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ASTROTURFING AS A CONTROVERSIAL MEDIA RELATIONS TOOL

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Abstract

The article is focused on one of Media Relations tools, which is, despite of being highly controversial and frequently criticised by Media Relations specialists, used very often. The aim of the article is to offer a complex set of theoretical as well as practical knowledge on astroturfing. The text is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with theoretical outlines of Media Relations and also provides classification of Media Relations tools. The second part of the text aims to discuss the issue of astroturfing. Placing emphasis on the practical implementation of astroturfing, the third chapter offers real cases of astroturfing and therefore an overview of astroturfing and its use in Slovakia as well as abroad. The fourth chapter, Conclusion, gives the author an opportunity to state that astroturfing has become a really searing problem, mostly in terms of Internet communication – unfortunately, online technologies, more than any other media before, have provided this unfair communication practice with a substantial amount of possibilities of being used effectively.

Keywords: astroturfing, controversial tool, media relations, public relations

1. Introduction to the Media Relations

Media Relations is one of the most significant communication activities that are included within Public Relations (PR) [1]. We would argue that Media Relations is even amongst the most important parts of PR. Media allow us to address any target group, and to a much greater extent [2]. In the past, Media Relations were rather called Press Relations, as the press was the most important means of mass information dissemination. Currently, the term Media Relations seems to be much more accurate and correct.

The processes of Media Relations may be defined as long-term procedures – their basis consists of creating, building, and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between a certain organisation (or a society) and media representatives. The process results in stimulation of positive publicity, which may contribute to establishing a favourable image and good reputation of a firm in the public eye. Of course, an organisation is able to reach its goals more easily

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and effectively; precisely thanks to these achievements in the area of PR. The specific aspects are better explained through the following scheme:

MEDIA RELATIONS	→	PUBLICITY	→	IMAGE	→	GOALS
Establishment of beneficial relationships		Creation of positive publicity		Building of positive image		Reaching the given goals

However, we have to point out that many, though far from all, organisations understand the importance of establishing Media Relations. According to J. Tomandl [3], we can no longer ask ourselves whether an organisation will or will not interact with media. In today's information age, it is almost impossible to avoid communication with the media. Each subject is, however, able to decide, what attitude to take while engaging in the processes of media communication. Fortunately, the latest trends lead to openness, communication and cooperation – such approaches are based on long-term activities, which are time-consuming, but very effective. Taking into consideration the key differences between variations of Media Relations, three basic approaches to Media Relations can be defined as follows:

1. Active approach – organisations strive to attract attention of the media; they offer them interesting topics, communicate with them on a regular basis. An organisation develops and applies its own communication strategy that is implemented in terms of building relationships with the media. As a result, deeper and long-time connections with media representatives are established. This fact provides an unquestionable advantage in case crisis communication is needed – the course of this crisis may be simpler and less damaging.
2. Passive approach – an organisation has no strategy and does not engage in any communication activities towards media. If the media contact such an organisation in order to acquire information, the organisation provides the given information and thus accommodates to the situation. What is worse, however, is that the media tend to contact these organisations on their own initiative only in case a problem emerges. Most of the organisations, which employ the passive approach, are neither able to communicate effectively, nor capable of establishing long-term relationships with journalists.
3. Hostile approach – it is an inconvenient, non-sustainable strategy; an organisation tries to avoid any communication with the media, and does so by rejecting opportunities to contact the media, and also by ignoring all requests for information or official statements. Paradoxically, these organisations sometimes attract the media interest, as journalists tend to suspect there is something to hide beneath 'the veil of mystery' (of not communicating). Moreover, in a time of crisis, it would be unreasonable to expect any support or patience from the media.

In case a company wants to employ the above-mentioned active strategy of communicating with the media and thus to establish effective Media Relations, there is a large amount of available tools that may help with the effort. These tools can be divided in accordance with various criteria. Based on the

current scholarly literature on the topic, the most frequently used categorisation of Media Relations is as follows:

- **Tools of individual influence –** even the era of digital technology and the Internet is not able to replace a direct contact. The tools of individual influence include, above all, attending personal meetings with journalists, performing interviews, contacting journalists via phone or electronic communication, as well as 'friendly' greetings on occasion of holidays or other significant events.
- **Tools of mass influence –** the tools, which are meant to communicate with a larger amount of recipients, i.e. press releases, press conferences, sections of websites designed to provide media representatives with information (so-called press rooms) and other similar means of communication are applied here.

As we believe, however, Media Relations tools can also be categorised chronologically (or rather in terms of their historical emergence, side by side with media communication). 'Traditional' tools were established and successfully applied prior to mass commercial expansion of the Internet, while digital tools are, on the contrary, closely related to online technologies and their extensive use.

- **Traditional tools of Media Relations** involve press releases and official statements, press conferences, personal and written communication with journalists, media cooperation, etc. Even though press releases are currently distributed solely via electronic communication, it is still adequate to see them as a part of traditional Media Relations tools, as they have been used decades before the digital era, i.e. before the global expansion of the Internet.
- **Digital tools of Media Relations** are based on using the Internet; we talk about, for example, sections of websites that provide the media and journalists with information in electronic form (press rooms), online video streams broadcasting press conferences, Internet social media and networks designed to build relationships with journalists, and weblogs, etc.

However, we cannot discuss the tools for establishing and maintaining Media Relations without mentioning one other significant category of tools – these are understood as **controversial Media Relations tools,** which are closely specified below.

2. Controversial Media Relations techniques - astroturfing

Astroturfing and spin doctoring are communication procedures considered as highly controversial – not only by the academic circles, but, understandably, also by the general public. Their critical perception and questionable reputation are associated with serious ethical issues and obvious moral inconsistency. It is highly disputable, certainly, whether these techniques and its uses are morally and ethically acceptable or not. In any case, even though such communication techniques are mostly inacceptable in terms of ethics, as they are closely related

to terms ‘manipulation’ and ‘propaganda’, they are practically employed very frequently, nowadays more than ever. As we have stated above, our main concern is the issue of astroturfing.

2.1. Astroturfing vs. grassroots

According to *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, the word “astroturf” is defined as “a type of artificial grass surface used especially for sports fields” [4]. It is no coincidence that this term has been derived from the name of a company that produces artificial lawns, i.e. man-made surfaces. Even though a grass surface is produced artificially, it is designed to look like a real, natural lawn. It is thus not surprising that the term ‘astroturfing’ refers, quite aptly, to an effort to produce an artificial substitution of something real.

Terminological issues associated with astroturfing lead us to another term – ‘grassroots’. The same dictionary claims that “grassroots” is one way to name “the ordinary people in a society or an organization” [4, p. 347]. ‘Grassroots’ is therefore generally associated with something produced spontaneously, on a natural basis. Dividing the term into two words, ‘grass’ and ‘roots’, we have to conclude it is obvious that the meaning is based on the natural process of growing – from the roots, upwards.

The terms ‘astroturfing’ and ‘grassroots’ have become quickly established in the field of social communication. Seeing their meanings in the context of media communication, the term ‘astroturfing’ is defined as an artificial production of a certain impression, i.e. a way of producing information that is artificially pushed towards public attention. Such an impression is constructed by highly calculated measures, claiming that a certain product, idea or man enjoys the ‘grassroots’ support, the support of common people, which is, obviously, not true [3, p. 169]. To put it simply, ‘astroturfing’ is a process of creating an artificial, false impression that customers, listeners, watchers, readers or Internet users share a certain opinion on a specific topic, product or person; this behaviour of the general public, associated with voicing their shared, prevailing opinions, seems to be spontaneous, natural – even though it is the exact opposite.

On the other hand, the term ‘grassroots’ refers to a situation, when a product, idea or person is, in fact, naturally supported by many common people, e.g. by customers, who recommend the given product to other potential customers on basis of their real positive experience. The product’s success is therefore based on healthy roots and natural foundations [3, p. 169]. If a product becomes very popular and enjoys positive reputation, people will recommend it to each other, praise its qualities and thus provide it with free advertising. Such propagation is highly effective, because it is not misleading; at least not in terms of real people’s sensations and feelings. The differences are clear when we compare customers’ reviews with a standard advertisement. Advertising activities are financed by manufacturers and producers in order to sell products – it is only logical to place emphasis on positive features of the products without

mentioning their shortcomings. However, other people's positive experience with products tends to lead us to actually believe in their favourable aspects.

2.2. Tools of astroturfing

Astroturfing, as a communication phenomenon, is certainly nothing new – its simple, 'primitive' forms have been present in social interaction since the very beginnings of business activities and politics. A few decades ago, one of the most popular forms of astroturfing was to produce (imitate) hundreds or even thousands of handwritten letters sent to television and radio broadcasters or to press newsrooms. By engaging in this activity, companies tried to convince the media that the general public was very much interested in an event or in a product. It was quite natural that the media should have paid a lot of attention to the given matter, as its booming popularity amongst the people (media audiences) was not easy to overlook. As stated by Internet portal MONO.sk, in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (i.e. in the Soviet Union) it was common to publicly read letters that were – allegedly – written by blue-collar workers, praising the political regime. In 1970, American president Richard Nixon paid people to send letters, which expressed their apparent support of his infamous actions, to press newsrooms [Author Collective, *Ukradnuté fotky, falošní blogeri. Aj takto sa robí marketing v prospech Smeru*, http://mono.sk/ukradnute-fotky-falosni-blogeri-aj-takto-sa-robi-marketing-v-prospech-smeru/].

To summarise the issue of 'traditional' astroturfing tools, which have existed prior to emergence of Internet communication (and still are employed occasionally, even though less frequently), we have to mention:

- fake letters and phone calls contacting the media or public institutions that express support of a certain topic, product, person;
- unauthentic phone calls to interactive radio or television programmes;
- presence of paid supporters within the audiences of television programmes, e.g. political affairs programmes;
- attendance of paid 'enthusiasts' as a part of public launching of a new product.

The Internet has started a whole new communication era, as well as whole new levels of astroturfing. Currently, this technique is brought to its perfection within the virtual environment. The web – thanks to its seeming anonymity, unbelievable user friendliness and speed of information transfer – offers 'gold opportunities' to create and implement extensive astroturfing campaigns that may influence more users than ever before. These facts suggest the unpleasant truth; Internet astroturfing is, unfortunately, used very often and very effectively. The online astroturfing techniques include:

- fake weblogs,
- manipulated commentaries posted to online discussion forums and to 'comments' sections below news articles on the Internet,
- unauthentic posts and commentaries published via social networks and placed in the social media environment.

Once more, it is necessary to put emphasis on the fact that the above-stated astroturfing techniques are employed by PR professionals, whole agencies or 'hired' persons – these are mostly fake bloggers or imaginary fans of a specific product who hide their true identity behind anonymous posts and/or made-up names (aliases); they often 'speak' in the name of non-existing or completely uninterested organisations.

2.3. Latest trends in astroturfing

It would be very unreasonable to presume that huge amounts of 'bribed' (false) disputers or bloggers on the Internet are the tip of 'the astroturfing iceberg'. As reported by the Guardian, some big companies now use sophisticated "persona management software" to create armies of virtual astroturfers, complete with fake IP addresses, non-political interests and online histories. Authentic-looking profiles are generated automatically and developed for months or years before being brought into use for a political or corporate campaign. As the software improves, these astroturfing armies will become increasingly difficult to spot, and the future of open debate online could become increasingly perilous [A. Bienkov, *Astroturfing: What is it and why does it matter?*, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/08/what-is-astroturfing].

To characterise this system in more detail, we may point out various facts as follows:

- "persona management software" multiplies the efforts of each astroturfer, creating the impression that there is major support for what a corporation or government is trying to do,
- this software creates all the online furniture a real person would possess: a name, email accounts, web pages and social media. In other words, it automatically generates what look like authentic profiles, making it hard to tell the difference between a virtual robot and a real commentator,
- fake accounts can be kept updated by automatically reposting or linking to content generated elsewhere, reinforcing the impression that the account holders are real and active,
- human astroturfers can then be assigned these 'pre-aged' accounts to create a back story, suggesting that they have been busy linking and retweeting for months. No one would suspect that they came onto the scene for the first time a moment ago, for the sole purpose of attacking an article on climate science or arguing against new controls on salt in junk food,
- with some clever use of social media, astroturfers can, in the security firm's words, "make it appear as if a person was actually at a conference and introduce himself/herself to key individuals as part of the exercise … There are a variety of social media tricks we can use to add a level of realness to fictitious personas." [G. Monbiot, *The need to protect the Internet from 'astroturfing' grows ever more urgent,* https://www.theguardian.com/

environment/georgemonbiot/2011/feb/23/need-to-protect-internet-from-astroturfing]

The given information makes it clear that astroturfing is a very serious communication phenomenon of no small extent and, beyond any doubt, it is a burning, acute problem of the contemporary Internet. We may tell for sure that its use will increase exponentially, as astroturfing is becoming much easier to perform and even much harder to detect – even for media professionals and communication specialists. To expose astroturfing in the future, it will be necessary to develop very advanced detection algorithms able to analyse a substantial amount of data. Nowadays, if Internet astroturfing is performed carefully and flawlessly, there is no chance that a common Internet user is able to detect it.

3. Uncovered cases of astroturfing in Slovakia and abroad

The third chapter aims to offer various uncovered cases of astroturfing. As it is obvious from the above-mentioned facts, astroturfing is being practiced in a number of different communication spheres – we may very likely encounter it while looking for online reviews of hotels, services or specific products. It is also used very frequently in the area of political communication and political marketing.

J. Ftorek's publication mentions an interesting case from the Czech Republic, which demonstrates obvious elements of astroturfing [5]. At the end of 2009, the City Hall of the Prague 1 Municipal District terminated the tenancy contract with one of exotic restaurants located in the City Centre, in a building owned by the city. Subsequently, more than 1000 letters were delivered to the City Hall – their writers claimed that the decision should have been reconsidered as the restaurant was their favourite and extremely popular in general. The City Hall eventually changed their primary decision, even though the reasons leading to revision of the case were not necessarily related to the given negative response voiced by the engaged part of the general public. However, later it became quite clear that the intense public reaction was not spontaneous and authentic at all. It was a rather thorough and cleverly organised event, as the City Hall's administration found out the moment they responded (mandatorily, in accordance with the corresponding legislation, i.e. with the legal act on free access to information) to all writers regarding the final decision. More than a half of the letters (i.e. more than 500 of them) were returned to the City Hall as undeliverable. The addressees or the addresses simply did not exist.

Another notable affair is a case from 2005, when American-Canadian union movement, United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which involved more than one million of supporters employed in the sector of agriculture and food production, started a public awareness campaign called 'Wake up Wal-Mart!'. The aim of this campaign was to criticise Walmart – the largest American retail corporation that operates a chain of hypermarkets, discount department stores and grocery stores, and is the biggest private employer in the

world – for granting their employees only below-standard salaries and minimal health care benefits. Within a short time after that, however, an opposition advocacy group and web community portal named 'Working Families for Walmart' was established. Many people seemingly used this communication channel to show their support of Walmart and to criticise the unionists' efforts. The situation seemed as if the contra-movement was founded spontaneously, on basis of shared opinions of many. A thorough inspection, however, uncovered that the whole action was financed by the Edelman PR firm – the website, which was positioned as a grassroots blog, was actually paid for by Wal-Mart. Both companies received a crushing wave of well-justified criticism. Edelman eventually confessed that the weblogs published via the website had only three different authors, and all of them were Edelman's employees [F. Urban, *Pochybné marketingové praktiky on-line – astroturfing*, https://touchit.sk/pochybne-marketingove-praktiky-on-line-astroturfing/19026].

Internet portal Touchit also claims that astroturfing is spreading immensely in Asia, especially in China. Lately, China has gone through a huge growth in the business sector of consumer electronics and digital equipment. The market segment is gigantic, as it involves more than half a billion of Internet users. However, some time ago a research team affiliated with Nanyang Technological University in Singapore analysed 1.2 million of reviews that were published on the Chinese version of Amazon, one of the largest and oldest global Internet retailers. Those reviews had been – allegedly – written by 650 000 different users, who had reviewed 140 000 products in total. The researchers identified 3118 fake reviewers working alone and 1937 fake reviewers affiliated with larger groups. The said reviewers not only filled the portal with promotional contributions and commentaries propagating products of their employers, but also defamed their competitors. The portal points out that even though such research efforts are highly valuable and more than welcome, they just scratch the surface. The current estimations by various analytic companies presume that 15 to 20% of all online reviews and ratings are artificial [F. Urban, *Pochybné marketingové praktiky on-line – astroturfing*, https://touchit.sk/pochybne-marketingove-praktiky-on-line-astroturfing/19026].

In the light of the global expansion of astroturfing and its frequent employment, Slovakia has witnessed a number of similar cases, even though on a rather smaller scale. At the end of 2015 and during the first months of 2016, i.e. right before parliamentary elections in March 2016, the Slovak Internet environment was flooded by disputers and commentators, who, mostly via Facebook, obviously supported a certain political party. Representatives of the given political party, however, denied their involvement in those activities and did not even acknowledge the existence of the fake disputers apparently supporting their party. This issue was thoroughly addressed by Denník N, one of Slovak broadsheet daily newspapers [F. Struhárik, *Procházkovi v kampani na webe pomáhajú falošní diskutéri. Nie je to prvý raz*, https://dennikn.sk/346480/prochazkovi-kampani-webe-pomahaju-falosni-diskuteri-nie-prvy/].

Radovan Bránik, a well-known member of Slovak blogosphere, jokingly discussed a similar issue – one of his weblogs was dedicated to 'saving' other blogger, who was, according to Bránik's words, suddenly missing [R. Bránik, *Zachráňte blogera Mareka Albrechta!*, http://branik.blog.sme.sk/c/341131/Zachrante-blogera-Mareka-Albrechta.html]. The author described online activities of three bloggers, who were, somehow randomly, interconnected – the portal's administrator claimed that most contributions posted by these bloggers were sent from a single IP address. Schools, where the bloggers in question reportedly studied at that time, did not recognise such persons; representatives of organisations, which the bloggers mentioned as their affiliations, also argued that they had never heard of them or their names. Bránik thus reacted to fictitious, so-called phantom bloggers, whose identities had been created in order to support a certain political party. Even though this particular case dates back to 2013 and all fake profiles have been deleted a long time ago, we may see such activities as a clear case of astroturfing. The topic was later elaborated by a group of journalists, who started to focus on the issue more thoroughly and created a story about various questionable ways of performing political marketing on the Internet [http://mono.sk/ukradnute-fotky-falosni-blogeri-aj-takto-sa-robi-marketing-v-prospech-smeru/].

Slovak Internet portal Modrý koník, which provides mothers and mothers-to-be with a space for discussing pregnancy, children's health and upbringing, addressed the issue of fake accounts related to propagation of products and services in a rather interesting manner. Some time ago, representatives of the portal claimed that it was crucial to preserve the forum's original functions – informal discussions, information exchanges between legitimate visitors, sharing experience. The main issue there was the fact that honest and personal communication activities were being invaded by other people, promoting their services or openly manipulating the discussions. The administrators used to block such contributions; later, whole accounts were blocked or deleted, too. This effort was, however, pointless; the blocked people needed only a few minutes to create new accounts under different names or via other e-mail addresses. The website's administrators therefore tried a different procedure – suspicious contributions were not blocked, but rather flagged as untrustworthy. The beginnings were quite problematic – it was not easy to decide when it was appropriate to use the label 'unreliable user'. After a few months, a couple of basic patterns were found – the administrators were able to uncover 237 fake users. Representatives of every brand, which was promoted by fake disputers posting to Modrý koník, were contacted and informed about the problem. The brands were allowed to erase the suspicious contributions. However, it was not rare that brands themselves were not responsible for the situation. Many fictitious accounts were created by employees of advertising, PR, or SEO agencies without their clients' awareness and consent. Let us summarise the results of this attempt to eliminate astroturfing:

- One third of the brands in question asked the administrators to erase the paid discussion participants from Modrý koník's user database within a week. The remaining brands were at least willing to discuss the problem.
- Most of the given brands reported that their PR or SEO agencies had 'established' the fake users without their request or approval – they wanted to 'have a serious talk' with their agencies.
- Majority of the affected brands acknowledged that the users, who had been labelled as 'unreliable', damaged their business reputation, and wanted to be informed by Modrý koník's administrators immediately if such a situation would emerge in the future.
- In one case, there was a legal dispute between a brand and its agency, as the agency's actions related to astroturfing were considered as breaking their contract regarding mutual cooperation [E. Brindzová, *Modrý koník chce 'zatočiť' so skrytou reklamou. Príspevky už nemaže, ale verejne označí,* http://strategie.hnonline.sk/spravy/782484-modry-konik-chce-zatocit-so-skrytou-reklamou-prispevky-uz-nemaze-ale-verejne-oznaci; M. Šmýkal, *Odhalil som 237 falošných diskutérov: Báli sa utečencov a chválili firmy,* https://dennikn.sk/blog/odhalil-237-falosnych-diskuterov-bali-sa-utecencov-chvalili-firmy/].

4. Conclusion

It is no secret that man is influenced by other people's opinions and experience much more than by advertising. Most of us even perceive advertising as unreliable or not worthy of our attention at all. Considering this point of view, it is undeniable that astroturfing, no matter how ethically and morally questionable it truly is, is also a highly functional persuasion technique. As has been pointed out repeatedly, the ethical inconsistency of such procedures is, however, seen as the crucial problem – not just by academics and media professionals, but also by the general public. Another key aspect of this issue is the fact that uncovering any astroturfing practice damages a company's business reputation substantially. Possible scandals or legal disputes, which go hand in hand with public exposure of astroturfing, may be even more harmful than its benefits (in case it remains hidden from the eyes of the public).

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