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Is reputation obsolete?

Essay by Judith Donath, October 17, 2008

In the past, most conversations were ephemeral: spoken words quickly slipped into the past, resurrected only if a listener later repeated them from memory. Today, many discussions and transactions live on indefinitely. Online conversations are often permanently archived and events in the face-to-face world are frequently recorded. We photograph each other at events both significant and mundane, 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. Today, I often no longer have to rely on someone else's account of your past behavior: I can see for myself.

In a world in which all action is recorded, is there still need for reputation information? 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? Or, has reputation become obsolete?

In some cases, the answer is yes.

For example, when buying something on eBay, if a seller's reputation is poor I'll go elsewhere. However, some ratings are falsely low because of retaliation, or inaccurately high due to fear of retaliation. The reported opinions of others are therefore dubious.* What I really want to know are the facts about the seller's past transactions: Were the items sent on time? Were they in good condition? The ideal would be if UPS had a service 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 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, and taxicab drivers; different communities interpret the same words and gestures in vastly different ways. In academia, the committee members evaluating a professor for promotion can read his C.V. and publications, but they also rely heavily on letters from colleagues 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 others' actions, people establish and learn about the community's standards. Reputation is the core of rewards and sanctioning – it amplifies the benefits of behaving well and the costs of misbehavior. If I work with someone who turns out to be lazy and dishonest, by telling my friends about it, they are spared from a similar bad experience. Having access to reputation information is a big benefit of 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. Our ability to share reputation information makes society possible (Dunbar 1996).

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

Yet reputation is subject to manipulation, for various reasons. People use it to influence opinion

to advance their own causes, to maliciously harm someone, or to curry favor by providing entertaining or seemingly confidential material. We need to understand what circumstances make reputation reliable.

Reputation information exchanged within close-knit communities is more reliable, and members learn 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". In overzealously promoting the careers of his students, Professor X acquired a poor reputation for inflated praising. Most letter writers temper the desire to over-enthusiastically praise in order to remain credible in the eyes of their peers, realizing that this close-knit community assesses the assessors. Without community ties, reputation is generally less useful. On public rating sites such as eBay, where no community binds the rater and the reader of ratings, there is no check on reliability and the ratings function primarily as a social exchange between the rater and subject (David & Pinch 2006).

So, is reputation obsolete in an increasingly archival world? The answer, it appears, is "sometimes". When the immediate facts 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 culture is important (Merry 1997), reputation and the communicative, community-building process of creating it is far from obsolete.

Online, new factors affect the balance between reputation and history. One big issue is "portable identity": if I spend countless hours on a site being a gracious and well-informed companion, shouldn't I be able to take that personal history and reputation with me to another site? Many would argue yes, that "you own your own words". (More controversial is the question of whether you *must* take your history with you: people prefer to port only positive pasts.) But porting reputation is a different matter. Your reputation is information about you, but it is not by you. If you own your own words, then your reputation is owned not by you, but by the people who talk about you. Furthermore, it is a subjective judgment made it a specific context that may not translate well into another. History is portable in ways that reputation is not.

An online site can encourage reliance on history by making search easy and by providing visualizations of patterns within its archive. Or it can encourage the use of reputation by providing both public and private communication channels, as well as feedback about the value of the reputation information people have provided. In technologically mediated societies, evaluating the relative merits of history and reputation is especially important, for the habits of such communities are shaped by deliberate design.

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

Judith Donath *is a Berkman Faculty Fellow and the director of the* Sociable Media Group *at the* MIT Media Lab*. Her work focuses on the social side of computing, synthesizing knowledge from fields such as graphic design, urban studies and cognitive science to build innovative interfaces for online communities and virtual identities. She is known internationally for pioneering research in social visualization, interface design, and computer mediated interaction.*

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