

Did an Industry Front Group Create Fake Twitter Accounts to Promote the Dakota Access Pipeline?

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Global Research, September 16, 2016

[DeSmogBlog](#) 15 September 2016

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

A DeSmog investigation has revealed the possibility that a front group supporting the [controversial Dakota Access Pipeline](#) (DAPL) — the [Midwest Alliance for Infrastructure Now \(MAIN\)](#) — may have created fake Twitter profiles, known by some as “sock puppets,” to convey a pro-pipeline message over social media. And MAIN may be employing the PR services of the firm [DCI Group](#), which has connections to the Republican Party, in order to do so.

DeSmog tracked down at least 16 different questionable Twitter accounts which used the [#NoDAPL](#) hashtag employed by protesters, in order to claim that opposition to the pipeline kills jobs, that those protesting the pipeline at the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s encampment use violence, and that the pipeline does not pose a risk to water sources or cross over tribal land.

On September 13, people began to suspect these accounts were fake, [calling them out on Twitter](#), and by September 14, most of the accounts no longer existed.

The Dakota Access Pipeline is set to carry oil obtained via [hydraulic fracturing \(“fracking”\)](#) from the [Bakken Shale](#) basin in North Dakota across the Dakotas, Iowa, and Illinois. Its owner, Energy Transfer Partners (ETP), says it [plans to](#) talk to the Obama administration and “reiterate [its] commitment to bring the Dakota Access Pipeline into operation.” It will do so despite the administration [requesting that the company halt construction](#) “voluntarily — particularly around the contested sacred tribal sites located 20 miles east and west of Lake Oahe and the Missouri River — until further notice.”

In his [memorandum](#) announcing his company’s plans to do so, ETP CEO Kelcy Warren espoused many of the same arguments that were deployed by the Twitter sock puppets, which calls into question whether his company helped spearhead the social media campaign behind the scenes in order to create the appearance of grassroots support, a technique known as “astroturfing.”

In that memo, Warren said his company plans to engage more aggressively in the PR sphere.

“It has not been my preference to engage in a media/PR battle,” wrote Warren. “However, misinformation has dominated the news, so we will work to communicate with the government and media more clearly in the days to come.”

Vicki Granado, a spokesperson for the company, did not respond to a request for comment.

In the meantime, as all stakeholders in the debate await a definitive next move from the Obama administration, protests both on-site and nationwide have continued, with a [militarized police presence](#) at the Sacred Stone Camp intensifying. U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) [spoke](#) at a [September 13 Washington, DC protest](#) against the pipeline, while U.S. Representatives Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) and Raul Ruiz (D-CA) that same day [called for a congressional oversight investigation](#) of the hotly contested permitting issues which have arisen in the ongoing saga over the pipeline's future.

With that backdrop, in came the “sock puppets” for their own September 13 day of action on Twitter — and with MAINlikely pulling the strings.

The Sock Puppets

The sock puppet profiles had names such as Ashley Lovinggood, Garnett Vreeken, Yong Fetner, and Ying Baars, and all of the profile pictures featured women. Besides tweets promoting the Dakota Access Pipeline, what links all of the bogus profiles together is that they all “follow” (similar to “liking” a page on Facebook) the company Hootsuite.



Hootsuite serves as a social media platform [management tool](#) which allows an administrator for many different social media accounts, such as Facebook and Twitter, to toggle quickly between accounts and send out posts in the form of tweets and other status updates. One of those accounts, that of Angla Dullea, formerly followed MAIN — and like all of the other pages — also followed Hootsuite; that is, until the account became suspended.

Dullea's profile photo bore an identical resemblance to the Twitter profile for [Palma Mackerl](#), another bare-bones Twitter account.



Dullea also retweeted a tweet from a group called [Standing Rock Fact Checker](#), which on its website describes itself as a project of MAIN. The website also states it is “dedicated to promoting the truth” and battling “misinformation about the approved — and nearly complete — Dakota Access project.” Five other suspicious Twitter profiles also shared Fact Checker tweets.

[MAIN members](#) include the South Dakota Petroleum and Propane Marketers Association, North Dakota Petroleum Council, Petroleum Marketers, Convenience Stores of Iowa, and others.

Reverse photo searches on Google revealed that the pictures used for other sock puppet profiles also appeared on a dermatologist website, a mail order bride website, and a [hairstyle website featuring a photo of Eva Longoria](#), as well as images of Chinese model Crystal Wang Xi Ran, singer Keri Hilson, and the late singer Amy Winehouse.



Eva Longoria doppelgänger; Photo Credit: Twitter | [Oliver Keyes](#)

The use of political bots and sock puppets is nothing new and in fact, has become normalized by political factions worldwide, explained [Norah Abokhodair](#) of the [Political Bots](#) research program based at the University of Washington and Oxford University.

“There are many ways in which social bots can disrupt or influence online discourse, such as, spamming, phishing, distributed denial of service attacks (DDoS), or other nefarious activities,” Abokhodair explained, pointing to examples such as the [Syrian Civil War bots](#) and [bots used in Turkey](#). “They can also be deployed for sophisticated activities like astroturfing, misdirection (botnet that tries to get the audience to attend to other content by spamming the hashtag) and smoke screening (serves to hide or provide cover for or obscure some type of activity).”

MAIN and DCI Group

MAIN was the only industry group to [issue a press release](#) in response to the Obama administration’s September 9 announcement halting construction on a portion of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Its press release contained a statement attributed to spokesperson Craig Stevens. Stevens also recently [did an interview with KVLY-TV](#), the NBC and CBS affiliate for Fargo, North Dakota. When on TV, however, he was billed as the “spokesperson for a pipeline sort of group, if you will” by segment host [Chris Berg](#).

Despite the lack of disclosure by KVLY and Berg, it turns out that [Craig Stevens](#) actually works as Media Affairs and Crisis Management Lead for DCI Group. His DCI Group contact information is listed for MAIN’s profile page on the website PR Newswire.



Image Credit: [PR Newswire](#)

DCI is a PR firm tied to the GOP and with roots in creating front groups on [behalf of Big Tobacco](#), spearheading the [modern Tea Party movement](#), and representing oppressive dictatorial regimes such as that of [Burma](#) and oil- and gas-soaked [Azerbaijan](#). Stevens [formerly worked](#) for the George W. Bush presidential campaign, served as [spokesperson](#) for U.S. Secretary of Energy Samuel Bodman for the George W. Bush Administration, and also worked on Mitt Romney’s 2012 Republican Party presidential campaign.

Jim Murphy, the political director for Donald Trump’s Republican Party presidential campaign, formerly [served as President and Managing Partner](#) for DCI Group. Beyond the DCI Group connection, [Continental Resources](#) — whose founder and CEO [Harold Hamm](#) is one of Donald Trump’s top energy advisers and a potential candidate for U.S. Secretary of Energy under a Trump presidency — said in a recent investor statement that a significant chunk of the [company’s Bakken oil will flow through Dakota Access](#).

Before DCI Group began working on Standing Rock-related projects for MAIN, it appears the PR firm LS2Group maintained the PR account for Dakota Access. A MAIN [press release from November 2015](#) lists [LS2’s Kayla Day](#) as the contact person and her LS2 work number is also listed, while metadata for the press release’s PDF shows the document was last saved by [former LS2 staffer Alex Shaner](#).

DCI's Role

As DeSmog has previously revealed, LS2 also did [PR work in support](#) of TransCanada's [Keystone XL](#) pipeline. The group Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement [published emails](#) from 2014 (obtained via a public records request) showing LS2 also doing advocacy work in support of Dakota Access.

LS2's Day told DeSmog that LS2 still does some work on behalf of MAIN, but declined to comment further on how the work is divvied up between LS2 and DCI Group. Stevens was first listed as a spokesperson for MAIN in a [September 6 press release](#), two days after the now-infamous [dog biting incident](#) took place at the protesting Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's Sacred Stone Camp. The Standing Rock Fact Checker website was registered the day before, and it also sent out its [first tweet](#) that same day.



Image Credit: Whols.net

Stevens declined to comment on who funds MAIN, referring to the membership list and confirming he was brought on in the past couple weeks to do PR work on behalf of the coalition, "as the whole public discussion has increased and been elevated" surrounding the pipeline. He also confirmed he runs the Fact Checker portal.

Asked about whether his firm or MAIN had anything to do with the sock-puppet tweets, Stevens denied he or MAIN had any involvement.

"It's frustrating to me because we're working to be respectful in tone and fact-based and any tactics like these are a distraction for what we're trying to do and that's to bring facts and contexts to this discussion," Stevens said. "I don't know about the tactics themselves and I don't know who or what is behind it, but as someone who's trying to get facts out and trying to be respectful in tone, it was incredibly frustrating that this was going on. As far as I know, and think I know, the MAIN Coalition had nothing to do with them."

However, noted environmental advocate and co-founder of climate group 350.org, Bill McKibben, doubts the authenticity of such claims from PR firms with a record like DCI, saying:

"There's a word for this kind of thing, and that word is: lying. The invention of fake people to make fake arguments perfectly exemplifies the tactics Big Oil has been reduced to. They can't win an argument on the merits, so they've given up trying. Instead, they literally make things up. The contrast with the steadfast straightforwardness of the tribes, and of the climate scientists, couldn't be more stark."

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