

Astroturfing

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Astroturfing is a form of advocacy often in support of a political or corporate agenda designed to give the appearance of a "grassroots" movement. The goal of such campaigns is to disguise the efforts of a political and/or commercial entity as an independent public reaction to some political entity--a politician, political group, product, service or event. The term is a derivation of AstroTurf, a brand of synthetic carpeting designed to look like natural grass.

Astroturfers attempt to orchestrate the actions of apparently diverse and geographically distributed individuals, by both overt ("outreach", "awareness", etc.) and covert (disinformation) means. Astroturfing may be undertaken by an individual promoting a personal agenda, or highly organized professional groups with money from large corporations, unions, non-profits, or activist organizations. Very often, the efforts are conducted by political consultants who also specialize in opposition research. Beneficiaries are not "grass root" campaigners but distant organizations that orchestrate such campaigns.

Some firms and associations utilizing astroturfing include Philip Morris, Georgia Pacific, the Chemical Manufacturers Association, General Electric, American Forest & Paper Association, Chevron, Union Carbide, Procter & Gamble, American Chemical Society, American Plastics Association, Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association, WMX Technologies, Browning Ferris Industries and the Nuclear Energy Institute.

Word origin

The term is said to have been used first in this context by former US Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas in 1985. It is wordplay based on grassroots democracy efforts--truly spontaneous undertakings largely sustained by private persons--as opposed to politicians, governments, corporations, or public-relations firms. AstroTurf refers to the bright green artificial grass used in some sports stadiums, so "astroturfing" refers to imitating or faking popular grassroots opinion or behaviour.

This practice is specifically prohibited by the code of ethics of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), the national associations for members of the public-relations and communication profession in the United States, Australia and the UK respectively. As private organizations, the most significant punishment the PRSA, PRIA and CIPR can hand out to members who engage in astroturfing is revocation of association membership. Although the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) does not specifically mention astroturfing, it does require honest communication.

Techniques

Astroturfing is a form of propaganda whose techniques usually consist of a few people attempting to give the impression that mass numbers of enthusiasts advocate some specific cause. In the UK this technique is better known as "rent-a-crowd" after the successful "rent-a-crate" business.

US Senator Lloyd Bentsen, believed to have coined the term, was quoted by the Washington Post in 1985 using it to describe a "mountain of cards and letters" sent to his Senate office to promote insurance industry interests, which Bentsen dismissed as "generated mail."

The National Smokers Alliance, an early astroturf group created by Burson-Marsteller on behalf of tobacco giant Philip Morris, worked to influence Federal legislation in 1995 by organizing mailings and running a phone-bank urging people to call or write to politicians expressing their opposition to laws aimed at discouraging teens from starting to smoke.

In 1998, a combination of television ads and phone-banks were used to simulate "grassroots" opposition to a bill aimed at discouraging teenage smoking. According to The New York Times, "Those smokers who are reached by phone banks sponsored by cigarette makers, or who call the 800 number shown in television ads, are patched through to the senator of their choice."

In 2003, apparent "grass-roots" letters favouring Republican Party policies appearing in local newspapers around the US were denounced as "astroturf" when Google searches revealed that identical letters were printed with different (local) signatures. The signers were electronically submitting pre-written letters from a political website that offered five "GOPoints" for sending one of their letters to a local paper plus an additional two "GOPoints" if the letter was published. A similar automated emailer employed by MoveOn.org in 2004 to support Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 film resulted in at least 22 form letters appearing in local papers.

Black propaganda is information that purports to be from a source on one side of a conflict, but is actually from the opposing side. Most astroturfing is black propaganda in that the identity of the source is falsified. However, the ostensible source of the evidence planted is usually not a grassroots organization. When black propaganda uses the same means as astroturfing, the distinction is less clear, as in the case of forged letters being sent to congressman Tom Perriello by a Washington lobbying firm working against 2009 clean energy legislation.

Journalist Ben Smith of The Politico has observed, "Interest groups across the spectrum have grown expert at locating, enraging and turning out authentic Americans. And the operatives behind the crowds say there's nothing wrong with a practice as old as American politics." Regarding the 2009 health care debate, author and blogger Ryan Sager has argued in a New York Times editorial: "Organizing isn't cheating. Doing everything in your power to get your people to show up is basic politics."

In business, astroturfing is one form of stealth marketing, which can include the manipulation of

viral marketing. Several examples are described as "undercover marketing" in the documentary *The Corporation*.

The term "astroturfing" is also used to describe public relations activities aimed at "falsely creating the impression of independent, popular support by means of an orchestrated and disguised public relations exercise....designed to give the impression of spontaneous support for an idea/product/company/service," according to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Social Media Guidelines, which cautions members that an astroturfing campaign is "self-evidently likely to contradict the CIPR Code."

It has become easier to structure a commercial astroturfing campaign in the electronic era because the cost and effort to send an e-mail (especially a pre-written, sign-your-name-at-the-bottom e-mail) is so low. Companies may use a boiler room full of telephones and computers where hired activists locate people and groups who create enthusiasm for the specified cause. Also, the use of psychographics allows hired supporters to persuade their targeted audience.

For several years, the People's Republic of China has employed paid "astroturfing bloggers", known as "red vests", "red vanguard", or the "50 Cent Party", the last being a reference to the 5 mao they are paid for each supportive post. (Cf. Amazon Mechanical Turk.)

Examples

Early examples

The National Smokers Alliance was an astroturfing group funded by the tobacco industry to oppose regulation of tobacco products.

President Richard M. Nixon had White House staffers write "letters to the editor" to various American newspapers, purporting to be from ordinary citizens who favored Nixon's policies. Among others, future Presidential candidate and pundit Pat Buchanan contributed to the effort.

Examples from the 1990s

In the early 1990s, the federal American Stop Smoking Intervention Study (ASSIST) program used federal funding to create the appearance of concerned citizens groups lobbying for the levy and allocation of state tobacco taxes. The beneficiaries of this program were tax-exempt voluntary health associations (VHAs) such as the American Cancer Society and American Heart Association who could not lobby for federal funding without violating tax laws, but who could lobby state governments. The plan was hatched in the wake of California's Proposition 99 of 1988, where in-fighting over allocation of the revenues almost scuttled the proposition. The federal program, administered through the National Cancer Institute, including hiring the Advocacy Institute to teach

the ASSIST and VHA staff to set up interlocking front organizations. These front organizations presented themselves as a groundswell of concerned citizens' groups, but were wholly staffed by employees of the federal offices and beneficiary VHAs.

In 1991 a memo from PR firm van Kloberg & Associates to Zairian ambassador Tatanene Tanata referring to the "Zaire Program 1991" was leaked. The memo outlines steps the firm was taking to improve the image of Mobutu Sese Seko's regime, including placing dozens of letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, and articles in the American press praising the Zairian government.

The Clinton health care plan of 1993 failed due to heavy opposition from conservatives, libertarians, and the HMO industry. Wendell Potter, who used to work for one of the largest American health insurance companies and testified in June 2009 against the HMO industry in the US Senate as a whistleblower, described in a commentary written for CNN Politics from personal experience how opposition against health care reform proposals is manufactured behind the scenes:

The big PR firms that work for the industry have close connections with those media outlets and stars in the conservative movement. One of their PR firms, which created and staffed a front group in the late '90s to kill the proposed "Patients' Bill of Rights," launched a PR and advertising campaign in conservative media outlets to drum up opposition to the bill. ... The industry goes to great lengths to keep its involvement in these campaigns hidden from public view. I know from having served on numerous trade group committees and industry-funded front groups, however, that industry leaders are always full partners in developing strategies to derail any reform that might interfere with insurers' ability to increase profits.

In 1996, Philip Morris funded the creation of the "Guest Choice Network," which opposed regulation of smoking in restaurants, bars, and hotels. The group, now called the Center for Consumer Freedom, today is primarily funded by agribusiness and food companies. A complaint was filed with the IRS by Citizens for Consumer Ethics, alleging that the organization had violated the conditions of its tax-exempt status.

In 1998, Paul Reitsma, former member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, was accused of writing letters to newspapers under assumed names praising himself and attacking his political opponents. A Parksville newspaper had asked a former RCMP handwriting expert to compare a sample of Reitsma's handwriting to that of letters to the editor submitted by a Warren Betanko", and then ran a story titled "MLA Reitsma is a liar and we can prove it". For this, Reitsma was expelled from the caucus of the British Columbia Liberal Party and then compelled to resign his seat after it became obvious that an effort to recall him would succeed.

Recent examples

Political

Organizations representing opposing schools of political thought have engaged in this activity worldwide.

Examples include:

The "Brooks Brothers riot" of November 2000, which has been billed as a "spontaneous grassroots uprising", has been cited as an example of astroturfing by US Republican Party operatives.

During the campaign for the 2005 general election, Britain's Labour party activists wrote letters to newspapers and posed as 'local people' to greet Tony Blair.

Since 2005, schools and political party organizations in the People's Republic of China are recruiting paid-per-comment bloggers countering unfavorable information on websites, bulletin boards, and other internet-accessible sources; they are collectively known as the 50 Cent Party.

In August 2006, a science journalist for the Wall Street Journal revealed that a YouTube video, "Al Gore's Penguin Army", which was claimed to be an amateur work, in fact came from the computers of DCI Group, a Washington, D.C.-based PR firm whose client list includes ExxonMobil and General Motors. (See Al Gore's Penguin Army video controversy.) This hoax was discovered when journalist Antonio Ragalado noticed that the YouTube video was the first sponsored listing when he performed a Google search for Al Gore. The fact that someone paid to have the alleged amateur film promoted was in itself suspicious.

In September 2008, Dutch columnist Margriet Oostveen wrote about her experiences ghostwriting letters for the McCain presidential campaign. Her editors at Salon.com asked her for proof that she had ghost-written letters, and she provided sample letters and lists of talking-points that the McCain campaign had provided to her.

In December 2008, Russian human rights defender Sergei Kovalev wrote that the Public Chamber of Russia failed to intervene in major human rights violations around the country. He wrote that the government set up the Chamber by the Soviet-era recipes for puppet non-government organizations, GONGOs.

In August 2009, Washington DC-based lobbyist firm Bonner & Associates acknowledged sending forged letters in opposition to the American Clean Energy and Security Act. The letters, sent to Rep. Tom Perriello, appeared to be from members of the NAACP and the Latino organization Creciendo Juntos. Bonner & Associates has in the past been caught astroturfing for organizations such as Philip Morris (now Altria) and PhRMA, as well as defrauding the U.S. Government. A NAACP response stated, "Bonner and Associates are exploiting the African-American Community to achieve their misdirected goal.

"They stole our name. They stole our logo. They created a position title and made up the name of someone to fill it. They forged a letter and sent it to our congressman without our authorization,"

said Tim Freilich, who sits on the executive committee of Creciendo Juntos, a nonprofit network that tackles issues related to Charlottesville's Hispanic community.

In August 2009, FreedomWorks, a corporate and individual-funded conservative political activist organization, and 60 Plus Association, a self-described "conservative alternative to the AARP", played an instrumental role in organizing health care reform protests at a large number of Democratic legislators' town hall meetings. Health care reform proponents have labeled FreedomWorks' efforts as "astroturf", because they use millions of dollars in corporate funding to support conservative "tea party" protests. Newsweek has stated that the organization has issued instructions and tactics on "how to make the demonstrations look homegrown". A FreedomWorks representative disputes the classification of this as 'astroturfing', saying, "there always needs to be some kind of organization -- we provide the organizational backbone." The AARP has described 60 Plus Association as being a front group for the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America.

It has been claimed that the Tea Party movement is astroturfed.

The 2011 anti-union drive in Wisconsin led by Governor Scott Walker has been criticized as, in part, an astroturf campaign by Americans for Prosperity, which is supported by the Koch brothers.

In August 2009 Greenpeace revealed a leaked email from the American Petroleum Institute (API) in which its members, oil companies like ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, ConocoPhillips are urged to send employees to 'Energy Citizen' rallies aimed to mobilize resistance against the Waxman-Markey climate change bill.

The Stop Too Big To Fail effort has been described as an astroturf operation funded by corporate interests intended to give the appearance of grassroots opposition to financial reform. Run by Consumers for Competitive Choice, an astroturfing firm, advertisement campaigns urged viewers to vote against the reform bill, with the goal of killing financial reform altogether.

In August 2010, the Alliance of Australian Retailers commenced a campaign against Plain cigarette packaging during the 2010 Australian Federal Election. It was later revealed that the AAR was started and funded by the Australian arm of Tobacco Company Philip Morris International.

In Toronto, Ontario, Canada mayor Rob Ford's election campaign involved the creation of fake social media profiles to raise the profile of the candidate. This was openly admitted days after the election victory to demonstrate the campaign manager's political savvy.

An Indiana University research study during 2010 developed a software system to detect astroturfing in the Twitter stream. "Some of these cases caught the attention of the popular press due to the sensitivity of the topic in the run up to the 2010 U.S. midterm political elections, and subsequently many of the accounts involved were suspended by Twitter". The study cited a limited number of examples, all promoting conservative policies and candidates.

Many town hall protesters against Congressional Republicans such as Rick Berg, Pat Meehan, Dan Webster, and Paul Ryan done in opposition to the 2011 budget by American Federation of

State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and Health Care for American Now (HCAN) members have been described as astroturf. Matt Kibbe, president of FreedomWorks, has said "getting people information about where town halls are held and where their views are on the Ryan budget-- that's exactly what we did during the health care, but again, they accused us of Astroturf, so they're essentially being hoisted on their own petard". The liberal groups dispute the classification saying that if the group "funding the talking points and email alerts isn't telling you who is funding them--that to me is the difference between Astroturf or cashroots organization and group that isn't." They say that they're educating their membership, and, in turn, the grassroots is making its way to town hall events and engaging in other forms of activism. "All you have to do is look at the footage of these town halls--these events are as organic as it gets," says Ethan Rome, executive director of HCAN. "There's authentic anger about what Republicans are doing, and people understand that this is important.". In one unambiguous case of astroturfing, a man attempted to put on a disguise in order to criticize Paul Ryan a second time. Ryan called on him before remarking, "You changed clothes!".

Business

In 2001, the Los Angeles Times accused Microsoft of astroturfing when hundreds of similar letters were sent to newspapers voicing disagreement with the United States Department of Justice and its antitrust suit against Microsoft. The letters, prepared by Americans for Technology Leadership, had in some cases been delivered via a mailing list to deceased people or incorrect addresses, where the recipients forwarded them without correction.

In 2002, The Guardian newspaper revealed the philosopher Roger Scruton had offered to place pro-tobacco opinion pieces in major newspapers and magazines in return for a fee £5500 from Japan Tobacco International.

In July 2004, RealNetworks tried to press Apple Inc. to open up their FairPlay DRM for the iPod with the Harmony plug-in. The work-around allows users to purchase songs from RealNetworks' Rhapsody and then convert it for use for the iPod. They also set up an internet petition "Hey Apple! Don't break my iPod" and slashed the prices of its songs to below that of iTunes. Many posters reacted negatively and accused RealNetworks of astroturfing.

In March 2006, the Save Our Species Alliance was exposed as a front group created by a timber lobbyist to weaken the Endangered Species Act. Its campaign director is Tim Wigley, the executive director of Pac/West Communications. Wigley was also the campaign director for Project Protect, a front group which spent \$2.9 million to help pass President Bush's Healthy Forests legislation, which has been criticized for its pro-industry bias. The Save Our Species Alliance web site portrays itself as a grassroots organization, but is criticized by environmentalists for being a front group for wealthy cattle and timber interests which consider federal environmental legislation an impediment to profit.

In March 2006 video game manufacturers faced over seventy anti-games bills across the United

States. Embattled, they established the Video Game Voters Network, "a new grassroots political network for gamers" which publicly portrayed itself as a populist effort to lobby state and federal legislators against supporting violent video game-related legislation. In April 2007, in an interview on video game news website GameDaily, consumer advocate and founder of the Entertainment Consumers Association (ECA), Hal Halpin, stated that "The Videogame Voters Network is very needed and wanted by the industry, but it's supported by the industry, so it's called 'astroturfing', where our organization is grassroots and the difference in the two pieces of terminology is significant when it comes to legislators because they'll look at an astroturf organization as one that's backed by the industry; funded by them, run by them, organized by them." The following day Entertainment Software Association (ESA) spokesperson Caroyln Rauch responded in a written statement, "...calling the VGVN 'astroturf' is not only counterproductive and just not correct, but it also demeans the passion and energy of its members."

Working Families for Wal-Mart portrays itself as a grassroots organization, but was started and funded by Wal-Mart. It paid former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young to head the organization.

In December 2006, the "All I want for Xmas is a PSP" marketing campaign by Zipatoni and Sony sparked ridicule from the gaming community when it was discovered that the fake blog was in fact assembled by a marketing team. (See PlayStation Portable#Controversial advertising campaigns)

In early 2007, a number of advertisements appeared on London Underground trains warning commuters that 75% of all the information on the web flowed through one site (implied to be Google), with a URL for www.information-revolution.org. Links also appeared on the homepage of Ask.com and in videos on YouTube. Both the adverts and website were designed in shades of red, white and black associated with anarchist movements. The website was intended to foster debate about the use of search engines, with messages such as "One source isn't choice". However, when web users found out that the site was actually built for Ask.com by the marketing company Profero, the site's forum became overwhelmed with negative messages.

In August 2007 Comcast Corporation's public relations representatives were accused of astroturfing by posing as fans on internet college team message boards in an effort to spread their negative views about the newly created Big Ten Network. Additionally, Comcast created their own marketing campaign "Putting Fans First" on radio and on the web. At that time Comcast and the Big Ten Network were involved in acrimonious negotiations.

In January 2008 Daniel DiFiore, the customer service manager of social networking site Moli.com was caught posting 'booster' comments under an alias on several web sites, including GetSatisfaction.com, Techcrunch and Digg.

In February 2008 Comcast paid individuals to take up seats at a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) hearing into Comcast's network management practices, including RST packet spoofing using Sandvine. These individuals fell asleep, applauded on cue, and took up so much room that a number of people with anti-Comcast sentiment were shut out.

Hands Off The Internet (HOTI) purports to be a campaign for internet users' rights but in fact the site is owned by big telecom companies and is actually a front to push the telecom industry's

objections to internet neutrality.

In late 2008, in Osaka, Japan, McDonald's acknowledged hiring people to stand in line for a new hamburger release. The part-time workers were given a stipend for the product that were to be included in the store's sales figures.

In 2009, in Montreal, Canada, Morrow Communications, a marketing company, acknowledged creating a dummy blog falsely pretending to be managed by 3 individuals to promote the use of bicycles in Montreal. They also created videos for the Blog and a Facebook webpage. Everything was in fact a marketing campaign, to prepare the launch of Bixi, the new public bike system in Montreal.

Lifestyle Lift was charged a \$300,000 penalty by the State of New York for anonymous positive reviews about the company in Internet message boards and other Web sites

BusinessWeek has stated that the public relations firm ASK Public Strategies, which works on behalf of clients including Chicago Children's Museum, ComEd, AT&T and Comcast, has helped set up front organizations that were listed as sponsors of public-issue ads. Some industry insiders have called this astroturfing. ASK's managing partner, Eric Sedler says opponents mischaracterize what ASK does, saying "I reject the notion that a company can't advocate a public policy."

October 2009, administration at North Carolina State University (NCSU) are leading a campaign for new Student Center. Although all money for the campaign came from the administration, they have recruited student leaders to campaign to the rest of campus, and student senate. Students have now formed their own Grassroots campaigns in response to the Rally and have voiced their opinions directly to the student government.

In 2010, a number of large Canadian television providers, including Rogers, Bell, and Telus, started an astroturfing advertisement campaign against a proposed tax increase on the TV providers. Their advertisements included facts that 'the Big Networks don't want Canadians to know' and statements such as 'Customers make case to CRTC against Big Networks' proposed TV tax'.

In 2010 the organization "BalancedCopyright for Canada" made use of blogs, Facebook and Twitter in an Astroturfing effort to influence the adoption of Bill C-32, Canada's "Digital Economy Strategy" by making it appear the bill had widespread public appeal.

Government

In 2011 it was revealed that HBGary Federal was contracted by the U.S. government to develop astroturfing software to manipulate and sway public opinion on controversial issues. This software could also scan for people with points of view the powers-that-be didn't like and then have the "fake" profiles attempt to discredit those "real" people.

Perhaps related to the HBGary Federal contract, the US Air Force in Solicitation Number RTB220610 sought "persona management software" for "classified social media activities."