

When 'groundswell of opinion' is deceptive

Astroturfing - or the creation of a fake grassroots movement to suggest that more people feel strongly about an issue than is actually the case - was highlighted by PM Lee Hsien Loong recently. Insight explores the phenomenon.

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ASTROTURFING

Manipulated and replicated online messages put out by a group wishing to push its own agenda or opinion

GRASSROOTS

Leaders who interact closely with those they serve get a good feel of actual ground sentiment on a range of issues

LAST May, then Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong was at the centre of an online storm over his application for a second term in Parliament.

A deluge of comments, many of them anonymous, surfaced on various forums including the portal of the Government's feedback arm, Reach.

They attacked Mr Siew for taking sides in the leadership dispute at the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) and taking a 'pro-gay' stance, saying he was unsuitable as an NMP.

Some netizens speculated that there was an organised attempt to make the online views appear representative of that of the majority.

As Mr Siew tells Insight: 'I continue to believe that there was a coordinated effort among certain quarters to converge on Reach as the official government channel, and to post a specific message repeatedly and persistently, including under different pseudonyms.'

Initially, the corporate counsel says, this view was based on impression and perception.

But his suspicions of a targeted campaign were confirmed when allegations of him receiving foreign funding surfaced.

The same posting appeared in multiple forums in a short time, suggesting that someone was going to one forum after another to post the same comments.

Mr Siew did not get a second term, but neither did any other NMP. No reason was given.

What he experienced was astroturfing - the creation of a fake grassroots movement to suggest more people feel strongly about an issue than is actually the case.

Astroturf often involves genuine views held by several persons who go on to rope in others to express and multiply these views with little effort by creating templates they can adapt. It seeks to give the impression of a groundswell of opinion.

This form of campaigning or lobbying, named after the brand of synthetic grass called astroturf, is not new. It began way before the Internet, under the guise of manufactured mail.

American writer Ryan Sager notes that in William Shakespeare's play Julius Caesar, the Roman emperor's close friend Brutus was persuaded to assassinate him when conspirator Cassius wrote fake letters of support for the plot in different handwriting styles to make it seem as if they came from various citizens.

More recently, astroturf's political definition is thought to have been coined by the late United States senator Lloyd Bentsen, to describe a pile of cards and letters he received that promoted the interests of insurance companies.

'A fellow from Texas can tell the difference between grassroots and astroturf,' he said in 1985, noting that the mail he had was generated.

The flood of such mail to America's politicians continues to this day. It shot up exponentially with the Internet, which made the cost of sending messages much cheaper.

In a 2007 article for Forbes.com, business journalist Gary Weiss noted that elected US congressmen 'are frequent targets of liars, fakers and assorted swindlers'.

The aim: to deceive them into believing there is a groundswell of public concern about the senders' pet issues.

Astroturf, Singapore style

SUCH manipulative strategies have surfaced here to pressure the Government to take a certain course of action.

At his dialogue with regular contributors to Reach last month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong cited a recent slew of e-mail messages calling on the Government to lower property prices, threatening to withdraw support for the ruling party at the next general election if this was not done.

The e-mail messages were, he said, 'well-written and cogently argued', and displayed knowledge of the property market.

But there was one giveaway - the identities of the writers proved to be fake. Mr Lee said they included names of grassroots leaders purportedly from Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC and Yio Chu Kang, who did not exist.

In the case of a grassroots leader who did, he was Chinese-educated and could not have written the letter.

Mr Lee said he did not know who was behind this campaign, but it was 'clearly not a straightforward effort to give the Government honest feedback'.

'Rather, it was a covert attempt to pressure the Government, perhaps for personal benefit,' he said.

Several colleagues in the newsroom have also received manufactured e-mail messages.

They seem genuinely different at first glance, but on closer examination, turn out to have been adapted from a template and even written in the same font.

Several of the e-mail messages demanding a lowering of public housing prices came with addresses that did not exist - such as Block 12 Marine Parade (the real block is in Marine Terrace), and Block 103 Bishan Road (the block is in Bishan Street 12).

No doubt, the manipulated messages sought to influence the media and sway public opinion in one direction.

Masking real intentions

THE line between astroturfing and organised lobbying, however, is thin, often blurred, and overlapping.

Indeed, e-mail messages signed by real people to lobby MPs and the Government on a particular issue often have no intention to deceive or mislead.

As media academic Ang Peng Hwa, director of the Singapore Internet Research Centre, explains, a person who cuts and pastes from a standard template may do so because he feels he cannot write as well, or believes that officials will read only grammatically correct letters.

Singapore Management University (SMU) law academic Eugene Tan points out that a slew of identical e-mail messages, word for word, could well be sent by people who wholly agree with what they say.

Such messages surfaced on several occasions, most recently during the Aware leadership tussle last year.

But while the sentiments might be heartfelt, the underlying motivations of those who organised these e-mail templates were not entirely transparent.

The Government saw the feedback as a clear sign of organised lobbying by groups on both sides, and said it would not be swayed.

For some activists, astroturfing is seen as the best way to generate support for a cause they feel passionately about.

According to Hong Kah GRC MP Amy Khor, who chairs Reach, astroturfing tends to occur with issues which a group of individuals holds very strong views on, and wishes to impose on others.

'They likely believe that creating the impression that this is genuine opinion coming from a large group of people will help to influence others to adopt their stand and even get the Government to make decisions in their favour,' says Dr Khor. She is also South West District Mayor and Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment and Water Resources.

As observers note, the sheer potential of manufactured mass sentiment to create an impression on policymakers is too tempting to resist. Not much effort or time is required to project the illusion of greater support.

Another reason for astroturfing would be to mask the real motivations behind a campaign which would otherwise not be welcomed, observes media researcher Tan Tarn How, a senior fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

He says this could happen if the motivation is religious. 'They are more likely to succeed if the veil is not lifted from their real intentions; it may backfire when their real agenda is revealed. Does the political situation actually encourage astroturfing because there are consequences if one participates in debate with one's full intentions revealed?' he asks pointedly.

Like fake currency

IF ASTROTURF seeks to deceive by misrepresenting the scale of genuine public opinion, policymakers need to be extra careful when they craft policies based on online feedback.

Which is why Dr Khor feels that policymakers have to solicit views widely from the real world, through face-to-face interactions, to ensure views are representative before forming any conclusions.

Signs of astroturfing spotted by Reach included a similar template across e-mail messages, a similar tone and style of feedback, and an abrupt and significant increase in postings on a single issue over a very short period of time.

'However, for some issues which are not as contentious and divisive, it may be hard to detect astroturfing if it is not as widespread or prevalent,' Dr Khor adds.

Another downside to astroturfing is that genuine mass sentiment may end up being given less weight.

Professor Ang, whose centre is based at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University, puts it bluntly: 'Astroturf is like junk mail or fake currency. It destroys the value of good, sensible mail and good currency.'

'Once one finds astroturf, how can one trust the rest of the e-mail? Astroturf destroys the trust that is necessary for the exchange of ideas.'

Should the phenomenon become more widespread, former NMP Siew warns, it will be more difficult for policymakers and civil society to assess how widely held a particular sentiment is.

'It potentially reduces the impact of new media as an advocacy tool,' he says, adding that everyone has to be more savvy and literate about spotting astroturf.

What would be worse for both the Government and the governed is a situation in which the underlying grievances beneath a patch of astroturf are dismissed because they are seen as being tainted.

This is why SMU's Mr Tan believes officials must never get lost in the cacophony of mass e-mail noise, but should look at the message.

As armchair lobbying is a growing trend, he points out, mining astroturfed e-mail messages and letters may help policymakers deal with misinformation, fears and the interests of various parties.

Don't discount views

ONE example is the growing unhappiness over the rapid inflow of foreigners in recent years, which spilled over on Internet sites, forums and on the ground.

It led to the Government sharpening distinctions between citizens, permanent residents and transient workers in areas such as education, housing and health care.

Dr Khor acknowledges that even if views surface or are part of a campaign, they cannot be discounted outright. This is more so when they are genuine and well-intentioned.

She cites, as an example, the online - and offline - petitions following the announcement of enhanced parenthood benefits during the 2008 National Day Rally.

They asked for the qualifying date to be moved up from January 2009 so that more families could benefit.

'The arguments were coherent and well thought out and a decision was made to bring forward the date of the package subsequently,' she says.

Within four days, the qualifying date was brought forward to the day on which the latest measures were announced.

It was a coup for citizen lobbying, but such cases are few and far between.

Politicians and pundits have an inherent distrust of anonymous or unfettered mass online comments for several reasons.

SMU's Mr Tan identifies three problems associated with astroturf. One is authenticity: Did somebody really send it?

The other is accuracy: Does it accurately represent public opinion?

A third is authority: Does a cause command the following of large segments of the public?

In his view, a campaign that is able to show it is authentic, accurate and authoritative in its representation of public opinion will be ignored at policymakers' peril.

Prof Ang, however, cautions that those who hope to effect change through astroturf 'should know that the Government does not believe in numbers as a judgment of the correctness of a policy'.

'There have been changes in policy through fairly casual comments because the comments were sensible. On the other hand, two casinos have been built notwithstanding an online petition signed by enough people to populate an HDB estate,' he adds.

Political observers suggest that astroturf is a manifestation of the lack of a level playing field for competing views to be aired and duly considered.

One reason astroturf is still uncommon here could be that grievances have by and large been addressed, and society is not as polarised. But as citizens become more vocal and more demanding in pushing their views, astroturf may be here to stay, as recent incidents suggest.

Mr Tan of IPS feels the onus is on all parties to fix the issue: Politicians should encourage more vibrant public debate on issues, policymakers must know the strengths and weaknesses of various feedback systems, and individuals should be more critical.

Dr Khor admits it is hard to prevent astroturfing, given the Internet's nature.

Hence Reach does not rely solely on the new media for feedback, even though it is convenient and has wide reach.

Ultimately, the solution to the challenge of astroturf is not technological.

It is for those at the grassroots to reflect ground sentiment accurately, and for those in charge to be fully aware of ground views, weigh them and respond, lest they spin out of control.

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