

Crowds on Demand

CROWDS ON DEMAND

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Caption

One way of understanding toxicity is as a reactive force, a force of deterioration, with the effect of rendering the active passive; toxicity as a leaching of vitality. As such, toxicity is not essential but a relational property. Like the parasite (Kockelman 2010, Serres 2007), its effect is not simply upon an object or a "host" as a single unit. Instead it takes effect within a system of relations as an impedance, or a corrosive agent. This image points to an instance of "astroturfing," a practice of converting economic capital into political power through the purchase and/or production of an illusion of grassroots support. The image is composed of a photograph of a New Orleans City Council meeting juxtaposed with a screenshot taken from the company website of Crowds on Demand, a freelance publicity firm that specializes in contracting crowds of actors to influence legislation and sway public opinion. The campaigns of Crowds on Demand—and the practice of astroturfing more generally—are toxic in that they inhabit the gaps, the interstices of symbolic channels of democratic political participation so as to filter, jumble, or overload these channels in ways that circumvent the democratic process.

Design Statement

This image is an illustration of a mode of political toxicity that takes effect through the manipulation of symbolic forms. It serves as an example, a case in point, of how the inherently symbolic grounds of democratic political action leaves its modes and forms of representation vulnerable to distortion. The ethnographic utility of this image is rooted in its ability to provide a "thicker" conception of what astroturfing is as a concept and practice by providing the viewer with visual access to a single, exemplary manifestation. The screenshot of the website shows a number of grassroots political tactics that Crowds on Demand lists as potential symbolic forms available to mimicry. The image of the city council meeting provides a snapshot of this practice. Illustrations like these are useful in ethnography to add precision and substance to text. That is, much like an ethnographic vignette, they enable the ethnographer to reduce the ambiguity of theory by detailing a particular situation, event, or episode of interest.

Project Statement

In this collection of images, I attempt to rethink post-truth and toxicity together, exploring visualization as a tactic for developing and representing a conception of epistemological "static" as a particularly toxic form of contemporary knowledge politics. Building off of Kockelman's analysis of "enemies, parasites, and noise" (2010), toxicity is here conceived as a particular type of third (a relation to a relation), one that is obstructive, corruptive, and/or corrosive to a previously established and effective channel of communication. Static, then, is a token of this type; it functions by flooding the channel with enough "alternative signals" that messages become unclear or distorted and the channel less effective, if not completely inoperative.



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Adams, James. 2019. "Crowds on Demand: Toxicity and Symbolic Form"

In "Static: The Toxic Knowledge Politics of a Post-trust Era." In *Visualizing Toxic Subjects*, curated by James Adams and Kim Fortun. The Center for Ethnography. May.

<https://tinyurl.com/y6l3loux>