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## **Commercial Trolling: Social Media and the Corporate Deformation of Democracy**

### **Abstract**

While “trolling” originally named and is today often thought to be the activity of recalcitrant or obstreperous individuals with too much time on their hands or axes to grind about particular issues, a great deal of trolling on today’s social media platforms is crafted not by such individuals but instead by persons (or even computer programs) acting on behalf of (and usually employed by) powerful interests, including corporations, institutions, governments, and lobbying groups, and whose goal is not so much contributing to real exchange of political views, but instead the tilting of the discursive field to make some positions appear reasonable or even popular, and to marginalize other opinions (and those who hold them). Such action is visible in the range of ongoing intrusions by corporate actors into Wikipedia, which is reflected in the elaborate infrastructure the site maintains to police such intrusions, an infrastructure not available to much of the rest of the internet. It is even more obvious in Anti-Global Warming (AGW) discourse, by agents of industry lobbying groups and energy companies, in many locations across the web. Given the ease with which capital can purchase the services of agents to advocate effectively for views that are disfavored by a large portion—at times, such as in the climate change debate, a large majority—of the population, questions are raised about the apparently inherent democratic nature of information distribution on the web, and about what means might be utilized to level the playing field between good-faith contributors to discourse on the one hand, and institutionally-directed contributors on the other.

### **i. “Peer” Production and Network Freedom**

One of the most vaunted and deepest beliefs associated with the internet is that it is “radically democratizing.” Despite its ubiquity, this sentiment means very different things to different people, and is

rarely specified in enough detail to overcome these wide variances in meaning. More often, the variability and even contradictions in meaning are allowed to exist side-by-side, serving best whichever master most needs its work at any given point. At bottom, two of the most fundamental and contradictory meanings of the “democratization” thesis depend on how one understands the nature of the actors who constitute society in general, and the democratic members of the social body in particular. As I discuss in detail in *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (2009), there can be little doubting the fundamental cyberlibertarian truism that “computers empower users.” What must be questioned, though, is just *who* those users are, and how or why we should think that “users” points to a defined, politically-palatable subset of today’s political and economic actors.

On the expansive, left-liberal or populist interpretation of “democratization” and “empowerment,” the presumption is that the empowered users are individuals, perhaps (in the most pointed and utopian of these theories) especially those users who until the advent of computerization had little apparent access to the instruments of democratic power. Clay Shirky, for example, wishes to position himself in public as such a generally liberal thinker, and his two major books, *Here Comes Everybody* and *Cognitive Surplus*, repeatedly extol the empowering effects of “the Internet” for individuals while almost completely avoiding discussion of these empowerment effects for actors other than individuals (or other than individuals with whom “we” agree politically). At times Shirky and others write as if these actors, for unspecified reasons, are prohibited from making use of the technology. Yet in the rightist extremes of the cyberlibertarian version of the same discourse, what is not always immediately apparent is that the *most* powerful actors may be just those for whom empowerment is desirable; that corporations and other forms of concentrated capital absolutely have every right to the same empowering tools as do less-powerful individuals; and that the same liberatory discourse that sounds to left-liberals as if it automatically endows “the underdog” with new freedoms, can sound to right-libertarians (usually advocates who come directly from industry, such as Sebastian Thrun, Peter Thiel, Sean Parker, Mark Zuckerberg, and others) as if it provides even more freedom (especially economic freedom) *to* the powerful actors such as themselves, who according to this ideology, most deserve and need it, their own

present wealth taken as a mark not just of their having attained power and access, but of their degree of entitlement to more of them.

The contradictions in these two understandings of “democratization” are nowhere more in evidence than in the advent and promotion of social media. In the left interpretation, the individuals who benefit from these software tools are precisely the ones who do not yet have strong access to the levers of democratic power; such users and theorists are often the ones who proclaim “the internet” to have an essence or inherent nature, a nature that is tilted toward the less-powerful, away from commercialization and corporate power. They may not hear—indeed, the details rarely need to be spelled out—that it is precisely commercial actors who promote and develop these tools in the first place, and that few controls or mechanisms are put in place (or are even conceivable) that could somehow block corporate power from taking advantage of these tools. These users are often ones who decry such contradictory notions as the “commercialization” of Facebook, the “corruption” of Instagram due to purchase by Facebook (as if it had not been “corrupt” before), and the belief that there once was a non-commercial web that had an essential nature that has somehow been “ruined” by its participation in commerce (e.g., Dash, “Web We Lost”; for more examples see Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*).

Among the most dangerous and jarring of such thinking is found in the work of what I will broadly call apparently left, left-populist, and left-socialist technological determinists. From the overt populism of Clay Shirky’s “organizing without organizations,” to the peer-enabling economics of Yochai Benkler, to the peer-to-peer politics of Michel Bauwens and his p2p Foundation, the starting presumption is that the actors in a democracy are individuals—often, good-intentioned, freely-acting individuals—and that formal or technological empowerment of such individuals is merely or only a matter of “unlocking” or “freeing” the power that some kind of current formal mechanism (one rarely described) currently prohibits. But this is a false picture of the existing political scene, in which capital “speaks” with extremely powerful voices through a myriad of actors, which an extreme emphasis on “openness” and absolute rulelessness—in other words, a completely unbridled free market of communication and ideas, already the guiding assumption of Hayekian libertarian thought—cannot hope to subvert.

Shirky, on his part, simply writes as if the only actors who will organize without organizations are themselves neither organizations nor individuals acting at the behest of organizations, as if the internet were somehow only available to individuals—a fact which, if true, should cause us to wonder why his long list of corporate consulting clients find him such an attractive speaker. Benkler and Bauwens, like other determinists of a more committed anti-capitalist left orientation, follow a more subtle pattern of argumentation, in which one must read carefully to notice when and where it turns out that technological forms will not in and of themselves produce “wealth” (Benkler) or “participatory democracy” (Bauwens), but instead will emerge when specific structural and legal changes to state and corporate power occur—in other words, when corporations and governments decide to *let* the democratic masses have the power that is currently largely held by just those institutions that currently hold the power. On close examination, these often marginal asides vitiate much of the argumentative material offered by these writers, who frame their observations with the claim that “technology is opening everything” but say, by the way, everything will actually open *if the powerful let it happen*—which is nothing more than a description of how things already are. Because calls for the powerful to change their ways end up being so fully buried in technological celebration, they are often missed altogether, allowing the powerful to continue to use technology to expand their own power while individuals go on believing that the opposite is happening.

While this pattern persists throughout any number of discursive spheres in discussion of the changes wrought by digital technology, it is nowhere more important and widespread than in discussions of a central question for any democracy: how the public is to obtain, react to, process, and further distribute information related to current issues of democratic governance. Given that the benefits of digital technology extolled by cyberlibertarians are precisely communicative ones, there can and should be no sphere more impacted by digital transformations than political discourse itself. Benkler writes:

The emergence of a substantial role for nonproprietary production offers discrete strategies to improve human development around the globe. Productivity in the information economy can be sustained without the kinds of exclusivity that have made it difficult for knowledge, information and their beneficial implementations to diffuse

beyond the circles of the wealthiest nations and social groups. (Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 464)

Elsewhere, he even more explicitly connects questions of communication to ones of economic production:

The technological state of a society, particularly the extent to which individual agents can engage in efficacious production activities with material resources under their individual control, affects the opportunities for, and hence the comparative prevalence and salience of, social, market (both price based and managerial), and state production modalities. . . . The emerging restructuring of capital investment in digital networks—in particular the phenomenon of user-capitalized computation and communications capabilities—is at least partly reversing that effect. Technology does not determine the level of sharing. But it does set threshold constraints on the effective domain of sharing as a modality of economic production. Within the domain of the feasible, the actual level of sharing practices will be culturally driven and cross-culturally diverse. (Benkler, “Sharing Nicely,” 278-9)

Again and again, Benkler hedges as to whether the freedoms provided by digital technology will benefit individuals outside of their economic capacity or specifically with regard to it, or both. This ambiguity is reflected in two ways in the title of his major book, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. The main title plays in a troubling way for any leftist interpretation on a book that has been taken as an ur-text for modern conservatism, Adam Smith’s 1776 *Wealth of Nations* (although as many have pointed out a close reading of that text makes it hard to reconcile with modern neoliberal beliefs). In Benkler’s subtitle, “social production” appears to refer to the actions of individuals outside of direct capital investments (e.g., Wikipedia), while the conjoining of “markets” and “freedom” suggests the deep ambiguity in Benkler’s thought. Is the point that markets are becoming more useful to the actors who already use them, or to people now outside of them? Is the point that individuals are becoming “more free” (whatever that might mean), or that those actors with access to markets are gaining

more freedom? In what ways does “freedom” need to be “transformed”—the literal meaning of that part of the subtitle?

These ambiguities are reflected throughout Benkler’s writings, where the ultimate use of peer-based production and its relationship to capital is repeatedly left ambiguous. The same ambiguity is just as pronounced in the work of the P2P Foundation, which aligns itself very clearly with left politics, and yet advocates an absolute kind of freedom and transparency whose benefits to the most powerful actors can only be ignored through willful avoidance. Consider this relatively typical statement of the goals of that foundation by its founder, Michel Bauwens:

Commons-based peer production ... is emerging as a proto-mode of production in which the value is created by productive publics or ‘producers’ in shared innovation commons, whether they are of knowledge, code or design. It occurs wherever people can link up horizontally and without permission to create common value together. It has the most potential as a leverage to transform what is now a proto-mode of production into a real mode of production beneficial to workers and ‘commoners’. To achieve this, strategic and tactical breaks with capitalism are necessary, though not necessarily with market forms. (Bauwens, “Peer-to-Peer Production”)

Bauwens continues:

Our proposal is that the users of the commons should be commons-friendly enterprise structures and not profit-maximising companies. These ethical companies, whose members are the commoners/contributors themselves, would be organised as global open design companies. These would be linked to networks of small factories that produce on the basis of shared values and could more easily adopt open-book management, open recruiting and open supply lines, ensuring transparency to the whole network, in order to create maximum mutual alignment between participants. This is simply an extension of the existing organisational practices of ‘immaterial commons production’, which combines full transparency of all actions with negotiated coordination.

Repeatedly, statements such as this one suggest both that some kind of technical infrastructure already exists that promotes noncommercial production (“horizontalization of human communication,” “the old decaying mode,” etc.), and that legal or administrative changes to existing systems are required to bring this system into being (“Our proposal is that the users of the commons should be commons-friendly enterprise structures and not profit-maximising companies. These ethical companies, whose members are the commoners/contributors themselves, would be organised as global open design companies”), with no clear account of how or why concentrated capital would or should allow these changes to take place. But without those changes, increases in “peer production” can and will be used by the most powerful actors to some degree in proportion with the power they already wield, as Bauwens himself admits (“this really-existing communism is interdependent with the really-existing capitalism of the entrepreneurial coalition that works with that particular commons”; “today’s new forms co-exist with the dominant modality and may at first even strengthen it”). In the worst case, creating the environment where “peers contribute” without ensuring a balanced playing field would appear to have not democratic but *antidemocratic* effects, because the absolute lack of constraints (exactly what is suggested by rightist cyberlibertarians) contains no checks against the increased concentration of power.

This is perhaps easiest to see in the work of those writers and thinkers who do not share Bauwens’s explicit commitment to some form of left-based limits on markets. One of the clearest examples is found in the work of Tapscott and Williams, including their 2006 *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*. That work explicitly adopts the language of peer production found in writers like Benkler and Bauwens:

In the past, collaboration was mostly small scale. It was something that took place among relatives, friends, and associates in households, communities, and workplaces. In relatively rare instances, collaboration approached mass scale, but this was mainly in short bursts of political action. Think of the Vietnam-era war protests or, more recently, about the raucous antiglobalization rallies in Seattle, Turin, and Washington. Never

before, however, have individuals had the power or opportunity to link up in loose networks of peers to produce goods and services in a very tangible and ongoing way.

They go on:

Today the tables are turning. The growing accessibility of information technologies puts the tools required to collaborate, create value, and compete at everybody's fingertips. This liberates people to participate in innovation and wealth creation within every sector of the economy. Millions of people already join forces in self-organized collaborations that produce dynamic new goods and services that rival those of the world's largest and best-financed enterprises. This new mode of innovation and value creation is called "peer production," or peering—which describes what happens when masses of people and firms collaborate openly to drive innovation and growth in their industries.<sup>1</sup> (Tapscott and Williams, *Wikinomics*, 10)

Tapscott and Williams deliberately (and largely toward the beginning of the book) invoke anti-corporatist movements like Vietnam-era antiwar protests and "raucous antiglobalization rallies in Seattle," and "contempt" on the part of "elected representatives," and gesture toward individuals having "power or opportunity to link up in loose networks," which "liberates people to participate in innovation. Careful attention to their book shows that again and again, "liberation" consists in *corporations* finding ways to take advantage of peer production to expand their own power and wealth. Tapscott and Williams's main rhetorical constructions are ones like "unleashing the power of us" (239), but again and again, when the efforts are described, even of nominally "open" products, services, and structures, the reason given to celebrate them is that they make it even more possible for concentrated capital to achieve its commercial goals:

One might think that Amazon would want to closely guard all of its proprietary tools and data. But, in fact, the opposite is true. [Amazon's Web services evangelist Jeff] Barr says,

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<sup>1</sup> The term "peer production" was coined by Yale professor Yochai Benkler. See Yochai Benkler, "Coase's Penguin, or, Linux and the Nature of the Firm," *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 112, (2002-2003). Throughout the book we use peer production and mass collaboration interchangeably. [note in original]

“The more data that we’re able to put in the hands of developers, the more interesting tools, sites, applications will be built, and the more of those that exist, the greater the return to Amazon. We’re going to see more traffic, more clicks, and ultimately we’ll see more purchases. So it’s definitely not like a science experiment.” Which leads us to viral growth. (Tapscott and Williams, *Wikinomics*, 196)

The application of this ideology is so pervasive that Tapscott and Williams seem not even notice that the bottom line to which they keep returning is the one mentioned here: “the greater the return to Amazon.”

## ii. The “Public” Sphere and Communicative Capitalism

There is no doubt that the internet provides a multiplicity of spaces for individuals to “speak”; there is much less clarity that something is provided that did not exist before, as political speech has been considered a vital—perhaps *the* vital—component of democracy and representative government since their inception. One does not generally read accounts of, for example, 18<sup>th</sup> century European or American citizens (or proto-citizens) complaining of their inability to participate in political discussions. On the contrary, the proliferation of widespread political conversation, discourse that was by no means limited to the elites (even if access was barred to a variety of actors, especially those not in the economic, social, racial, or cultural majority), is exactly the hallmark of these eras. Structural defects were explicit in political theory that were eventually undone through any number of mechanisms, including the communication tools that we sometimes now hear must be surpassed for their undemocratic effects (such as Shirky’s attack on television in *Cognitive Surplus*, which, as critics such as Nicholas Carr have pointed out, offers no causal account at all for the many important social and cultural movements that took place during the age of mass media, and tends toward making them sound impossible; see Carr, “Gilligan’s Web”). There is thus more than a little irony to the claim that the web provides a democratic communication sphere that was lacking from the very milieu in which the great theorist of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas, locates it to begin with, while looking away from the many ways in which the

web reproduces or even exacerbates problems of commercial, advertising and PR practices with which Habermas has always been explicitly concerned.

Despite frequently being invoked as the patron saint of the open discourse that is supposed to characterize the digital commons, in reality Habermas repeatedly warns about the saturation of discourse with commercial interests:

The decreasing transparency of the market, usually regarded as the motive for expanded advertising, is in good part actually just the opposite, that is, its consequence.

Competition via advertising that replaced competition via pricing is what above all created a confusing multiplicity of markets controlled by specific companies offering brand name products all the more difficult to compare with one another in terms of economic rationality the more their exchange value is codetermined by the psychological manipulation of advertising. There is a transparent connection between the tendency toward capitalist big business and an oligopolistic restriction of the market, on the one hand; and, on the other, the proverbial soap operas, that is, a flood of advertisement which pervades the mass media's integration-oriented culture as a whole. (Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 189-90)

This clear caution in Habermas has at least at times been heeded by thinkers about internet communication: "Habermas' classical argument that the public sphere is intermittently threatened by — latent — power structures that attempt to inhibit and control the individual is undoubtedly correct. Yet at the same time, groups and individuals can indeed accomplish change by communicative action, and digital communications technology may empower them to do so," writes one recent commentator applying Habermas's thought to the digital (Boeder, "Habermas's Heritage"). But in the main this part of his work is heeded much less than are Habermas's general views about the importance of the public sphere, such that we are almost daily told that the internet finally returns to us the space for individuals to speak that "mass media" took away.

Among the most incisive critics of this view is the political and new media theorist Jodi Dean (see, among her many works on the topic, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* and *Publicity's Secret*). Up against the guiding presumption that online discourse serves (broadly speaking) democratic interests, Dean develops the notion of “communicative capitalism,” suggesting that (as writers like McChesney have long argued from other directions; see *Corporate Media* and *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*) that we have applied market-based thinking to the very stuff of democracy and that in doing so, we are not enhancing but in fact notably curtailing some of the most vital functions of political communication:

The ideal of publicity functions ideologically serving global capitalism’s reliance on networked information technologies and consumers convinced that their every blog post, virtual march, or YouTube upload is a radical act rather than an entertaining diversion. Communicative capitalism mobilizes the faith in exposure animating democracy as the perfect lure. Subjects feel themselves to be active even as their every activity reinforces the status quo. Revelation can be celebrated because it is ineffectual. Its results are medialogical, just another contribution to the circulation of content with little impact on power or policy. (Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 148)

“Communicative capitalism,” as Dean conceives of it,

is a political-economic formation ‘in which there is talk without response, in which the very practices associated with governance by the people consolidate and support the most brutal inequities of corporate-controlled capitalism. One way to understand the hold of communicative capitalism is to consider its animating fantasies, fantasies that, for many on the left, are inextricable from their faith in democracy. (Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 24-5)

Therefore, returning to Habermas’s perspective on the importance of the public sphere and our very different discursive landscape, she writes:

Communication in communicative capitalism, then, is not, as Jürgen Habermas would suggest, “action oriented toward reaching understanding.” In Habermas’s model of communicative action, the use value of a message depends on its orientation. A sender sends a message with the intention that the message be received and understood. Any acceptance or rejection of the message depends on this understanding. Understanding is thus a necessary part of the communicative exchange. In communicative capitalism, however, the use value of a message is less important than its exchange value, its contribution to a larger pool, flow, or circulation of content. A contribution need not be understood; it need only be repeated, reproduced, forwarded. Circulation is the setting for the acceptance or rejection of a contribution. (Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 27)

Again, much of the difficulty in determining how and for whom the public sphere is functioning depends critically on who we take to be the proper actors in liberal democracy. As Mark Poster has written, the very understanding of the terms “public” and “private” emerge from political traditions in such different forms from how they are widely understood today that their differential deployment in what appears to be a single line of discussion is not especially surprising:

The problem we face is that of defining the term “public.” Liberal theory generally resorted to the ancient Greek distinction between the family or household and the polis, the former being “private” and the latter “public.” When the term crossed boundaries from political to economic theory, with Ricardo and Marx, a complication set in: the term “political economy” combined the Greek sense of public and the Greek sense of private since economy referred for them to the governance of the (private) household. The older usage preserved a space for the public in the agora to be sure but referred to discussions about the general good, not market transactions. In the newer usage the economic realm is termed “political economy” but is considered “private.” To make matters worse, common parlance nowadays has the term “private” designating speeches and actions that

are isolated, unobserved by anyone and not recorded or monitored by any machine.

(Poster, “CyberDemocracy”)

To an extent much greater than one would suspect reading the work of left or populist enthusiasts like Shirky and Benkler, the digital world today is not a sphere of relatively equally powered individuals, but rather reflects other contemporary media ecologies in its permeability to the voices of concentrated capital, and may, in its ability to obscure the sources of those voices, provide at least as much power to deform political discourse as it has had in every other contemporary form of media.

### **iii. Conflicts of Interest When Anyone Can Edit**

Few sites make the stakes of this issue as clear as does Wikipedia. Its well-known slogan, “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” is often taken as a hallmark of democratization, via the characteristically hopeful reading of “anyone” that mostly means amateur individuals working for “love” or “care” (Shirky, “Wikipedia”). More importantly, Wikipedia is often taken by cyberlibertarians as a microcosm of the internet as a whole, particularly with regard to political and cultural communication; in many ways I think that this is a correct assumption, but that the dynamics of Wikipedia provide not just hopeful but many cautionary lessons about the nature of contemporary peer production and political communication. In many ways, Wikipedia is a model of online communication and peer production. What it shows is that the internet as public sphere is saturated by and with actors who operate out of “care” and “love,” *and* actors other than those for whom individual “care” and “love” are the primary interests—instead, the primary interests are those of commercial entities, capital as such, powerful institutions, and others who are typically not thought of as Wikipedia’s “anyone.” Wikipedia has had to spend considerable resources within its relatively typical organizational structure and unusually *closed* contributory system (in comparison to the internet as a whole) to stave off the efforts of these actors. The lack of such an organizational structure, and the infeasibility of developing such infrastructures for the internet at large, along with the continued vigilance necessary to maintain even the incomplete democratized contributor base of Wikipedia, suggest that the internet in general is more like the

commercialized market of ideas that concerns critics like Habermas and McChesney, than it is like the public sphere of democratic interaction advertised by cyberlibertarians.

From fairly early in its history, Wikipedia has been deeply affected by the presence of commercial and other professional interests who want to take advantage of its openness to promote or promulgate points of view that, on the surface, do not live up to its avowed goal of “neutrality.” The use of false accounts (including “sockpuppets”; see “Sockpuppets”) has typically been reviewed in the literature primarily as reflecting intense political and personal conflicts, affecting for example pages on high-profile individuals such as political leaders, highly controversial topics like abortion and climate change, and topics where alternate or “conspiratorial” views exist alongside “conventional” or “accepted” narratives such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the September 11, 2001 attacks (see, e.g., O’Neil, “Wikipedia and Authority”; Dean, *Publicity’s Secret*). Yet an examination of Wikipedia’s documentation of these matters reveals a related but much less well-known problem—one to which Wikipedia has developed a series of fairly effective countermeasures—of commercial and institutional bodies attempting to deliberately shape Wikipedia entries in their own interests, taking literally the notion that “anyone” can edit the encyclopedia, despite the relatively clear prohibitions on certain forms of contributions instituted on the site.

Such attempts to steer Wikipedia take at least two important forms. One, which may on the surface seem the more benign of the two, is exemplified by corporations who consider Wikipedia to be like any other location on the web, and therefore a location that should or even must be controlled by its corporate communications unit (as are places such as a corporation’s own URL, its Facebook and Twitter pages, sites where its products are sold, and locations for its advertisements). Arguably, it is part of a public corporation’s fiduciary duty to correct inaccurate information about itself; while this does not necessarily (or even legally) mean that it must correct misinformation itself, the desire to control every aspect of information displayed about itself seems quite natural. A second, prominent, and apparently less benign phenomenon, is the desire of interested parties to deform Wikipedia coverage of various topics to reflect underlying agendas at the direction of institutions, corporations, or even concentrations of capital

that want to deliberately distort what Wikipedia attempts to enforce with some strictness: its “neutral point of view” (NPOV). NPOV “means representing fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible without bias, all significant views that have been published by reliable sources. All Wikipedia articles and other encyclopedic content must be written from a neutral point of view. NPOV is a fundamental principle of Wikipedia and of other Wikimedia projects. This policy is nonnegotiable and all editors and articles must follow it” (“Wikipedia: Neutral Point of View”).

While in its early days Wikipedia was able to maintain a relatively informal policy with regard to the identity of editors and to treat examples of deliberate distortion of pages on an as-needed basis, fairly quickly these issues began to emerge as ones of significant ongoing concern, requiring both formal guidelines and enforcement mechanisms. Wikipedia’s tools for combating what is too blithely called “vandalism” are well-remarked in the critical literature and even lauded as examples of “community maintenance” of open process (see Carr, “Questioning Wikipedia”; Ford, “Missing Wikipedians”; Mathieu, “Wikipedia and Authority”; Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* and “Wikipedia”), but its means for dealing with commercial speech are less well-known. In fact, in response to the ongoing efforts of commercial entities (as well as other actors with a vested interest in a given topic, such as individuals wanting to edit or create their own Wikipedia pages), Wikipedia maintains detailed conflict of interest guidelines, the enforcement of which is an important activity of both its volunteer editors and paid staff:

Wikipedia is known for being “the encyclopedia that anyone can edit”.<sup>[1]</sup> However the encyclopedia has a strict neutrality policy; in 2007, the policy stated that debates are “described, represented, and characterized, but not engaged in.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Wikipedia’s conflict of interest guideline states (as of 2012) that a conflict of interest (COI) is an “incompatibility between the aim of Wikipedia, which is to produce a neutral, reliably sourced encyclopaedia, and the aims of an individual editor,” and that “COI editing involves contributing to Wikipedia in order to promote your own interests or those of other individuals, companies, or groups. Where advancing outside interests is more important to an editor than

advancing the aims of Wikipedia, that editor stands in a conflict of interest.”<sup>31</sup> (“Wikipedia: Paid Editing on Wikipedia”)

The policy extends not merely to overt conflicts of interest (i.e., modifying information overtly to skew it in favor of oneself or one’s employer), but to paid advocacy of any sort, which is banned in general:

Paid advocacy is any contribution or edit to Wikipedia content that advocates for your employer’s point of view. It includes, but is not limited to, edits made by public relations firms, companies and nonprofit organizations, and editors paid to edit Wikipedia to improve an individual’s or organization’s image. Advocacy of any sort within articles is prohibited by our policies on neutral point of view and what Wikipedia is not, and paid advocacy is considered to be an especially egregious form of advocacy. Paid advocates are **very strongly discouraged** from direct article editing, and should instead propose changes on the talk page of the article in question. (“Wikipedia: Conflict of Interest”)

“Paid advocacy” is not quite the same thing as “paid editing”; in some cases, though infrequently, the latter is permissible:

Paid editing is the practice of accepting money to edit Wikipedia. Paid advocacy, that is, being paid to promote something or someone on Wikipedia, is a subset of paid editing. If you intend to participate in paid editing, transparency and neutrality are key. Editing in a way that biases the coverage of Wikipedia or that violates our core policies is not acceptable. (“Wikipedia: Conflict of Interest”)

Wikipedia attempts to make the distinction as clear as possible; the policy presented under the heading “Paid Advocacy, Public Relations, and Marketing” on the same Conflict of Interest page reads:

If either of the following applies to you:

1. you are receiving monetary or other benefits or considerations to edit Wikipedia as a representative of an organization (whether directly as an employee or contractor of that organization, or indirectly as an employee or contractor of a firm hired by that organization for public relations purposes), or

2. you expect to derive monetary or other benefits or considerations from editing Wikipedia (for example, by being an owner, officer, or other stakeholder of an organization; or by having some other form of close financial relationship with a topic you wish to write about),

then you are very strongly discouraged from editing Wikipedia in areas where those external relationships could reasonably be said to undermine your ability to remain neutral.

If you have a financial connection to a topic (as an employee, owner or other stakeholder), you are advised to refrain from editing articles directly, and to provide full disclosure of the connection. You may use the article talk pages to suggest changes, or the {{request edit}} template to request edits. Requested edits are subject to the same editorial standards as any other, and may not be acted upon.

The writing of “puff pieces” and advertisements is strictly prohibited. (“Wikipedia: Conflict of Interest”)

While these guidelines may appear to rule out any editing of Wikipedia entries by paid individuals, in fact this is not the case; a whole range of editorial activities are allowed by being construed as “non-controversial edits,” though Wikipedia reserves the right for its editors to overrule contributors as to the status of edits as controversial or not. Naturally enough, this requires Wikipedia to maintain a vigorous enforcement practice to ensure that entries meet its COI guidelines. This enforcement is knowingly made more complicated by Wikipedia’s preference for pseudonymity in editor nicknames, a policy maintained because “use of a real name... may make a contributor more vulnerable to issues such as [harassment](#), both on and off Wikipedia” (“Wikipedia: Username Policy”).

As an example of Wikipedia’s continual need to uncover cases of COI and the complex matter of enforcement, consider its “Wikipedia Talk: Paid Operatives” page, which despite its general title is in fact devoted almost entirely to a single case of possible COI, exemplary for the amount of Wikipedian attention it received and the low stakes of the actual content that may or may not reflect a COI. The case involves a user with the Wikipedia handle [Joedesantis](#), a name chosen deliberately to avoid COI and

Wikipedia advice by reflecting the user's real name, Joe DeSantis. DeSantis was the Communications Director for the unsuccessful 2012 Newt Gingrich Presidential campaign, which ran from 2011 through May, 2012. DeSantis worked as Gingrich's Communications Director (and in similar capacities) prior to his Presidential campaign, and DeSantis's Wikipedia user page clearly indicated this employment status. As of May 2011, DeSantis's user page read, in its entirety:

I am the Online Communications Director for Newt Gingrich's presidential campaign. While I recognize I am not a dispassionate third party, I try to make all edits conform to Wikipedia rules and guidelines. Often I will post edit requests rather than creating language myself due to [Wikipedia:COI](#). I created this profile to submit edits and post edit requests to his and related articles while being fully open about my affiliation.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User:Joedesantis&oldid=430186322>

Obviously this disclosure goes far and above Wikipedia's requirements and meets head-on the spirit of its COI guidelines; DeSantis's overt disclosure is coupled with an explicit reticence to edit directly pages with which he has any close connection, and the oversight of pages for which editors do have a COI is expressly allowed within the Wikipedia guidelines; such editors are simply asked to post requests for information to be changed on a page's Talk page so that editors without a COI can decide whether or not the proposed changes do or do not reflect NPOV. In addition, DeSantis's contribution record shows that he rarely if ever contributed to pages on which he did have a COI, although he more frequently made remarks on their Talk pages (which, again, conforms to COI guidelines), generally about the accuracy of relatively fine details.

Despite the lack of any specific controversial content added or changed by DeSantis, in January 2012 a user with the Wikipedia handle [Buster7](#) initiated a series of complaints against DeSantis in a number of Wikipedia COI fora, starting with the [Conflict of Interest: Noticeboard](#), where Buster7 asks:

Is there a guideline or a policy or at least some history of what to do about a paid political operative editing (or even discussing entries into the article on the talk page) about the candidate for which he is the Communications Director. ... Will the readers of the article know that it is

written by the Gingrich Campaign? ...Buster Seven Talk 17:15, 24 January 2012 (UTC)

(“Wikipedia: Conflict of Interest—Noticeboard, Archive 55”)

Buster7 does not identify any particular edits made by Joedesantis that appear to violate COI guidelines, but rather objects to DeSantis’s attempts to oversee in any way the content of pages related to Gingrich. This objection clearly falls outside the COI guidelines, as several Wikipedia editors are quick to point out; indeed, this is clear enough that quickly the issue becomes not whether DeSantis violated those guidelines but whether Buster7 violated Wikipedia policies and guidelines on harassment, including improper use of its COI mechanisms (called “canvassing”) to target an editor with whom, it emerges, Buster7 may have strong and fundamental political disagreements that have nothing to do with any specific conduct on DeSantis’s part. The request for COI review of DeSantis was marked “resolved” the day after Buster7 raised it, with the resolving Wikipedia administrator writing that “the guidelines clearly invite COI editors to use article talk pages. As a result, it would be inappropriate to discourage the editor from doing so on the basis of a COI,” and another administrator writing that

Someone with an up-front COI, who even discloses their real-life identity, is sticking closely to a strict interpretation of our COI guidelines, voluntarily restricting himself to the discussion page, and not being disruptive in the process? Are you asking for which barnstar to hand out? By the way, we’re all “mere editors”, there’s nothing a [clueful](#) editor can’t do that an admin or crat would bring to that discussion. You’re asking how the article can remain neutral, that’s up to the people actually editing it, which doesn’t include the person with a COI. (“Wikipedia: Conflict of Interest—Noticeboard, Archive 55”)

With these comments and the administrative decision, the situation would appear to be resolved, although it is important to note that Buster7’s original complaint, while clearly not falling under Wikipedia’s COI guidelines, does raise troubling questions about the efficacy of those guidelines; Buster7 may in fact be correct that “even if Joe just comments at the talk page that alone will influence editors and future consensus discussions and all future editing input generated from the talk pages”—that is to say that there may be very real ideological consequences of paid advocates monitoring pages in which they have vested

interests, even if those consequences cannot be identified in terms of discrete items on an individual page but rather in contextual effects and in terms of items that are included or not included based on the reluctance of unaffiliated parties to get into editing wars with the paid advocates who indicate that they monitor the page on a regular basis. Thus even Wikipedia's rich and complex COI guidelines and enforcement mechanism may not eliminate various forms of interested deformation of its content despite many overt efforts to maintain NPOV.

However, the conflict does not in fact end with this resolution. Buster7 goes on to repeat his complaint in several other Wikipedia fora, including Jimmy Wales's [User Talk](#) page. Clearly now indicating that he does not have a specific problem with DeSantis or his conduct, Buster7 turns his attention to the underlying COI guidelines: "Paid political operatives are not just advocates. They are not Public Relations folks working for Campbells Soup." `Buster Seven Talk 12:44, 7 February 2012 (UTC) These are serious, substantive issues, which raise questions about the nature of the democratic/anarchic community of contributors and editors that comprise Wikipedia, and Buster7's specific concern about how the hundreds of thousands of readers/visitors to the site will understand its content is well-taken: indeed, the default interpretation of "everyone" in "everyone can edit" as pointing specifically at volunteer individuals unaffiliated with sponsoring organizations would appear to be at odds with even the minimal monitoring of an electoral candidate's campaign page instanced by this particular controversy; the presumption for most users may be that Wikipedia's apparent NPOV means that nobody with any vested interest in the page has any editorial input into it whatsoever, despite the relatively obvious truth that "everyone" means *everyone*.

Buster7's objections to the role played by Joedesantis eventually become the greater target of action within the Wikipedia administrative and editorial community. Thus the page to which I referred in beginning this example, "[Wikipedia Talk: Paid Operatives](#)," is not a part of the general administrative apparatus of Wikipedia (pages with the prefix Wikipedia, including several referenced above such as "[Wikipedia: Neutral Point of View](#)"), but is instead an "essay" started by Buster7 and devoted almost exclusively to discussion of his charges against Joedesantis and charges of other Wikipedia editors and

administrators (not including Joedesantis, who stays out of the conversation) against Buster7 for overzealous animus toward Joedesantis: “BusterSeven’s creation of this attack page against Joe DeSantis shows a fundamental misunderstanding of COI policy, namely, that being a “Paid Operative” is an automatic violation of the policy. —Kenatipo speak! 19:39, 14 February 2012 (UTC)” (“Wikipedia Talk: Paid Operatives”) Here Kenatipo’s own political leanings are laid on the table, and his/her objections to Buster7’s general issue—since, it turns out, Joe DeSantis is the only Wikipedia editor at the time the essay was assembled to disclose such an overt COI and to attempt openly to comply with Wikipedia’s COI guidelines—take on an interested and personal tone themselves. No action is taken against any of the parties involved, and despite the hostility perceived by some Wikipedians by Buster7 for Joedesantis, very little is done about the underlying issue, although Buster7 continues to raise it and some other Wikipedians acknowledge it is an area of concern. This page alone runs to over 8000 words.

My point in rehearsing this long and relatively undramatic story is threefold: first, it demonstrates the extremely fine-grained representational questions raised by “open” communicative structures when the assumption is dropped that all contributors will be disinterested and unsponsored; second, it shows the tremendous and impressive policy and enforcement structure maintained by Wikipedia to ensure that this resource, now of vital importance to human knowledge itself, remains relatively neutral and objective (however one construes the meanings of these highly contested terms); third, but perhaps most importantly, it shows the mechanisms necessary to maintain this neutrality in any open communicative space, and that they *do not exist on the web at large* (hence the need for Wikipedia to develop them in such detail). This is to say that, as a microcosm, Wikipedia shows that communication on the web is under constant appropriation by capital and power, and that even when tools are specifically developed to stave off this appropriation, the exact measures necessary are themselves not altogether clear and not easily implemented.

This last point is made more strongly by looking at the continual onslaught of commercial and powerful interests on Wikipedia’s NPOV, and Wikipedia’s only partial success in managing it or even developing an effective management regime. Because of its preference for pseudonymous user names,

identification of paid Wikipedia editors is difficult to begin with; because many organizations do not necessarily identify their IP addresses with directly attributable identities, and paid editors may of course use web resources not directly provided by the entity paying them, it is not easy to determine when and whether interested parties are contributing to Wikipedia, and if so, what exactly they are doing. The [Wikipedia: Conflict of Interest—Noticeboard](#) features ongoing investigations of possible COI violations, ranging from partisan political editing and vandalism to various kinds of paid advocacy; the page was started in December 2006 and as of January 2013 has [58 pages of archives](#), reflecting ongoing COI problems of every sort and, in most cases, the successful resolution of these problems (or non-problems).

While this apparently successful policing of the Wikipedia community demonstrates that it is possible to maintain something like political neutrality in a widely distributed (though also carefully and, in part, centrally-administered) community, there is also evidence that this success is incomplete:

In 2007, Virgil Griffith, a [Caltech](#) computation and neural-systems graduate student, created a searchable database that linked changes made by anonymous Wikipedia editors to companies and organizations from which the changes were made.<sup>[29]</sup>

Most of the edits WikiScanner found were minor or harmless,<sup>[29]</sup> but the site was mined to detect the most controversial and embarrassing instance of conflict of interest edits.<sup>[32]</sup> These instances received media coverage worldwide. Included among the accused were the [Vatican](#),<sup>[33][34]</sup> the CIA,<sup>[29][34][35]</sup> the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#),<sup>[30]</sup> the US [Democratic Party](#)'s Congressional Campaign Committee,<sup>[34][36]</sup> the [US Republican Party](#),<sup>[31][36]</sup> Britain's [Labour Party](#),<sup>[36]</sup> Britain's [Conservative Party](#),<sup>[31]</sup> the [Canadian government](#),<sup>[37]</sup> [Industry Canada](#),<sup>[38]</sup> the Department of Prime Minister, Cabinet, and Defence in Australia,<sup>[39][40][41][42][43][44]</sup> the [United Nations](#),<sup>[45]</sup> the [US Senate](#),<sup>[46]</sup> the US [Department of Homeland Security](#),<sup>[47]</sup> the US [Environmental Protection Agency](#),<sup>[47]</sup> Montana Senator [Conrad Burns](#),<sup>[29]</sup> Ohio Governor [Bob Taft](#),<sup>[48]</sup> the [Israeli government](#),<sup>[49]</sup> [Exxon Mobil](#),<sup>[50]</sup> [Walmart](#),<sup>[29][50]</sup> [AstraZeneca](#), [Diebold](#),<sup>[29][31][36]</sup> [Dow Chemical](#),<sup>[31]</sup> [Disney](#),<sup>[37]</sup> [Dell](#),<sup>[50]</sup> [Anheuser-Busch](#),<sup>[51]</sup> [Nestlé](#),<sup>[31]</sup> [Pepsi](#), [Boeing](#),<sup>[31]</sup> [Sony Computer Entertainment](#),<sup>[52]</sup> [EA](#),<sup>[53]</sup> [SCO Group](#),<sup>[51]</sup> [MySpace](#),<sup>[31]</sup> [Pfizer](#),<sup>[47]</sup> [Raytheon](#),<sup>[47]</sup> [DuPont](#),<sup>[54]</sup>

Anglican and Catholic churches,<sup>[31]</sup> the [Church of Scientology](#),<sup>[31][37]</sup> the [World Harvest Church](#),<sup>[48]</sup> [Amnesty International](#),<sup>[31]</sup> the [Discovery Channel](#),<sup>[31]</sup> [Fox News](#),<sup>[36][55]</sup> [CBS](#), [The Washington Post](#), the [National Rifle Association](#),<sup>[31]</sup> [News International](#),<sup>[31]</sup> [Al Jazeera](#),<sup>[47]</sup> [Bob Jones University](#),<sup>[47]</sup> and [Ohio State University](#).<sup>[48]</sup>

Although the edits correlated with known IP addresses, there was no proof that the changes actually came from a member of the organization or employee of the company, only that someone had access to their network.<sup>[34]</sup> (“Wikipedia: Conflict of Interest Editing on Wikipedia”) WikiScanner revealed that, unlike Joe DeSantis, many organizations appear to allow, or not to stop, or even to encourage or direct their employees and associates to edit materials in which they have a direct interest. The list of editors operating from numerical IPs exposed by WikiScanner—many of which also have available named internet addresses (such as cia.gov, sony.com, etc.), suggesting that at least some deliberate deception is involved—was, as Wikipedia’s own summary suggests, quite large, and the number of edits they performed was larger. While many of the edits were minor, their apparent origins in the organizations sponsoring the editors suggests forms of systematic non-neutrality akin to those Buster<sup>7</sup> alleges in the more overt case of Joedesantis: that readers of Wikipedia expect that the encyclopedia is written, curated and generally overseen by those without vested interests in the topics they cover, when in fact in many cases this may not be true.

Furthermore, WikiScanner reportedly uncovered quite a few instances of editing that do not appear innocent at all: “In one example he gives, a computer linked to an IP address registered to the Dow Chemical company is seen to have [deleted a passage](#) on the Bhopal chemical disaster of 1984, which occurred at a plant operated by Union Carbide, now a wholly-owned Dow subsidiary.” (Blakely, “Exposed”) Unsurprisingly, the WikiScanner project met with significant praise from the Wikipedia community: “Wikipedia co-founder<sup>[27]</sup> [Jimmy Wales](#) spoke enthusiastically about WikiScanner, noting in one source that ‘It brings an additional level of transparency to what’s going on at Wikipedia’ and stating in another that it was ‘fabulous and I strongly support it.’<sup>[12][28]</sup>” (“WikiScanner”). However, the long-term efficacy of WikiScanner is unclear, as its utility depends on a wide range of unpredictable factors,

including reliable association tables between IP addresses and their named institutional owners, and even then can only catch examples of paid editors working under conditions that are now known to be detectable (in other words, it provides more incentive for paid advocates to work off-site from their sponsors). WikiScanner and a successor project variously called WikiScanner Classic, WikiScanner2, or WikiWatcher ran on and off through 2011 (“WikiScanner”). In December 2012, a new site called WikiWatchdog (<http://wikiwatchdog.com/>) appeared, replicating the WikiScanner functionality. The site provides access to the entire database of pages anonymously edited from IPs belonging to corporations and institutions; the bulk of these edits occur in the past, and most of the organizations named in press coverage no longer appear to actively edit in this manner, although the site does find some very recent edits. What is unclear, of course, is the volume of edits that occur that can’t be detected by the now well-publicized and inherently detectable means on which WikiScanner and its offspring focus.

Throughout its history, Wikipedia has been beset by the efforts of “interested” or POV editors from all sides and of all sorts. The most famous cases of what is typically termed “vandalism” of Wikipedia have occupied most of the press attention, involving clearly committed ideologues warring over climate-related articles, for example (which in 2009 caused Wikipedia, in its pursuit of NPOV, to ban a pro-climate change writer from its pages; see Bethell, “Wikipedia”; for a very recent example, see Noswitz, “Meet the Climate Change Denier”), and even more famously over highly controversial topics like abortion, scientology, and so on. While such high-profile cases reveal both the political pressure exerted on Wikipedia from all sides and the efficacy of the mechanisms developed by the site to deal with them, they can draw our attention away from the possibly more subtle but not necessarily less effective efforts of interested editors to steer a variety of issues away from Wikipedia’s declared neutrality, whether for local benefit (see, e.g., Blue, “Corruption in Wikiland”) or more global ones. When seen as a microcosm, however, commercial trolling on Wikipedia must make us wonder if the playing field in social production and political communication on the web can possibly be level.

#### iv. Astroturf and the Ecology of Climate Change Discourse

Because the web as a whole is not a closed community and has no current enforcement mechanism forcing individuals to identify themselves by their real names—although there have been efforts to develop such policies, and some sites, notably Facebook, overtly promote (although in practice only partly enforce) them—it is not even possibly to gauge accurately the amount of activity paralleling paid advocacy on Wikipedia that takes place on the web at large. (Notably, in some jurisdictions including some EU countries such as Germany, mandating users display their real names explicitly violates the law, out of privacy concerns; see Lomas, “Facebook Users.”) Given the close and careful control of these matters on Wikipedia we must assume that the practice is much more widespread in the unregulated wilds of social media. Of course, for the most part, no other site parallels Wikipedia in its centrality as a source of apparently neutral information, so the targets of discourse are not even immediately apparent. Yet if the Wikipedia example is at all a representative microcosm, it seem hard to deny the possibility that online discourse is thoroughly infiltrated by commercial, institutional, and other interested speakers who may not necessarily disclose their interest in the causes about which they speak; their use of public relations techniques not ordinarily employed by individuals; or their goals in contributing to discourse. Again, my goal is not to contest the view that the internet provides a space for political discourse, or that it necessarily makes that discourse *less* effective or *more* compromised by commercial actors than it was prior to the internet; my goal is to destabilize the claim that there is an inherently democratizing effect of internet discourse that effectively immunizes that sphere from the corporate and institutional interests with which we are familiar from other discursive spheres.

Although its rise is contemporaneous with the web, there is no particular reason to think that the practice known as “Astroturfing” is connected with networked communication. It is, however, a prominent form of contemporary deformation of political discourse, one whose effects not just on political discourse but on political decision-making, especially in the United States, can hardly be underestimated, and whose true dimensions remain largely unknown:

Astroturfing refers to political, advertising or public relations campaigns that are designed to mask the sponsors of the message to give the appearance of coming from a disinterested, [grassroots](#) participant. Astroturfing is intended to give the statements the credibility of an independent entity by withholding information about the source's financial connection. The term is a derivation of [AstroTurf](#), a brand of synthetic carpeting designed to look like natural grass. (“Astroturfing”)

Astroturfing encompasses a wide range of online and offline activities; Wikipedia includes the following among the techniques used online:

Organizations may astroturf through the use of [front groups](#) that pretend to serve the public's interests, while actually being operated by a discreet sponsor.<sup>[16]</sup> Front groups may emphasize voices of dissent and instill doubt about the credibility of expert consensus in order to create uncertainty on an issue that threatens the sponsor's business.<sup>[17]</sup> Fake blogs are sometimes used to give the appearance of providing genuine testimony, while being funded or operated by a commercial or political interest.<sup>[17]</sup>

Some astroturfers deploy [sockpuppeting](#) techniques, where a single person creates multiple identities to give the appearance of grassroots support. Sockpuppets may post positive reviews about a product, attack participants that criticize the organization, or post negative reviews and comments about competitors, under fake identities.<sup>[19][18]</sup> (“Astroturfing”)

Astroturfing is of significant concern through all parts of political discourse, and it clearly encompasses a variety of commercial and PR speech strategies that have been deployed by commercial and concentrated political interests since there have been such interests. At the same time the current strategies suggest new levels of scientific analysis and ways to manipulate political consent and consensus, issues that have troubled democracies that rely on free expression for the consideration of political issues for a long time (see, e.g., Chomsky, *Media Control*; Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*; McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* and *Corporate Media*). Nevertheless, the internet appears to provide a variety of means for increasing covert steering of political discourse that exceeds earlier forms of propaganda

(because it is so much easier to “speak in public” while not disclosing one’s identity, let alone one’s vested or paid interests) in terms of tactical and strategic calculation, hiddenness from public view, and overall efficacy.

There may be no more important political issue in our world today than climate change, and few topics are discussed as briskly online. Yet despite what is typically called an “unprecedented” consensus among world scientists about the causes and effects of climate change, the forces arguing against the thesis are loud and persuasive enough that most democratic bodies have been effectively stymied from the kinds of broad actions that scientists argue are necessary to ameliorate the problem. One of the (many) outspoken voices of concern about climate change is the British writer George Monbiot, who frequently writes editorials for the UK *Guardian* newspaper that generate hundreds of comments both for and against his positions. Monbiot writes about the effects of astroturfing in his own publications and in discussions of climate change generally:

[I first came across online astroturfing in 2002](#), when the investigators Andy Rowell and Jonathan Matthews looked into a series of comments made by two people calling themselves Mary Murphy and Andura Smetacek. They had launched ferocious attacks, across several internet forums, against a scientist whose research suggested that Mexican corn had been widely contaminated by GM pollen.

Rowell and Matthews found that one of the messages Mary Murphy had sent came from a domain owned by the Bivings Group, a PR company specialising in internet lobbying. An article on the [Bivings website](#) explained that “there are some campaigns where it would be undesirable or even disastrous to let the audience know that your organisation is directly involved ... Message boards, chat rooms, and listservs are a great way to anonymously monitor what is being said.

Once you are plugged into this world, it is possible to make postings to these outlets that present your position as an uninvolved third party.” (Monbiot, “AstroTurf Libertarians”)

Monbiot calls these commentators “astroturf libertarians,” and the name seems to me apposite for several reasons: it points not only to the explicit political position for which many of the commentators advocate,

but to the notion of democratic discourse itself entailed by the formal qualities of their contributions: as in the US Supreme Court decision in the *Citizens United* case (see “Citizens United,” Raskin, ““Citizens United””), according to which “money is speech,” and therefore prohibitions on political spending equal unconstitutional constraints on speech per se (despite the terribly muting effect that heavily-financed voices can have on individuals of ordinary means), at least some of the promoters of these methods see it as a true realization of free speech rights.

Given their relative lack of visibility, the effects of astroturfing on online discourse are difficult to judge empirically. Monbiot offers some anecdotal observations:

Reading comment threads on the *Guardian*'s sites and elsewhere on the web, two patterns jump out at me. The first is that discussions of issues in which there's little money at stake tend to be a lot more civilised than debates about issues where companies stand to lose or gain billions: such as climate change, public health and corporate tax avoidance. These are often characterised by amazing levels of abuse and disruption. ...

The second pattern is the strong association between this tactic and a certain set of views: pro-corporate, anti-tax, anti-regulation. Both traditional conservatives and traditional progressives tend to be more willing to discuss an issue than these rightwing libertarians, many of whom seek to shut down debate.

So what's going on? I'm not suggesting that most of the people trying to derail these discussions are paid to do so, though I would be surprised if none were. I'm suggesting that some of the efforts to prevent intelligence from blooming seem to be organised, and that neither website hosts nor other commenters know how to respond. (Monbiot, “AstroTurf Libertarians”)

The goal of the climate change denial movement is not actually the production of convincing science or even real evidence that disproves the thesis that man-made carbon outputs are dramatically changing the climate. As in the case of the tobacco industry's campaign against anti-tobacco legislation, the goal of institutions of concentrated capital vested in the industry in question is specifically to sow doubt so as to paralyze or significantly impede efforts to take action (on these and many related points, in

addition to Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*, also see Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*). This strategy has been developed and promulgated by operatives at the highest level of the political right in the United States:

In 1994, according to a leaked memo, the [Republican](#) strategist [Frank Luntz](#) advised members of the Republican Party, with regard to climate change, that “you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue” and “challenge the science” by “recruiting experts who are sympathetic to your view.”<sup>[9]</sup> (“Climate Change Denial”)

The effort is to affect public opinion, and given the global political dominance of the United States, it is no surprise that a significant change in US opinion about climate change has accompanied a near-total prevention of efforts to combat it:

The proportion of Americans believing that “global warming is exaggerated in the media” rose from 1998 to 2004, dropped from 2005 to 2007,<sup>[12]</sup> and continued to rise from then on.<sup>[16]</sup> 35% of Americans believe that it’s very likely some scientists have falsified research data to support their own theories and beliefs while 26% say not at all.<sup>[24]</sup> The U.S. is also an exception regarding public opinion on the cause of global warming, with nearly half of the population (47%, the largest in any country) attributing global warming to natural causes.<sup>[25]</sup> (“Public Opinion on Climate Change”)

What is especially notable about these efforts is that it is not “winning the argument” that is important to those who manipulate online discussion. Instead, the mere salting of a discourse with contrary opinion significantly guides how a substantial portion of the reading community responds to it. One need not even necessarily agree in one’s conscious or rational mind with the perspectives advanced; the mere presence of certain forms of contrary opinion create the doubt and distrust that are central to the agenda being promoted. In one study specifically designed to measure these effects, a team of researchers sought to gauge the effects of astroturf discourse on the readers of online content about climate change. Working with a group of undergraduate students at a “enrolled in accounting classes at a large Canadian university,” a group of researchers constructed an experiment to determine the effects of astroturfed

discourse on open-minded audiences, students who received course credit for participating in the experiment. The experiment consisted in showing the students nearly-identical websites about climate change, with subtle alterations as to the source of the information. Among the surprising results were that transparency is not particularly useful in disarming the effects of denialist reasoning: “Disclosing the funding source of an organization did not affect participants’ perceptions of the dependent variables.”

Furthermore,

participants who browsed a website from an astroturf organization found the information as less credible and the organization as less trustworthy, compared to those who browsed a website from a grassroots organization. Despite such a correct assessment of the message and the target, however, participants’ uncertainty and beliefs about global warming were still significantly affected, as astroturf organizations had intended to instill confusion and uncertainty in the general public regarding the global warming issue. This stark contrast (i.e., not trusting, but still being persuaded) may indicate the power of minimal exposure to astroturfing messages. (Cho et al, “Astroturfing Global Warming,” 579)

It seems clear that practitioners like Frank Luntz (see his *Words that Work*) and others have developed strategies built around just these phenomena, according to which the emotions and thus the political inclinations of audiences can be manipulated through what is often called, euphemistically but with a certain accuracy, “button pushing.” Perhaps because of inherent identifications with capital and power and against positions critical of existing power (but regardless of the facts underlying any particular issue), commercial trolling can sway a percentage of citizens away from one perspective and toward another. As Hamilton and Oreskes among many others have argued, such manipulation of public opinion via propaganda is the only plausible explanation for the proliferation of general doubts about climate change and therefore the lack of ability to take strong action against it. With almost the efficiency of a computer program, commercial trolls know just how to sway just enough people to steer the polis away from actions that would be too detrimental to the circulation and concentration of capital (for more on the

efficacy of these strategies, in addition to Monbiot's writings, see Mooney, "Science," and Oldham, *Astro(Turf) Wars*).

#### **v. The Programmatic Distortion of Democracy**

My brief here has been to outline ways in which concentrated capital can and does use the apparent openness of discourse on the internet to shape the political exchange that is supposed to be the very heart of democratic deliberation and representative democracy. It is worth reflecting briefly in just a slightly broader frame how computation and computational thinking can easily be yoked to the interests of concentrated power. One of the most disturbing observations in recent discussions of commercial trolling is the (largely rumored) existence and use of "trollbots" and so called "persona management software." In a story reported in early 2011, documents were leaked concerning a defense contractor named HBGary, which provides high-level contracting services to the defense and national security establishment. According to the emails and attached documents, the US Department of Defense (DOD), among other entities, uses

sophisticated "persona management" software that allows a small team of only a few people to appear to be many, while keeping the personas from accidentally cross-contaminating each other. Then, to top it off, the team can actually automate some functions so one persona can appear to be an entire Brooks Brothers riot online. (Rockefeller, "The HB Gary Email")

Quoting from the leaked documents, Rockefeller continues:

To build this capability we will create a set of personas on Twitter, blogs, forums, buzz, and MySpace under created names that fit the profile (satellitejockey, hack3rman, etc). These accounts are maintained and updated automatically through RSS feeds, retweets, and linking together social media commenting between platforms. With a pool of these accounts to choose from, once you have a real name persona you create a Facebook and LinkedIn account using the given name, lock those accounts down and link these accounts to a selected # of previously created social media accounts, automatically pre-aging the real accounts.

Using the assigned social media accounts we can automate the posting of content that is relevant to the persona. In this case there are specific social media strategy website RSS feeds we can subscribe to and then repost content on twitter with the appropriate hashtags. In fact using hashtags and gaming some location based check-in services we can make it appear as if a persona was actually at a conference and introduce himself/herself to key individuals as part of the exercise, as one example. There are a variety of social media tricks we can use to add a level of realness to all fictitious personas. (Rockefeller, “The HB Gary Email”)

Among the critical points made by Rockefeller is that the hacker group Anonymous (or someone representing themselves as Anonymous) has disparaged such efforts as not worthy of consideration because their efforts should be visible or obvious as inauthentic contributions to discourse. Such a view fits into the rightist cyberlibertarian perspective, according to which everything should be free and open, perspectives that concentrate power deserve the exaggerated discursive power they can garner for themselves, and the individual has both the duty and the ability to counteract the effects of such manipulation through “transparency.” As the astroturfing experiment by Cho and his co-authors shows, in fact, such transparency is ineffective in un-deforming communication; the deforming effects are felt simply by contributing pro-corporate, pro-capital, pro-power political sentiments.

In an article that followed on his original one about astroturfing and climate change discourse, Monbiot notes the apparent work of persona management systems:

After I wrote about online astroturfing in December, I was contacted by a whistleblower. He was part of a commercial team employed to infest internet forums and comment threads on behalf of corporate clients, promoting their causes and arguing with anyone who opposed them.

Like the other members of the team, he posed as a disinterested member of the public. Or, to be more accurate, as a crowd of disinterested members of the public: he used 70 personas, both to avoid detection and to create the impression there was widespread support for his pro-corporate arguments. (Monbiot, “The Need to Protect”)

Monbiot and Rockefeller both quote from a US government solicitation for persona management software operators, which reads in part:

0001- Online Persona Management Service. 50 User Licenses, 10 Personas per user. Software will allow 10 personas per user, replete with background , history, supporting details, and cyber presences that are technically, culturally and geographically consistent. Individual applications will enable an operator to exercise a number of different online persons from the same workstation and without fear of being discovered by sophisticated adversaries. Personas must be able to appear to originate in nearly any part of the world and can interact through conventional online services and social media platforms. The service includes a user friendly application environment to maximize the user's situational awareness by displaying real-time local information. (Monbiot, "The Need to Protect")

Rockefeller writes that "it appears from the solicitation it is contracted for use in foreign theaters like Afghanistan and Iraq." Although the ethics of using such techniques as part of a disinformation campaign in a declared war are obviously different from those of using it as part of ordinary political discourse, the very way in which the solicitation is framed gives credence to the view that persona management software is widely used, perhaps especially by defense, intelligence, and corporate users.

It might be argued, on first blush, that such software and techniques could be equally well-used by both sides in any given political debate. No doubt, there is some truth to this, but this fact must be contextualized in several ways. First, it has long been the case in world politics that concentrated capital tends to operate much more heavily on one side of political splits than the other; for a long time in the US and elsewhere in global democracies capital has aligned itself far more often with the political right than it has the left. Secondly, the ideological operations of capital already make its voice heard with a particular power: it speaks with a self-reinforcing authority because it speaks from wealth and power, and so when it works to disparage the views of others it can capture the unconscious identifications of disenfranchised citizens much more than can the left. Finally, the sheer availability of resources is heavily tilted toward capital, which can afford to throw many more resources toward deformations of discourse

than can those without such resources—this unbalanced playing field has long been a primary concern of thinkers, particularly on the left, who worry that the public sphere as constituted today has lost much of its efficacy in providing the discursive consideration of political issues that the founders of the democratic system thought so inextricably joined to the democratic project itself.

It would be hard to say from looking up close that political discourse is more distorted by capital today than it was 30, 40, or 50 years ago. Among the factors distorting it today in the US are consolidations in radio ownership and the proliferation of rightist voices who will repeatedly voice any effective position regardless of its relationship with the facts, the massive decline in the number of newspapers, and the dismantling of the Fairness Doctrine. Each of these has some temporal continuity with the advent of the internet. The clear fact that there has been a deliberate and coordinated attack on the discursive public sphere by capital—via corporations, media outlets, foundations, and other vehicles—cannot be directly associated with the rise of the internet. Yet it is notable that the rhetoric of discursive freedom-via-technology arises along with what Dean, McChesney, Matthew Hindman (*The Myth of Digital Democracy*) and others have remarked as an actual decline in the quality of democratic discourse. As Wikipedia's vigilance shows, the mechanisms necessary to protect discourse from interested deformation are multifarious and very difficult to maintain, and largely inconceivable in open and unmoderated communities. As the phenomenon of online astroturfing demonstrates, online discourse is under constant assault from concentrated capital that deliberately hides both its identity and its strategies and tactics. The notion that the "internet democratizes," especially with regard to the most important aspects of political communication, cannot and must not be taken on faith. Presuming that the internet democratizes inherently and levels the playing field for all participants can only help to ensure that the marketplace of ideas truly is just that, and that like all marketplaces, those with the most power will be able to exploit every means at their behest to keep it.

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