

» Grassroots and astroturfs, mobilizing public opinion on the Internet

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A recent Harvard University study revealed that the Chinese government has a clear strategy for manipulating Internet conversations in the country: more than 2 million people generate approximately 448 million positive comments about the Communist Party each year¹. Since the start of the Digital Revolution and the social media boom, the matter of fake profiles, bots, and paid content have always been present—and taboo—in many digital strategies.

There are currently many cases and scandals involving institutions and people, especially in politics, that have used smear campaigns to discredit their rivals. Others use self-promotion strategies to amplify positive messages. Both cases consist of attempts—usually fairly clumsy—at manipulating the conversation and context, and they almost always lead to negative results for the people or entities that inspired and carried them out.

In the era of hypertransparency associated with the digital communication revolution, the truth always comes to light. In the era of ethics, as opposed to aesthetics, the Internet has changed the rules of the game and it is currently possible to influence the conversation in a clean and transparent manner, going back to the origins of communication and persuasion, with much more solid results. Thanks to the Internet and its ability to influence, many traditionally minority communities, such as social or environmental activists, are now influential within the general social context and lead new schools of thought.



According to Chris Anderson's *The Long Tail*² theory, the Internet and the digital environment have changed the laws of distribution and the rules for the market of products and services with principles that can also be applied to the world of ideas. In the past, when inventory storage and distribution costs were high, only the most popular products were sold and businesses were governed by the Pareto Principle, through which they obtained 80% of their revenue from 20% of products, which were the most successful. Today, companies such as Amazon and Netflix have shown that the more demand niches you cover, the more successful you are.

All the aforementioned items can be replicated in the *marketplace of ideas*. A number of years ago it was believed that media outlets offered what subscribers wanted to read. In other words, the mass media, content distribution channel owners with finite space, attempted to understand the top needs of consumers in order to fulfill those needs with information and entertainment focused primarily on the trends that became increasingly solid with the support of the media, thereby creating an endogamic spiral in schools of thought. However, the Internet has given a voice to all ideologies and helped build increasingly exogamic societies where new communities of individuals continuously appear and, based on their needs and expectations, they are able to find similar people with a shared cause or area on which to base their relationships and exponentially gain the ability to influence economic, social, political, and cultural contexts.

In the field of political communication, aside from sometimes using *smear campaigns*, parties and candidates were the first to create mobilization strategies that were known as **grassroots** campaigns. Grassroots strategies use the Internet as a source of intelligence in order to gain an understanding of citizen demands. They are embraced by the party's political ideas, proposals and solutions are offered, and every identified community receives the exact message it wants to hear. Finally, communities are empowered and mobilize around a cause.

¹ *How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument*. Gary King, Jennifer Pan Margaret y E. Roberts. 26 de Agosto de 2016 <https://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/50c.pdf?m=1463587807>

² *The Long Tail, why the future of business is selling less of more*. Chris Anderson, New York Times, 2008 <https://www.amazon.com/Long-Tail-Future-Business-Selling/dp/1401309666>

This marks a return to the origins of politics, but at a tremendous speed and with a level of capillarity that previously required years. This organic and needs-based mobilization method results in mobilizations that are more solid and that in the medium and long term are able to sway schools of thought.

In Minnesota (United States), between 1916 and 1944, before every home had a television or radio, there was a political party known as the Farmer Labor Party consisting of farmers and workers who initially had opposing views since the farmers were small owners and the workers were employees. However, the two communities found a common cause that led to the party's creation, and this cause was the fight for Social Security, which combined the interests of both parties and allowed them to obtain three consecutive terms in the state and four representatives in the Senate Chamber, among other achievements. This movement, which at the time required several years for its creation and success, can now be established in a few weeks through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social media channels.

NEW INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, humans have five types of needs:

1. Physiological or basic
2. Safety
3. Social (love and belonging)
4. Self-esteem
5. Self-actualization

These needs **can be analyzed according to the degree of development of a nation** and a society. In developed markets and emerging economies, with the rise of the middle class, improved education, and greater purchasing power, basic needs and matters related to safety are losing weight compared to social needs and aspects linked to self-esteem and self-actualization, which new communication and marketing trends are latching onto more frequently by **focusing strategies on storytelling** as a tool used to convey ideas and values that connect with those needs and to help differentiate businesses and brands.

Thanks to the Internet and Big Data platforms, there is progressively more knowledge of communities and their needs, as well as their areas of conversation and interests. Their ability to grow and exert influence depends on their mobilization capacity, which can be organically promoted through grassroots strategies. However, there is another equally interesting driver, and it is known as the astroturf strategy.

“Creativity, proactivity, foresight and commitment will be the main prerequisites that will shape the intrapreneurship ecosystem in companies”

ASTROTURFING, THE LATEST OPPORTUNITY

Institutions, businesses, and brands have access to a major opportunity. The Internet makes it possible to observe the progress of conversations involving communities and areas in order to detect potential risks or opportunities. It is clear that favorable trends towards sharing economies will help companies improve their performance in this niche. Would Uber and Airbnb have been as successful if they had created bots and trolls to attack traditional mobility and lodging services or to continuously repeat the benefits of their services? In order to promote a trend, it is necessary to identify the beneficiaries of that trend, provide them with a message and arguments, and empower them to be the best allies. It is

no coincidence that Uber's strategy was led by the director of the successful campaign that made Barack Obama president of the United States in 2008. The reality is that Uber sells more than a transportation service; it sells a lifestyle, which means that it must convince and mobilize people. If you search for campaigns linked to Uber in Change.org (one of the leading citizen activism platforms on the Internet), most support the company's interests.

If we go back to the beginning of The Long Tail, there are all types of thoughts and ideologies, radical and moderate, that coexist on the Internet. There will always be a group of people, who may not be connected, but who share a number of common needs and causes that may coincide with the interests of an industry, company, institution, etc. If that need is identified and the corresponding actors and leaders are found, grouped, coordinated, and empowered, the start of a new social change will begin. It may apply to the public or private sector, and like all changes, it will be beneficial to some and harmful to others.

To reach these objectives and to develop an astroturf strategy, it is first necessary to identify the position and the corresponding stable conversation, as well as the people, content, and times defined by the agenda of the organic conversation. The bigger and more stable the wave, the more opportunities for development, and also faster and with less effort. Once identified, it is important to find a common cause that is shared by the institution, businesses or brand and the communities that have been identified in order to define objectives, combine interests, find allies, and establish a reason for creating a community on which to base a shared culture, with symbols and customs that allow their identification, associated themes, leaders, connectors, and channels for easier coordination. The strategy as well as the medium- and long-term vision of each industry and company will lead to the definition of the final result: As an institution, do you want to follow trends or set trends?



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