

The Post-Crackdown Ecology of the Chinese Internet: Mutually Assured Destruction

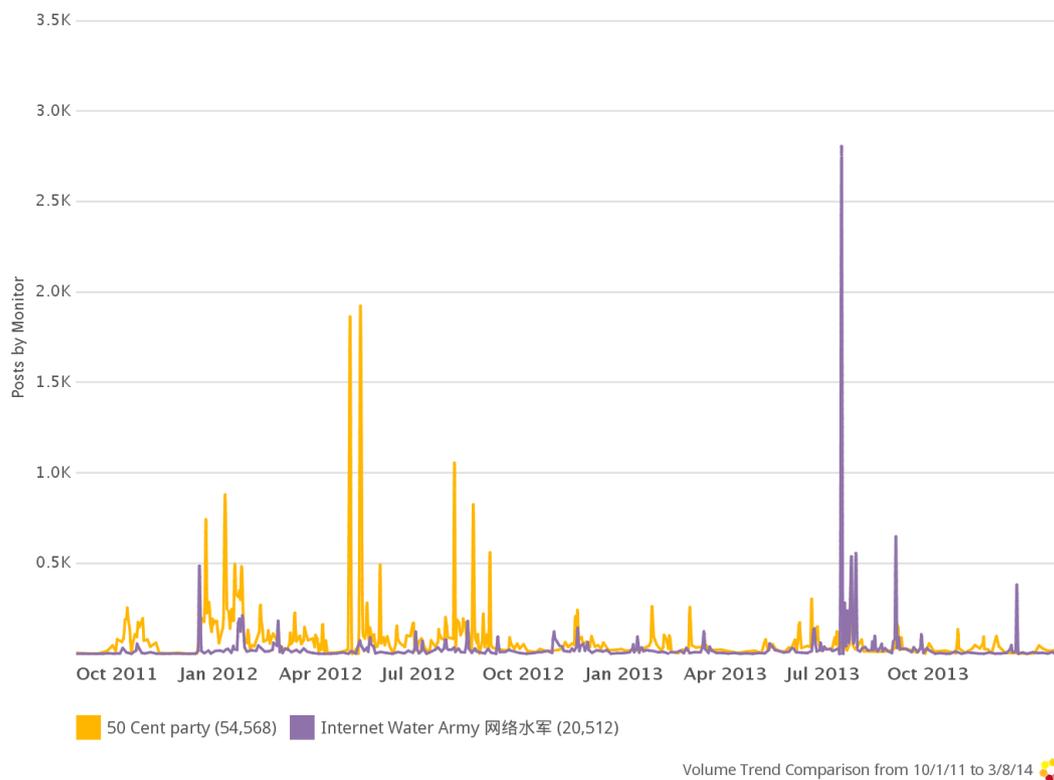
Since last summer, there has been a series of campaigns launched by the government and state-owned media, in response to the growing influence of Weibo in shaping public opinion, to bring popular opinion leaders in line - the so-called Big Vs: Weibo users with mass followings whose identities have been verified by Sina. These often high-profile users were often detained on charges of "inciting trouble" or libel for posting unverified or critical information on their microblogs. We argue that the Big V crackdown has amounted to a strategy of mutually assured destruction: it hasn't strengthened the government's control on Weibo or made public opinion more favorable, but rather made the whole Weibo ecosystem more paranoid, more untrustworthy, and ultimately less popular.

Though Weibo is considered China's most free and public forum, there are opaque and often competing forces guiding public opinion guidance behind the scenes. In addition to Big V's, a number of other well known groups and strategies have developed to shape public opinion. For instance, "Internet water army" describes "paid posters ready and willing to 'flood' the internet for whoever is willing to pay,"¹ which usually means PR firms representing competing companies. Pro-government posters are accused of being "50 cent party," (五毛党), a term originating from a released Hunan government document from 2004. It shows that there is a specific fund for hiring so called "internet commentator" to lead public opinion. Those employers (full-time or part-time) are paid fifty cents per post. Other groups include The US Cent Party, 美分党, used to delegitimize posters who appear to be in favor of foreign governments or organizations, and the Lead the Way Party, 带路党, a reference to traitors during World War 2 who helped "lead the way" for foreign invaders rather than fighting imperialism.

Despite significant netizen critique of the government's actions in the Big V cases, the crackdown has proven effective because it resulted in more people talking about internet water armies and non-governmental Weibo manipulation. In other words, the cases have shed light on the extent to which Weibo can be manipulated and presented other targets of public mistrust.

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Figure 1: Volume Comparison between 50 Cent Party and Internet Water Army between 10/1/2011 and 3/8/2014



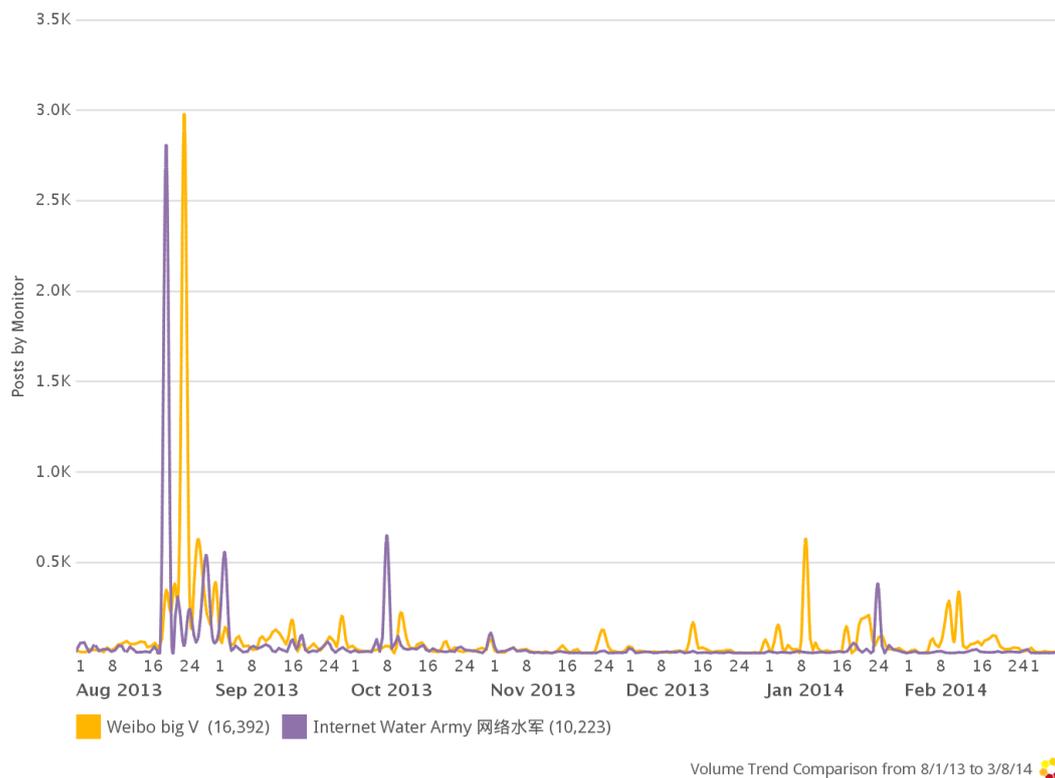
The Chinese internet has become so paranoid that any discussion of sensitive topics frequently devolves into netizens accusing each other of being members of this party or that. Yet, as we've proven in case after case, the utterances least trusted on the Chinese internet tends to come from state-run media or other government representatives. The Big V crackdown can be understood, then, as an attempt to apportion blame onto other groups and undermine Weibo's credibility as a whole. By insinuating opaque motives and murky financial relationships behind popular opinion leaders, the crackdown poisons the Chinese internet environment and kill meaningful critique. At stake is not just the future success of Weibo, but also more generally the volume and quality of public discourse in China.

Netizens react to the case of Charles Xue

In the case of Charles Xue, @薛蛮子, the highest-profile casualty of the Big V crackdown, Xue was criticized for starting an internet PR company and employed 秦火火, a internet marketer notorious for instigating phony viral events and disturbing the social order. Under the logic of the crackdown, Xue's crime was keeping close ties to internet water armies and for harboring selfish ambitions of dominating public opinion. The billionaire Chinese-American investor confessed to spreading misinformation online and called on other Big Vs to behave themselves. He currently sits in detention, awaiting charges. In the court of public opinion, does he deserve punishment?

Xue was already a controversial figure – he was a princeling and many thought he was hypocritical for criticizing the system he had profited so handsomely from – but at the time of his August 2013 arrest for soliciting prostitutes, he had more than 12 million followers. His detainment drove the largest conversation spikes about internet water armies and Big Vs.

Figure 2: Volume comparison between Internet Water Army and Big V from 8/4/2011 to 3/8/2014



Netizens seem ambivalent about Xue himself, but deeply critical of the implication that a larger witch hunt was under way:

It's no news of @薛蛮子 went whoring, it's big new that it's on CCTV!

薛蛮子嫖娼不算新闻，上央视新闻了才是新闻！

Taking advantage of the current system but trying to build personal image by criticizing the system, he has really pissed off the system and get revenged.

占着体制内的份子和便宜赚得盆满钵满回头为了点儿身前身后名不停拿批判体制塑造个人形象恶心体制的终于玩脱了，体制怒了，决定恶心回去而已。

Recently, the state media heavily attacked on big V and tries to destroy their credibility. The reason is that big Vs exposed corruption, criticized the abusing of power and

injustice, and satirized the system. They spoke the people's truth instead of singing paeon for bigwigs. No matter big V or not, no matter how harsh the circumstance is, we will never compromise or give up. One weibo for each, we will change China!

风生水起→ →//@正义正气 2011: //@历史断片://@丁来峰:近期官媒集中火力炮轰微博大V, 试图摧毁大V们的公信力。原因在于大V们爆出了贪腐, 痛斥了强权, 批评了不公, 讽刺了体制。不为权贵唱赞歌, 只为苍生鸣不平。。。。无论加不加V, 无论环境优劣, 我们不妥协, 不放弃, 每人一博, 改变中国。转发微博@摆古论今: 最近微博风声鹤唳, 央视刚刚宣布清理谣言号, 个别所谓的“异见人士”立即把以前的微博删得干干净净, 有的宣布休博, 有的就是写写心灵鸡汤, 那些正义之气早跑得无影无踪。更有几个互粉的大号, 平时称兄道弟发私信叫帮转帖子的, 看见气氛不对, 马上退粉。哥们, 那些兄弟情呢? 这就是肝胆相照? 同舟共济?

For many netizens, there was no logic in the government's blaming Big Vs as a group even if there were misbehaving individuals. People were also deeply skeptical of how state-controlled media reported the story.

State media led by People's Daily try to divert attention, they're the real rumor-mongers!
@博联社马晓霖: No matter how powerful big Vs are, they will never like CCTV. Enough is enough. The big V's credibility is only a matter of personal reputation. When the credibility of state media has lost, then it ruins the nation and the Party's reputation.

@中青报曹林: Do not label stigma on Weibo big V. Those big Vs who broke law should get legal punishment. It's not right to punish someone as a warning to others, or demonize the whole group.

以人民日报为代表的官媒们企图转移视线, 他们才是真正的造谣者//@中青报曹林://@博联社马晓霖: 【V言耸听】大V有多大? 再大也比不上裤衩大。凡事适可而止, 过犹不及, 别忘了央视新楼起火时的尴尬: 全国人民看见的事实你们直接无视。大V公信力差不过折损个人诚信, 官媒公信力缺失, 那是党国诚信的失败。转发微博@中青报曹林: 在腾讯大家写了篇评论: 不要给微博大V贴污名标签 <http://t.cn/z87HJ1w> 一些媒体在批评网络问题时, 把矛头指向了微博大V们。动辄就“莫让大V成大谣”“大V们应揽镜自照”云云。哪个大V违法了就依法惩处, “杀鸡骇猴”“敲山震虎”运动和道德上的抹黑, 不是法律之道。@微微胖 @摘星手 010 @央视新闻

Crackdown spurs conversation about Weibo manipulation

While the crackdown didn't make the government look better, it was perhaps successful in sparking a larger conversation about internet water armies and drawing attention to other types of negative influence on the internet. Plenty of netizens criticized water armies in the days and weeks following the crackdown.

Internet water army has become industrial chain which can easily smear a company. The regular water army can profit 1 yuan for each post and those with more than 5000,000 followers can make 100 yuan for each repost.

Jan 20, 2013

网络水军形成产业链 几万元就可搞臭一个企业#热点微议#。转发微博@绵阳司法: [网络水军形成产业链 几万元就可搞臭一个企业]#热点微议#一般的“网络水军”发一次帖能得到几毛钱到一元, 而粉丝数超过 50 万的微博账号转发一次能得到 100 多元的报酬。小编速度分享相关评述。

Those so called opinion leaders organize water army make fuss on the internet, with clear organization, agenda, tactics and great profit. It's typical Internet crime organization with the characteristics of gangsters.

Aug 21, 2013

转发微博@周泽律师:【"网络黑社会"来了?】"秦火火"、"立二拆四"等人,被以涉嫌寻衅滋事罪和非法经营罪被北京警方刑事拘留。办案民警表示,秦、杨等人伙同"意见领袖"、组织网络"水军"长期在网上制作事端、为非作歹,其组织严密、目的明确、手段恶劣、获利巨大,是典型的带有黑社会性质的网络犯罪组织。

<http://t.cn/zQe8Vrw>

The water army led by 薛蛮子 and 秦火火 is swollen with arrogance. It's unbelievable that the People's Daily was attacked by organized internet water army. The big ideological failure of ruling party will surely be written into record.

Aug 7, 2013

薛蛮子的水军明火执仗,秦火火的火气如此之大,人民日报海外版竟然遭到网络水军有组织的政治围攻,这种执政党在意识形态战争中屡屡溃败的事实,将来是要写进历史的。

As a warning strategy, the crackdown has certainly worked. Many Big Vs have since cautiously deleted sensitive posts, remained silent or just posted some irrelevant posts. Some have given up VIP verification or left Weibo altogether. The Yuyao flooding in October 2013 underscored the increasing unwillingness of Big Vs to act as leaders in any situation. Unlike in disasters before, few Big V's answered people's calls for help or participated in the rescue effort. A post written by a well-known dissident Li Chengpeng (李承鹏) explained their inaction:

"Don't blame us for not caring about Yuyao. We truly dare not. Last time, during Ya'an, we offered money and volunteers and stayed up for two nights. However, we were severely slandered by online water army. Don't criticize us for making things worse. Please ask yourselves honestly, from Wenchuan to Ya'an, how much help had the civil force contributed? Don't blame us for trying to win the public's hearts. This time, we didn't do anything. But do you have people on your side this time? You asked for it!"

别怪我们不关心余姚。我们不敢哪。上次雅安我们出钱、出人、两昼不睡，竟遭一批批水军抹黑造谣。别说我们添乱，你扪心自问从汶川到雅安，民间力量帮了多少忙传递了多少信息。别说我们抢夺民心了，这次我们不去、不问、不管，民心就在你们那里吗？活该！

@李承鹏 V

《公布账目》：一、感谢所有善主，让我们确知同类在哪里。二、在我们看来，即使没捐一包方便面也是善主，因为你用自己的方式关注了灾区的同胞，我们讨厌道德绑架，我们认为，善念一闪，即是光明。三、我们会继续改进，因为，我们必然坚持。详细账目请点击右侧链接地址<http://t.cn/zH4KMgw>



5月23日 11:36 来自新浪微博

👍(938) | 转发(10384) | 评论(1203)

10月15日 23:37 来自新浪微博

👍(1007) | 转发(2338) | 收藏 | 评论(1048)

Though Sina's fortunes have not dimmed in the months since the crackdown, Weibo has suffered. A study conducted by the Telegraph found that just two weeks after Xue's arrest, the daily number of tweets from a sample group of highly active users halved.² The Telegraph further reports that the number of posts may have fallen as much as 70% since the crackdown, while the Chinese Internet Network Information Center reports that Weibo users had dropped 9% from 2012 to 281 million at the end of 2013.³ For many users, or at least for many uses, WeChat has supplanted Weibo, but it's difficult to say whether the switch would have happened so quickly without the crackdown to catalyze public desire for safety. In the end, the crackdown didn't destroy individual reputations, the act of rumor-mongering, nor shadowy online marketing campaigns, but it has severely damaged the volume and quality of public discourse in China. But freedom and control has long been a cat and mouse game, shifting back and forth with each wave of technology. The government should know by now that not only will people find a way to exchange information, there are significant risks in driving sensitive topics back into private spheres, where they are more difficult to monitor.

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10608245/China-kills-off-discussion-on-Weibo-after-internet-crackdown.html>

³ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-01-16/china-microblog-users-fall-9-on-tencent-app-competition.html>