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

Jennifer Pan

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Workshop on NLP for Internet Freedom
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1Based on joint work with Gary King (Harvard) and Margaret Roberts (UCSD)
China’s Massive Propaganda Effort

A huge organization: designed to suppress, distort, and control information paradoxically reveals goals, intentions, and actions of Chinese regime.

Well known controls:
- High level of control over traditional media
- "The Great Firewall" (site-level)
- Automated keyword-based filtering
- Search filtering
- Human post-level censorship

The largest selective suppression of human expression in history

(Rumors of) as many as 2M government "astroturfers":
- Post fabricated social media comments, as if they were opinions of ordinary people
- Official name: "Internet commentators" (网评论员)
- Common name: "50c Party" members (五毛党 not 自干五)

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- 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

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- Prevailing view of activists, journalists, social media participants, and some scholars: 50c party argues with & debates against those who criticize the government, its leaders, and their policies.

"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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“Combat hostile energy [which should be] resolutely resisted, proactively refuted, and eagerly reported to Internet authorities” (Haley, 2012)
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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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We collected people accused on social media of being 50c:
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  We collected people accused on social media of being 50c: 65% *argue* with critics of the regime
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  It’s antidisestablishmentarianism!
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Evidence?
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First Systematic Evidence on China’s 50c Party
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- Decipher Leaked emails: Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office

2,341 emails (covering 2013 & 2014)
1,245 contained 50c posts
43,797 known 50c cent posts
Extrapolate to all of China
Validate Extrapolation (and validate the validation)

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

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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 piece-meal) payments; probably part of their jobs

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Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Operations

Higher Level Offices Reported To

Commentators Reporting to Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office

Zhanggong Internet Propaganda Office

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Online Propaganda

20 Aug. 2018
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Categories and Analyses of 50c Party Posts

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

1. Leaked Zhanggong 50c posts: 43,797 posts
2. Leaked Zhanggong 50c weibo accounts: 167,971 posts
3. Partition accounts for extrapolation (using falling rule lists) into (a) ordinary & (b) exclusive
   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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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

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Online Propaganda

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Online Propaganda

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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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

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Content of Leaked and Predicted 50c Party Posts

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### Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of 50c Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhanggong</td>
<td>154,216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangxi Province</td>
<td>10.65 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
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- 53% on government sites (a noticeable proportion of all)
- 47% on commercial sites (1 of every 178 posts)
Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

- Number of social media posts in China:

- 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)
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

- Number of social media posts in China: >80.4 B
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Size of the 50c Party (in 2013)

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- Number of 50c Posts in Zhanggong: 154,216
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43,797 Zhanggong 50c Posts: Highly Coordinated
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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)

Jennifer Pan (Stanford)
Online Propaganda
20 Aug. 2018
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
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- Potentially at stake: their job, or more

The Survey:

- Random sample of predicted 50c accounts
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- Specially designed, pre-tested survey question:

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Survey Validation of 50c Party Membership Predictions

Comparison of Predicted 50c Status with Known and Unlikely Samples:

- Predicted 50c Status: 59%
- Known 50c Status: 57%
- Unlikely 50c Status: 19%

Predicted vs. Known: Not significantly different
Predicted vs. Unlikely: Significantly different
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Validation by the Chinese Government

Privately sharing draft paper among colleagues, this move does not last.

Editorial in the Global Times:

- Published in Chinese
- Gives open admission to the existence of public opinion guidance
- Offers tacit confirmation of the veracity of our leaked archive
- Acknowledges purpose is to stop the spread of “grassroots social issues”

Approximately, 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 Global Times website: 82%

Supportive posts on (more representative) Weibo: 30%
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China's strategy:
- Do not engage on controversial issues.
- No censoring of criticism.
- No 50c posts arguing against criticism.
- Stop collective action:
  - Censor discussion of real-world collective action.
  - Distract with cheerleading and positive valence.

Broader implications:
- Grievances (allowed), collective action (not allowed).
- Arguments never end arguments; but distraction does.

Implications for future research:
- When studied at scale, government information controls leave big footprints.
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China’s strategy:
  - Do not engage on controversial issues:
    - No censoring of criticism
    - No 50c posts arguing against criticism
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Broader implications:
- Grievances (allowed), collective action (not allowed)
- Arguments never end arguments; but distraction does

Implications for future research:
- When studied at scale, government information controls leave big footprints
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For more information

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