Lab fluens

International study day:

ASTROTURFING

and other strategies for the instrumentalization of citizen authenticity

May 5, 2025

UQAM - room PK1140
201, av. du Président-Kennedy
Montréal H2X 3Y7

PROGRAM

RECEPTION
8:00

8:30 - 9:00 : Greetings by Stephanie Yates and Camille Alloing

SESSION 1
9:00 – 12:00

Astroturfing, legislative framework, and effects on public debate

- **Melissa Durkee** (Washington University)
  - ***Astroturfing and Democratic Participation in Global Governance: Exploring Legal Frameworks***
- **Jordan B. Kinder** (Wilfrid Laurier University)
  - ***On Canadian Oil, Social Media, and the New Astroturfing***
- **Andreea Musulan & Jean-François Godbout** (Université de Montréal)
  - ***Online Influence Campaigns: Strategies and Vulnerabilities***

LUNCH BREAK

SESSION 2
13:15 – 15:30

Conceptualization of the phenomenon, strategies, and tactics

- **Courtney D. Boman** (University of Alabama)
  - ***Shielding Against Astroturfing: The Power of Inoculation***
- **Elizabeth Dubois** (University of Ottawa) & **Fenwick McKelvey** (Concordia University)
  - ***Experimenting with generative AI tools to create astroturfing campaigns***

BREAK

SESSION 3
16:00 – 18:00

Detection on digital platforms

- **Florian Dauphin** (Université de Picardie Jules Verne)
  - ***Debunking vs. Astroturfing: Raising Awareness and Mobilizing Against Manipulative Strategies***
- **Derek Ruths** (McGill University)
  - ***Mission Impossible – detecting social media bots***

END OF THE DAY
18:00- 18:30

Closing remarks by the organizers

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Dr. Elizabeth Dubois is an Associate Professor and University Research Chair in Politics, Communication and Technology at the University of Ottawa where she runs the Pol Comm Tech Lab and examines political uses of digital media. She also hosts the Wonks and War Rooms podcast

DEREK RUTHS

Derek Ruths, Associate Professor at McGill and co-founder of Charitable Analytics International, develops responsible AI and data science solutions. He advises industry and government on AI's impact and has led projects on health data, COVID-19 policy, and socio-technical challenges.

FENWICK MCKELVEY

Fenwick McKelvey, Associate Professor at Concordia, studies the politics of digital media and their regulation. A media and regulatory hearing expert, he authored Internet Daemons (2018), awarded in 2019, and serves on The Walrus editorial review board.

ANDREEA MUSULAN

Andreea Musulan is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Montreal, working on detecting malicious coordinated activity online, with a focus on political ideology, polarization, and their impact on public opinion through social media.

MELISSA MJ DURKEE

Melissa (MJ) Durkee, William Gardiner Hammond Professor of Law at Washington University in St. Louis, directs the Whitney R. Harris World Law Institute and specializes in public-private interactions in international lawmaking.

FLORIAN DAUPHIN

Florian Dauphin, PhD in sociology and senior lecturer at UPJV, studies disinformation, debunking, influencers, and generative AI. He is a researcher at the Habiter le Monde laboratory and a member of the GDR Internet, AI, and Society.

COURTNEY BOMAN

Courtney D. Boman is an assistant professor in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at The University of Alabama. Her research focuses on quantitative experimental design, exploring crisis and risk communication through persuasion, new media effects, and message strategy.

JORDAN B. KINDER

Jordan B. Kinder, Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, holds a Ph.D. in English and Film Studies from the University of Alberta. He researches energy, media, and infrastructure, including Van Ginkel Associates' role in the 1970s Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Proposal.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS GODBOUT

Jean-François Godbout, professor at UdeM and visiting researcher at Mila, specializes in data science, AI, and machine learning, with a focus on disinformation and political polarization.

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Experimenting with generative AI tools to create astroturfing campaigns

"Researchers asked AI to generate political spam. It worked" The headline comes from a major newspaper covering a simple experiment. Would major generative AI models produce election specific misinformation in the Canadian context? Yes, 4 out of 5 models offered many versions of tweet length posts which could easily be used in an astroturfing campaign. This example comes from a simple student-led project and illustrates how important it is to better understand the opportunities and limits generative AI presents for creating election mis and dis information. Our presentation introduces two methods and evaluations of student-led classroom research to understand and evaluate generative AI supported astroturfing campaigns and other potentially problematic political uses of increasingly available generative AI tools.

First, we discuss red-teaming's impact in the classroom. Red-teaming is a method and exercise with military origins that aims to simulate 'attacks' on critical infrastructure and processes in order to better understand vulnerability points and how to correct them. Our prototype, Fraudulent Futures, provides a gamified method for testing electoral integrity and resilience for generative AI risks. Using profiles based on real-world actor groups for both the Red Team ("bad actors") and the Blue Team (election stakeholders such as journalists, electoral officers, etc.), we simulate an electoral setting in which these teams must either create or respond to AI generated disinformation and misinformation.

Second, we report on a classroom exercise where students selected generative AI tools to test during a five week data collection period. They prompted tools to generate campaign materials, social media posts for candidates, and disinformation and documented responses. Results showed most tools create political content with no apparent limits and responses to prompts are often inconsistent over time.

Our presentation outlines the literatures and considerations drawn on to conceptualize the exercises; the Canadian political context used; the series of choices to be made in designing such an exercise; and next steps and potential benefits of this approach to understanding GenAI dis/misinformation and electoral politics.

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Petroturfing: On Canadian Oil, Social Media, and the New Astroturfing

Based on the recently published Petroturfing: Refining Canadian Oil through Social Media (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), this presentation examines how the Canadian pro-oil movement took shape through social media and ignited the oil culture wars—wars waged from positions founded on either dirty or ethical oil imaginaries—in order to undermine resistance to the fossil fuel industry and delay energy transition by symbolically refining Canadian oil as a progressive and, indeed, decolonial force.

Returning to the central claims in the book that figure the pro-oil movement as a fossil-fuelled mode of astroturfing to which the title of the book derives, this presentation specifically addresses how the architectures and infrastructures of social media establish fertile conditions for astroturfing. In the case of the Canadian pro-oil movement, two animating fictions serve as its rationale: first, that the oil and gas industry is constrained and under threat and, second, that a movement "from below" is needed to bolster the industry.

Through self-presentation as grassroots groups and campaigns, the pro-oil movement effectively renders dominant views and relations surrounding fossil fuels as marginalized ones, which is made possible by a process the book describes as legitimation through circulation.

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Online Influence Campaigns: Strategies and Vulnerabilities

In order to combat the creation and spread of harmful content online, this paper defines and contextualizes the concept of inauthentic, societal-scale manipulation by malicious actors.

We review the literature on societally harmful content and how it proliferates to analyze the manipulation strategies used by such actors and the vulnerabilities they target. We also provide an overview of a recent case study of extensive manipulation to emphasize the severity of the problem. We then address the role that Artificial Intelligence plays in the development and dissemination of harmful content, and how its evolution presents new threats to societal cohesion for countries across the globe.

Our survey aims to increase our understanding of not just particular aspects of these threats, but also the strategies underlying their deployment, so we can effectively prepare for the evolving cybersecurity landscape.

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Astroturfing and Democratic Participation in Global Governance: Exploring Legal Frameworks

Astroturfing, where businesses create or fund seemingly grassroots movements, can threaten the integrity of governance processes at the international level, just as it does at the domestic level. Multinational corporations and industry groups have increasingly expanded their lobbying efforts beyond national borders, influencing rulemaking processes —sometimes covertly—at various international bodies including the World Health Organization, the International Maritime Organization, and others.

This contribution explores the intertwined issues of astroturfing and corporate influence within the context of global governance, focusing particularly on their impact at international organizations. It surveys participatory structures at several international organizations, demonstrating how those structures are often focused on inclusiveness and representativeness over transparency. It offers some examples of how these structures can expose international organizations to astroturfing and other non-transparent influence.

A successful participatory model for international organizations should acknowledge that business groups can use a variety of channels to communicate their input, including trade and industry associations, other non-governmental groups, academics and think tanks, domestic officials, and others. Because of these links between businesses and other groups, which are sometimes invisible, governance approaches that attempt to distinguish between business and other actors are not likely to prove durable over time. Instead, two basic governance models are most likely to succeed: a roundtable model that includes only a small set of actors through an invitation or application process but then invites deep substantive engagement by those stakeholders, or a public comment model that allows participation by all interested parties but at an arms-length level of engagement.

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Shielding Against Astroturfing: The Power of Inoculation

Astroturfing, the orchestrated manipulation of public opinion through disinformation campaigns, poses a significant threat to organizations by undermining their credibility and damaging their reputation. This research investigates the effectiveness of inoculation strategies, specifically pre-bunking, in countering the impact of these deceptive attacks.

Multiple studies, situated within the context of crisis communication and paracrisis frameworks, examined the effects of various communication approaches, including pre-bunking, supportive public relations messaging, strategic silence, and no response strategies. Online experiments were conducted to evaluate the impact of these approaches on organizational outcomes such as reputation, credibility, and public attitudes. Findings consistently demonstrate the effectiveness of pre-bunking in protecting against the adverse effects of astroturfing. The research highlights the importance of message construction within pre-bunking interventions, emphasizing the benefits of incorporating explicit details and autonomy support to foster psychological reactance towards disinformation.

Beyond attitudinal measures, the research also investigates the influence of these strategies on behavioral intentions and the potential for social amplification of pre-bunking messages through social media platforms. Importantly, the findings indicate that individuals who received pre-bunking messages were significantly less likely to share or amplify the subsequent astroturfing messages on social media platforms. This suggests that pre-bunking not only protects individual attitudes towards an organization being attacked, but also effectively limits the spread of disinformation by reducing its social amplification.

Collectively, these findings contribute to the development of proactive disinformation response models for crisis communication, offering practical guidance for organizations seeking to defend against astroturf attacks and maintain public trust in an increasingly complex and disinformation-ridden information environment. Moreover, this research provides valuable insights into the theoretical underpinnings of inoculation theory in the context of contemporary communication challenges, particularly in countering disinformation-based astroturfing campaigns.

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Debunking in the Face of Astroturfing: Awareness and Mobilization Against Manipulative Strategies

Digital platforms have become key spaces for the dissemination and contestation of information. Among the phenomena emerging in these spaces, astroturfing—the artificial simulation of popular support for a cause—serves as an opinion manipulation strategy used by interest groups, corporations, or political actors. This study examines the role of skeptical video creators and debunking communities in detecting and exposing these manipulative practices.

Through an analysis of YouTube videos and interviews with content creators engaged in the fight against misinformation, this research explores the discursive and rhetorical strategies used to counter astroturfing. The findings reveal that debunking relies on several key elements: identifying contradictions and inconsistencies in manipulative campaigns, using empirical evidence and fact-checking methodologies, and crafting aesthetics and narratives suited to digital platform dynamics. However, these efforts face challenges due to social media algorithms, which tend to favor the most polarizing content—sometimes making debunking less visible than the manipulative strategies it seeks to expose.

This study highlights the tensions between the critical engagement of skeptical video creators and the constraints of the attention economy while questioning the effectiveness of current regulatory measures in addressing these sophisticated forms of manipulation.

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Mission Impossible – detecting social media bots

Social media bots are a fundamental component of astroturfing campaigns. This makes it important to study them and ultimately develop methods to neutralize their effects. But to study them – and often to implement countermeasures – we must find them first.

In this talk, we examine why this is an impossible undertaking in the wild. Studies work with bot datasets constructed from social media platforms, but it is all but impossible for such datasets to be representative. Given this reality, we need alternatives. We will consider a novel competition-based approach we've been working on that offers the promise of providing the core resources and insights we need to build detection systems and know their limits as well as explore the space of bot capabilities and architectures.

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