

Promoting Nationalism or Becoming apolitical?

Understanding China's response to crisis on Weibo

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Abstract

Online social media has become one of the most important ways for authoritarian regimes to maintain its resilience. When authoritarian regimes are faced with challenges, what options they would take to defend their regime? This paper takes Hong Kong protest and early stage covid-19 as two examples to study how Chinese official Weibo account responded to these crises. Based on web scraping and text analysis, this paper seeks to answer how does these Weibo account change during the after the crisis, including their word frequency, topic, keywords and sentimental scores. This paper introduces two main approaches that has been frequently used in this scenario, testing which one might be more dominant in these cases and trying to provide an explanation towards the result.

Introduction

Utilizing online social media to sustain the authoritarian resilience has become one major method used by authoritarian regimes (Huang, 2015). Recently, China's authoritarian regimes have experienced unprecedented challenges, ranging from doubting government's governance in the early stage of covid-19 pandemic to long-lasting Hong Kong protest in 2019. Under these circumstances, there are mainly two approaches to tackle with the crisis and challenges: Promoting nationalism (Zhao, 1998; Perry, 2013) and distracting citizens from focusing on political incidents (Tong et al., 2014). While the latter one is more regarded as a soft approach which softly "suppresses" citizens' awareness of democracy, the former one is more aggressive approach, shaping nationalism and targeting Western values and Western countries.

Take covid-19 and Hong Kong protest as two examples, we would find several interesting patterns on Weibo (the biggest social media in China), which can help us to test which approach China would use when facing the crisis. For example, an interesting divergence for attitude towards "democracy" (minzhu) has been observed when during and after the Hong Kong protest. During the protest, Chinese official media tends to have a negative attitude towards

democracy, *“Recently, the protest in Hong Kong reveals the evilness of democracy”* while they happily embrace the democracy when the flames of protests were put off, *“We, Chinese should strive for building a government with democracy and rule of law”*.

By using web scraping and text analysis method on Weibo, we try to figure out some interesting patterns on Chinese media, government and opinion leaders’ Weibo account and understand the political logic behind it. This study seeks to use covid-19 and Hong Kong protest as two crises to see which path China would use to maintain its legitimacy? To be more specific, this study tends to use natural experiment to test whether official social media accounts in authoritarian China would become more nationalism, political, aggressive, critical to Western countries (Western values) or more apolitical, gentle, suppressing the hot discussion on political issues? The paper is structured as followed. First, it begins with two approaches that authoritarian government would use when facing crisis. Then, it introduces Weibo dataset, main methodology and the influence of two key incidents. Furthermore, it reports some high-level patterns and results from the data. Finally, we would provide some explanations and discussions for the Chinese route in tackling with the crisis.

Two different approaches

When authoritarian regimes suffering from challenges, there are mainly two approaches: promoting nationalism and becoming apolitical. Tracing back to the history, both approaches are common methods that have been used in authoritarian countries.

Promoting Nationalism

Utilizing nationalism seems to be one common tactic used by authoritarian regimes to maintain its legitimacy. This tactic has been widely used in China (Weiss, 2013), Argentina (Dock, 1993), Iran (Wien, 2008) and Russia (Kolsto et al., 2016). As Zhao (1998) argued the state-led nationalism has strong anti-Western campaign, shaping the uniqueness of Chinese regime. Weiss (2013) also realized the benefits of nationalism. She claimed that even nationalist protests give the incentives for authoritarian leaders to stay firm rather than challenging their legitimacy.

If we move forward into the Internet world, we would also realize the benefits of utilizing nationalism on Weibo. When talking about the territorial dispute, Weibo nationalists play an

important role in arousing anti-foreign (i.e. anti-Japan) nationalism in China, distracting citizens from doubting on its own legitimacy (Zhang et al., 2018). To be more specific, this nationalism also criticizes the Western norm and values, highlighting the uniqueness and incomparability between China and the rest of the world, diminishing the influence of democratization from Western countries.

For example, People's Daily posted on late-November that "American democracy is extremely hypocrisy, and they attempted to occupy Hong Kong."¹. This post highly signifies the main character of nationalism, including anti-foreign, highlighting China's uniqueness and arousing nationalism, providing one approach for solving the crisis.

Becoming Apolitical

Apart from using nationalism to distract Chinese citizens' attention and highlighting the uniqueness of China, especially as a socialism state, another common approach is to become apolitical or distract the citizens from political affairs. This tactic is also commonly used by China (King et al., 2017), South Africa (Bond, 2008) and Weimar Germany (Kracauer, 1998). This approach promotes apolitical attitude in authoritarian countries, discouraging citizens from participating in the political affairs. Large survey data also share the similar findings. When asking about citizens' willingness to participate in political activities, Asian Barometer Survey has shown only around one-third is willing to compared with around one-half in other democratic countries in East Asia (Shin & Sin, 2012).

Focusing on the area of social media, this distraction pattern has been noticed by several researchers (Han, 2015, King et al., 2017). There are abundant (voluntary) fifty-cent armies on Chinese social media, fabricating social media posts self-motivated or hired by Chinese government. They argued that these fifty-cent armies, no matter voluntary or not, paid more attention on distracting the general public instead of engaged argument and debate, which matches with our apolitical approach, highlighting the important role of distraction when handling crisis.

Data

¹ Sina Weibo, People's Daily (30 November 2019), Retrieved via web scraping on May 3, 2020.

This study uses data from Weibo, one of the biggest online microblog platforms in China. It has 465 million monthly active users in 2019 (Weibo Annual Report, 2019), making it one of the China's most influencing social media. Recognized as China's Twitter with a word limit of 140 words per blog, it shows netizens attitude with a quite strict word limit.

In this paper, we first select twenty Weibo accounts from three categories, including official media (i.e. People's Daily 人民日报), private media (i.e. pengpai, The Paper 澎湃新闻) and government (i.e. Central Youth League 共青团中央), all of which has an official background and play an important role in conducting propaganda campaign during the crisis. These accounts are selected from official Weibo Index², which ranks the popularity of Weibo account in a certain category. Apart from official sector, we also include other Weibo account including opinion leaders and celebrities to compare with the official account.

In terms of the timeline, we have set two key incidents as "crisis": Hong Kong protest in 2019 and the most recent covid-19 pandemic, among which one is pure political while the other is more comprehensive. Based on that, we set three durations (November 2019, late-January 2020 and the most recent 30 days), each with a 30-day duration and web scraped all original blogs posted during these periods. Then, we cleaned the data for further analysis.

On average, there are around 52 million followers per selected account, with around 4500 posts per account during the 90-day period. Take People's Daily as an example, each post it has around 78 thousand likes, 4.5 thousand comments and 15 thousand forwards, showing its great influence on social media. Although these 20 accounts are just a few selected from the whole Weibo accounts, however, they have significant influence on China's social media and have become one of the most important platforms that government conducts online propaganda campaign via these influential Weibo accounts.

Methods

To help us further understand how Chinese official media change during the crisis, this paper mainly uses a mixture of web scraping and text analysis methods. Our first step is to web scrape all posts during the 90-day timeframe. We used official Weibo API as well as methods

² It is an official Weibo popularity ranking systems (<https://www.bang.weibo.com>).

provided in previous articles (Zhang et al., 2014) to conduct web scraping. In total, we have around 900 thousand posts for these 20 accounts in the 90-day period.

Our second step is to conduct text analysis from several perspectives. First, we would like to examine whether certain words have become much more commonly used (i.e. democracy, political rights etc.) during the crisis, trying to shed light on whether there is a topic change during the crisis. Then, we would conduct topic extraction by using both tf-idf and page rank method adapted to Mandarin, trying to figure out whether their topics are switching to a more political or apolitical pattern; Thirdly, we tried to conduct sentimental analysis by using two sentimental packages (SnowNLP and Baidu) provided for Mandarin to see whether their sentiment is becoming more positive or negative on the social media. Finally, we conduct experiments and recruit some hand-coders to test the confidence level of the existing models.

This four-step analysis would help us to figure out several interesting patterns depicted by China's official blogs during the crisis. It would also be helpful for us to understand how Chinese government and media react to the crisis and the paths they choose to overcome the legitimacy crisis, helping us better understand the authoritarian resilience in China.

Two key incidents: Hong Kong protest and Covid-19 pandemic

To further evaluate China's government response to crisis, we select two key incidents: Hong Kong protest in 2019 and the early stage of covid-19 pandemic. While the latter is a purely political protest in Hong Kong, the latter covid-19 pandemic posed severe threat to local government's government at early stage when pandemic is out of control in Wuhan, China. By using these two key incidents, it would be helpful for us to understand how Chinese media and government respond to political and non-political crisis respectively.

Hong Kong protest

There has been a long tradition for pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong, starting from 2010, with its highlight in 2014 and 2019 (Lee, 2010). Stephan (2015) made a great explanation for the protest, claiming that it was caused due to the long-term dispute between authoritarian central government and local powerful business elites. Putting it into the context of the most recent Hong Kong protest, the long-lasting protest posed significant challenges on authoritarian resilience in China, challenging the authoritarian resilience from a pro-democracy perspective.

The “Occupy Central” movement in Hong Kong as well as “Sunflower Movement” in Taiwan further enhances PRC authorities’ worries about the danger of politicized students in Mainland China (Perry, 2017).

The most recent Hong Kong protest has its highlight in June and November 2019. In November, a city-wide strike took place and protesters occupied two universities in Hong Kong, confronting the police until the end of the November, signifying the acceleration of the protest. In the same time, Mainland’s legitimacy was been challenged by Hong Kong protest that civilians have been aware of the democratization movement in Hong Kong, putting great threat to the authoritarian resilience. Also, it is worth noting that United States passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in late-November, which had huge impact on doubting China’s model. So, we select this timeframe as our main time of focus, ranging from November 1st till the end of November to see how Chinese official medias react during the most severe protests in Hong Kong.

Covid-19 pandemic

If we say protests in Hong Kong is a pure political challenge towards Chinese legitimacy outside China’s political system, then the early stage of covid-19 pandemic poses a threat towards Chinese local and central government governance inside China’s political system.

Although China successfully conquered the pandemic finally, however at the beginning there were dozens of critiques doubting the local government’s governance, which reached its summit at the incidence of death of Dr. Li in early-February. Thus, we tried our best to figure out how Chinese official media and government use social media to rebuild its authority and legitimacy, especially during the early stage of the pandemic when criticism towards the government fills the online social media.

Main Findings

Word count: Are they more likely to refer to certain kind of words?

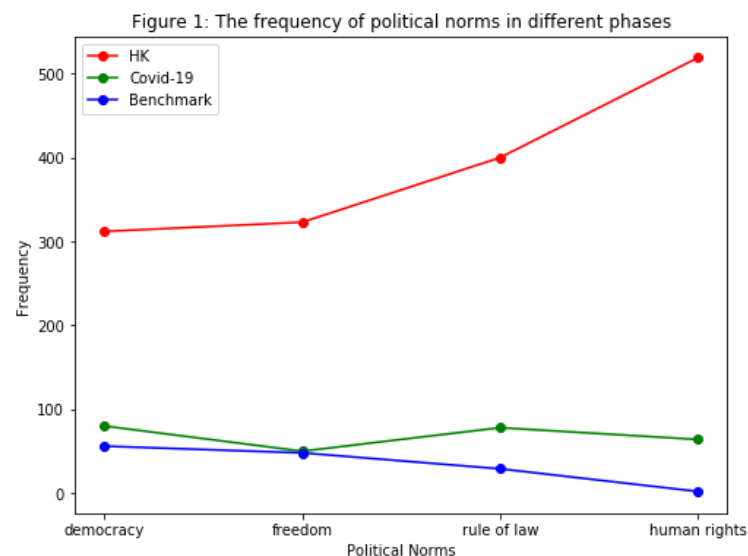
1. More frequent usage of political norms

Just through simply counting the frequency of words of over the total 80,000 posts, we would find a significant increase of using political norms during the two crises. We found that

the frequency of using political norms (democracy(minzhu 民主), freedom(ziyou 自由), rule of law(fazhi 法治), human rights(renquan 人权)) has been dramatically increased during the Hong Kong protest. As Figure One shows, the frequency of these political norms on average has been four times than our benchmark sample, especially the frequency for usage of human rights has been around 40 times than our benchmark sample.

Several quotes from the Weibo can easily help us depict the reason why the usage has been dramatically increased. “Hong Kong thugs are not parading peacefully but are committing extreme violent crimes that endanger and deprive others of democracy, human rights, freedom and security” (November 21, 2019 People’s Daily), “What American "human rights" and "democracy" bring to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and other countries” (November 30, 2019 People’s Daily). Instead of becoming apolitical and distracting citizens from political topics, they tend to reveal Chinese nationalism, attributing the cause of Hong Kong parade to the invasion of American democracy instead of its own political system contradiction.

Figure 1: The frequency of political norms in different phases



2. More frequent usage of Chinese uniqueness and “hard” words

Apart from political norms, it is also worth noting that China’s official social media has paid more focus on China’s uniqueness and was more likely to use “hard” words. Just by simply counting the words, we would find more words related to Chinese uniqueness has been used. Also, more “hard” words have been used by Chinese government to condemn the foreign affairs during the crisis.

Figure 2 has shown that China has laid great emphasis on using hard words when dealing with political crisis. During Hong Kong protest, the words referring to Western (西方), US (美国), Chinese characteristic (中国特色) and China (中国) have all been doubled compared to our benchmark samples, trying their best to illustrate that China is quite unique compared with other countries. For example, CCTV official Weibo account claimed that “*CNN is shaping the Western value, calumniating China’s development.*” (CGTN Weibo Account, November 3, 2019) The frequent use of these words was aimed to tell Chinese citizens that China is using a path different from traditional Western countries, hence these Western “democracy” value and challenges should not be applied to our China’s unique governance, choosing a “unique-China” theory to neutralize major challenges during the crisis.

Figure 3 has shown the frequent use of “hard” words. Hard words refer to direct opposition or against towards certain opinion. Compared with our benchmark, we would see that both incidents lead to the dramatic increase of using “hard” words, including oppose (fandui 反对), interference (ganshe 干涉), domestic politics (neizheng 内政), protest (kangyi 抗议). These hard words seldomly appeared during our benchmark sample, while its appearance was 10 to 20 times more frequent during political crisis and 2 times during covid-19 pandemic. Xinhua News Weibo Account claimed that “US politicians’ involvement in Hong Kong affairs is an interference in China’s internal affairs.” (Xinhua News Weibo Account, November 28, 2019), accelerating the crisis to a nationalism level, arousing citizens’ opposition towards Western countries, defending its own legitimacy, proving the fact that China is choosing the nationalism path instead of the traditional apolitical path.

Figure 2 & 3: The frequency of Chinese uniqueness and hard words in different phases

Figure 2: The frequency of "Chinese uniqueness" in different phases

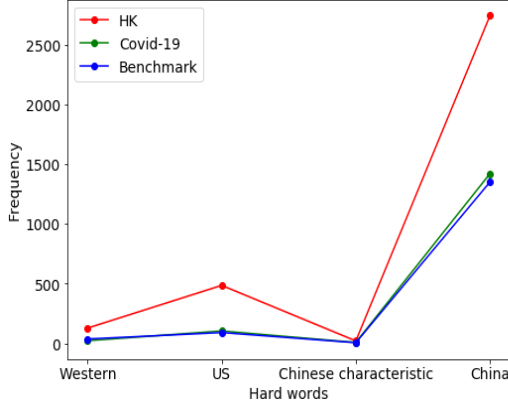
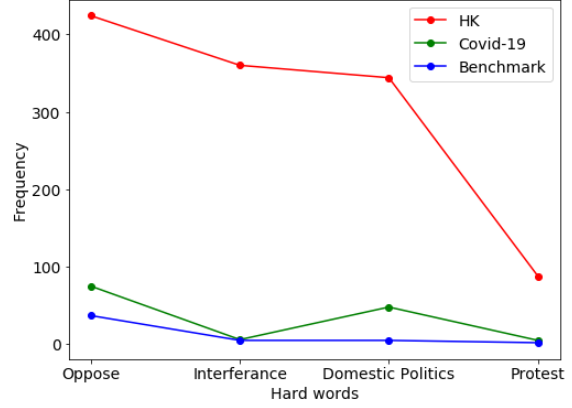


Figure 3: The frequency of hard words in different phases



Topic extraction: Is the topic becoming more political or apolitical?

Apart from counting the frequency of word usage, we step much further, trying to extract the key topic from the dataset. We use both adapted tf-idf and page rank method to extract topic from the dataset, trying to see whether our focused Weibo account has a shift for being political or apolitical when crisis happens.

Table 1: Top 5 topics during three timeframes by using tf-idf and page rank models

Incident	Hong Kong Protest		Covid-19		Benchmark	
Model	tf-idf	Page rank	tf-idf	Page rank	tf-idf	Page rank
Top	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Cases	Cases	Cases	Cases
Five	Live	China	Coronavirus	Pandemic	Coronavirus	Wuhan
Keywords	Rioters	Rioters	Confirmed	Wuhan	Wuhan	Coronavirus
(N = 79604)	CCTV	Police	Control	Hospital	Control	US
	Air Force	State	Wuhan	Confirmed	Pandemic	China

As is shown in Table 1, apart from some common keywords (i.e. Hong Kong, coronavirus, cases etc.), both models have referred to some political keywords mentioned in our dataset. It has shown that during the Hong Kong protest crisis, these official Weibo account tends to become much more political rather than our apolitical crisis. Instead of distracting citizens from collective actions (King et al., 2017), they encourage citizens to have a collective nationalism towards the “rioters” in Hong Kong and the so-called Western forces behind the scene. It is

also worth mentioning that the appearance of air force and police appears to be a military deterrence posed via Chinese official social media.

It is also interesting to see that in terms of the early stage of covid-19 pandemic, there is no significant change or pattern in keyword selection, and it seems that most reports are relevant to the pandemics' update. It seems that keeping information up to date and keeping pandemic under control is the top priority other than worrying its legitimacy change. It is also worth noting that our benchmark sample listed US ahead of China, showing that US has become a more and more important role on Chinese social media, which might be caused by the ongoing covid-19 pandemic in United States and sharpening Sino-US relations.

Based on some manual coding, both models seem excellent in extracting the keywords and seems consistent with each other. Compared with our manual coding done by three students, it seems that the page rank model (78% accuracy) performs better than tf-idf (63% accuracy).

Sentimental Analysis: Will official social media accounts become more aggressive and critical?

Apart from word counts and keyword, we would also find that Chinese official social media appears to have a significant sentiment change during the crisis. When Hong Kong protest happens, they tend to become more aggressive, critical, standing on the opposite side towards the Western countries and values. To have a better understanding of this sentiment, we conduct a sentimental analysis to further understand their attitude shift between and after the crisis. Since sentimental score calculation is very time consuming, we select Weibo account from Xinhua News as an example to study its sentimental score in two methods during three time periods with a total count of 4118 posts.

Table 2: Sentimental Score during three time periods (e.g. Xinhua News, n=4118)³

Category	Hong Kong			Covid-19			Benchmark		
	Overall	Political	Others	Overall	Political	Others	Overall	Political	Others
Mean (Snow)	0.816	0.92	0.803	0.65	0.83	0.644	0.66	0.89	0.647
S.D. (Snow)	0.246	0.26	0.243	0.173	0.136	0.174	0.279	0.278	0.282

³ Note: The sentimental score is a 0-1 continuous variable which 0 represents negative, 1 represents positive.

N	675	74	601	2038	61	1977	1408	58	1350
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As Table 2 depicts that sentimental score during these three time periods varies. However, surprisingly, we would find that both methods have shown that during Hong Kong protests, Chinese official social media tend to behave more positive compared with our benchmark since more critical words have appeared in criticizing the Western countries.

Interestingly, when taking a deeper look of the posts during the crisis, we would not surprisingly to find dozens of positive encouragement (zheng neng liang) appearing quite often in the social media, such as “Fight for your own and China’s future”, “Give you a thumb” that highly elevates the sentimental score. Also, both Baidu and Snow sentimental score has big flaws that it has very low correspondence rate with the coder. Nevertheless, it still depicts us with a combination method of two: Both striking down the West and distracting the citizens by posting some useless encouragement online at the same time.

Discussion and Comparison

Discussion: Comparison among different Weibo accounts

In this study, we included three types of official Weibo accounts: Official media, private media and government. Apart from these three types, we also include opinion leaders (mentioned in Zhang et al., 2017) for comparison. Although in a state-controlled censorship and propaganda campaign, all posts seem followings similar guideline, however, it is also worth noting that there does have some differences among different Weibo accounts.

Table 3: Comparison among different Weibo accounts (n=79604)

	Official Media (i.e. CCTV)	Private Media (i.e. Pengpai)	Government (i.e. Gov SH)	Opinion Leader (i.e. Xinjin Hu)
Political posts ⁴	~7%	~6.5%	~4%	~20%
Sentiment	0.702	0.685	0.78	0.69
N (accounts)	6	6	6	2
N (posts)	28350	23880	21453	5921

We would find that there are no significant differences among descriptive analysis between

⁴ Similar to the Table 2, political posts here are defined as posts containing highly political words, i.e. freedom, democracy, rule of law etc.

official media and private media, claiming that Chinese public and private media are all under the same governance logic especially when talking about the political topic. In comparison, government has a similar but a little bit different compared with the media; They are more likely to have less political posts and their sentiments tend to be more positive. This pattern fits with our observation that government account is more likely to publish sort of encouragement (e.g. “Thumb up for a new day!”) while official and private media account tends to have more political information behind it.

One interesting comparison is opinion leader perspective mentioned in several scholars’ paper (Nip et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). Due to the time limit, we only include two opinion leaders at this moment but would include more opinion leaders (including property tycoons, military officials, grassroots, liberals or nationals). Understanding their sentiment score as well as their attitude towards political posts is important for us to understand it more from a grassroots perspective.

Discussion: Comparison among two political and non-political incidents

As previous tables and figures show, there is apparent difference in the frequency of words, keywords and sentimental score between Hong Kong protest and our benchmark sample, however, it seems that there are no significant different between covid-19 early challenge and benchmark. Does it mean that Chinese official social media account would only respond to key political challenges but ignore the other challenges?

Both Figure 1 and 3 show that during the covid-19, the frequency of hard words and politics-related words are also doubled, but just not as significant as the Hong Kong protest. Why would a covid-19 pandemic lead to the increase use of political words? It seems that compared with blaming the Westerners and launching the anti-foreign nationalism, government used an inborn nationalism to promote the unity of the whole nations. It also seems to be promoting the nationalism, but just from another more “inside” perspective.

Explanation: Why would this happen?

Instead of distracting citizens from certain political crisis, it seems that Chinese official social media chooses an approach that arousing nationalism and directly fighting back to the political challenge by reemphasizing the uniqueness of China, maintaining the authoritarian

resilience in China. So why would this happen?

Some theory attributes it to the cultural logic behind it, claiming that the nationalism is caused by the collective actions embedded in Confucius norms (Shi, 2014). Under this culture, citizens are more likely to form a collective barrier towards the outsider. To be more specific, citizens inside the culture would regard themselves as well as their political background different from the Westerners, forming a nationalism fighting back the “invasion” of the Westerners. Because of the exclusive, long-standing cultural pattern behind scene, authoritarian China would successfully utilize this pattern to fight back instead of distracting it towards another path.

Conclusion

Based on web scraping and text analysis on twenty major Weibo accounts in China, this paper attempts to answer the question that how Chinese official social media account would respond to the crisis aroused targeting its legitimacy? The paper further broke down it into several perspectives, including word counts, topic extraction and sentimental analysis.

Compared with our most recent analysis, this paper has found that the reference of key political norms as well as hard words has become 10 to 20 times much more frequent than the benchmark. Also, keywords are becoming more and more politics-oriented, showing as a deference towards the foreign power. Although this phenomena in the case of covid-19 is not as strong as the Hong Kong protest, however, both cases prove that Chinese official social media is using a nationalism approach, emphasizing China’s uniqueness and using hard words to target the Western countries. Different from traditional distraction approach, this approach seems to use the propaganda campaign to unite Chinese to fight against with the “invasion” of Western forces, showing an interesting pattern that Chinese officials have opted to take to maintain its authoritarian resilience, providing solid evidence for studying how authoritarian government maintains its resilience, especially during the crisis outbreak.

However, due to time and technical limitations, this paper has some limitations. Although this paper has included two opinion leaders as comparison, however, more studies related to opinion leaders might be added to view it from a more unofficial perspective. Also, this study provides a descriptive picture of what actions have been taken, and more follow-up actions

should be taken in terms of the casual mechanism behind it and may apply the machine learning algorithm to make it have better classification.

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