

Investigating Astroturfing Messages Masquerading as Grassroots Undermining Democratic Values

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Abstract: A deceptive practice of orchestrated grassroots movements to influence public voices is termed "astroturfing." The mysterious groups disguise the true sponsor and receive funds to amplify astroturf messages using multiple platforms. When public debate itself is manufactured, the genuine voices disentangle from participation in the democracy. This gives scope for unscrupulous syndicate plant narratives to befuddle public opinions. The public's dissent against governments goes unnoticed when a third party, masked as a representative of society, influences the policies, undermining democracy. Referring to multiple literatures and case studies, this paper aims to examine the patterns of astroturf messages and techniques employed to erode democratic principles and curb public voices. The study found that unregulated astroturfing dismantles public deliberations and necessitates a robust legal framework to uphold the democratic ideologies. To conclude, astroturfing deliberately attempts to dissociate collective public actions so that the bourgeoisie position themselves as decision-makers to influence the democratic ecosystem. Democracy should ensure that all members of the group, regardless of their distance, have an equal voice and share in the state's resources.

Keywords: Deceptive, Grassroot, Narratives, Dissent, Policies, Democracy.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1985, U.S. Senator Lloyd observed an unusual influx of letters supporting a specific policy without disclosing the actual sponsor, which led him to coin the term "astroturfing." The messages communicated masquerade as public movements to cater to the sponsors' interests, undermining the democratic right to participate in the policymaking process. The rapid development in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and network connectivity redefined digital communication. This resulted in manufactured consensus superseding the genuine public interests. The modus operandi in amplification of astroturf messages is to mimic the welfare activities, like environmental protection, social policies, and civic rights, implanting corporate narratives. This paper deciphers the communication patterns and consequences on democratic principles like transparency, accountability, and equity.

The study analyzes specific cases to interpret the real intent behind the astroturf messages, drawing on the available literature about the genesis of astroturfing and its potential impact. The algorithm ecosystem in social media makes it difficult to sort out the genuine content from the deceiving ones, underscoring a need for a monitoring mechanism to defend the democratic rights of the audience. All these

contribute to a rise in polarization and misinformation that undermines public voices in matters affecting their lives.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly works on astroturfing observed its deceptive nature to cause social harm. Walker and Le (2023) argued that deceptive nature of astroturfing "poison the well" referring to how the genuine advocacy groups lose trust through a mechanism of categorical stigmatization. Through survey-experiments, they found that astroturfing led to drastic decline in the trust in advocacy institutions irrespective of their identity status highlighting implications for social movements. Astroturfing has a strong political linkage, often considered as a propaganda instrument to manipulate public opinions. Masterson in his research described astroturfing as "ballot stuffing" where fake comments are deemed recognized as public support in authoritarian regimes to prevent dissents from probable protests. The India Forum (2025) defines astroturfing as digital deception to complicate political communication through manipulation and misinformation, undermining the independent thought process of the voters. An important submission by Rimmer (2025) recommends for legal reforms from both political and corporation specific. It highlights the concerns in climate change and public health, in particular affected by astroturfing. Further, the interference by

foreign governments in astroturfing is another area of concern. Keller et al. (2022) detected the presence of similar coordination patterns irrespective of political and country contexts. The study used network-based methodology to identify the coordination patterns.

Although a limited number of scholarly works and documents are analyzed in this study, the synthesis of the same generates themes signifying the potential impact of Astroturf messages undermining democratic values:

➤ *Deception as the Selling Point*

Walker and Le (2023) linked astroturfing as a “poison the well” tactic that initiated categorical stigmatization, while The India Forum (2025) and Masterson described it as manufactured consent (“ballot stuffing” and “digital deception”). This shared emphasis shows astroturfing is not mere misinformation but a deliberate attempt to mimic grassroots advocacy that exploits the very trust foundation of civil society and electoral processes.

➤ *Trust Deficit*

Walker and Le’s survey experiments reveal a collapse of institutional trust—affecting genuine advocacy groups regardless of identity or ideology. This finding directly amplifies Masterson’s observation of protest suppression in authoritarian settings and The India Forum’s warning about undermined voter autonomy. The result is a unified narrative: astroturfing does not merely sway opinions; it contaminates the epistemic environment in which all advocacy and voting occur.

To conclude, the reviewed works strongly address the problem, connect its mechanisms, and call for significant reforms. However, there is less attention on post-detection follow-ups to restore trust. The studies neglect the state-specific laws to protect the public from astroturfing practices. Future research should focus on legislative and corporate laws to restore trust in democracy and ensure authentic political communication.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative synthesis of secondary sources, including academic articles, reports, and case studies. Data were gathered from real-time public affairs, including web searches on astroturfing related statistics. The study aimed at consequences of astroturf messages undermining democracy, referring to specific cases for better understanding.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

➤ *Case 1: Cambridge Analytica's Role in the 2016 US Elections*

The power of digital democracy traces back to the impact created by Cambridge Analytica, infamous for influencing voter behavior in the 2016 US election. This was a classic case of technical brilliance, as Cambridge Analytica was able to capture the psychology of voters and design political advertisements tailored to their interests. It began with a quiz-like survey on Facebook that harvested data from

millions of users. The data was apparently sold to Cambridge Analytica, as claimed by Christopher Wylie, a whistleblower. This was used to design a personalized political ad to lure their targets. They organized campaigns with political messages to swing election campaigns across the states. Cambridge Analytica had been attributed with interfering in the US 2016 election, leading Donald Trump to victory.

➤ *Case 2: Moms for Liberty (MFL)*

The largest advocacy group in the United States, Moms for Liberty, accused of astroturfing, had a significant sway in presidential primaries. The organization identified as a grassroots defender of parental rights staged multiple events to discuss curriculum restrictions in educational institutions. Identified as a far-right wing organization, MFL pushed for a ban on LGBTQ books and insisted on restricting students’ exposure to gender and sex-related subjects at schools. Another significant observation is the participation of aspiring presidential candidates at the events organized by the MFL. The main speakers were presidential bigwigs, backing the MOL activities, and flattering their agenda clearly implies manufactured objectives to influence the political preferences.

➤ *Impact on Democratic Values*

Astro-turfing fuels public cynicism against government institutions, undermining democracy. When the very foundation of democracy, built on trust, is browbeaten, the public is compelled to subscribe to the fabricated pronouncements. Referring to the Cambridge Analytica case where public debate was controlled and managed by anonymous groups through manufactured political messages masquerading as grassroots movements. This directly affects the electoral process when the public perception changes with fabricated information, resulting in a mistaken choice of a potential candidate. Advocacy groups connected with public reforms are susceptible to astroturfing techniques, dispiriting their future participation in public affairs. Democracy is under severe threat when the decision-making rights of the citizens are dishonored by undue influence. A democratic state will always encourage disagreements and free participation in the common interests of all.

Globally, astroturfing interrupts public discourse, deploying amplification techniques intended to disentangle genuine grassroots voices. Sectors like fossil fuel and pharma firms are involved in astroturfing activities to influence policy-making and limit legal restrictions intended to make profits, overlooking public interests. They tactically design an economic defense to conceal the agenda behind such establishments. While the detection mechanisms like coordination patterns offer hope, it’s quite difficult to cut down its efficacy considering the digital concealment and algorithmic amplification. In the absence of distinction between the legislative and corporate laws, genuine sponsor and funding sources are masked. Critics argue that astroturfing fuels biased networking based on the unauthenticated political communications. It continues to exist provided robust regulations are imposed and sensitize the public on media literacy to make rational decisions.

V. CONCLUSION

Astroturf communications, which pretend to be real grassroots, relentlessly undermine democratic values through lies and manipulation. The study's findings show that astroturfing has a comprehensive effect on the election process and leads to a lack of trust. To protect democracy, public institutions must put transparency first, set rules against astroturfing, and acknowledge real grassroots involvement. Future research should investigate the function of artificial intelligence in both the proliferation and restriction of astroturfing.

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