

Joseph M. Reagle, Jr., **Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015, 241 pp., \$27.95 (hardcover).

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There are many challenges in social research that result from the ubiquity of user-generated content for public consumption and its subsequent evaluation by online communities. This mode of communication is perhaps too often regarded as trivial, but the social dynamics of virtual publics may be the key to people understanding one another. The designated comment sections are spaces where anyone with an Internet connection has the ability to anonymously post their thoughts with little fear of repercussion. Have these comment sections become so riddled with meaningless blather, insidious claims, and inflammatory language that they are best left ignored or disabled altogether? Do they reveal anything about collective human behavior, or should they be dismissed as inconsequential accessories to the primary content of a website? In ***Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web***, Joseph Reagle dives into the dark depths of the Internet and discusses online comment as a genre of communication that is a means of portraying the self and influencing others.

Using an interpretive framework, Reagle approaches his topic through subjective observation and acknowledges the social construction of meaning. His intentions are not necessarily to uncover some universal truth revealed through computer mediated interaction, but to explore the vast possibilities of this mode of communication and pose interesting explanations for how it works. He is obviously well versed in modern uses of the Web, demonstrating his knowledge by referencing a diverse catalog of websites and varied incidents of comment-related controversy. Rather than conducting a narrow analysis of social media networks alone, he expands his scope to include online retailers, sites for rating and reviewing, and even communities for writers of creative fan fiction. He bolsters the notion of comment as a distinct genre, while also encouraging the interpretation of generalizable themes across contexts. However, the inclusivity eventually becomes a weakness. The book provides such a multiplicity of anecdotes and examples that it does not contain much in-depth discussion of any one topic. This lack of focus is apparent throughout, illustrated further by the structure of each chapter's subheadings, which can be somewhat difficult to follow.

Reading the Comments is separated into eight chapters, each addressing a specific function of comment and leading up to the final inquiry, "Commenterrible?" In the first chapter, Reagle clearly defines a comment as relatively short, intended to be seen and reacted to by others, and able to exist outside of immediate time and context. This definition is maintained in each chapter and is justified through a

qualitative discourse analysis of reactive online commentary. Comment is interpreted as a multifaceted means of contact that is not only about something specific, but that carries with it objectives, implications, and an intended audience. Collecting generalizable knowledge about the genre can be difficult because of its somewhat impersonal nature, the fact that nonverbal cues cannot be conveyed in the same way as face-to-face interaction, and the ease with which messages can be manipulated and misconstrued. However, Reagle meticulously tackles the tremendous task of reading into the comments, moving past the familiar surface level and into an increasingly complex domain.

The second chapter is dedicated to what may be considered the most basic intention of commenting: informing others. Computers have added a new level to our sense of self, conceiving an intimacy between human and machine that has transformed the way we interact (Turkle, 2005). In this way, the lines between creator, consumer, and critic are blurred, and the ability to construct our own online identities allows anyone to masquerade as an expert. Retailers and review sites encourage people to post their experiential knowledge, which leads to a readily available mass quantity of information that may or may not be truly useful. Consequently, people now appear to possess an inherent need to be as informed as possible in order to make any decision. The power to advise has also allowed room for the power to manipulate, which is the central theme of the following chapter. Manipulation is characterized not only by deceiving others through intentionally false ratings, but also by incentivized content created as an exchange between consumers and companies—which, Reagle claims, fuels the temptation for everyone to become manipulators.

Chapter 4 demonstrates some beneficial aspects of comment culture, using feedback in fan fiction communities as an example of good intentions fueling constructive criticism. This function harkens back to some aspects of informing, in which reviewers genuinely appear to be helping guide others in the decision-making process. But these positive examples seem minimal when set alongside the harrowing examples of what Reagle designates as “alienation.” The rise of social media has led to the creation of “networked publics” in which sharing personal information is viewed as a central aspect of active participation (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Much of what may have once been considered private is now consciously presented to a general public, which leads to more opportunities for people to become targets of destructive speech. In chapter 5, Reagle points toward lack of accountability and anonymity fueling acts of cyberharrassment and takes a feminist perspective by addressing the significant gender and racial disparities in online abuse. The reader may be unsatisfied without a specific, pragmatic solution to this serious social ill, but the author ends the chapter with an insistence on collective support of those being abused.

Chapter 6 poses one of the more intriguing and concerning functions of comment: shaping. Prior computer mediated communication research has examined the ways in which online spaces literally shape qualities like our attitudes toward prejudice norms (Hsueh, Yogeewaran, & Malinen, 2015) and our expressions of gender identity (Van Doorn, 2010). Reagle expands on such findings by integrating examples from popular culture to show the intricacies of reforming identity online. Although he does not take a solid stance on how (or why) to “thrive” in comment, the reciprocal relationship between technology and society is evident and is shown to be increasingly complex. This complexity is stretched to include what Reagle categorizes as “bemusing,” the seventh and final function of the comment genre.

Here, comment's reactivity and social construction is demonstrated by highlighting arbitrary rating systems, strange interpretations, biases, excuses, and revelations.

This book should be praised for its interdisciplinary nature and audience accessibility. Communication research traditionally borrows from other academic circles, and *Reading the Comments* recognizes the contribution of scholars in fields such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Reagle forms his own inquiries and hypotheses through a combination of direct observation and a wide-ranging consideration of previous research. For example, theories surrounding "deindividuation" and "depersonalization" are posited as motivating factors in trolling techniques. Reagle does not clearly favor any one idea, and he simply presents cases that evidence people losing their sense of self and social norms altogether, as well as shifting to a group mentality. Psychological studies of self-esteem and feedback are referenced in correlation with avoidance and coping strategies, as people with negative self-image may be less likely to successfully engage online. Social capital and competition are also designated as important contributing factors in this form of communication.

One of the main advantages of Internet culture is its international reach. The accessibility of communication across physical distances allows much potential for an online global dialogue, but this is largely unexplored in the text itself. *Reading the Comments* provides a broad discussion of virtual social space, but is still mainly based on Eurocentric ideals. Depending on cultural norms, people may interpret comments very differently and interact in ways that are not addressed in this book. Perhaps Reagle's intent was to confine his study to Western identities and capitalist critique, but he missed a fruitful opportunity to consider the inherently transnational dimensions of the Internet.

Reagle's work is still an insightful addition to the field of communication and can reach a fairly wide audience. Researchers interested in online communities, interpersonal discourse, identity construction, and modern computer mediated communication would surely benefit from reading this book. Additionally, by effectively avoiding the use of exclusive language and technical, academic jargon, *Reading the Comments* can be a captivating text for the general public. Public scholarship is a profitable goal for modern social researchers, especially those concerned with society's routine encounters with media, and the accessibility is unquestionably one of the strengths of this book.

Comment is an unavoidable byproduct of Internet culture that allows manipulation, deception, criticism, and harassment through anonymity. These deleterious effects can lead one to conclude that comment is simply best avoided altogether. However, Reagle suggests otherwise as he concludes his expedition to the bottom of the Web. Comment provides an insight into broader social problems and reveals characteristics of contemporary human communication. Online communication tactics and technologies are rapidly evolving, and research such as this is increasingly crucial to better understanding the norms and challenges of social interaction.

References

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