

# What Is Astroturfing?

The following information is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's website, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of Dec. 10, 2016.

**Compiled by Dave Havir**

A definition titled "Astroturf" was posted at powerbase.info. Following is an excerpt of the definition.

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"Astroturf" refers to grassroots groups or coalitions which are actually fake; often created or heavily funded by corporations, public relations firms, industry trade associations, and political interests.

Astroturfing is used by organizations to give the illusion of genuine public support to their cause, manufacturing public opinion in what some commentators have called "democracy for hire." As a deceptive use of third-party technique, Astroturfing can be considered a form of propaganda.

Unlike genuine grassroots activism, which tends to be people-rich but cash-poor, Astroturf activism is normally people-poor but cash-rich.

Astroturf campaigns work by recruiting the support of less-informed activists and individuals to their cause, often by means of deception.

Astroturfing can mislead the public into believing that the views of the astroturfer are mainstream and that widespread genuine support actually exists, when in most cases it does not.

Deceptive Astroturf campaigns are thus most likely to occur where the interests of wealthy or powerful interests come into conflict with the interests of the public.



A definition titled "Astroturfing" was posted at weebly.com. Following is an excerpt of the definition.

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"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.



An article by Peter Grier titled “The Time-Honored Practice of Astroturf Lobbying” was posted at csmonitor.com on Sept. 3, 2009. Following are excerpts of the article.

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In Washington, one person’s Astroturf can be another’s Kentucky bluegrass.

No, people have not flipped out due to broad-leaved weeds in their lawns. We’re talking about lobbying—the city’s third-largest business, after government and tourism.

“Astroturf” lobbying is the practice of generating false or misleading pressure out in the hinterland, the grass roots of politics. (Astroturf is fake grass, see? Oh, you got that.)

If some D.C. lobbyist drafts an angry letter about an issue, then gets a compliant local to plant it in the hometown paper, that’s Astroturfing.

So is sending out young Washington staffers on road trips to Iowa or Oregon to wave placards at congressional town-hall meetings.

The nickname is fairly new—Sen. Lloyd Bentsen of Texas appears to have coined it in the mid-1980s—but the practice isn’t. President Nixon used to get his campaign folks to send him falsified telegrams of support.

Astroturfing is in the news because some Democrats claim that this summer’s uproar over health care at many lawmakers’ town halls was actually whipped up by activists from the nation’s capital. They say it’s fake, and they say the heck with it.

In general, the line between Astroturf and genuine grass-roots lobbying can be more difficult to determine than you think.

Most Americans probably think “lobbying” refers to paid professionals bending the ear of elected officials over lunch, but that’s no longer true.

Grass-roots lobbying, the business of reaching out to potentially sympathetic groups and individuals in members’ home districts, is a huge and sophisticated business.

Spending on registered lobbyists (the ear-bending lunch smoothies) was about \$3.24 billion in 2008, writes American University political scientist James Thurber in a recent essay on lobbyist ethics reform.

But that’s only the tip of the iceberg lettuce, folks. Mr. Thurber estimates that the total spent on lobby activities in Washington, including grass-roots organizing, independent media campaigns and other more under-the-radar stuff, is around \$9 billion.

Google “grass-roots lobbying” and you’ll turn up the websites of prosperous D.C. firms eager to help you mobilize a winning coalition with rural groups, seniors, veterans, educational organizations, and minorities. You provide the issue, of course.

Under current law, such efforts to influence the political process generally don’t have to be reported.

The public has little idea what’s going on unless someone gets caught at out-and-out fraud, like sending out letters pretending to be people you are not in order to influence an issue (a true recent case).

Now, that’s Astroturf.



An article by Adam Bienkov titled “Astroturfing: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?” was posted at [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com) on Feb. 8, 2012. Following are excerpts of the article.

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Claims that a pro-Kremlin group funded a vast network of online activists to create the illusion of widespread support for Vladimir Putin may seem like a bizarre tale restricted to an authoritarian state.

However, the use of so-called “astroturf” groups is widespread across all nations and walks of life, from China to Britain, from book reviews to online surveys and from big business to local politics.

What is astroturfing?

Astroturfing is the attempt to create an impression of widespread grassroots support for a policy, individual or product where little such support exists. Multiple online identities and fake pressure groups are used to mislead the public into believing that the position of the astroturfer is the commonly held view.

Although usually associated with the Internet, the practice has been widespread ever since newspaper editors first invented the letters page. Pick up

any local paper around the time of an election and you will find multiple letters from “concerned residents of X” objecting to the disastrous policies of Y.

Similarly, concerned residents often turn up on talk-radio shows and even in campaign literature, although the latter can prove more dangerous, as Labour party activists posing as residents in Greenwich discovered a few years back.

To overcome these dangers, most astroturfing now takes place on the forums and comment sections of blogs and newspaper websites. Here, individual astroturfers can leave comments under numerous identities with little fear of discovery.

Discovery does occur, however, and in 2008 one member of Boris Johnson’s campaign team was caught posting comments on blogs critical of his boss without sufficiently concealing their identity.

A few years later, another member of Johnson’s campaign was found posing as a concerned Labour supporter trying to prevent Ken Livingstone from being the party’s candidate for mayor.

What are the latest astroturfing trends?

None of these British examples comes close to the sort of operation seen in Russia. New forms of software enable any organisation with the funds and the knowhow to conduct astroturfing on a far bigger scale than even the Kremlin could hope for.

As reported by the Guardian, some big companies now use sophisticated “persona management software” to create armies of virtual astroturfers, complete with fake IP addresses, nonpolitical interests and online histories.

Authentic-looking profiles are generated automatically and developed for months or years before being brought into use for a political or corporate campaign.

As the software improves, these astroturf armies will become increasingly difficult to spot, and the future of open debate online could become increasingly perilous.

Why is this happening?

The development of these new astroturf tools is both a response and a result of the openness inherent online. Twitter and blogging have given a voice to millions and allowed genuine opposition movements to take their case to the masses.

Censorship of these movements has not always proved effective, with only authoritarian governments possessing the means and the will to implement it.

For big business and less repressive governments, the alternative of simply crowding out your opposition online must seem a far more attractive prospect.

With a few computers and a handful of operatives, whole legions of supporters can be magicked out of thin air, and at a potentially lower cost than the “hundreds of thousands” allegedly spent in Russia.

How widespread these practices are is anyone’s guess, but, as the size and influence of online debate increases, the demand for such astroturf services will only increase too.



A video and an article by J.D. Heyes titled “Watch for These 4 Signs of Astroturfing to Recognize Corporate Disinfo and Propaganda” were posted at naturalnews.com on June 19, 2015. Following is the article.

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Most Americans are probably not familiar with the industry term astroturfing—the practice of hiding or masking the sponsors of a particular message, be it in public relations, political or in advertising—to give the appearance that it is supported by, and originates from, a grassroots sponsor.

That’s a shame, because the practice is used to sham and scam Americans into believing certain ads or messages are genuine, and this is especially true with Big Pharma. So pervasive is the pharmaceutical industry’s reach into American society that even Ivy League professors and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have been compromised.

In a recent TEDx Talk, investigative reporter Sharyl Attkisson, formerly of CBS News, discussed the issue of astroturfing (as she did in her recent best-selling book, *Stonewalled: My Fight for Truth Against the Forces of Obstruction, Intimidation, and Harassment in Obama’s Washington*).

### **It isn’t about truth, it’s about selling the fiction**

“In this eye-opening talk, veteran investigative journalist Sharyl Attkisson shows how astroturf, or fake grassroots movements funded by political, corporate, or other special interests very effectively manipulate and distort media messages,” said a description of her talk.

In particular, Attkisson identified four ways Americans can generally spot astroturfing:

- “Inflammatory and charged language—i.e., quacks, kooks, pseudo, conspiracy theorist”
- “Made up myths that are ‘debunked’ which can wind up on Snopes (I call them Inception stories)”
- “Attacking or controversializing people’s character or organizations instead of addressing the facts”
- “And especially the ‘turfers that reserve all of their public skepticism and criticisms for those exposing the wrong doers instead of directing that skepticism to the wrongdoers themselves. Prime example: Instead of questioning authority, they question those that question the authority.”

Attkisson ought to know. As she explained in her book, she was eventually marginalized so badly at CBS News while attempting to uncover major Obama Administration scandals (for which she was targeted by the White House), she

eventually was reduced to publishing what she could, when she was allowed to, on the new network's website only, having lost her on-air presence.

The reason? Most of her superiors at CBS News are supporters of the president and Democrats in general, as driven home by the fact that the president of CBS News is David Rhodes, whose brother, Ben Rhodes, is a member of President Obama's National Security Council.

"The whole point of astroturfing is to try to get widespread support for or against an agenda when there's not," Attkisson said in her talk. "Astroturf seeks to manipulate you into changing your opinion by making you feel as if you're an outlier when you're not."

She went on to provide some examples of the practice.

### **Vaccine-autism link "debunked" by controversializing truth-tellers**

"One example is the [National Football League's] Washington Redskins name," she said. "Without taking a position on the controversy, if you simply were looking at news media coverage over the course of the past year, or looking at social media, you'd probably have to conclude that most Americans find that name offensive and think it ought to be changed."

In reality, she said, "71 percent of Americans" really don't want to see the name changed, or nearly three-quarters of respondents.

Another example she used was the "controversy" over the link between vaccines and autism, which Natural News has well documented. And she called phony online encyclopedia Wikipedia an "astroturfer's dream come true," because of the way they use it to manipulate data and push propaganda.

"Astroturfers seek to controversialize those who disagree with them," she continued. "They attack news organizations that publish stories they don't like, whistleblowers who tell the truth, politicians who dare to ask the tough questions, and journalists who have the audacity to report on all of it."

Other times, astroturfers will attempt to cloud the issue with so much flak and controversy that Americans "simply throw up their hands" and disregard everything, including the truth, she said.

You can see the entire 10-minute talk, which took place Feb. 16 at the University of Nevada, here [on their website].