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Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's "Fifty-Cent Army"

HAN Rongbin

Abstract: Studies on public expression in China tend to focus on how the state and internet users (netizens) struggle over the limits of online expression. Few have systematically traced discourse competition within state-imposed boundaries, particularly how the authoritarian state has adapted to manage, rather than censor, online expression. This paper explores and evaluates the state's attempts to manipulate online expression without resorting to censorship and coercion by examining the role of internet commentators, known as the "fifty-cent army", in Chinese cyberspace. To cope with the challenge of online expression, the authoritarian state has mobilized its agents to engage anonymously in online discussions and produce apparently spontaneous pro-regime commentary. However, due to a lack of proper motivation and the persistence of old propaganda logic, this seemingly smart adaptation has proven ineffective or even counter-productive: It not only decreases netizens' trust in the state but also, ironically, suppresses the voices of regime supporters.

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Keywords: China, discourse competition, internet commentators, political astroturfing

Dr. Han Rongbin is an assistant professor in the Department of International Affairs, University of Georgia, USA. His research interests centre on regime transition, media politics and social activism in authoritarian regimes, with an area focus on China.

E-mail: <hanr@uga.edu>

Introduction

Studies on online expression and participation in authoritarian regimes tend to focus on the cat-and-mouse struggle between the state and its citizens over what can be discussed and what cannot. However, despite their insights on state censorship and netizens' resistance (for instance, Harwit and Clark 2001; Boas 2006; Goldsmith and Wu 2006; Deibert et al. 2008, 2010; Esarey and Xiao 2008; Lagerkvist 2007; Yang 2009), the liberalization-control framework implicit in these studies has its limitations: It not only promotes an incorrect image of netizens fighting unanimously against authoritarian states, but also leads us to overlook certain aspects of states' creativity in their adaptations to the internet era. To understand the impact of the internet on authoritarian regimes, particularly the resilience of authoritarianism in the new governing realm of cyberspace, it is important to look at the regime's strategies to manage – rather than simply suppress – online expression. How does China's authoritarian state manage public opinion beyond directly censoring content? And how does it steer online expression to its advantage without resorting to censorship or coercion? What are the most significant implications of state adaptation?

This paper explores these questions by examining how China's adaptive authoritarian regime has striven to maintain legitimacy by employing grassroots public relations techniques such as “astroturfing”. I argue that, beyond censorship, the Chinese propaganda state has established an army of online commentators (the “fifty-cent army”, 五毛党, *wumao dang*) to engage in online expression anonymously and promote a pro-government discourse. However, due to the lack of strong motivation to do their job well and the persistence of state propaganda logic that treats online commenting like old-style propaganda work, online commentators often get exposed and fail to fulfil their mission. As a result, this seemingly smart move has produced at best mixed results: Though it may have managed to increase the state's PR effectiveness on specific issues, it often backfires and chips away at the party-state's legitimacy.

Beyond Censorship: The Chinese Authoritarian State on the Internet

As important as it is, boundary-spanning confrontation on censorship is not the only aspect of public expression in Chinese cyberspace. From the state's perspective, as explained by Stern and O'Brien (2012: 175), "beyond a number of well-patrolled 'forbidden zones', the Chinese state speaks with many voices and its bottom line is often unclear". As far as online expression is concerned, the party-state has neither the capacity (Yang 2009; Esarey and Xiao 2008; Lagerkvist 2007) nor the intention to eliminate all public expression (Barboza 2011; Wen 2010; Richburg 2009; Lorentzen 2013). In fact, even political criticisms are tolerated to a large extent. King, Pan and Roberts (2013), through large-scale quantitative analysis of state censorship behaviours, find that the state actually prioritizes curtailing collective action over eliminating general criticism from the web.

The internet has created a "zone of freedom", which is not yet a full-blown public sphere, but relatively independent from the state (Hu 2008; Lagerkvist 2007). Such findings are suggestive, particularly because they implicitly acknowledge the limitations of focusing exclusively on censorship, a perspective that fails to pay sufficient attention to developments in online expression and state adaptation. As Jens Damm (2007) points out, such a framework is mistaken in assessing the internet's impact on Chinese society because it ignores the rising urbanism and consumerism that renders a fragmented and localized internet. According to him, Chinese netizens typically do not demand large-scale political change even though they are ready to protest when the state interferes with their "zone of freedom".

Meanwhile, the authoritarian state and its propaganda machinery has adapted far beyond censorship and coercion. Scholars have long observed the adaptability of the Chinese authoritarian regime and viewed it as the primary reason for its resilience (for instance, see Nathan 2003; Shambaugh 2008). In particular, the state has made significant adjustments to its propaganda system to better cope with the challenges brought about by the increasingly commercialized media and the rise of the internet. Zhao Yuezhi (1997), for instance, suggests that market mechanisms have been introduced into party journalism, contributing to the emergence of a "propagandist/commercial model" that performs more subtle ideological work for the

party. Similarly, Daniela Stockmann (2013) finds that media commercialization has strengthened the party's rule because it provides the regime with better information about public opinion while allowing the party to shape its message when it deems necessary.

In the realm of online expression, the Chinese authoritarian state has adapted by establishing the world's most complicated censorship system. Observers have debated the effectiveness of such a system. Though some scholars argue that the state has achieved sufficient control (Boas 2006), many suggest that it has failed to make online expression conform to its preferences (Yang 2009; Esarey and Xiao 2008). In fact, arbitrary and harsh censorship often backfires, politicizing otherwise neutral or indifferent netizens. The continuing rise of critical expression online and the declining effectiveness of state media (Lei 2011; Tong and Lei 2013) have forced the state and its propaganda system to adapt further beyond censorship. On the one hand, the state has increased its online presence by promoting official media outlets and e-government platforms (Kalathil and Boas 2003; Damm 2006; Jiang and Xu 2009). On the other hand, it has also started to adopt innovative propaganda techniques. Lagerkvist (2008), for instance, argues that the state has resorted to "internet ideotainment", which juxtaposes "images, symbolic representations and sounds of popular web and mobile phone culture together with both subtle and overt ideological constructs and nationalistic propaganda". According to him, the new propaganda has shifted the focus from ideology to the subtle management of the public's attention (Lagerkvist 2010: 161–189). Hung Chin-Fu (2010), analysing the role of online commentators in pacifying angry netizens during the 2008 Weng'an riot, identifies another technique the authoritarian regime has employed to manage public attention. He argues that the strategy – mobilizing online commentators to engage in online comments anonymously – has facilitated the revitalization of the state's propaganda apparatus.

These studies have provided insights into the state's adaptation within the virtual space. However, state adaptation entails more than simply adopting new propaganda techniques. To better understand state adaptation, it is necessary to explore the effectiveness and the major implications of the new techniques. How does the online commentator system function? How effective is the system? Answers to such questions are essential to gauging the adaptability and resili-

ence of the authoritarian regime. I will examine how the state has recruited, trained, utilized and rewarded online commentators as well as explain how the commentators go about doing their job. Based on that, I evaluate the effectiveness of the online commentator system, discuss its implications and highlight the obstacles in the state's adaptation.

I maintain that state adaptation is often not a centrally coordinated process in which the state acts as a monolithic rational actor. Instead, multiple party-state agencies at different levels and in different sectors as well as individual officials are involved, each with different incentives and priorities. All of these actors can be innovative in adopting new measures to cope with new challenges, and central coordination and mutual learning help diffuse this adaptation. Furthermore, because state adaptation happens within the existing power configuration without systematic organizational change, involved actors often continue to comply with the power structure and logic they are embedded in. This explains why the seemingly smart move of introducing online commentators proved ineffective or even counter-productive.

Astroturfing and Methods

Astroturfing is a PR technique used in politics and advertising in which actors are paid to display apparently spontaneous grassroots support for a particular product, policy or event. In Chinese cyberspace in general, many users are motivated to advocate or impugn particular facts, opinions or beliefs anonymously. Regardless of whether they are sincere, these efforts are considered astroturfing if users pose as spontaneous voices when they are really organized or sponsored by certain groups. Though the technique is also widely adopted by netizens for personal or commercial purposes (Roberts 2008; Kong 2008), this paper will focus on political astroturfing by the state.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, data collection has been a major challenge. There was no official announcement regarding when, why or how the internet commentator system was created, nor are systematic data available on how the system operates. Aside from interviews with informants and existing studies, I base my analysis primarily on three sources.

First, sources from the party-state provide us with clues to how the system works. Incompetent, careless or disaffected state officials working in the propaganda system have on occasion leaked internal documents, communication logs and other pieces of information exposing online commentators. For instance, *China Digital Times* (CDT) at Berkeley has collected thousands of state censorship directives due to system glitches of the websites that stored them. In addition, people who previously worked in the system sometimes talk about their experiences. Two years after he quit the job, a former Nankai University student explained his work monitoring the university campus Bulletin Board System (BBS) on an overseas Chinese forum.

Second, official media reports constitute another major source of data. Local governments and propaganda branches sometimes view the introduction of online commentators as part of their routine job or even as an achievement to be reported to higher levels. This is evident in a local media report on the training of online commentators in Shanxi Province, which also proudly provided links to coverage of the event by influential news portals such as QQ.com and 163.com and state media outlets such as people.com.cn (*Jinzheng Xinwenwang* 2006). Though official media rarely detail how online commentators operate in the field, they provide clues about the state's perspective and structural features of the system.

Third, along the lines of what Stern and O'Brien (2012) call a "state reflected in society approach", I draw on my own observations and on netizens' experiences gleaned from long-term in-depth online ethnographic work. Between 2009 and 2013, I usually spent at least one hour a day observing selected sites, including but not limited to tianya.cn, MITBBS.com, newsmth.net, and the news channel of 163.com. Occasionally, I also took the online "guerrilla ethnography" approach (Yang 2003) and explored links provided by netizens to other online platforms. With limited access to direct information sources inside the state, what netizens see and experience serves as an indirect but crucial way to understand how online commentators operate in the field. In effect, tracing and comparing behaviours of netizens and online commentators can provide direct evidence for analysis. Furthermore, Chinese netizens are very sensitive to and sometimes cognizant of the state's efforts to manipulate public opinion. They can help the researcher with data collection in this regard.

As a matter of fact, many leaks from the state I draw on were first provided, collected and disseminated by netizens.

Manufacturing Consent Online: The Rise of the "Fifty-Cent Army"

The internet has lowered the cost of public expression in authoritarian regimes by enabling citizens to circumvent many forms of restriction. In China, monitoring in the traditional sense rarely works online, as denying or editing by gatekeepers before publication has become less common. State agents or intermediary actors, such as the forum moderators who are delegated the authority to filter online content, only assume a partial gate-keeping role by blocking sensitive keywords and deleting taboo topics *ex post facto*. But even when they do this diligently, their efforts are plagued by a lack of standards and hindered by the vast number of threads generated daily by users. The internet thus provides a cheap and effective way to advance agendas and influence public opinion, even for actors with limited resources. Anonymous expression, which is the dominant form of online expression in China, is particularly vulnerable to manipulation, as manipulators, sometimes using multiple usernames (IDs), can effectively "stir up" (炒作, *chaozuo*) a certain topic to attract other netizens into the discussion and turn the topic into a hot one (Chen et al. 2011). For instance, BBS users used to employ multiple "jacket IDs" (马甲, *majia*, "ghost accounts") to fabricate a crowd in order to hit the top ten list that appears on the front page. The practice was so common that major BBSs like Newsmth.net now limit the number of IDs one person can register (see *Newsmth* 2007). In the accidental user-data leakage of tianya.cn (Lin 2011), China's largest internet forum, netizens discovered thousands of ghost accounts that were registered with identical e-mail addresses and passwords (*Popular Computer Weekly Microblog* 2011). Such evidence shows that a "public" can be created online that may be able to influence public opinion through purposeful framing and information input.

The state is motivated to manipulate online opinion due to both the challenges and the opportunities the internet has presented. On the one hand, state propaganda is becoming increasingly ineffective. Though it may be premature to dismiss the role of the propaganda system (Kennedy 2009; Lagerkvist 2010: 180), some studies have

found a negative correlation between the exposure of official propaganda and citizen's trust in the government (Chen and Shi 2001). The situation online is not any better for the state. Studies suggest that with the emergence of a critical and politicized citizenry online, the state has not only failed to control online expression (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Yang 2009), but also lost its ideational leadership (Lei 2011; Tong and Lei 2013). Direct observation echoes the findings: Netizens demonstrate strong distrust of mouthpiece media outlets like *People's Daily* (人民日报, *Renmin Ribao*) and China Central Television (CCTV). Many netizens refer to *People's Daily* as *Screwing the People Daily* (日人民报, *Ri Ren Min Bao*), and CCTV is nicknamed CCAV, with AV standing for pornographic videos. The growing ineffectiveness of state propaganda demonstrates the necessity for the regime to adapt.

On the other hand, the internet also provides the state with new possibilities and can be turned into a new propaganda frontier (Lagerkvist 2008). Besides increasing direct propaganda efforts online and setting up e-government platforms (Wang 2011; Ye 2009; He 2010), the battle is also fought on multiple fronts. According to Chen Kai, Deputy Secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Communist Youth League Committee, the state's internet PR efforts are comprehensive and its tasks include collecting, researching, analysing and, finally, guiding public opinion (Chen 2007). The introduction of internet commentators, as will be discussed below, represents a new endeavour by the state to guide popular opinion online.

Introduction of Online Commentators

The earliest mention of online commentators appeared in an official report that stated that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Changsha Municipal Committee of Hunan Province began to hire internet commentators in October 2004 (Zhonggong Hefei Shiwei Xuanchuanbu 2006). These commentators were paid a basic monthly salary of 600 CNY (approximately 88 USD), plus 50 cents (CNY) for each post – the source of the nickname the “fifty-cent army” (Zhang 2010a; Yang 2009). In late 2004, the Supervision Department of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection organized a training session for 127 internet commentators from all over the country with a special focus on internet anti-corruption propaganda (Ma 2004). The earliest mention of online commentators on campus BBSs

can be traced to Nanjing University in 2005 (Bandurski 2008; Hung 2010; Wen 2008).

Online commentators work either full-time for state media portals, such as *xinhuanet.com* and *southcn.com*, or part-time for various government agencies (Zhang 2010a). Many of the full-time commentators work like reporters or columnists in traditional media. These commentators are relatively high-end, as they receive higher pay and do not conceal their identities or their affiliation with the state. Those deployed anonymously to manipulate online opinion through astroturfing are qualitatively different. They are often either public servants (often in the propaganda system) assigned online commenting tasks in addition to their routine work, or specially recruited. They receive low base salaries and a small per-piece payment. Most importantly, they are anonymous when engaging in online discussions because they conceal their identities and affiliation and pretend to be average netizens. In other words, they are more like online "trolls". Analysis in this paper focuses exclusively on these anonymous commentators because the government's deployment of full-time commentators, who work more like traditional propaganda workers, is less innovative than astroturfing.

There are numerous agencies sponsoring internet commentators, including local propaganda offices, ministries and even schools and state-owned enterprises. For instance, China's largest oil and gasoline producer, Sinopec, was found to be running an astroturfing campaign justifying rising gasoline prices in 2011 (Wang 2011). In addition, a single institution may have multiple groups of online commentators at work. For example, a former Nankai University student disclosed that there are two student groups working on public opinion on the university's BBS sites: one under the Propaganda Department of the Party Committee, primarily responsible for monitoring and deleting unacceptable posts, and the other under the Student Affairs Office, meant to guide public opinion through astroturfing (*Unknown Space* 2010).

In general, available evidence suggests that the introduction of online commentators was not a centrally coordinated policy, but rather an initiative of various state agencies at different levels in different sectors. Thus the rapid spread of online commentators was likely due to officials at all levels gradually, and more or less simultaneously,

realizing their potential for guiding public opinion and mimicking each other.

Recruitment

Internet commentators are recruited through many channels. Most of them are directly recruited from within the propaganda system or from other governmental or semi-governmental institutions. In some cases, local governments or government institutions may directly recruit from the general public (Zhonggong Zhengding Xianwei Xuanchuanbu 2009). Certain recruitment criteria are common, including loyalty to the party-state and online communication skills. For instance, a leaked document from the Hengyang Party-Building Web's "Party School Frontline" channel laid out the requirements listed below (*Hengyang Dangjianwang* 2010a), which can also be found in other recruitment flyers. A good recruit must

- have a solid political stance; champion the CCP's leadership; firmly uphold the party's direction, principles and policies; be law-abiding; and possess the right ideology and good moral character as well as a spirit of professionalism;
- be equipped with theoretical training and good at cyber languages, with a wide scope of knowledge and skill in writing;
- be familiar with the work of the party-school system, have basic computer skills and be able to adeptly use relevant software and internet applications; and
- accept the supervision and guidance of the Party School Frontline channel.

In addition to the meaningless official clichés in the first and fourth provisions, the remaining criteria are also general and vague, with a lot of leeway. As a result, they are not necessarily strictly enforced. For instance, universities often treat online commenting as a part-time position that provides modest compensation for needy students, and recruitment is open to whoever is willing to do the job (Anonymous 3 2009). Random factors can play a decisive role in recruitment. According to a former Nankai BBS monitor, he was recruited simply because he had a good personal relationship with his predecessor (*Unknown Space* 2010).

Training

Online commentators often receive some training before taking up their job. Such training takes diverse formats but often focuses heavily on technical aspects, particularly writing and computer skills. At a training session organized by the Ministry of Culture, internet commentators visited xinhuanet.com and people.com.cn, exchanged their experiences in group settings and attended lectures with titles such as "Techniques of Online Commentary and Forum Management", "Online Communication and Web 2.0", "Online Communication and Crisis Management", "Guiding Public Opinion Online" and "Characteristics of Online Communication and Writing of Internet Comments" (Wen 2008). Local governments have adopted similar training strategies. Chengdu's Qingyang District invited veteran editors from *Xinhua* News Agency to lecture on how to write internet comments (*Qingyang Dangwugongkaiwang* 2009). The Public Health Bureau of Fuyang, Zhejiang Province, trained its part-time internet commentators by providing "Instructions on Internet Propaganda" and "Writing on Public Health Information" (Fuyangshi Weishengju 2009).

Available data show that part of the training is likely quite basic, revealing the inadequate skill set of many online commentators. For instance, the *Technical Training Outline* by the Hengyang Party-Building Web teaches online commentators how to register and log in to the system and how to post or reply to threads. The only trick of some complexity concerns using multiple IDs to avoid betraying one's true identity (*Hengyang Dangjianwang* 2010b). Sometimes, specific instructions are given on an *ad hoc* basis when online commentators are assigned a specific task, as discussed below. Such instructions, though they cannot replace more formal training sessions, serve as on-site training.

Functions

Online commentators may receive their tasks and instructions via phone calls or e-mails, or in person. However, state agencies sponsoring internet commentators are increasingly relying on online platforms such as intranets, QQ groups, and WeChat groups (both QQ and WeChat are popular instant messaging services provided by Tencent, one of China's largest internet firms) to manage their online commentators. For instance, a simple search of QQ groups alone

with the keyword “internet commentary” on 8 August 2014 returned almost 200 groups. This is impressive considering that the results do not include groups that have avoided the keyword in their title or made them unsearchable. This is highly possible because online commentating is essentially a secretive mission.

Online commentators assume a wide range of responsibilities. Typically, their tasks include collecting, analysing and reporting online opinion, guiding public opinion by engaging in discussion on hot-button topics, tracking the handling of public issues and coordinating with government agencies to provide timely responses to netizens (Hong 2009). The following excerpt from a recruiting flyer from the Propaganda Department of the Zhengding Party Committee, Hebei, provides an example of what online commentators are expected to do (Zhonggong Zhengding Xianwei Xuanchuanbu 2009):

- compose original postings and carry out positive publicity online to promote the priorities and major deployments of the party committee and the government;
- release authoritative information on major incidents to hinder the spread of rumours and ensure correct direction of online opinion;
- answer questions and clarify confusion for netizens on hot-button incidents, interpret the policies of and measures taken by the party and the government and divert netizens’ emotions;
- strengthen information management on the internet and tightly integrate the analysis of online opinion, disposing of harmful information and guiding online opinion.

These instructions show that besides monitoring public opinion, the primary mission for online commentators is to facilitate state propaganda and defuse crises. In online propaganda campaigns, commentators work to attract public attention and fabricate an audience, if necessary. For instance, in 2008, as part of a province-wide propaganda initiative, officials in Hengyang, Hunan Province, asked online commentators to engage in thematic discussions, post comments on local and national websites, and participate in online interviews with local officials (Zhonggong Hengyang Shiwei Xuanchuanbu 2008). In online crisis management, internet commentators are mobilized to neutralize adverse socio-political events, particularly those that may trigger popular contention. For instance, online commentators were

deployed to pacify public anger after the Weng'an incident in 2008, in which rioters torched governmental buildings and vehicles because of the suspicious death of a young girl (Hung 2010). The following accidentally disclosed report by the Shanghai Communist Youth League (2010) summarizes the "achievements" of Shanghai online commentators in online crisis management:

In 2009, under the guidance of the Municipal Internet Propaganda Office, online commentators from municipal agencies engaged in a series of online incidents, including the building collapse incident (Foster 2009; Cao 2009), forcible installation of green-dam software (Jacobs 2009; MacKinnon 2009), self-immolation of an anti-demolition resident (Qian 2010), the black taxi entrapment case (Bao 2009), and so forth. They put up, replied to, and forwarded over 200 posts on portal websites and forums, including people.com.cn, xinhuanet.com, eastday.com, tianya.cn and so forth. And more than 20 of their comments were accepted by the commentary channel of eastday.com (Shanghai Communist Youth League 2010).

Online commentators' tasks are not restricted to crisis management or propaganda. They sometimes serve as communication channels between the state and the public. For instance, online commentators from Changsha and Hengyang in Hunan Province regularly compile and report online opinions and netizens' complaints to local leaders (Zhang 2010b). Some campus forum managers I interviewed (Anonymous 2 2009) also claimed that their job includes collecting students' suggestions and criticisms for university authorities. "Linking the government and the people" is one of the few tasks that boosts the morale of online commentators.

Rewards

How do state agencies motivate online commentators? Though there are cases in which governmental employees are mobilized without extra compensation, many online commentators receive some form of compensation. Commonly, online commentators work only part-time and receive per-post payments at a rate of around 50 cents. However, the per-post rate can go as low as 10 cents and there can be a cap – 100 CNY (approximately 15 USD) per month in the case of Hengyang Party-Building Web (*Hengyang Dangjianwang* 2010a). Campus online commentators typically receive 200 to 300 CNY per month

(approximately 30 to 50 USD) as work-study compensation, barely enough for one or two weeks of dining at a university canteen.

In some cases, working as an online commentator may provide non-monetary rewards. Interviews with campus BBS managers (Anonymous 3 2009) show that student online commentators may be offered positions in the student union or Communist Youth League. This is attractive to students because working as a functionary in such organizations not only benefits politically ambitious students, but also strengthens their resumes even if they are looking for other jobs. For online commentators in the propaganda apparatus, a common reward is to select top performers and grant them awards during anniversaries or “Summing-up and Commending Conferences” (*Zhejiang Zaixian* 2008; also see *July 1 Community* 2010).

In general, online commentators do not receive encouraging rewards. The monetary compensation is at best modest and the per-post payment tends to incentivize them to prioritize the quantity rather than the quality of their comments. Other forms of rewards are rare and often symbolic in nature, hardly offsetting the stigma attached to the job. Such rewards are far from sufficient to maintain the morale of online commentators and motivate them to excel at their work.

Assessing the Online Commentator System

With the declining credibility of state propaganda, online commentators may potentially play an important role in maintaining the regime’s stability and legitimacy. Unlike the old propaganda machine, which relied on coercive control over information flow, online commentators resort to identity and rhetorical power to persuade. By basing themselves on the ground and interacting as and with netizens, they may increase the credibility of state messages which otherwise would be discredited. And by fabricating a grassroots voice supporting the regime, they also sometimes bolster the state’s preferred positions. In this sense, the system is a clever bid to replace increasingly ineffective old propaganda techniques (Hung 2010). But to gauge its effectiveness, it is important to see how online commentators actually conduct their tasks. The following two mini case studies, one on crisis management and the other on propaganda campaigns, reveal how online commentators act in the field.

Case 1: Trial of Bo Xilai

Figure 1: Sample of Online Commentators in Action



Source: news.163.com 2013.

The controversial trial of Bo Xilai was a major political event in 2013 and one in which online commentators were mobilized. As a former Politburo member and party secretary of Chongqing, Bo has a wide base of support because of his appeal to leftists and the poor (Bo was and still is very popular in Chongqing, as my casual interaction with local residents indicates). His fall not only evinced how corrupt the system is, but also signalled the power struggle within the regime (Li 2012; Zhao 2012). Thus, his trial was a critical moment for the regime, and the party-state made considerable efforts both to mute open opposition to the trial and to justify it. Besides quickly removing

negative comments from major forums and commentary channels of news websites, online commentators were deployed to flood the commentary zones with pro-government comments. The figure above shows six consecutive (rather than hand-picked) comments by four different users after one report on NetEase (163.com), which demonstrate well what manipulated “online opinion” looks like.

Here is the translation of these comments:

- chy106 [NetEase user from Nantong, Jiangsu Province]: “In a rule-of-law [I have translated 法制 as “rule of law” (法治, *fazhi*) rather than “rule by law” because the terms are used loosely and the commentator here clearly meant to praise the government] society, all privileges and monetary power pale before the law. Breaking the law will lead to no good ending”.
- Daxiong Buzai Kuqi [“Daxiong No Longer Cries”] [NetEase user from Huizhou, Guangdong Province]: “The court is fair. The trial is open and people all over the country are watching and listening. We need to convince Bo and convince the people. This is China, a society that has rule of law”.
- Daxiong Buzai Kuqi [“Daxiong No Longer Cries”] [NetEase user from Huizhou, Guangdong Province]: “Conduct the trial in accordance with law rather than being far-fetched. Hope the trial will be fair and open so that people will be convinced”.
- [NetEase user from Huizhou, Guangdong Province]: “The fair trial of Bo Xilai reflects the centre’s policy of achieving rule of law, punishing corruption and disciplining the party”.
- chy106 [NetEase user from Nantong, Jiangsu Province]: “The open trial of Bo Xilai shows the fairness of the law”.
- Taihang Xuemanshan [“Moutain Taihang in Snow”] [NetEase user from Heihe, Heilongjiang Province]: “The fair trial of Bo Xilai reflects the centre’s policy of achieving rule of law, punishing corruption and disciplining the party”.

Almost all of the 396 comments following the report smell strongly of official propaganda, particularly because of the blatant pro-government stance and the official language style. Not a single comment directly questions the trial or criticizes the regime. This is strange, as NetEase is known for its critical commentary among Chinese netizens. The repetition of the same clause by different users from different localities (for instance, the fourth and sixth comments

above) also deepens the suspicion because average netizens rarely repeat others in this way, while online commentators often do so to reduce their workload (Chen et al. 2011). Additionally, all these comments are highly similar, showing that online commentators may have received rigid instructions and even sample comments. A check of the users that posted such comments further reveals that at least some of them are state-sponsored: Most, if not all, of their recent comments were about Bo Xilai; all of their comments were pro-government and had an official tone; many of them registered not long before the incident; and a number of users posted multiple comments after the same report within a short span of time. All the evidence shows that the thread has been taken over by the "fifty-cent army", but the takeover is meaningless because all of these obvious signs of online commenting betray the intention of the state.

Case 2: "Liberate Thinking and Develop Hengyang" in Hunan

Online commentators are often mobilized for propaganda campaigns as well. In 2008, for instance, online commentators in Hengyang, Hunan Province, were summoned to facilitate a local propaganda initiative entitled "Liberate Thinking and Develop Hengyang". Besides serving as audience members in online interviews with local officials and producing comments on portal websites, online commentators were mobilized to make a splash on the local public forum, Red Net BBS. More specifically, they were ordered to reply to a particular thread titled "Hengyang Municipal Propaganda Branch 'Liberate Thinking Big Discussion' Special Thread".

To organize and coordinate online commentators to fulfil the task, a series of instructions were issued on how they should carry out their work. For instance, a notice on 26 September 2008 asked online commentators to compose and post 1,000 replies to the thread (*Red Net BBS* 2008). Subordinate counties, districts and bureaus under the municipality were assigned quotas with designated responsible personnel. In a follow-up notice on 9 October titled "Urgent Task", each online commentator was further asked to post at least 60 opinions and suggestions under the thread before 15 October. Both notices included instructions on what those comments should look like: They should be between 100 and 500 words, be issue-centred rather than pointing at certain units or individuals, avoid tedious empty talk

and focus on concrete opinions and suggestions, use multiple pseudonyms, and so forth. The 9 October notice also encouraged commentators to create distinctive IDs and share them with each other. After repeated orders, online commentators in the end managed to produce 1,115 replies to the thread.

Again, the thread smells like pure official propaganda, and there is little evidence of public participation. Most comments are highly similar in terms of their format and language code. In addition, unlike real spontaneous online discussion, these comments came in suspicious waves, indicating that the local propaganda office was orchestrating the action: 1,090 out of the 1,115 replies were posted between 22 September and 2 November, none between 3 and 10 November, and then 23 popped up within an hour between 19:18 and 20:05 on 11 November. After 11 November, only two more comments were posted, signalling that online commentators had completed their assignments and retreated. All these signs betray the government's manipulation of the discussion, causing politically sensitive netizens to stay away from the thread. Of course, without participation from average netizens, online commentators' astroturfing work becomes pointless.

As these two cases demonstrate, though online commentators work anonymously, they often get exposed, rendering their opinion-guiding efforts fruitless or even counter-productive. Given their inherently covert mission, why are online commentators often found out by netizens? There are two primary reasons.

First, online commentators are not motivated to excel in their jobs. Online commentators often get "caught" because they display certain traits like the official language codes they employ, the newness of their pseudonyms (meaning, the relatively recent date the accounts under those names were created), the sharing of multiple IDs by one IP address, IP addresses associated with government institutions, or repeated pro-government postings from a particular ID (Hou 2009). Such problems could be easily fixed if online commentators mastered some basic computer skills and writing techniques. However, aside from some basic training, there is no practical method to control and improve the quality of online commentators and their work. As Li Guanghua, who led a group of commentators in Hengyang, pointed out, the "capabilities of online commentators vary and many comments they post fail to guide public opinion online, and even backfire

sometimes" (Zhang 2010b). Without a way to guarantee the quality and evaluate the performance of online commentators, it is difficult, if not impossible, to improve their effectiveness. In effect, since many online commentators are propaganda agents or government employees, they are familiar with official language code, but not online expression. What makes things worse is that the instructions and rules they have to follow when carrying out their mission also prevent them from wholeheartedly adopting the cyber language, as the two cases above demonstrate.

There is also little incentive for online commentators to take their job seriously and enhance the effectiveness of online commenting. Since most online commentators receive a per-post payment (see the discussion on rewards above), they are incentivized to prioritize quantity over quality in their job. The problem becomes even worse given the low morale of many online commentators. Other than those who persuade themselves that they are contributing to social stability and helping link the state to the people, many online commentators do not see any value in their job. One campus forum commentator told me that he basically looked the other way in terms of online discussions by his fellow students:

My friends know that I am working as an online commentator. You cannot hide anything when you all live under the same roof. I remain silent most of the time and only remind them when they are going a little too far. It is not glorious, but they understand (Anonymous 1 2009).

This quote suggests that monetary incentives are insufficient to motivate many online commentators. In fact, the very fact that online commentators are paid can sometimes be demoralizing because it makes online commenting seem like a cheap "sale of (priceless) souls" (出卖灵魂, *chumai linghun*).

Second, a more fundamental factor contributing to the dysfunction of the online commentator system is the persistent state propaganda logic. As Florini, Lai, and Tan (2012) have found, government agencies and officials often have difficulty in changing their behaviour and mindset even when institutions have been changed. The same mechanism is at work here: Although the state has attempted to adapt its propaganda strategy by introducing the online commentator system, the old mindset and practices of the propaganda machine still influence how the new system works. To guide opinions, online

commentators need to work covertly. Yet they are exposed directly or indirectly by the state itself in many instances. In particular, local governments are sometimes unabashed about their intention to guide public opinion through online commentators and thus allow reports on them to appear in mainstream media. For instance, *Nanfang Dushibao* (南方都市报, *Southern Metropolis Daily*) reported on Gansu Province's plan to hire 650 online commentators to guide public opinion (*Nanfang Dushibao* 2010), and the *Yangzi Wanbao* (扬子晚报, *Yangtze Evening Post*) reported on Suqian, Jiangsu Province, installing 26 internet commentators (Cai 2005). One major reason why online commentators are made known to the public is that they are treated like traditional propaganda workers. For instance, a local TV station in Xishui County, Hubei Province, reported on the training of online commentators as part of the routine propaganda work of the local government (*China Digital Times* 2011). In this sense, the visibility of online commentators is partly a legacy of past approaches to propaganda work.

The persistence of the outdated propaganda logic is also evident in the efforts by local propaganda officials to seek recognition from higher levels. As the deputy director of the Hengyang Information Office admitted, when calling on online commentators to participate in an online interview with the municipal party secretary, one of his considerations was to “plead for recognition” (邀功, *yaogong*) (Zhang 2010b). Another striking case is the Hengyang Party-Building Web. The website asked online commentators to comment on reports on its party-building channel, which netizens rarely visited. As a result, we see only party-school commentators following up dull and dry reports simply with a few words like “good” (好, *hao*), “upvote” (顶, *ding*) or “support” (支持, *zhichi*). Considering that the website has received a series of awards and honours (*Hengyang Wanbao* 2009), it is clear that the target audience of those commenting is not netizens, but the commenters' superiors. By introducing online commentators, local officials and propaganda cadres signal to higher levels that they are working hard. Whether online commenting has any real effect in guiding public opinion may be a secondary consideration.

As the existence of online commentators has been made public and as netizens have frequently caught them in action, the system has increasingly become a liability rather than an asset. It is especially the case when the marks of state propaganda become too obvious. In

these circumstances, the system can backfire and any opinion favouring the state can come to be taken as propaganda. Pro-government voices become "politically incorrect" among netizens and are frequently labelled the "fifty-cent army". This demoralizes potential regime supporters. Zhang Shengjun (2010), a professor at Beijing Normal University, complained in a report published by the popular nationalistic newspaper *Huanqiu Shibao* (环球时报, *Global Times*), that the "fifty-cent army" label has become "a baton waved towards all Chinese patriots". The online commentator system has engendered so much criticism that even pro-regime netizens have complained about it. One user from ccthere.com (a forum known for its relatively pro-government stance) expressed his condemnation:

It is totally because of the incompetence of the Central Propaganda Department. For decades it relied on CCTV's monopoly and its capacity degenerated. [...] Now it even relies on such disgusting means like employing the "fifty-cent army" to spread rumours! You're the government, not bandits! (Ccthere Community 2011)

Such criticism can sometimes take on symbolic forms and occur in public. In April 2010, when Wu Hao, then the deputy director of the Propaganda Department of Yunnan Province, was delivering a talk at Renmin University, he was attacked by a netizen who threw a wad of 50-cent CNY notes on his face and yelled "Wu Hao, fifty cents!" (*Xinhuabao* 2010). The attack was enormously acclaimed by netizens (China Media Project 2010).

Conclusion

Despite state censorship, the internet has provided Chinese netizens with some freedom of expression. However, the anonymous nature of online expression also enables the state to manipulate online opinion through tactics like astroturfing. This paper has detailed the recruitment, training, functions and rewarding of online commentators. I argue that, as an important adaptation of the propaganda state to the internet age, the system often causes more trouble than it solves because the adaptation efforts are inherently constrained by the functioning logic of the propaganda machine. As more and more netizens become aware of online commentators, their posting frequently backfires. It is particularly ironic that the bureaucratic apparatus within which they work undermines the system, as online commentators pay

less attention to persuading the netizens and more to how they will be evaluated by their superiors. Thus, the target of many online commentators is not disaffected netizens, but the bureaucratic system itself.

The state, of course, is not the only party involved in online opinion-engineering. Social actors, particularly dissenters, employ similar astroturfing techniques to advance their agendas. Their attempts to manufacture discontent (see, for instance, Thornton 2008), though these have attracted much less attention and criticism, also impair the development of trust among netizens. Recognizing that their opinion can be manipulated, netizens become extremely sensitive to each other's identity. Terms like the "fifty-cent army" and "internet spies" are not merely markers that netizens use to label opponents, but also symbolize netizens' anxiety about identity: Who is a friend and who is an enemy? Such anxiety often fuels labelling wars and affects netizens' online behaviour, which in turn shapes the outcome of discourse competition. This suggests that studies about the internet should go beyond the struggle over censorship and systematically trace online discourse competition in which both the state and its challengers demonstrate considerable adaptability. Such adaptability will not only determine outcomes of the regime's short-term stability maintenance efforts, but may also impact its legitimacy in the long run.

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