

Fake Rage:
The Influence of Astroturfing on Anti-Lockdown Protests

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COVID-19 has sent the world into a state of upheaval, manifesting in a surge of protests across the country; protests against stay-at-home mandates, closures of businesses, and other measures taken by state and local governments to prevent the spread of the illness. As highlighted by media organizations such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *WIRED Magazine*, questions have emerged as to who is responsible for organizing and funding these protests. These articles theorize that many of these anti-lockdown protests may be connected to “a network of right-leaning individuals and groups” that “amplif[y]” the frustrations felt by many Americans through the “help from Republican megadonors.”¹ This process of generating seemingly-grassroots activism is known as “astroturfing,” and has been used by governments and corporations across the world. This essay seeks to show the potential development of in-person astroturfing in the United States may have serious ramifications for political communication in the coming decades. If these accusations are true, implying that these mass protests are “fake” instead of “real,” then the already-eroding trust between government, corporations, and the public may finally be dealt its death knell.

Illness International: History of Pandemics and Astroturfing

To begin, the history of pandemics demonstrates that these waves of illnesses can usher in dramatic social and political change. An apt comparison to COVID-19 is the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. As told by Alexander, the Spanish Flu caused an amount of economic, social,

¹ Stanley-Becker, Isaac, and Tony Romm. 2020. "The Anti-Quarantine Protests Seem Spontaneous. But Behind The Scenes, A Powerful Network Is Helping." *The Washington Post*, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/inside-the-conservative-networks-backing-anti-quarantine-protests/2020/04/22/da75c81e-83fe-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703_story.html.

and political upheaval in Mexico that is reminiscent of current Coronavirus collateral effects in the United States:

Within a few weeks, the severity of the epidemic was clear: people were perishing, often by the dozens, sometimes by the hundreds, across the republic...In the countryside, hacienda owners allowed burials and established makeshift lazarettos (isolation chambers) to quarantine sick workers...Whole sectors of the economy faltered...Without coal and oil [production], transportation ground to a halt. Workers, unable to pay rents, were forced into the streets. By late October, the press was reporting 1,500 to 2,000 deaths per day.²

Quarantines, workers unable to pay rent, and thousands of deaths a day are many of the same challenges Americans are facing across the country today. Just as the United States is dealing with COVID-19 in the midst of protests and political , Mexico was in the midst of revolutionary political change.

This revolutionary struggle, along with the 1918 pandemic, energized the various functions of civil society in Mexico. Medical professionals began to offer their various medical approaches to fighting the disease, non-governmental organizations began to gather donations in order to create a “socially equitable response” to the pandemic, and “moral crusaders” used the opportunity to project their own opinions of race and class inequality to justify the mistreatment of those sick.³ Most importantly for the topic of this essay, “entrepreneurs, among them pharmacy owners, retailers, and inventors, used the flu as a chance to spin a profit.”⁴ These “entrepreneurs” in Mexico are emblematic of a greater, deeper problem where some people will

²Alexander, Ryan M. 2019. "The Spanish Flu And The Sanitary Dictatorship: Mexico's Response To The 1918 Influenza Pandemic". *The Americas* 76 (3): 443-465. doi:10.1017/tam.2019.34.

³ Ibid, p.443

⁴ Ibid, p. 446

prey on the weak and vulnerable. Pandemics leave people frightened, disoriented, and drained; prime candidates for dangerous fraudsters to advantage of.

Tools of Political Communication: Agenda-Setting, Framing, and Astroturfing

If we accept that a small percentage of people are willing to take advantage of others during a crisis, then it must follow that people *will take advantage of each other in whatever way possible, including convincing others of certain political ideologies or beliefs*. This is the basis of “astroturfing,” a form of political communication where a group has a “wealthy corporate or private donor who exogenously sets a normative order that...that may be a source of personal identity for a larger membership, but that cannot be reworked by that wider membership.”⁵ Using this tool, *the wealthy donor has the ability to change political ideologies of massive groups of people without appearing to have any influence at all over the movement*.

While this phenomenon has recently entered into the mainstream consciousness of America through the possibly-Russian influenced 2016 Presidential Election and anti-lockdown protests, accusations of astroturfing campaigns have been thrown at elections in South Korea,⁶ elections in Australia,⁷ and throughout the international legal community in the past. Furthermore, the forms and issues in which astroturfing campaigns support do vary; Henrie and Gilde highlight examples such as efforts by the Tobacco Industry to “discredit the effects of second-hand smoke,” the influence of corporate mining sponsors over the seemingly-grassroots

⁵ Howard, Philip N. 2006. *New Media Campaigns And The Managed Citizen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 144

⁶ Keller, Franziska B., David Schoch, Sebastian Stier, and JungHwan Yang. 2019. "Political Astroturfing On Twitter: How To Coordinate A Disinformation Campaign". *Political Communication* 37 (2): 256-280. doi:10.1080/10584609.2019.1661888.

⁷ Wear, Rae. 2014. "Astroturf And Populism In Australia: The Convoy Of No Confidence". *Australian Journal Of Political Science* 49 (1): 54-67. doi:10.1080/10361146.2013.864598.

“People of the West!” campaign, and the open encouragement by IBM of its employees to “blog in favor of the company and against competitors.”⁸

These examples show that astroturfing campaigns, or at least accusations of astroturfing, are pervasive throughout the world. *The pervasiveness of these campaigns amongst different industries and countries indicates that astroturf campaigns are effective (or the campaigns are at least seen as being effective).* To analyze the ways that astroturfing campaigns are effective, we can use two political communication theories: *agenda-setting*, and *framing*. Agenda-setting, a theory developed by political scientists Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, is the ability of the media to indicate important political messages or ideologies to the widespread public.⁹ McCombs and Shaw originally hypothesized that “*the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign influencing the [public] salience of attitudes toward[s]...political issues.*” The ability to dictate what is important and relevant to the public is *the* critical function of agenda-setting, one that serves a purpose for astroturf campaigns. As noted by Durkee, astroturfing campaigns by corporations in international law are able to take control of industry through agenda-setting:

Businesses form associations that appear to be dedicated to nonprofit, public-regarding causes but are, in fact, mouthpieces for covert business agendas...these tactics can result in mixed agendas that render the organizations' intentions and loyalties unclear. The result is organizations with names like "Citizens for Sensible Control of Acid Rain" (formed by coal and electricity companies); the "National Wetlands Coalition" (serving U.S. oil companies and real estate developers); "Consumers for World Trade" (formed by

⁸ Henrie, Kenneth, and Christian Gilde. 2019. "An Examination Of The Impact Of Astroturfing On Nationalism: A Persuasion Knowledge Perspective". *Social Sciences* 8 (2): 1-11. doi:10.3390/socsci8020038.

⁹ Moy, Patricia, David Tewksbury, and Eike Marke Rine. 2016. "Agenda-Setting, Priming, And Framing". *The International Encyclopedia Of Communication Theory And Philosophy*. doi:10.1002/9781118766804.

an industry coalition); and...[the] "Center for Indoor Air Research" (captured by the tobacco industry).¹⁰

Astroturf actors who are able to capture or co-opt political agendas and movements are able to delegitimize important aspects of the policy debate and water down the effectiveness of future political conversation. While agenda-setting is a core tool of astroturfing used to smother political debate, framing helps campaigns change how people view political protests.

As described by Robert Entman, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”¹¹ Framing, for astroturf campaigns, is an important way to bring a specific aspect of an issue or policy mainstream, often as a way to discredit the entire movement. As noted by Keller et. al, the South Korean National Information Service (NIS) used framing in order to create support for the ruling party Presidential candidate Geun-hye Park:

According to state prosecutors and journalists, agents of the NIS [had] posted hundreds of thousands of Twitter messages in order to influence public opinion in favor of electing Geun-hye Park...Participants of information campaigns coordinate[d] the messages they post[ed] based on top-down instructions from their principals....More specifically, the NIS wanted to promote the Saenuridang’s conservative ideas, draw attention away from negative news about that party, denigrate liberal candidates, raise divisive issues on North Korea, and pollute the general public discourse on social media platforms dominated by liberals.¹²

¹⁰ “Astroturf Activism,” p. 238

¹¹ Entman, Robert M. 1993. "Framing: Toward Clarification Of A Fractured Paradigm". *Journal Of Communication* 43 (4): 51-58. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

¹² “Astroturfing on Twitter,” p. 261, 270-71

Altering how participants view political candidates by highlighting certain aspects is a textbook example of framing. By casting doubt upon the legitimacy of liberal candidates and driving attention towards discordant policy debates, the NIS was able to frame the South Korean election in a way that would raise the chances of Saenuridang, the ruling party, staying in power. As shown, both agenda-setting and framing are two powerful communication tools that astroturfing campaigns can use to shape political outcomes through protest. Given these examples of astroturfing campaigns using agenda-setting and framing, we can apply this analysis to the anti-lockdown protests to see if the accusations are warranted.

Analyzing the Protests: The Movement, The Message, and the Public Sphere

If the accusations of astroturfing powering the anti-lockdown protests are true, we can expect to see agenda-setting and framing being used to express either a particular idea or political angle in the messaging and ideological content of the demonstrations. As noted in WIRED Magazine, all different kinds of protestors, spread across the ideological spectrum, were concerned about a wide range of issues:

While some carried the kind of signs you'd expect at a gathering meant to denounce an extended quarantine period—"Fear Is the Real Virus," "This 'Cure' Is Deadlier Than Covid"—concern about the economic impact of social distancing was far from the demonstrators' only issue. They are also concerned about gun rights, socialism, immigration, the Constitution, medical freedom, abortion. And, because white nationalists are always eager to append themselves to any group of angry (white) people, there were also a few Confederate flag-wavers talking about revolution.¹³

¹³ Grey Ellis, Emma. 2020. "The Anti-Quarantine Protests Aren't About Covid-19". *WIRED Magazine*, , 2020. <https://www.wired.com/story/anti-lockdown-protests-online/>.

The idea that this protest was not simply a stance against economic lockdown and quarantining but a referendum on a expansive set of policy areas and issue was a common frame. This might have been on purpose; if the accusations of astroturfing are true, creating the sense that the demonstrations were supported by a wide range of people and ideologies would, in theory, legitimize the protesters and their grievances. However, as stated in *The Washington Post* article, advertisements on Facebook supporting the protests were, as a part of a “wide-ranging and well-financed conservative campaign,” funded by a right-leaning initiative called Convention of States.¹⁴ Further reading reveals that the initiative is connected to Robert Mercer, noted billionaire hedge fund manager and Republican benefactor, as well as boasting past support from two different members of the Trump administration. *This information seems to confirm that the anti-lockdown movements are influenced by wealthy patrons and groups to order to appear “grassroots,” the very definition of astroturfing, through the tools of agenda-setting and framing.* However, it is important to be aware of the fact that this evidence may simply just be connections until otherwise proven through the legal system. Regardless of this fact, both the anti-lockdown movement and the allegations of astroturfing have shaken the foundations of this country’s public sphere.

Conclusion: The Future of the American Public Sphere

The anti-lockdown movement and astroturfing accusations, in hindsight, initiated the reawakening of American civil society. The recent murder of Minneapolis resident George Floyd has triggered even more protests across the country, resulting in further divisions in the public.

¹⁴ “The Anti-Quarantine Protests”

FiveThirtyEight highlighted that a Monmouth University survey found that “74 percent of Americans felt the country was on the wrong track, the largest share since Monmouth first asked the question nationally in 2013.”¹⁵ Clearly, both the impact of COVID-19 and the George Floyd murder have thrown the future of the American republic into uncertainty. As shown, the proliferation of communication tools used by political organizations, such as astroturfing, has resulted in a more divided public. In terms of the success of astroturfing in the anti-lockdown protests groups, if the goal of these organizations was to dictate both the political agenda and frame of these protests, then it is certainly a success. In closing, astroturfing has been a potent tool for political actors to dictate both the agenda and frame of political issues in protests across the world. As shown by the anti-lockdown protests, political actors co-opting movements should be expected in the American dialogue. Thus, astroturfing, in the way that it produces “fake rage,” should be the focus of further research as a growing influence on the political process of this country.

¹⁵ Skelley, Geoffrey. 2020. "How Americans Feel About George Floyd's Death And The Protests". Blog. *Pollapaloza*. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-americans-feel-about-george-floyds-death-and-the-protests/>.

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