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Digital Deceit: How Astroturfing Produces Democratic Deficits

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Political tactics to construct the semblance of grassroots movements work to drown out dissent and minority perspectives.

Shortly after demonetisation was announced in India in 2016, wave after wave of campaigns and coordinated hashtags such as #DemonetizationSuccess framed the move as a 'master stroke'—a bold and transformative reform. It did not matter to this celebratory digital narrative what was unfolding on the ground, where demonetisation had quickly disrupted economic life, crippling small businesses, depleting daily wages, and plunging millions of people into financial uncertainty.

A similar pattern unfolded during the 2020–2021 farmers' protest against three farm reform laws. Coordinated digital narratives discredited farmers' concerns about livelihood by branding the movement as "anti-national" and as linked to 'pro-Khalistan' separatism. These digital distortions were not spontaneous but the result of carefully crafted campaigns designed to delegitimise dissent and fracture public solidarity.

Behind both the campaigns were calculated attempts that unleashed thousands of social media accounts and bots to drown out dissenting voices and fabricate an illusion of popular support. What appeared to be genuine public sentiment on digital platforms was, in reality, manufactured—the digital version of what is known as astroturfing: a political tactic used to construct an artificial grassroots movement aimed at manipulating democratic discourse.

Astroturf is the brand name of a popular variety of synthetic grass used in sports grounds, which gave US Senator Lloyd Bentsen a handy metaphor in 1986 to criticise orchestrated lobbying campaigns that created the illusion of grassroots support. (The immediate provocation for him was an avalanche of letters opposing insurance legislation that appeared to reflect widespread public concern, but were, in fact, staged by industry insiders.)

Before the era of the internet, astroturfing existed in a more limited and controlled form, largely employed by corporate giants within business-driven models. The tobacco industry secretly funded fake advocacy groups and front organisations from the 1950s to the 1990s to discredit anti-smoking research, cast doubt on the health risks of smoking, and resist government regulation. The so-called "Plastic Cup Movement" of the early 1900s was marketed as a public health movement emphasising cleanliness over reusable glasses, but was led by the Dixie Cup Company, which employed medical professionals and educational campaigns to drive plastic cup sales in the name of civic interest.

With the rise of digital platforms, astroturfing has taken new forms. Such digital astroturfing uses the phenomenon of social media bubbles to influence decision-making processes. Political actors initiate strategic top-down activity on the internet that mimics bottom-up activity by autonomous individuals. A preferred narrative is disseminated through sensationalist hashtags, carried along by bots, fake profiles, troll accounts, troll farming, sock puppets, click farms, and paid supporters. Real users, unaware of the manipulation, amplify the narrative through likes, shares, and retweets. As this material propagates itself through networks, even unfounded rumours start to seem true. When repeated by enough people, they achieve a tipping point, accepted as truth not because of evidence, but because of visibility and volume. The result is a false sense of consensus, where the line between authentic support and synthetic messaging becomes virtually impossible to detect.

The tools employed by the astroturfer are only as effective as the strategies guiding their deployment. One of the primary strategies is narrative switching, whereby the original message is substituted or changed over time to align with desired political agendas. It is part of reverse censorship (Khader and Kumar, 2023), whereby, rather than censoring voices, public spaces are filled with doctored content to drown out genuine discourse.

An instance was reported in a study (Jackech et al., 2021) of the 2019 Indian national elections, which found a network of pro-BJP WhatsApp groups actively involved in boosting the visibility of narratives with hashtags such as #ModiMeinHaiDum, #ModiKaParivaar, and #ModiTransformsIndia. These efforts resulted in the posting of over 2.3 million tweets on X (formerly Twitter), including approximately 92,000 identical, copy-paste tweets disseminated by around 4,750 users. The researchers found that 69 out of the 75 campaigns successfully triggered nationwide Twitter trends, often within minutes of their launch. Over time, these artificially amplified

campaigns were absorbed into mainstream political discourse, primarily due to the volume of real retweets and the visibility they gained through repeated exposure.

The production of such information disorder (Khader and Kumar, 2023) aims to achieve conformity and reduce the individual's need for rational scrutiny. Overwhelming information designed to manipulate undermines the logical capacity of voters to form independent decisions. Participation may exist, but it will be based on flawed information rather than reasoned knowledge. False popular opinion invested with the authority to shape political outcomes (Lazarotto, 2023), bringing into question democratic outcomes.

Astroturfing has consequences for the freedom of speech and thought granted by Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. Misinformation drains the marketplace of ideas of authentic voices and replaces them with manufactured consensus. Seldom are any new opinions introduced; astroturfing drowns out dissent and minority perspectives, weakening inclusivity in decision-making. Harassment of dissenting thinkers can lead to self-censorship. This creates a fear-driven public space, hostile to free expression.

To address the challenge of astroturfing, three key interventions may be considered. Firstly, political digital campaign units such as party IT cells and affiliated consultancies should be brought under a formal registration framework with legislative backing. These entities must disclose administrator identities, funding sources, and associated pages to a regulatory body, and must clearly label all paid or sponsored content, including influencer-based promotions. While the effectiveness of such a framework will ultimately depend on the neutrality of its enforcement, if implemented fairly, it could significantly enhance transparency. Secondly, an independent National Digital Ethics and Disinformation Council could be established to monitor large-scale bot activity, review coordinated misinformation efforts, and recommend algorithmic transparency standards. This body could also issue advisories during elections and national crises to prevent the manipulation of digital discourse. Thirdly, integrating digital ethics and media literacy into the school curriculum is essential to equip young users with the tools to critically assess political content, identify misinformation, and engage responsibly online.

The crisis of astroturfing is here to stay, and so long as it affects democracy and our institutions, we can ignore it only at our peril.

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