Reverse Engineering Chinese Government Information Controls

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Paul and Marica Wythes Center on Contemporary China, Princeton University, 10/11/2017

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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
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
Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Power shortages
Gov't raises power prices to curb demand

Count
Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul
●
●
●
●
●
●
●
●
●
●
●
●... ●
● ● ●
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!
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”; “no successful attempts to quantify” 50c party activity; even several analyses with made up dependent variables!
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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 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).
First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party

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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
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In fact: 99.3% of
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> 200
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No evidence of 50c
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Categories and Analyses of 50c Party Posts

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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  3. Partition accounts for extrapolation (using Bayesian falling rule lists)
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- Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)
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- Separate analyses — from Zhanggong to China:
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- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Cheerleading
- Factual Reporting
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions

Proportion

Leaked e-mails, all sites
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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- Cheerleading
- Factual Reporting
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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

Proportion

- Cheerleading
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Factual Reporting
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions

Taunting of Foreign Countries

0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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

Proportion

- 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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- Within county prediction, all posts

Graph showing the proportion of different content types, including argumentative praise or criticism, taunting of foreign countries, factual reporting, non-argumentative praise or suggestions, and cheerleading.
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)
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- Number of social media posts in China:
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  - 53% on government sites (a noticeable proportion of all)
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Number of 50c Posts in Zhanggong: 154,216
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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)
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.
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Let's ask them(!)

Not your optimal survey respondents:

Their job:

to intentionally

mislead

about the subject of the survey

Take orders from an

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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?"

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Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

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<th>Status Origin</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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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
- 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%

Results indicate:
- figures are accurate,
- the regime has a problem

14/16
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- Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues...
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  - Supportive comments on the nationalist website: 82%
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  - Supportive comments on the nationalist website: 82%
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  - 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.
- 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

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- For authoritarian regimes:
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
    - common knowledge of grievances
    - ⇝ cost of coordination
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For authoritarian regimes:

Scholars have thought autocrats want to move common knowledge of grievances to make coordination more costly. We find: China has two versions of common knowledge:

Grievances: no problem, already well known
Collective action: big problem, emergency action required

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\[ \text{common knowledge of grievances} \]

\[ \Rightarrow \]

\[ \text{cost of coordination} \]

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Grievances (allowed)

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For more information

GaryKing.org

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