Reverse Engineering Chinese Government Information Controls\textsuperscript{1}

Gary King\textsuperscript{2}

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\textsuperscript{1}Based on joint work with Jennifer Pan (Stanford) and Margaret Roberts (UCSD)
\textsuperscript{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](#))
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- Computer-Assisted Keyword and Document Set Discovery from Unstructured Text (in press, [AJPS](#))

Copies at GaryKing.org
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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, 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

Disagreements between central and local leaders
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Censorship Reveals Government Goals
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![Graph showing Ai Weiwei arrested and counts published and censored over time.]

Count Published
Count Censored

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
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
Prevailing view of scholars, activists, journalists, social media participants:
Goal of China’s 50c Party

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It’s antidisestablishmentarianism!
Goal of China’s 50c Party

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Evidence?
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*

  **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;
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*

  Evidence? A few anecdotes; “no ground truth”; “no successful attempts to quantify” 50c party activity; even several analyses with made up dependent variables!
Goal of China’s 50c Party

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First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party
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- Decipher Leaked emails
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  - 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)

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

6/16
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  - Survey 1: 50c party members
  - “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

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

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
   ₩59% & ₩41% accounts that engage with Zhanggong weibo
   ₩≤ 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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8/16
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3. Partition accounts for extrapolation (using Bayesian falling rule lists) into *ordinary* (59%)
Categories and Analyses of 50c Party Posts

- Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)
  - Taunting of foreign countries (prevailing view)
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts
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- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Cheerleading
- Factual Reporting
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions

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

![Graph showing content of leaked and predicted 50c Party posts. The graph includes categories such as leaked emails, leaked accounts on Weibo, argumentative praise or criticism, taunting of foreign countries, cheerleading, factual reporting, non-argumentative praise or suggestions.](image-url)
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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

Proportion

0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0

Cheerleading

Argumentative Praise or Criticism
Taunting of Foreign Countries

Factual Reporting
Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts](chart.png)

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Leaked accounts, Weibo
- Leaked accounts, ordinary
- Leaked accounts, exclusive
- Within county prediction, all posts

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- Taunting of Foreign Countries
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Leaked accounts, Weibo
- Leaked accounts, ordinary
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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:
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- Number of social media posts in China: \( >80.4 \text{ B} \)
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

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

- Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential
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 guidance management, or online commenting experience?"

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Ask same question of random sample of known 50c (from Zhanggong)
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Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions
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The results show that the predicted membership is significantly different from the known membership based on the Zhanggong Archive and the random sample.
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The percent yes values for Predicted 50c and Known 50c are significantly different, but the percent yes for Known “Not” 50c is not significantly different.

13/16
Validation by the Chinese Government

Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues. . .

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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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.
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For more information

GaryKing.org

JenPan.com

MargaretRoberts.net