

## **Examples of Astroturfing**

**Astroturfing** denotes political, advertising, or public relations campaigns that are formally planned by an organization, but are disguised as spontaneous, popular "grassroots" behavior. The term refers to AstroTurf, a brand of synthetic carpeting designed to look like natural grass.

The goal of such campaigns is to disguise the efforts of a political or commercial entity as an independent public reaction to some political entity—a politician, political group, product, service or event. 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.

### **Early examples**

Shakespeare alleges Caius Cassius' astroturfing of Brutus to encourage him to act against Julius Caesar – however, the historical veracity of this is undocumented, so it is listed as a fictional example below.

In the late 1800s, Léopold II, King of the Belgians used extensive astroturf lobbying in the US and Europe, including setting up a front organisation known as the International African Association, to facilitate his private colonialism and economic exploitation of the Congo Free State.

At the turn of the 20th century, it was common to have newspapers in major American cities sponsored by local political parties. Some were open about this practice, but many of these relationships were hidden. Other examples include political "clubs" which front for voter fraud and intimidation.

In one case, documented in the book *All the President's Men*, the Committee to Re-Elect the President orchestrated several campaigns of "public support" for decisions made by President Nixon in the period preceding the 1972 election, including telegrams to the White House and an apparently independent advertisement placed in *The New York Times*.

Manipulation of public opinion was also used in the Soviet Union. Political decisions were often preceded by massive campaigns of orchestrated 'letters from workers' (письма трудящихся, *pisma trudyashchikhsya*) which were quoted and published in

newspapers and radio. In Stalin's era, massive "public demonstrations" were organized against "the enemies of the people"; those attending were often forced or intimidated into doing so.

*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.

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, including Wendy's, Pilgrim's Pride and Tyson Foods.

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*

According to MSNBC, the so-called "Brooks Brothers riot" of November 2000 was an example of astroturfing by US Republican Party operatives.

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 was 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.”

### *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."

([www.freedomofmusicchoice.org](http://www.freedomofmusicchoice.org)) 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 country. 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[as] 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 Carolyn 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. Young created a controversy in his response to a journalist's questions; when asked by a California newspaper about Walmart hurting independent businesses, he said that, "But you see, those are the people who have been overcharging us — selling us stale bread and bad meat and wilted vegetables... I think they've ripped off our communities. First it was Jews, then it was Koreans and now it's Arabs. Very few black people own these stores."

In December 2006, the "All I want for Xmas is a PSP" marketing campaign by Zipatoni and Sony sparked ridicule[citation needed] from the gaming community when it was discovered that the fake blog was in fact assembled by a marketing team.

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](http://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 an 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.

*Fictional examples*

William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* depicts Cassius conducting what might be considered an astroturfing campaign on Brutus: he leaves letters where Brutus will find them encouraging Brutus to act against Caesar, purportedly from concerned citizens but really written by Cassius himself "in several hands".

Government astroturfing, as well as other sneaky tricks including an eleven-day war waged to distract from a sex scandal, are depicted in the film *Wag the Dog*.

The satirical newspaper *The Onion* had an opinion piece titled "[I'd Love This Product Even If I Weren't A Stealth Marketer.](#)" which is written as though by a young employee for Pepsi-Cola who is paid to astroturf.

In the Christopher Buckley novel *Thank You for Smoking*, Nick Naylor mentions several astroturf groups, including a "Smokers' Rights" group made up of Hispanic smokers that was called "Fumamos", Spanish for "We smoke". (See also *FOREST*.)