Big Data Reveals Made Up Data: (How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument)¹

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University of Texas at Austin, 9/7/2017

¹Based on joint work with Jennifer Pan (Stanford) and Margaret Roberts (UCSD)
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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)

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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
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- What Could be the Goal?
  - Stop criticism of the state
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Censorship Reveals Government Goals
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Ai Weiwei arrested

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Count Published
Count Censored
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

0 10 20 30 40
Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul

4/16
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
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!
Goal of China’s 50c Party

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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!
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. Wrong
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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 **Wrong**

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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** *Wrong*
- 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
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 of the validation)

Survey 1: 50c party members

"Survey" 2: the Chinese regime
First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party

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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.

The Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Operation

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Categories and Analyses of 50c Party Posts

Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)

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%)
4. Accounts that engage with Zhanggong weibo
5. Unleaked posts from Zhanggong exclusive 50c weibo accounts
6. Unleaked posts from exclusive 50c weibo accounts across China
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- Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
- Leaked Zhanggong 50c weibo accounts: 167,971 posts
- Partition accounts for extrapolation (using Bayesian falling rule lists) into ordinary (59%) & exclusive (41%) accounts that engage with Zhanggong weibo ≤ 10 followers
- Unleaked posts from Zhanggong exclusive 50c weibo accounts
- Unleaked posts from exclusive 50c weibo accounts across China

8/16
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  - Non-argumentative praise or suggestions

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Categories and Analyses of 50c Party Posts

- **Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories** ("readme," Hopkins & King 2010)
  - Taunting of foreign countries (prevailing view)
  - Argumentative praise or criticism
  - Non-argumentative praise or suggestions (our evidence)
  - Factual reporting
  - Cheerleading

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

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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Proportion

- Cheerleading
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

Proportion

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

Cheerleading

Taunting of Foreign Countries

Argumentative Praise or Criticism

Factual Reporting

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

![Graph showing content distribution]

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

Categories:
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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- Leaked accounts, ordinary
- Leaked accounts, exclusive
- Within county prediction, all posts

- Cheerleading
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- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions
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9/16
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Number of social media posts in China:
Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

- Number of social media posts in China: >80.4 B
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  - 53% on government sites (a noticable proportion of all)
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  - 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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Count of Posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Description</th>
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Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential. A clear measure of government intent.
43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated

- Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential

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Count of Posts
Date (Jan 2013 − Dec 2014)
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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<th>Status Origin</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Predicted 50c Across China</th>
<th>Known Zhanggong Archive</th>
<th>Known &quot;Not&quot; 50c</th>
<th>Random sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not</td>
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There is no significant difference.
## Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

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- Predicted 50c Across China: 59%
- Known 50c Leaked Zhanggong Archive: 57%
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The percentages are not significantly different.
## Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

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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
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≈ posing a survey question to the government, "Do you agree with our results?"
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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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**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 coordinate.
- We find: China has two versions of common knowledge of grievances. 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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Scholars have thought autocrats want common knowledge of grievances, which would increase the cost of coordination. 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 ⇝ cost of coordination ↑

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\[ \Rightarrow \]

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For more information

GaryKing.org

JenPan.com

MargaretRoberts.net