

# Australian Broadcasting Corporation

*Radio National*

## Don't trust the web

The internet is awash with misinformation, manipulated identities, fake reviews, and dishonest comments. Politicians use astroturfing. So do businesses and marketing firms. Beware—it's infecting everyone. Reporter Hagar Cohen

Hagar Cohen: If you've wondered how far to trust the information that you're getting on the internet, who writes the reviews of films or books? Or makes all those comments? And how many friends or followers someone has on Facebook or Twitter? Well, you're right to wonder. It's frighteningly easy for one person hiding behind many fake identities to manipulate the flow of ideas or the wonders of a particular toaster, or the evil of a certain politician.

With the incredible rise of social media, this kind of deception is now infecting traditional media, as journalists source much of their information from the web, or are echoing online trends; that's 'trends' in inverted commas. And as you'll hear on the program today, anyone with the right bit of software can look like a worldwide movement. This phenomenon has a name; it's called 'online astroturfing'.

Ravi Prasad: Astroturfing is trying to create the appearance of a grassroots movement; hence 'astroturf', artificial grass. The idea of astroturfing is if you lay enough Astroturf hopefully it will turn into real grass.

Hagar Cohen: Hello and welcome to Background Briefing on ABC Radio National. I'm Hagar Cohen. Astroturfing is now so commonplace that there are people who study it to try and combat it. It's an arms race; every breakthrough in the technology that identifies astroturfing is followed by yet another bit of software that finds a new way to manufacture the deception. It's a wild virtual world, where it's hard to tell truth from fiction, and it's affecting everyone.

Sydney-based advertising strategist, Ravi Prasad, helps his clients to set up Astroturf campaigns.

Ravi Prasad: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, this is what public relations consultants are paid for; they are paid to help a client create and shape public perception, and that begins... one of the strategies and tactics for doing that is astroturfing.

Hagar Cohen: It involves, though, being deceptive.

Ravi Prasad: Yeah, it's necessarily a deceptive practice, because you are pretending that it is something that it is not.

Hagar Cohen: And you don't think there's anything wrong with that?

Ravi Prasad: That's an interesting question.

Hagar Cohen: Ravi Prasad is of course not alone. In fact, astroturfers are in high demand and their ability to deceive is an asset. For example, an advertisement posted online recently reads:

Voiceover [reading advertisement text]: Greetings. On this project we need providers that have large popular and authentic accounts on Twitter and Facebook, ability to get attention, spread buzz and divulge rumours quickly, many followers and friends who follow their posts with trust, and what we will pay for is an astroturfing grassroots campaign of criticism on Twitter and Facebook against a given large company that is misbehaving against ours.

Hagar Cohen: The temptation for people to astroturf is obvious. What can be easier than posting a few comments here and there on popular blogs or Twitter or Facebook, hoping to skew public

opinion one way or another? Even the American army is into creating fake personas online as a way of spreading their own propaganda. It's aimed particularly at people in the Arab world who are also receiving propaganda from Muslim fundamentalists.

And in business, some of the biggest corporations have been known to develop highly secretive astroturf campaigns against their rivals online.

Some savvy groups and individuals say this is all very dangerous, because the internet is hard to regulate. An online group recently launched a project to fight the trend to deception. Barrett Brown:

Barrett Brown: Information being so fundamental to everything else, this practice of basically making it impossible to determine where information is actually coming from, to me I think it's one of the biggest dangers we're facing in the twenty-first century.

Hagar Cohen: In Australia some time ago, a digital marketing agency was hiring people to operate multiple fake identities on the web. The job ad went on the Gumtree website, and it reads:

Voiceover [reading advertisement text]: The job requires you to have very good search skills and to find conversations online. You'll then take on a supplied persona and join in on the conversation. You'll have to be very clever and adaptive and if you don't know about a subject, then you'll have to learn how to sell yourself as authentic.

Hagar Cohen: This post created a huge debate online by those outraged that anyone could encourage such deceptive work. Speaking now at his Sydney office, the author of the job ad, Jeffrey Emerson, says he was surprised by the reaction.

Jeffrey Emerson: That was a really challenging time, because it was really... I was taken aback by how strongly people felt. People had said that I should be stabbed and left to die in a ditch, or something along those lines.

Hagar Cohen: At the time, Jeffrey Emerson named his product the 'trusted avatar'.

Jeffrey Emerson: So, the trusted avatar was a product that I created that would allow companies to talk about their products online in forums. And the idea was if someone asked for let's say, for instance, a good place to get a car loan, then the avatar would say, 'Oh, these guys were really good.' If a consumer asked, 'Where could I get cheap nappies?' the avatar may say, 'Oh, this place over here has a great deal online.'

Hagar Cohen: But that avatar is being paid by the company that manufactures the nappies.

Jeffrey Emerson: Correct.

Hagar Cohen: And does not disclose that.

Jeffrey Emerson: Correct. And hence that's where the backlash came from, because the avatars were behaving as real people and weren't disclosing they were part of the company. There was a lot of negative connotation behind that.

Hagar Cohen: Do you concede though that the product itself was unethical.

Jeffrey Emerson: You know, to this day and through all that I went through online, I still maintain that it was borderline, it was grey hat but I didn't think it was unethical, because as a business, as a business owner, as a professional, I would never do anything that I thought was unethical.

Hagar Cohen: It's a bit like cash for comment, isn't it?

Jeffrey Emerson: It's precisely cash for comment. Yeah, so, the crux for me and why I don't think it's unethical is because you actually were giving helpful and meaningful pointers or advice.

Hagar Cohen: Despite being paid to do it...

Jeffrey Emerson: Yep, you're just being paid.

Hagar Cohen: ...and not disclosing.

Jeffrey Emerson: Yeah, so, that was the thing. The non-disclosure was what kind of made it hard to justify.

Hagar Cohen: Jeffrey Emerson ended up killing off his so-called trusted avatar. It became too risky for his clients, because now the astroturf-busters are on the lookout. He's also done some deep thinking and decided it wasn't right.

Jeffrey Emerson: Yeah, I changed my mind because it was too grey hat; it wasn't clear-cut enough. And in the end, I do accept that wasn't ethical enough to stand behind 100 per cent. So I stopped doing it, but that's the nature of trying to innovate, you know. I was just trying to innovate, within our industry and sometimes you fail.

Hagar Cohen: Practically no one advocates astroturfing openly, so there are many questions around who is involved, what is the scale of the campaigns and what purpose they serve. The editor of a marketing magazine called mUmBRELLA is putting a lot of effort into demystifying the practice. Tim Burrowes was the one who exposed the trusted avatar in the first place and he's still on the lookout for people trying to astroturf on his website.

Tim Burrowes: It is a major concern, because, for instance, we're a website where pretty much the whole media and marketing industry may take a look. So careers are at stake, businesses are at stake, reputations are at stake, so having someone be unfairly critical about a direct rival, lots and lots of times, pretending to be different people, you know, it's foul play.

Hagar Cohen: Last month, Tim Burrowes exposed an astroturf plot that was so extraordinary, it made international headlines. It goes like this: Greenpeace made allegations that the paper company Solaris contributes to destroying Indonesian rainforests by using the timber to make toilet paper, and so endangering the population of the Sumatran tiger. The supermarket chain IGA picked up on the information and cancelled its contract to buy Solaris toilet paper. Solaris was furious, and took out ads accusing Greenpeace of misleading the public by making outrageous accusations.

This PR dispute was the first story on the saga that went on the mUmBRELLA website.

Tim Burrowes: After we reported on this tussle between Greenpeace and Solaris, normally what happens is you'll have a few comments the day you publish it and generally with a story as it goes down the site there'll be less and less, but we kept noticing that the comments kept coming in.

Hagar Cohen: In fact, the comments thread on the mUmBRELLA website went berserk and most of the posts were anti-Greenpeace and anti-the South African owned supermarket chain IGA. Here are some examples:

Woman's voice: As a woman, I have no respect for the lack of testicles shown by the IGA management. To all you South Africans running the show there, we love brave and strong men in Australia, so go home.

Hagar Cohen: The tone of the comments became toxic, and that's when a Greenpeace activist called Reece Turner, weighed into the online debate. He reiterated Greenpeace's position on Solaris then the next comments on mUmBRELLA attacked Reece Turner personally.

Man's voice: Dear Reece, I really have to wonder how the f\*ck you can look at yourself in the mirror in the morning. You are a bloody hypocrite of epic proportions. You are a man who masquerades around acting like a do-gooder, when in reality you are just scum.

Hagar Cohen: And then came this one:

Man's voice: Hey Reece, [ape noises]. Translated from Apeian language into English, that means, 'Reece, you're a f\*\*cking idiot extraordinaire.'

Hagar Cohen: A stream of other comments in a similar tone followed, so the editor of mUmBRELLA, Tim Burrowes, decided to investigate. Remarkably, he revealed that some of the offensive comments were being generated from the office of the paper giant Solaris in Australia.

Tim Burrowes: There were some other quite outspoken comments, including this one using quite similar language about, 'we love big brave and strong men in Australia, so go home.' Took a look at that one and here we go to 9.01am, 'Lover of Country'. Now, we can see from this address there are actually three people who posted, just three, but quite outspoken stuff; one person calling themselves, 'Act Responsibly'; one person calling themselves 'Crusaders Fan'; one person calling themselves, 'Lover of Country'. So we now take this IP address, again we're just copying it, we're popping it into a service called IP Lookup, paste it in, hit return, and up some details come. And we can see host: office.solarispaper.com.au and that's the smoking gun.

Hagar Cohen: The comments were later found to have been written by a senior member of Solaris management who had confessed to his actions internally. Solaris has since issued an apology to mUmBRELLA, expressing its regrets to anyone who's been offended by the comments.

This is Background Briefing on ABC Radio National. Today's program is about a phenomenon called online astroturfing; companies, lobby groups, politicians, posting as ordinary people to spruik an idea or a product or to put down a rival.

Advertising strategist, Ravi Prasad:

Ravi Prasad: Astroturfing in the digital age is... the only thing new about it is the media and the channels, but it's what advertising agencies, political lobby groups, political parties and people have been doing for a very, very long time.

Hagar Cohen: Ravi Prasad explains the appeal of astroturfing.

Ravi Prasad: Well, it's clearly highly effective. Public debate in Australia has been shaped in a profound way by astroturfing. If you look at the debate around the carbon tax, the debate around mining supertax, and the public debate around asylum seekers, the public debates in these major areas of policy are being shaped in meaningful ways by astroturfing.

Hagar Cohen: It involves, though, being deceptive.

Ravi Prasad: Yeah, it's necessarily a deceptive practice, because you are pretending that it is something that it is not.

Hagar Cohen: And you don't think there's anything wrong with that?

Ravi Prasad: That's an interesting question. Yeah, I believe that it's wrong, but there are those that will say that it is simply another tactic in a suite of tactics that advertisers, marketers and PR people can draw upon, and these are essentially... they're not immoral, they're just amoral.

Hagar Cohen: But you're happy to provide that service, nevertheless?

Ravi Prasad: I'm prepared to talk to companies and agencies about the practice and give my advice on its utilisation. Whether I advocate it or not depends on the client and depends on the circumstances. There are places for it that I'm comfortable with.

Hagar Cohen: Do you want to give me a particular example?

Ravi Prasad: No, I'm not going to give you any examples on this at all, I'm sorry.

Hagar Cohen: But he will talk about why it's considered an essential PR tool.

Ravi Prasad: In Australia, there's some Nielsen research, and it said that the greatest influence on an individual consumer's purchasing behaviour is peer review and recommendation. If somebody says to you, 'Oh, you've got to see it; it's a great movie,' that's more likely to make you go and see the movie than any number of ads, any number of press ads. So what you have to do is encourage one consumer to talk to another consumer. Astroturfing is about starting that conversation.

Hagar Cohen: Ravi Prasad is concerned that a lot of mistakes are made as new methods of astroturfing leapfrog in the fast changing internet world.

Ravi Prasad: The media landscape has changed and is changing so quickly and will continue to change so quickly, that the rules are not written. We're writing the rules as we go.

Hagar Cohen: Meanwhile, the legal system is finding it hard to keep up with the speed of developments in the wild virtual world, but some things hold true. Intellectual property lawyer with Swaab Attorneys, Matthew Hall.

Matthew Hall: The Australian consumer law protects consumers from misleading and deceptive conduct, so to the extent to which a business undertakes an astroturfing campaign and promotes a commercial activity or a trading activity or a commercial product, it will be illegal, it will be misleading and deceptive. But if it's outside of trade or commerce, so if it is political, then it won't be covered by the Australian Consumer Law and in fact there is currently no legislation in Australia regulating truth or accuracy in political advertising.

Hagar Cohen: Matthew Hall.

In Sydney, an agency called SR7 works at making sense of the chaotic world born out of the millions of social media conversations. James Griffin:

James Griffin: You're right in that it's essentially a chaotic conversation and part of our role is to crunch the data, understand the emerging trends, synthesise the conversations that are occurring out there and put an overlay of analysis on top of that. So it's helpful to clients and members of the public to be able to get a broad view of what's being said in social media before making a decision on how to then go and influence or participate in that particular debate that's occurring online.

Hagar Cohen: Just how people go about influencing the debate is the contentious issue. There are those who comment and declare their agenda, and others who deceive readers by pretending to be objective when in fact they're not.

It was reported recently that the army in America awarded a contract for software to create hundreds of fake personas on social media sites. The contract is worth nearly US\$3 million. The purpose is to influence online debate and skew conversations in the army's favour, particularly of course online conversations on community forums used by people in Iraq or Afghanistan, many of who are anti-American. This is where the US sees dispelling propaganda a priority. The tender for this job was published online and its requirements were revealing. It reads in part:

Woman's voice: Software will allow ten 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 work station and without fear of being discovered by sophisticated adversaries.

Hagar Cohen: It goes on, saying:

Woman's voice: 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.

Hagar Cohen: James Griffin explains:

James Griffin: Persona management: it's the construction of a program that allows what they've termed an operator. The operator has the ability from their computer screen to control multiple online profiles or personas. And from their one screen they can then get those particular people to engage in a conversation with each other; to engage in a conversation with real and legitimate people; and to undertake activities online that to the naked eye would look like a series or a number of people participating in an online conversation. A lot of detail and effort goes into ensuring that the personas look as real as any online person does; that would go as far as making sure that they have a digital footprint, which is essentially your history online.

Hagar Cohen: Two months ago, the US Army again put out a tender for a social media strategy. This time around, they're wanting a system that can detect social media attacks against the US; the kinds of conversations that rely on mob mentality. The strategy will also measure the influence of the attacks and then work out a way to dispel them.

James Griffin is bidding for the contract.

James Griffin: The US Defence Force put out a tender for help in understanding social media and through a partner organisation we're looking to tender for the work, which will include some quite detailed analysis of social media and its impact on the mob mentality and how people make decisions and have their decisions made for them through the use of social media. So it's quite an interesting tender to be involved in and for us really validation of a business concept that we had three and a half years ago. It's amazing to think how far social media has come when you're reading a tender from the US government.

Hagar Cohen: It's also written in the tender that the social media strategy needs to somehow counter the adverse comments on the enemy's forums. Background Briefing asks James Griffin to explain what this actually means.

James Griffin: Quite simply, I think that's putting propaganda out to match that of adversaries to United States efforts. It's simply a new medium by which to have a proxy war with your enemy.

Hagar Cohen: So is this something that you'll be willing to do?

James Griffin: We operate within legal international frameworks and with strong ethical beliefs, so we know where to draw the line. But nonetheless, it's a very exciting tender to be involved in.

Hagar Cohen: In the US astroturfing, whether for business, individual reputations or politics, is so widespread that one group of online activists have started a project to bring it down. The founder of Operation Metal Gear is US-based Barrett Brown.

Barrett Brown: Fundamentally what we're trying to do is minimise the effects of these capabilities. Particularly of persona management. And that entails first of all bringing out info and making the public aware that these things exist.

Hagar Cohen: One of Barrett Brown's first initiatives is to follow up on a particularly explosive affair. It all began when the online activist group Anonymous hacked into the computers of an internet security firm called HBGary Federal. Anonymous discovered thousands of emails that showed the extent of HBGary's proposed astroturf campaigns.

Barrett Brown, who read them all, says the planned work by HBGary Federal did not seem to understand how much damage it could cause.

Barrett Brown: You can see the mentalities that exist in this industry. You never see them turning down any project or questioning whether or not there will be any side effects or repercussions

for anything they're developing and putting into practice. They're not thinking about how things like persona management provided to corporations might be corrosive to the democratic institutions.

Hagar Cohen: It's quite a complex but really interesting story. Anonymous hacked into the computers of a security firm and found out that there were plans to discredit Wikileaks by using astroturfing tactics and persona management software. Emails obtained by the hacking group are intriguing, nerdy stuff.

Man's voice: 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, et cetera). 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 number of previously created social media accounts, automatically pre-aging the real accounts.

Hagar Cohen: This proposal was intended to be used by the Bank of America and Wikileaks was their target because at the time it was known that Wikileaks got hold of documents which if made public would tear to pieces the reputation of the Bank of America. The fine details of the proposed cyber war were laid bare in 70,000 emails and Barrett Brown says the scale of the deception they documented was of unbelievable proportions.

Barrett Brown: It was going to be extremely damaging to the information flow in the US and elsewhere. You know, the ability of private citizens to ensure that the information that they're getting is accurate and to the extent that parties such as the Bank of America or the government have these capabilities, they're going to use them. They have a tremendous advantage. A really dishonest and dangerous advantage over not just their competitors, but also private citizens.

Hagar Cohen: After the emails were made public, the Bank of America declared they had nothing to do with them and knew nothing of it, despite being named as intended clients. Barrett Brown is concerned that the public discourse will be skewed in favour of private institutions like the Bank of America, or people with a lot of money to spend on astroturfing. Raising public awareness in this issue is paramount. Barrett Brown:

Barrett Brown: The majority of people aren't aware of this issue. That's a serious problem inasmuch as if you go around saying, 'Look, here's persona management, with all these fake personas, and they're having these conversations,' the average person is going to think that sounds kind of whacky.

Hagar Cohen: Today, there are thousands of small operators who offer similar types of cyber services. For example, one of those operators created a service called the 'Twitter bomb'. He's known online as SharePro and on his YouTube presentation he says that he can take control over thousands of Twitter accounts to generate hundreds of thousands of fake messages.

SharePro [on YouTube]: Everybody, this is your boy SharePro and what you're looking at front and centre is my Twitter system that allows me to create Twitter accounts on the fly and by using thousands of Twitter accounts I'm able to publish hundreds of thousands of messages simply by logging into this web interface. The idea is to generate legitimate traffic by targeting relative people and the way we do that is we spider Twitter, we find out who's talking about subjects that are actually relative to our keywords, and then we make friends and followers.

Hagar Cohen: Now on the phone, SharePro, who doesn't want to disclose where he lives, says that his software isn't complicated at all and similar campaigns are being done all over the world.

SharePro: These kinds of technologies are not just in the hands of governments today; this type of technology is in the hands of anybody who's got half of a brain.

Hagar Cohen: So you're saying it's very widespread?

SharePro: Yeah. You've got to remember, it's not just the technology; the technology's very simple to create; it's the idea behind it. And once you understand the idea it's very easy to automate by you know sitting down and programming and coding it. To code something like that is nothing more than two hours to do.

Hagar Cohen: SharePro says that his software can take over online discussions and change their agenda without anyone in the online community noticing that their conversations are being manipulated.

SharePro: It's based on algorithms and other things that I'd prefer not to say over the phone. I use very intense methods.

Hagar Cohen: Your presentation on YouTube shows that you're able to access thousands of Twitter accounts that send messages. Who are all those Twitter accounts?

SharePro: Well, they're accounts. I guess what I'm trying to say here is people should be aware of what is out there and obviously not believe what they read just because it's written.

Hagar Cohen: It was reported that in the US, presidential candidate Newt Gingrich bought hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter; again, to make it look like he's got more support than he really does. In fact, the website peekyou.com found that only eight per cent of Newt Gingrich's 1.3 million followers are real. Online astroturfing is now so big that universities are developing software that will detect astroturf campaigns. For example, in the state of Indiana, the Centre for Complex Networks and Systems Research came up with software that has 95 per cent success exposing astroturfing on Twitter.

Professor of informatics and computer science, Filippo Menczer, says his team tested the software during the mid-term election last year.

Filippo Menczer: Twitter is a medium that is used a lot these days to spread information and news. So in politics as well it is used by campaigns for promoting certain candidates and this is great; it's just another channel besides traditional media. But astroturf is something that some people may do to manipulate this medium.

Hagar Cohen: Filippo Menczer and his group named their astroturf detective Truthy. This software found that during the midterm election some political candidates were promoted on social media by astroturf tactics.

Filippo Menczer: A lot of names of candidates that were trending prior to the midterm election in the US were promoted also by fake accounts that we found. So this can be somewhat effective at giving the impression that there is a lot of buzz around a candidate, or perhaps trying to get people to believe some fake news that is ... a candidate, we've seen lots of examples of that.

Hagar Cohen: For example, the website freedomest.com operated fake accounts, or bots, on Twitter. Bots are like robots and on Twitter bot accounts can automatically generate messages and in this instance, the bot accounts Filippo Menczer discovered were used to bombard Twitter with supportive messaging about a number of Republican candidates.

Filippo Menczer: We found one instance of about ten bots, who were all controlled by one particular operative, who actually admitted to this. And those messages were quite clever, because they were all just links to articles on a particular website that looked like news reports and in fact they were all fake. All the accounts would coordinate to target a particular influential user at the same time and just to get this person's attention, give the impression that lots of people were talking about this news and induce this person into retweeting it to their many, many followers—you know, these were typically people with tens of thousands of followers. So those, we thought, were quite clever instances.

Hagar Cohen: Do you think there's going to be a time on the internet where it will be saturated by astroturfing to the extent that we're not going to know what's real and what's not?

Filippo Menczer: No, I'm not that pessimistic. The work of people who do research on detection of various kinds of abuse is to raise the cost so that it may not be worth it for whoever wants to manipulate the medium that way. As is normally the case, this is an arms race, where what happens is that after a long time, the cost of conducting an effective campaign goes up. And if it goes up enough, then it is not worth it for the attackers.

Hagar Cohen: Filippo Menczer is now working on the second stage of the Truthy software. He hopes the improved version will make astroturfing easier to detect and more expensive to do. Nevertheless, astroturfing has never been more widespread.

The most sophisticated players are thought to be the Chinese government. In China, anyone attempting to write something that's critical of the government will be bombarded with attacks by so-called ordinary people. Those ordinary people get paid by the government 50 cents a post, which is why they're known as 'the 50-cent party'.

Activists in the US-based Tea Party were also exposed for waging their own 50-cent-style war. Their tactics were captured by the camera of the Australian filmmaker, Taki Oldham. For his documentary, called (Astro) Turf Wars, he joined Tea Party meetings undercover. He's talking to Background Briefing on skype from the US.

Taki Oldham: The internet is an incredibly important part of this suite of tools that those who are trying to sway public opinion behind the scenes can use, because it affords anonymity and a way to act in a subversive manner that wasn't available before. For example, in my film part of what I did was when I went undercover and filmed one of these meetings taking place where basically Tea Party activists being instructed how to go online and manipulate things like amazon.com to improve the ratings of certain types of books and movies and to sabotage other types of books and movies. You'll see if you do your research that there's a whole and entire emerging industry now of people who basically can manipulate social media to make products or ideas become more prominent, or indeed become less prominent.

Hagar Cohen: Here's the part from his documentary where a Tea Party activist instructs the audience to astroturf online.

[excerpt from (Astro) Turf Wars from: So what do we do? We become digital activists... to ... Give our ideals a fighting chance.]

Hagar Cohen: As we've heard, it's common for the astroturfers to use popular online personalities with a big following in the hope that they will pass on the astroturf message to their thousands of friends and followers. For example, Sydney blogger, Neerav Bhatt, blogs about travel and technology. He says he's had enough of astroturfers trying to exploit him for his online connections. But he was especially surprised when he thought he detected an astroturfer commenting on his blog to spruik the government's Tourism Australia website.

Neerav Bhatt: The comments looked quite innocuous, but at the bottom of the comment there was a direct link to a large government tourism organisation and within the text of the comments in several places there were specific words which were deep linked to pages on that tourism organisation's website. And that's classic astroturfing technique, which a normal person would never do.

Hagar Cohen: So this particular person commented a few times, or wanted to comment a few times, on your website?

Neerav Bhatt: Yes. So I kept the first comment to the side, in the moderation queue, and then over the next few weeks they came back and added a few more, which I just kept as an example.

Hagar Cohen: Neerav Bhatt decided to investigate. He found that the astroturfer on his blog was an employee of a Sydney-based digital agency, whose major client is Tourism Australia.

Neerav Bhatt: With so many different people in the chain, you don't know at what level it was authorised. It could well just have been the individual who did it, to achieve whatever their boss told them to do to promote their client, or it could be higher up.

Look, on the other hand, it could well be just someone who doesn't understand how the internet works. There are people in the marketing industry who think there's nothing wrong with doing that. They wouldn't think there's any issue with it at all together.

Hagar Cohen: Further research reveals that between March and April this year, the digital agency employee who attempted to promote the Australia Tourism website on Neerav's blog, did so on seven other travel blogs. Here are some examples:

Man's voice: Hi Clem, definitely book your trip to Australia. I first took one month annual leave in Australia, and one year later I'm still here. I love it here.

I think once you're here you'll never want to leave Australia. This site has inspired me to have my leave in Australia.

This site might be useful to help you decide on where to go. I hope your travels go well.

Hagar Cohen: The problem with these comments isn't what they say, which is quite innocuous, it's that the person who wrote them is pretending to be an ordinary traveller, when in fact he's working to promote the Tourism Australia website. He should have declared his agenda. Background Briefing is not suggesting that the government agency Australia Tourism was involved in astroturfing; only the individual who carried out the work.

Astroturfing is particularly dangerous because traditional media relies so much on social media to connect with audiences. The program Q&A on ABC Television is a good example because of the way it uses Twitter to interact with viewers. But as the program's popularity has grown, so have attempts by people to manipulate Q&A 's Twitter conversation.

An online technology specialist, Leslie Nassar, has created the Twitter software for Q&A . He says it has a filter that weeds out some forms of astroturfing.

Leslie Nassar: If it looks like it's one person posting the same thing over and over again, or it's the same question being posted over and over and over again, we only really need to display that once. So where people are really trying to push a specific, say, question across, or a really specific idea across, we're able to filter that back so that it's just presented once to the moderator rather than a thousand times.

Hagar Cohen: Are people trying to do that at all? I mean, have you detected any unusual behaviour on the...

Leslie Nassar: Oh, certainly. Certainly. There's unusual behaviour pretty much 24/7. Occasionally you get these peaks of activity where people are just saying the same thing over and over and over again. You wonder, 'Is there an intelligence behind this that's sort of presenting this concerted effort to get this idea through?'

Hagar Cohen: Many of the astroturfers use bot accounts; again, these are robot accounts that can generate automatic messages. He says the Twitter bots work in clusters to make it look like there are many people talking about the same thing.

Leslie Nassar: If you have a look at a cluster of these bots and you have a look at the way that they interact; you know, they'll be retweeting each other—so they'll be copying each other's tweets; in some cases they'll be replying to them—they'll say, 'That's a really good point.' They'll use very general terms of support, because obviously the program doesn't know what it's actually

replying to. You know, it'll say, 'That's a really good point,' and then retweet the link that one of its little cohorts has already posted.

So when you look at the cluster of them, what you're seeing is a little echo chamber almost.

Hagar Cohen: And perhaps even likely to get picked up by a legitimate Twitter users who want to join the bot conversation?

Leslie Nassar: Exactly. For any human user, if you look at Twitter what you see is that you see a big stream of, it's almost like a stream of non-sequiturs; it's very abstract; there are lots of different ideas going on. Now, if one of those items in your stream happens to have been automatically generated from a bot but it's not readily apparent, then there's a very good chance that the people will reply to it. You know, they'll unwittingly engage in a conversation with a bot, or with a program, rather than with a human. And what that does is it gives a legitimacy to the bot.

Hagar Cohen: And that's exactly what those people behind the bots are trying to do.

Leslie Nassar: Yeah, they're trying to get their message out there to as many people as they can, but get it out there in such a way that it doesn't look like overt PR; it's got to look like a grassroots movement.

Hagar Cohen: For example, he revealed that Channel 7 was astroturfing on Twitter during the popular television show, Dancing with the Stars. It happened when he was watching the show from home and got curious about how Channel 7 were operating the program's Twitter function. So he looked at their Twitter stream and saw that the tweets, who were all very enthusiastic of the show, were from obviously fake accounts. He found out that the accounts had only ever been tweeting about the show and they were created only a few hours before the show started. Leslie Nassar:

Leslie Nassar: Generally, people will create a Twitter account, the first thing out of their mouths is not going to be, 'I can't wait until Dancing with the Stars starts tonight, 6.30pm on 7.'

Just to give a little bit of context there, there were 10,000 tweets posted for the first episode of Dancing with the Stars. Of those 10,000 tweets, only 20 of them went to air, and of those 20, 25 per cent of them were from accounts that had only ever tweeted about Dancing with the Stars and had been created between 2.30 and 3.30pm on that day.

Hagar Cohen: Leslie Nassar was accused of astroturfing himself after creating the now infamous fake Stephen Conroy account, tweeting bizarre messages about the controversial NBN scheme. For months, he had people questioning who was behind it. The account was called 'Fake Stephen Conroy' and Leslie Nassar rejects claims he did something wrong.

Leslie Nassar: I think the difference between satire and astroturfing is that astroturfing's this sort of intent to go out and deceive people. With Fake Stephen Conroy, Fake Stephen Conroy—for one thing, of the three words in his name, the first one is fake, right? So for people to look at that and say, 'Oh, you know, I'm just not sure... Is this the real Stephen Conroy, or is he an imposter?' For anyone not to get that it's a satirical account, I think, is pretty damning.

Hagar Cohen: On the other hand, New South Wales Greens member Jan Barham says there was nothing satirical about the manipulative astroturfers who tried to discredit her just before the New South Wales election this year.

Political opponents were pretending to be her and twittered in her name dozens of embarrassing comments.

Jan Barham: When I became aware of the Twitter site operating in my name and started to read them, it was someone feeding fears that people have about the Greens that have been promoted by some of the shock jocks and papers that are very anti-Green. And those comments were

fuelled through this Twitter site with me supposedly making some outrageous comments that were going to inflame people, that were derogatory towards certain sectors of the community, or plainly arrogant.

Hagar Cohen: Can you tell me about some of those tweets that stuck in your mind?

Jan Barham: Well, the one that was brought to my attention was one relating to TAFE students, denigrating people's intelligence who are TAFE-educated rather than degreed. And the irony in that situation is that I am TAFE-educated; I haven't got a university degree.

Hagar Cohen: Nevertheless, a lot of people bought into the debate and this tweet was among the hundreds that came in response to the fake Jan Barham's comments on Twitter.

Woman's voice: Hi Jan Barham, just wanted to let you know I'm having your TAFE tweet printed on T-shirts and flyers ready for polling day. #auspol

Hagar Cohen: Other tweets pretending to be Jan Barham said this:

Woman's voice: Allow me to make a prediction, if I may be so bold. Bob Brown will be PM by 2015. Bet on it. #auspol

Hagar Cohen: And another tweet from the fake Jan Barham account set her up as a real Yuppie.

Woman's voice: Sipping a delicious soy latte. Anyone else in Byron have any community issues to discuss? #auspol #nswvotes

Hagar Cohen: And then there were those who responded and just denigrated her for her greenie ideology.

Woman's voice: Who the f\*ck is this Jan Barham every man and his dog is bitching about? Another souped up Greens wannabe PM, or just a Byron Bay fruit loop?

Man's voice: Jan Barham, please, stop peddling your delusional gibberish in public. Innocent children could be reading this.

Man's voice: I'm sure Jan could do with a shave as well. #ewhairyarmpits

Hagar Cohen: To this day, Jan Barham, who nevertheless did win her seat in the election, is disturbed by how the Twitter conversation about her escalated.

Jan Barham: This is what I don't understand why it attracted so much attention and how it happened. And when some people did contact me, people who were some of the characters engaging in that, they explained to me that some of those personalities that were engaging in this conversation, they weren't necessarily a mass of people, but they were one person masquerading as multiples, which started me thinking about this whole network of how that virtual world works; that sometimes it's one person with multiple identities presenting something as if it's of interest to a lot of people, that there's broad concern about things being said and done. It seemed like everyone was fascinated and there became a thing called Jan-gate!

Hagar Cohen: Jan Barham did try to expose astroturfing, but couldn't get enough evidence to track down the perpetrators.

Jan Barham: It's a whole new world that we have to consider in the political context, I think, and try and get a reality check around how that's happening, because it can be manipulated so easily by someone that's savvy with the technology and has other motives where they could be entrapping other people into campaigns unknowingly, affecting outcomes for all our lives.

Hagar Cohen: Background Briefing coordinating producer is Linda McGinnis. Research Anna Whitfeld. Technical operator this week is Steven Tilley. Our executive producer is Kirsten Garrett. I'm Hagar Cohen and you're listening to Background Briefing on ABC Radio National.



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