

the roots of astroturfing

by caroline w. lee

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 forg-

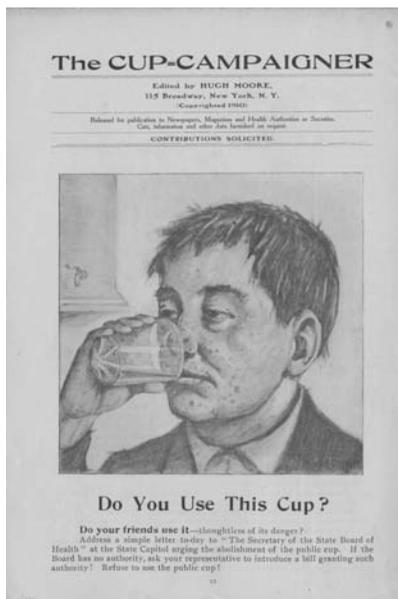
ing letters to congressional representatives from real community groups.

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 lobbying 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



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 disgusting 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 esteemable 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 enforcement of the drinking cup order would ever cost the State."

Was this really astroturfing, or just effective marketing? While never mentioning the Public Cup Vendor Company, Moore printed his name prominently on the back of *The Cup-Campaigner*. Elite reformers led many Progressive-era movements, and business leaders of the age took great pride in their civic boosterism and concern for workers' welfare. Perhaps Moore was just one of business professor Hayagreeva Rao's "market rebels," a well-heeled activist who created a market by embracing radical innovation. Moore's evangelism went beyond

pamphleteering—he even gave Al-Gore-style lantern slide shows on banishing 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 "grass-roots 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

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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 flustered, health-obsessed, environmentally conscious time, Moore's pamphlets have something to tell us about corpo-

rate power and social change.

First, public policy expert Cliff Zukin and his colleagues have noted that "buy-cotting"—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

of the upper classes. “Leading railroads” were “fearless” and “quick to respond” “months before any of the State Board of Health orders had gone into effect.” Moore even listed an honor roll of “Sixteen Progressive Lines” using individual cups. Not to be left out, “leading banking houses” like Kidder, Peabody & Co., “managers of the great department stores” like Wanamaker’s and Macy’s, and “owners of office buildings” joined the fight, all duly recognized in *The Cup-Campaigner*.

While those worlds of investment banking, retail, and travel have since been transformed, the fact that wealthy capitalists saw a public health initiative as great public relations is no accident. Even in 1909, market-oriented activism wasn’t the province of downtrodden outsiders, and democratic participation on the part of everyday consumers was depicted as wholly compatible with market solutions for pressing social problems. As in contemporary corporate

“greening” efforts, business investment in social change is oriented toward activity that may alter consumer culture for the better, but does little to challenge the inequalities in the current system.

It’s tempting to see Moore’s claim that “agitation is no fad” as a quaint hiccup of fate—a rare case of business seeking to amplify dissent rather than suppress it, in a much longer throughline of union-busting and repression. However, this would ignore the larger consequences of Moore’s fight. Insurance industry groups may have subsidized grassroots mobilization to fight a public health care option in 2009, but Moore’s own pro-regulation stance sought to privatize a formerly public service under the banner of the public good. For the poor, the right to a drink of water was taken away, and the public health gains the Dixie Cup ushered in were accompanied by a culture of disposable convenience, toxic in less visible ways. Moore would no doubt be proud that

today’s consumers protest potential carcinogens in plastic water bottles and impressed that manufacturers charge \$15 for aluminum bottles. Here at Lafayette College, we give all first-year students their own reusable water bottle at orientation. Such initiatives save the environment while they sell bottles, but they also sell the idea that consumer activism and corporate profits benefit each other—that we can do good and do well at the same time. This fiction of business sponsorship of progressive causes, pioneered at the turn of the 20th century, is far more enduring than the easily exposed fakeries of reactionary corporate astroturfing in the 21st. Plastic progressivism may be BPA-free, but it’s much more likely to attract warm bodies to watered-down causes.

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