



'CyberTurfing' and other forms of online persuasion

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This paper examines the phenomenon known as 'AstroTurfing', and specifically its online equivalent 'CyberTurfing' and other forms of online persuasion. It starts from the position that information technology academics have spent so much time analysing subversion, intrusions, and disruption by both State and business actors into private spheres that there has been a failure to conduct a proper examination of how the same actors use various digitally mediated platforms already in existence to advance their own commercial and political interests. The focus of this article is 'CyberTurfing' - the online equivalent of AstroTurfing - a form of stealth marketing designed to appear to be as a kind of bottom-up activism that in reality is powered by someone else behind the scenes and other online persuasion campaigns. 'CyberTurfing' is the practice by state actors and businesses of using digitally mediated platforms to promote specific agendas. The theoretical background for the paper is provided by two very different narratives of the regulation of cyberspace: Castell's networked individualism and Kahneman and Tversky's theory of heuristics in judgement making. The first part of the paper looks at the history of AstroTurfing, before introducing its online equivalent and other forms of online persuasion. The second part of the paper analyses the regulatory and legal framework surrounding CyberTurfing and other forms of online persuasion campaigns. The next section differentiates between two different types of AstroTurfing: that done for commercial gain and that for the purpose of shaping political influence, concluding that under our current regulatory regime the former is largely regulated while the latter is, for the most part, not. Finally the paper posits that while commercial CyberTurfing is at least on regulators' radar, CyberTurfing campaigns for political benefit are far more disruptive to democratic discourse. When a campaign is undertaken to advance a political agenda, campaign or ideology, any organisations offering these services do so for a commercial benefit and therefore should be subjected to regulatory oversight. Accordingly, the final section proposes a framework for regulating CyberTurfing and a regulatory solution that allows regulators to protect "politically neutral" and "innocent" platforms.