**[Indian astroturfing against Pakistan](https://nation.com.pk/06-Dec-2020/indian-astroturfing-against-pakistan" \t "_new)**

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The definition of astroturfing is: the deceptive practice of presenting an orchestrated marketing or public relations campaign in the guise of unsolicited comments from the members of the public.

Astroturfing was invented and mastered by Western countries for commercial purposes. However, Russia successfully employed it to allegedly getting Donald Trump elected as the US president in the previous US Elections in 2016.

Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook in response to the allegations of Russian involvement in US elections through astroturfing, took stringent measures to crackdown on fake online profiles used for astroturfing.

This crackdown resulted in the emergence of ‘sock puppets’ using VPN (Virtual Private Network) to avoid detection. A sock puppet account is a false online identity, typically created by a person or group in order to promote their own opinions or views. These sock puppets, having state support, use a VPN to avoid scrutiny by social media platforms.

India’s ruling parties and BJP IT cell, employ this technology as well as the Indian intelligence agency RAW. Their primary target in Pakistan is the Pakistani security establishment. The Indian astroturfing revolves around creating dissent. The main themes of their astroturfing operation is the Indian narrative in support of the Baloch nationalists. The ground network of RAW augments this astroturfing operation by sponsoring terrorism in Balochistan. Similarly astroturfing is used to create an impression that the Pakistan Army is to be blamed for all the problems being faced by Pakistan. Using a ‘missing persons’ theme to lay the blame on Pakistan’s security establishment is another product of sock puppets’ propaganda.

Legitimate discussions on Pakistani mainstream media are misconstrued to deny the fact that there is an ongoing ‘war within’ Pakistan. Indian Astroturfing brushes the fact that this war requires Pakistani security institutions to fight back and it’s not a war for personal but national interests.

The other astroturfing theme by Indian sock puppets is to support political dissent. Indian sock puppets work tirelessly in support of Pakistani opposition parties like PDM and PTM in order to promote dissent and target the Pakistan Army.

It must be noted that this astroturfing operation by India is being conducted simultaneously by Indian mainstream media and on social media by their sock puppets and verified accounts alike. The recent example is when news broke out in India about Pakistani Army tanks roaming in Karachi and the alleged kidnapping of the Inspector General of Sindh Police.

Both Indian mainstream accounts and social media astroturfing played a part in creating confusion and succeeded in promoting their top theme which targets the Pakistani security establishment.

It is a well acknowledged fact in India that as long as the people of Pakistan will keep loving their Army, there is no chance in the world for them to establish their hegemony over Pakistan.

The presence of Twitter and Facebook regional headquarters in India, coupled with the largest English-speaking mouthpiece power, work in the favour of Indian astroturfing operations targeting Pakistan.

Independent and official counter efforts by Pakistan get shot down by Twitter and Facebook due to the large Indian influence on these social media platforms as mentioned above. India finds it easy to get Pakistani activists’ accounts blocked by complaining against them both officially and by mass reporting against them online through their created sock puppets.

Pakistan needs a comprehensive response to this scenario. The use of the Chinese model may not be possible but using checks and balances employed by China can help us counter Indian astroturfing.

At the same time, talking to Twitter and Facebook over the issue at the government level may help in creating a level playing field.

Astroturfing is a reality and is unlikely to be curtailed anytime soon. Countering astroturfing employed by India requires the use of the intelligent scrutiny of sock puppet accounts by creating an awareness about them through mainstream and social media.

These sock puppets accounts being operated by the Indian government are trying to spread an anti-establishment narrative. They can be identified by observing the text they use. In almost all the cases they use the same text/theme. Identifying these sock puppets is easy but requires an organisational structure.

The regular crackdown on ‘sock puppets’ by social media giants is essential. Putting a condition on their operations in the country, linking it with this action is the need of the moment due to the fact that the false perception they create becomes more important than reality.