↓ 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

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

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
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    - Distract with cheerleading and positive valence

- **For authoritarian regimes:**
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
    - common knowledge of grievances $\sim$ cost of coordination

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
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- For authoritarian regimes:
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
    - ↓ common knowledge of grievances $\sim$ ↑ cost of coordination
  - We find: China has two versions of common knowledge
Theoretical Implications

- **For China:**
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
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    - 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 \( \sim \) ↑ cost of coordination
  - We find: China has two versions of common knowledge
    - Grievances *(allowed)*
Theoretical Implications

For China:
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For authoritarian regimes:
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  \[ \downarrow \text{common knowledge of grievances} \sim \uparrow \text{cost of coordination} \]
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For more information

GaryKing.org

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