

How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument¹

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Northeastern University, 9/26/2016

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

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- Empirical Results:

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China's Highly Contested Social Media Landscape

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 - Common name: “50c Party” members

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 - Disagreements between central and local leaders

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“posting information favorable to the regime and chastising its critics” (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010)

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“undercover pro-government Internet commenters” (Foreign Policy)

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“neutralize undesirable public opinion by pushing pro-Party views” (Far Eastern Economic Review)

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"If you oppose the US and Japan [online], you are a member of the 50 cents army" (artist-dissident Ai Weiwei)

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“Combat hostile energy [which should be] resolutely resisted, proactively refuted, and eagerly reported to Internet authorities” (Haley, 2012)

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We collected people accused on social media of being 50c:

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65% *argue* with critics of the regime

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It's antisestablishmentarianism!

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- **Distracts**; redirects public attention from criticism and central issues to **cheerleading** and positive discussions of valence issues

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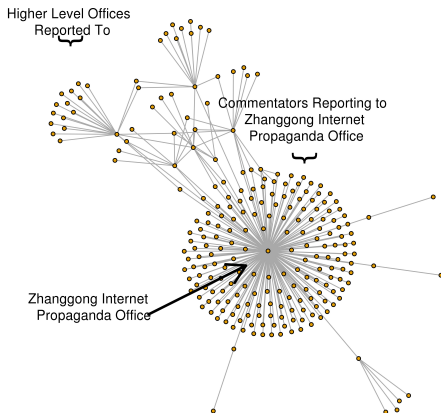
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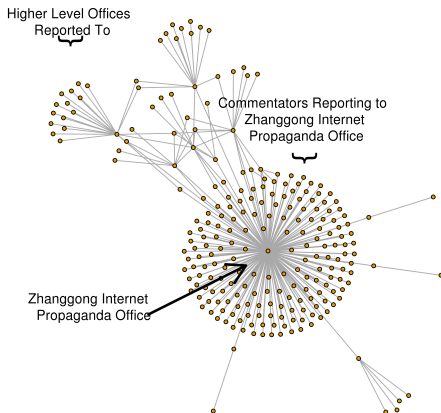
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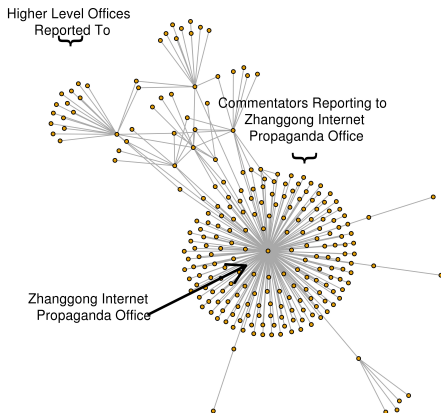


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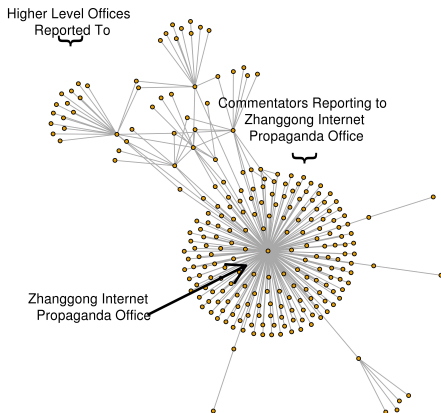
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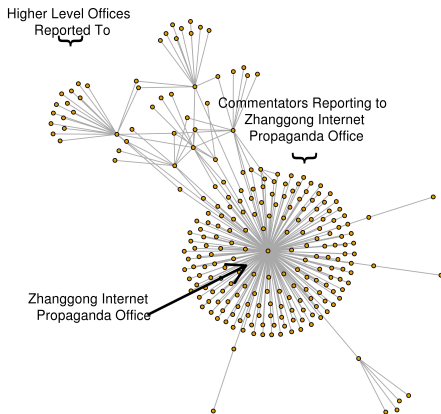
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 - **In fact:** 99.3% of posts made by >200 government offices
 - **No evidence of 50c (or any piecemeal) payments;** probably part of their jobs

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- Separate analyses — from Zhanggong to China:

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- Estimate distribution of posts across 5 categories (“readme,” Hopkins & King 2010)
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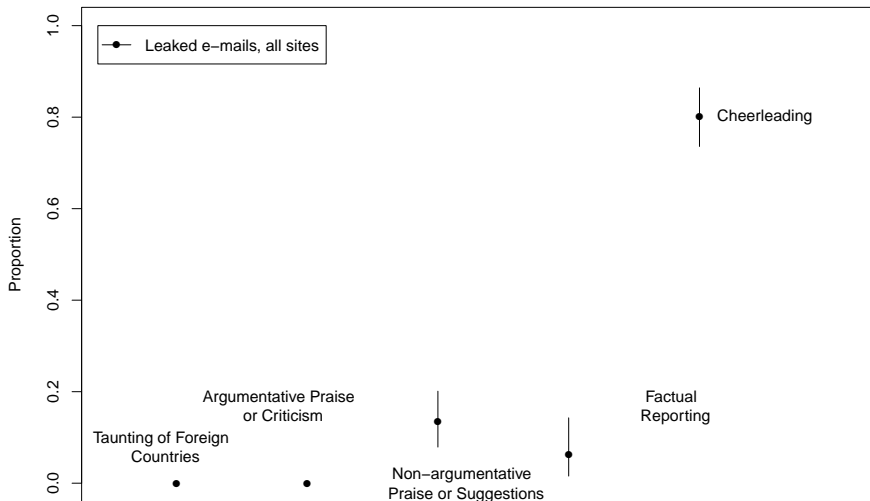
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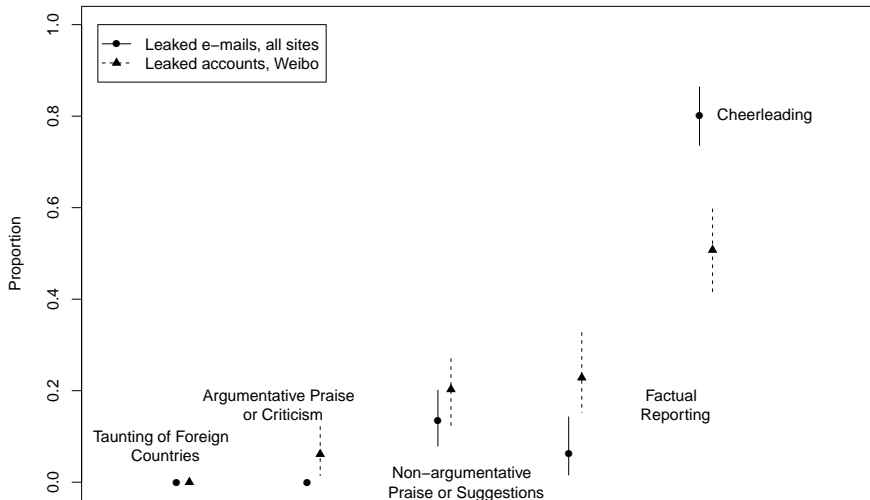
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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

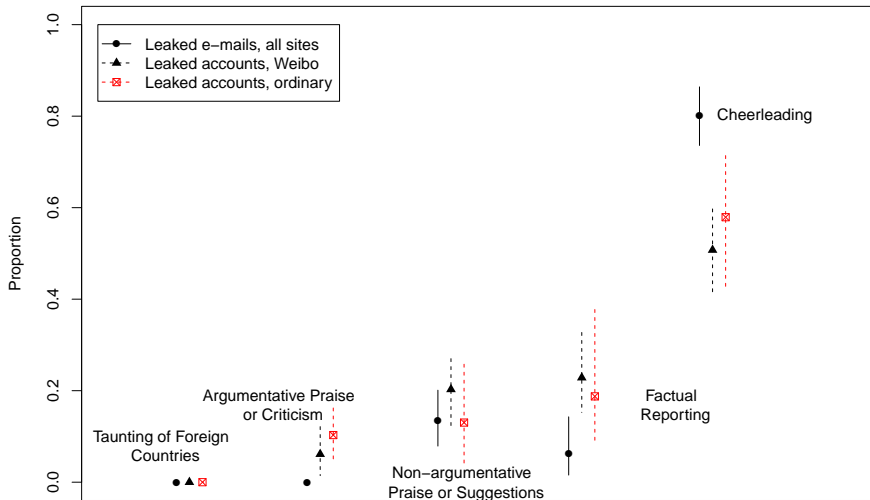
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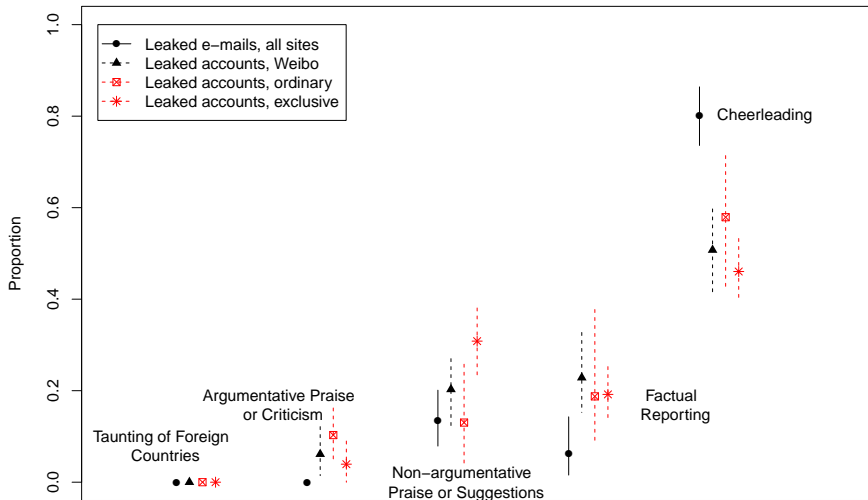
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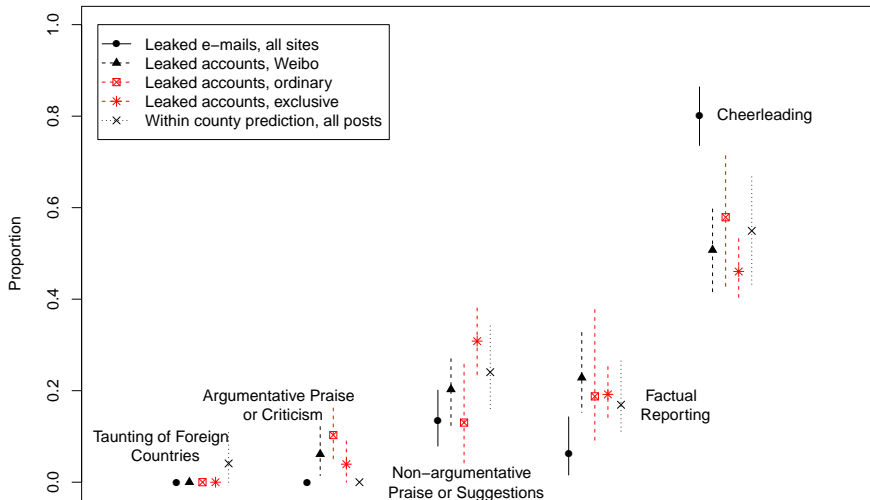
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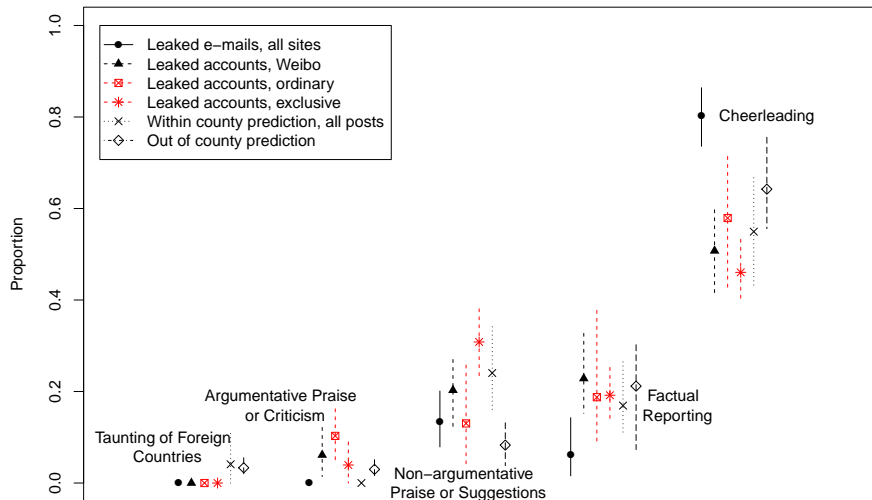
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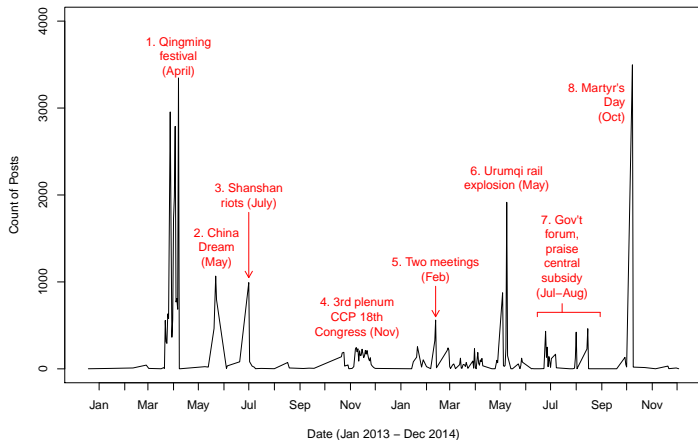
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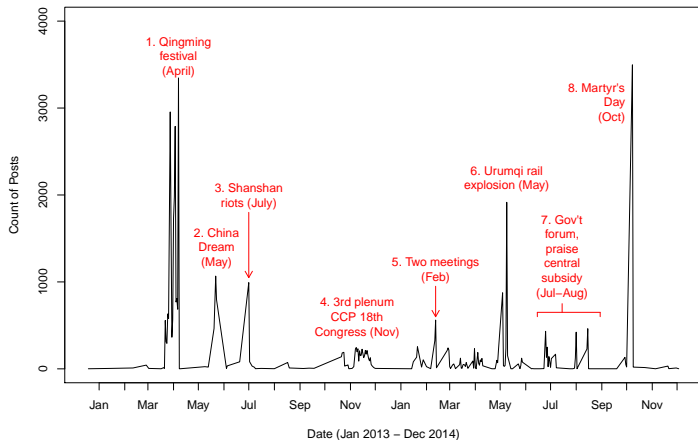
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 - 53% on government sites (a noticeable proportion of all)
 - 47% on commercial sites (1 of every 178 posts)

43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated

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Coordinated bursts, many for events with collective action potential

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 - Ask same question of accounts *known not to be* 50c

Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

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50c Status

Origin

Percent Yes

Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

| 50c Status | Origin | Percent Yes |
|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| Predicted 50c | Across China | |

Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

| 50c Status | Origin | Percent Yes |
|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| Predicted 50c | Across China | 59% |

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For more information



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