

## **“There’s Got to be a Review Democracy”: Communicative Capitalism, Neoliberal Citizenship and the Politics of Participation on the Consumer Evaluation Website Yelp.com**

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Celebrated for its capacity to decentralize the processes of knowledge and reputation management, Yelp.com is the subject of this case study, which analyzes the politics of participation on the user-driven consumer evaluation website. A comparative discourse analysis of Yelp’s promotional campaign and virtual geography demonstrates how the website structures the practice of consumer reviewing within a neoliberal political rationality that interpellates users as consumer-citizens. Theorized within the framework of communicative capitalism, this research argues that Yelp reproduces and stabilizes traditional power relations. Situating Yelp within the political economy of consumer evaluation sites, consumer reviewing is analyzed as a form of post-politics that reconfigures democratic participation in economic terms and effectively contributes to the depoliticization of contemporary citizenship.

*There’s got to be a review democracy! / And that’s Yelp / By the People, For the People /  
Review your hat maker, beard groomer, church’s steeple . . . / Our forefathers would  
approve this new way to help / “Real People, Real Reviews,” Head directly to Yelp!*

(Yelp video advertisement, 2009)

The above lyrics appeared in a 2009 user-generated video advertisement cross-promoting the documentary *Beer Wars* (Baron, 2009) and Yelp!, a socially networked consumer evaluation website.<sup>1</sup> The parody stars comedian Remy Munasifi, dressed as Abe Lincoln and rapping to the tune of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. It opens with a nod to the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that Yelp “does hereby forthwith emancipate the people of this great nation from the shackles of poor beer choices.” Drawing on narratives of freedom and equality, the ad promotes Yelp as having “liberated” consumers and small businesses from the pay-to-play corporate economy that has long controlled the way people have thought about, talked about, and consumed commodity goods and services. In accordance with the company’s larger promotional strategies, Yelp suggests that the task of rating and reviewing undermines the tyranny of traditional reputation managers—i.e., big business, advertisers, and marketers—by democratizing the review process. From this viewpoint, consumer review sites like Yelp ostensibly empower consumers to

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<sup>1</sup> The entire ad can be retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaOmTvXkz4E>

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collectively transform aspects of local commerce (as well as the broader consumer culture). As this case study demonstrates, however, Yelp effectively reconfigures democratic participation within a market-based, economized notion of citizenship. Constitutive of what Jodi Dean identifies as “the post-political formation of communicative capitalism” (2005, p. 53), consumer revaluation sites like Yelp (re)produce a *depoliticized* subjectivity specific to neoliberal modes of government.

To date, much of the literature on consumer evaluation websites is comprised of administrative studies that investigate purchasing influence and marketing strategies (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Liu, 2006). While useful for documenting empirical data about consumer practices, marketing research is generally less concerned with the larger political economic implications of user-generated content production. This research attempts to fill that void by situating Yelp within the political economy of consumer evaluation sites to understand how participation on Yelp is discursively constructed, and to what ends. The following case study contrasts Yelp’s promotional discourse and site architecture to empirically demonstrate how consumer evaluation websites reproduce the ideological effects of communicative capitalism. An analysis of Yelp’s promotional discourse reveals how the site constructs a “mystical connection between technology and democracy” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 2): Via themes of *consumer empowerment*, *community*, and *transparency*, consumer reviewing is fetishized as a communicative practice designed to usurp the monopoly power of reputation managers and big business. The second part of this study offers a structural analysis of the site’s “architectures of participation” (O’Reilly, 2005) to demonstrate how participation in Yelp’s “review democracy” is configured within a neoliberal political rationality. Understood within the framework of communicative capitalism, a comparative analysis of Yelp’s marketing rhetoric and structure offer empirical support for the ways in which consumer reviewing contributes to neoliberalism’s depoliticizing effects. Within the political economy of “Yelp capitalism,”<sup>2</sup> therefore, this case study argues that commercial consumer evaluation sites do not so much undermine contemporary political economic relations, as they reproduce these relations.

### **About Yelp**

Yelp launched in 2004 as the brainchild of Jeremy Stoppelman and Russel Simmons, two former PayPal employees working for an Internet incubator owned by PayPal co-founder Max Levchin (Stoppelman, 2009a). As one of the most popular consumer evaluation sites, Yelp merges traditional yellow-pages content with social networking features into a consumer resource designed to “connect people with great local businesses” (Yelp Official Blog, 2010). Yelp provides a space for community members to rate and review local businesses, services, and nonprofit organizations, from restaurants and gas stations to dentists and charities. Yelp is premised on the belief that the best and most trusted recommendations for things to do, places to go, and what services to employ come from family, friends, or colleagues—not advertisers, marketers, or other sources with ulterior motives. Governed by the “first-hand” experiences of its members, Yelp is thus a virtual space ostensibly free from the compromised opinions of professional critics and advertisers.

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this insightful contribution.

Boasting the trademark "Real People, Real Reviews," Yelp logged 33 million consumer reviews and 84 million unique monthly visitors at the time of writing (About Yelp, 2012), ranking as the 43rd most-trafficked website in the United States (Alexa, 2012). Since 2008, the site has expanded to 96 international markets, with offices in the UK, Ireland, France, Austria, Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands, positioning the company as a global leader in the local listings market. Advertising sales from local businesses make up a majority of the company's revenue. This has been mired with controversy, as the site negotiates profits from the very businesses its users critique (About Yelp, 2012; Chafkin, 2012). Valued at US\$898 million in 2011, Yelp launched a successful initial public offering (IPO) in March 2012, and it continues to grow (Rusli, 2012). While it is not the first online consumer evaluation site, its popularity, rapid growth, controversial "community" emphasis, and local focus exemplify the techno-utopian, democratizing promises associated with globally networked communication technologies and platforms.

### **Consumer Evaluation Sites and the Post-Politics of Communicative Capitalism**

The interactive and participatory affordances of Web 2.0 platforms have been widely celebrated across popular and scholarly discourses for their democratizing effects (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2003). Animated by the widely held belief that anyone can contribute content or access the Internet, Dean argues that technological innovation "becomes a screen upon which all sorts of fantasies of political action are projected" (2009, p. 36). Driven primarily by what Dean refers to as "the fantasies of abundance" (e.g., of access, information) and "participation," globally networked platforms promise new possibilities for democratic governance—for creating a digital public sphere that makes free speech, (virtual) assembly, transparency, accountability, and opportunities for deliberation more accessible. Importantly, however, these affordances are delimited by the structural inequalities of digital networks, their commercial contexts, and their site architectures. As Dean and other critical theorists point out, the social Web's proprietary structures do not so much empower users as democratic citizens, as they provide *illusions* of empowerment (e.g., Andrejevic, 2007; van Dijk, 2009). From this latter standpoint, social media users are active agents only insofar as their free labor is directed toward the end of capital accumulation for the site's owners and third-party interests.

Challenging the myth of a digital democracy, Dean (2009) identifies the convergence of capitalism and democracy in digitally networked technologies as "communicative capitalism." Insofar as *publicity* continues to be regarded as foundational to a functioning democracy, the production and consumption of information in the digital sphere thus becomes a primary civic duty for rationally informed citizens. Central to her critique of digital media production and consumption, however, is the value placed on message production. As Dean argues, digital platforms have transformed "messages" into "contributions," in which the goal is to effectively reproduce the latter's constant circulation. Messages-as-contributions across digital platforms are valued not for their meaning, but for their production and circulation; under communicative capitalism, the generation of content across social media sites like Yelp is not valued for being received, understood, or deliberated (i.e., the use value of a message), but for having been produced at all (i.e., the exchange value). A message's use value is subordinated to its exchange value, as what matters for the social Web to monetize content is merely the contribution of content, of messages.

In the process of clicking, linking, and circulating content, therefore, citizens are interpellated as media consumers; democratic values, generally understood as inalienable rights and processes, are conflated with the tasks of media production and consumption in the post-Internet era. Accordingly, under communicative capitalism, technology functions as a stand-in for direct politics that no longer occur through the active work of organized interests (e.g., political parties, unions), but through the endless circulation of unanswered digital contributions. Summarily, "The paradox of the technological fetish is that the technology acting in our stead actually enables us to remain politically passive. We don't have to assume political responsibility because, again, the technology is doing it for us" (Dean, 2009, p. 38). By displacing everyday struggles through their reiteration, rather than confronting them in political spaces, communication is "reformatted in terms of market and spectacle" (Dean, 2005, p. 55). Under communicative capitalism, social media condense complex broad social issues into a single space or platform, displacing political energies away from organized struggles to privilege a constant stream of individualized contributions that require no response from the very institutions they intend to resist. What emerges is a "deadlocked democracy . . . that talks without responding" (Dean, 2009, p. 22). For Dean, the endless circulation of content is ultimately an ineffective form of sociopolitical change. Importantly, the democratic values to be realized through new media communications do not necessarily translate to more equitable distributions of wealth, power, influence, or freedom. "Instead, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's peoples" (Dean, 2005, p. 3).

Functioning in the service of communicative capitalism, consumer evaluation websites are exemplary of how "the standards of a finance- and consumption-driven entertainment culture" have set the terms of contemporary democratic governance (Dean, 2009, p. 24). Consumer evaluation sites thus converge capitalism and democracy by constructing a space for "consumer-citizens" to *feel* as if they are participating in the democratic process in the production of ratings and reviews. In accordance with the ideological effects of neoliberal capitalism, consumer evaluation websites effectively *depoliticize* contemporary citizenship by configuring political subjectivity in economic terms.

### **Consumer Reviewing and Neoliberal Citizenship**

In much the same way that communicative capitalism marks technology as a stand-in for political responsibility, neoliberal capitalism "presents consumption as a stand-in for citizenship" (Jubas, 2007, p. 237). As a political economic project aimed at "re-regulating society" through market rationalization, neoliberalism regards the realm of consumption as a primary site for political activity. Positing that contemporary governance is best achieved through privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice, individuals are instructed to "reinvent themselves continually through the process of consumption" (*ibid.*, p. 232). Accordingly, good citizenship requires the maximization of self *not* through society or collective action, but through individual choices made in the private spheres of lifestyle and consumption.

The practice of consumer reviewing, therefore, assists in rationalizing a system of self-empowered governance. If the neoliberal citizen's most important and pressing obligation to society is to privately empower the self, then consumer evaluation websites offer the means by which this can occur. As the moral autonomy of consumer-citizens "is measured by their capacity for 'self-care'" (Brown, 2006,

p. 694), Yelp functions as a valuable resource for effectively navigating the marketplace by offering recommendations for consuming and living—not just where to shop, but what to do, what to eat, and how to engage in these tasks most efficiently.

For critics on the left, the neoliberal citizen-subject is thus a distinct and *depoliticized* form of contemporary citizenship, one that emerged as political energies and actions configured around market relations (Brown, 2006). Undermined by the political rationality of neoliberalism is attention to, among other things, commitments to egalitarianism, universalism, political (rather than private) autonomy, sovereignty, justice, and a concern for the common or public good (Brown, 2006; Dean, 2009; Hamann, 2009). Even where consumer evaluation sites harness the collective power of users to transform some aspect of consumer culture, consumer citizenship fundamentally assumes that we cannot *evade* the market, but that we can *change* it by engaging; agitating; or demanding more equitable, fair, or socially just practices. As such, the neoliberal citizen-subject does not promote the reduction of consumption but rather, he or she reproduces the social, cultural, and political economic inequalities inherent to capitalist markets (Jubas, 2007; Kuehn, 2009; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009). In accordance with the goals of communicative capitalism, consumer evaluation sites function in the service of neoliberalism's anti-democratic political rationality.

### Method

This analysis aims to understand how Yelp structures participation to function in the service of communicative capitalism and neoliberal governance. The processes for this study's data collection and analysis were informed by van Dijk (1993) and Fairclough's (2003) methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA), and by Papacharissi's (2009) application of CDA to social networking sites. As a method for analysis, CDA assumes that an identifiable relationship exists between discourse and power, and it aims to uncover "what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events" reproduce or challenge dominance (van Dijk, 1993, p. 250). As such, in this study, both the data collection and the analysis treated promotional discourse, online architectural space, and Yelp's business model as texts and communicative events that could be "read" in terms of the power dynamics they structured or by which they were structured.

To understand how Yelp discursively framed (fetishized) participation, all documents serving promotional purposes were collected for analysis (e.g., press releases, advertisements, merchandise, electronic newsletters). News articles published between October 2004 (Yelp's launch date) and June 2010 were also gathered through a Lexis-Nexus search, as were all existing entries from both Yelp's official blog and its community blog. Promotional materials were read and coded for the reoccurring terms and phrases used to describe both user participation and the site's overall goals. Coded terms and phrases were kept in an Excel spreadsheet and subsequently grouped into categories until they reached saturation; categories were then collapsed into themes.

Yelp's architectural features were also analyzed to understand how the site structures user participation in the context of its promotional discourse. Informed by case studies on the virtual geographies of the social Web (e.g., Arvidsson, 2006; Karaganis, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009), an

architectural analysis assessed how Yelp constructed a social space “within a number of more or less precise coordinates” (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 245).<sup>3</sup> Site architecture is defined here as “composite result of structure, design and organization” (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 205); all medium characteristics determined by programming code were considered, including site features, options, tools, and organization.

As a registered Yelp member, I regularly accessed and examined the site’s architectural options and layout from May 2010 to February 2011; all observations and changes during this time were logged in an Excel spreadsheet, alongside an exhaustive list that described architectural features, affordances, and limitations offered by the site. In a second document, a spatial analysis mapped the organizational layout of Yelp’s homepage, subpages, and interactive features in terms of how they were ordered, labeled, and indexed. Finally, extensive researcher memos (Maxwell, 2004) were used to document how Yelp’s terms of service, review guidelines, and privacy statements discursively constructed site “norms” of participation; researcher memos also documented how the site’s aesthetic choices contributed the level of mood and atmosphere, which, in turn, informed Yelp’s culture of participation. What specific behaviors, activities, and communicative practices these documents, features, and aesthetics encouraged, prohibited, or sanctioned were then compared and contrasted with both the list of other architectural affordances and limitations and Yelp’s promotional discourse.

The Excel spreadsheet, spatial map, and researcher memos were all treated as data in the analytical process. Observations were coded for similar themes, noting recurring lexical, aesthetic, and organizational patterns that shaped the Yelp environment and, in turn, the range of communicative practices available. Special consideration was given to how (and which) available features within a particular (sub)page were organized or highlighted to promote or delimit specific actions, and also to the role aesthetic choices played in constructing Yelp as a sociocultural system (Papacharissi, 2009). Using Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) method of constant comparison, the findings from the architectural analysis were then compared and contrasted with the way that Yelp’s promotional discourse framed site goals and participation for its users—an iterative process theoretically informed by the literature on communicative capitalism and consumer-citizenship, which ultimately helped make sense of the disconnect between the rhetorical promises of empowered consumption and the culture(s) of participation that Yelp’s architectural features structurally enabled and constrained.

### **Yelp as Communicative Capitalism**

Yelp’s promotional discourse constructs a brand of consumer reviewing that promotes “better democracy” through the fantasies of abundance and participation—a process which occurs primarily via themes of consumer empowerment, community, and transparency. Participation on Yelp is fetishized as an active process that undermines traditional power relations by overturning the legacy of corporate dominance. As underscored by CEO Jeremy Stoppelman, Yelp “democratizes the reputation of a business. Rather than a single arbiter of taste, it’s hundreds of people saying whether they like this business or not”

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<sup>3</sup> Site structure assumes architecture does not *determine* use, but does engineer affordances and limitations that structure participation in specific ways.

(Sutel, 2007). Yelp promises that consumers ("Real People") can effect political economic change with unfettered discourse through and about consumption ("Real Reviews").

Consumer empowerment is framed by Stoppelman in terms of a power shift: "Media is [sic] shifting . . . The power has shifted from businesses with money to little guys who perform" (Fost, 2008); "We've ceded unprecedented power to consumers, but this simply means power once wielded by an elite few is now in the hands of all" (Stoppelman, 2009b). Similarly, he criticizes the "old guard" for refusing to adapt to changing economic and cultural times: "There's simply anger over the accountability that Yelp brings and also this feeling of powerlessness because so much power is now being put in the hands of the consumer" (Pattison, 2009).

The site actively distinguishes itself from hierarchical publicity models by celebrating its "completely member-driven" community. According to Stoppelman, "We put the community first, the consumer second and businesses third" (Hansell, 2008). This is despite the fact that "there will always be tension between Yelp and business owners because consumers are creating the content, which is inherently unpredictable" (Richards, 2009). Prioritizing Yelp's community of users, he elsewhere reiterates, "Business owners want to control their reputation, and we're just not going to let that happen" (Miller, 2009). Instead, the site's top priority is "to make sure the community is protected and can share without fear of being publicly spat on" (ibid.). Further emphasizing user-centrism, Yelp claims to rarely remove reviews; even when companies criticized by users are paid advertisers, the site prefers "to let the crowd have its say" (Fost, 2008). Across the site's promotional discourse, the rights of Yelp members are, at least rhetorically, prioritized over its commercial interests.

In addition to themes of empowerment and community, Yelp also promises transparency. Uncompromised by the paid opinions of professional marketers, Yelp boasts its reliability as a consumer-produced resource: "People turn to their friends and colleagues far more than to other sources of information because the source is unlikely to have an ulterior motive, they are not out to sell them something" (Yelp! Inc., 2005). Transparency, in turn, facilitates trust: "[T]he less you contribute, the less valuable you frankly are to the community. The more we know about you, the more we can trust you" (Kamenetz, 2008). Personal disclosure and frequency of reviews become two ways credibility is secured against corporate shells (fake reviews written by marketers).

Understood within the framework of communicative capitalism, Yelp's rhetoric of empowerment, community, and transparency reproduce the ideological primacy of *publicity* to democratic processes (Dean, 2005)—i.e., user-generated content creates the information *and* the transparency needed for the "*demos*" to make rational, informed decisions uncompromised by top-level interests. The abundance of information and participation promises change—better business practices, better customer service, better community relations, better choices—all with "consumer-citizens" in the driver seat. Such claims echo the legacy of false narratives of democratization to be realized in new technologies, while also equating democracy with consumption—or, given the participatory practice of consumer reviewing, *prosumption* (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). In this sense, producing reviews reconfigures democratic participation in market terms and interpellates the reviewer as a neoliberal citizen-subject.

The following section analyzes the site's business model and architectures of participation in relation to the site's promotional rhetoric to empirically demonstrate how Yelp produces neoliberal market citizenship in service of communicative capitalism.

### **Structuring Participation**

Unsurprisingly, Yelp's architectures of participation structure the possibilities for consumer empowerment, community, and transparency in accordance with the goals of communicative capitalism. This section illustrates how Yelp constructs a consumption-oriented culture that delimits the range of communicative possibilities for public, productive talk. The site's "Yelp for Business Owners" initiative is then reviewed for the ways in which it constructs consumer reviewing as a means for activating neoliberal consumer citizenship.

### **Modes of Communicating**

As a self-proclaimed user-centric community, Yelp limits the capacity for two-way communicative engagement. Despite its social networking capabilities, communicative features are restricted to the site's "Talk" function, a group forum where users can asynchronously post and respond to discussion threads. Architecturally, the Talk forum is visibly obscured by links to more popular site features, and thus it functions largely as a backchannel for the community's most active users. Importantly, Yelp Talk is not available in every community; users from rural or suburban locations, for example, are often re-directed to a proximate city or blank template.<sup>4</sup>

The "Compliment" function is another communicative option on the site. This function enables users to leave short personalized comments about another's activity. While designed to encourage dialogue between users, conversation is architecturally limited to a dyadic mode of communication; users can respond only to received compliments, and these compliments are not available for other members to engage (e.g., as in Facebook's "Wall" feature). Aesthetically, compliments also encourage a certain *type* of participation; for example, users must select compliments from a pre-determined list of categories (*Thank You, Good Writer, Just a Note, Write More, Great Photo, You're Funny, Cute Pic, Hot Stuff, Like Your Profile, You're Cool, or Great Lists*). Each option is represented by its own virtual badge and "witty" pre-scripted text; (e.g., the default for *Hot Stuff* states: "Like a strip of bacon frying over an open fire, you're seriously sizzling"). While pre-scripted text can be replaced with original comments, the default settings standardize positive reinforcement; users are cued to assume tasteful self-presentation and dissuaded from asking questions or critically engaging reviews (e.g., challenging accuracy, truthfulness, etc.). Although there is something to be said for civility, Yelp aestheticizes the "messiness" of democratic communication by architecturally constraining productive talk.

Another complimenting feature allows users to *anonymously* rate each review as "Useful," "Funny," or "Cool" ("UFCs"). Each user's total UFC count is then publicly displayed at the top of his or her

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<sup>4</sup> A number of Yelp users interviewed for another part of this project noted that they did not know Yelp had a Talk feature until long after joining the site.



profile as a marker of status and credibility. Like Compliments, the UFC designation guides participation in certain ways. As a reward system (i.e., something to be "collected"), UFCs implicitly suggest that a "good review" ought to be structured around these traits (i.e., useful, funny, cool) and thus limit the frames through which consumers approach the evaluation process. Most importantly, UFCs promote a one-way mode of communicating that also discourages critical discourse in place of positive self-presentation and the accumulation of anonymous virtual accolades.

As mediated through the site's architectural and lexical features, Yelp constructs a communicative space that limits the possibilities for social, productive, and public discourse about local businesses and services. In accordance with communicative capitalism, messages are "not actions to elicit response," but mere contributions to an endless stream of content in which no one is obligated—if architecturally enabled—to respond (Dean, 2005, p. 58). The next section expands on these observations, but points to the way in which Yelp's categorizations, homepage, profile template, and review guidelines reinforce a market-based, individualized mode of citizenship over other potential civic or political formations.

### ***Structuring a Pro-Consumption Bias***

Despite the range of businesses and services available for reviewing, user engagement is architecturally structured around hedonic, rather than utilitarian, forms of consumption. Yelp prominently displays a "Best of Yelp" feature in the center of each locality's homepage, which offers a list of links to the top-rated local businesses within four distinct categories: *Restaurants, Shopping, Nightlife, Beauty and Spas*. Given that Yelp offers an additional 18 categories for review, it is easy to imagine how differently the site would be perceived if "Best of Yelp" prioritized another set of services—e.g., *Mass Media, Local Services, Public Services/Government, Religious Organizations*, or even *Local Flavor*. Generally, however, categorization on Yelp promotes discourse about hedonic consumption over civic or public experiences. On Yelp Talk, for instance, categories prompt discussions about entertainment and fun (e.g., *Shopping, Travel, Relationships, Humor, Entertainment, Sports*) over topics that might bridge consumption with more local, political, and civic issues (e.g., *News & Politics, Local Questions and Answers*). While featured categories may not directly determine how Yelp is ultimately used, the available choices cue users to anticipate and thus co-construct a particular social space.

User profile templates are similarly limited to opportunities for self-publicity: *My Blog or Website; When I'm not Yelping \_\_\_; Why You Should Read My Reviews; My Second Favorite Website; The Last Great Book I Read; My First Concert; My Favorite Movie; My Last Meal on Earth; Don't Tell Anyone Else, But \_\_\_; Most Recent Discovery; and Current Crush*. Three pertain to geographical location (*My Hometown, Location*, and the ambiguous *Find Me In \_\_\_*). Like other social networking sites, Yelp profiles serve as a means of "writing [oneself] into being" (Ellison & boyd, 2007), and they are central to fostering social interaction and connections between users. The open or closed nature of profile templates suggests different ways of behaving and self-presenting. On Yelp, personal disclosures are limited to an individual's alignment with particular taste cultures and consumer-oriented identities. Credibility on Yelp is established not by the member's community relationships, but by *habitus* conveyed through the display of favorite books, movies, websites, and music. Basic categories that elicit more traditional forms of identity or

cultural citizenship that appear on other social networking sites—e.g., occupation, religion, political affiliation—are altogether absent on Yelp.

While the ability to communicate around or through reviews is architecturally closed, the space in which users write and publish reviews is comparatively open. As noted, users can rate, review, and add any existing organization—meaning that small restaurants, medical facilities, public transportation, museums, radio stations, and nonprofits are equally subject to evaluation. There are no anonymous reviews on Yelp—a structural affordance designed to promote transparency and credibility; no other specific template criteria are required to publish a review. Ostensibly, this openness enables reviewers to communicate through the site in unintended ways. However, whereas the architectural affordances enable polysemic interactivity (Duffy, 2010), Yelp’s official content guidelines effectively foreclose upon this possibility by regulating reviews according to their “Relevance”: “Reviews aren’t the place for rants about a business’s employment practices, political ideologies, or other matters that don’t address the core of the normal customer experience” (Yelp content guidelines, 2009). Here, Yelp’s Content Guidelines reify the “normal customer experience” within a specific ideological discourse of commodity fetishism in which consumption is limited to personally experienced transactions of exchange. Moreover, these guidelines are not “suggestions,” but rules. As such, “irrelevant” reviews are treated comparatively different from corporate shells or other fake reviews; the former are permanently *removed* from Yelp, while the latter are merely *filtered* behind an accessible CAPTCHA wall. This is to say, reviews that veer from an ideology of consumption are more harshly sanctioned than reviews deemed false, malicious, or deceptive.<sup>5</sup> On Yelp, lying and shilling have more speech protections than civic or political discourses.

Yelp’s site architecture, as demonstrated, discursively constructs the practice of ranking and evaluation within a specific ideological framework conducive to the reproduction of consumer capitalism—which is, of course, conducive to the site’s own commercial imperatives. Discourses through and about consumption are limited to the fetishism of commodities, symbolically annihilating critiques of work conditions, production contexts, ideological affiliations, ethical standards and practices, or discussions about the political economy of local government. Of course, politicizing consumer reviews is an inherently limited way of affecting change, as change is restricted to altering market dynamics and little else. However, despite the shortcomings of consumer-citizenship’s economized political activity, such limitations have not prevented local business owners from feeling threatened by Yelp’s “review democracy.” Moreover, insofar as Yelp’s commercial model relies upon local business advertising, the structural ineffectiveness of consumer-citizenship has neither prevented Yelp nor business owners from interfering with the communicative practice of consumer reviewing. As revealed in the next section, the politics of participation are further foreclosed upon in the context of Yelp’s pro-business turn.

### **Yelp’s Pro-Business Turn**

Yelp claims to democratize business by providing a space in which consumer evaluations can overturn elite authorities of taste; however, Yelp structurally delimits the range of such possibilities with

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<sup>5</sup> Deleted reviews are permanently destroyed; filtered reviews can be algorithmically “unfiltered” to [re]appear under a business listing at any time.

its initiatives to advance [local] business relations. As part of the site's evolving commercial model, a host of tools and resources have opened Yelp's user-centric platform to business owners. In recent years, Yelp has redesigned its architectures of participation in accordance with the site's commercial objectives, reshaping the site's evaluative model toward one arguably more business-centric than user-centric.

### ***Leveling the Playing Field: Yelp for Business Owners***

Originally, local business owners had little control or recourse over content posted to Yelp. Frustrated by a growing sense of powerlessness, business owners openly and publicly challenged the integrity of Yelp reviews. A number of local businesses launched class action lawsuits, three of which accused Yelp of extortion for its aggressive sales tactics and advertising practices. A 2009 expose by the Oakland, California weekly *East Bay Express* claimed Yelp's sales team strategically filtered positive reviews or highlighted negative ones for small businesses refusing to advertise with the site (Richards, 2009). Additional reports in the popular press, trade publications, and blogs escalated anti-Yelp backlash about its advertising and filtering practices.

By 2008, Yelp had already begun to its rollout of site features designed to bring local business owners into the fold. The first of its pro-business initiatives, "Yelp for Business Owners" (YBO) is a suite of free tools that enables verified business owners to manage their Yelp profile with personalized content. With this resource, owners can add or edit information, photographs, promotional deals, announcements, or other details about business specialties and management. Owners who have claimed their Yelp page can also post public responses to each review written about their business, or they can choose to send private messages to reviewers. Registered business owners also receive email alerts when new reviews are posted, which affords the advantage of real-time reputation management. Additionally, owners have access to basic Web traffic reports and advice about how to harness other tools to their benefit, including ways to embed personalized analytics to track and monitor user behavior.<sup>6</sup>

Architecturally, YBO is significant because it affords communicative options unavailable to the reviewers who collectively make up a bulk of the site's content. On a functional level, YBO is structured as a separate website (<https://biz.yelp.com>) from that of the main Yelp homepage ([www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com)). Additionally, many tools available on YBO are unavailable to users, particularly data *about* Yelp users (e.g., traffic analytics). Between its distinct URL, features, and updates, YBO is symbolically structured as its own separate sociocultural system, a place from which reviewers are excluded. It is a space that gives business owners the opportunity to manage their brand by producing content and either publicly or privately responding to reviews. While owners cannot log into the "other Yelp" with their business account, they can write as a regular user; with both options, business owners arguably have more opportunities to traverse the site (including Yelp Talk) and create content than the ordinary Yelp reviewer.

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<sup>6</sup> The YBO benefits are free; advertisers pay for search engine placement and advanced features.

### ***Yelp's Local Business Outreach Programs***

Shortly after launching "Yelp for Business Owners," Yelp created the position and employed a "Local Business Outreach Manager" in 2009 to manage small business relationships. Hired to "educate" the small business community about how Yelp works, the local business outreach manager hosts free online webinars, "town hall" meetings at local chambers of commerce, and talks with restaurant/retail associations about how Yelp's free tools can be used toward productive ends. By 2010, Yelp had created the "Yelp Small Business Advisory Council," a group of 25 select local business owners from around the United States to serve as "small business advisors" to Yelp. Through monthly teleconferences, Yelp's Small Business Advisory Council discusses Yelp-related product developments with Yelp executives and provides "input and guidance regarding the concerns of small business owners" (Lowe, 2010).

Another major pro-business initiative is the ground-level "Community Managers" (CMs) who reside in major metropolitan cities around the world and serve as liaisons between local Yelpers, businesses, and Yelp corporate headquarters. As paid employees, CMs maintain local business relationships, arrange advertising and promotional packages, manage street marketing, publish weekly newsletters, and organize regular event sponsorships for the site's select "Yelp Elite" members. Importantly, CMs not only facilitate local community relations between reviewers, businesses, and headquarters, but they also assist in *manufacturing* the Yelp community by writing Yelp reviews, engaging in Yelp Talk threads, inducting Yelp Elite members, selecting a featured "Review of the Day" (ROTD), and writing positive compliments to incentivize participation. CMs also use Yelp Talk to recap Elite events, encourage reviews, and offer "shout-outs" (e.g., positive reviews, compliments) directed at participating local businesses.

### ***Proprietary Rights and the Commodification of User Labor***

As illustrated, Yelp's pro-business initiatives have extended the "old guard" a number of tools and resources to employ both offensive and defensive strategies against consumer reviewers. Given that a bulk of Yelp's revenue is derived from local ads, Yelp must appease the very companies that help to monetize the site's content. As a means of valorizing consumer reviewers, therefore, Yelp retains proprietary rights over all consumer-generated content. When creating an account on Yelp, for example, the terms of service agreement grants full ownership to users over their own content; users own—and are therefore liable for—their reviews. However, while reviewers might *own* their content, they simultaneously relinquish control over the *rights* to how that content is used. As stated in Yelp's U.S. Terms of Service (TOS) Agreement (2012):

We may use Your Content in a number of different ways, including publicly displaying it, reformatting it, incorporating it into advertisements and other works, creating derivative works from it, promoting it, distributing it, and allowing others to do the same in connection with their own websites and media platforms . . . As such, you hereby *irrevocably grant us world-wide, perpetual, non-exclusive, royalty-free, assignable, sublicensable, transferable rights to use Your Content for any purpose.* [emphasis added]

Yelp can thus use any consumer-generated content in advertisements, blogs, newsletters, press materials, promotional materials, or other commercial forms. Additionally, Yelp reserves the right to exploit user labor in its sale to third parties. For example, ZipRealty, a national online real estate brokerage, integrates Yelp reviews into its home sale listings as a way of virtually showing potential homebuyers the proximity of restaurants, entertainment spots, and other services. Moreover, reviews are regularly published in local printed weeklies without the user's (i.e., author's) knowledge or consent. These types of exclusive third-party contracts serve as a form of surplus value for Yelp. At the same time, business owners are offered new marketing tools, while user rights are relinquished to assist in the reproduction of power dynamics long at play in the political economy. As Yelp constructs an asymmetrical relationship by retaining ownership over all content, communication within Yelp's "review democracy" is commodified in the service of capital accumulation.

Between YBO, the local community outreach programs, and its proprietary terms of service, Yelp offers a number of strategies for local businesses to manage their reputations in ways that facilitate more participation from reviewers, and, ultimately, more capital for Yelp. As noted, YBO offers comparatively advantageous communicative opportunities to the business owners. Despite the rhetorical promise of transparency, Yelp affords business owners (but not users) the ability to engage in publicly accessible, two-way modes of communication within the review space. Although restricting reviewers from publicly interacting with each review admittedly has its benefits (e.g., less spamming and fewer verbal attacks, irrelevant posts, and trolls, as well as less "stealth" advertising), limiting this right to business owners privileges the single, authoritative voice Yelp's "review democracy" claims to undermine. Participation on Yelp is fetishized as democratic, yet business owners talk back (and over) consumers. While public responses can backfire, business owners still retain comparatively more communicative options for engagement than reviewers (the *demos*).

Situating Yelp within the framework of communicative capitalism helps to explain why businesses are given equal—if not more—opportunities for talking back. Inviting businesses into the communicative circuit contributes to the fantasies of abundance and participation in which more information ostensibly correlates to more freedom and better democracy (Dean, 2009); this is evidenced in Yelp's justification of its pro-business turn as the desire to create a "positive feedback loop, so local businesses can connect with their most vocal customers in a positive and productive way" (Yelp! Inc., 2008). In the context of communicative capitalism, where messages-as-contributions across digital platforms are valued more for their production than for the meaning or origination of those contributions, who it is that comes to produce content is rendered irrelevant. It is the "positive feedback loop" that matters most in reproducing the social Web's endless circulation of content. As explained by Dean, the political ineffectiveness of digital platforms is evidenced by the constant media-stream in which top-level actors—e.g., politicians, corporations, local businesses, public service providers—are no longer obligated to respond. This is evidenced on Yelp, as business owners are afforded the opportunity to contribute their own messages. Armed with Yelp-issued tools for better branding, therefore, business owners obfuscate critique with little incentive to address the actual problems raised by consumer-citizens; business owners can effectively conceal their role in the larger political economy by generating more publicity, countering critique with louder, more clearly staged, or more spectacular communicative flows that "will give their contributions

dominance or stickiness" (Dean, 2005, p. 53). Opening Yelp to business owners thus functions in service of communicative capitalism, as such initiatives facilitate ever-more contributions into the circulation of content necessary for the reproduction of capital, rather than democratic processes or actual change. At the same time, Yelp's proprietary rights ensure the commodification of democratic exchange, no matter how illusory such exchanges may, in fact, be.

### Implications and Conclusion

As everyday people share their consumption experiences with others over the social Web, consumer evaluation sites are celebrated for their capacity to upset the information asymmetry that has long favored the interests of business, brands, and other reputation managers (Christodoulides, 2009). However, as this research demonstrates, such sites do not so much destabilize existing power relations, as they reinforce the existing political economy. Ultimately, consumer evaluation sites "materialize and repurpose democratic ideals and aspirations in ways that strengthen and support globalized neoliberalism" (Dean, 2009, p. 17), which manifests through Yelp in three interrelated ways: the construction of network inequalities, an economized notion of citizenship, and the depoliticizing effects characteristic of communicative capitalism.

Yelp effectively supports the goals of neoliberal capitalism by reproducing the traditional hierarchy of business-consumer relations. All the while, the underlying inequalities of digital networks are obfuscated by the fantasies of abundance and participation proffered by Yelp's promotional discourse. In the meantime, Yelp's pro-business turn and proprietary terms of service favor the processes of capital accumulation for both participating businesses and Yelp itself. Constitutive of communicative capitalism, therefore, capitalism and democracy merge as the site's profit obligations motivate the monetization of consumer labor—not only by its proprietary terms, but primarily via paid advertisements from the very businesses Yelp members critique. Put another way, Yelp's "review democracy" is instrumentalized against both consumers and small businesses in the service of "Yelp capitalism." This is evidenced across the site's culture of consumerism and sanctioning of political critique, its architectural constraints on productive talk, its pro-business turn, its (alleged) manipulation of reviews to generate profit, its proprietary control over user-generated content, and its commodification of communication generally. Demonstrating little regard for formal democratic values, Yelp structurally delimits consumer agency and privileges the imperatives of business owners while (allegedly) extorting small businesses for their complicity.<sup>7</sup>

Consumer evaluation sites also effectively conceal their own structural inequalities by supporting the neoliberal framework that treats expressions of *consumer choice* as the "will of the people." Consistent with the larger neoliberal project, consumer evaluation sites come to be yet another space in which market values invade all forms of social life. As Dean rightly notes, however, "the market is not a system for delivering political outcomes" (2009, p. 22). Commercial choice, amongst other effects, constructs a politics of *difference* around cultural taste or *habitus*, a politics in which the goals of social reproduction

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<sup>7</sup> As articulately summarized by one of the manuscript's anonymous reviewers, "If anything, invoking Rancière here, Yelp AND the businesses coalesce around a shared hatred for (consumer) democracy" (see Rancière, 2006).

are about what is best for the self, not "what is best for anyone" (ibid.). As evidenced on Yelp, one's affiliations and activities are affirmed in ways conducive to the reproduction of consumer capitalism as it interpellates participants within an economized notion of political subjectivity. In doing so, the site forecloses upon the inalienable rights and processes of direct action, sovereignty, a commitment to the commons and social justice, and other fundamental traits of democratic citizenship (Brown, 2006). So whereas Yelp grants consumer-citizens a "voice," the politics of participation are limited to changing market dynamics and little else. Following the logic of neoliberal political rationality, therefore, Yelp ultimately produces what Brown refers to as an anti-democratic citizen-subject: Yelp is thus political only insofar as it delivers the effects constitutive of neoliberal capitalism—the depoliticization of contemporary citizenship.

Yelp's depoliticization of citizenship is characteristic of the ideological and political effects of communicative capitalism, as well, something which, in turn, works to support and strengthen neoliberal global capitalism. In limiting "change" to marketplace dynamics, consumer evaluation sites effectively reproduce the political inefficacy of the neoliberal citizen-subject. Under communicative capitalism, the technological fetish acts *for us* (Dean, 2009); accordingly, consumers might feel engaged as they click, rate, rank, review, compliment, and boycott, yet political energies are never raised to the level of the universal. As everyday life is evaluated in terms of personal preferences and feelings, and is treated as being constituted by online communicative engagements, political struggles (and participation in them) are displaced "from local and institutional settings" (ibid., p. 32). In other words, *talking* about businesses displaces the activities required to develop and enact the formal legislation aimed at changing the structures in which such abuses occur. Instead, the consumer-citizen fights for gender equality by reviewing and consuming women-owned businesses and services. She lobbies for LGBTQ rights by boycotting shops that do not endorse marriage equality;<sup>8</sup> she votes for ethical production by supporting locally owned cafes that serve fair trade coffee as an intentional form of publicity designed to redirect commerce away from corporate chains. In doing so, the consumer-citizen does not attend rallies, volunteer at local community centers, or collect signatures for ballot propositions. There is thus little burden of responsibility, as the technological fetish stands in for political action. Instead, the participatory affordances of Yelp's social platform reinvigorates a sense of efficacy that one can "do something" by producing, consuming, and recirculating more information.

As Dean argues, reducing "doing" to "talking" protects corporate and governmental activities, officials, and abuses, as they "are able to market and monitor, expropriate and privatize, unencumbered even as their activities are observed and discussed" (2009, p. 32). Moreover, as reviews stand in for attendance at city council meetings, electoral lobbying, and other formal political processes, attention is also displaced from the fact that commercial platforms like Yelp are primarily designed to deliver consumers to advertisers. Thus, as democratic participation is reduced to evaluations of the marketplace, the neoliberal citizen-subject is effectively *immobilized* in matters of the state (ibid.). And herein lies the point: Changing market relations through the expression of personal consumer choice is a depoliticized form of citizenship that displaces political struggles to somewhere outside the terrain of democratic

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, Yelp's pro-consumption bias functions to symbolically annihilate discourses of production; of ideology; or of other social, political and civic concerns.

governance. Social media platforms might enable consumers to feel productive and politically empowered, but this subjectivity is ultimately illusory if such practices start and end with the circulation of communicative content. At their most political, aggregated endorsements might help direct commercial flows to smaller or more ethical business (although we ought not to mistake the former as inherently characteristic of the latter), but consumer evaluations do little to redress the structural inequalities promoted by the violent global expansion of neoliberal corporate capitalism.

Using Yelp as a case study, this research has situated consumer evaluation websites in the context of communicative capitalism, as tools for the interpellation of neoliberal citizenship. As demonstrated, Yelp's promise to deinstitutionalize information, knowledge, and reputation management is undermined by its architectures of participation, which, in turn, offer a marketized model of political rationality that commodifies communication in the task of capital accumulation. Taken together, Yelp's promotional discourse, architecture, and site goals constitute the ideological effects of communicative capitalism. Yelp constructs a space that configures the politics of participation in economic terms, conceals the inequalities of digital networks, and advances the depoliticization of contemporary citizenship. As Jubas concludes, "Democratization involves a radical change in capitalist and other exclusionary structures rather than a new, politically charged consumerism" (2007, p. 251). Thus, the political economy in which Yelp is situated cannot be ignored, as it demonstrates the limitations of commercially driven social platforms in recognizing the promises of "better" democracy. The structural conditions of Yelp capitalism thus expose the inherent contradictions embedded in user-generated content production, particularly as such production applies to the monetization of user labor via proprietary mechanisms, but also through the appropriation of empowerment, agency, and democracy more generally.

One limitation to this conclusion, of course, is that such critical analyses do not account for how users themselves experience or perceive their contributions to communicative capitalism. Future audience studies research might be instrumental in understanding both the role consumer evaluation websites play in the depoliticization process, and the extent to which such processes are negotiated, resisted, or, conversely, actualized in offline spaces. As also noted in this analysis, Yelp offers a number of open features that allow consumer reviewers to transcend the site's ideological and structural barriers. Do users accommodate or resist Yelp's agenda? How might they negotiate, contest, hack, or alter the site's pro-business initiatives and proprietary mechanisms, and to what effect? Potentially, Yelp members or other users regularly utilize the site for purposes unintended by site owners. Moreover, are there any distinct *offline* effects, however localized, worth considering that might emerge between business-consumer relations via consumer evaluation sites? And if not, how do the rising popularity and effectiveness of consumer evaluation sites play a role in the political inefficacy of the political left, as described by Dean? In an era of communicative capitalism's proliferation and expansion, these are perhaps a few key issues that future research might address.



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