



**HAL**  
open science

## Digital Parrhesia 2.0: Moving beyond deceptive communications strategies in the digital world

François Allard-Huver, Nicholas Gilewicz

► **To cite this version:**

François Allard-Huver, Nicholas Gilewicz. Digital Parrhesia 2.0: Moving beyond deceptive communications strategies in the digital world. Handbook of Research on Digital Media and Creative Technologies, pp.404-416, 2015, 978-1-4666-8205-4. 10.4018/978-1-4666-8205-4.ch017 . hal-02092103

**HAL Id: hal-02092103**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02092103>**

Submitted on 7 Apr 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Digital Parrhesia 2.0: Moving beyond Deceptive Communications Strategies in the Digital World

**François Allard-Huver**  
*Sorbonne University, France*

**Nicholas Gilewicz**  
*University of Pennsylvania, USA*

## ABSTRACT

*Deceptive communications strategies are further problematized in digital space. Because digitally mediated communication easily accommodates pseudonymous and anonymous speech, digital ethos depends upon finding the proper balance between the ability to create pseudonymous and anonymous online presences and the public need for transparency in public speech. Analyzing such content requires analyzing media forms and the honesty of speakers themselves. This chapter applies Michel Foucault's articulation of parrhesia—the ability to speak freely and the concomitant public duties it requires of speakers—to digital communication. It first theorizes digital parrhesia, then outlines a techno-semiotic methodological approach with which researchers—and the public—can consider online advocacy speech. The chapter then analyzes one case of astroturfing, and one of sockpuppeting, using this techno-semiotic method to indicate the generalizability of the theory of digital parrhesia, and the utility of the techno-semiotic approach.*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to analyze a variety of deceptive communication strategies and practices taking place in the digital world. Examining phenomena of astroturfing done by corporate actors to sockpuppet comments and other misconduct by

private actors, we try to understand how deceptive communications practices are further problematized in the digital space, where ethos depends on a finding a proper balance between the ability to create pseudonymous or anonymous online presences, and the public need for transparency in public speech.



Among these deceptive communication practices we include, astroturfing—fake grassroots campaigns about matters of public interest—presents a special problem to researchers, particularly to those interested in studying the content of advocacy speech. Specifically, the content may be true, and even compelling, but if the honesty of the speaker is questionable, that truth may be a house of cards. This concern is heightened because of the fake accounts or false posts used by so-called “sockpuppets.” In recent years, these wrongdoings even extended to the private sphere with the multiplication of fake social network accounts used for cyber-bullying or cyberharassment. These deceptive communication practices threaten the prospect that the Web could function as a public sphere and therefore need to be taken into account in our analysis.

In previous work, we expanded Pramod K. Nayar’s application of *parrhesia* to digital space (2010), relying, as did Nayar, on Foucault’s articulation of this ancient Greek concept (Foucault, 2001). In this chapter we further develop our previous research on *parrhesia* and digital *parrhesia* (Gilewicz and Allard-Huver, 2012). Thus, we not only derive a model for analyzing the credibility of digital advocacy speech and a model for truth-telling in the digital public sphere, but also implement a theoretical and pragmatic method for understanding ethos and its implication on the web. *Parrhesia*, or the ability to speak freely, implies three public duties for speakers: to speak the truth, to sincerely believe that truth, and to honestly represent themselves when speaking. Astroturfing, sockpuppets or other online misbehavior that conceals identities in order to reduce the risks of speaking truth to power—or to the public—always fails the latter duty.

In networked space, however, pseudonymous and anonymous speech can work both democratically and propagandistically. We think that the legitimate need to speak the truth in this space does not forbid the right to protect your identity

in specific situation, but the examples we chose to explore here show abusive use of pseudonyms or anonymity. This chapter proposes that digital *parrhesia* helps evaluate deceptive communication strategies and helps understand why such evaluation matters. By using digital *parrhesia* to analyze these online communication practices, this chapter’s analytic model aims to contribute to the preservation—and may be the revivification of—a culture of truth-telling.

## BACKGROUND: BEEKEEPING OR ASTROTURFING?

Recently an important phenomenon of bee mortality has been observed around the globe. Every year, nearly 30-60% of the bee colonies are unable to survive the winter, a phenomenon called “CCD - Colony Collapse Disorder” by scientific experts (Evans et al., 2009). As some observers raise the specter of a total disappearance of bees in the forthcoming years, several scientific hypotheses have been advanced to explain CCD. The first is related to the multiplication of colonies diseases – such as parasites, mites or fungus. Another one blames the current agricultural system and intensive agriculture leading to bee malnutrition. Intensive beekeeping and selection of more docile but more fragile species are part of the assumptions. However, one of the main explanations given by scientists is that crop protection products – pesticides – play a determining role in the general weakness and therefore mortality of beehives (Henry et al., 2012) but is also subject to harsh fights between scientists (Cresswell & Thompson, 2012). Nonetheless, the insecticide class of neonicotinoids, such as imidacloprid, fipronil or thiamethoxam, is suspected to disorient and weaken the bees. These three insecticides are respectively sold under the commercial name Gaucho, Regent TS and Cruiser by Bayer, BASF and Syngenta, three of the world largest chemical and agricultural companies. Many sound science

studies argue that these pesticides are at least one factor in CCD, but crop protection companies often deny any link, blaming misuse of their products not the products themselves. In December 2013, after numerous studies pointing out the critical role of neonicotinoids in the CCD, the European Union decided to temporarily ban the use of these insecticides. This decision has revived the controversy and led to judicial arm-wrestling between the EU and the big companies.

In this simmering conflict, the Bee Biodiversity Network (BBN) was created in 2007 to gather French beekeepers, growers and other agricultural professionals. The BBN supports the idea that CCD's most plausible explanations are parasites or bee malnutrition. They promote numerous innovative programs for helping the bees, particularly the creation of so-called "jachère apicole" (bee fallow land), the goal of which "is to create a pantry for bees and thus contribute effectively to the survival of bees and maintaining biodiversity." (Bee Biodiversity Network, 2012). The promotion of these programs also led the BBN to organize, every year since 2012, "The European Bees and Pollination Week" with help of European Parliament members, on the grounds of the European Parliament. The BBN also developed a lot of online action and has an active website.

The BBN raised attention within the online community and watchdog websites such as Corporate Europe and Lobbypedia started to investigate. What surprised these actors was that the BBN suggested that alimentation would be the major causes of the CCD without mentioning pesticide as a factor. They even discharged industry responsibility, an odd and unique position among beekeepers. Further investigation led the NGOs to discover the website was in fact funded and publicly endorsed by BASF. Where the Bee Biodiversity Network website is vague about its members, partners, and funders, BASF's Web site promotes "The French Bee Biodiversity Network" as something

the corporation initiated, and the Web site of the network credits its chairman and founder, Philippe Lecompte, who is identified as a "professional organic beekeeper in France." (Bee Biodiversity Network, n.d.). Nowhere does the network's web site identify BASF as a creator or a partner, (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2012). In fact, BASF only appears on the BBN site with its corporate logo, in small font, in the bottom right corner of an invitation to a biodiversity conference in Brussels. The industry thus officially started to support and endorse such public actions (Campagnes et environnement, n.d.) in order to promote its corporate responsibility (Mennessier, 2010), while, at the same time, concealing its role as a prime mover for the BBN in the first place.

A core concern of the circulation and presentation of information in public space is one central to the question of authorship and credibility: astroturfing. In this case, what began as a simple action in the public space and through a website ended in astroturfing practices being exposed by digital media observers.

This clear case of astroturfing—and how it was uncovered—allows us to observe the interrelationship between astroturfing, digital media use, and the exposure of other deceptive communication practices. In Europe, much as in the United States, citizens are accustomed to controversies and debate. The BBN raised concern and became a center of attention not because it was making a point in the debate about CCD. The astroturf was exposed as such because the BBN misled, hiding who in reality spoke through it and from where its discourses and ideas originally emerged—that is, from the pesticide industry. These beekeepers violated what we see as a fundamental factor governing digital communication space: *parrhesia*, in which the public duty of speakers is to speak the truth, to sincerely believe that truth, and to honestly represent themselves when speaking.

## BUILDING A THEORY OF DIGITAL *PARRHESIA*

Growing access to the tools of digital media production, from email to Web site design to video, have created new communication spaces and communities. Citizens, corporations, and governments all have enhanced abilities to engage in public dialogue about their beliefs, products, and intents—and enhanced abilities to conceal their identities while doing so. Thus, digital communication space introduces new problems for ethos; this realm depends on a proper balance between the ability to create pseudonymous or anonymous online presences, and the public need for transparency in public speech.

The act of astroturfing may be thought of as manufacturing support for an issue, or attempting to mislead politicians, news media, or citizens about the origins of such support. The use of the term dates at least to 1985, when United States

Senator Lloyd Bentsen said, about receiving letters that promoted insurance companies' interests, that, "A fellow from Texas can tell the difference between grass roots and Astroturf. This is generated mail" (qtd. in Sager, 2009). Astroturfing attempts to leech the legitimacy held by grassroots movements, pretending that it is a response from below to governance from above.

Among online deceptive communication strategies, sockpuppetry has raised a lot of attention and concern in online civil society and is often seen as a major threat to ethical online discussion. Sockpuppetry can be seen as a related online astroturfing strategy. It creates false online identities, not for the legitimate purpose of protecting true identity— anonymity or pseudonymity can be understood as an "alternate" identity operating as a protective mask—but to defend an axiological or ideological point of view that a person or an organization would not normally publically defend. Phony Facebook or Twitter accounts, comments under another name in a forum discussion or even false

product reviews are the most common form of sockpuppetry in the web. But, how can we distinguish between sockpuppetry and regular and legitimate communication, especially those involving alternate identities?

Pseudonymity and anonymity surely have their place, for they accommodate truthful comments from individuals who may have valid reasons—from fear of community disapproval to the fear of being "disappeared" by a government—to conceal their identity. Yet, corporations, governments, and their public relations or advertising companies can exploit that same anonymity. What may be legitimately defensive for an individual becomes a public relations tactic for an organization attempting to reduce the risk of advocacy. But if in the digital era, astroturfing is easier than ever, so is learning the true identity of astroturfers, as seen in the Bee Biodiversity Network case.

In order to fully understand the role of digital communications in astroturfing, and to develop a method to analyze digital astroturfing, this chapter turns to Foucault's articulation of the ancient Greek concept *parrhesia* (2001). Commonly translated as "free speech," *parrhesia* implies that when one has the ability to speak freely, one also has the public duty to speak the truth, to sincerely believe that truth, and to honestly represent oneself when speaking—criteria worth repeating, and to which this chapter will repeatedly return.

This concept was first ported to digital space to make an affirmative argument for the value of the Web site WikiLeaks as a defender of "the agora of information" and a culture of digital truth-telling (Nayar, 2010). The argument is compelling, but the implications of digital *parrhesia* are both wider and deeper than simply defending WikiLeaks, because, according to Nayar himself, digital cultures generate new communities: "Digital cultures create a new communications culture, which generates a new community, the global civil society . . . and the globalisation of conscience. [WikiLeaks] is an embodiment of

this new form of communications-leading-to-community, a digital *parrhesia*” (Nayar, 2010, p. 29). Under this view, new communities emerge whose participants may be judged by whether they adhere to the duties implied by *parrhesia*. Discourse under *parrhesia* centers on truth-telling in the service of community. Digital *parrhesia* is then a necessary component of digital communities, like *parrhesia* was a necessity in the Greek agora.

Risk balances the duty to speak truthfully in digital *parrhesia*, and in what Foucault calls the “parrhesiastic game,” speakers balance the risk to themselves with the duty to speak the truth. “In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy” (Foucault, 2001, p. 19-20). If engaging in the parrhesiastic game is courageous, then undermining and exploiting the game is cowardly. Moreover, doing so suspends or negates the rule of the game, and thus suspends—and threatens—the role of the society as a discursive community as well.

Digital *parrhesia*, then, may be considered a discursive space where a wide range of individuals can engage in truth-telling practices, and a space whose boundaries—the duty to speak the truth, to believe that truth, to honestly represent oneself, all though online media—also provide the beginnings of a critical framework for assessing the credibility of digital texts. Clearly, identifying digital *parrhesia* as a discursive space and defining the boundaries of that space is useful; it allows us to distinguish between digital actors who seek to reveal the truth, or to conceal it. Getting there, however, requires a clear methodology. And the importance of good methods here cannot be overstated; accusing an author of astroturfing or sockpuppetry, under digital *parrhesia*, is tantamount to accusing that author of propagandistic lying.

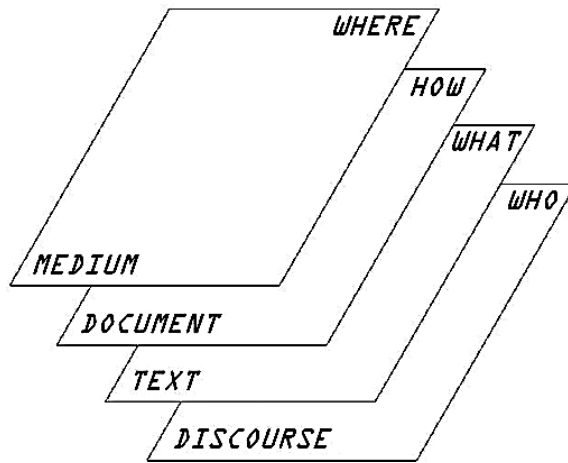
Digital *parrhesia* lends itself to semiotic analysis because it identifies different levels of speech. At each level, truth-claiming hinges on the medium where the speech occurs, how the speech is distributed, the content of the speech, and the identity of the speaker herself. People who have the ability to speak freely in digital culture also have the obligation to become Bentsen’s “fellow from Texas” who can distinguish between grassroots content that emerges from below, and content that is astroturfed down from above. Distinguishing between the two often is contingent on questions of authorship and discourse. In order to help researchers make this distinction, the next section operationalizes digital *parrhesia* by integrating the author and the medium into what we call a “techno-semiotic” method of analysis.

### **Building a Techno-Semiotic Method for Digital *Parrhesia***

The idea that every human construct has different levels of meaning is the basis of semiotics, which itself can be a key that unlocks the structure of communication by revealing patterns of meaning at those levels. Semiotics aims to build a coherent approach for analyzing units of meaning. The goal of this chapter is not to solve questions asked by generations of semioticians, from the foundational work (Saussure, 1977; Barthes, 1968; Morris, 1964; Greimas, 1989) to scholars of today (Eco, 1976; Klinkenberg, 2000; Veron, 1988), but rather to operationalize their theoretical work into an easily applied method. The different steps of this method have much in common with the analytical skills used in the humanities and literature studies. And the “techno” part of the techno-semiotic method does not require advanced technical knowledge, but rather awareness that a medium itself is a complex object or condition.

In this way, we propose to understand online statements and the systems in which they evolve. Of the object of research—in the case of this chapter, an advocacy statement that may or may not be astroturfing—four questions must be asked:

Figure 1. Levels of meaning and questions



1. Where does the statement occur?
2. How is the statement enunciated?
3. What does the statement say?
4. And who said it?

These questions correspond to different levels of meaning: the medium, the document, the text, and the discourse (see Figure 1). In the techno-semiotic method, the levels, while having separate and identifiable characteristics, are not isolated from each other. Rather, each level plays a role and influences, and is influenced by, the other levels. So each level must be considered through two points of view: looking at properties intrinsic to each specific level of meaning, and looking at how the levels of meaning can and do interact.

First, the practice of semiotics in social science, communication and media studies has shown that exhaustive analyses must not restrict themselves only to content—the technical apparatus of communication must be considered as well. Davallon, for example, suggested that what makes objects of communication research unique is their “techno-semiotic weight” (2004). From the sheet of paper to the PDF document, every document has material features that transform the way we receive and perceive signs, but also influences our research

practices and the meanings we give to objects. This is but one aspect of the method—particularly significant at the level of the medium—which is highly influential, but not deterministic, because as Wright suggested, a technical apparatus does not determine communicative processes, which are themselves social, not technological, in nature (1986). Thus, the first step in describing an object is to describe the technical apparatus and the system that produces it. For example, this method always asks: are articles published in *The New York Times* newspaper and on nytimes.com the same? Is a 1933 speech by United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt the same when heard on the radio then, and when read in a history textbook today? These are the types of questions that the techno-semiotic method prompts: Where does the statement occur? And how does the medium in which it occurs affect the meaning of the statement? These questions serve to avoid the pitfall of technological determinism, while still insisting that a statement’s technological context affects its meaning.

The second step of this method takes us to the level of how a statement is enunciated. This is closely related to the where, or to the medium, but is distinct. Rather than looking at the medium and its systems—the differences between New York Times stories in print or online, or the differences between a contemporaneous radio speech and a textbook—the second step turns to the document itself, and the process by which it comes into being. The question of how a statement is enunciated regards how statements become text and how those texts are disseminated. For example, an author rarely publishes handwritten drafts of her work. Instead, she uses word processing software, then sends a copy—sometimes digital, sometimes paper—to her editor, who may send it along for further review by peers and copyeditors, until the document is transformed into a printable version for the printers. Thus, techno-semiotic analysis requires that attention be paid to how



documents are produced and distributed, and to how those processes affect and inform the meanings of statements.

Of course, analyses of communication texts are commonly concerned with the content of statements, which is our third level: what the statement says, returning to the classic core question of finding meaning in a text. A news story viewed on YouTube will be different than the same news story viewed during a CNN broadcast. Neither will be understood in exactly the same way, nor will they be understood the same way as the script of the broadcast, or the audio track heard without the video. The medium informs this level, because audiences receive different media differently. Nonetheless, texts—particularly news and digital advocacy—have claims. Those claims must be identified and evaluated, and understood in the context of the previous two levels: to what extent the medium informs those claims, and to what extent how those claims are presented and distributed affects their reception.

The final level of meaning to investigate is the discourse. The analysis of discourse can be as complex as the definition of the term itself. In the techno-semiotic method, research into the content of the message requires gathering some information about the speaker, in order to understand his intentions and purposes. When considering a statement, the question of who said it is then a more global question about the speaker and her relation to the statement. Analysis at the level of discourse is closely and strongly interrelated with the other levels of meaning. Through analysis at the levels of the technics of the medium, of the production and distribution of a text, and of the content of a text, a holistic understanding of a statement and its meaning begins to emerge. To paraphrase and expound upon Marshall McLuhan, if the message is the medium, then we can say that the discourse is the medium: analysis of the medium reveals the space in which the discourse can evolve, can be

influenced and transformed, but also for whom it was crafted and to what purpose it was deployed. Meaning is conveyed through discourse and its intent; the techno-semiotic model thus treats the author, via authorship claims, as text.

Traditionally, mass media have served to confer status upon certain speakers—news anchors of major television networks, editors of major newspapers, politicians, and so forth—but in digital communication space, traditional status conferral is dramatically weakened. When discussing matters of public interest in digital communication space, we argue, status is conferred by the honesty of the speaker. Her discourse must fulfill her public parrhesiastic duties, which, again, are: to speak the truth, to sincerely believe that truth, and to honestly represent herself when speaking. As we will see in the examples that follow, analyzing the last of these—honest representation—is at the crux of determining whether advocacy speech is astroturfing.

### **ASTROTURFING THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION: FROM PUBLIC CONSULTATION TO RISK MANIPULATION**

In a previous project, Allard-Huver tried to understand how negotiating the concept of risk in the European public sphere transformed advocacy communications (2011). He analyzed the public deliberation from 2002 to 2009 surrounding the 91/414 European Directive regulating pesticides, finding that some public feedback was surprisingly similar, considering letters were supposedly from individuals writing individually. Using the techno-semiotic method, it quickly became clear that an astroturfing attempt was being made within the European legislative process.

During its public consultation for the report *Thematic strategy on the sustainable use of pesticides*, the European Commission invited pesticide

stakeholders to send comments, suggest modifications, put forward reservations and criticize the commission's work (European Commission, 2009). Some feedback that initially seemed to be from individuals appeared to be a part of a coordinated campaign, when seen through the prism of digital *parrhesia* and evaluated by the techno-semiotic method. These questions followed from the method:

First, is the European Commission Website, as a digital public sphere, more subject to astroturfing attempts? The first level of inquiry focuses on the Web site—the media layer—of the European Commission, its functions, and the ways it created a digital public sphere. The site functioned in three ways: it served as a medium that raised public awareness of the problems of pesticides; it built a digital discussion space for public participation in debates about pesticide use; and now, it serves as a public archive for a completed process. Each function makes clear that the Web site is a mediator between different publics. The site, by enunciating the perspectives of European legislators as well as those of other stakeholders, suggests that the rules of *parrhesia* are at work; in turn, stakeholders, by participating in the process, imply that they accept those rules. But the physical and material distance introduced by Internet communication itself must not be forgotten. On the commission's Web site, distinguishing speakers can be difficult, and one can easily submit false information, or falsify an identity; this admits the possibility of astroturfing into the process. Nevertheless, because the site also plays the role of an archive, the public—and researchers—can investigate the advocacy speech therein, and how *parrhesia* operates in these debates.

Now, we can look at the third level of meaning: the content of the documents. The principal element of our interrogation is that some of the stakeholder texts are remarkably similar. The text of Birgitt Walz-Tylla's letter is almost the same as the text sent by Carlo Lick, B. Birk and Joseph Haber. For example, all four letters include this

exact text: "As a scientist who has dedicated most of his career to researching and developing crop protection products, I believe there are a number of elements of this strategy that need to be further considered," even Walz-Tylla, a woman who, humorously, also "dedicated most of *his* career" (emphasis ours) (European Commission, 2009). Here, the content analysis is less the analysis of signs themselves, and more the recognition that the texts are the same. And these seams—like Birgitt Walz-Tylla's apparent claim to manhood, and our ability to quickly compare texts—suggest that these letters are part of a coordinated astroturfing campaign.

So, *who* then is the speaker? The person who signed these letters? The person or people who wrote the original text, which was then distributed to these four scientists? These questions go directly to the third duty of a speaker in the realm of digital *parrhesia*: the duty to honestly represent oneself when speaking. These four letters share the same content, but differ slightly in their presentation and the ways in which their authors present themselves publically. All identify themselves as scientists, and some sign their letters with their academic titles, laying a public claim to be experts in their fields. The letters from Birk and Lick clearly state their professional affiliations; both work for BASF, a chemical company with interests in pesticide production. Walz-Tylla and Haber do not provide their professional affiliations. But no matter: a simple Google search revealed that at the time of the report, Walz-Tylla was an employee of Bayer Crop Science, and Haber was an employee of BASF. Both companies are industry stakeholders.

Thus, what separately seem to be legitimate individual positions of experts are revealed to be the direct participation of industry. This discourse does not arise from the individual concern of scientists, but from what appears to be coordinated industry propaganda. An industrial agent almost certainly wrote the original text, and suggested the campaign to other industrial stakeholders. This actor, in fact, is the true author of the discourse,

but stays in the shadows, uses different identities, and ultimately leaves its intention unclear—is the issue one of good science, or good business? In this debate, then, we can say that these four scientists—and whomever wrote their letters for them—do not respect *parrhesia*. While they may have attempted to exploit the ease of submitting digital feedback, the realm of digital *parrhesia* also affords the opportunity to uncover their campaign. Therefore, digital *parrhesia* and the techno-semiotic method reveal what we believe to be a clear case of astroturfing.

### **SOCKPUPPETING PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA: SECRETING RACISM**

Astroturfing can be professional, well-styled, and coordinated, as seen in the BASF and Bayer-CropScience employees submitting letters as individual stakeholders, even though the content thereof is so similar as to suggest a coordinated campaign by industrial stakeholders. Astroturfing can also be petty, but still astroturfing, when a public official spreads individual social biases and political accusations under pseudonyms. In its previous iteration, the following example was discussed in terms of petty astroturfing; in fact, it bears greater resemblance to sockpuppeting: the creation of an online account controlled by a user of a different name or reputation, in an attempt to conceal the identity of that user while simultaneously providing him with a mouthpiece for his views.

In 2010 and 2011, a commenter on the Web site of the *St. Petersburg Times*, a daily newspaper in Florida, posted a number of controversial comments under the pseudonym “Reality.” The commenter complained about “race pimps” who would “walk around looking like an idiot thug trying to hold your pants up. Whittie isn’t to blame for your ignorance” (*sic.*). Reality also criticized what he saw as St. Petersburg’s outsized number

of “thug shootings” and “prostitute beatings,” and also attacked two Pinellas County commissioners—in one case alleging that a commissioner helped a “developer friend” access funds from the county (DeCamp, 2011b).

A reporter noticed that Reality often ended comments with the phrase “just say’n,” a phrase also used by another Pinellas County commissioner named Norm Roche, and he noticed that Reality announced a new Web site in a comment—a Web site registered to Roche. Initially, this might not seem to be a case of astroturfing; after all, Roche was not manufacturing wide support for racism. However, when confronted by a reporter, Roche admitted that he posted both as “Reality” and as “Norm Roche,” suggesting a desire to distance his public persona from the views of “Reality”—revealing that “Reality” was Roche’s digital sockpuppet. And when critiquing elected officials, including his colleagues, he again used a pseudonym to distance Norm Roche from Reality. Even if the Reality persona was consistent and the author of Reality’s comments believed them to be true, that one person operated two personae, whose opinions did not fully align (at least in public), suggested an effort to mislead or misdirect readers of those comments.

The word “secreting” has two meanings: concealing in a hiding place, and forming then emanating a substance. Here, Roche used a pseudonym to conceal the origins of his controversial comments, and possibly to conceal his own controversial views. (It must be noted, however, that Roche has publicly denied being a racist or a homophobe.) At the same time, he used a pseudonym to distribute those controversial comments, and to do so, used a medium that permitted pseudonymous comments and integrated them with news stories. In this case, the journalist who uncovered the relationship between Reality and Norm Roche used something akin to the techno-semiotic method to do so, and we argue that the method works very well to analyze speech in this situation.

As per the method, we first address issues related to the medium. Here, Roche's speech required a news product that offered an online commenting system. Such a system permits an exchange of ideas between readers who participate, and sometimes between readers and journalists, should journalists choose to respond to comments. Immediately, we see that these texts are polysemous—different readers interpret the meaning of news stories differently, including inscribing their own, sometimes divergent, meanings onto those texts.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, we see how these texts become polyvocal—for readers who do not comment, the news product is the story *plus* the comment threads. Within such polyvocal texts, voices that threaten the peace of the community can easily be identified. In this case, a reporter identified outlandish claims by a commenter. These claims could not exist without the newspaper offering a comment thread, which offering, in turn, introduced polyvocality into its news product. The digital text therefore has the ability to reveal through its medium the plurality of voices that create and recreate new texts.

Second, we address questions related to how the speech is distributed. In the case of these comment threads, reader comments are attached to the end of a news story. Online, the *St. Petersburg Times* publishes stories along with the comments; at the end of the story, the reader must click a link reading “Join the discussion: Click to view comments, add yours.” While other content exists on the page, ranging from advertisements to copyright information to links to other news stories, only links to the comments, or links that help readers repurpose the story by sharing or printing it, are directly connected to the story itself. When commenting, a reader becomes a reader-author; when sharing a story by email or on a blog, the reader becomes a reader-publisher. In both cases, a participating reader implicates herself in a case of digital *parrhesia*, especially because she must agree to “Comment policy and guidelines” which include, among others, the requirement that

“Your comments must be truthful. You may not impersonate another user or a tampabay.com staff member by choosing a similar screen name. You must disclose conflicts of interest” (Tampabay.com, 2012). Finally, other commenters indicated a parrhesiastic situation, because they implicitly interrogated and summoned the criteria of digital *parrhesia*. On the story revealing that Reality was Norm Roche, many of the 137 comments debated whether the publication had violated its own promises of privacy to its commenters, whether the reporter had used honest techniques to uncover this story, and whether a commenter should take responsibility for his comments by posting them under his real name.

Next, we address questions about the content of the speech. The comments by Reality were often incendiary, supporting biases of some commenters and provoking outrage among others. Reader comments, in fact, operate as at least three different texts. First, comments exist in relation to the news story—expanding it, criticizing it, and opining on it. Second, comments exist in relation to other comments; they respond to previous comments while anticipating future ones. Third, comments exist as part of a complete news product, one that includes news story and all comments, that is served to non-commenting readers. The digital text is at the crossroads of the journalist's production of meaning and the public's reception and sometimes re-appropriation of it. The reporter who revealed Reality as Roche did so by understanding the first two content interrelationships—by identifying commonalities between supposedly different voices, and ultimately revealing them to be the same.

Finally, we consider the speaker himself. All four of the levels of the techno-semiotic method interrelate, but questions of discourse are perhaps the most pervasive of all. Above, we have seen how online commenting systems promote polyvocal texts, and thus create opportunities for deviant speech. We also have seen that by posting comments, readers become reader-authors, and in

doing so, implicate themselves in a parrhesiastic system. Further, even the most cursory look at the content of reader comments reveals that understanding their intertextual and multitextual nature allows us to see the different ways in which content may be deployed. Discourse, then, is overlaid on all of these. The question of who is commenting and why may be the fundamental question of digital ethos in online texts such as these. In this case, once the reporter marshaled his evidence and asked Roche if he was Reality, Roche admitted that his reasons for concealing his identity (at least part of the time) were entirely discursive. He told the reporter, “A lot of it can be rhetoric and rants. Unfortunately it’s part of our communication base now, and you have to be part of it, you have to track it” (Decamp, 2011a).

Thus, we see how a reporter used a process much like the techno-semiotic method to break a news story about a politician who concealed his identity while making possibly racist comments about his constituents. And we also see how different layers of meaning generated through the medium, its distribution, its content, and its author are all available to analyze the credibility of online speech.

## **CONCLUSION: DIGITAL PARRHESIA AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TEXTS**

Clearly, an application of digital *parrhesia* has the potential to evaluate and assess digital astroturfing and sockpuppeting. Under the *parrhesia* model, truth-claims are reviewed in three ways: whether they are true, whether the speaker believes that they are true, and whether the speaker is honestly representing herself. Again, *parrhesia* accommodates pseudonymous and anonymous speech because honesty does not require mapping a name onto a real speaker, but rather requires that the speaker honestly believes in and argues for her truth claims. The techno-semiotic method accounts for this, but it also has wider implications.

As Nayar suggested, digital communication constitutes new communities (2010). This is not a new phenomenon—we have seen it before in the old bulletin board systems and chat rooms, and we see it today in online communities ranging from 4chan to Facebook groups. These communities, as all communities do, develop their own behavioral norms and mores. These norms help define the discursive space of digital *parrhesia*; the risks to a speaker for violating those norms—in the digital space, ranging from chastisement to banishment—help determine when and how the speaker will fulfill her duties to speak the truth, to believe that her truth-claim is indeed true, and to honestly represent herself and her belief. For astroturfers, the risk is that a secret propaganda campaign will be revealed, with consequences ranging from public shame to criminal liability. For sockpuppeteers, the risk is that their false representations and true identities will be revealed and that they have thus violate the mores or norms of the discursive space in which they operate. Most directly in the case of cyberbullying or cyberharrassment, fake accounts only show the perpetrators’ cowardice as they serve the purpose to evade the law or to avoid direct confrontations with “targets,” using the technosemiotic layer as a cover.

To operationalize digital *parrhesia*—to make it useable not only for academic critics, but to make a model that can be used to consider digital communication more broadly—we have integrated the medium and the speaker into our techno-semiotic method. Doing so solves a major problem with the sender-receiver model of communications, which manages to persist even when it is not appropriate. Under a sender-receiver model, texts can be recognized as univocal and polysemous—that is, readers can negotiate their own meanings with texts, even meanings that run counter to the preferred reading of a univocal author. But when texts become *polyvocal*, and when the medium itself—for example, an online news story with comments—creates polyvocality, the sender-receiver model falters.

Considering polyvocality in digital media facilitates the exposure of astroturfers and sockpuppeteers. In this chapter alone, we have a scholar (Allard-Huver, 2011) and a journalist (DeCamp, 2011a; DeCamp, 2011b) use observations made through or use techniques reliant upon digital media to expose astroturfing and sockpuppeting that, themselves, were at least partially executed through digital media. This suggests that polyvocal media and polyvocal texts, when functioning in a parrhesiastic way (that is to say, when discussing community issues in ways that hinge on acts of truth-telling), are especially appropriate subjects for the techno-semiotic analysis outlined in this chapter.

The cases outlined here—how the distribution of the PDF of a European Commission report compiling the feedback of stakeholders regarding pesticide use facilitated the revelation of astroturfing by pesticide manufacturers; and a journalist revealing that an elected official clandestinely used a digital sockpuppet to stoked the fires of racism in Florida—suggest the versatility of both digital *parrhesia* as a theory and the techno-semiotic method as a method.

## REFERENCES

- Allard-Huver, F. (2011). *Transformation and circulation of the notion of “risk” in the European Commission*. (Unpublished Master Thesis). University of Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, France.
- Barthes, R. (1968). *Elements of semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bee Biodiversity Network/ Le Réseau Biodiversité pour les Abeilles. (2012). *Give a flower to the bees*. Retrieved April 24, 2014 from [http://www.reseau-biodiversite-abeilles.com/?page\\_id=1169](http://www.reseau-biodiversite-abeilles.com/?page_id=1169)
- Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel. (2011, October 18). *Convention de la chaîne M6*. Retrieved February 12, 2012, from <http://www.csa.fr/Espace-juridique/Conventions-des-editeurs/Convention-de-la-chaine-M6>
- Cresswell, J., & Thompson, H. (2012). Comment on “A Common Pesticide Decreases Foraging Success and Survival in Honey Bees”. *Science*, 337(6101), 1453. doi:10.1126/science.1224618 PMID:22997307
- Davallon, J. (2004). Objet concret, objet scientifique, objet de recherche. *Hermes*, 38, 30–37.
- DeCamp, D. (2011a, November 17). Pinellas county commissioner Norm Roche has altered ego for online comments. *St. Petersburg Times*. Retrieved January 22, 2012, from <http://www.tampabay.com/news/localgovernment/article1202065.ece>
- DeCamp, D. (2011b, November 18). Norm Roche’s anonymous online snark strains city, county relations. *St. Petersburg Times*. Retrieved January 22, 2012, from <http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/local/norm-roche-anonymous-online-snark-strains-city-county-relations/1202287>
- Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- European Commission. (2009). Towards a thematic strategy on the sustainable use of pesticides. *Environment*.
- Evans, J. D., Saegerman, C., Mullin, C., Haubruge, E., Nguyen, B. K., Frazier, M., & Pettis, J. S. et al. (2009). Colony collapse disorder: A descriptive study. *PLoS ONE*, 4(8), e6481. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0006481 PMID:19649264
- Foucault, M. (2001). *Fearless speech*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Freenews. (2011a, May 17). *La Freebox à l'honneur dans E=M6 (MàJ)*. Retrieved February 12, 2012, from <http://www.freenews.fr/spip.php?article8300>

Freenews. (2011b, October 11). *Reportage bidon sur la Freebox dans E=M6: intervention du CSA*. Retrieved February 12, 2012, from <http://www.freenews.fr/spip.php?article9131>

Gilewicz, N., & Allard-Huver, F. (2012). Digital parrhesia as a counterweight to astroturfing. In S. Apostel & M. Folk (Eds.), *Online credibility and digital ethos: Evaluating computer-mediated communication* (pp. 215-227). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Greimas, J. (1989). *The social sciences: A semiotic view*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Henry, M., Béguin, M., Requier, F., Rollin, O., Odoux, J.-F., Aupinel, P., & Decourtye, A. et al. (2012). A common pesticide decreases foraging success and survival in honey bees. *Science*, 336(6079), 348–350. doi:10.1126/science.1215039 PMID:22461498

Klinkenberg, J.-M. (2000). *Précis de sémiotique générale*. Paris: Seuil.

McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Morris, C. W. (1964). *Signification and significance: A study of the relations of signs and values*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Nayar, P. K. (2010, December 25). Wikileaks, the new information cultures and digital parrhesia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(45), 27–30.

Sager, R. (2009, August 18). Keep off the astroturf. [Electronic version]. *The New York Times*. Retrieved January 22, 2012, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/19/opinion/19sager.html>

Saussure, F. (1977). *Course in general linguistics*. Fontana: Collins.

Tampabay.com. (2012). *Comments policy*. Retrieved January 22, 2012, from [http://www.tampabay.com/universal/comment\\_guidelines.shtml](http://www.tampabay.com/universal/comment_guidelines.shtml)

Veron, E. (1988). *La sémiotique sociale: Fragments d'une théorie de la discursivité*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.

Wright, C. R. (1986). *Masscommunication: A sociological perspective*. New York: Random House.

## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Discourse:** A sum of proposition and enunciation that creates a body of knowledge. The circulation of this discourse via media and other form of organization is called “discursive formation” in Foucault’s discourse.

**Semiotics:** Literally the science of the signs, semiotics is the study of the meaning in every form. Here the perspective adopted is to study communication as an exchange, a construction and a negotiation of sign *via* the media.

**Technological Determinism:** A doctrine focusing on the technological evolution of information and communication system rather than on their interaction and their subordination to the society that developed them.

**Techno-Semiotic:** A way to understand and analyze media and communication phenomenon as being at the crossroad between a construction and a circulation of knowledge and signification, and information and communication technologies seen a *savoir-faire* serving and accompanying this circulation.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> A phenomenon readily seen in comment threads following all political stories, for example.