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

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1 Based on joint work with Jennifer Pan (Stanford) and Margaret Roberts (UCSD)
2 GaryKing.org
Empirical Results:
Reverse Engineering Chinese Censorship (Science)
How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression (APSR)
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 (PNAS)
A Method of Automated Nonparametric Content Analysis for Social Science (AJPS)
Computer-Assisted Keyword and Document Set Discovery from Unstructured Text

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Papers

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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?

1. Stop collective action

- Right

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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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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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

“posting information favorable to the regime and chastising its critics” (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010)
Goal of China’s 50c Party

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“undercover pro-government Internet commenters” (Foreign Policy)
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  “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

- 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:
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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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Evidence?
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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; even several analyses with made up dependent variables!
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First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party

Leaked emails: Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office (网宣办)

Workers claiming credit for their 50c posts
On the web, but overlooked and ignored
Large, unstructured, messy data ⇝ systematized (hard to do!)

2,341 emails (covering 2013 & 2014)
1,245 contained 50c posts
43,797 known 50c cent posts

Survey 1: 50c party members
Survey 2: the Chinese regime

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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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No evidence of 50c (or any piecemeal) payments; probably part of their jobs.
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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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Proportion
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)
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- 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)
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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.
43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated

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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
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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Predicted v. known: not significantly different
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Predicted v. known: not significantly different
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≈

"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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Results indicate:
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- Stop collective action:
  - Censor discussion of real-world collective action
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- We usually think autocrats want to
  - ↓ common knowledge of grievances
  - ⇝ cost of coordination
- China differentiates 2 versions of common knowledge:
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- When studied at scale, government information controls leave big footprints.
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GaryKing.org

JenPan.com

MargaretRoberts.net