## *Astroturf*

Truth Be Told – Sheryl Attkisson

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TRUTH BE TOLD

KEEP OFF THE FAKE GRASS

# Astroturf

By Sharyl Attkisson

What's most successful when it appears to be something it's not? Astroturf. As in fake grass. Astroturf is a term for corporate, special interest and political interests and political interests of all stripes explore media and the Internet to perpetuate astroturf to ever-expanding. Surreptitious astroturf methods are now more important to these interests than traditional lobbying of Congress. There's an entire PR industry built around it in Washington.

Astroturfers often disguise themselves and publish blogs, write letters to the editor, produce ads, start nonprofits, establish Facebook and Twitter accounts, edit Wikipedia pages or simply post comments online to try to fool you into thinking an independent or grassroots movement is speaking. They use their partners in blogs and in the news media in an attempt to lend an air of legitimacy or impartiality to their efforts.

Astroturf's biggest accomplishment is when it crosses over into semi-trusted news organizations that unquestioningly cite or copy it.

The whole point of astroturf is to try to convince you there's widespread support for or against an agenda when there's not.

The language of astroturfers and propagandists includes trendsetter inflammatory terms such as: anti, nuts, paranoid, fringe, conspiracy theorist, conspiracy theory, denier and junk science. Sometimes astroturfers claim to "debunk myths" that aren't myths at all. They declare debates over that aren't over. They claim that "everybody agrees" when everyone doesn't agree. They aim to make you think you're an outlier when you're not.

Astroturfers and propagandists tend to attack and controversialize the news organizations, personalities and people surrounding an issue rather than sticking to the facts. They try to censor and silence topics and speakers rather than engage them. And most of all, they reserve all of their expressed skepticism for those who expose wrongdoing rather than the wrongdoers. In other words, instead of questioning authority, they question those who question authority.

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Those who write articles or are merely such as "science" and "skeptic" in their titles or propagandists in an attempt to portray an image of neutrality and logic when they are often fighting a established science and serving pro-pharmaceutical industry agenda. Those include: ScienceBlogs.com (its author using the pseudonym "Orac"), vaccine inventor Dr. Paul Offit of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, who earned an undisclosed fortune from Merck pharmaceuticals, and his apparent replacement in trolling blogs, David Ruhenstein-Reiss. She is a low professor at the University of California, Hastings, and a frequent contributor to SkepticalRapture.com.

A final category frequently mentioned are the quasi-news organizations that sometimes throw cookies off the astroturf trail because they publish some legitimate news-type or pop-culture stories, but mix in propaganda or astroturf. These sources tend to be highly cited by the unquestioning traditional news media, either to advance an agenda, or in the media's attempt to be hip and edgy or "get clicks."

Sometimes, astroturf is in the eye of the beholder. But no matter how you see it, there is no short supply.

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**Talking Points**

Have you heard of the term "astroturf," as in fake grassroots? There are corporations, special interest and political interest groups roaming around the media and internet trying to trick us into thinking an independent or grassroots movement is speaking. Why? To try and convince us that there is a wide-spread agenda for or against something where there's not.

Thinking back now, have we read articles from these astroturf writers? They seem to attack and controversialize the news organizations, personalities and people surrounding an issue rather than the issues and facts themselves. Rather than engaging speakers they try to censor and silence them. And, rather than questioning authority they question those who question authority.

There is no short supply of astroturfers. Sometimes it's in the eye of the beholder when it comes to these issues. What can we do and where can we go to get trusted information on important topics?

**Resources**

Full references for each article are available at http://pathwaystofamilywellness.org/references.html

"Astroturf and Manipulation of Media Messages" by Sharyl Attkisson at *TEDxUniversityofNevada*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bYAQ-ZZtEU