

## **Why be nice? Motivations for honesty in online assessments.**

a [Berkman Center for Internet and Society](#) paper

[Judith Donath](#)

April 8, 2008

This essay looks at the problem of how to make reputation systems that are robust and reliable, and that function in the domain of computer-mediated interaction

Reputation is a community's collective information about a person. It allows many people to benefit from the experiences of others. Our ability to convey information about each other – to form reputations - helps make large scale societies possible. The desire for a good reputation motivates people to follow social norms, and by making bad behavior costlier it reduces the risk in trying new things and making new connections.

Reputation requires that we provide our assessments to other people. What motivates us to do this? Noting that Sarah is unhelpful when I ask her a favor or that Sam was prompt in shipping some books helps me form my own impressions of what they are like and how to act with them in the future. But why take the time and effort to share this information with others?

The motivations for sharing one's impressions and experiences of a person with other people include a desire to help others, to gain favor with the subject, or to manipulate the behavior of the listeners. Some motivations lead to sharing information honestly: if I want to help the listeners, I will want to tell them the truth (at least as I perceive it). If, however, my motivation is to help a friend or retaliate against an enemy by manipulating how other's perceive them, then the information I provide may be quite misleading. The issue of reliability is central to reputation, for while other people's honest assessments can be very helpful, manipulative false information can be harmful to the listener, the innocent subject, or both.

Traditionally, reputation information has been shared via "evaluative talk about a person who is not present", i.e. gossip (Eder & Enke 1991). Being privy to this information is one of the key benefits of community membership: a socially isolated person does not have access to reputation information and is thus at greater risk in dealing with others he does not know well. Typically, this information is held in the minds of the community members (rather than attached to the subject, as with online ratings or Hester Prynne's "A"). It has been argued (Dunbar 1996) that our ability to keep track of social relationships and reputation information limits the size of human social groups to an upper bound of about 150-200.

One of the promises of the online world is that it can extend our social reach, transcending geographic limitations and allowing us to maintain larger social groups. To do so, simply making it easier to contact more people is not sufficient. The online world entails frequent encounters with strangers in an environment where many of the cues we

use to assess others at short acquaintanceship are missing and where high level of social mobility makes free-riding easier. We must also expand our ability to share and keep track of reputations.

Recognizing this, many sites incorporate reputation management systems. An example is the online auction site eBay, where buyers and sellers rate each other after each transaction and these ratings are attached to the subject's identity. Public rating systems allow anyone using the site to have access to this information. This especially helps newcomers, who can immediately benefit from long time users' experiences. And it efficiently handles reputation management for large populations.

Yet such rating systems are often unreliable. Users who have had a bad experience may still leave positive feedback because they worry that they have more to lose if the other retaliates by rating them poorly. It is not surprising that false praise and retaliatory complaint are common problems: here, the rater and the subject have a relationship, both in their transaction and rating process, while the rater has no relationship with the rating's audience. For people willing to invest more time and effort, however, more extensive and nuanced information can be found on the community boards, where buyers and sellers can talk with likeminded others, learn useful strategies and point out problematic transactions and scams. The ratings are not useless: they encourage good behavior and provide quick guidance about the most egregious users. But they do not substitute for cultivating relationships with experienced users.

The community boards occupy an interesting space between public ratings and oral gossip. Like public ratings, they are open to anyone, including new users and the subjects of the discussion (though it seems rare for the subjects of negative ratings to appear on them). Like oral gossip, they place the reputation issues within a more general context of establishing group norms (Eder & Enke 1991; Gluckman 1963). They require more investment of time than simply glancing at ratings, and they do not provide the secrecy and group bonding that private gossip does (though that is not necessarily a negative, for the public statements on a community board are more accountable). Perhaps most importantly, they create a sense of the reality of the others to whom one is providing rating information, thus changing the motivation from an obligation to the transaction partner to a social interaction with a fellow community member (even if "community" is quite loosely defined here).

The rater's motivation determines the likely reliability of any assessment. The writer of a review may not know the audience, but still be motivated by a desire to be well-regarded by them, particularly if they can subsequently evaluate the subject for themselves, as with a book, a movie, a Slashdot comment, as opposed to a private transaction. (This assumes that the audience seeks accuracy; if they seek primarily entertainment, as with celebrity gossip, accuracy may instead be desired only so as to stay within the legal limits libel laws impose).

The creator of an online site can shape its social dynamics through the means provided for people to convey their impression others. Private communication, public boards, and

explicit ratings are just some of the channels for such information, and each provides its own balance of accuracy, community formation, entertainment, etc. Understanding the motivation of the assessing participants is fundamental to understanding how these are likely to be used.

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