

Sockpuppet (Internet)

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A **sockpuppet** is an online identity used for purposes of deception. The term, a reference to the manipulation of a simple hand puppet made from a sock, originally referred to a false identity assumed by a member of an Internet community who spoke to, or about, themselves while pretending to be another person.^[1] The term now includes other misleading uses of online identities, such as those created to praise, defend or support a person or organization,^[2] or to circumvent a suspension or ban from a website. A significant difference between the use of a pseudonym^[3] and the creation of a sockpuppet is that the sockpuppet poses as an independent third-party unaffiliated with the puppeteer. Many online communities attempt to block sockpuppets.

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History

The term "sockpuppet" was used as early as July 9, 1993,^[4] but did not become common in USENET groups until 1996. The first *Oxford English Dictionary* example of the term, defined as "a person whose actions are controlled by another; a minion," is taken from *U.S. News and World Report*, March 27, 2000.^[5]

The history of reviewing one's own work under another name predates the Internet. Walt Whitman and Anthony Burgess both reviewed their books under pseudonyms.^[6] Another notable example was Benjamin Franklin.^[7]

On October 21, 2013 the Wikimedia Foundation (WMF) condemned paid advocacy sockpuppeting on Wikipedia and, on October 23, specifically banned editing by the public relations firm Wiki-PR.^[8]

Types

Ballot stuffing

Sockpuppets may be created during an online poll to submit multiple votes in favor of the puppeteer. A related usage is the creation of multiple identities, each supporting the puppeteer's views in an argument, attempting to position the puppeteer as representing majority opinion and sideline opposition voices. In the abstract theory of social networks and reputation systems, this is known as a sybil attack.

A sockpuppet-like use of deceptive fake identities is used in stealth marketing. The stealth marketer creates one or more pseudonymous accounts, each one claiming to be owned by a different enthusiastic supporter of the sponsor's product or book or ideology.^{[9][10]}

Strawman sockpuppet

A strawman sockpuppet is a false flag pseudonym created to make a particular point of view look foolish or unwholesome in order to generate negative sentiment against it. Strawman sockpuppets typically behave in an unintelligent, uninformed, or bigoted manner and advance "straw man" arguments that their puppeteers can easily refute. The intended effect is to discredit more rational arguments made for the same position.^[11] Such sockpuppets behave in a similar manner to internet trolls.

Meatpuppet

The term "meatpuppet" (or "meat puppet") is used as a pejorative description of various online behaviors. The term was in use before the Internet existed, including references in Ursula Le Guin's science fiction story "The Diary of the Rose" (1976),^[12] the alternative rock band Meat Puppets, and the cyberpunk novelist William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984).^[13] Editors of Wikipedia use the term to label contributions of new community members if suspected of having been recruited by an existing member to support their position.^[14] Such a recruited member is considered analogous to a sockpuppet even though he is actually a separate individual (i.e. "meat") rather than a fictitious creation. *Wired* columnist Lore Sjöberg put "meat puppet" first on a satirical list of "common terms used at Wikipedia," defining the term as "a person who disagrees with you."^[15]

Nevertheless, other online sources use the term "meatpuppet" to describe sockpuppet behaviors. For example, according to one online encyclopedia, a meat puppet "publishes comments on blogs, wikis and other public venues about some phenomenon or product in order to generate public interest and buzz"—that is, he is engaged in behavior more widely known as "astroturfing."^[16] A 2006 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* defined a meat puppet as "a peculiar inhabitant of the digital world—a fictional character that passes for a real person online."^{[17][18]}

Legal implications of sockpuppetry in the United States

In 2008, 49-year-old Missouri resident Lori Drew was prosecuted and found guilty by a Federal court jury in connection with the creation of a MySpace account on which she claimed to be a 16-year-old boy named Josh Evans. Drew's goal had been to create a relationship with Megan Meier, a 13-year-old girl who had been in conflict with Drew's daughter. After "Josh" ended the relationship with Megan, Megan committed suicide. Drew was found guilty for misrepresenting her identity, in violation of the MySpace terms of service. The Los Angeles U.S. Attorney claimed that this conduct was covered by federal computer fraud legislation against "accessing a computer without authorization via interstate commerce."^{[19][20]} Drew filed a motion challenging the verdict, arguing that her use of a false identity did not constitute unauthorized access to MySpace, based on a 1973 breach of contract dispute where a court of appeals ruled that "fraudulently induced consent is consent nonetheless."^[21] The prosecution appealed the trial court judge's decision to throw out the guilty verdict, but later dropped its appeal.^[22]

In 2010, Raphael Golb was convicted on 30 of 31 counts, including identity theft, criminal impersonation, and aggravated harassment, for using multiple sockpuppet accounts to attack and impersonate historians he perceived as rivals of his father, Norman Golb.^[23] Golb defended his actions as "satirical hoaxes" protected by free-speech rights. He was disbarred and sentenced to six months in prison but remained free on appeal on \$25,000 bail.^[24]

Examples of sockpuppetry

Business promotion

In 2007, the CEO of Whole Foods, John Mackey, was discovered to have posted as "Rahodeb" on the Yahoo Finance Message Board, extolling his own company and predicting a dire future for its rival, Wild Oats Markets, while concealing his relationship to both companies. Whole Foods argued that nothing that Mackey did broke the law.^{[6][25]}

During the 2007 trial of Conrad Black, chief executive of Hollinger International, prosecutors alleged that he had posted messages on a Yahoo Finance chat room using the name "nspector", attacking short sellers and blaming them for his company's stock performance. Prosecutors provided evidence of these postings in Black's criminal trial where he was convicted of mail fraud and obstruction. The postings were raised at multiple points in the trial.^[6]

Book and film reviews

An Amazon.com computer glitch in 2004 revealed the names of many authors who had written reviews of their books using pseudonyms. John Rechy, who wrote the best-selling 1963 novel *City of Night*, was one of the more famous authors unmasked in this way, and was shown to have written numerous five-star reviews of his own work.^[6] In 2010, historian Orlando Figes was found to have written Amazon reviews under the names "orlando-birkbeck" and "historian", praising his own books and condemning those of fellow historians Rachel Polonsky and Robert Service. The two sued Figes and won monetary damages.^{[26][27]} During a panel in 2012, UK fiction writer Stephen Leather admitted using pseudonyms to praise his own books, claiming that "everyone does it". He spoke of building a "network of characters", some operated by his friends, who discussed his books and had conversations with him directly.^[28]

David Manning was a fictitious film critic, created by a marketing executive working for Sony Corporation to give consistently good reviews for releases from Sony subsidiary Columbia Pictures, which could then be quoted in promotional material.^[29]

Blog commentary

American reporter Michael Hiltzik was temporarily suspended from posting to his blog, "The Golden State," on the Los Angeles Times after he admitted "posting there, as well as on other sites, under false names." He used the pseudonyms to attack conservatives such as Hugh Hewitt and L.A. prosecutor Patrick Frey—who eventually exposed him.^{[30][31]} Hiltzik's blog at the LA Times was the newspaper's first blog. While suspended from blogging, Hiltzik continued to write regularly for the newspaper.

Lee Siegel, a writer for *The New Republic* magazine, was suspended for defending his articles and blog comments under the user name "Sprezzatura." In one such comment, "Sprezzatura" defended Siegel's bad reviews of Jon Stewart: "Siegel is brave, brilliant and wittier than Stewart will ever be."^{[32][33]}

Government sockpuppetry

As an example of state-sponsored Internet sockpuppetry, in 2011, a Californian company, Ntrepid, was awarded a \$2.76 million contract under the auspices of US Central Command for "online persona management" operations^[34] to create "fake online personas to influence net conversations and spread US propaganda" in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Pashto,^[34] as part of the of a programme called Operation Earnest Voice (OEV), which was first developed in Iraq as a weapon of psychological warfare.

See also

- Astroturfing
- On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog
- Online reputation
- Passing (sociology)
- Shill

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External links

- Sock puppet (<http://www.catb.org/jargon/html/S/sock-puppet.html>) at *Jargon File*

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