



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

CONVERGING DISCOURSE, DIVERGING AUDIENCES:
AUTHORITARIAN PROPAGANDA WITH STRATEGIC
DIFFERENTIATION

By
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Abstract

This thesis introduces the concept of *strategic differentiation* to explain how authoritarian regimes, rather than issuing uniform propaganda, adapt their messaging across platforms and audiences in a deliberate, calibrated manner. Drawing on Chinese state media texts from 2007 to 2022—including China Central Television (CCTV), People’s Daily, and Government Work Reports—this study examines how language, framing, and interpretive accessibility vary depending on audience sophistication and political context.

Using semantic network analysis with FastText word embeddings and entropy-based readability metrics, the study finds systematic evidence of discursive segmentation. Elite-facing platforms employ lexically rich, technical language, while mass-facing outlets rely on simplified, emotionally resonant narratives. Temporal analysis reveals that propaganda coherence intensifies during crises and relaxes during routine periods, suggesting that message alignment is a strategic choice rather than a constant feature.

These findings contribute to the literature on authoritarian information control by highlighting how regimes manage interpretation—not only through content, but through audience-specific messaging strategies. While the study is limited in its focus on textual media and does not directly measure audience reception, it provides a structured framework and replicable method for analyzing differentiated propaganda. The concept of strategic differentiation offers a new lens for understanding how authoritarian regimes communicate selectively to maintain control, manage legitimacy, and contain dissent.

Keywords: Strategic Differentiation; Authoritarian Propaganda; Information Control; Audience Segmentation; Semantic Network Analysis; Strategic Ambiguity; Selective Engagement; Linguistic Readability; Political Communication; Chinese State Media

1 Introduction

Authoritarian regimes rely heavily on propaganda to maintain political stability, public compliance, and elite cohesion. Traditional accounts of authoritarian communication tend to adopt a binary framework, portraying propaganda either as persuasive—aimed at cultivating public trust in regime competence—or as dominant—focused on coercion and fear to suppress dissent (Boussalis et al., 2022; Carter & Carter, 2023; Huang, 2015; Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024). However, this dichotomy fails to capture the strategic nuance of real-world authoritarian messaging. In practice, regimes do not simply oscillate between persuasion and domination; rather, they engage in *strategic differentiation*—a systematic process of tailoring propaganda across platforms and audiences to serve varying political objectives.

This study introduces strategic differentiation as a central analytical lens for understanding how authoritarian regimes calibrate messaging styles, linguistic complexity, and interpretive access. Propaganda is not merely a monolithic tool of control, but a differentiated architecture of communication that varies by platform type, audience literacy, and issue salience. Drawing from insights in political psychology and communication, this framework suggests that propaganda targets audience predispositions by embedding messages in different stylistic forms—from emotionally resonant slogans for mass publics to technical jargon for elites. Importantly, this differentiation is not incidental; it is a deliberate method for guiding interpretation, avoiding backlash, and preserving regime flexibility.

The logic of strategic differentiation is especially salient in vertically stratified propaganda ecosystems like China’s, where media platforms serve distinct functional roles. For instance, China Central Television (CCTV) broadcasts simplified and emotionally charged narratives to a broad public, while People’s Daily delivers more structured ideological messaging to party members and engaged citizens. Government Work Reports (GWRs), by contrast, provide policy-specific and technical language intended for bureaucrats and elites. These three platforms form a communication triad that enables the regime to strategically segment audiences and calibrate messages accordingly.

A key mechanism underlying strategic differentiation is *strategic ambiguity*—the use of vague, symbolic, or emotionally coded language to enable flexible interpretation while preserving plausible deniability (Aragonès & Neeman, 2000; Bräuninger & Giger, 2016; Frankenhuis et al., 2023; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). Ambiguity allows regimes to simultaneously appeal to multiple constituencies, signal internal policy shifts to elites, and suppress

the formation of coherent dissent among the public. For elites, ambiguity often takes the form of insider cues embedded in technical or ideological terminology; for the masses, it deflects scrutiny through platitudes and slogans.

The implications of strategic differentiation extend beyond text to censorship and multimodal propaganda. Studies show that censorship in China is not uniformly repressive, but varies in response to political cycles, policy transitions, and issue sensitivity (Han & Shao, 2022; Lorentzen, 2013). Similarly, visual propaganda—including posters, television, and digital imagery—often encodes meaning through cultural symbolism accessible only to select audiences (Caroll, 2017; Huang, 2015; Mattingly & Yao, 2022). These patterns suggest a broader regime strategy of *selective engagement*—deliberately deciding who gets to interpret what, when, and how.

This study contributes both theoretically and empirically to the literature on authoritarian communication. Theoretically, it reframes propaganda not as a binary between persuasion and repression, but as a fluid spectrum of differentiated audience engagement. Empirically, it tests this framework using semantic network analysis and readability metrics on propaganda texts from CCTV, People’s Daily, and GWRs between 2007 and 2022. Using FastText-based word embeddings and entropy-based readability scores, the analysis identifies cross-platform variation in meaning construction and linguistic complexity. The results reveal clear patterns of semantic divergence, strategic silence, and linguistic opacity aligned with audience segmentation. By showing how regimes manage meaning—not just messages—this study deepens our understanding of how authoritarian propaganda adapts to political constraints and communicative challenges.

2 Literature Review

This study introduces *strategic differentiation* as a novel framework to understand how authoritarian regimes craft propaganda across diverse platforms and audiences. Existing literature on authoritarian communication has long revolved around a binary model: propaganda is seen either as *persuasive*—intended to foster trust in the regime’s competence and legitimacy—or *dominant*—used as a tool of coercion, designed to instill fear and suppress dissent (Boussalis et al., 2022; Carter & Carter, 2023; Huang, 2015; Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024). However, this dichotomy overlooks the dynamic and often deliberately calibrated

nature of messaging that characterizes real-world authoritarian communication. Regimes do not simply speak with one voice; they vary their tone, style, and content depending on the audience. Some are drawn in with ideology, others managed through silence, ambiguity, or emotionally resonant narratives. This flexibility in propaganda strategy demands a new analytical lens.

Strategic differentiation offers such a lens. It conceptualizes propaganda as a multi-directional, adaptive process that targets specific audiences with tailored messages. Rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all narrative, regimes differentiate their communication based on the political relevance, informational needs, and cognitive predispositions of distinct constituencies. Through this lens, propaganda is not simply a top-down delivery of ideology or fear—it is a selectively responsive practice, aimed at engaging some, misleading others, and ignoring still others in ways that best serve the regime’s goals. Importantly, this strategy operates within a constrained political environment where the regime must maintain control over interpretation while avoiding overt contradictions or backlash.

2.1 Psychological and Communicative Foundations

The theory of strategic differentiation builds on foundational work in political psychology and communication. Alvarez and Brehm (2002) emphasize that individuals rarely make political decisions based on complete information. Instead, they rely on heuristics and contextual cues that trigger predispositions and simplify complex choices. For most people—especially those with low political engagement or limited access to information—these cues shape not just opinions but also perceptions of what counts as relevant or legitimate political content. In such environments, propaganda serves as a substitute for knowledge, guiding interpretation through simplification, repetition, and emotional appeal.

This insight is crucial in authoritarian contexts, where the state actively limits alternative sources of information. Propaganda must function not only as a message but as a framework for interpreting reality. Emotional cues, symbolic gestures, and selective references to historical memory or moral values serve as shortcuts for processing political events and policy shifts. Strategic differentiation emerges from this logic: different audiences rely on different cues, and regimes craft messages accordingly.

Complementing this view, Johnston et al. (2017) finds that political preferences are mul-

tidimensional, shaped by how individuals perceive their social and cultural identities. For some, political messages that emphasize ideology or nationalism resonate more deeply; for others, material concerns such as job security or social welfare dominate. This has clear implications for propaganda design: when economic performance is strong and public expectations are met, regimes may reduce their engagement with the general population, letting favorable conditions speak for themselves. Conversely, when public confidence is low or social grievances emerge, messaging may intensify or shift focus. Either way, the decision about *whether* to engage—and *how*—is itself strategic. What may appear as passivity or incoherence in communication is often intentional silence, aimed at preventing interpretation rather than promoting it.

2.2 Strategic Differentiation and Elite Cohesion

Strategic differentiation also provides a powerful lens for understanding elite integration, which remains a cornerstone of authoritarian durability (Kailitz & Stockemer, 2017; Schedler & Hoffmann, 2016; Shih, 2008). While much of the literature focuses on loyalty among top leaders, the stability of authoritarian regimes also depends on the compliance of mid-level elites—including local bureaucrats, state-affiliated businesspeople, educators, and public-sector employees. These actors often lack direct access to internal policy deliberations and instead rely on public-facing propaganda to infer policy shifts and align their actions accordingly.

Yet their interpretive capabilities vary significantly depending on education, occupation, Party membership, and access to restricted information (Chen, 2018; Liu et al., 2023; Wagner et al., 2021). A bureaucrat in Beijing might easily decode nuanced shifts in economic policy language, while a provincial teacher might only grasp surface-level ideological messages. Strategic differentiation allows regimes to navigate this asymmetry: by embedding layered cues in official communication, they provide clear signals to elites while issuing broader, less decipherable messages to the general public.

This communicative layering plays a crucial role in maintaining elite unity while avoiding mass mobilization. It allows the regime to integrate diverse elite actors into a shared interpretive framework—one that encourages instrumental compliance and reduces the risk of spontaneous, collective dissent among peripheral power holders. Importantly, such messaging must be precise enough to guide elite behavior but ambiguous enough to remain

politically safe in public discourse. This balance is a hallmark of effective strategic differentiation.

2.3 Strategic Ambiguity and the Control of Interpretation

A central mechanism through which strategic differentiation operates is *strategic ambiguity*. This concept, widely used in political science and organizational theory (Aragonès & Neeman, 2000; Bräuninger & Giger, 2016; Frankenhuis et al., 2023; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010), refers to the deliberate crafting of vague or multi-interpretable language to accommodate diverse audiences or avoid conflict. In authoritarian propaganda, strategic ambiguity is not a weakness—it is a tactical resource. It allows the regime to address multiple constituencies with the same message while ensuring plausible deniability, flexibility of response, and interpretive control.

For mass audiences, ambiguity can prevent the formation of concrete criticisms or coordinated interpretations. For elites, the same ambiguity may carry coded meanings—grounded in insider knowledge, ideological training, or professional expertise. What seems like platitude or redundancy to the uninformed can be a subtle policy signal to those who know what to look for. The regime’s ability to embed layered meanings in a single communicative act is essential for navigating politically sensitive terrain, especially in times of economic slowdown, policy transition, or social unrest.

2.4 Selective Engagement and Multilevel Messaging

The broader strategy underlying these practices is *selective engagement*—a concept originally developed in diplomacy to describe how states manage competing interests across audiences (Art, 1998; Gupta, 2007; Qiang, 2019). Applied to domestic propaganda, selective engagement refers to the regime’s intentional variation in how it engages different societal groups, not just in whether it speaks, but in *how* and *what* it communicates.

Authoritarian regimes may deliver rich, policy-specific discourse to elite or professional audiences—through internal reports, official newspapers, or technical speeches—while offering emotionally charged, simplified, or ambiguous messages to the general population through platforms like television, social media, or slogans. In some cases, regimes may even

issue contradictory messages across platforms, trusting that different audiences will absorb only what is relevant to them. This strategy not only prevents mass audiences from forming coherent counter-narratives, but also protects elite messaging from being politicized or misunderstood.

2.5 Censorship and the Management of Contradictions

Strategic differentiation also manifests in censorship practices, which fluctuate with political sensitivity and leadership priorities. In the Chinese context, scholars have shown that censorship levels vary according to leadership transitions, major events, and perceived social unrest (Han & Shao, 2022; Lorentzen, 2013). Particularly around economic issues, where the public’s lived experience may contradict official narratives, propaganda becomes a high-stakes endeavor. Authoritarian regimes must maintain coherence between their rhetoric and material reality—yet they often lack the policy flexibility to address dissatisfaction directly.

In such cases, managing interpretation becomes key. Rather than simply censoring dissent, the regime may preemptively structure public understanding through vague but emotionally appealing propaganda, while issuing more informative cues to elites to prevent confusion or misalignment. Strategic differentiation allows the regime to confront structural contradictions without provoking backlash, maintaining control not by eliminating dissent, but by ensuring that different groups see and understand different things.

2.6 Visual and Multimodal Propaganda: New Directions

Finally, the logic of strategic differentiation extends beyond text to visual and multimedia propaganda. Prior research has shown that imagery—whether in posters, television, or online videos—can perform both persuasive and coercive functions (Huang, 2015; Mattingly & Yao, 2022). These forms often encode meaning through culturally specific symbols, visual metaphors, or emotionally resonant imagery that vary in interpretability depending on audience background and platform. As Carroll (2017) notes, such visuals require contextual knowledge for proper decoding, making them ideal tools for selective engagement.

This study’s framework opens new avenues for research into multimodal authoritarian communication. Future work could examine how textual and visual cues intersect, reinforce,

or diverge in their effects on different audience segments. By extending strategic differentiation to the realm of imagery, we can better understand how authoritarian regimes synchronize messages across modalities to shape perception, preempt dissent, and reinforce elite cohesion.

3 Theory and Hypothesis

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Rather than treating authoritarian propaganda as either persuasive or dominant, this study advances a more flexible and context-sensitive account through the concept of *strategic differentiation*. Under this framework, propaganda is conceptualized as a deliberately adaptive tool, tailored to audience composition, media platform characteristics, and the broader political climate. Instead of delivering uniform messages, regimes engage in differentiated communication strategies, modulating message complexity and style to align with the interpretive capacities and expectations of various audience segments.

To formally structure this framework, we define a minimum case with three different platforms forming a triad, the three types of platforms are in ascending order of audience sophistication: $Plat_1$, $Plat_2$, and $Plat_3$. We then define $Sim(Plat_x, Plat_y)$ as the semantic similarity between any two platforms for a given category c in year y . This measure captures the degree of linguistic or thematic alignment across propaganda sources. Higher semantic similarity implies a shared communicative agenda, while lower similarity suggests targeted differentiation.

Within this structure, two propaganda modes are especially critical:

1. **Diverging Audience:** This is the default communication strategy in stable periods. Suppose $Plat_1$ is mass-oriented platform while $Plat_2$ and $Plat_3$ are elite-oriented, semantic similarity would be low between $Plat_1$ and both $Plat_2$ and $Plat_3$, but relatively high between $Plat_2$ and $Plat_3$, i.e.,

$$Sim(Plat_1, Plat_2) \approx Sim(Plat_1, Plat_3) < Sim(Plat_2, Plat_3)$$

This reflects a deliberate segmentation strategy where elite-facing platforms converge

on technical or ideological messaging, while mass-facing platforms deploy simplified or emotionally resonant content. The objective is to inform elites while symbolically managing public sentiment.

It is worth noting that the logic of divergence could, in theory, operate in the reverse direction—if $Plat_1$ and $Plat_2$ were both mass-oriented platforms and only $Plat_3$ targeted elites. In such cases, we would observe:

$$Sim(Plat_1, Plat_2) > Sim(Plat_1, Plat_3) \approx Sim(Plat_2, Plat_3)$$

However, for parsimony and consistency with empirical cases in this study, we focus on the former configuration.

2. **Converging Discourse:** In moments of crisis or major political consolidation, all three platforms exhibit high semantic similarity:

$$Sim(Plat_1, Plat_2) \approx Sim(Plat_2, Plat_3) \approx Sim(Plat_1, Plat_3)$$

This convergence enables the regime to project unity and decisiveness, strengthening legitimacy across all audience levels. It also suggests that message uniformity is strategically deployed to dampen dissent and signal competence.

The remaining two modes function as auxiliary or conditional strategies that help contextualize variation:

- **Gradual Transition:** This reflects a progressive alignment in semantic similarity from mass to elite platforms, capturing transitional periods where the regime escalates message sophistication gradually across audience layers. This may occur when introducing complex reforms or new ideological shifts.

$$Sim(Plat_1, Plat_2) \approx Sim(Plat_2, Plat_3) > Sim(Plat_1, Plat_3) >$$

- **Deemphasized Topic:** In this scenario, all platforms show low similarity, and often low keyword prominence. This indicates a deliberate obfuscation or deprioritization of a sensitive or destabilizing topic, reflecting strategic silence rather than message coordination.

Strategic differentiation thus involves not only the modulation of content but also of interpretive access. Mechanisms such as *linguistic opacity* (through technical or ideological language) and *selective semantic framing* (through narrative emphasis or omission) serve to embed control within the structure of communication. These techniques enable the regime to simultaneously inform, confuse, reassure, or intimidate depending on the target audience, platform, and moment.

3.2 Hypotheses

Building upon this theoretical framework, this study formulates the following hypotheses:

H1: Audience Variation Hypothesis This hypothesis contends that semantic differentiation systematically occurs across platforms within the same temporal context, reflecting a strategic approach to audience segmentation. Specifically, platforms catering to politically sophisticated audiences will demonstrate higher semantic alignment due to their shared elite-oriented messaging, compared to platform tailored to the mass public.

Formally, the hypothesis is represented as:

$$\text{Sim}_{(Plat1, Plat2)}^{c,y} \approx \text{Sim}_{(Plat1, Plat3)}^{c,y} < \text{Sim}_{(Plat2, Plat3)}^{c,y}$$

H2: Temporal Variation Hypothesis This hypothesis anticipates strategic semantic convergence across platforms during defined crises or critical political junctures. During these periods, regimes are expected to align narratives to enhance perceptions of competence and unity, thereby stabilizing regime legitimacy and controlling public perception during periods of heightened uncertainty.

Formally, this hypothesis can be depicted as:

$$\Delta \text{Sim}_{(Plat1, Plat2, Plat3)}^{c,y}(\text{crisis}) > \Delta \text{Sim}_{(Plat1, Plat2, Plat3)}^{c,y}(\text{normal})$$

H3: Readability Variation Hypothesis This hypothesis proposes that readability scores will vary systematically with platform sophistication. Specifically, the linguistic complexity (lexical and syntactic richness) of propaganda messages is expected to be highest in elite-oriented platforms, reflecting a deliberate strategy of linguistic opacity intended to restrict interpretive access to politically literate elites. In contrast, mass-oriented platforms will maintain simplified, emotionally resonant language to facilitate broad public engagement.

Formally represented as:

$$\text{Readability}_{Plat1}^y < \text{Readability}_{Plat2}^y < \text{Readability}_{Plat3}^y$$

These hypotheses collectively frame the empirical examination, guiding analysis toward uncovering nuanced strategies of audience engagement, temporal variation in message coherence, and deliberate manipulation of linguistic complexity within authoritarian propaganda. Through detailed semantic network and readability analyses, this study empirically tests the conceptual premises of strategic differentiation, enhancing our understanding of authoritarian information management practices.

4 Data and Method

4.1 Data

To examine how authoritarian regimes strategically tailor communication across different audiences, this study utilizes a longitudinal corpus of Chinese state-affiliated media texts from 2007 to 2022. These texts are drawn from three platforms that exemplify distinct audience orientations and communicative roles in China’s propaganda ecosystem:

- **China Central Television (CCTV)** represents $Plat_1$, the mass-facing tier of communication. As the state’s primary broadcast outlet, CCTV is widely accessible and aimed at the general public. Its messaging style is emotionally resonant, slogan-heavy, and often visually dramatic. This platform delivers simplified narratives that aim to stabilize sentiment and reinforce regime legitimacy through broad symbolic cues. It

is designed to be easily understood by all citizens, regardless of education level or political engagement.

- **People’ s Daily (PD)** serves as $Plat_2$, an intermediary platform. As the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, PD targets politically engaged citizens, party members, and mid-level officials. It combines ideological messaging with formal policy guidance, using structured and literate prose. People’ s Daily occupies a transitional space between public mobilization and internal signaling, often aligning closely with the Party line while retaining a wider readership than internal documents.
- **Government Work Reports (GWRs)** embody $Plat_3$, the elite-facing channel of communication. These annual reports are presented at legislative sessions at various levels of government and are typically read by bureaucrats, technocrats, and professional policy audiences. The reports employ technical, policy-specific language and are rich in formal jargon and institutional references. They are intended less for broad persuasion and more for signaling strategic direction to internal elites and implementers.

Together, these platforms form a vertically stratified propaganda architecture, allowing the regime to differentially encode information based on presumed audience sophistication.

Keyword selection for analysis is grounded in the NEPD dataset—the most comprehensive manually annotated corpus of Chinese official news currently available. NEPD consists of four months of labeled articles from People’ s Daily. Within each labeled category (economic, political, societal), keywords were extracted based on their PageRank centrality in the document-term network, and also filtered by high overall frequency and appearance in both January 2015 and January 2018. (周好 et al., 2022) This approach ensures that the most structurally prominent and topically salient terms are used for semantic comparison. However, it introduces a known limitation: the keywords are drawn exclusively from People’ s Daily and from a time period after Xi Jinping assumed power, potentially skewing the selection toward ideological language emphasized during his leadership. These constraints are acknowledged in the interpretation of results. (Appendix 1 for word list)

4.2 Method

To assess both the thematic content and linguistic style of propaganda across these platforms, two models are employed: one focusing on semantic structure and the other on textual complexity.

4.2.1 Model 1: Semantic Network Analysis via Word Embeddings

The first model constructs yearly, platform-specific semantic networks using word embeddings trained with FastText. Word embeddings are a powerful NLP technique that maps words into high-dimensional vector space based on their usage context. In layman’s terms, words that appear in similar contexts tend to have similar vector representations. This allows us to capture nuanced meanings that go beyond surface-level frequency—for example, ”reform” may be semantically close to ”innovation” in one platform but closer to ”stability” in another, indicating differing policy frames.

FastText is particularly suitable for this task for three reasons:

1. **Performance and Speed:** FastText is computationally efficient, making it well-suited for training on large annual corpora.
2. **Subword Modeling:** Unlike traditional word2vec models, FastText breaks down words into character n-grams , which is especially important for Chinese where word boundaries are not explicit and morphemes carry semantic weight.(e.g., “supermarket” could become “super” , “market” , and “supermarket”)
3. **Domain Adaptability:** Because FastText embeddings are trained independently for each platform-year, they reflect how the meaning of a term shifts over time and across media.

After training, a local semantic network is constructed for each selected keyword by extracting its top-100 closest terms in the vector space. These networks are then compared across platforms using a *weighted Jaccard similarity* score, which quantifies the degree of overlap in both the identity and ranking of similar terms. Higher similarity suggests converging discourse, while lower similarity reflects deliberate divergence, allowing us to directly test the hypotheses of strategic differentiation.

4.2.2 Model 2: Readability and Linguistic Opacity

While Model 1 focuses on what is said and how meanings are framed, Model 2 asks how accessible the messages are to different audiences. This is done by analyzing the *readability* of texts, operationalized through two entropy-based metrics:

- **Lexical Entropy:** Measures how diverse the vocabulary is. A document with many different words (each appearing with similar frequency) has higher entropy and is harder to read. This signals either higher technicality or deliberate obfuscation.
- **Syntactic Entropy:** Measures the variation in grammatical structures (e.g., subject-verb-object patterns, modifiers). Higher syntactic entropy indicates more complex sentence constructions.

These metrics are applied annually to the full text of each platform using open-source parsing tools (Lei et al., 2024). The goal is to detect patterns in linguistic opacity that correspond to platform type. For instance, GWRs are expected to show higher lexical entropy (dense vocabulary) but not necessarily higher syntactic entropy, indicating an elite-facing technical style that conveys more information without excessive grammatical complexity. CCTV, by contrast, is expected to maintain low entropy on both measures, reflecting its role in delivering simple, emotionally charged content.

4.3 Analytical Strategy

Each model contributes to testing the hypotheses derived from the theory of strategic differentiation:

- **Model 1** directly tests semantic similarity hypotheses by tracking how the framing of the same keyword diverges or converges across $Plat_1$, $Plat_2$, and $Plat_3$ for each category (economic, political, societal) and year.
- **Model 2** addresses the readability hypothesis by measuring whether elite-facing platforms ($Plat_3$) consistently employ more lexically complex language, validating the notion of strategic opacity.

Together, these models reveal not only *what* is said and *how* it is said, but also *to whom* it is likely intended—demonstrating the multidimensionality of strategic interpretation in authoritarian propaganda.

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Model 1 General Discussion

5.1.1 Overall Pattern

The analysis reveals a complex, nuanced landscape of semantic similarity across three distinct state media platforms: China Central Television (CCTV), People’ s Daily (PD), and Government Work Reports (GWR). The data indicates strategic differentiation consistent with our theoretical expectations of audience segmentation and temporal variation. Among the three discourse categories—economic, political, and societal—economic and societal topics displayed the clearest patterns of audience differentiation.

To summarize the cross-platform semantic similarities averaged across all years, the table below presents the Jaccard similarity scores for each category:

Category	PD vs. GOV	PD vs. CCTV	GOV vs. CCTV
Economic	0.0839	0.0649	0.0681
Political	0.0551	0.0686	0.0545
Societal	0.1083	0.0853	0.0849

Table 1: Average Jaccard Similarity Across Media Platforms by Discourse Category (2007–2022)

5.1.2 Economic and Societal Discourse

Economic discourse showed moderate divergence between mass-facing (CCTV) and elite-oriented platforms (PD and GWR). Specifically, the average semantic similarity (Jaccard similarity) between PD and GWR was 0.0839, PD and CCTV was 0.0649, and GWR and CCTV was 0.0681. This pattern aligns closely with the hypothesis of “diverging audience,” suggesting that while economic narratives maintain coherence among elite circles, com-

munication towards the broader public is strategically simplified or emotionally resonant. This moderate divergence indicates a carefully calibrated strategy where detailed economic information and complex policy discussions are reserved for politically engaged or policy-implementing elites, while the mass audience receives broader, more symbolic reassurances.

Societal discourse followed a similar pattern but exhibited higher similarity across all three media platforms. PD vs. GOV scored 0.1083, PD vs. CCTV 0.0853, and GOV vs. CCTV 0.0849. The high similarity suggests that societal topics—such as healthcare, education, and public services—carry broad appeal and are intentionally harmonized across audiences. These issues are tied directly to citizens’ everyday experiences and the regime’s legitimacy claims, making them ideal for messaging convergence. The regime likely sees little risk in promoting unified narratives on societal well-being, and may even view consistency in this domain as a source of soft legitimacy and public reassurance.

5.1.3 Political Discourse

Political discourse presented the most surprising pattern, with the lowest overall similarity: PD vs. GOV at 0.0551; PD vs. CCTV at 0.0686; and GOV vs. CCTV at 0.0545. This is unexpected, especially given assumptions that political propaganda would become more unified under Xi Jinping’s centralized ideological leadership. Several interpretations are possible:

1. **Platform-Specific Roles:** GWR’s technical and policy-specific focus may naturally differ from the more ideological messaging roles of PD and CCTV. This functional distinction could explain the low similarity between GOV and other platforms—GWR is simply not designed to perform the role of political mobilization.
2. **Selective Elite Engagement:** Alternatively, this divergence might reflect a deliberate strategy. By isolating technical political messaging in elite-facing documents and using more ideological, emotional framing in PD and CCTV, the regime can preserve high signal clarity for elites while symbolically engaging the broader public.
3. **Content Sensitivity and Obfuscation:** Another possibility is that political language, particularly under Xi, became highly codified and varied in intent depending on audience. Elite documents may embed strategic jargon and policy indicators, while

public-facing outlets adopt generalized, abstract terms like leadership” or spirit,” resulting in reduced semantic overlap despite thematic alignment.

5.1.4 Temporal Analysis

Figure 1 shows similarity scores between three platforms by keyword categories and by time. The plot for political discourse similarity reflects a possible Xi Jinping-era influence: after he took the presidency in 2012, the similarity pattern appears to develop in the opposite direction from economic and societal keywords, with PD and CCTV becoming more similar to each other in political discourse. This may indicate growing rhetorical alignment between public-facing platforms, though we caution against over-interpreting this pattern without further evidence on intent or strategic coordination.

Temporal variation becomes especially pronounced during national crises. Strategic shifts in semantic similarity are evident in three pivotal periods: the 2009 global financial crisis, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2015 financial turmoil. These moments offer potential insight into how the regime adapts propaganda coherence in response to public anxiety and elite coordination needs.

2009 (Global Financial Crisis) In the aftermath of the global economic downturn, China launched a ¥ 4 trillion stimulus plan under Premier Wen Jiabao. During this period, semantic similarity among all three platforms increased, especially in economic discourse. Employment and investment became focal points, with all outlets emphasizing stability, confidence, and recovery. The convergence suggests an effort to project unified control and policy decisiveness, potentially aimed at reassuring both elites and the public amid global instability.

2020 (COVID-19 Pandemic) As the pandemic escalated, a similar convergence emerged across economic and societal topics. Propaganda emphasized national unity, mobilization, and health security. GWRs, PD, and CCTV all shared themes of anti-pandemic policies and central leadership, reflecting a coordinated ideological response. Notably, political discourse in 2020 showed its strongest convergence of any year, though this could be temporary and crisis-driven rather than structural. Also worth noting is that societal convergence exceeded economic convergence in 2020, reversing the trend from 2009. This shift could reflect

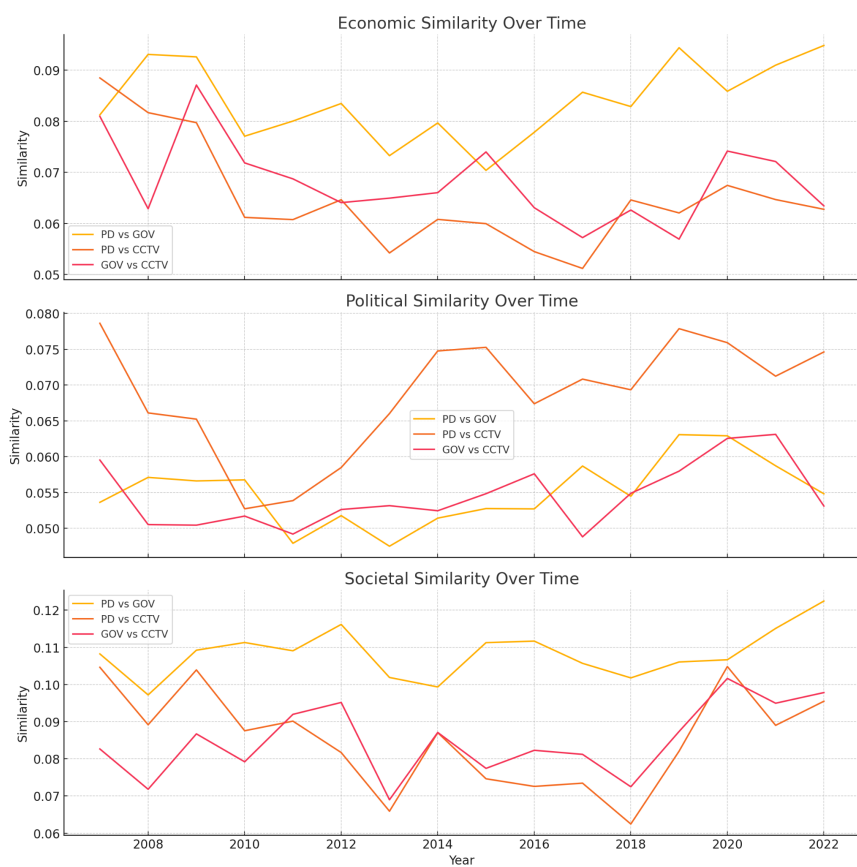


Figure 1: Similarity Score by Year and Keyword Category

changing regime priorities or differing public needs, though the underlying causes remain speculative.

2015 (Stock Market Crash and Economic Slowdown) The 2015 crisis stands out as a deviation. Triggered by a volatile stock market collapse and broader concerns over the sustainability of China’s growth model, the crisis primarily affected elite economic confidence. The semantic convergence during this period was notable only in economic discourse, with political and societal similarities remaining low. This suggests that the regime viewed the primary audience of concern as economic elites, not the general public. Unlike 2009 and 2020, when broad-based anxiety warranted mass mobilization narratives, 2015’s response appeared narrowly tailored to stabilize elite expectations, indicating targeted convergence rather than system-wide rhetorical alignment.

Following this section, we now turn to specific case studies based on selected keywords.

5.2 Model 1 Case Studies (Theory-Consistent Revision)

This section presents four illustrative keyword cases—“*CPC Central Committee*” (党中央), “*Employment*” (就业), “*Investment*” (投资), and “*Nation*” (国家)—to explore the patterns of semantic similarity across platforms over time. These examples serve to demonstrate how the theoretical modes of propaganda configuration (**diverging audience**, **converging discourse**, **gradual transition**, and **deemphasized topic**) may appear in practice. It is important to note that the intent is not to assign each case deterministically to one mode or to infer specific word associations within the semantic neighborhoods. Instead, the focus is on general patterns in similarity scores and what they suggest about the regime’s communication strategy in particular contexts.

5.2.1 *CPC Central Committee* (党中央) — From Diverging Audience to Converging Discourse

From 2007 to around 2015, the semantic similarity of this keyword between Government Work Reports (GWRs) and the other two platforms remained relatively low, while People’s Daily (PD) and China Central Television (CCTV) were closer to each other. This suggests a

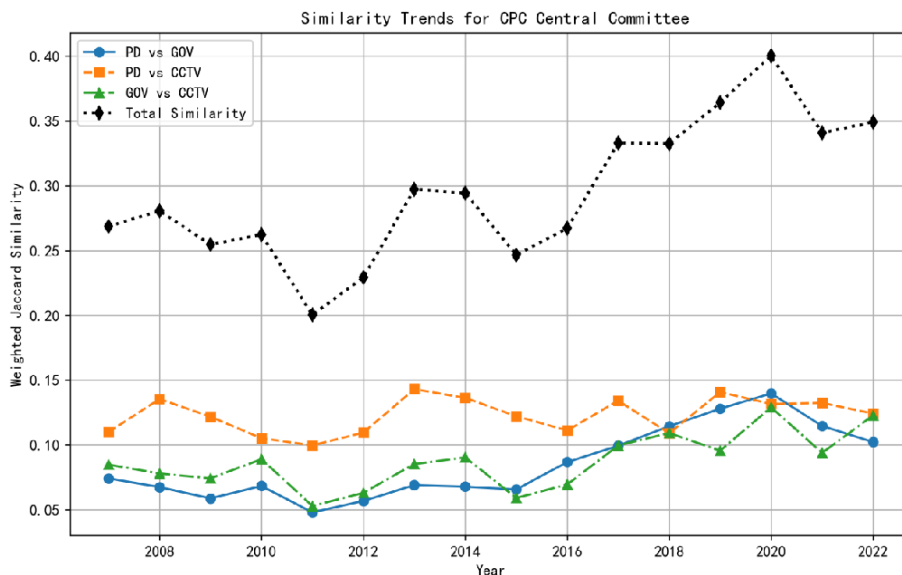


Figure 2: Semantic network Similarities for "CPC Central Committee" across platforms

segmented communication pattern where elite-oriented documents and mass-facing outlets discussed this political term differently.

After 2017, however, similarity scores across all three platforms rose, indicating increased alignment. This pattern is consistent with **converging discourse**, likely reflecting the political centralization under Xi Jinping. While we refrain from interpreting specific content, this temporal pattern suggests that ideological uniformity may have been prioritized during this period.

5.2.2 *Employment* (就业) — Diverging Audience with Crisis-driven Convergence

Across most years, employment shows a pattern consistent with **diverging audience**, with GWRs and PD appearing more similar to each other than to CCTV. This reflects differentiated communication strategies, possibly tailored toward elite policy discussions and public reassurance, respectively.

However, in 2009, 2016, and 2020, the three platforms exhibited notably higher similarity scores. These spikes coincide with the global financial crisis, 2015-16 structural economic transitions, and the COVID-19 pandemic. While not conclusive, these moments suggest

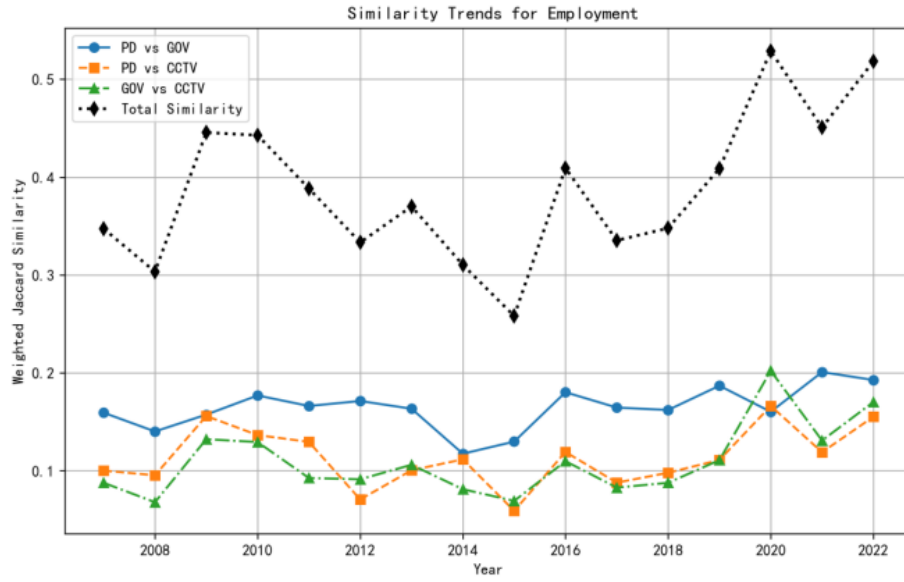


Figure 3: Semantic network similarities for “Employment” across platforms.

temporary shifts toward **converging discourse** during periods of heightened socioeconomic pressure.

5.2.3 *Investment* (投资) — Diverging Audience with Brief Convergence

For most years, investment remains segmented across platforms, again aligning with the **diverging audience** mode. GWRs and PD show moderately higher similarity, while CCTV stays distinct. However, there are brief periods of increased similarity—notably in 2009 and slightly in 2020—that correspond with known economic crises. These episodes suggest limited, short-term alignment.

5.2.4 *Nation* (国家) — Deemphasized Topic with Post Trade-war Convergence

Unlike the other terms, “nation” exhibited relatively low similarity scores across all platforms in most years, especially prior to 2018. This suggests that it may have been a **deemphasized topic**—one that was present in discourse but discussed differently or inconsistently across platforms.

Starting around 2018, a modest increase in similarity suggests a shift toward more unified

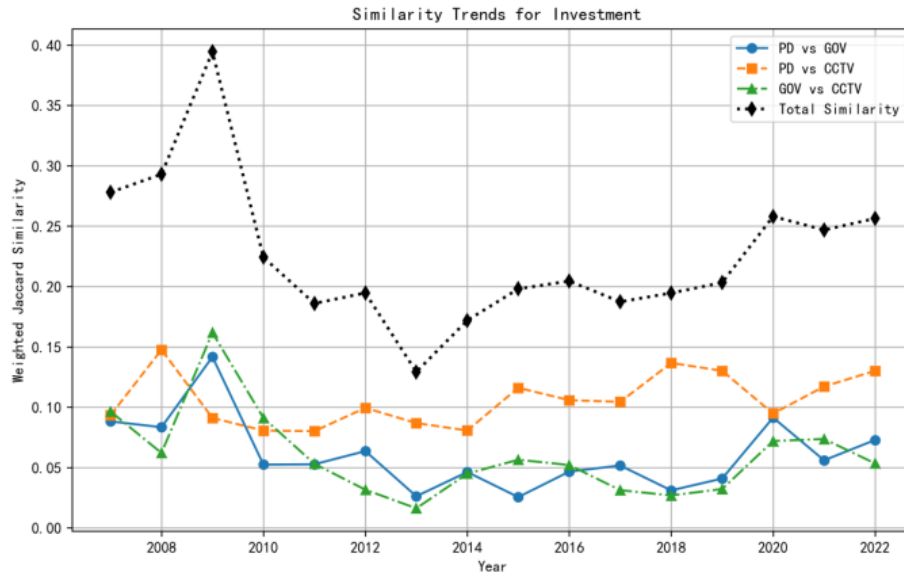


Figure 4: Semantic network Similarities for “Investment”

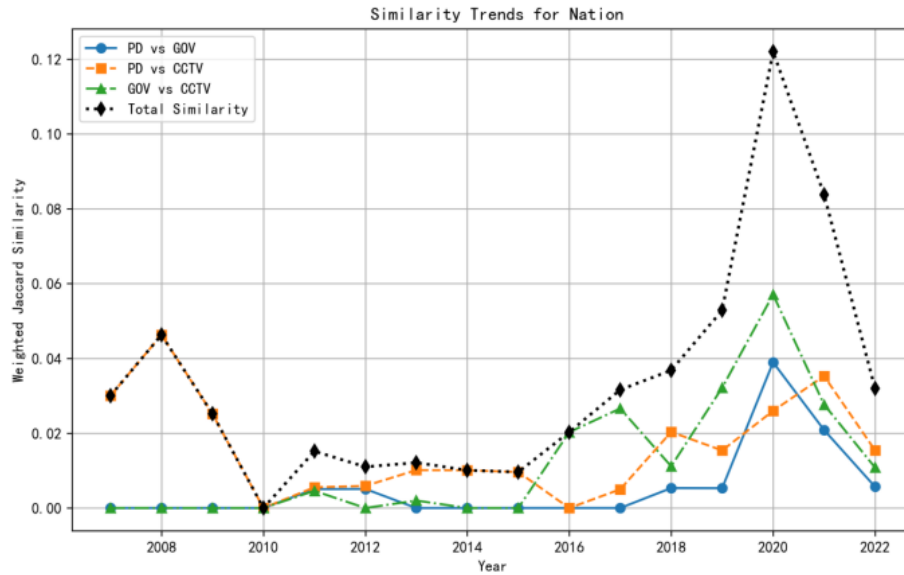


Figure 5: Semantic network Similarities for “Nation”.

framing, possibly linked to rising geopolitical tension and domestic mobilization narratives, specifically the trade war between China and the US. However, the similarity scores remain lower than other keywords during peak alignment years, and the overall pattern does not strongly reflect either **converging discourse** or **gradual transition**. Instead, the earlier period’s lack of alignment highlights how certain foundational concepts can be selectively downplayed or framed ambiguously depending on broader political priorities.

5.3 Model 2 Results: Readability and Linguistic Opacity

This section evaluates lexical and syntactic entropy to assess how linguistic opacity varies across platforms. The findings are consistent with the **readability variation hypothesis**.

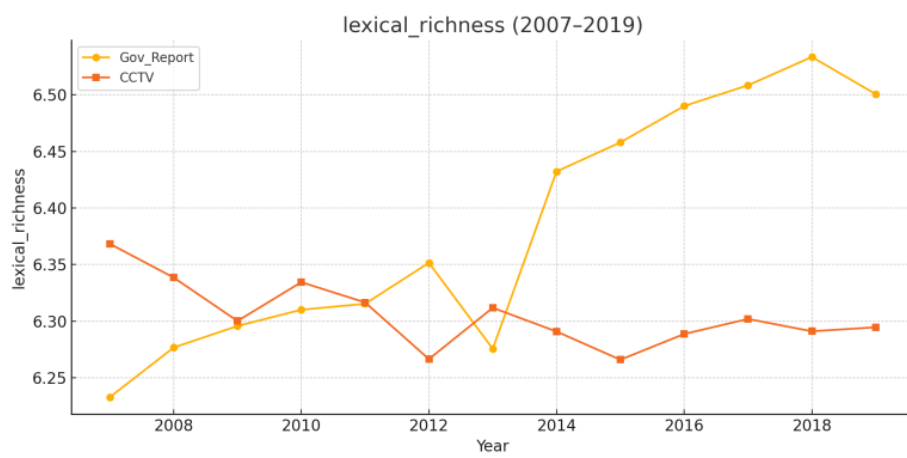


Figure 6: Lexical richness of Central Government Work Reports vs. CCTV news scripts, 2007–2019.

5.3.1 Lexical Richness

GWRs consistently show higher lexical entropy than CCTV scripts, especially after 2013. This suggests an increasing use of technical and specialized vocabulary in elite-oriented content, likely reflecting growing ideological codification under Xi Jinping. CCTV remains stable in its limited vocabulary, reinforcing its mass-oriented role.

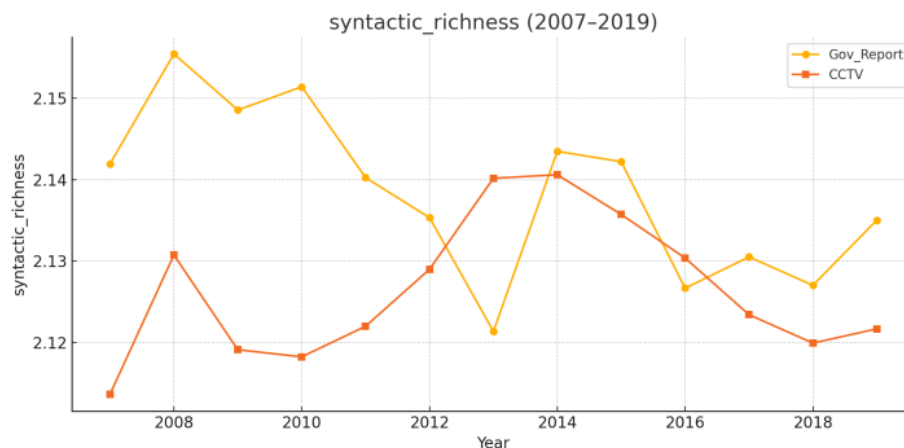


Figure 7: Syntactic richness of Central Government Work Reports vs. CCTV news scripts, 2007–2019.

5.3.2 Syntactic Richness

Syntactic entropy was higher in GWRs before 2013, but declined afterward. This simplification of sentence structure may reflect efforts to streamline communication within elite circles while still maintaining high lexical density. CCTV consistently maintains low syntactic richness.

5.3.3 Interpretation and Limitations

The evidence supports the notion that linguistic complexity is unequally distributed across platforms. While these results are preliminary and limited to GWR and CCTV, they suggest that propaganda is structured not only by *content* but also by *accessibility*. Strategic opacity is thus maintained through vocabulary density rather than syntactic complexity, consistent with the theoretical model of differentiated audience engagement.

6 Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on authoritarian communication by introducing the concept of *strategic differentiation*—a framework for understanding how propaganda is systematically adapted across platforms and audiences within a regime’s in-

formation architecture. Moving beyond the binary of persuasion versus domination, this paper argues that authoritarian regimes strategically vary their messaging not only in content but also in semantic framing and linguistic complexity, based on presumed audience characteristics and the broader political context.

Empirically, the paper leverages a combination of semantic network analysis and readability metrics to examine over a decade of Chinese state media texts across three vertically stratified platforms: CCTV, People’s Daily, and Government Work Reports. The findings reveal consistent patterns of audience segmentation: elite-facing platforms tend to use more technical and lexically dense language, while mass-facing platforms rely on simplified, emotionally resonant discourse. Moreover, variation in semantic similarity across platforms supports the claim that propaganda coherence is selectively deployed—tightening during moments of crisis and loosening during routine governance. These patterns suggest that propaganda in China operates not as a monolithic voice, but as a layered communication system calibrated to different audiences through both inclusion and exclusion.

While the paper does not claim to offer a comprehensive theory of authoritarian propaganda, it contributes a structured framework and a set of operational tools for analyzing differentiated messaging strategies. The concept of strategic differentiation—supported by evidence from both semantic and stylistic variation—helps clarify how authoritarian regimes manage interpretation without openly revealing their intent. Methodologically, the use of FastText word embeddings and entropy-based readability scores offers a scalable and replicable approach for tracing subtle shifts in language and meaning over time.

At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. The keyword list used in the semantic analysis is derived from a subset of the NEPD dataset, which may reflect selection bias toward the People’s Daily and the Xi-era rhetorical style. The study also does not directly test audience reception or behavioral response, which would be essential for validating the downstream effects of differentiated messaging. Finally, the scope of analysis remains confined to textual media, leaving visual and social media propaganda for future exploration.

Nevertheless, this thesis offers a conceptual and empirical foundation for understanding propaganda as a practice of selective meaning-making. By analyzing not only what authoritarian regimes say but how they say it—and to whom—this study provides a modest yet meaningful contribution to the study of political communication under authoritarian-

ism. It invites future work to build upon this framework, extending the analysis to broader contexts, additional media forms, and more direct measures of audience interpretation.

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Appendix

Political Category Keywords (政治类关键词)

工作 (work), 建设 (construction), 信息 (information), 制度 (system), 监督 (supervision), 机构 (organization), 司法 (judiciary), 职务 (position), 案件 (case), 社会 (society), 管理 (management), 意见 (opinion), 部门 (department), 活动 (activity), 解决 (resolution), 行政 (administration), 发展 (development), 政府 (government), 法院 (court), 北京 (Beijing), 改革 (reform), 政协 (CPPCC), 书记 (secretary), 责任 (responsibility), 服务 (service), 企业 (enterprise), 组织 (organization), 纪委 (discipline inspection)

Economic Category Keywords (经济类关键词)

发展 (development), 市场 (market), 政府 (government), 企业 (enterprise), 管理 (management), 业务 (operations), 农业 (agriculture), 政务 (government affairs), 产业 (industry), 资本 (capital), 服务 (service), 建设 (construction), 金融 (finance), 制度 (system), 推动 (promote), 工作 (work), 公司 (company), 经济 (economy), 技术 (technology), 投资 (investment), 监督 (supervision), 产品 (product), 信息 (information), 领域 (sector), 项目 (project)

Social Category Keywords (社会类关键词)

服务 (service), 标准 (standard), 机构 (institution), 医院 (hospital), 保障 (security), 管理 (management), 平台 (platform), 信息 (information), 社会 (society), 发展 (development), 养老 (elder care), 政府 (government), 项目 (project), 社区 (community), 部门 (department), 制度 (system), 工作 (work), 建设 (construction), 城市 (city), 扶贫 (poverty alleviation), 政策 (policy), 就业 (employment), 医疗 (healthcare)