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Nonprofit Organizations advocate for the poor, the disenfranchised and the oppressed. This process is thought to build social capital and civil society, while engendering the development of social skills and deliberation. In recent years, scholars have observed that nonprofit advocacy organizations have moved from membership associations to professionalized policy change organizations. Virtual advocacy will move the process farther a field. Astroturf, the creation of synthetic advocacy efforts, continues this process further. All of this has troubling implications for nonprofit organizations and nonprofit theory. This paper describes the astroturf phenomenon, reviews pertinent nonprofit theory and speculates on the impact of astroturf for society and the further development of nonprofit theory.

Keywords: *advocacy, astroturf, technology, campaigns, nonprofit organizations*

The rise of Astroturf (synthetic grassroots organizing) efforts has created a major dilemma for nonprofit advocacy organizations and raises concerns for nonprofit theory as well.

This paper looks at the Astroturf Phenomena, considers the implications for nonprofit advocacy and then discusses the issue in light of relevant theories of nonprofit political action.

Advocacy and community mobilization are important mechanisms of the nonprofit sector's long-term commitment to building civil society (Jenkins, 1987; Berry & Arons, 2002; Salamon, 1994). Through the organization of communities and individuals, the creation of associations and the building of relationships, nonprofit organizations promote the functioning of democracy and the health of communities (Putnam, 1995; 2000; Skocpol, 2003).

Nonprofit organizations and social movement organizations invest substantial resources in community organization and other community mobilization activities designed to change policy and to empower community members. While these efforts frequently have instrumental goals in mind, a side benefit is the creation of community and social capital.

Traditional face-to-face organizing is often the methodology of choice. This is difficult work. Many hours of time and a considerable amount of skill in facilitation are needed to conduct face-to-face meetings with community members (Alinsky, 1970; Kahn, 1970; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). Nonprofit organizations make this investment based on the assumptions that advocacy works better when people are involved, that the political system is more responsive to people than to faceless organizations, that individual participants learn important civic skills, that people and communities feel empowered, and that the promise of democracy is fulfilled through these processes. For all of these reasons, grassroots organizing is considered a significant part of the nonprofit sector practice. A respectable portion of nonprofit theory supports the importance of this activity (see Putnam, 2000; 1993; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003; Skocpol, 2003), often disparaging the political activity of less member-driven advocacy organizations as "checkbook democracy."

But what if it all wasn't true? What if one didn't need to organize the grassroots to yield some of the political benefits of grassroots advocacy? In fact, what if the results generated without grassroots involvement eclipsed those generated through the traditional process? Would or should one invest the effort required by the traditional process? These are the

questions raised by the growing phenomenon of Astroturf political action.

Astroturf and Community Mobilization

Astroturf, quite simply, is synthetic grassroots organizing created for manipulative political purposes (see Lyon & Maxwell, 2004; Allen, 1998; Austin, 2002). In this type of activity, an entity that wishes to affect public policy creates an effort that gives the appearance of grassroots support. Using public relations methodology (audience analysis, news media, advertising and so forth), Astroturf simulates mobilization by a legitimate local organization. When done well, Astroturf efforts can look very much like the efforts that they are intended to replicate. The techniques are well developed and the results often convince even seasoned observers. While it is difficult to say with any authority, the environmental politics arena seems to engender the most Astroturf activity (Beder, 1998; Savage, 1995; Sanchez, 1996; Stauber & Rampton, 1995), perhaps because of the direct confrontation of environmental groups with corporate interests. A particularly vivid illustration of this type of effort is part of the "wise use" movement which opposes more traditional environmental advocacy efforts (see Austin, 2002).

The "Wise Use" movement was an attempt to modify and soften legal restrictions on extractive industries brought on by Federal and State environmental laws. It was widely thought to be sponsored, in part, by the affected industries that are the adversaries of the environmental movement. A number of seemingly legitimate local organizations were created in affected areas, each with a mission opposed to the ideas of environmentalists.

When successful, Astroturf efforts resemble actual community mobilization efforts. They create the impression that local people are engaged in the effort and doing the things that traditional community organizations do.

The Astroturf organization may be incorporated and it might have a local office staffed by employees and a website. It may buy advertising, use direct mail and so forth. For corporately-sponsored Astroturf efforts, money is not the barrier that it often is for grassroots groups.

It would be easy for the public and the political system to assume that an Astroturf effort is just a well funded nonprofit. But this change effort is not driven by the will of the local people, it is driven by the vested interests of an organization and a hired a public affairs firm (perhaps a public relations firm, a law firm or a political consulting organization).

Astroturf has no real need for traditional mobilization, unless it can only reach a desired goal by using that technique. In most cases, there is no expectation that participation will exist or empowerment will occur. In Astroturf efforts, success is defined in terms of attainment of the client's desired political outcome.

Secondary goals, such as community empowerment, the development of civic skills, the creation of on-going associations for community decision making are not sought after and may even be discouraged. Empowerment of the people and groups who may eventually become the sponsor's opponent is not in the sponsor's interest. By dispensing with these more pro-social actions, Astroturf efforts dramatically lower the transaction costs associated with true community mobilization.

Astroturf efforts are probably more often employed by commercial corporations, but that does not mean that all corporate grassroots political efforts are Astroturf. Corporations often engage in legitimate attempts to influence public opinion. The effort becomes Astroturf when a front group is created to mask the true identities and interests being represented. It is also possible for nonprofits or governmental organizations to mount Astroturf efforts.

Technology and Astroturf

Information and communication technology can clearly accelerate the process of creating Astroturf campaigns. The technological onslaught that has revolutionized advocacy and political campaigns can easily be rerouted to Astroturf efforts (McNutt, 2000; Hick & McNutt, 2002; Cornfield, 2004). This can mean anything from throwing up a website for a simulated organization to the use of complex technology to identify and reach potential supporters. The entire arsenal of e-marketing can be brought to bear on behalf of Astroturf efforts. The growing sophistication of these efforts is almost magical in nature.

Howard (2003; Howard & Milstein, 2003) paints a very frightening picture of how Astroturf organizations can use polling, sophisticated databases, data mining, clustering and a host of additional techniques in efforts to woo voters and pressure decision makers. Since political marketing shares much of the base knowledge of traditional commercial marketing (see Shea & Burton, 2001), it seems clear that new techniques developed for one use will eventually diffuse to the other. It seems clear that technology will hasten the progress made by providers of Astroturf.

Perhaps the key issue in all of this is trust. Can we trust community efforts that we encounter? Surely well-meaning citizens can become part of Astroturf efforts; citizens might not realize that an entity to which they belong is in reality, Astroturf. Likewise, it is very possible for decision makers to misread the results of an Astroturf effort as the pulse of the community. This is, of course, the intent of those creating the Astroturf effort.

Astroturf is the manipulative use of media and other political techniques to create the perception of a grassroots community organization where none exists for the purpose of political gain. Central to this description is deception. Astroturf organizations can only be successful when they are not recognized as such. An Astroturf effort cannot easily continue once it is successfully identified.

Nonprofits and Astroturf

Nonprofit theorists have continually cited the benefits of political and civic participation (Jenkins, 1987; Putnam, 2000). These advantages include a healthier society, a more robust democracy and the building of social capital (Field, 2003). The sector considers this a part of its mission. There is, perhaps, less discussion about the relationship between the instrumental political goals and the broader benefits of participation.

Astroturf provides a fascinating test case for the adequacy of the current nonprofit theoretical framework. The differences between Astroturf and other types of political participation are often difficult to see, but a key difference pertains to the use of deception. People who engaged in Astroturf programming

are knowingly deceiving the public and public officials. More importantly, those members of the public who become part of Astroturf efforts or are influenced by Astroturf efforts have been duped.

One wonders about the damage caused by this deception. More specifically, will Astroturf erode the positive effects of political participation? This question has important implications for a variety of issues dear to nonprofit scholarship.

Nonprofit Theory and the Problem of Astroturf

Nonprofit scholars have expounded, often eloquently, about the role of the nonprofit sector in promoting a healthy democracy and civil society. The sector not only advocates for the poor, the powerless and the dispossessed, but also builds the connections and networks that underpin civil society (Jenkins, 1987). As such, nonprofit organizations and voluntary action builds democratic infrastructure and insures the integrity of government.

In recent years, nonprofit scholars have raised substantial questions about the state of the civic infrastructure in the United States and elsewhere. They argue that declines in face to face interaction, deliberation and involvement have lead to a diminished and impoverished civic life with direct consequences for the health of the American political system.

Putnam (2000) in his influential book *Bowling Alone*, identified the problem of declining political engagement and the loss of social capital (see also Putnam, 1993). He argues that the decline of traditional types of civic participation and membership in associations lead to a political system that fails to engage citizens. He cites declines in voter participation, involvement in other forms of political engagement and confidence in government as evidence of this trend.

Social capital is the critical ingredient that makes the political system operates properly. Social capital, as Putnam (2000) sees it, is depended upon trust and networks of reciprocity.

While Putnam has his detractors, his point about traditional member based organizations versus advocacy organizations that function with little actual involvement from the public is difficult to refute. Others, most notably Jeffery Berry

(1999), have obtained similar results (but see Tichenor & Harris, 2005). Unlike Putnam, Berry sees this trend as a positive development.

Berry (1999) argues that there was a shift in advocacy organizations leading to a "New Liberalism." Traditional advocacy organizations were large, membership based organizations that did the bidding of their members. This changed in the late 1960s with the emergence of a new type of advocacy organization (Public Interest) that was smaller, professionally managed and with a marginal role for the membership. Berry (1999) sees this as a positive development because it frees advocates to work on issues that have less political support, supports the needs of the middle class and professionalizes the practice of advocacy.

Skocpol's (2003) historical analysis also identifies this trend. Reviewing the changes that have occurred over the past century, she sees civic life supported by membership organizations. The growth of associations provided access to the political system and often political power. Associations not only provided Americans with the opportunity to participate but also provided the chance to develop important civic skills and to deliberate on public issues. Finally, membership organizations provided the opportunity for individuals to associate with people from other social classes. All of these things are important in the construction of the type of civic life that nonprofit organizations strive to create.

These characteristics are lost in the advocacy groups that replaced them in the advocacy revolution of the 1960s and 1970s (Skocpol, 2003). These organizations often lacked members at all and even when they included members, their roles were often very limited. Ergo, Skocpol (2003) concludes that these organizations do little to build the kind of social capital needed for a healthy civil society.

These two theorists, Putnam and Skocpol, agree that the current state of the advocacy community is problematic. Their approaches vary considerably but their conclusions dovetail quite nicely. However, they don't deal with the issue of nonprofit advocacy effectiveness to any great extent, although Berry's research is discussed by Skocpol (2003).

Taken together, Putnam and Skocpol identify a process that

replaces the associations of old with newer advocacy groups that have either no members or nominal members. They argue that this development can have important and negative consequences. While they don't discuss virtual advocacy groups (see Cornfield, 2004), this new development [for example Move On] could move things even further afield. So we see that this is a development that can be said to be accelerated by technology and taken to its logical, and unpleasant, conclusion by Astroturf. Following their arguments, we can identify four logical steps in the development of nonprofit advocacy:

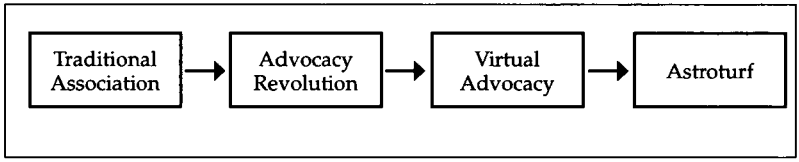
1. Advocacy by Membership Organizations: These groups combine local opportunities with national connections. This is the ideal for both Skocpol and Putnam.
2. Advocacy by Newer Advocacy Organizations: These are the "New Liberalism/Public Interest/ Advocacy Revolution" organizations that Berry (1977, 1999) identified. The organizations are professionally managed with little or no input by members. These organizations include many of the current on-line advocates.
3. Virtual Advocacy Groups: These organizations exist only on the Internet and have a limited (if any) community footprint. They may or may not have members. These may be single actor efforts as were some of the strategic voting or "Nader Trader" operations during the 2000 US Presidential Election (see Cornfield, 2004; Earl & Sussman, 2004).
4. Astroturf Political Efforts: These organizations depart completely from the model that Putnam and Skocpol identify as ideal and can depart in important ways from both the Advocacy Revolution groups and the virtual advocacy groups. They have intentionality, so they differ from Smart Mobs (see Rheinegold, 2002) and other spontaneously generated groups.

Since Astroturf is not legitimate political engagement, it might be considered a perversion of the type of organizing in phases two and three. The line between phase three and phase four; between legitimate and illegitimate activities; might become an exceedingly fine one. The critical issue here is trust

vs. deception. One can trust that the organizations in phase three are at least somewhat trustworthy. One cannot make the same statement in phase four. On balance, the creation of social capital might decline after phase one.

It is difficult not to see the virtual advocacy group as a logical result of the forces that lead to the "advocacy revolution" groups. It is just a move from a small office in Washington, DC to cyberspace. They provide even less opportunity for the building of social capital and civil society—or do they?

Progression of Nonprofit Advocacy



Deliberation, participation and the building of civic skills are arguably what are lost when we move, first to an advocacy revolution organizations and then to an on-line organization. These are forces that play an important role in the nonprofit universe. Nonprofit theory supports their importance and salience.

In addition to Putnam and Skocpol, other nonprofit theorists have argued the importance of these factors. Lohmann (1992) argues that deliberation is critical for the development of the nonprofit commons. A similar argument is made by the communitarians (Etzioni, 1993), who identify these areas as important to the development of community and civil society.

Verba, Schlotzman & Brady (1995) cite the importance of civic skills (running meeting, negotiating, running for office, voting) in facilitating political engagement. While other factors are also important in determining who becomes politically active, the Civic Volunteerism Model predicts that the development of civic skills is critical component to explaining why people participate.

While it might be true that the advocacy organizations of the 1960s and 1970s did less to foster the development of civic skills than those of earlier times, and not everyone agrees that this is true, it does not necessarily follow that Internet-based

organizations will follow suit and reduce civic engagement further. In fact, Internet based efforts may actually reverse the trend, by leveraging the interactivity and two way communication of new media.

Putnam (2000) alludes to this possibility in his discussion of newer sources of social capital. Skocpol (2003) has some similar ideas as do others (see Field, 2002). Sanders (2005) advances the idea that on-line ad offline activities may lead to alloy social capital. Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton (2001) go further seeing the Internet as a major facilitator of social capital development. McNutt and Fram (2004) argue that civic skills are transferable to the on-line environment. New technologies can use what the new media has to offer to improve political participation.

If more advocacy organizations used the potential of the Internet wisely, they would make Astroturf efforts more difficult. On balance, if more advocacy groups employed two-way communication on-line, it will be far easier to detect which organizations are legitimate and which are merely a front. Technology can make Astroturf more effective, but it might also make it more easily detected.

Conclusions and Implications

Astroturf raises substantial issues for nonprofit theory, research and practice. It might be considered a logical outcome of a process of separating advocacy from political engagement. In this case, technology can accelerate this process or it can set the participation bar higher and make such efforts more difficult to conduct.

Another way of looking at Astroturf is as a nonprofit phenomenon that nonprofit theory doesn't really explain very well. It would not be the extension of earlier theory but a completely new experience. It might fall into the same category with hate groups, terrorist cells and a range of other nonprofit enterprises that we really don't spend very much time thinking about. To be fair, Putnam (2000) devotes a section to such things and there are articles that deal with these issues, but most of the literature on Astroturf is external to the nonprofit studies knowledge base.

Developing a nonprofit literature on Astroturf will be challenging. These will be difficult entities to study because they are identified only when they become ineffective. Standard approaches to nonprofit sampling won't work. While news media might be used to identify examples, most of the efforts would be those that failed. Insiders would probably consider this as client confidentiality or trade secrets. We might be forced to develop a research base on ineffective Astroturf efforts.

The theoretical and practical problem might be how to prevent Astroturf from occurring. Nonprofit theory might focus on how to differentiate between real and synthetic nonprofit entities. The corporation charter might be identical. We also might want to explore if voluntary action engendered by a real nonprofit is different from that created by an artificially created nonprofit.

One of the most significant questions raised in this analysis is the issue of multiple pathways to meaningful political action and engagement. If we restrict the definition of effective political engagement as face to face interaction in the traditional sense, than we will be disappointed. It is unlikely that the trends in advocacy organizations that began in the 1970s will reverse themselves, so we can expect that we will move further and further from the situation that some nonprofit theorists consider desirable.

A related issue is the role of technology in political action. Technology can accelerate the process of moving away from the nonprofit ideal if it is used in certain ways. Astroturf efforts, using high technology, will add even more distance between the ideal and the real and could become a dominant form of political participation, outclassing the efforts of interest groups with less funding. An Astroturf political world is certainly possible. Politics could become just another form of a television reality show.

Technology can also save political engagement as we know it. By using the new media in the ways that it is intended to be used, interactivity and deliberation are more likely and more possible. Astroturf will become more and more difficult. Trust in the political system will improve as citizen's reengage with their political institutions. Generational change might be at work here. As more tech-savvy generations emerge, the desire

for a trust of the on-line will grow. We will have to find new ways of differentiating between the trustworthy and untrustworthy in Internet politics.

The most important point raised here is a clarion call to rethink many of our traditional assumptions about political action and the nonprofit sector. Much of what we think about politics and the nonprofit sector ignores the growing importance of virtual networks. Because this has not been a priority in nonprofit sector research, it is clear that our research base is spotty at best. In many ways, we've been too idealistic and, perhaps, too trusting.

In many ways, Astroturf is similar to contributions fraud. Every year phony nonprofits conduct fundraising efforts. Money is stolen from well-intentioned contributors. Astroturf deals with support rather than money, but the violation of trust is the same. While Astroturf isn't usually illegal, it is still quite deceptive. If the deception is successful, there are still psychic benefits to the mark or victim. If it is discovered, those benefits can disappear.

Assumptions have a critical role in theory building. If we assume that organizations are what they say they are, we will come to one set of conclusions. If we probe those assumptions, other conclusions are possible and they may bring us closer to reality. Astroturf is an important issue for nonprofit theory and one that we ignore at our peril.

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