Analyzing Social Media in China

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1Based on joint work with Jennifer Pan (Stanford) and Margaret Roberts (UCSD)
2GaryKing.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 (AJPS)

Copies at GaryKing.org
Academic Papers

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Copies at GaryKing.org
Summary of Our Prior Work on Censorship

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, one 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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Censorship Reveals Government Goals
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Count Published
Count Censored

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  | 60  | 80  | 100 | 0   | 0
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
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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”;
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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

6/16
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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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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 accounts ≤ 10 followers
4. Unleaked posts from Zhanggong exclusive 50c weibo accounts
5. Unleaked posts from exclusive 50c weibo accounts across China
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  - Taunting of foreign countries (prevailing view)
  - Argumentative praise or criticism
  - Non-argumentative praise or suggestions
  - Factual reporting
  - Cheerleading

- Separate analyses — from Zhanggong to China:
  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
  4. Unleaked posts from Zhanggong exclusive 50c weibo accounts
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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Proportion

- Cheerleading
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph depicting the content of leaked 50c Party posts. The graph shows the proportion of leaked emails, leaked accounts on different platforms, and the types of content such as argumentative praise or criticism, taunting of foreign countries, cheerleading, factual reporting, and non-argumentative praise or suggestions.](image-url)
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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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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 that government

Their employer:
The government

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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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

≈ 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%
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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  - 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:
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
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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%
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  - Supportive comments on the nationalist website: 82%
  - Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo:
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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%
  - Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%
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
  - \[ \downarrow \]
  - 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
Theoretical Implications

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- **For authoritarian regimes:**
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
  - ↓ common knowledge of grievances
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Theoretical Implications

For China:
- Do not engage on controversial issues:
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For authoritarian regimes:
- Scholars have thought autocrats want the common knowledge of grievances to rise, but this 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.

15/16
Theoretical Implications

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Theoretical Implications

For China:

- Do not engage on controversial issues:
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  - No 50c posts arguing against criticism

- Stop collective action:

For authoritarian regimes:

Scholars have thought autocrats want to lower the common knowledge of grievances, which increases the cost of coordination. We find that 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.
Theoretical Implications

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

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Theoretical Implications

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- 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
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- **For China:**
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  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
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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 of grievances
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