In retrospect, 2009 is likely to be remembered as the year astroturfing got turbocharged. With all the excitement surrounding health care and climate change legislation following Barack Obama’s election, companies’ efforts to mobilize American citizens against industry-threatening regulation accelerated dramatically. While populist imagery isn’t new to corporate America, these campaigns to give pro-industry causes the veneer of barricade-busting insurgency seem to have become more aggressive.

Just as ever-green Astroturf is only a plastic version of the real thing, “astroturfed” political actions masquerade as grassroots efforts. In 2009, a “Faces of Coal” website claiming to depict “an alliance of people from all walks of life” used snapshots purchased from a stock photo database. Oil company employees were paid to attend rallies sporting “Energy Citizen” t-shirts. Average Joes repeat talking points on online discussion boards and use “best practices” for disrupting town hall meetings, getting their instructions not from fellow activists but from Washington, D.C., insiders. One consultancy was even caught forging letters to congressional representatives from real community groups.

Late-night comedians have had a field day lampooning these slick, often superficial efforts to manufacture bottom-up support from the top down. “What about the big people, the corporations? Who protects them from the government?” Jon Stewart asked recently on The Daily Show. He then showed a series of gauzy pro-industry commercials featuring actors doing their best just-us-folks impressions: “Well, you won’t believe it: the little people!” As the 21st century threatens to become the age of “astrotweeting,” social progressives might get nostalgic for the days when corporations stuck to Beltway lob- bying and smoke-filled rooms to get their way.

While astroturfing seems to have come on the scene very recently, it isn’t really new nor is it an invention of right-leaning corporate titans seeking to preserve the status quo. Looking back on an ostensibly progressive public health campaign of an earlier era can shed new light on the corporate underwriting of contentious politics.

Sipping water from a disposable cup is hardly a political act today. But 100 years ago, buying a waxed paper cup with a brand new Lincoln penny meant becoming part of a Progressive movement to abolish the “tin dipper,” the common drinking cup ubiquitous in schools, trains, shops, and railways stations. Prior to the Spanish flu epidemic, Americans away from home routinely used shared cups, which contributed to the spread of common germs as well as diphtheria, syphilis, tuberculosis, and typhoid. Public drinking cups were known sources of contagion, but it would take a massive reform effort to change an established service built into the architecture of public spaces all over the country.

Two crisp pamphlets that played a part in this movement are housed in the Special Collections of Skillman Library at Lafayette College, where I teach. The Cup-Campaigner of 1909, a “militant little paper published at intervals by persons striving to banish that most prolific medium for spreading disease—the public drinking cup,” looks every bit the Progressive-era mobilization tool. It urges citizens to “join the fight” against the roots of astroturfing

by caroline w. lee

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common cup, reports the bandwagon of support already gained, and solicits contributions for the cause.

The catch? The publisher of The Cup-Campaigner was Hugh Moore, a co-founder of the Public Cup Vendor Company, which would later become the Dixie Cup Company.

Moore's new company stood to gain enormously from the movement, a fact that he never disclosed among pages of copy extolling paper cups, “so nice, so efficient and so cheap that there is hardly any excuse for using the old time common drinking cup.” For those who balked at paying for water, Moore celebrates the convenience of the new mechanical water vendors: “just think of the luxury—a new cup filled with pure water all for a cent!”

If that weren’t enough, Moore wasn’t above disgust readers or tugging on their heartstrings, most of all when a working-class man contaminated a vulnerable woman of means. A tuberculosis-sufferer’s “sweeping mustache” spreads “well over the sides of the glass and into the water” after a coughing fit. Sad stories personalize the human costs: “Mrs. Olive Peters, age 60” died from the public drinking cup, while “an esteemed young woman in Topeka, whose character is above reproach,” contracted a “loathsome disease.” “To have protected this one girl would have been of greater value to society and humanity than all the efforts that have been made to banish common cups and participated in other social causes throughout his life.

Indeed, Moore’s personalized crusade seems positively quaint compared to the multi-billion dollar outsourcing of such efforts now. Research by sociologist Edward Walker shows how the “grassroots lobbying” industry reduces the costs of participation for vast numbers of American citizens, mainly by providing talking points to stakeholders and facilitating emails and phone calls to representatives. Today’s e-petitions, with their pleas to “Take action now!” require little more than typing one’s name and clicking send. While these feverish solicitations seem similar to The Cup-Campaigner’s “The iron is hot; strike together!”, Moore’s pamphlet also offered sample legislative bills and instructions, should your representative resist the cause: “Address a simple letter to-day to ‘The Secretary of the State Board of Health.’” Even children could get involved—Moore reported that California public school students ceremonially smashed and buried tin dippers to celebrate their victory over the common cup.

But contrasting Moore’s efforts to galvanize genuine public support with today’s industry-backed campaigns, which seem more concerned with creating the appearance of popular agitation, neglects elements of The Cup-Campaigner that align with two very contemporary sociological concerns about the blurring of social movements and institutional politics. In our own flu-spooked, health-obsessed, environmentally conscious time, Moore’s pamphlets have something to tell us about corporate social responsibility and social change.

First, public policy expert Cliff Zukin and his colleagues have noted that “buying”—buying a product to support a cause—is now one of Americans’ most common engagement activities after voting. Letter-writing to a state health department required far more initiative in 1909 than joining a company’s Facebook group does today, but buying paper cups and telling friends about them was just as important to the cause. Under this banner, Moore trumpeted that “10,500 people refused to use public cups at the New York Central’s Grand Central Station” simply because they used the paper cups on offer instead. As Moore’s sales figures improved, he could claim a groundswell of grassroots activism—most of it the result of business owners’ installation of a vending machine at no cost to themselves.

Second, the decision of those business owners to allow water vending machines was hailed as a matter of noble leadership and sacrifice for the public good; the twin evils of “CUSTOM and IGNORANCE,” which prevented change among the hoi polloi, weren’t shared by the country’s industrial barons. Social movement and organizations scholars catalogue how Wal-Mart and its ilk now frame themselves as instigators of progressive change, but Moore celebrated businesses as forward-thinking change agents long before the invention of “corporate social responsibility” and “sustainability certification.”

In fact, in Moore’s account, government regulation against the common cup was important, but industries were charging ahead with bold reforms to “protect their patrons,” especially those
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“The 40th President” is set in the White House press room, with Pryor playing the president. He fields nine questions from a racially mixed group of reporters. Pryor stiffly answers questions about international and economic affairs from two white men and a native Hawai’ian, but begins to loosen up when an African American reporter asks if an increase in NASA’s budget means that blacks will finally be recruited as astronauts.

“I feel it’s time that black people should go to space,” Pryor responds. “White people have been going to space for years, and spacing out on us, as you might say.” He adds that space flights will now have “a little Miles Davis and some Charlie Parker. We gonna have some different kinds of things in there. That’s right!”

Dave Chappelle

30 years of black presidents

by walter r. jacobs

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