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Inauthentic communication, organization-public relationships, and trust: A content analysis of online astroturfing news coverage

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ABSTRACT

Guided by authenticity, organization-public relationship, and relationship management literature, this exploratory study uses content analysis to examine the impact of news coverage surrounding astroturfing as a means to understand whether astroturfing, or inauthentic communication, undermines the authenticity of and trust within online organization-public relationships. Findings suggested that positivity and networking strategies have significant associations with dimensions of trust. Strategic implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Effective public relations is the management of symmetrical, two-way flow of communication between an organization (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992) and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Social media provides public relations professionals with a tool to effectively communicate with their organization's publics through dialogue or reciprocal communication (Bowen, 2013). Inauthentic communication in social media environments damages an organization's online relationship with its publics (Sweetser, 2010) and can have long-lasting effects.

Astroturfing, or inauthentic grassroots communication that disseminates a “predetermined message...in a manner that makes each message appear authentic and original” (Berkman, 2008, p. 7), undermines the authenticity of online organization-public relationships, as well as erodes the trust that results from reputation management strategies. Given that public relations ethics places strong emphasis on transparency, credibility, and authenticity, understanding portrayals of online astroturfing in the news media has practical and normative applications for digital public relations practitioners particularly in relation to which relationship management strategies could be used in attempts to rebuild trust.

Using a content analysis of news articles, this exploratory study aims to examine the impact of news coverage surrounding online astroturfing as a means to understand whether astroturfing, or inauthentic communication, undermines the authenticity of and trust within online organization-public relationships.

2. Literature review

Previous studies examined the effects and ethics of non-disclosure of information (Bowen, 2002, 2016) in social media campaigns in terms of impact on organization-public relationships (Sweetser, 2010). This exploratory study aims to examine the impact of news coverage surrounding astroturfing as a means to understand whether astroturfing undermines the authenticity of and trust within online organization-public relationships.

2.1. Operational definitions

Trust, a key outcome of organization-public relationships, was defined as a “party's level of confidence in and willingness to open

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oneself to the other party” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 3). Perceived authenticity was defined as the “degree to which stakeholders perceive an organization’s offerings and claims to be consistent with its identity and reputation” (Molleda & Jain, 2013, p. 440). Astroturfing was defined as “an attempt by an organization group to spread a predetermined message, but to do so in a manner that makes each message appear authentic and original” (Berkman, 2008, p. 7). Social networking, which will be referred to as social media, was defined as “open source (i.e. publicly accessible) websites that facilitate social interaction and networking, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+ and Renren in China” (Stacks & Bowen, 2013). This study used Ledingham and Brunig (1998)’s definition of organization-public relationship, which was “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity” (p. 62).

2.2. Authenticity

Organizations must reflect authenticity in their communication and relationships with key publics. The *Arthur W. Page Society’s (2007) Authentic Enterprise* argued that effective communications should convey authenticity. In short, effective, organizational communication must reflect the organization’s values (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007). The *Authentic Enterprise* also argued that effective communication by authentic organizations should “shift from changing perceptions to changing realities” (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, p. 16).

Authenticity is challenging for organizations to enact or institutionalize given that perceptions of authenticity are contextual and situational (Edwards, 2010). While the problematic nature of authenticity stems from Sartre’s (1948) approach to existentialism, scholars have called for consistency in organizational actions to help foster greater authenticity (Bowen, 2010b; Molleda & Jain, 2013). Bowen (2010b) argued that authenticity was “being the same on the inside as one appears to be outside an organization” (p. 578). Under Bowen’s (2010b) conceptualization, authenticity was comprised of three different dimensions, including transparency, truthfulness, and genuineness. Furthermore, Bowen (2010b) argued that organizations could be deemed authentic if they are consistently transparent, truthful, and genuine in their interactions with other businesses and their respective publics – a sentiment that Molleda and Jain (2013) echoed. Citing Rawlings and Stoker (2006), Bowen (2010b) extended the three dimensions of authenticity to include sincerity and autonomy when determining if an organization is acting authentically, particularly in terms of whether an organization’s message reflects its actual thoughts, intentions, and actions.

Organizations must be consistent in their actions and communication, so that accurate assessments of the organization’s authenticity can be made by members of key publics (Molleda & Jain, 2013). Perceived authenticity, as Molleda and Jain (2013) claimed, was the “degree to which stakeholders perceive an organization’s offerings and claims to be consistent with its identity and reputation” (p. 440). Similarly, Molleda and Jain (2013) argued that organizations must be self-aware when it comes to their identity and reputation when communicating with stakeholders.

2.3. Astroturfing: inauthentic communication

With roots in political communication (Spicer, 2013), astroturfing has been a subject of study by different scholars (Berkman, 2008; Gilewicz & Allard-Huver, 2013; Jacobs, 2012). Berkman (2008) defined astroturfing as “an attempt by an organization group to spread predetermined message, but to do so in a manner that makes each message appear authentic and original” (p. 7). Several studies have built upon and explicated this definition from different ethical (Bowen, 2002; Gilewicz & Allard-Huver, 2013), reputation management (Sweetser, 2010), and organization-public relationship (Sweetser, 2010) perspectives.

2.3.1. Online astroturfing

Online astroturfing has ambiguous origins. Jacobs (2012) asserted that the rise in astroturfing grew out of a “demand for testimonials and recommendations” (p. 567). Jacobs (2012) attributed this change in the public relations industry to a heightened focus on “getting messages out and influencing decision-making” (p. 567–568).

Online astroturfing may have negative implications for public relations professionals working in online environments such as social media. Jacobs (2012) defined online astroturfing as the “artificial advocacy of a product, service or political viewpoint, to give the appearance of a ‘grassroots’ movement” (p. 567). Under this definition of online astroturfing, Jacobs (2012) asserted that fake testimonials, paid reviews, fake or automated followers and Facebook ‘likes’ qualified as online astroturfing. Given the pervasiveness of the Internet and social media, Jacobs (2012) posited that astroturfing has long-lasting reputational and legal consequences. Furthermore, Jacobs (2012) argued that the distrust that occurs from a discovered instance of astroturfing taints other organizations’ authentic testimonials.

Some scholars (Gilewicz & Allard-Huver, 2013) argue that digital parrhesia is one means of detecting online astroturfing. Gilewicz and Allard-Huver (2013) examined digital ethos as it pertains to the relationship between online pseudonyms, astroturfing, and transparency through an application of Foucault’s parrhesia—“the ability to speak freely” (p. 215). Parrhesia implies that individuals have a duty to “speak the truth, to sincerely believe that truth, and to honestly represent themselves when speaking” (Gilewicz & Allard-Huver, 2013, p. 215). Gilewicz and Allard-Huver (2013) argued that digital parrhesia and all of the public duties associated with it were useful because it helped “distinguish between digital actors who seek to reveal the truth or to conceal it” (p. 218). More so, Gilewicz and Allard-Huver (2013) argued digital parrhesia was a tool for evaluating astroturfing and exposing it.

2.3.2. Front groups

Front groups were defined as “a group of citizens or experts—and preferably a coalition of such groups—which can publicly

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