A Study of Specific Cases to Elucidate Astroturfing Techniques and Policy Outcomes

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Abstract

Around the middle of the 20th century, businesses funded the third-party groups that had no way related to them to influence and appeal the governments. This is when astroturfing started. Astroturfing is a good way to propagate incorrect information and shift political agendas since it uses secret sponsorship instead of open lobbying. The rapid advancements in Technology intensified the influx of Automated Bots, Fake social media accounts and orchestrated campaigns. These are the modus operandi of a state-sponsored deployed to split the public using Amplification techniques. Several studies observed that astroturfing is correlated with larger themes, including misinformation and corporate political tactic. Although Astroturfing is a new normal in political sphere, but the impact on Public Policies is seldom conversed. Therefore, Democracy is under threat when the genuine voices are impersonated and the interests of a few are propagated at large. This paper examines astroturfing as a deceiving strategy that impact the policymaking and disrupt the democratic institutions to benefit the lobbying groups. Consequently, the paper analyzes landmark sector-specific cases to find out how Astroturfing influences the policy outcomes through different techniques. The objective is to sensitize the stakeholders for better clarity and also suggest few countermeasures to lower down its impact.

Keywords: Astroturfing, Technology, Political agenda, Amplification, Misinformation, Lobbying, Democracy.

Introduction

The word "astroturfing" comes from the name of the kind of fake grass, "AstroTurf." It is used to tell the difference between actual grassroots movements and phony ones. It implies making it look like a lot of people care about a policy, group, or cause when they don't. Businesses, governments, or interest groups do this so that people don't know they're involved. This dishonest trick seeks to change people's minds by making it look like a lot of people naturally like something. This then makes the public and politicians think it's true. Astroturfing is a good way to propagate incorrect information and shift political agendas since it uses secret sponsorship instead of open lobbying. In the middle of the 20th century, businesses that the government was watching started giving money to groups that didn't seem to be connected to the businesses to speak for them. This is when astroturfing started. For instance, the tobacco

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industry's early efforts set a norm for employing front groups to cast doubt on scientific findings and slow down changes to the law.

As technology has improved, astroturfing has altered. Twitter (now X) and Facebook are two social media sites that have made the digital era more prevalent and advanced. Automated bots, false accounts, and planned campaigns have made it feasible to manipulate on a massive scale. This is what state-sponsored operations do when they utilize algorithmic amplification to tear up groupings of people. Astroturfing research illustrates how it is linked to bigger problems, like false information and corporate political strategy. Astroturfing is bad for democracy because it makes people less likely to believe in legitimate lobbying attempts and alters how people talk about policy. Research on corporate nonmarket strategies has shown that astroturfing can be used to influence decision-makers and interest groups. "Bear hugs" are another kind of direct gift that changes how lobbying and self-regulation work. Astroturfing typically leads to regulatory capture, which means that the laws are more advantageous to the people who paid for them than to the general public. For instance, health laws that aren't strict enough or environmental rules that take too long to go into effect. Astroturfing is getting more and more linked to big problems in the globe, such denying climate change and messing with elections. Astroturf groups that fight against laws that would make energy cleaner have been paid for by fossil fuel interests. It looks like there is resistance from the ground up. Also, both Russia and China, which are both government players, have employed digital astroturfing to get engaged in the politics of other nations by propagating false news that divides people in order to reach their political goals.

This new thing shows how simple it is to shift astroturfing from bogus front groups into farms of AI-powered bots. This makes regulations much more vulnerable. Astroturfing is common, but we don't yet know how it affects policy. This research investigates these matters via particular instances and delineates processes that enable deceit, including narrative switching and information subsidies. It makes these actions less mysterious, which adds to the discussion about how to be open and honest in a society that is growing more digital.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology to examine astroturfing activities and their policy implications, enabling an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena in real-world contexts. Case studies are particularly effective in elucidating mechanisms such as coordination and influence. That's because astroturfing is sneaky, so quantitative tools might not catch it. We employed purposeful sampling to pick examples that were different from each other and would show us a good picture of the overall group. The criteria were: (a) National vs. Global; (b) Historic to Current; (c) Corporate vs. State-Sponsored; and (d) verifiable proof of the consequences of astroturfing. Astroturfing has place in many areas, such as Health, Education, and the Environment. However, this study focuses on just two specific cases:

1. The Tobacco Industry’s Health Astroturfing

2. The Russian IRA's Digital Astroturfing

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected the information from peer-reviewed studies, investigative reports (including the Mueller Report and the US Senate Intelligence Committee), social media analysis, and policy documents. Ethical considerations prioritized public-domain material to alleviate privacy issues. Limitations encompass source biases and difficulties in establishing causation, alleviated through cross-verification. Future research may integrate quantitative data, such as engagement rates, to enable a more thorough evaluation.

Results and Discussion

Case 1: The Tobacco Industry's Health Astroturfing

Astroturfing is when you fund fake groups to make health evidence look less trustworthy and slow down rules. The tobacco business was the first to do this. In the 1990s, Philip Morris and other companies started the Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC) to support "sound science" and challenge studies that linked smoking to health problems. TASSC hired scientists to do research and write letters and opinion pieces for the media. The Burson-Marsteller PR firm helped them do this. The US campaigns of the 1990s are a well-known example. Tobacco companies set up fake groups like the Alliance of Australian Retailers to fight against plain package requirements, saying they were representing for small businesses. Companies. Similar approaches also delayed the EU Tobacco Products Directive in Europe. Some of the effects of these policies were long periods of regulatory inertia, with smoking bans and warnings pushed back for decades. This made public health concerns worse and cost billions in healthcare. This case shows how astroturfing makes it harder for scientists to agree on things. This makes people mistrust policies and not do anything about them.

Key Astroturfing Practices found in the above case:

a. Pretend to be a real organization
b. Hidden funding from third parties
c. Supporting fake science (greenwashing)
d. Sending letters to lawmakers to change their minds

Key Policy Outcomes found in the above case

a. Delays in legislation on purpose
b. Ignoring warning labels
c. Long-term health problems
d. Debates that were altered

Case 2: The Russian IRA's Digital Astroturfing

The Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency (IRA) generated more than 1.4 million fake accounts to divide voters in the 2016 US elections. Accounts made up fake identities by "narrative switching," then switched to statements that were pro-Trump and anti-Clinton on subjects like race and immigration. The IRA held rallies like Trump's, but they didn't tell people they were Russian. They also hacked into Clinton's personal email account. The campaign changed how people felt about betting and voting. This was especially true on holidays that

weren't Russian, when trolls were at their busiest. Swing States like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania were the target focus that helped Trump triumph, resultant the lowered sanctions against Russia. This motivated to investigations like the Mueller Report. This case sensitize how Digital Astroturfing can influence voters and electoral outcomes that erodes public trust in the democracy.

Key Astroturfing Practices found in the above case:

a. Use Bot networks to flood social media sites
b. Changing the Narratives
c. Planned Pro and Anti-Rallies
d. Synchronized fake behavior

Key Policy Outcomes found in the above case:

a. Changed the minds of US voters in 2016
b. Relaxed the penalties on Russia
c. Lack of trust in elections
d. Made it easier for digital invasions to drown out public voices

Conclusion

This research elucidates astroturfing as a multifaceted instrument for policy manipulation, demonstrating its variation from corporate led organizations to state-sponsored digital exposures. The results suggest that deceitful practices upset democracy and implement policies that favor the richest. This is essential because it shows how astroturfing gives powerful people an unfair advantage, which is harmful for the public interest. Some ways to fight back are: (1) regulations that force lobbyists to tell the truth about their money and groups; (2) AI-enabled systems that can find bots on platforms; and (3) agreements between governments on false information. Future research may stimulate economic effects or evaluate interventions in real-time settings.

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