BIG DATA REVEALS MADE UP DATA: (How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument)\textsuperscript{1}

Gary King\textsuperscript{2}

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University of Texas at Austin, 9/7/2017

\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)

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?

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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  1. Stop criticism of the state
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Censorship Reveals Government Goals
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Ai Weiwei arrested

Count Published
Count Censored

Count
Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul

0 10 20 30 40

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 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:
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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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!
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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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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

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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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing the content of leaked and predicted 50c Party posts.](image)

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- Leaked accounts, Weibo
- Leaked accounts, ordinary

Proportion

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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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43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated
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Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential
A clear measure of government intent.

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)
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How Can We Validate 50c Party Membership Predictions?

Let's ask them(!)

Not your optimal survey respondents:

Their job: 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)
- Ask same question of accounts *known not to be* 50c
Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

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<th>Status Origin</th>
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<tr>
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Not significantly different

13/16
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The percent yes rates are significantly different.
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'"

Supportive comments on the nationalist website: 82%

Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%

Results indicate: figures are accurate, the regime has a problem
Validation by the Chinese Government

- Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues...

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— a testable hypothesis!

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Results indicate:

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Validation by the Chinese Government

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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%
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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.
Theoretical Implications

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- **For authoritarian regimes:**
  - Scholars have thought autocrats want to
    - common knowledge of grievances
  - But we find: China has two versions of common knowledge
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For authoritarian regimes:

Scholars have thought autocrats want common knowledge of grievances to decrease the cost of coordination. We find: China has two versions of common knowledge of grievances (allowed) and collective action (not allowed), which require emergency action. 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:

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Theoretical Implications

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