

Is reputation obsolete?

An essay for the [Publius Project](#)

Judith Donath

September 11, 2008

In the past, most transactions and conversations were ephemeral. Words were spoken and quickly slipped into the past, resurrected only if one of the listening parties chose to repeat them from memory at a subsequent time. Today, many discussions are held online, where they permanently archived. I don't need to hear someone else's account of whether your argument was skillful or your tone polite; I can see for myself. Our face to face world is also becoming increasingly archival. We photograph each other at picnics, parties and chance mundane encounters, and upload the images to public media-feeds. Records of our travel times, purchases, health conditions, phone calls, and more exist in vast corporate and government databases.

In a (possibly nightmarish) world in which all action is recorded there is, perhaps, no need for reputation information: you could learn everything about another's behavior directly. If I can see the events of the past for myself, is getting other people's potentially biased and self-serving opinions about it worth anything – is reputation obsolete?

In some cases, the answer is yes.

For example, if I am buying something on eBay, I'll look at the seller's reputation and if it is not very good, I'll go elsewhere. However, these public ratings are often inaccurately high because the rater is afraid of retaliation, or inaccurately low because the rater is retaliating for receiving a poor rating. Thus, I gain little from the opinion of the other buyers¹. What I really want to know are the facts about the seller's past transactions: Were the items sent on time? In good condition? It would be ideal if UPS had an option where they photographed an item to be shipped, wrapped it themselves, and posted the photo and shipping info; I could then look up a verified record of the seller's actions (though items whose condition is not readily apparent from a photo – a laptop, for instance – would need a more extensive evaluation). In other words, I'm more interested in history here than in reputation.

Yet reputation is more than just biased reporting. Even when the facts of an event are clear, interpretations of them can be important. A politician's publicly broadcast speech is subsequently argued over by journalists, bloggers, taxicab drivers: different political communities interpret the same words and gestures in vastly different ways. In

¹ People do use these ratings and they affect price (Resnick et al. 2006) but this is in the absence of better information.

academia, the committee members evaluating a professor for promotion have access to his c.v. and publications, but they also rely heavily on letters from established members of the field assessing the significance of the candidate's work.

Reputation is central to community formation and cooperation (Emler 2001; Gluckman 1963; Hardin 2003). Through discussion about other's actions, people establish and learn about the community's standards. Reputation amplifies an individual's experience for the benefit of a whole community. If I work with someone who turns out to be lazy and dishonest, by telling my friends about it, they are spared having to have this bad experience themselves. Our ability to share reputation information makes society possible (Dunbar 1996). Reputation is the core of rewards and sanctioning – it amplifies the benefits of behaving well and the costs of misbehavior. And having access to reputation information is a big benefit for community membership: insiders know who to trust and how to act toward each other, while strangers do not get the benefit of other's past experiences.

In light of this, it would seem that the answer to the question “Is reputation obsolete?” is “No”.

Yet reputation is also subject to manipulation. It is, after all, second hand information. People manipulate it for a variety of reasons: they may be trying to influence opinion to advance their own causes, or to maliciously seek to harm someone, or to curry favor by providing entertaining or seemingly confidential material.

The context of exchange affects the reliability of reputation information. Information exchanged within close-knit communities will be more reliable, and members are likely to know when assessments are biased. A colleague recently mentioned that she would never trust another recommendation letter from Professor X again – she'd seen too many in which he claimed that different students were “*the* top scholar I've known”. Professor X was trying to promote the careers of his students, but in the process acquired a poor reputation for inflated praising. Here, a close-knit community assesses the assessors and most letter writers temper the desire to over-enthusiastically praise with the desire to remain credible in the eyes of their peers.

Other contexts yield less useful assessments. On public rating sites such as eBay, the ratings are primarily a transaction between the buyer and seller, rather than between the rater and reader (David & Pinch 2006). With no community binding the latter, there is no check on reliability.

In the online world, design shapes these contexts. It shapes how we access archival information -- new technologies may make vast amounts of data available, but we are still awaiting interfaces that make it useful and present it fairly. And design affects the reliability of reputation information. Community, identity and feedback about veracity make reputations more reliable and valuable (Lampe & Resnick 2004; Miller, Resnick & Zeckhauser 2005).

To return to our initial question: is reputation obsolete in an increasingly archival world? The answer, it appears, is “sometimes”. When the immediate facts about a situation are primary, we should make use of the vast amount of archived material available. But when situations are ambiguous, when there are conflicting versions of events or codes of behavior, and when developing a shared cultural interpretation of the meaning of things is important (Merry 1997), reputation – and the communicative process of creating it - is far from obsolete.

References

- David, Shay and Trevor John Pinch. 2006. Six Degrees of Reputation: The Use and Abuse of Online Review and Recommendation Systems. *First Monday* 11, no. 3.
- Dunbar, Robin I. M. 1996. *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Emler, Nicholas. 2001. Gossiping. In *The New Handbook of Language and Social Psychology*, ed. W. P. Robinson and H. Giles:317–338. New York Wiley.
- Gluckman, Max. 1963. Gossip and Scandal (Papers in Honor of Melville J. Herskovits). *Current Anthropology* 4, no. 3: 307-316.
- Hardin, Russell. 2003. Gaming trust. In *Trust and reciprocity: Interdisciplinary lessons from experimental research*, ed. Elinor Ostrom and James Walker:80-101. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lampe, Cliff and Paul Resnick. 2004. Slash(dot) and burn: Distributed moderation in a large online conversation space. In *ACM Computer Human Interaction Conference*. Vienna, Austria.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 1997. Rethinking gossip and scandal. In *Reputation: Studies in the Voluntary Elicitation of Good Conduct*, ed. Daniel B. Klein:47-74. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Miller, N., P. Resnick, and R. Zeckhauser. 2005. Eliciting Informative Feedback: The Peer-Prediction Method. *Management Science* 51, no. 9: 1359.
- Resnick, P., R. Zeckhauser, J. Swanson, and K. Lockwood. 2006. The value of reputation on eBay: A controlled experiment. *Experimental Economics* 9, no. 2: 79-101.