How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument\textsuperscript{1}

Gary King\textsuperscript{2}

Institute for Quantitative Social Science
Harvard University

University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1/23/17

\textsuperscript{1}Based on joint work with Jennifer Pan (Stanford) and Margaret Roberts (UCSD)
\textsuperscript{2}GaryKing.org
Papers

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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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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Ai Weiwei arrested

Count Published
Count Censored
Censorship Reveals Government Goals

Collective Support for Environmental Lottery

Count Published

Count Censored

Jan  Feb  Mar  Apr  May  Jun  Jul
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
Goal of China’s 50c Party

- Prevailing view of scholars, activists, journalists, social media participants:
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It’s antidisestablishmentarianism!
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  Evidence?
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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
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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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Higher Level Offices Reported To

Commentators Reporting to Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office

Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office
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)

1. Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
2. Leaked Zhanggong 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
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts
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![Graph showing the content distribution of leaked emails.]

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Cheerleading
- Factual Reporting
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions

Proportion
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing content proportions of leaked emails and accounts on Weibo.](image-url)
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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Proportion
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- Leaked e-mails, all sites
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Legend:
- Cheerleading
- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
- Taunting of Foreign Countries
- Non-argumentative Praise or Suggestions
- Factual Reporting
Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

![Graph showing the content distribution of leaked and predicted posts.](chart.png)

Legend:

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

Proportion of different content categories:

- Argumentative Praise or Criticism
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)
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- Number of social media posts in China:
  - 80.4 B
  - 154,216
  - 10.65 M
  - 448 M
  - 53% on government sites (a noticeable proportion of all)
  - 47% on commercial sites (1 of every 178 posts)
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7. Gov’t forum, praise central subsidy (Jul–Aug)
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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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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
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- 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?"
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
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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
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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
  - ⇝ 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