



Structuring feeling: Web 2.0, online ranking and rating, and the digital 'reputation' economy

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abstract

Blogging, twittering, facebooking, posting videos on youtube, providing feedback on newspaper articles online or rating restaurants or hotels on tripadvisor, are often seen to be positive elements in the development of the digital public sphere. Academics and human resources experts alike laud the ways in which these activities contribute to the increasing circulation of 'social capital' or 'reputation', which we can see as a new form of currency and, more generally, value. This paper will examine these claims about the emerging economy in reputation, focusing specifically on the ways reputation has historically been defined and understood and how it is currently being aggregated, measured, structured and represented by specific business interests online. It will consider the uses to which these ratings, lists, scores and other forms of overt reputation building are being put and discuss whether they constitute forms of free labour. In the end, it will conclude that these practices herald a form of market discipline and affective conditioning, which, much like other more traditional kinds of value generation such as branding, function to direct human meaning-making and self-identity in highly motivated and profitable ways.

'For what we are defining is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period.'

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

'Venom can be a great leading indicator!'

Michelle Conlin, *BusinessWeek*, April 16 2007

In this age when more and more people have access to online feedback mechanisms and social networking sites that appear to link them directly to each other and to corporations, Internet gurus are increasingly fond of proclaiming that we are witnessing a return to the freedom and flow of the Greek agora. This is a fantastical historical projection to be sure, but one that sees the market as nothing more than a series of conversations expressing feelings and opinions between interested parties. The authors of a book entitled *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, for example, insist that the contemporary online economy is 'based on intersecting interests. Open to many resolutions. Essentially unpredictable. Spoken from the centre of the self' (Levine, Locke, Searles and Weinberger, 2009: 149). This perspective puts affective relations at the centre of the market's operations; if markets are conversations, then value must be generated

through our visible, affective and quantifiable participation in these conversations and the tangible reputations we accrue as a result.

Human resources professionals also have come to recognize that an individual employee's skills matter far less than the depth and intensity of their social relationships online, or, in more familiar terms, their social capital, which can be aggregated and expressed as their digital reputation. The number of times a name comes up in a Google search, an Ebay rating as a buyer or seller, the number of friends on Facebook, or followers on Twitter can all be seen as representations of digital reputation – the general public feeling or sentiment about a product, person or service. Organizations that have well-connected employees with high degrees of social capital and solid digital reputations report higher amounts of innovation and patent outputs, higher chances of survival, and higher earnings (Krebs, 2000). So, while previously internet activity might have been a knock against a employee, nowadays the goal is to 'hire-and-wire' – 'to hire the best people with the best network and integrate them into the value chain so that their combined human and social capital provide excellent returns' (Krebs, 2000: 89).

The overt expression of individual feelings and the concomitant creation of a notable (and possibly profitable) digital reputation via blogging, twittering, facebooking, ranking and providing feedback are generally seen to be positive developments; not only have consumers been freed from the top-down directives of a promotional culture, the argument goes, they are now able to draw on the collective intelligence and affective relations of all the Average-Joes around them. In addition, simply by expressing their opinions and feelings, individuals have become empowered participants in an emerging online economy; feelings and opinions expressed in the form of ranking and rating for example, build personal reputation, which functions, in turn, as a new form of currency and, more generally, value. Some critics argue that this new communicative and affective transparency online will produce a more 'ethical' economy (Arvidsson and Pietersen, 2009).

This paper will interrogate some of the assumptions and practices that underpin these claims about the emerging reputation economy online. It will explore the meanings of 'reputation' and its link to the rise of promotional self-production or self-branding. It will explore the prehistory of online rating and ranking, and will review the variety of web tools and analytics that have emerged recently to measure, manage, represent and structure our feelings, and that promise us a monetizable asset in the form of digital reputation. The paper argues that online reputation measurement and management systems are new sites of cultural production; they are places where the expression of feeling is ostensibly constituted as 'reputation' and then mined for value. But, where, and for whom, are profits actually made in these processes?

While we could argue that the activities of online rating, ranking and feeding back comprise a kind of immaterial labour insofar as they produce value in the form of digital reputation, to date, the only actual monetary value to have emerged from these practices is produced by the labour of what might be called 'feeling-intermediaries' – social media intelligence specialists or 'listeners', information measurers and aggregators, and statisticians. These feeling-intermediaries most often work for

corporations, brand managers, and marketers. They produce value insofar as they are able to mine, intervene in, and direct online feedback in ways beneficial to their employers. Their work represents an entirely new set of services that have arisen to find the profit in Web 2.0. Quite simply, they are sites where we might analyze the appropriation of value from feeling via specific kinds of structuring logics and measurement algorithms.

It might be more accurate to characterize the individual activities of ranking, rating or social networking, then, as moments of experiential re-structuring: points at which, as Raymond Williams would say, social experiences ‘in solution’ are precipitated (Williams, 1977: 133-134) and prepared for market as formalized utterances and profitable information by specific types of capitalist enterprise. In other contemporary contexts, such as reality television production, I have named this legislation and structuring of personal performance and affect by capitalist interests ‘self-branding’. To be sure, the practices of ranking, rating and feeding back are similar to these processes, and the promise of valuable reputation held out by both reality television production and online web participation are evidence of a contemporary structure of feeling where personal visibility and surveillance is chic (Andrejevic, 2004: 105), fame is money, and the manipulation of affect a required skill. But, again, it is crucial to note that what is extracted from the expression of this feeling is valuable only to those who develop, control and license the mechanisms of extraction, measurement and representation, not for the people doing the expressing. So, while some critics contend that the production and promise of digital reputation signals the rise of a new form of ethical politics linked to the expression of collective affect, I will argue that the digital reputation economy functions through forms of market discipline and affective conditioning, which, much like the practices of branding, work to direct human meaning-making and self-identity in highly motivated and profitable ways.

Reputation

Reputation is an extremely fluid, contingent, and precarious personal attribute generated entirely by the perception, attention and approval of others. As critic John Rodden argues, building a reputation involves an on-going process of ‘image-making’ and perception management, and, as such, is never given once and for all (Rodden, 2006: 75). Acquiring a reputation begs the question, ‘reputation for what?’ – the answer for which is predicated on a whole host of extremely variable contextual and institutional factors. While historically reputation has been assumed to be a direct reflection of the inherent quality of a person’s work or achievement, these days the acquisition of reputation bears very little relation to any specific skill or accomplishment, but appears to be derived solely from the performance of effective attention-getting itself, by any means necessary (Rodden, 2006: 80), including expressing feelings and opinions online.

Of course, any notion of the ‘inherent quality’ of a person’s achievement is an historical and cultural construction, as, indeed, is reputation itself. A ‘reputation’ is conditioned and, arguably, constituted by cultural and economic institutions that have the power to authorize and direct attention, and transmute that attention back into value. In other words, reputation is a cultural product, and, as such is conditioned by its mode of

production. This mode of production is generally marked by the perennially exploitative relations between labour and capital as well as by other relations of power based on forms of identity such as race, sexuality and gender. In the end, what is produced in the form of a reputation inevitably exceeds the control of those individuals who generate it or the individual who must 'carry' it; typically, we are 'subjected to' a reputation. As women well know, having born the burden of what Linda Williams has called a 'surplus aestheticism' for centuries (1999: 41), visibility and the reputation that follows from it is, most often, a trap (Foucault, 1977).

Many have argued that this power of authorizing and validating attention, nowadays primarily enacted by the media industries, which can lead to the growth of a profitable reputation, feeds the lack in all individuals, promising, simultaneously, to recognize our uniqueness and assuage our anomie. As Leo Braudy has famously written, reputation and fame are, at least discursively, marked by contradiction - between uniqueness and acceptance, distinction and commonality, and, most of all, the desire for transparency between what one truly is 'inside' and what others see and celebrate (Braudy, 1997). Insofar as we collectively make and break reputations through the processes of engaging in, or withholding, identification with others, the rise of the attention or 'reputation' economy online can be read as a social symptom - evidence of a significant shift in modalities of the 'self' in the West.

The contemporary flexible self

Cultural historian Warren Sussman asserts that procedures of self-production and self-presentation have always reflected the dominant economic and cultural interests of the time. Invariably 'changes in culture do mean changes in modal types of character' (Sussman, 1984: 285). In other words, our forms of self-production are deeply conditioned by our economic and social context; dominant modalities of 'self' are both summoned into being and illustrated in our cultural discourses and institutions. The ways we come to internalize or embody these versions of 'selfhood' are always contested and in flux, constituting examples of biopower in action (Foucault, 1990: 153).

Critics such as Philip Cushman and Anthony Giddens contend that the burgeoning consumer landscape post World War II brought us an 'empty self': a self who must perpetually consume in order to be effectively organized and identified, but who can never effectively be satiated. For Giddens, as for Cushman, perpetual attention to the construction of 'self' through the production of a coherent narrative of self is the only remaining continuity, or through-line, in our lives (Giddens, 1991; Cushman, 1990). Zygmunt Baumann (2001: 22) concurs: '(i)t is me, my living body or that living body which is me, which seems to be the sole constant ingredient of the admittedly unstable, always until further notice composition of the world around me'.

Eva Illouz, in her book *Cold Intimacies*, describes the ways in which Freudianism, as it was disseminated in both scientific discourses and popular culture in the early part of the twentieth century, resulted in new kinds of 'identity symbols' and new emotional styles of selfhood predicated on the outward struggle for personal authenticity and truth

(2007). These styles of selfhood, in turn, jibed nicely with the intensification of consumer culture throughout the twentieth century. To follow these lines of inquiry we might ask: How are our personal narratives predicated on more general culturally constructed *ideas about* our interiority, and the values we attach to the expression of some version of interiority, being generated, conditioned and deployed within post-Fordist capitalism and neo-liberal modes of governmentality?

As David Harvey has famously argued, processes of ‘flexible accumulation’ mark the current post-Fordist mode of production. These processes include strategies of permanent innovation, mobility and change, subcontracting, and just-in-time, decentralized production (Harvey, 1990). They are also heavily dependent on communication networks and emphasize the production of knowledge and symbolic products, including packaging, branding and marketing, over concrete material production (see Goldman and Papson, 2006; Harvey, 1990). Under these conditions, the construction, deployment, and embodiment of perpetually changing images come to play a larger and larger role in capital accumulation (Harvey, 1990: 288). Neoliberalism, as the political ideology and mode of governmentality that accompanies these economic developments, posits that the role of the state is to advance and protect ‘strong property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005: 2). Here, individual responsibility is stressed, while communitarian or state-run social or cultural initiatives are discouraged. And, most significantly, market exchange is seen as ‘an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs’ (Harvey, 2005: 3).

Work under the hyper-networked conditions of flexible accumulation and the market-driven ethos of neoliberalism has grown increasingly precarious and unstable. French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello describe them as marked by flexibility, casualization, segmentation, intensity, and increased competition (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Autonomous Marxist critics, such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Paolo Virno argue that the increased production of immaterial commodities, such as design, knowledge and communication, necessitates new forms of labour, which involve creativity, innovation, and the manipulation of personal emotion and affect. This ‘immaterial labour’, defined by Maurizio Lazzarato as ‘the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 133), demands that the worker put his or her own life experience, communicative competency, and sense of self into the job. In other words, with immaterial labour, ‘the very stuff of human subjectivity’ is put to work for capital (Neilsen and Rossiter, 2005: unpaginated). But this subjectivity is not freely expressed or unfettered; it is most often subject to rigorous participative management programs, which remain authoritarian. As Lazzarato writes ‘one has to express oneself, one has to speak, communicate, cooperate... (t)he tone is that of the people who are in executive command’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 135).

The paradigmatic worker under post-Fordist capitalism may likewise be considered a virtuoso. Paolo Virno defines virtuosity as ‘an activity which finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) within itself’ (Virno, 2004: 52), and requires the presence of others. Insofar as we are language speakers, we are all virtuosos, and our ability to create, communicate and manipulate affect is increasingly central to job performance:

think of the call centre worker, the waitress, airline attendant or the Reality TV participant. Virno's figure of the virtuoso signals the move of labour toward the never-ending immaterial production of affect, feeling, or emotional 'experience', and the transformation of the space of work into something resembling a highly socialized (yet privatized) public sphere.

A version of selfhood that arises from these conditions has been termed the 'flexible personality' (Holmes, 2002): perpetually active, willing to innovate and change personal affiliations on a dime. In order to hedge against our 'stable instability' (Virno, 1996: 17), we look to exploit every opportunity and grow increasingly cynical as we recognize that work is a game and that its rules do not require respect, but only adaptation. And, under the conditions of a perpetually transforming, unstable and increasingly image-based mode of production, we come to recognize that the ability to attract attention – to garner a reputation – might provide us with a modicum of personal and financial security.

If these conditions of work suggest a perpetually malleable, cynical and changeable style of selfhood, then the cultural industries are the places where the appropriate, profit-producing templates of the self are developed and propagated. Elsewhere I have argued that reality television programs are the paradigmatic example of how individuals' affect, creativity, communicative capacity and the ability to forge social relationships become directly productive for capital (Hearn, 2006), at the same time as they provide the parameters within which a self can become culturally legible and potentially profitable for the culture at large. But, reality television is not the only place where this cynical outer-directed approach to self-production can be found; indeed as Emma Dowling, Elizabeth Wissinger, and Lynne Pettinger among others, have noted, most kinds of service work these days require it (Dowling, 2007; Wisinger 2007; Pettinger, 2004). In the post-Fordist era, then, we see a shift from a working self, to the self *as* work in the form of a self-brand with reputation as its currency.

Promotional culture and self-branding

As mentioned above, marketing and branding have become central activities of contemporary capitalism. No longer concerned with simply fixing a logo to a product, branding practices increasingly attempt to establish virtual contexts for consumption; experiences, spaces, relationships are all branded. In addition, branding activities are entirely dependent on the processes of meaning making and sociality of consumers as they not only buy but also live through the brand. So, branding practices produce sets of images and immaterial symbolic values in and through which individuals negotiate the world at the same time as they work to contain and direct the expressive, meaning-making capacities of social actors in definite self-advantaging ways, shaping markets and controlling competition. Here, consumers' behavior, relationships, bodies, and selves become 'both the object and the medium of brand activity' (Moor, 2003: 42). Contemporary branding efforts exemplify Michel Foucault's famous claim that:

[T]he body is...directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to

emit signs. This investment of the body is bound up...with its economic use. (Foucault, 1977: 25 emphasis added)

Andrew Wernick outlines a specific example of the body forced to be economically useful and to emit signs of its own utility in his book *Promotional Culture*. He argues that the intensification and generalization of the processes of promotion and marketing produces a 'promotional culture', and era of 'spin', where what matters most is not 'meaning' per se, or 'truth' or 'reason', but 'winning' attention, emotional allegiance, or market share. Goods, services, corporations, and, most centrally, people are all implicated in a promotional culture. Wernick describes it this way: 'a subject that promotes itself, constructs itself for others in line with the competitive imaging needs of the market. Just like any other artificially imaged commodity, then, the resultant construct is a persona produced for public consumption' (Wernick, 1991:192).

This process of self-production might also be described as 'self-branding'. Elsewhere I have defined the 'branded self' as an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its working environment (Hearn, 2008). The self as commodity for sale on the labour market must also generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary. Self-branding may be considered a form of affective, immaterial labour that is purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation and potentially, profit.

The view that self-promotion is a form of profit-producing work is now very common. Indeed, we most likely engage in a form of it ourselves as we craft our profiles on social network sites, such as Facebook, or attempt to compose compelling 140 character messages on Twitter. Self-branding is a function of an image economy, where attention is monetized and notoriety, or fame, is capital. And these days, as Barbra Ehrenreich reminds us in her recent book *Bright-Sided*, a smiley face and a positive attitude are the hallmarks of a successfully 'branded person'; to borrow from Mauricio Lazzarato, smiley positivity is 'the tone of the people who are in executive command' (Lazzarato, 1996: 134). It is against this backdrop, then, that we might begin to explore the rise of the online reputation economy.

Measuring brand value

Like other brands, the success of the self-brand is evidenced by reputation, which must first be measured and represented. To better understand this process we need only look to the ways in which other branded goods and corporations are routinely subject to abstract systems of measurement through which their value is constituted.

Agencies such as Interbrand, for example, are dedicated to measuring a brand's equity by the extent to which consumers recognize, use, and live through the brand. This process depends entirely on measuring what are patently immeasurable values: the 'share of mind' in each consumer, consumer loyalty, emotional associations, and sentimental attachment, or in other words, reputation. Brand equity measurement companies attempt to capture numerically, and by various tortured algorithms, the ineffable and intangible relationships and meanings humans are producing and

reproducing out in the world. Indeed, brand valuation systems arose in the 1980s as a way for corporations to avoid expensive ‘write-downs’ during mergers or acquisitions; they could simply point to the value of the brand acquired as an excuse for paying more than the tangible assets were worth. In this way, corporations came to add brands ‘as a type of intangible asset on their balance sheets’ (Lury and Moor, 2010: 33). Brand equity measurement systems, then, were developed in order to manage a perception problem experienced by corporations and, in this way, may be read as an early form of promotional reputation management.

Of course, the process of commensuration involved in brand valuation systems, which transforms qualitative distinctions into quantitative ones, actively works to depersonalize and de-particularize the very activities being measured. Quite simply, these measurement strategies work to render liquid and generic individual meanings and sentimental investments in the brand in order to make them exchangeable on the market; these systems mark the point at which human feelings are commodified. It is in this sense that Adam Arvidsson claims brands constitute the most general form of value under post-Fordist, informational capital (Arvidsson, 2006: 130; Lury and Moor, 2010: 31). But, by focusing on which types of relationships and which kinds of meanings are most advantageous to a brand’s ability to inspire consumer loyalty and thereby produce profit, these measurement systems arguably produce brand value rather than measure it. The epistemology of branding, then, involves determining what kinds of human experiences and behaviours ‘count’ as most valuable to capital accumulation now and in the future. In this way, brand value measurement systems are biopolitical and disciplinary. Brand equity measurement systems have much in common with systems of reputation measurement in the digital world. But, as we explore the rise of the reputation economy, the question remains: who or what constitutes a contemporary ‘reputation’ and who participates in its construction?

A brief pre-history of ranking and rating

Certainly, the most obvious precursor to the forms of reputation measurement systems arising now in the digital realm, at least in the sphere of cultural production, are best seller lists and popular music charts. While these lists and charts appear to simply count a song’s or book’s popularity measured in units sold, the mechanics, methodologies and interests behind their constitution generally remain clouded in mystery (Miller, 2000). Suffice it to say that, just as with the brand measurement systems, these lists serve the promotional interests of the book or music industries, work to discipline consumption, and function as forms of myth or self-fulfilling prophecy. The best-seller lists, for example, measure only the pace or intensity of sales, rather than the cumulative rate of sales over time and, therefore end up simply reflecting books that have been heavily promoted for a short period of time by publishers (Miller, 2000). The lists also have few, if any, protections from those business interests who would game the system by buying thousands of copies of books or albums, or, where rules tied to a professional association do exist, they are sufficiently opaque as to be easily thwarted. Nonetheless, these lists continue to serve as representations of popularity, as they appear to distill public sentiment into easily understood numbers and ratings, glossed as ‘science’, and work to build profitable reputation.

Indeed, lists and rankings of everything from bestselling novels, to universities, to Madonna's boyfriends, could reasonably be classified as a contemporary cultural 'craze' in the West. The idiom of the list, Ernest Hakanen argues, allows us to locate ourselves within the social field. Their numeric shorthand not only helps us sort through the overwhelming world of commodities and services, speaking reassuringly in the language of science and statistics, but also helps us to position our tastes, beliefs, and level of success relative to other consumers; following Bourdieu, we could claim they work to generate cultural capital and new taste formations.¹ The pursuit of cultural capital via a mastery of lists can easily be seen as a kind of affective and performative pre-history to the current pursuit of visibility, attention and personal reputation online. When we consume the list, rating or ranking, we simultaneously individuate and fit ourselves into the logic of the market; we find our 'selves' in the list (Hakanen, 2002).

But surely there is a meaningful difference between these industry-generated lists and the kinds of real-time interactive feedback mechanisms available to everyone online? Does the constitution of reputation change when mediated by digital technologies and social networks?

The rise of digital reputation via web 2.0

Many who celebrate the rise of social media see it as facilitating a wholesale change in social relations, and, indeed, in the nature of capitalism (for example Benkler, 2006 and Bauwens, 2005), confirming the centrality of socialized production, social capital, and immaterial labour. Add to this the rise of a culture of public intimacy, where the public display and mediation of personal emotion and affect is clearly linked to monetary value (in reality television, for example) and we see the emergence of something Adam Arvidsson and Nicolai Peitersen have termed 'the General Sentiment' (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009). Just as Marx argued that the General Intellect, the cumulative knowledge of all individual workers, would become a direct component of capitalist production, Arvidsson and Peitersen contend that alongside this, 'some form of public affect, like reputation' is emerging as a new 'standard of value'. Value comes increasingly to depend on 'the ability of an object to act as a catalyst for flows of public affect' (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 8-9).

While prior to the digital age it was impossible to fully know the extent of our social relationships and connections or the impact of the social web we had woven, nowadays, social media like Twitter or Facebook provide a new 'protocol' for social relations; they allow individuals' personal connections to become more durable, representable, ever-expandable, and, most importantly, they render public their affective qualities (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 17). Not only can we see the numbers of relationships a person has, but we can assess their quality and conduct as well; '(t)his means that what used to be private or "intimate" information is now becoming a public parameter that can, and is, deployed in evaluating the overall social worth of a person or organization' (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 18). With the emergence of publicly available information about a person's affective bonds, we get a sense of their total social impact,

1 My thanks to Liam Young for this insight.

an amalgam of their digital activity, which can then be measured, rationalized, and represented as their ‘digital reputation’.

Canadian marketing consultant, Tara Hunt, calls this total social impact ‘Whuffie’ – a term drawn from a currency imagined by sci-fi writer Cory Doctorow in his book *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*. Doctorow imagines a post-capitalist world of abundance, where individuals collect Whuffie by making positive affective investments in their communities. Hunt uses the term interchangeably with ‘social capital’ and declares that it is displacing money and becoming an indispensable new form of online currency. In this age of reputational transparency, companies must expand their social networks and cultivate meaningful quality relationships with the people in those networks. They can do this, according to Hunt, by going above and beyond their profit-driven mission and finding a ‘high end’, authentic, commitment to community (Hunt, 2009). Borrowing from Arvidsson and Peitersen, we might argue that corporations generate Whuffie, by ‘offering an ethical surplus to the polis’ (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 20), enriching the General Sentiment by making public affective investments in their communities.

Of course, corporate social responsibility offices around the globe have long recognized the value of making calculated investments of public affect in social causes and the link between these investments and concrete financial returns. The perpetual interactivity and transparency of social network sites seem to raise the stakes in these ventures however because, through them, interested parties can easily police corporate commitments. Does individual participation in online rankings and feedback systems simply reflect public sentiment, which can then collectively press toward generating ethical and socially responsible behaviour on the part of corporations and businesses? Is the dream of a true transparency between personal or corporate internal motivation and public self-presentation, named by Braudy, finally becoming possible?

Online feeling measurement and management systems

In order to begin to answer these questions, we must first examine who directs the flows of affective investment into concrete forms of social capital, or digital reputation, and what mechanisms are being deployed to solicit, aggregate, and represent these investments. Who determines what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘valuable’ reputation and whose contributions and interests are, both, appropriated and erased in the process?

As of 2008, over 32% of Internet issuers had provided a rating, and over 30% had posted an extended online comment about a product, service or person (Pang and Lee, 2008: 1). Clearly the drive to speak ‘from the centre of the self’ in the form of personal opinion is a strong one. This speech does not remain personally expressive for long, however; it only becomes valuable once it has been aggregated, represented and put to work. A plethora of different sites and services exist to fulfill these tasks.

To begin, feedback mechanisms shape individual sentiment even before it is expressed through the ‘proper engineering of the information systems that mediate online feedback communities’ (Dellarocas, 2003: 1410). These automated ratings mechanisms,

the first and most famous being ebay's rating system for buyers and sellers, are what Chrysanthos Dellarocas has called 'the digitization of word of mouth' and have proliferated throughout the world of ecommerce, working as 'a viable mechanism for fostering cooperation among strangers' (Dellarocas, 2003: 1407). The assumed transparency enabled by these systems, Dellarocas argues, creates incentive for good behaviour on the part of businesses and a modicum of stability in what would otherwise be a very risky trading environment. Automated feedback mediators delimit who can participate, what kinds of information they can contribute, and in what format it is represented to others. They can also control for a number of feedback parameters that would be impossible to control in real world settings. Like the numeric best-seller list, or the brand equity algorithms, in these processes detail, nuance and context are reduced to simple summary statistics, transforming what 'used to be a sociological or ethical problem, how to get a community to function, into an engineering problem' (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 25).

Once these feedback and ratings mechanisms are in place, sites such as ivillage, Buzzillions, Tripadvisor, or Urbanspoon deploy them to solicit consumer feedback for products and services. Generic consumer sites like epinion.com or yelp.com have also emerged exhorting consumers to express their feelings on a wide variety of services, goods and topics. But, often unbeknownst to the participant opinion-expressing consumers, these companies also partner with corporations and serve as 'knowledge brokers' or 'innomediaries' (Sawhney, Prandelli and Verona, 2003: 77). So, as these sites operate under the guise of serving consumers' interests by providing a place for the free expression of consumer opinion and feeling, their corporate clients are able to access these suggestions, using them to grow brand equity and develop products. According to Scott Armstrong of the marketing firm BrainRider, this practice is a part of the increasingly sophisticated world of business marketing online, one that sees social networking as a tactic to attract consumers and consumer feedback as an easy route to free knowledge resources. These resources can be mined for value and social connections with consumers can be actively cultivated in order to 'sell the invisible'.² The invisible, according to marketing guru Harry Beckwith, is, first and foremost, constituted by the client's feelings about the quality of their relationship with a business – in other words its reputation; manufacturing this intangible product is the marketer's most important job (Beckwith, 1997: 51).

Other online services that actively track, broker, aggregate consumer feedback and transform this feedback into value for corporate clients have also emerged in recent years. Companies such as Sysomos, Radian6 or Bazaarvoice are 'listening platforms', trolling the web in order to offer 'real time intelligence' about the reputation of their clients' product, brand or service. They also help clients identify key influencers and viral marketers and effectively 'participate' (read intervene) in consumer conversations, promising to help 'your customers build your business'.³

The intelligence collected by these companies is measured through the use of several 'out of the box' metrics, such as webcrawlers, key word searches, and brand mentions.

2 Personal interview with Scott Armstrong, CEO www.brainrider.com, September 25, 2010.

3 This phrase is taken from the home page of Bazaarvoice.com.

As Radian6's Vice President of Social Strategy, Amber Naslund, describes, these metrics provide both quantitative measures in the form of 'share of voice' or volume of mentions, such as the total number of twitters about a brand or service, and qualitative metrics or 'share of the conversation', which attempt to determine whether 'they are the right conversations with the right people'.⁴ The intelligence, once collected, is subjected to various forms of analysis, the most common being sentiment analysis.

Facebook, Twitter, and other 'sentiment-aware applications' (Pang and Lee, 2008: 1) have challenged opinion miners to move beyond the mere number of mentions as expressions of what people think to the analysis of the content of those mentions. Sentiment analysis is based in linguistic analysis and begins by parsing 'mentions' into polarities, or positive and negative values. It then subjects the mentions to several other filters, such as the degree of emotional intensity indicated by the use of adjectives and lexical cohesion, and subjectivity, which measures the partiality or impartiality of the source of the utterance by examining the semantic construction of the mention, other topics raised in it, and the extremity of the position expressed in relation to other mentions (Pang and Lee, 2008: 58-86). Sentiment analysis is just one mode of analysis offered by companies like Radian6, however. According to Naslund, many businesses perceive pervasive negative conversations about their brand that shift and move across the Internet as the greatest threat to business. Locating the sites where the important conversations are happening and intervening successfully in them, then, is also crucial to useful intelligence analysis.

As Naslund claims, 'reputation management is one of the chief focus areas for most of the social media world, and will be for many years to come'. So, once the intelligence is gathered and analyzed, services like Radian6 offer guidance to clients about how best to intervene in, and manage, the conversations and opinions being expressed online. A client of Radian6, for example, is encouraged to enter broader fields of discussion and feedback online, participating in conversations that 'matter to your customers and communities' in order to shape and take charge of the conversations being had 'in and around your brand'. The goal is to foster a community of loyal consumers that will endure 'in between the points of sale'.⁵ Tactics may involve participating in chat room conversations, and identifying influencers, viral marketers, or brand fans. In this age of social media, then, the goal of online marketing involves far more than finding and targeting a specific consumer, but in 'fostering a community' of influencers and brand advocates from amongst already existing consumers and deploying them to do the work of brand enhancement for free.

Other online services are more involved in directly constructing and/or managing online reputation. Sites, such as reputationdefender.com, offer a monthly assessment of an individual or corporate online reputation and provide a service that will control and manipulate information that might appear about a client in order to create only a 'positive' reputational profile. Sites such as TrustPlus provide a reputation score for any person, product or service provider on the web for a fee. As Trent Cruz has noted,

4 Personal interview with Amber Naslund, Vice President for Social Strategy, Radian6, November 9, 2010.

5 Interview with Amber Naslund. VP Social Strategy, Radian6, November 9, 2010

Canadian internet start-up Empire Avenue is a kind of reputational stock exchange, where companies and individuals can track their influence and invest in the potential influence of others. For example, I invest in you based on the degree to which you actively participate in online social media sites; your social capital could pay me dividends. Empire Avenue offers a mechanism whereby an individual can earn online currency for making the right investments in other people's influence or by maximizing their own share price. This is accomplished by extending their social network, posting regularly on Twitter and offering comments, ratings, and feedback wherever possible – in other words, by actively developing a 'self-brand'. But, as Cruz wryly notes, one's own share price is also heavily conditioned by the degree to which one invests in others: 'many users still seem to adhere to an Internet ethos of reciprocity rather than cold market logic. "If you buy me I'll buy you" continues to be a common investment strategy' (Cruz, 2010). The online currency offered on Empire Avenue, called 'eaves', is not yet translatable into real dollars, although plans are in the works to make this happen. The eventual goal for the site's developers, however, is to sell the data about personal influence accumulated on the site to advertisers so that they might begin to determine and generate customizable advertising rates.

Numerous other forms of reputational meta-measurement services have arisen to provide corporations and advertisers with information about their 'Whuffie'. Nielsen's buzzmetrics promises to troll 'nearly 100 million blogs, social networks, groups, boards and other CGM platforms'. Tweetbeep will email you as often as every 15 minutes every time someone tweets your search terms. Klout.com, owned by twitter, promises to identify top 'influencers' of different topics trending online and offers to provide you with your own 'klout score' based on your aggregated internet activity. Summize will let you know, at any given time, what topics or issues are trending on Twitter or other social media sites. Facebook's Lexicon counts occurrences of phrases on people's walls over time. Quantcast tracks the demographics of searchers for a specific key word, so that data about an online audience is available whenever you need it. And, of course, Google will soon provide a ranking of rankings: a master list of the most influential people with the best reputations on social network sites (Green, 2008).

Structuring feeling and digital reputation

As we have seen, affective investment online has given rise to a plethora of new services that, like brand equity measurement systems, promise to translate individuals' lived ideas and feelings into quantifiable value for the market. This promise is predicated on lofty ideas about the power of authentic free expression from the 'center of the self' and the possibilities of a profitable self brand. But, as the variety of examples outlined above illustrate, the view of a market comprised of open and genuine affective investments that will eventually produce ethical behaviour breaks down almost immediately. Indeed, the rhetoric of an online reputation economy deploys several mystifying assumptions. First, it suggests that individual affect arrives on the scene in some kind of pure state, untouched by already existing class, gender, race and other social relations and is only ever motivated by an honest desire to do good. Second, it insists that the acquisition of a reputation by rating and feeding back is a simple and transparent process reflecting the 'inherent value' of honest expression. And finally, it

suggests that a digital reputation will eventually ‘pay off’ for its holder as a value in and for itself. But, can these various representations of reputation be read as ‘true’ measures of individual affect as some critics contend?

Arguments for the emergence of an ethical ‘public sentiment’ as a result of social media seem to suggest that opinion and word of mouth flow in an unfettered and transparent way from isolated individuals at their keyboards through the forms of aggregation and representation described above. But, if this is so, why does research repeatedly show that, when ranking and rating everything from youtube videos to hotels, individuals routinely give positive reviews? A study of ebay ratings provided by buyers from 2002 notes that over 99% of ratings of sellers were positive and only 0.6% were negative. Indeed, as of 2009, the average rating for anything online was 4.3 out of 5 (Fowler and De Avila, 2009). Given that reputation is an extremely contingent and changeable attribute, conditioned by its institutional and cultural setting and broad-based cultural assumptions about social value, the overwhelming positive reputation of everything digital might be read in any number of ways: as a function of the technological imperative – representing the thrill derived from the sheer novelty of the act of feeding back, or, as the result of the legislated, smiley-faced, outer-directed cultural ethos of the contemporary work world, or, perhaps, as with Empire Avenue, the result of a market-driven ethos of quid-pro-quo; if I rate you high and you might do the same for me. But, given the processes and services reviewed above, it is likely the combined result of reputation measurement and management systems working to bolster the interests of their corporate employers.

Arguably, reputation as the aggregation of attention has always mattered, even while the mechanisms for its generation have changed and intensified in recent years. It is the question of how it matters, of what the mechanisms are through which reputation is measured and rendered productive for capital that are the real issues here. As we have seen, the services outlined above are places where human sociality is subjected to measurement for the market, and, as such, they are ground zero for what David Harvie and Massimo de Angelis have termed ‘the war over measure’; ‘the daily struggle over the whats, hows, how muches, whys and whos of social production’. This struggle occurs wherever we see capital attempting to extract value from the self-valorizing practices of individuals (de Angelis and Harvie, 2006: 11).

Following from this, we could argue that the affective expressions and investments of individuals online constitute a kind of ‘free labour’. As Tiziana Terranova describes, free labour online involves an ‘immanent process of channeling collective labour into monetary flows and its structuration with capitalist business practices’ (Terranova, 2000: 38) and can include activities as diverse as designing software, posting youtube videos, creating Facebook profiles and of course, ranking and feeding back. It is voluntary activity whose affective qualities are colonized for value by capitalist interests. And, just as women’s work in the home contributes directly to capitalist accumulation but is also ‘not counted’ in formal economic analysis, the new online economy is entirely under-girded by free labour, even as dominant discourses work to cloak its existence under the rubric of ‘authentic expression’ and ‘personal empowerment’. Arguably, the promise attached to the achievement of a valuable personal digital reputation distracts individuals from the fact that businesses have

effectively outsourced the work of product innovation, promotion and marketing onto them while simultaneously disciplining self-presentation and affective relations in ways congruent with capital's long-term interests. As Terranova (2000: 43) argues, 'affective production on the Net... does not exist as a free-floating post-industrial utopia but in full, mutually constituting interaction with late capitalism'.

Under the ideology of neo-liberal entrepreneurial individualism, we are repeatedly told our opinions matter, but to whom and to what end? The ranking activities constantly being solicited from us contribute to value generation, although not for the person doing the ranking and feeding back in any direct way. For example, youtube stars are perpetually peppering their presentations with exhortations to viewers to rate, feedback or subscribe because more feedback and subscriptions equal more remuneration from youtube; here rating and providing feedback add value to a product entirely out of the rater's control. Even when we track our own Whuffie or constitute ourselves as super-Facebookers, as illustrated in *Empire Avenue*, the reputation we generate is simply a reputation for building the reputation of others, resulting in a seemingly endless circuit of exchange without foundation.

The claim that the interactive feedback represented in measured forms of 'reputation' will inevitably produce socially ethical behaviour seems far-fetched in a world where market logics and values remain dominant and cynical forms of self-production prevail. Individuals generally craft reputation via the self-brand because they hope this work will eventually find its realization in the general equivalent – money; the celebrity industry works ideologically to valorize this hope. And, as the cursory look through the role of feeling-intermediaries above has shown, even where the motivation is the social good, the result remains monetary accumulation. As reputation seekers in the reputational economy, we may be nodes in the new distributed means of production as producer, product and consumer, but we do not even begin to control the means of our own distribution.

Insofar as measurement systems constitute that which they measure, when we rank, rate or feedback, we are not only finding ourselves in the list, we are giving ourselves up to it. And here, finally, we might find a link between these speculative comments about the 'free labour' of digital reputation building and the working conditions that prevail in the material world. The embrace of ranking, ratings and lists and the dream of a reputation economy serve an ideological and promotional function, re-inscribing ideas about the objectivity and freedom of markets and capitalism more generally; they reduce us to what Neil Postman calls a 'calculable' person, 'one who knows his or her value as calculated by an external, refereed source' (Postman cited in Hakanen, 2002: 247). If that source is the General Sentiment, as Arvidson and Pietersen would have us believe, it is a highly conditioned, over-determined 'sentiment' at that – one that bears the scars of the legislated affective displays that are required from all of us smiley virtuosos these days. Could it be that the pursuit of digital reputation serves a compensatory function for all of those ways in which we are disempowered as workers in the real world?

In reaction to material social conditions, we see the emergence of a structure of feeling (in Williams' sense) characterized by an anxious need to talk back, weigh in and be

seen. These expressions are then distilled, aggregated, and monetized by the online measurement systems described above. Here, self-expression may not comprise 'labour', strictly speaking, but it does constitute a free source of large profits. And, as feeling-intermediaries structure feelings into profits for themselves and their clients, a valuable personal digital reputation will likely never materialize for most people; instead, there will be only an escalating, unrelenting barrage of promotional edicts and appeals. After all is said and done, then, it could well be that the online reputation economy is just a chimera, whose pursuit constitutes yet another instance of what Paolo Virno has called the 'stubborn personalization of subjugation' (Virno 1996, 195).

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