Astroturfing in Indian Politics: Web of Deception and Reverse Censorship

Fareeha M.A Khader[1], Dr .T.Satish Kumar[2]

Research Scholar (Ph.D), Dept. of Journalism and Mass Communication, Osmania University,

Hyderabad, India[1]

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Journalism and Mass Communication, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India[2]

ABSTRACT: Astroturfing, a practice aimed at mimicking grassroots movements while cleverly concealing their artificial origin. This has become a prominent strategy in modern politics as it allows for manipulation of public perception. In this study we delve into the concept of Astroturfing in the context of Indian politics, elucidating the methods, motivations, and consequences of this covert practice. Drawing insights from various other studies across the world, we aim to explore how political actors, particularly the political parties, employ astroturfing techniques to shape public opinion, influence electoral outcomes, and obscure their manipulative endeavors. With this study we intend to examine the impact of these astroturfing on democratic processes in India's political landscape by understanding the political discourse around actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death.

KEYWORDS: Manipulation, Public opinion, Political discourse, Sushant Singh Rajput, Reverse censorship, Troll farming, Bots, and Twitter trends etc.

I.INTRODUCTION

Concept and Origin: The term "astroturfing" has historical origins in a quip by Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen in 1985, who sharply observed that a flood of letters on insurance legislation that seemed like a grassroots movement but was in actuality orchestrated by insurers. Astroturfing has since then evolved with the technological advancements in communication technology. Today, it encompasses a wide spectrum of deceptive practices meticulously designed for manipulation of public perception by creating a false impression of genuine grassroots movements. This is done through coordinated online activities, often emanating from a single source but by using multiple accounts to amplify the illusion of spontaneous, grassroots sentiment or mass support.

Astroturfing distorts the authenticity of genuine conversations by creating an 'information disorder'. Information disorder refers to the dissemination of misleading or false information that disrupts the reliability and trustworthiness of the overall information environment. This can include various forms such as misinformation, disinformation, fabricated news, and manipulated media (Wardle and Dias (2017). As netizens navigate a sea of information, it becomes extremely challenging for them to distinguish between authentic voices and manufactured narratives.

Purpose of Astroturfing – Reverse Censorship

The overarching purpose of astroturfing transcends simple manipulation to encompass the notion of reverse censorship, an intricate strategy where orchestrated narratives flood the discourse space, overshadowing

authentic voices and dissent – This is referred to as 'Reverse Censorship'. Unlike traditional censorship that suppresses information, reverse censorship inundates the digital landscape, making it challenging to discern genuine voices from orchestrated ones (Schwab, 2019). Astroturfing seeks to drown out authentic discourse, shaping narratives in favor of the orchestrators. This "reverse censorship" involves flooding the online space with conspiracy theories and rumors, creating a cacophony of information that may distort the truth (Bugorkova, 2015).

II.LITERATURE REVIEW

Henrie and Gilde (2019) have researched on how digital astroturfing is utilized as a persuasive tool in the context of nationalism. They specifically focus on the impact of digital astroturfing on individuals' nationalistic tendencies. While a single astroturfed Twitter post may not drastically change one's nationalistic perceptions, the study suggests that long-term exposure to such messages could have a cumulative effect. Nationalism, being a collection of attitudes over time, may be gradually influenced by persistent astroturfing efforts.

The authors conducted an exploratory experimental study where they exposed participants to social media messages related to nationalism, specifically in the context of the coal energy sector. They created two experimental conditions: one where the message appeared to be astroturfed (i.e., created by a fake grassroots organization) and another where the message was presented as non-astroturfed (i.e., from an established, authentic source). Their findings suggested that people, both those with and without nationalist tendencies, were more likely to be persuaded by an astroturfed message compared to a non-astroturfed one. This indicates that digital astroturfing can be an effective persuasive tool in shaping individuals' nationalistic beliefs and attitudes.

Farkas and Neumayer (2021) also discuss the concept of Astroturfing in the context of disguised propaganda in their paper. They write about the use of Astroturfing in China and Russia, where government agencies have orchestrated large-scale troll armies. In these troll armies; individuals are paid to promote government agendas through social media profiles. For instance, in China, this practice has been referred to as the '50-cents party,' as users were rumored to receive 50 cents for each social media post they created in support of the government. These paid users create content that appears to be expressions of genuine public opinion, but in reality, they are part of an organized effort to manipulate online discussions and shape public sentiment.

Techniques of Astroturfing

Astroturfing, a covert strategy to manipulate public opinion, deploys a spectrum of sophisticated techniques in the digital realm.

Troll Farming
Troll farming constitutes a pivotal technique in astroturfing, involving the creation and dissemination of deliberately provocative content by individuals or groups for strategic purposes. Organized troll farms, often funded by political entities or corporations, unleash a barrage of comments, posts, and messages across social media platforms. These trolls strategically amplify certain viewpoints while suppressing opposing narratives, creating a distorted perception of public sentiment (Schwab, 2019).
Countries like China and Russia have put in state-sponsored efforts to manipulate online discussions and spread propaganda by employing individuals to create and disseminate specific content. (Farkas and Neumayer, 2021)

Sockpuppets and Bots
Sockpuppets and use of Social bots is also an aspect of troll farming that enables the amplification of fabricated narratives and give an illusion of mass support. Sockpuppets are fictitious online personas, meticulously crafted to appear as genuine individuals, engaging in conversations to influence opinions. They play a role in mobilizing

audiences, leveraging social media tools such as hashtags and internet memes. By creating a seemingly organic presence, they aim to attract and influence individuals who may be unaware of the manipulated nature of the content (Mina, 2019). Troll dens may need several social media accounts for sockpuppeting that can be used by their employed trolls to push an agenda.

Bots, on the other hand, are automated programs that mimic human behavior, executing predefined tasks such as liking, sharing, or commenting. Together, they contribute to the illusion of organic, widespread support, often overwhelming authentic voices in online discussions (Longley, 2020). In other words, bots play a significant role in increasing the spread or reach of posts and inflating metric counts (Woolley and Howard, 2016).

Manufacturing Twitter Trends
Trending hashtags on Twitter serve as a barometer of public sentiment, influencing discussions, opinions, and even setting the political agenda. The manipulation of these trends can have far-reaching consequences, extending beyond the social media into the broader political landscape. Coordinated mass postings facilitate the manipulation of Twitter trends, creating controlled social media narratives. These campaigns involve coordinated efforts to use of specific hashtags across multiple accounts to create an illusion of widespread engagement or popularity. This technique exploits the algorithms managing the social media platforms, in order to propel manipulated hashtags into trending sections, further amplifying the intended narrative (Jakesch et al., 2021).

Psychographical Data Mining and Cambridge Analytica
The advent of psychographical data mining has been epitomized by the practices of companies like Cambridge Analytica to usher in a new era of astroturfing sophistication. By analyzing individuals' psychological traits and preferences from their social media accounts, astroturfing campaigns can tailor content to specific demographics, maximizing the impact of deceptive narratives. The 2016 U.S. presidential election witnessed the unprecedented use of psychographic targeting, marking a paradigm shift in astroturfing strategies (Schwab, 2019).

Cambridge Analytica entered the American political landscape, aiming to equip conservatives with big data tools to rival their Democratic counterparts. They aimed to create intricate psychographical profiles for each American voter, enabling campaigns to personalize their messages on an individual basis. Cambridge Analytica's role remains questionable from its initial intention to provide data-driven advantages to conservatives to its later accusations of data privacy, unauthorized data access, and manipulation of social media for political purposes (Detrow, 2018).

Astroturfing in India

Almost every political party in India now has a dedicated social media unit popularly known as the IT cell which responsible for creating and disseminating content. This content includes articles, memes, videos, and messages that align with the party's narrative and objectives. These IT cells use popular social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp reach a wide audience. They may also use other online forums, discussion groups, and news websites. IT cells coordinate campaigns to flood social media with specific messages or hashtags, creating a false sense of grassroots support.

IT cells are involved in amplifying the party's messages and attacking opponents. This involves not only promoting positive content about their political party but also spreading negative information about rival parties and candidates. The agenda is set by a select few close to the party leadership and shared with the IT cell workers through Whatsapp or Google documents. These IT cells associated with political parties also engage in

troll farming, sockpuppeting and use of bots and they also engage in spread rumors, false information, or engage in personal attacks to tarnish the reputation of opponents.

In a comprehensive analysis by BuzzFeed News, it was revealed that a significant number of political hashtags dominating Twitter trends in India were not spontaneous but the result of meticulously organized campaigns. The campaigns provided individuals with tweet templates, encouraging the replication of tweets or retweets to amplify the hashtags' visibility. At least 10 political hashtags that appeared in the top 10 Twitter trends in India were identified as products of organized campaigns with more than 50% of the tweets containing these top 10 trending hashtags were found to be duplicates, indicating a concerted effort to amplify their visibility. (Dixit, 2017)

In January 2020, a Reddit user known as '/u/onosmosis' conducted another comprehensive study, analyzing unverified Twitter accounts to identify trends in online propaganda and misinformation. The study, which focused on politically oriented accounts, revealed a substantial online presence for both Congress and BJP. However, a significant disparity emerged, with 2.7 lakh accounts supporting BJP and 1.2 lakh supporting Congress. Notably, the study identified 17,779 pro-BJP accounts engaged in spreading fake news, while the corresponding number for Congress was significantly lower at 147. This finding points to a systematic effort to manipulate online narratives, with a pronounced scale favoring the BJP. (Mihindukulasuriya, 2020)

Another prominent study conducted by researchers from Cornell University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) delves into the intricacies of a "cross-platform organization" and its orchestrated manipulation of Twitter trends during the 2019 Indian general election. The research focuses on 664 pro-BJP WhatsApp groups, uncovering evidence of 75 hashtag manipulation campaigns orchestrated through these groups. The campaigns aimed to propagate targeted political messages and mobilize participants for mass postings on Twitter. The researchers employed a comprehensive approach, using historical trend data from the Twitter Trending Topics Archive. The analysis encompassed 2,368,000 tweets posted by 244,000 users, with 92,000 being copy-pasted tweets by 4,750 participants. By scrutinizing the impact of these campaigns on Twitter trends, the study provides insights into the scale and effectiveness of cross-platform media manipulation during the election period. A case study of the campaign to trend "#ModiMeinHaiDum" highlighted the speed at which trends were initiated and gained traction. Within hours, the hashtag accumulated thousands of tweets and remained on Twitter's trending list for an extended period (Jakesch et.al, 2021).

Case study—Sushant Singh Rajput's Death
The death of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput in June 2020 not only became a national tragedy but also a subject of intense social media activity. The circumstances surrounding his shocking suicide triggered a wave of online discussions, investigations, and conspiracy theories. This proves to be an excellent example of the phenomenon of astroturfing focusing on how various actors, including politicians, media channels, and interest groups, manipulated social media to shape public opinion for political gains and popularity.

According to Mysorae & Hemmige (2021), over 80,000 fake accounts were reportedly created across different social media platforms. The primary aim of these fake accounts was to dishonor the Maharashtra Government and Mumbai police regarding their handling of the online investigation into the Sushant Singh Rajput case. A study conducted by Akbar et al. (2022) analyzed approximately 7,000 YouTube videos and 100,000 tweets linked to 2,000 journalists, media houses, and around 1,200 politicians. The sheer volume of data indicates the widespread engagement and interest in the online discussions surrounding Sushant Singh Rajput's death. They specifically looked at tweets by over 2,000 journalists, 7,818 politicians, and media houses. It noted that 7,818

BJP and INC politicians put out 103,125 tweets about the case, demonstrating a high level of political engagement (Akbar et al., 2022).

The data reveals that a majority of Twitter traffic on the matter came from BJP politicians, with a notable surge during mid-July when a coordinated effort to demand a CBI inquiry took place. The study observed that BJP politicians had significantly more tweets (61,196) than their Congress counterparts (32,406), indicating a concerted effort to drive the narrative (Akbar et al., 2022).

The Sushant Singh Rajput case, unfolding against the backdrop of the Bihar election and strained relations between the oppositional government in Maharashtra and the BJP, became a highly charged and politically sensitive issue. Politicians and police from Maharashtra and Bihar played pivotal roles in shaping the social media discourse around Rajput's death. The shift in language from 'suicide' to 'murder' was apparent, with BJP politicians prominently using the term 'murder' in tweets. This strategic use of keywords suggests a deliberate attempt to influence public perception and steer discussions in a particular direction. In this context, Mumbai police faced criticism on Twitter, particularly after late July 2020. BJP, as the opposition, took an aggressive stance, attacking the Mumbai police with hashtags such as #ShameOnMumbaiPolice and #MahaGovtExposed. The attack on Mumbai police served as a bridge to criticize the state cabinet. Hashtags like #AnilDeshmukhSavingSSRKillers targeted the home minister, and eventually, Aditya Thackeray, a prominent leader and son of Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, became a target.

Ethno-nationalism became part of the narrative, particularly with the trending hashtag #NationStandsWithKangana. This narrative focused on portraying outsiders to Mumbai, including Sushant Singh Rajput and Kangana Ranaut, as being mistreated and driven to extreme steps. Bihar politicians contributed to the ethnonational narrative, emphasizing the hashtag #CBIForSonOfBihar and #BiharsPride.

Astroturfing is not limited to political actors alone; media channels also played a crucial role in disseminating information and, at a lot of times, misinformation. The study noted that certain media outlets and journalists actively contributed to spreading conspiracy theories related to Rajput's death. The conspiracy theories diverted attention from the initial focus on suicide to the insinuation of murder and a larger political conspiracy. Some journalists and media houses seem to have a shared emphasis on hashtags against Rhea Chakraborty (#RheaChakraborty) as they advocated for a CBI inquiry (#CBIMustForSushant and #CBIForSSR). While some media houses crafted themselves as vigilantes (#TimesNowForCBIForSSR and #Warrior4SSR) and presented arguments suggesting doubt in the minds of the audience (#ArrestCulpritsofSSR and #SushantDeathMystery).

The data also indicates that the Sushant Singh Rajput case served as a diversionary tactic for political parties instead of addressing critical national issues like the Covid crisis and migrant exodus, the focus shifted to the actor's death, allowing politicians and media to remain in the spotlight and potentially gain support through emotional engagement. The data through the research of Akbar et al. (2022) suggests a complex interplay between social media, journalists, and media houses in shaping the narrative around Sushant Singh Rajput's suicide, with topics evolving over time and new characters and angles being introduced periodically to keep the story hyped and trending for over 3 months.

IV.CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The social media discourse around Sushant Singh Rajput's death became a proxy battleground for political adversaries. Ethno-nationalism, polarization, Bollywood-mafia-nepotism nexus and criticism of the Mumbai police served as tools for both sides to advance their political narratives. The meta-narrative, shaped by

politicians from both Maharashtra and Bihar, played a significant role in influencing public perception during a politically charged period. Politicians strategically used hashtags, narratives of ethno-nationalism, and criticism of the police to advance their political agendas, creating a complex and multifaceted narrative around the tragic incident. The information disorder, chaos and confusion of multiple parallel narratives diluted the facts and drowned the voices of reason and dissent through reverse censorship.

If a tragic news story like an actor's death could be astroturfed into a campaign, would there not be an unprecedented potential to Astroturf a genuine grassroots movement in order to manipulate the discourse and public perception around it? What the citizen experiences as political information is the product of several mediating processes which are more or less invisible to him or her (McNair, 2017). The posts, likes, tweets, retweets, comments and any social media engagement you see on product or movie reviews to political posts could all be astroturfed to manipulate public opinion for financial or political gains. This is indeed a powerful weapon in the hands of political actors. The consequences of astroturfing, with its pervasive spread of manipulated content and reverse censorship are far-reaching and need to be explored with further research in this area.

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