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## **PUBLIC'S VULNERABILITY AGAINST ABUSIVE PRACTICES OF COMMUNICATION EMPLOYED BY ORGANIZATIONS: LIMITATIONS FOR CIVIL MONITORING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present article reflects on the matter of civil surveillance over abusive practices of communication employed by private organizations, addressing how such practices, focused on an attempt to corrupt public opinion, create a fuzzy category whose monitoring is permeated by obstacles and difficulties. Then specifically explores the practice of astroturfing, understood as a manifestation of a simulated public, reflecting how their logical and dynamics configure an ambiguous and indeterminate practice.

### **KEYWORDS**

Communication in organisations; abusive communication practices;  
civilian oversight; astroturfing; communication monitoring

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### **OVERVIEW**

In the last two decades, the emergence of civil initiatives aimed at the surveillance of abusive communication practices employed by private organizations reconfigured elements of the multifaceted relationship between organizations and society, elevating the publics to a central position in the defense of their own interests. In several countries, websites and blogs<sup>1</sup> began to take the form of a network of surveillance radars specifically oriented for monitoring abusive communication practices employed by organizations, producing in that process a large number of denunciations involving some of the world's largest corporations. At the same time, those actions opened new and exciting research topics for studies on the organizational communication field. In particular, these initiatives raised questions about who have the role of monitoring organizational communications practices. They also highlight the need of reflection about the unique characteristics that underlie such a monitoring process when it deals with ambiguous practices that seek to influence public opinion in a diffuse manner.

Reflecting on this topic, Henriques & Silva (2013) point out how the media, in their traditional role of watchdog, are permeated by barriers that restrict its performance on the monitoring of the abusive communication practices engendered by organizations. The emergence of civil initiatives oriented to monitoring such practices denotes a similar

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples are the PRWatch ([www.prwatch.org](http://www.prwatch.org)), the SpinWatch ([www.spinwatch.org](http://www.spinwatch.org)) and the SourceWatch ([www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org)).

perception of certain social actors about the limitations of the press. Those actors try to organize and mobilize publics to fill what they believe to be an important gap in contemporary life. Henriques and Silva (2013) emphasize, however, that the performance of those publics are not free of constraints, existing several barriers and challenges that impose limits on civilian efforts.

This article aims to deepen the discussion about the civil surveillance, focusing especially on the challenges faced to monitor the abusive practices of communication employed by organizations. To do so, it's crucial to turn our attention to a less explored aspect of the theme that may have profound implications on future researches: what, after all, constitutes an abusive practice of communication? In this sense, we believe on the importance of undertaking a more extensive exploration of those practices in order to understand the limits imposed to civil society in monitoring procedures.

In a first note, the reflection about these practices pervades the construction of a better understanding of how they differ from the so-called corporate crimes, especially because of their aim of corrupting the public opinion. In that sense, they constitute a distinct category of activities endowed with a fuzzy complexity that allow us to glimpse facets of the public's own vulnerability. Evidently, such a category is formed by a huge multiplicity of practices, each one with their own characteristics and dynamics that impose limitations that must be faced on a monitoring exercise.

Facing such diversity, we choose to focus our efforts to investigate a specific practice attempting to capture how its logics and dynamics set challenges for those seeking to exercise surveillance over it. In that sense, we elected to analyze the *astroturfing*, understood as a communication practice that creates a demonstration of a simulated public. We began with a brief history about that practice and its use by organizations as a strategy to influence public opinion. Then, we undertake further exploration on the details and dynamics that characterize the *astroturfing* based on the results of a case study about a campaign held in Rio de Janeiro in 2005 named "Eu sou da Lapa"<sup>2</sup>. We highlight the way that these dynamics constitute a practice that is essentially open, ambiguous and indeterminate, whose boundaries cannot be seen precisely and which imposes several constraints for those who seek to monitor it.

#### **CORPORATE CRIMES AND THE ATTEMPT TO CORRUPT PUBLIC OPINION**

The so-called corporate crimes are not a precisely defined category. By a narrower description, that moniker designates the infringement of legal provisions that vary by place, covering acts or omissions of companies and corporations that are typified as a crime. They are also known sometimes as "white-collar crime", an expression coined by sociologist Edwin Sutherland in 1939. Nowadays, the definition of corporate crime is often even more comprehensive, including monopoly cases, discharge of toxic pollutants above legal limits, systematic neglect of safety conditions, use of child labor, bribery, fraud and other (Mokhiber, 1995).

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<sup>2</sup> The name could be translated to "I am from Lapa", a famous and traditional neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, the second largest city in Brazil.

Corporations' behavior can be considered criminal not only because of their acts, but also for negligence and omission where they should take some responsibility. On first case the examples are frauds and acts of active or passive corruption in the relationship with government and governmental agencies. Such actions, by their potential affectation, constitute something important on a public dimension. On second are notorious cases of damage caused by normal operation or operational accidents, with include either diffuse damage (to the environment in general, for example) or prejudice to a specific group of people if this becomes something with a collective importance. Such situations fit a generic heading of corporate crime also because of their publicly reprehensible character, which, apart from its essentially legal and juridical aspects, link those actions to a trial by public opinion.

Here lies a crucial point: in principle, the acts of organizations undergo a double judgment that often establishes a tension and a critical moment in relationship with the publics. It is expected of organizations compliance with the laws, and the surfacing of infractions can produce damage to their image and reputation. This only happens, however, if the fact becomes publicly known. Even then, depends on a scale beyond circles of specific audiences, reaching a more general public dimension. Both the press (vested on the function of watchdog) and the publics (that establish mechanisms for civilian oversight of the organizations) have an essential role for this dynamic to work since those actors are able to amplify the formation of a public judgment, demanding accountability and pressuring authorities to trigger the legal effects.

Beyond the corporate crimes, there is another category of acts to be considered. Among the many types of fraud that can be committed by organizations there are those who corrupt the good faith of the public and are perpetrated directly against public opinion. In its simplest form, these can fit the label of the so-called misleading or abusive advertising (often reached by legal classification, such in the laws for consumers' protection<sup>3</sup>). But there are also other practices not always easily labeled, given their surreptitious character, and those can be ethically and morally questioned.

In this category we can identify a varied set of practices intended to influence public opinion. Among others, we can identify the distortion of information about private interests, the attempt to generate misleading stories, the creation of false events, the act of spreading gossips or rumors, the simulation of publics or situations that can influence audiences, the foundation of front organizations to disseminate information or defend certain points of view as a third disinterested party, and the recruitment of scientists without disclosing their ties to the organizations to influence the public debate on controversies with seeming neutrality.

Some of these practices are generally recognized as advertising scams, designed as mere gimmicks used in the relationship with the public and with public opinion. Others, however, have become the object of more systematic reflections in recent decades, mainly due to a growing acknowledgement of their ability to corrupt public opinion. Some even got their own names, a factor that helps the building of a history of those

<sup>3</sup> In Brazilian case, the "Código de Defesa do Consumidor", for example.

practices and reflection about their logics, dynamics and effects. Astroturfing, for example, is a term that designates demonstrations of a simulated public.

It is important to note that although emerging with more defined contours in the public sphere only in the last two decades, the origin of most of these practices refers to a previous period, appearing in classical propaganda texts in the first half of the twentieth century. They are present, for example, on Edward Bernays works (2005; 2011), one of the most prominent North American propagandists of the past century; studies conducted by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), an association formed by researchers with the aim of examining the use of propaganda in the United States between 1937 and 1942; and reflections on propaganda by the psychologist Leonard Doob (1935).

The link between these practices and the propaganda allows us to infer a key point about them: as all persuasive propaganda practices, the examples quoted above challenge the limits of influence relations and are not always easy to typify and prove as an abuse given their elusive characteristics. At their core, they are a complex set of information and counter-information concealed by the barrier of secrecy. Additionally, they are modeled on ambiguities able to build scenarios that oscillate between real and false aspects, creating trails that are difficult to follow, becoming progressively harder to denounce them. These are uncertain practices with diffuse effects, and it is not easy to point or measure their direct consequences. The ethical and moral boundaries are, in general, unclear, being a challenge appoint at which moment they cross the ethically acceptable threshold.

While corporate crime gained prominence in recent decades and become increasingly consolidated in several jurisdictions, practices that corrupt public opinion remained largely on the sidelines of the laws. We argue that the elusive nature of these practices favors the emergence of a similar scenario to what Sutherland envisioned in 1949 for corporate crimes, in which these attracted little public attention by generating only a “relatively disorganized public resentment” (Sutherland, 1949). Several decades of a broad effort of theorists, jurists and the civil society itself were necessary to overcome that scenario and allow corporate crimes to acquire the current widespread recognition. Regarding the communication practices that corrupt public opinion, it is valid to think that the historical failure in their surveillance contributed so they do not have an ample social recognition. As noted previously by Henriques & Silva (2013), the press in its watchdog role is permeated by barriers that hinder their performance in monitoring these practices - difficulties imposed by the systemic nature of the media and also by a quite complex interaction with the same practices that it should monitor.

Thus, the abusive communication practices that corrupt public opinion escapes the double scrutiny that we identified earlier. Not regulated by law and without being able to penetrate spaces of increased visibility, they remain away from the eyes and judgments of public opinion. It is important to note, however, that the emergence of civil surveillance initiatives aimed at monitoring these practices began a movement that is reshaping this scenario. This surveillance network, driven by possibilities of a different configuration of public opinion and collective action brought by the Internet, tries to throw lights on such

conduct of organizations and make them take responsibility for their actions, giving rise to a large number of accusations involving some of the largest companies in the world.

Organized publics, however, should also face numerous limitations to fulfill this role of surveillance. They need to deal with the imperative of building credibility that allows their complaints to reverberate in the public sphere. Also, these initiatives must overcome barriers of secrecy, something that often requires specialized knowledge, and gain broad visibility that is achieved mainly through the media so their activities may have greater impact (Henriques & Silva, 2013). Furthermore, they must also face challenges arising from the ambiguity of characteristics and dynamics of those communication strategies. Each of the practices previously presented have particular logics of great complexity that must be considered so that they can be monitored – and we must address those for a better understanding of civil surveillance. Guided by that rationalization, in the next session we reflect about one of these practices, the astroturfing, trying to observe how its dynamic and characteristics constitute significant barriers to surveillance process.

#### **ASTROTURFING: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE PRACTICE**

The term astroturfing was coined in 1985. In that year a Democrat Senator from Texas, Lloyd Bentsen, was involved in a heated debate about increases in life insurance benefits. During that period, Bentsen received in his office hundreds of letters that defended a position with similar arguments of those championed by American insurers. Those letters were similar in content, but signed by different people who identify themselves as citizens concerned about the situation - something that caused distrust in the political.

Such suspicions led senator Bentsen to comment that “a fellow from Texas can tell the difference between grassroots and Astro Turf. This is generated mail” (Russakoff & Swardon, 1985). In this comparison, he contrasted two terms: grassroots (or “grass roots”), name that designates spontaneous popular demonstrations in the United States, and the AstroTurf, the artificial grass brand created by Monsanto in the 1960s and famous for its similarity to the appearance of real grass. Bentsen then stated that these letters were not spontaneous, but rather an attempt to create the appearance of a popular support for the cause of insurers.

In the nearly three decades since the emergence of the name astroturfing, as a form to designate the demonstrations of simulated publics, a key factor in increasing the recognition of the practice was its connection with the public relations industry and some of the world largest organizations. This point was explored through a series of accusations about how some of the most renowned PR agencies employ astroturfing campaigns in favor of large corporations and governments (Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Hoggan, 2009) - allegations that came in the wake of the broader civil surveillance movement about abusive communication practices performed by private organizations that we explored previously.

One of the first astroturfing cases with worldwide repercussion involving a private organization occurred in 1993. In that year, Philip Morris (now Altria), one of the largest American companies in the tobacco industry, financed the creation of the National

Smokers Alliance (NSA), developed by PR agency Burson-Marsteller. The NSA was presented as a grassroots association, created by smokers in order to fight for the right to smoke, something that supposedly was at risk due to new legislation limiting the consumption of cigarettes. The alliance, however, was not spontaneous and didn't even have members at the time of its foundation, being funded by Phillip Morris as a tactic to exert public pressure to stop such legislation (Hoggan, 2009).

In the last two decades, major PR agencies in the world were targeted on accusations about the use of astroturfing in campaigns benefiting several corporations. Among others, Edelman<sup>4</sup> was accused of developing a campaign to Wal Mart using such practices (Barbaro, 2006); APCO<sup>5</sup> was involved in creating fake support groups for Phillip Morris and the tobacco industry (Hoggan, 2009); Ruder Finn<sup>6</sup> was reported as controlling groups funded by corporations to attack the Kyoto Protocol and the idea of global warming (Hammond, 1997); and Burson-Marsteller<sup>7</sup> was not only involved in allegations of use of astroturfing for the tobacco industry, but also for the energy industry (Beder, 1998). The persistent accusations also echoed in the professional PR associations. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), the major institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively, have mentioned nominally the astroturfing in their codes of ethics as a practice that should not be engaged by its members.

The number of cases in which the PR industry supposedly employs astroturfing draws attention even of practitioners of the area, which join the civil surveillance network on the subject, reporting abuses and ethical lapses. One of these is the Canadian James Hoggan, president of Hoggan and Associates agency. In his book "Climate Cover-up" (2009), about the links of the energy industry with groups who deny the existence of global warming, Hoggan examines a series of cases of astroturfing perpetrated by PR agencies, asserting that we live, without awareness of it, the "Age of Astroturfing".

The astroturfing also gained prominence with the advent and popularization of so-called web 2.0, which features an unparalleled surge of publicity of opinions - and when this characteristic is summed to the anonymity of the internet the results are also unprecedented possibilities for astroturfing. British journalist George Monbiot, one of the main authors working with the subject, points out that the Internet "gives companies and governments golden opportunities to run astroturf operations: fake grassroots campaigns, which create the impression that large numbers of people are demanding or opposing particular policies" (Monbiot, 2011).

According to Monbiot, there is a growing accumulation of evidence in various countries about how forums and feedback sessions on the internet are being occupied by

<sup>4</sup> The O'Dwyer Ranking 2012 designated Edelman as the largest PR agency of the world. Full list available at [www.odwyerpr.com/pr\\_firm\\_rankings/independents.htm](http://www.odwyerpr.com/pr_firm_rankings/independents.htm), access in 27/07/2014.

<sup>5</sup> APCO was designated as the second largest PR agency of the world on the O'Dwyer Ranking 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Ruder Finn was designated as the fifth largest PR agency of the world on the O'Dwyer Ranking 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Burson-Marsteller is a subsidiary of the WPP Group, the largest multinational advertising and public relations company of the world in 2013. Information available at [www.wpp.com/wpp/about](http://www.wpp.com/wpp/about), access in 27/07/2014.

people who are not who they say they are. These evidence are materialized in the form of accusations of astroturfing operations in the UK (Monbiot, 2011), Sweden (Royal, 2010), Spain (Jessen & Kesser, 2012), China (Mackinnon, 2010), among others. Recently, the European Union itself has been accused of practices that simulate a civil society support for their activities (Snowdon, 2013).

Despite the growing worldwide recognition, the astroturfing remains relatively incognito in Brazil, with few cases gaining the public arena. One of the first records of such practice in the country was the episode “Eu Sou da Lapa”, held in Rio de Janeiro in 2005, which consisted of a supposed grassroots movement for revaluation of the Lapa neighborhood in Rio. The movement was created, however, by an advertising agency hired by a construction company that was about to launch a real estate development in the neighborhood. Such action aimed to simulate a popular demonstration in favor of Lapa as a way to increase the interest for real estate construction in that area. With that objective, local personalities were hired as spokespersons of the supposed movement, a website and a community in Orkut were created and a large number of materials and giveaways were distributed in the city, such as shirts, adhesives and guides. Throughout the month of October of that year, “Eu sou da Lapa” took the streets of Rio de Janeiro claiming to be a movement of civil society that was spreading through the city.

After the action, the agency responsible for the case inscribed it on the Prêmio Aberje, the highest award in the field of business communications in Brazil<sup>8</sup>. When describing the strategies employed, the agency said it had created “a popular movement, using the tool of astroturfing (propaganda actions that look as spontaneous initiatives)”<sup>9</sup>, thus revealing the artificial nature of the action. This revelation, however, did not generate a negative backlash, which shows a lack of knowledge about the practice in the country. Just recently some accusations of the use of astroturfing in the political field were treated by major media outlets, primarily due to a dispute involving the *Veja* Magazine and the Partido dos Trabalhadores in the episode named “#VejaBandida” (SILVA, 2013), but the issue remains still without a major impact on Brazil.

We observe, in general, that the last decades marked the rise of astroturfing in the public sphere, resulting in a growing number of accusations about the use of the practice in many countries. There are very few cases, however, which resulted in sanctions for the involved, and we believe that this fact can be related to a fundamental element of the practice: its inherent ambiguity, which hinders monitoring process and denunciations.

#### **AN ESSENTIALLY AMBIGUOUS PRACTICE**

In this session, we explore some important evidence to corroborate the previous reflection on the limitations of civilian surveillance related to astroturfing. To accomplish this objective, we present findings of a research conducted about the campaign “Eu Sou da Lapa”, a case that occurred in late 2005 in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The research

<sup>8</sup> Organized by the Associação Brasileira de Comunicação Empresarial – Aberje

<sup>9</sup> Statement found on the agency archives, available at <http://www.blogdeguerrilha.com.br/cases>, access in 27/07/2014.

wasn't intended to denounce the case, but to undertake an investigation into the dynamics of the astroturfing. Because of that, the choice was to work only with publicly available information about the episode. The campaign "Eu Sou da Lapa" was chosen, in this sense, because of the plurality of public material available. Among other, we had access to the website of the movement, a community in Orkut social network, a manifesto of the movement which was widely distributed, a presentation on the case conducted by the agency responsible for the action and made available on the Internet, as well as dozens of press articles that have addressed the movement during October, November and December of 2005.

Such plurality of empirical material allowed an ample analysis. The collected material was classified into three categories in order to search for logical elements that pervades the astroturfing: a) utterances, category composed of materials that bring claims about the nature and the characteristics of the movement "Eu Sou da Lapa", i.e., those that tries to publicly define what that manifestation is; b) actions held by the movement, category identified from material collected on the case "Eu Sou da Lapa"; c) reverberations, category related to the social commentaries about the case, i.e., its reverberation in the press and social media (there were 25 newspaper articles and 278 posts on social networks in total). Through this empirical material we had a glimpse of some of the dynamics of astroturfing, with findings showing how the practice is pervaded by ambiguities that give it an open character and ill-defined barriers that establish difficulties for its monitoring. In the next few paragraphs we present three of those findings, reflecting about them briefly.

A first finding is that the practice is more complex than simple lies, combining real and deceptive aspects. During the episode "Eu Sou da Lapa", several actions actually happened. For example, local personalities wore the shirt of the movement and held public demonstrations, including musical performances and a sand sculpture in Copacabana beach of the Arcos da Lapa, one of the main symbols of that neighborhood. At the same time a large number of bars all around the city were distributing kits of that movement, made of napkins and other personalized items. Rounds of free beer were also distributed in various establishments in the city, as well as free shirts, stickers and pins of the "Eu sou da Lapa". At newsstands, guides of the Lapa neighborhood explaining its historical and cultural significance were offered, and signs from "Eu Sou da Lapa" were exhibited in stadiums during soccer games. In addition to these promotional activities, ordinary people identified with the neighborhood also joined the manifestations in good faith, declaring approval to the movement proposals and goals.

In that way, that case was not something that can be seen as a false news story or an easily refutable lie. During their daily lives, ordinary people encountered several concrete instances of such movement and its manifestations. However, these actions brought quite ambiguous elements especially in regard to false interpretations by the agency responsible for the case. They were not, in this sense, exactly what the agency claimed, as they were publicized as a social movement, originated from publics expressing their support for it. The aspect of simulation, as expected, does not appear in the utterances



of the movement, thus revealing an aspect of concealment and deception, an attempt to make people believe in something that would not be happening exactly that way.

A second finding that emerges from the analysis of the case “Eu sou da Lapa” and helps exploit the limitations of the monitoring of astroturfing is the creation of a complex plot during the development of the practice. We can face the astroturfing as an example of what Daniel Boorstin (1962) calls the pseudo-event: an event built strategically to assume the appearance of true, with the prefix “pseudo” being employed by the author to emphasize precisely the deceptive aspect present in them. The astroturfing, from this angle, consists in a manifestation of a public that does not exist, being, however, a construct oriented to make people believe that a public would actually be manifesting.

In exploring the theme of pseudo-events, Boorstin argues that one of defining characteristics of this phenomenon is the construction of a plot from the “original” pseudo-event so it can become increasingly naturalized and less recognizable. This plot unfolds through the impressions of journalists and ordinary conversations about the fact, interpretations about the incident by a specialist, speculation about its causes or consequences - or, in other words, through the reverberation of that pseudo-event.

It is critical to understand such reverberation not only as a set of immediate reactions to that event, but as a complex network formed by a multiplicity of elements. It is made from the reactions of the media and public about what happens, but it is also woven by new events that unfold from the original pseudo-event, and which are also accompanied by their respective reverberations. Some of these may even set new pseudo-events, planned and programmed precisely to help build this plot. The most important point to understand is how those reverberations and new events end up reconfiguring interpretations about the pseudo-event.

The more this plot is constructed, i.e., the more the pseudo-event reverberates in society, more of its artificial nature is overshadowed by the complexity of the situation. Something similar was noticed by researchers at Indiana University in the United States during a research of astroturfing attempts in the North American elections. According to the group, when these attempts actually fall into the stream of ordinary conversations, its simulated nature quickly becomes indistinguishable (Ratkiewicz et al, 2011).

During the analysis of the “Eu Sou da Lapa”, we could catch glimpses of this process, observing how a tangle of developments, new strategic interventions and social interactions on the situation progressively built a plot that obscured the artificial nature of the case. The actions engineered by the agency responsible for the case, for example, occur successively and made the movement look something organic. They also fostered an impression that many were already mobilized around that cause, that those manifestations involved a large number of people and was a subject widely commented which all people emitted or were about to emit opinions and supports.

The episode also achieved media visibility. Altogether, we find twenty five appearances of that movement in the media between October and November of 2005, including national vehicles - for example, the participation of saxophonist Ademir Leão, one of the local personalities recruited by the agency, in a late night talk show on TV Globo, the

biggest network in Brazil. The investigation of the community “Eu Sou da Lapa” in Orkut also allowed us to see how some of the actions generated many comments from users, especially those that offered free rounds of beer in bars - some users posted comments about their experience with such action while others mourned the lost opportunity to gain free drink and wondered about future interventions.

In conclusion, we found small interactions around that movement that helped in the developing of an increasingly dense plot. Successively, one pseudo-event became something somehow naturalized and consolidated, and people stop questioning what is happening as they take that event as a fact. We note, in this sense, how “Eu Sou da Lapa” was treated by the press at the end of the campaign, being readily incorporated as a consolidated part of a framework on the revitalization of that neighborhood, a scenario in which becomes even more ambiguous dealing with that case and the original pseudo-event behind him.

The third finding that makes it even more ambiguous and difficult to monitor the astroturfing is the possibility of a real public mobilization. The main peculiarity of astroturfing lies precisely in the possibility of formation of a public that was simulated before. Unlike, for example, a spill of a toxic substance in a factory, which would affect many individuals around the event and would lead the public to move in relation to the fact, the gist of astroturfing lies in the existence of a public that is already presented, but in a simulated way.

A dimension that consistently stands out in astroturfing cases is related to a call for mobilization that seeks to make ordinary people start to act about that event. It is, however, a specific call to mobilization which seeks to make the subjects join the simulated public (that seems authentic to them) that is manifesting in order to hide its deceptive character and make the process more believable. The National Smokers Alliance, which we explored earlier, is an emblematic case in this regard. Created to give the impression of a spontaneous manifestation of citizens concerned with threats to the right to smoke, as soon it was founded, the NSA puts into action an “...state-of-the-art campaign that uses full-page newspaper ads, direct telemarketing, paid canvassers, free 800 numbers and newsletters” (Stauber & Rampton, 1995: 29) to recruit people for the association. The NSA therefore acted on two fronts: one expressed an audience that, at first, was simulated, while the other undertook an effort to bring some authenticity to that audience, make people actually be mobilized for that cause.

As a pseudo-event needs social interaction - the development of a plot - so the artificial elements of its construction are eclipsed, the astroturfing depends on the formation of a more authentic public to influence public opinion with greater effect. Faced with a multiplicity of subjects defending those ideas and acting as that public, it is virtually impossible to determine the origin of that public and artificial nature.

In that mobilization, we can observe something planned since the very manifestation of a simulated public carries the basic configuration of what will be de facto mobilized public. In this way, those manifestations present a collective way of seeing the situation that set basic contours for subsequent actions. The astroturfing prefigure and

project a public, calling other persons to join that public and position themselves aligned within the possibilities offered by the situation. Thus, the practice reveal possible actions at that moment about a particular cause - in the case of “Eu sou da Lapa”, this position was related to the act of wearing the shirt of that movement, using some material with that name stamped. The main page of the website “Eu Sou da Lapa” related the use of materials of the movement as a way to adhere to the cause (“ask for your shirt and join this movement”), being possible to observe, mainly through the community “Eu Sou da Lapa” in Orkut, how people acted in such a way, requesting shirts and stickers as a form to join that movement.

Thus, we can consider the astroturfing as a “spark”, something that may initiate a process to mobilize a public. The practice offers a basic position for the subjects to act as part of that public that they believe is already manifesting. At the same time, it brings appeals that encourage individuals to assume such a position within a framework – in other words, an incentive to act. Such factors include a simple action that does not demand a lot of the person (wear a shirt supporting a revitalization movement of a neighborhood as emblematic as the Lapa is an example) and the very idea that a collective is already mobilized around that movement - the notion that many other subjects are already manifesting spontaneously like that.

Despite being a key element in the dynamics of astroturfing, it is clear that not all cases of this practice cause such a mobilization of an authentic public. When there is success in such formation, however, its becomes difficult to distinguish the phenomenon, isolate and understand what is misleading and what is authentic in that public - when more people are mobilized, more elements of authenticity are aggregated to the simulated public. When all bars of Lapa begin to distribute the materials of that movement, when a large group of people starts to wear that shirt, use those brooches and say that they are also from Lapa, how to point to the public that was simulated? And even more important: how to characterize the practice as abusive and denounce it?

## **FINAL REMARKS**

It seems important, after all, to return to the question of corporate crimes and the abusive practices of communication that attempt to corrupt public opinion. Corporate crimes, like any crime, are punished only through discursive reconstitution which allows you to expose the facts in its materiality to trial as consistent and verifiable history. Immaterial and diffuse characteristics of propaganda and fraud against public opinion engendered by organizations challenge this notion, since they themselves are within the fluid discursive logic of the narratives in dispute. However, one cannot escape punishment by demoralization and possible erosion of trust: the court of public opinion. The problem is how to capture those practices that try to deceive the good faith of the public.

As noted, these practices are difficult to apprehend. They are endowed with aspects that generate constraints and challenges and that must be faced by the public that try to occupy a monitoring position. Our intention in this article was not to draw an extensive framework of these difficulties, something that would require different analyzes due to

the multiplicity of practices that seek to corrupt public opinion, but rather to explore one of these practices to demonstrate their complexity. The astroturfing, seen as an ambiguous, complex and indeterminate practice, exposes some of the vulnerabilities of the public and limitations of surveillance procedures by civil society, providing new insights for future research on this topic.

Thus, it is important to note that many of the allegations about the astroturfing turn only to the deceptive aspects that come into play, not recognizing the coexistence of spontaneous and authentic manifestations that make it even more complicated to understand this practice. The denunciations that focus only on deceptive aspects may even diminish the strength of such accusations before the public as those realize that real aspects were left out of such charges. The construction of a narrative originated on social interaction around pseudo-events is another sore point since it relegates the misleading character of these “manufactured events” into the background, creating a sense of frustration on those who try to expose it. Also, the construction of this web of interactions makes any attempt to point to exact boundaries of the practice progressively more complicated.

Finally, when the astroturfing manages to mobilize subjects to act similarly to the initially simulated public a huge challenge is created for those seeking to monitor the practice. At that moment, the threshold between the simulated and the real becomes confused, and the denunciation of the misleading and artificial character of the practice could end up being a factor that increases the mobilization of those who are genuinely engaged and expressing their opinion without knowledge about the initial simulation. Something like that happened in the case of #VejaBandida mentioned before. After the denunciation of Veja Magazine that the episode was an astroturfing, with proof that 50% of all messages with that hash tag were originated from a small number of fake profiles, a new manifestation on twitter took place. With the #VejaTemMedo hash tag, this new manifestation was held by those who indeed participated in the original one – the other 50%. They criticized the allegations about the supposedly artificial nature of #VejaBandida, stating that it was just an attempt to delegitimize the views expressed by ordinary citizens about the magazine.

In conclusion, the astroturfing is a particularly ambiguous practice, and that is the reason why it is difficult to monitor it. Even when civil surveillance networks are able to capture cases of the use of such a strategy, the logics inherent to it make the denunciation process not as simple as pointing a trivial lie. This explains the failure of many public accusations in generating constraints to those who employs astroturfing.

It is important to note that, despite the difficulties, the performance of this network of civil surveillance is not fruitless, achieving decisive success in increasing the public exposure of the practice. As a consequence of this increase, many countries began to discuss, albeit timidly, some of the legal aspects involved in the issue, but still without producing a recognizable jurisprudence on the subject. Referring to our discussion on corporate crimes, we can speculate that this marks the strengthening of a process that aims to break the barrier lifted by a “relatively disorganized public resentment”, something of great importance to the social recognition of such practices.

In this sense, two important precedents have been recently established in relation to astroturfing. In a first case, the Chief Prosecutor of the State of New York concluded an investigation that fined 19 local businesses who performed actions of astroturfing on the internet (Seltzer, 2013). Also, the Taiwan justice just fined Samsung in approximately \$350.000 by using astroturfing practices in online forums in that country (Fingas, 2013). Undoubtedly, these are still modest steps if we consider the large number of denounces about the astroturfing built in the last two decades, but constitute an important step to change that scenario. Given the difficulties of characterization of this practice as abusive, prospects for future research remain open to further extend the comprehension of its logic and of the vulnerability of the public, as well as explore new configurations for organizations and society relationship. //

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