

Inauthentic Authenticity: Astroturfing to Generate True Affect Using Fakery

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Astroturfing is a process of manipulating authenticity to legitimize and give the appearance of sincerity to the communication activities of various organizations. This process fits into digital affective capitalism, in which affective communications lead to the creation of profiles that seem authentic and the circulation of discourse that seems sincere. Building on a critical review of the literature, we develop a matrix model that situates online astroturfing practices on a continuum between authentic and inauthentic publics, with organizations engaging in either sincere or insincere discourse and actions. We position online astroturfing within the broader question about the development of a digital affective economy. Using three cases, we revisit our model to show the forms of digital affective labor used to construct inauthenticity.

Keywords: astroturfing, authenticity, sincerity, affective labor, disinformation

The term “astroturfing” is attributed to Democratic U.S. senator Lloyd Bentsen, in a comment he made referencing a brand of synthetic grass. In 1985, he received a large number of letters from opponents of his plan to increase taxes on alcohol. As the story goes, to reassure his fellow citizens, he said, “A fellow from Texas can tell the difference between grass roots and Astroturf . . . this is generated mail” (Sager,

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2009, para. 4). Were these letters all written and mailed by the alcohol lobby (Distilled Spirits Council of the United States) or by third parties paid to do so, or were the letters produced by the industry and then signed and mailed by citizens? Whether or not the tale is accurate, since then, astroturfing has come to refer to communication strategies that obscure the sponsors of mobilizations while claiming to originate from the public (Walker, 2014). Today, the term is receiving growing media coverage, to either draw attention to or denounce various practices, ranging from fake online commentaries for commercial purposes to organizing phony demonstrations in support of various causes. Between the more restrictive definitions, which describe astroturfing primarily in opposition to grassroots, and broader definitions that include various forms of online fakery, the concept today seems to encompass fairly disparate phenomena. In the literature, many authors agree that astroturfing encompasses a wide range of communication practices intended to simulate authentic voices in public space, particularly on social media. However, this concept remains poorly defined, with broad boundaries that can lead to confusion (Verdon, 2024) and complicate its study. In this article, we aim to demonstrate the variability in definitions of astroturfing and propose a matrix model to contextualize the diverse phenomena associated with or analyzed as astroturfing in the scientific literature. We primarily examine the phenomenon of astroturfing as it is deployed on social media.

In light of current literature on the topic, we posit that astroturfing is a relevant object for probing the fabrication of authenticity as a digital artifice in the context of disinformation. More specifically, astroturfing is the process of simulating the authenticity typically attributed to a group of citizens, organically working together, to legitimize the claims and actions of various organizations and influence their intended publics. These organizations can then be perceived as more or less sincere, their transparency being one of the factors that shape the perception of their sincerity. Thus, in this article, we use the notion of authenticity to assess the nature of the citizens mobilized in a communication campaign and the notion of sincerity to assess the degree of transparency of the sponsoring organizations. This process fits into digital affective capitalism, in which social media profiles can create authenticity and make their discourse seem sincere using affective communication. Affects are understood here in their Spinozist sense, as the set of affections that shape our capacity to act, whether physical (bodily sensations) or intellectual (thoughts, ideas). Affects have the power to “produce an economic effect” (Massumi, 1995, p. 106), particularly when they direct attention to specific discourses or products. Affective capitalism can therefore be seen as an array of mechanisms aimed at capturing these affects, transforming “our capacities to affect and become affected . . . into assets, goods, services, and managerial strategies” (Karppe, Kähkönen, Mannevu, Pajala, & Sihvonen, 2016, p. 9). As we demonstrate, the development of technologies capable of identifying, analyzing, and leveraging what affects us (a message, content, interaction, etc.) on social media (Arvidsson, 2011) enables astroturfing strategies that turn the instrumentalization of our affections into tools for producing artificial authenticity.

To support this hypothesis, we begin with a critical review of the scientific literature on astroturfing to better understand the range of situations covered by the concept. Then, in a second section, we discuss the connections between astroturfing and authenticity. We propose a matrix model that places online astroturfing practices on a continuum between authentic and inauthentic publics and organizations that engage in sincere or insincere discourse and actions. In a third section, we position online astroturfing within the broader question about the development of a digital affective economy. Using three cases, we return to our model to show the forms of digital affective labor used to construct inauthenticity. Sham

authenticity arises less from a strict question of true or false than from the capacity to transform the circulation of information on social media platforms into citizen or consumerist power to act. Our work is part of a broader research project and aims to provide a conceptual framework for analyzing both past and present cases of astroturfing.

Analysis of the Scientific Literature on Astroturfing

Astroturfing is defined in various ways. Our study proposes, first, a detailed and critical review of the literature on the topic, guided by the following two questions: What are the tensions and commonalities among the various approaches to astroturfing communications? Which connections does the literature draw between astroturfing and authenticity?

To produce this analysis, we used the software program *Publish or Perish* (Harzing, 2010). Using the search term “astroturfing,” we collected all the references provided by Google Scholar API via this software between January 1986 and June 2022. We then sorted them to keep only articles published in scientific journals and conference proceedings (removal of theses, blog articles, books, etc.). This gave us 2,120 articles containing the word “astroturfing” in the title, abstract, and/or keywords. An initial quantitative analysis revealed that the volume of publications on the topic increased significantly beginning in 2013 (Figure 1). Multiple themes are associated with astroturfing in these articles. For example, in our corpus, 208 articles deal exclusively with social media, according to the keywords used to index them, their titles, and summaries, but most of these articles do not focus exclusively on astroturfing.

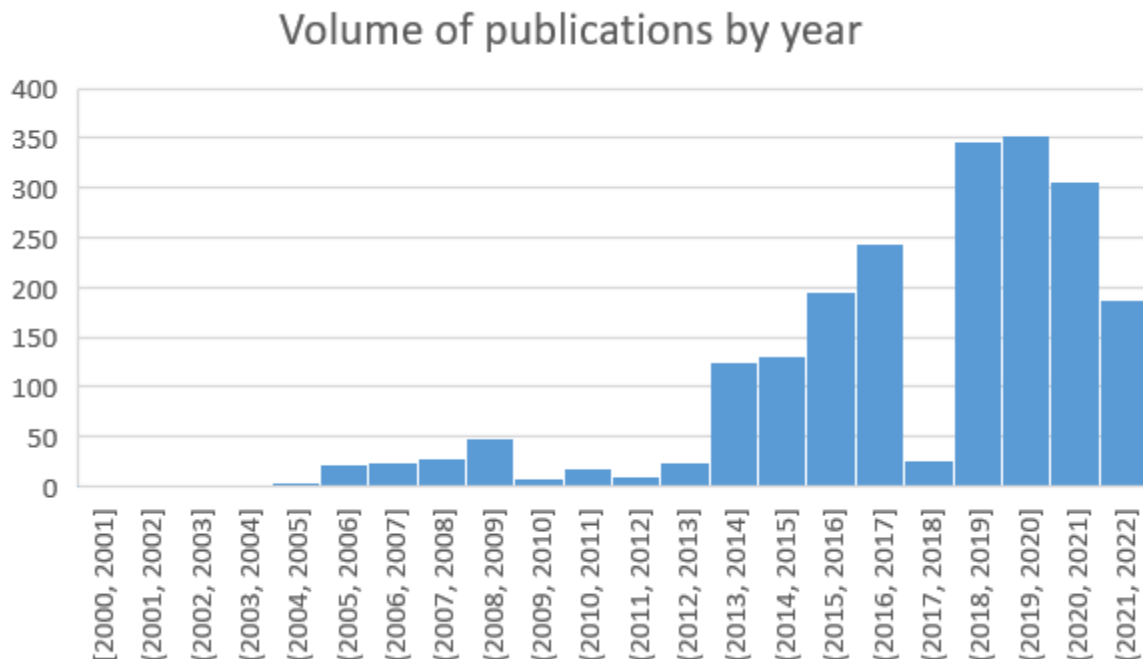


Figure 1. Volume of scientific publications (articles, conference proceedings) with "astroturfing" in the title or keywords. The data from before 2000 were not significant and were therefore withdrawn.

In fact, only 41 articles contain the term "astroturfing" or "astroturf" in the title and are exclusively dedicated to analyzing this phenomenon. Of these articles, 10 focus on social media, and 21 are about the Internet more broadly. Based on this subcorpus of 41 articles, we first examine how the authors define astroturfing. Then we present the main practices identified and associated with this phenomenon. Finally, the connections between astroturfing and disinformation, on one hand, and astroturfing and authenticity, on the other, are presented and discussed.

Framing What Is Trying Not to Be Framed: Can (Digital) Astroturfing Be Defined?

The term "astroturf" has been used in literature since 1995 (Stauber & Rampton, 1995). Initially, definitions of astroturfing were somewhat limited, primarily focusing on politically oriented practices (Haikarainen, 2014). In the 2010s, a growing number of studies, particularly outside the United States, began to explore this phenomenon (Laurens, 2015; Lits, 2021a; Wear, 2014). Researchers such as Wang et al. (2012) also began to examine the multiple dimensions of astroturfing, moving beyond a singular focus (Haikarainen, 2014). From 2007 onward, with works like McNutt and Boland (2007), online astroturfing emerged as a distinct area of study (Haikarainen, 2014). However, as the concept shifted from a narrow to a broader focus in Internet studies, it begun to integrate other communication phenomena such as sock puppetry, click farms, and trolling (Kovic, Rauchfleisch, Sele, & Caspar, 2018).

Astroturfing is most frequently equated with political or commercial communications strategy (Arce-García, Said-Hung, & Mottareale, 2022; Keller, Schoch, Stier, & Yang, 2020; Kraemer, Whiteman, & Banerjee, 2013; Lits, 2021a; Lyon & Maxwell, 2004; Mix & Waldo, 2015; Peng, 2016). Appearing in various sectors (Boulay, 2012), this strategy aims to manipulate public opinion (Arce-García et al., 2022; Boman & Schneider, 2021; García-Orosa, 2021; Henrie & Gilde, 2019; Mendelová, 2016; Seto, 2019) or influence government decisions (Laurens, 2015; Wear, 2014) and public policy (Al-Rawi & Rahman, 2020). When used for political purposes, astroturfing inserts private interests (Arce-García et al., 2022; Chagas, 2022; Henrie & Gilde, 2019) into political and media agenda (Chagas, 2022) to attract the attention of policy makers on specific issues (Chen et al., 2021; Keller et al., 2020). In the literature, astroturfing is often associated with the intention to create the illusion of grassroots public support and backing that exceeds its actual scale (Al-Rawi & Rahman, 2020; Chagas, 2022; García-Orosa, 2021; Hardy, 2017; Keller et al., 2020; Neagli, 2021; Scott, 2019; Zerback, Töpfl, & Knöpfle, 2021). When an impression of consensus (Leiser, 2016) or "social proof" (Peng, Detchon, Choo, & Ashman, 2017) is created, people feel more inclined to rally behind a cause or trust a brand. Although clear, this definition does not take into account the sponsors' stance, which must also be considered.

For some authors, deception constitutes a key characteristic of astroturfing, differentiating it from grassroots (Leiser, 2016; Peng et al., 2017). The focus is then put on the artificial nature of the front groups (Cho, Martens, Kim, & Rodrigue, 2011; Kraemer et al., 2013; Laurens, 2015), the messages they share (Arce-García et al., 2022), or even the participation of impostors in genuine citizens' mobilizations (Chen et

al., 2021). For Keller et al. (2020), another key characteristic of astroturfing is its reliance on centralized coordination, especially for disseminating and sharing information (Arce-García et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2011). While grassroots mobilizations are also coordinated, their information dissemination techniques seem less orchestrated than in astroturfing campaigns (Schoch, Keller, Stier, & Yang, 2022).

Research on astroturfing also focuses on uncovering the instigators of mobilizations and the political or commercial interests they represent (Al-Rawi & Rahman, 2020; Leiser, 2016). According to the literature, the sponsors constitute a diverse set: businesses, associations, and political actors or groups, sometimes with the support of public relations agencies (Lits, 2021b; Lock, Seele, & Heath, 2016; Mix & Waldo, 2015). Some authors also consider the unreported funding of citizens' movements by businesses or political groups a form of astroturfing (Boulay, 2012). Astroturfing therefore appears on a continuum from grassroots to entirely factitious front groups (Lits, 2021a).

Studies of online astroturfing have broadened its definition. According to Kovic et al. (2018), digital astroturfing differs from traditional astroturfing, as the former is less complex to analyze and implement. They establish five characteristics that define digital astroturfing: It occurs on the Internet, is initiated by political actors, and is manufactured, deceptive, and strategic. However, it seems too restrictive to suggest the nature of astroturfing is exclusively political. Fake comments with a commercial goal, for example, are also considered an astroturfing practice (Zerback & Töpfl, 2022; Zerback et al., 2021). The literature echoes this wider sense of astroturfing by acknowledging a broad array of practices, especially online (Chan, 2022; Chen et al., 2021), with aims ranging from commercial purposes (Peng, 2016; Sisson, 2017) to political destabilization (Keller et al., 2020; Kovic et al., 2018).

The way social media functions encourages this phenomenon by facilitating anonymity, reducing the cost of access, and boosting the viral circulation of information (Henrie & Gilde, 2019; Hobbs, Della Bosca, Schlosberg, & Sun, 2020). In the literature, many digital practices are labeled as astroturfing, such as the creation of fake blogs, sponsored comments, or reviews posted online and the use of sock puppets or click farms (Alallaq, Al-khiza'ay, & Han, 2019; Kovic et al., 2018; Lyons, 2014; Mendelová, 2016). Some of these practices are presented as quite common in public relations (Mendelová, 2016). These new possibilities offered by social media have expanded the practices of astroturfing and thereby broadened the scope of the concept in the literature. However, extending the concept of astroturfing to these new online activities also risks diluting its definition by reducing it to observable practices, without accounting for the (in)visibility of the sponsors and the citizens involved. To fully capture both earlier forms of astroturfing and its newer manifestations, it is necessary to rethink its definition by distinguishing both the behavior of sponsoring organizations and the nature of the citizens mobilized.

There is also a need to rethink how astroturfing and disinformation coexist. For some authors, astroturfing and disinformation are used as synonyms (Arce-García et al., 2022; Zerback & Töpfl, 2022), which poses the risk of reducing astroturfing to only that aspect. Disinformation and astroturfing both mislead the public (Chen et al., 2021) and can negatively affect public debates (García-Orosa, 2021; Schoch et al., 2022), which thereby lose authenticity (Al-Rawi & Rahman, 2020; Chan, 2022; Lits, 2021a; Lock & Seele, 2017), but it does not follow that the two phenomena are intrinsically and systematically linked. Astroturfing can include other types of behaviors (e.g., liking a post and registering for an account) that are

difficult to categorize as being solely a form of disinformation (Chan, 2022). Furthermore, astroturf messages can support verified information (Arce-García et al., 2022) that is unrelated to disinformation.

Astroturfing thus raises the question of authenticity, conceived primarily in its phenomenological dimension: How is authenticity constructed in the eyes of the publics that sponsors seek to mislead? Authenticity has been used to study public communication in different areas, including activism (Müller, 2024), crisis communication (Kuncoro, 2022; Mazzei, Kim, Togna, Lee, & Lovari, 2019; Nayani et al., 2022), politics (Bahtiar & Indah, 2024; Stanyer, 2022), and business (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Lopez, Chefor, & Babin, 2023; Pittman & Sheehan, 2021; Toft, Sunny, & Taylor, 2020; Yildirim & Aydoğan, 2023). Authenticity on the Internet mainly encompasses three dimensions: the integrity and origin of information (Jacobs, 2024), the authenticity of interactions, and the verification of identities (Davis, 2019; Dietlin, Loomis, & Preffer, 2019). The advent of Web 2.0 has rendered questions of authenticity increasingly complex, driven by the fluidity of digital interactions (McGregor, 2015). Social media platforms actively regulate and enforce authenticity through a range of policies (Haan, 2019; Sardá, Natale, Sotirakopoulos, & Monaghan, 2019). The value ascribed to authenticity within social media environments (Cunningham & Craig, 2017), and previously within the expressive practices of the social Web (Allard & Vandenberghe, 2003), derives from its perceived distinction from traditional media industries and products. In this context, authenticity operates as a form of communicational labor—creating and animating fake profiles, producing content, and engaging in related activities—indispensable for establishing legitimacy (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Edlom, 2020; Massi, Piancatelli, Vocino, & Rojas-Méndez, 2024; McRae, 2017).

In the literature, astroturfing, as a form of insincere communication, significantly undermines authenticity and trust in online relationships between organizations and the public (Sisson, 2017). Since deception characterizes astroturfing, it influences perceptions of organizational trust, authenticity, and legitimacy (Lock & Seele, 2017). That legitimacy is built through communications strategies that may be astroturfing or, on the contrary, rooted in a kind of communicational ethics. It is when the public realizes they have been subjected to astroturfing that their trust is shaken (Kang, Kim, Chu, Kim & Cho, 2016). Astroturfing can be conceptualized as a continuum between authentic organizational and political communication that generates trust and unethical communication that produces mistrust (Cho et al., 2011; Kang et al., 2016; Leiser, 2016; Lock & Seele, 2017; Lock et al., 2016; Sisson, 2017).

In summary, definitions of astroturfing appear to oscillate around the supposed effects of the communications practices associated with it and the difficulty of qualifying those very practices. They do, however, allow us to explore who, in our media environments, is participating in producing inauthenticity, deception, and fakery. Astroturfing inscribes a continuum between organizations or individuals that are genuinely authentic and entities or communications that simulate authenticity to legitimize their actions or attract attention. This concept, when applied to the practices of authentic organizations, also sheds light on intent: Is there a desire to deceive? Expressed differently, are the organization and its members sincere?

Astroturfing, or How to Be Sincerely Inauthentic

In a chapter of *Structural Anthropology* (Lévi-Strauss, 1958), Lévi-Strauss points out that modern societies are affected by inauthenticity because of the use of various forms of mediated communications.

What if, contrary to Lévi-Strauss's perspective, mediated communications exist on a continuum between authenticity and inauthenticity? The literature presented above allows us to view astroturfing as a relevant topic for discussing this line of questioning.

According to Handler (1986), authenticity should be seen as a form of cultural construction. As a society, we identify criteria to define authenticity, and then we judge people, objects, and situations using those criteria to determine whether or not they are authentic. In Handler's (1986) view, any reflection on authenticity should address Lionel Trilling's (1972) *Sincerity and Authenticity*. In this book, Trilling takes a cultural history perspective to study the emergence of a preoccupation with authenticity and sincerity. As medieval societies gave way to early modern ones, authenticity and sincerity became important for judging a person's public behavior. In the context of increased mobility, sincerity matters for honest social relationships and has to do with the roles people play in society: Is the role congruent with their inner or true self? This led Trilling to the concept of authenticity and the true self—an individual existence not as others see it, but as it really is, separate from the roles the individual might play. Trilling argues that in the individualist worldview, authenticity has taken precedence over sincerity. Authenticity is expected not for the benefit of oneself, but for the sake of others as a way of establishing genuine social connections (Handler, 1986). As such, the preoccupation with authenticity is closely linked to human communications.

Today, it is interesting to see how the concept of authenticity can be used to assess various things, not only individuals but also objects (artworks, museum artifacts, luxury products) and activities, such as communications. Reflecting on objects, Spooner (1986) posited that defining the authenticity of an action or object depends on the combination of objective attributes and subjective interpretations, which are constantly negotiated by individuals and their peer groups. Authenticity is the reflection of interest in an object or action. The authenticity attributed to a communications practice therefore, reflects our concerns about it and can serve as a reference point in its evaluation.

"Authenticity" and "sincerity" are sometimes used as synonyms. "Sincerity" is less commonly used in the academic literature and is mainly invoked in the context of authenticity, where sincerity is one of the foundations of a person's authenticity (Bialystok, 2011; Sinanan & Milnes, 2010; Toft et al. 2020; Trilling, 1972; Williams, 2018). Sincerity is often equated with honesty and transparency, particularly in interpersonal and mediated communication, which resonates with Trilling's perspective. However, we argue that sincerity can be distinguished from authenticity and serves as a valuable lens for understanding astroturfing, specifically at the level of the sponsors' strategy.

Authenticity and sincerity raise the question of value since behaviors, actions, or objects must be valued to be considered (in)authentic or (in)sincere. Drawing on Graeber (2001), value can take visible forms (external signs such as art, jewelry, or clothing) and invisible forms (hidden forces such as debts or obligations). In this perspective, sincerity can be understood as the inner and invisible dimension of one's true self, while authenticity refers to its visible and phenomenological expression. Both are thus forms of power that acquire value, underscoring their significance in communication practices. Two characteristics that make it possible to qualify a message or technique as astroturfing are the concealment (invisibility) of the author's identity and the overaccentuation (visibility) of the public's origin. From this perspective, many regular communications practices could be defined as not entirely authentic and the stakeholders involved

as not entirely sincere. A politician could write a disinformation message on their own behalf without that qualifying as astroturfing. Conversely, a group misrepresenting itself as an individual and posting a genuine message would be considered astroturfing (Lits, 2021a). Figure 2 allows us to classify communications practices, not based on the content conveyed (disinformation, misinformation, fake news), but on the actors participating in them. Is this organization sincere or transparent in the relationships it wants to establish with its publics? Are the publics that participate in that action authentic? On the *y*-axis, we identify the sincerity or insincerity of the organizations. If an organization is not trying to hide anything and is presenting itself openly as the sponsor of a communication action, it is sincere toward its publics. If, on the contrary, it is covering up and pretending that a movement it created is a true grassroots demonstration, it is insincere.

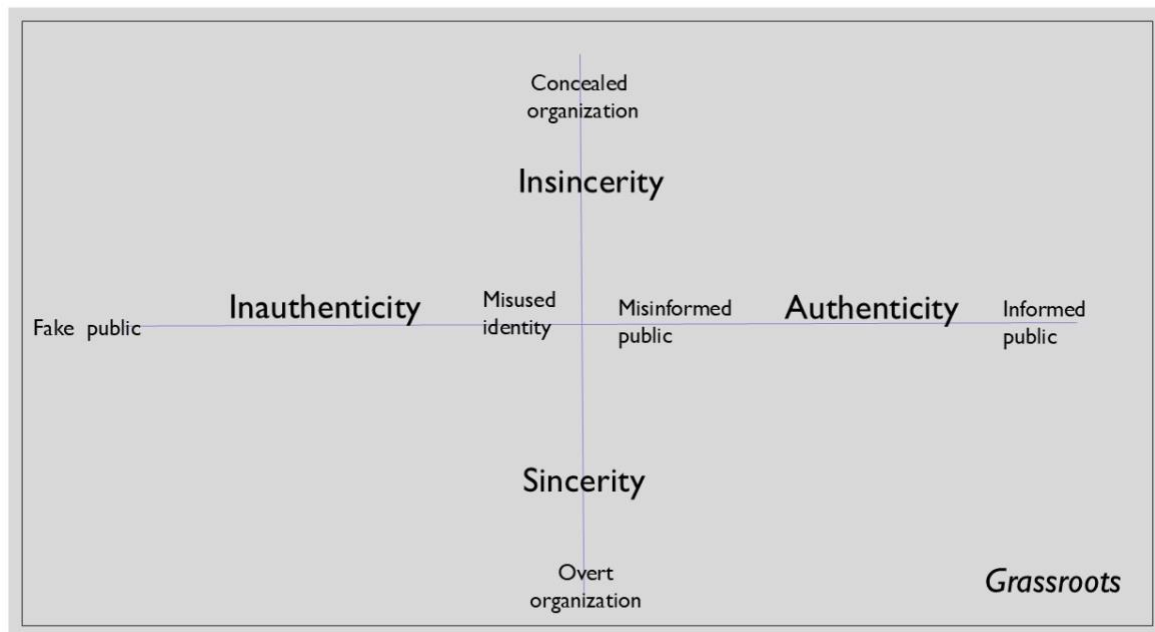


Figure 2. Sincerity and authenticity in astroturfing.

Likewise, on the *x* axis, we can identify the authenticity or inauthenticity of the publics participating in actions, interventions, or demonstrations for a cause, a brand, or an organization. A public that is not trying to alter its own identity or usurp the identity of another group in a communication context can be considered authentic. On the contrary, a public comprised of false online accounts to be identified as a member of a community or group to which it does not belong, or people being paid, is an inauthentic public.

The concept of authenticity lets us consider the intermediaries and place them along the *x* axis. For example, in the case of real citizens who are being manipulated, employees forced to take a position in favor of their employer, or cases of online identity theft, the attributes of authenticity are instrumentalized by people other than the individuals themselves. The concept of sincerity lets us identify disinformation

actions used to instrumentalize relationships with publics to generate mobilization around a cause that serves the insincere entity, for example. It also allows us to include in astroturfing strategies borderline or intermediate practices that do not always fit the strict definition of the phenomenon, but that exist to generate fakery. In contrast, a situation in which the publics are authentic, and the sponsor is sincere, reveals a genuine mobilization.

Using the concepts of authenticity and sincerity, the disinformation process at work online and elsewhere can be described with greater accuracy. Amid the many existing and sometimes competing definitions of astroturfing, we propose considering it to be using a means of communication, especially online, to foster the construction of insincere ties with publics and then instrumentalizing the authenticity of those publics. Nonetheless, is it enough to simply manipulate the functionalities of digital platforms to create inauthentic authenticity, or does the mere appearance of sincerity effectively encourage people to support a cause? For philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1677/1985), what gives us the power to act and entices us to want to be authentically ourselves is what creates an affect in us. The efficacy of astroturfing is therefore a function of the affections made possible by the platforms.

Producing Affections Through Communication to Simulate and Stimulate Mobilizations

Affects are forces in relation to one another (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), vectors that contribute to the production of concrete effects. Emotions are born from the circulation of things that affect us, and we cannot understand them without referring to what is affecting us. Affects are thus plural in the sense that they resonate with both various emotions (joy, sadness, etc.) and relationships that are in constant reconfiguration. Affects are mobilized by the media to attract attention (Massumi, 1995), and their dissemination within social groups helps structure collective experiences (Williams, 1977). It is also possible to conceive of them as culturally specific phenomena that circulate and attach bodies to objects and signs (Ahmed, 2004). These attachments subsequently guide our relationships with others and orient our social relationships and representations of what was affected.

On one hand, therefore, what affects us helps construct collective or individual experiences, which then allow us to define what is or is not authentic for us. On the other hand, our affections allow us to define what does or does not touch us. Depending on their intensity, they modulate our investment in an activity (Grossberg, 1997). The circulation of affects relies on affective labor (Hardt & Negri, 2005) that is often performed through communication: in media, to produce affective writing likely to attract attention (Siapera & Iliadi, 2015) or with friends and family, to develop affective safety (Ouellette & Wilson, 2011). This labor, which consists of producing “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion” (Hardt & Negri, 2005, p. 96), is an activity of socialization, interactions, and contact that manipulates affects, both our own and others’. It is an inherent part of affective capitalism (Karppi et al., 2016), in which affects are harnessed for systems of value production, and our capacity to affect and be affected shapes our communication and consumption practices.

Affective capitalism is especially well-developed online (Alloing & Pierre, 2017). Platforms have developed various features to generate affective signs such as hashtags (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012) and emojis (Alloing & Pierre, 2023; Stark & Crawford, 2015). These are circulated via sharing features

and linked to content through an emotional design (Norman, 2002), where affective affordances guide our interactions (Alloing, Fortant, Pierre, Richert, & Palisser, 2025; Sturm Wilkerson, Riedl, & Whipple, 2021). Users employ these affective functions in various situations: in social mobilizations to attract attention (Papacharissi, 2014), in political debates to generate “affective polarizations” (Lee, Choi, & Ahn, 2025), to create or participate in community (Döveling, Harju, & Sommer, 2018), and also to disinform (Ali Adeeb & Mirhoseini, 2023). These affects can be both positive and negative, with negative ones tending to generate different interactions such as less sharing (Weismueller, Harrigan, Coussement, & Tessitore, 2022). The affective interfaces that we use every day are full of content to which digital affects are attached (Gilroy-Ware, 2017). The platforms can then process those affects to sort, classify, and rank the information they make visible. According to Arvidsson (2011), this circulation, associated with affective information technologies, facilitates the measurement of publics’ affective investment, enabling the production of a “general feeling” associated with this information.

We can consider astroturfing as occurring when a strategy, especially in its digital form, involves simulating the authenticity of an online profile, thus making engaging in affective labor essential for those seeking to implement it. In the literature on astroturfing, many articles report cases of fake profiles participating in disinformation actions or fake mobilizations, such as the Internet water army in China (Chen et al., 2021; “Internet water army,” 2025) or the Lifestyle Lift company, which asked its employees to create fake online accounts to post positive evaluations and comments (Leiser, 2016; Miller, 2009). In this last case, false online comments produced by bots rely on emotional terminology and affective rhetoric to simulate their authenticity. Like any kind of affective labor (Mankekar & Gupta, 2016), these practices also help simulate the sincerity of the communicator. This “sincerity” fosters relationships with strangers (clients, publics), which is essential for making connections among members of a fake movement appear credible or—using fake profiles—for recruiting or disinforming authentic people.

Affective labor can do more than positively affect an organization (Mendelová, 2016) or attach negative affects (hashtags, comments, emojis, etc.) to its competitors. The resonance generated by content that evokes high emotional intensity and affective polarization (Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021) increases the circulation and exposure of messages and profiles that simulate the sincerity of organizations or the authenticity of participants. This is especially evident in astroturfing campaigns orchestrated by governments or during elections (Al-Rawi & Rahman, 2020; Chagas, 2022; Keller et al., 2020; Schoch et al., 2022). In these high-stakes political contexts, digital affective labor aimed at simulating authenticity and/or sincerity boosts clicks, interactions, and mobilization, becoming a central element of astroturfing strategies. The communication produced by this labor fosters a sense of collectivity, empowering certain members of political or social communities to speak out or act within digital spaces (Rovira-Sancho, 2023).

Returning to our previous model (Figure 2), we can position on it cases identified as astroturfing by the literature, media, or legal system and analyze them (Figure 3). At the top left of the matrix is an example of fake comments produced by employees of the Bell telecommunications company in Canada. In 2014, the company encouraged its employees to support the launch of the , apps on the iTunes App Store and the Google Play Store. As they were employees, this public was not completely authentic, while the company, in trying to hide its role, was being insincere. The comments used a systematic emotional repertory and factitious experience sharing to generate a structure of feelings specific to online affective

publics (Papacharissi, 2014; Williams, 1977). The company was fined for this (Competition Bureau Canada [CBC], 2015).

Friends of Glass presents itself as a “movement” of European citizens defending the use of glass for bottles, primarily through online mobilization (Laurens, 2015). Their website or Facebook page does not explicitly specify, however, that it is not an NGO headed by ecology activists, but a public relations agency working for the industrial glass bottle manufacturing lobby. In our model, this organization and its sponsors are insincere, but the publics that support it are authentic because they were deceived. Here, the affective labor consists of calling on various affects, notably fear (climate change), joy (helping the planet by recycling), or sadness (consequences of pollution). Affects have the capacity “to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself” (Massumi, 1995, p. 106), which, here, benefits the deceptive communication of these manufacturing companies.

Finally, in the bottom left is the example of tweets supposedly sent by Amazon employees to support the company’s campaign against unionization (CBC, 2015). The sponsor was clearly identifiable and therefore sincere, but the participating publics were inauthentic. The use of emojis and likes aims to make the voices seem authentic while delivering a message produced by Amazon. These tweets, as affects, are circulated using hashtags. They “stick,” in Sarah Ahmed’s (2004) meaning of the term, to other information about the topic to pull public attention to the company’s discourse rather than the discourse of the employees mobilizing for unionization.



Figure 3. Sincerity and authenticity in astroturfing matrix with cases.

In summary, online astroturfing consists of mobilizing or constructing, from scratch, “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2014) that connect with each other, disconnect, mobilize, and interact based on the affects they attach to information and receive in return (comments, GIFs, etc.)—in other words, publics that are compatible with the digital affective capitalist standards of the platforms (Coté & Pybus, 2011). This reinforces the capacity of some organizations to disinform and deceive—in short, to be insincere. This is also what differentiates online astroturfing from its offline forms: the ability to directly exploit how platforms shape and influence our emotions. Viewed from this angle, astroturfing allows us to question authenticity and disinformation, not as a matter of intent or of true or false, but as the capacity to set into motion bodies, representations, and emotions to simulate and stimulate authentic mobilizations and sincere communications.

Conclusion

The literature on astroturfing does not provide a stable consensus on the topic, as demonstrated in this article. However, one point of agreement emerges: Astroturfing is widely characterized by the intent to create an illusion of grassroots support that exceeds its actual scale through the deployment of a range of communicative practices. Online, these practices are made easy by platforms: creation of fake profiles, phony comments, deceptive content, and so on. In this realm, astroturfing is almost routine and actively participates in the contemporary phenomena of disinformation. In its wake, a generalized mistrust develops that hinders the establishment of bonds of trust between institutions and citizens, media and publics, and businesses and customers.

This approach to astroturfing, as discussed in the literature, raises the following key questions: How is the illusion of a popular movement constructed? Is it necessary to appear authentic or sincere to deceive certain publics? What effects do these strategies or practices produce on their audiences? How do platforms themselves shape these practices?

Rather than offering a strict definition, we propose a conceptual framework that considers astroturfing as the outcome of a set of processes designed to generate authenticity: the authenticity of citizens who speak out in public spaces, and the authenticity of publics who like, tweet, share hashtags, or comment on social media. However, the authenticity of the Web profile speaking out or clicking to support a cause cannot be separated from the sincerity of the discourse put forward by the organization promoting that cause. The model we propose provides nuance and granularity to our understanding of communications practices that are distinct, but that have been grouped together under the term “astroturfing.” It is possible to authentically participate in a cause backed by insincere promoters and to sincerely reach out to inauthentic publics.

Since authenticity and sincerity arise from our social experiences, they are dependent on what others do with them. They are both affective and social. Online, these affections are embodied in a set of signs that contribute to the constitution of an affecting public and affected networks (Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit, 2015). Astroturfing, as the manipulation of authenticity online, is encouraged and amplified by affective labor, performed sincerely or insincerely, on a large or small scale. Conceptualizing this specific digital affective labor allows us to view online authenticity as the outcome of a set of communication

practices that seek to turn affections into a means of simulating a sincere relationship. A message spread by a public that disinform can therefore become authentic the moment it produces an effect and an affect. The disinformation is no longer a matter of intent, as the literature on fake news sometimes tends to assume (Tandoc, 2021). Disinforming can be a sincere way of spreading a message on platforms that use affect as a springboard for visibility.

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