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Literacies

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Colin Lankshear, Michele Knobel

Literacies

Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives



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The Ratings Game: From eBay to Plastic (2003)

Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear

Biography of the Text

This chapter was originally published by Open University Press in the first edition of *New Literacies*, although we had previously published a piece on reading, writing and ratings on eBay.com in Ilana Snyder's (2002) collection, *Silicon Literacies*. Like many of the themes we began exploring from the standpoint of what might be significantly “new” in contemporary conceptions and practices of literacy, the focus on ratings grew directly out of our everyday lives living in Mexico as researchers and writers associated with the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) during 1999–2001.

In part, we became strongly dependent on online retailers and sales mediators like Amazon and eBay—often making online purchases and having them shipped to a U.S. address (e.g., a conference hotel, friends' homes) and picking them up on the next visit “north.” We read closely the customer reviews and ratings of items in the case of Amazon and paid careful attention to sellers' ratings on eBay. At the same time, and more to the point so far as our writing was concerned, we were interested in *trendspotting*. From the inception of the mass internet in the early nineties we had actively followed people and initiatives identified as “shapers” (Friedman, 2000) by leading edge sources like *Wired* magazine and stories about influential people on the web. This had got us into reading online magazines like *Suck* (suck.com) and, later, trendspotting blogs like BoingBoing.net. When *Suck* and *Feed* (feedmag.com) merged and produced *Plastic* (plastic.com) we were

struck by the way the site's use of ratings and karma points resonated with our interest in attention economics and with how participants acquired status within identifiable online communities, along with how seriously they took their ratings and karma. In addition, we had been interested for some years in trends we identified with the idea of "digital epistemologies"—ways in which, and the extent to which, phenomena like hits and ratings come to constitute indices of "truth" and "value" alongside, or in some cases in place of, more conventional epistemological criteria.

These intersecting interests led to us taking "ratings" seriously as a theme to be explored in relation to new literacies.

Introduction

Current educational literature is awash with talk of "new literacies," "technoliteracies," "multiliteracies" and the like in response to the deep incursion of new information and communications technologies into everyday routines within modern societies. Much of this talk is general and impressionistic, however. Considerably less documentation of new literacy practices engendered and mediated by the internet has been forthcoming, let alone of what social issues and responsibilities such new practices may evoke.

This chapter focuses on the emergence of the community ratings feedback systems on eBay and Plastic as cases of a new literacy—a new way of reading and writing aspects of the world that are important to participants in these online activities. It explores the rise of ratings systems as regulating devices within online communities and how these are taken up (or not taken up) by community members.

In particular, the ratings system used on eBay will be examined from two standpoints that are evolving to a considerable extent in tension with one another. One standpoint is that of its creators—the owners and operators of eBay—and their communitarian "visionary" purposes for developing it. The other standpoint is that of its users, among whom many seem to be appropriating the community ratings feedback system for personal purposes—some of which appear mean-spirited and intentionally self-serving to say the least.

The ratings system on Plastic—whose tagline reads, "Recycling the Web in real time"—is an online forum devoted to posting and discussing the "best content from all over the Web for discussion" (Plastic, 2002a: n.p.). Its rating and filtering system is one of the striking things about Plastic. Participants can use this to screen out comments with low ratings and read only those rated highly. This saves them time they would otherwise have to spend sifting through postings to sort out those that are worth reading from those that aren't.

The use of rating systems as public evaluations of “worth” (moral, commercial, intellectual, etc.) is not confined to these two sites alone. Rather, it is spreading rapidly across a range of different web-based communities. For example, Amazon—the “Earth’s Biggest SelectionTM of products” (Amazon.com, 2002: n.p.)—has set in place a 5–star rating system that users can use to evaluate products and Amazon Marketplace sellers (where purchases are made directly from companies, rather than Amazon.com per se), and a numerical system that alerts buyers to the sales ranking of a product within the Amazon.com system.

Our aim in this chapter is to capture something of the dialectic between *strategies* of producers and *uses* of consumers (de Certeau, 1984) at play in the emergence of a distinctively contemporary practice of everyday life online.

What *Is* eBay?

eBay was among the first person-to-person auction venues to go online. It is currently the most popular and successful internet trading community in the world (Friedman, 2000; Multex.com, 2001: 1). As of early 2002, eBay has over 42.4 million registered users and each day users list millions of items for auction in more than 8,000 categories—and it is still growing (eBay, 2002a: 1; MSN Money, 2002: 1). Categories range from premium artworks, through real estate and cars, to clothing, jewelry, toys, comics and trading cards (with one person recently auctioning off his soul . . .). eBay describes itself as

the world’s personal trading community, [which] has changed the way people buy and sell collectibles and unique items. By providing a safe trading place on the internet, the eBay community has flourished. Not only does eBay provide an efficient medium for people to buy or sell items directly from or to a large number of people, it’s a forum where buyers and sellers develop reputations and, in some cases, it can change people’s lives (eBay, 2002b: 1).

eBay (ebay.com) comprises sets of internet pages that are basically long lists of new and used items that people have posted to the eBay internet site for sale by auction. Sellers are responsible for writing item descriptions and for generating pictures of the items that are then inserted into an eBay page template and posted on the eBay website under a self-selected category heading (and where it is automatically allocated an item number). Potential buyers—who must be registered with eBay—browse these lists or use the eBay search function to locate items of interest. They can then bid on or “watch” these items. Watching involves clicking on the “watch this item” hyperlink, and the item is then hotlinked to one’s personal “eBay” space (i.e., “my eBay”).

Bidding works in two ways, similarly to conventional auctions. Bidders may make the lowest viable bid possible at that particular point in time and wait to see

what happens (or place a new minimum bid after being outbid by someone else). Alternatively, they can place a “proxy” bid—which is the maximum amount they are willing to pay for the item, and eBay acts for them as a proxy bidder: bidding in their place until the item is “won” or their specified maximum amount has been exceeded by another bidder. Sellers—who are also always registered members of eBay—pay to list their items with eBay. The fee depends on the starting price or reserve set for an item (e.g., a \$0.01 to \$9.99 starting price costs \$0.30 to list, and a reserve price of \$0.01 to \$24.99 costs \$0.50 to list), or on the type of item being listed (real estate comes with a \$50.00 listing set fee, as does a vehicle). Items can also be sold for a fixed price (i.e., not auctioned off) under the eBay stores service. These items are subject to a different listing fee scale. Commission on auctioned and other sold items is charged at 5.25 per cent of the first \$25.00 and an additional 2.75 per cent after that up to \$1,000. From \$1,000 onwards, 1.5 per cent commission is paid on the remaining amount (eBay, 2002c: 1). eBay membership is free, as is bidding and browsing.

eBay currently operates in 22 countries and 11 languages. Although it is certainly advantageous to access an eBay site in your home country (language, currency, dates, time and shipping wise), it is possible to bid from anywhere in the world whenever payment options and shipping agreements permit.

What’s *New* About eBay

While some people might claim that eBay is just an old physical space (auctions) in virtual get-up, we think it is spawning some genuinely new social practices and new literacies associated with them.

We will make our case for the newness of some of the social practices and literacies associated with them from two angles. The first simply identifies some new features of reading relevant aspects of the world occasioned by moving the familiar social practice of auctioning into an unfamiliar space, namely the virtual space of the internet. One or two brief examples must suffice here.

eBay calls for interesting new constellations or “batteries” of ways of reading and writing in order to achieve one’s purposes as an online buyer or seller. For example, the eBay venue operates as a “transaction medium.” Nobody at eBay sees or handles what is being bought and sold. And there is nobody to tell one where to go to find what one is looking for (or might want to look for if one knew it could be available). Hence, it is not a matter simply of knowing how to read or write the text of item descriptions. Participants need also to know how to navigate through or add to the website. For example, they need to know how to access and read the battery of “how-to” texts provided on the eBay website (e.g., how to bid, how to post an item for sale, how to leave feedback, how to lodge formal complaints about a buyer or seller, how to access user-to-user help and advice discus-

sion lists). Users also need to know how to read and write “taxonomically” in the sense of knowing what is likely to be in or should be in each category—of which there are thousands. They need to be able to read between the lines in item descriptions (e.g., a Clarice Cliff style crocus jug is *not* a Clarice Cliff crocus jug). In many cases it is necessary to be able to read digitized images accurately (e.g., know that color is often not true-to-life in digital images of objects, understand depth of field and the effects it has on objects, be wary of out-of-focus or soft focus images or lighting effects). Knowing (how) to convert from imperial to metric measures, or even one currency to another, is often required for international dealings and so on. Fakes and forgeries are much easier to disguise on eBay than in meatspace. Collectors appear to have developed a whole new set of criteria for judging the authenticity of an item. These include evaluating the source of the product (e.g., if the seller is the daughter or son of a famous sportsperson, then it’s likely the sports memorabilia he or she is selling is genuine), judging the seller by location (e.g., someone selling art deco ceramics and living in England or ex-English colonies is most likely to be selling authentic pieces in good condition), judging the seller by the other products he or she has listed for auction (cf. Smith and Smith, c.2002). They also include a wariness of what some call, “overdocumentation.” This is the presence of too many documents “verifying” the authenticity of an item (Sherman, 2001: 63). Perhaps most importantly, however, the reader of item descriptions and images has to pay careful attention to what is *not* said or shown. For example, sellers who list high-end designer handbags (e.g., Gucci, Hermès, Coach) without mentioning that the bags have serial numbers, or who does not list the silver content stamp (.925 or higher) for a purported solid silver item, may be less likely to be selling an authentic item.

Moreover, physical or meatspace literacy practices often *mean* different things within eBay. For example, one regular eBay user we interviewed said she loves coming across item descriptions that include misspelled words. To her it means she is more likely to “win” a bargain from this person than from someone who spells correctly. Non-standard spelling indicates to her someone who is less likely to be in a professional job or to own a shop and, hence in her eyes, to be less likely to know the real value of the ceramics or other objects they are offering for sale.

The second way of considering what is new about eBay is by reference to Bezos’ distinction between first and second phase automation introduced in Chapter 3. Indeed, eBay provided Bezos with an exemplar of the kind of thing he wanted to do. We may recall Bezos’ distinction here by way of Robert Spector’s (2000: 16) account of Bezo’s passion for “second phase automation.”

Bezos has described second-phase automation as “the common theme that has run through my life. The first phase of automation is where you use technology to do the same old business processes, but just faster and more efficiently.” A

typical first phase of automation in the e-commerce field would be barcode scanners and point-of-sale systems. With the internet “you’re doing the same process you’ve always done, but just more efficiently.” He described the second phase of automation as “when you can fundamentally change the underlying business process and do things in a completely new way. So it’s more of a revolution instead of an evolution.”

Bezos’ distinction enables us to distinguish further between processes and practices that have simply become “digitized” and those practices and processes that exist only because digital technologies do. As we can see by reference to its community feedback ratings system, eBay is a case of the latter.

In his analysis of globalization, Thomas Freidman (2000) distinguishes between two roles available for companies, governments and institutions in the “Evernet world” of globalized networks of communication, service and power. He calls these roles “shapers” and “adapters” respectively. Shapers are agents that shape up activities within a globalized world of networked coalitions and practices—whether that activity is “making a profit, making war or making a government or corporation respect human rights” (Freidman, 2000: 202). Shapers design rules, create interaction frameworks and set new standards for global practices. Adapters, on the other hand, follow shapers’ leads and adapt to the “scene” being created.

Friedman identifies eBay as a foremost and highly original shaper. He sees it as having been a leader in creating a whole new marketplace and instigating an entirely new set of interaction protocols for buyers and sellers. eBay, says Friedman, “came out of nowhere and within three years created a new set of rules and forms of interaction by which consumers would buy and sell things on the World Wide Web” (Friedman, 2000: 202). At the core of eBay’s business process is a simple rating scale and 80-character feedback system by which buyers can rate and respond to the effectiveness of sellers over the course of a transaction, and *vice versa*. This ratings system has been absolutely integral to eBay’s success in its enterprise. It has simultaneously transformed relations between buyers and sellers on the internet, and been elevated to prominence in the identity-shaping and reputation making behavior of many individuals in the practice of pursuing a positive ratings profile.

eBay’s rating system involves a three point rating scale—positive, neutral and negative—that serves as a public judgment of a person’s reputation, trustworthiness and reliability. Once an auction transaction has been completed (the winning bidder has paid for and received the item) the buyer can leave feedback about the seller and *vice versa* by means of the item number. Only the buyer and seller are authorized to comment formally on a particular transaction. Feedback consists of the actual rating (positive, neutral, negative) and a written recommendation.

eBay's website reminds eBayers that "[h]onest feedback shapes the community" (eBay 2002d: 1). The higher the positive ratings a person has, the more "reputable," "trustworthy" and "reliable" they are in eBay terms. On the other hand, accumulating a net feedback rating of -4 (minus four), means an individual can be excluded from the eBay community. Exclusion is not automatic, however, since it is up to users to notify eBay that someone has received four or more negative ratings.

As an aside, eBay's success has spawned a diverse range of complementary products and services, many of which entail literacies of one kind or another. For example, *eBay a-go-go*[™] has been purpose-designed to be an eBay wireless auction alerting service that operates via one's mobile phone or pager. It alerts users when they have been outbid, or won or sold an item. There are also various auction "tracking" and bidding software programs and online services (e.g., Amherst Robots, 2001; eSnipe, 2001), online mediation services for auction transactions that go wrong, escrow and e-cash services (e.g., BidPay and Billpoint), a range of how-to-bid-successfully books (e.g., Collier and Woerner, 2000; Reno, Reno, and Butler, 2000), and online beginner's introductions to eBay (e.g., SoYouWanna, 2000). Finally, for those who are truly serious about learning how to read and write the world according to eBay, there is eBay University.

Why *Ratings*?

eBay's overt intention in devising and implementing the feedback ratings system is to build a self-monitoring ethical community of eBay users—or "eBayers" for short. We would argue that the feedback ratings system might actually be read as an embodied ideological induction into a certain community-based "cyber space." That is, eBay is not only a shaper within the new technologies arena, but it is also an "educator" in that it "teaches" people how they *should* act within this new cyber space, and therefore, how they should act in relation to each other. It is, therefore, a space of induction. It plays a role in shoring up new discursive norms. It socializes people about what counts as an exemplary global space, and helps generate good global citizens by encouraging the "right" kind of cyber practices that lead to a well-organized and civil World Wide Web.

Indeed, even this side of the eBay experience is held up as an exemplary model for other companies to emulate on the internet.

Besides being creative about using the internet, Kanter [a Harvard Business School professor] says, there are other ingredients of the eBay model that companies should study as they expand their Web initiatives. She emphasizes principles rooted as much in social interaction as in the tenets of business: a sense of community where people can talk to one another as well as with the company they

patronize and a corporate culture that reinforces those connections and serves all members.

As an example, Kanter points to eBay's Giving Board, where users can post a problem and receive advice from other eBay members. "You get a lot of loyalty by treating people as members of a community," she says. "Analysts can't quite quantify that, but it sure shows up in eBay's profitability." (Heun, 2001: 1)

eBayers and Their Ratings

eBayers are very clear about the importance of their ratings. Many go to extraordinary lengths to obtain positive ratings. Some item postings contain a "customer assurance statement" that resembles an airline "thanks for flying with us" patter to stand in as a "bid confidently" statement. For example,

A Word of Thanks . . . We at Lorelei's Jewelry would like to Thank all of our Customers for their Patronage over the last 4 years. Our number 1 priority is to give you the best Customer Service in the Business. We know that you have choices and appreciate your business. Our Goal is to provide an Exceptional Line of Jewelry at the Absolute Lowest Prices. We are here to answer any Questions that you may have in a Timely Manner Via Telephone or Email. All Winning Bidders are Notified Promptly and Items are Normally Shipped the Day Payment is received. We hope that you will join our long list of Satisfied Customers . . .Over 10,000 Feedbacks and Growing Daily. (Lorelei's, 2000: 1)

The reference to 10,000 feedbacks is the clincher here. It is worn like a badge of honor (although canny eBayers will note that the company does not advertise "10,000 *positive* feedbacks" and will immediately go to the company's ratings page to verify the ratings are positive as implied). Some sellers email successful bidders at the end of a transaction to let them know the seller has left them positive feedback. The email can even contain a hyperlink to automated feedback forms. Customers need only fill in the actual rating and the written feedback line.

Many individual eBayers have constructed elaborate processes that aim at ensuring as many positive feedback statements and ratings as possible:

I have a spreadsheet that i use to keep track of my items, buying and selling and there is a space for me to check off that i have left feedback for a buyer/seller. When the buyer/seller leaves feedback for me in return, i circle the check mark, letting me know the transaction has come full circle. when i sell something, i include a thank you card with the item number listed, the item name listed, my ebay name and a note stating that i have left positive feedback for them and would appreciate the same in kind and i still have problems getting them to leave me feedback! So every month, i go down the spreadsheet and e-mail those who have failed to leave feedback asking them why they have not done so and if there were problems i was not aware of. this is very time consuming but it has

worked on most of the delinquents. it more or less embarrasses them into leaving feedback (eBay message board, 2001).

Having even one negative feedback is perceived as bad for business:

[Ratings and feedback] are very important as it's the only real way of knowing how good sellers are. I have never bought off someone with a bad rating and there are quite a few of them out there. . . . I have had to give out a few bad ratings to people who have won auctions and have never paid me or contacted me for that matter (*arkanoid2020* email interview 12/02/2001).

[Ratings] are extremely important. I don't want to buy from vendors with negative feedback, and I don't expect people to want to buy from me if I have any. Those comments are listed in red, and they show up like a neon sign!! (*bea1997* email interview 25/09/2000).

Ratings have actually become a “currency” for the eBay community, assuming the kind of role local community networks and character references have in physical space. One of our interviewees, *susygirl*, says:

I really take pride in [my ratings]. And for me it is the alter ego—it is *susygirl*'s not mine. And so I get pissed [off] if someone doesn't send me a positive feedback. But I never write and ask them to. Some sellers do that and I usually don't respond to that (email interview 1/02/2001).

Others, like *bea1997*, a long-term and very experienced eBay'er, have preferred to be “duped” by buyers than risk negative feedback. *bea1997* explained to us,

Sometimes I lose money from customers who break an item and ask for money back. I just don't want to risk having my good reputation ruined for a few lousy bucks so I just take the blame and send their money back (email interview 25/09/2000).

bea1997's experience tallies with others reported elsewhere. For example, Erick Sherman recounts,

[b]oth buyers and sellers get burned from time to time, but usually not badly. Shamus remembers someone who bought a \$25 trading card from him on eBay then returned it, but with a corner newly bent. “He said, ‘That's what you sent me,’” says Shamus, who didn't argue because the amount was too small and negative feedback would hurt his future sales (Sherman, 2001: 63).

Others have vigorously fought with eBay to have what the eBay'er regards as unjust negative feedback removed (which is almost impossible to have done), and

various eBayers have established entire websites devoted to explaining the events behind any negative feedback they have received.

Ratings are considered by most eBayers to be so important that the dedicated discussion board attached to the eBay website (located on a server in the U.S.) for discussing feedback is a popular and much-used service. This “board” is a web-based service that allows people to post messages (or responses to messages) about their ratings and feedback problems, warnings about “deadbeat” sellers or buyers, “sniping” (bidders waiting until the very last moment to place a winning bid), how to go about lodging a complaint about an unfair negative rating, and so on. Despite eBay’s emphasis on *community*, however, the rating and feedback system has not made for close-knit and harmonious fellowship.

Reciprocity is a key value enacted on eBay in relation to ratings. As *susy-girl* observed, she is “pissed (off)” if she completes a transaction and the seller doesn’t leave feedback for her. Reciprocity in ratings is likewise important to *arkanoid2020*:

I have also had the problem of people not giving me a rating after a successful transaction, which is a shame because I always make the effort (email interview 12/02/2001).

Other eBayers express their feelings about a lack of reciprocity very strongly. Much of the eBay-based discussion about ratings is taken up with who should leave feedback and a rating first, and why. For example,

I figured out feedback right away. When I receive an item I immediately leave feedback. That’s my way of keeping track of things. I then immediately email the seller and thank them for good service (I’ve been very fortunate in this regard.) and ask them to leave feedback. It seems to me that sellers will only leave feedback if requested to do so and *_if_* I leave positive feedback. Sellers should leave feedback when they get my prompt payment in my opinion. Why do I have to gently nudge them and leave my feedback first? They get my money first (eBay feedback discussion board, 2001).

In bad-case scenarios, the power of leaving feedback is held over the buyer or seller. For example, when a buyer has received an item and for some reason wants to return it to the seller, but the seller does not agree to receive it back, the buyer may threaten to leave negative feedback if the seller does not comply with his or her wishes. eBay members refer to this as “feedback hostage taking”—where the seller (or buyer) is held hostage to receiving feedback (e.g., “I’ll leave you feedback only when you’ve left me feedback”). In worst-case scenarios, this is what eBayers refer to as “feedback extortion,” and it is taken very seriously by eBay itself. The eBay feedback system has actually generated a metalanguage for talking about

participant practices. This vocabulary comprises mostly new, mostly pejorative terms that eBayers invent and use freely and fluently (see Table 12.1).

Term	Definition
feedback bombing	Two senses: (1) The process whereby two or more people gang up on someone, purchase products, then leave negative feedback (2) The process whereby two or more people gang up on someone, purchase products, then leave positive feedback (and is usually reciprocal—those in on the scam positively bomb each other’s auction)
feedback padding	One person creates two eBay bidding accounts and uses one account to pad out the feedback on his or her other account.
feedback extortion	eBay defines feedback extortion as “demanding any action from a fellow user that he or she is not required to do, at the threat of leaving negative feedback.”
retaliatory negative feedback	When a negative feedback rating is given to one person in an eBay transaction by the other, the first responds with a negative rating—regardless of the quality of service received. This often goes hand-in-hand with feedback hostage taking (e.g., “I was really unhappy with this transaction but can’t leave feedback until the other one does because I want to leave a negative feedback but am worried that if I leave it first then the person I’m dealing with will give me a negative feedback in response!”).
(to be) neutralized	To receive a “neutral” rating (it is also possible to “neutral” someone, too; that is, to give them a neutral rating).
(to be) NEGged (also “neg”)	To receive a “negative” rating (it is also possible to ‘NEG’ someone, too; that is, to give them a negative rating).
Deadbeat bidder or seller (also referred to as “deadbeats”)	This is the term eBayers use to describe people who do not deliver on their half of the transaction (i.e., do not pay or do not send the item or send the item in poor condition etc.). eBay’s official term of bidders who skip out on a deal is “Non-Paying Bidders,” or NPBs for short.

Table 12.1: Shared metalanguage on eBay’s Feedback Discussion Board.

Not surprisingly, exchanges on the feedback discussion board can become heated, with little evidence of the kind of tolerance one would expect in a community of the kind eBay aims to foster:

and i agree if you knew the answer why bother asking? i get lots of people asking stupid ? [trans: questions] like what does it measure? when it is already posted on my auctions . . . i tell them to go back and read the description. i don't find that to be rude. (eBay feedback discussion board, 2001)

And responses from two different people:

not rude? must be why you have so many successful transactions . . .

Why not just answer the question and accept that stupid people make up a big percentage of customers?

The guy's sarcastic, not rude. Read his very limited, posted feedback for a good laugh.

The reference to the first poster's "successful transactions" and "very limited, posted feedback" are snide comments on the poster's beginner status: one positive rating. Such reactions indicate a tendency for eBayers to read ratings both as statements of their public reputations and as indicators of "wisdom" and knowledge where all things eBay are concerned.

eBay's response to the soap opera-like dimensions of the community feedback and ratings system is to continue holding out for a self-regulating, "trustworthy" and intelligent community:

Hello folks,
Thanks for the discussion. Let me offer you eBay's perspective on Feedback for consideration:

The real value in Feedback is in the trends that it reveals. While it is an admirable goal to work towards a perfect rating, it is IMPOSSIBLE to always please everyone all the time anywhere in life, right? An occasional isolated negative will not impact the VAST majority of users when they are deciding whether or not to bid or accept a bid. (I would say "ANY" users, but then someone would post to prove me wrong, hehehe).

We hope you will use the Feedback forum faithfully, despite the risk of receiving a negative that you feel you don't deserve, because in this way our whole community is served best. The purpose of Feedback is to help keep the site safe. If we use it appropriately, the good guys are always going to have FAR more positive comments than the less-scrupulous users who will quickly earn track records that show their true colors for all to see, as well.

Daphne will step down from her soapbox now. :)

Daphne

eBay Community Support
(eBay feedback discussion board, 10/03/2000)

Interestingly, eBay has recently instituted a feedback service that alerts participants to items they have yet to leave feedback on. It is also possible to access a list of feedback each user *leaves* others. This adds a second dimension to a user's feedback and rating profile and often makes for interesting exchanges in the discussion spaces of eBay.

Plastic

eBay users are not the only ones to take the ratings game seriously. eBay's rating system has impacted powerfully on internet-based social interactions, with numerous other interactive internet sites using ratings systems as public reputation markers. Plastic is a good example of this. It is somewhat unusual on the internet, however, since it evaluates quality of thinking and expression rather than business conduct.

Plastic began in January 2001, with the aim of being a "new model" of news delivery: "anarchy vs. hierarchy, and so on and so forth" (Joey, 2001: 1), and promising "the best content from all over the Web for discussion" (Schroedinger's Cat, 2002: 1). This new model of news delivery puts "the audience in charge of the news cycle as much as possible without devolving into the kind of ear-splitting echo chamber that's turned 'community' into such a dirty word" (Joey, 2001: 1). Historically speaking, Plastic was the offspring of a merger between Suck and Feed—two popular but culturally edgy content provider web services established in 1995 (Greenstein, 2000: 1), combining the quirkiness of Suck newsletters with the insightful and wide-ranging discussions of Feed (cf. Anuff and Cox, 1997; Johnson, 1997). Plastic was launched in partnership with the editors and services of ten news and content providers—Spin, The New Republic, Inside, Movieline, Gamers.com, Modern Humorist, TeeVee, Netslaves, Nerve and Wired News—who helped to choose from among member submissions which news items would be posted on the Plastic website for discussion (Greenstein, 2000). In December 2001, Plastic decided to go it alone with the help of "user-editors" (Plastic members who act as volunteer submissions editors) after the web service was bought by Carl Steadman—known generically as "Carl" by Plastic users—who remains Chief-Editor and self-appointed site janitor.

The Plastic community is highly heterogeneous. Judging by the comments posted and the historical and cultural reference points used, however, the majority of users appear to be male, North American, and mostly 20- and 30-somethings. Or, as one anonymous poster described the typical Plastic user:

1. Age: 18 - 35

2. Education: Liberal Arts College, 3.5 years, no diploma.
 3. Career: 2 - 10 years pulling lattes at Starbucks, 18 months at a failed dot-com, now an “independent Web-design consultant.”
 4. Likes: Digerati, biscotti, anime
 5. Dislikes: Math, finance, work
 6. Gender: One of six available choices
 7. Politics: 60% lefty gonzo, 40% libertarian nutcake
 8. Pastimes: S&M, B&D, T&A, LS/MFT (no weirdos, please!)
- (Anonymous Idiot, 2001: 1).

In other words, Plasticians tend to be self-styled members of an erudite, ironic and humorous “plugged in” crowd, interested in quirky takes on anything newsworthy—particularly anything connected with popular culture—as well as in serious and informed discussion of current events. Estimates place the number of regular Plastic users at around 15,000 (McKinnon 2001: 1). And anything that will provoke discussion is regarded as post-worthy (Carl, in an interview with Honan, 2001:1).

Although Plastic emulates a long-existing technology news and discussion website service devoted to a technogeek audience—Slashdot.com—it is “new” in the sense that it turns “push media” like email-posted newspaper headlines and news websites on their head by having members propose content and comment publicly upon it. “Plastic’s original contribution is a forum to discuss the diverse news pieces it promotes. At Plastic, readers’ comments are what it’s all about” (Barrett, 2001: 1).

Items are written up by users and can be posted to 8 topic categories: Et-cetera, Film&TV, Games, Media, Music, Politics, Tech and Work. Those whose news items are accepted for posting and/or who post comments on the website are awarded ratings on two dimensions. One of these is “karma,” which is used to rate a participant as an active member of the community relative to the number of newsworthy postings—both in terms of submitting stories and posting comments on stories—she or he has made to the site overall. A karma rating of 50 or over generally elevates the poster to (volunteer) submissions editor status.

The other rating system—which is linked directly to karma—is peer moderation that operates on a scale of -1 to +5 for a posting overall. Non-registered posters are allocated a default initial rating of “0” when they first post a comment, while the rating baseline for registered users is +1. Moderation points are awarded by Plastic’s editors and by a changing group of registered Plastic members who have been randomly assigned the role by Plastic’s editors; or, as the message alerting members to their new moderator status puts it: “Congratulations! You’ve wasted so much time on Plastic that for the next 4 days we’re making you a moderator” (Plastic, 2002a: 1). Each moderator gets 10 moderating points to

award to posted comments on a Plastic news item, and the possible ratings each moderator can allocate are:

Whatever 0
Irrelevant -1
Incoherent -1
Obnoxious -1
Astute+1
Clever +1
Informative +1
Funny +1
Genius +1
Over-rated +1
Under-rated +1

The moderation points awarded to each post are tallied and the final score is automatically updated and posted in the subject line of the message for readers to see. In other words, “if four or five moderators think a comment is brilliant, it may end up with a +5; useless comments are moderated down to a -1” (Plastic, 2002b: 2).

This ranking practice is based on formal recognition by the site that users cannot read everything that is posted on a topic. With a peer ranking system in place, users can set filters to screen out postings that fall outside a ranking range of their choice. For example, setting the filter threshold at +3 means only those comments that have been moderated and score at or above +3 will be displayed. Conversely, setting the filter threshold at -1 means every comment posted will be displayed. Plastic offers this ranking and filtering function as a means for helping users practice selective reading and to help enhance the quality of postings to the site.

Like the ratings system used on eBay, the moderation and karma system on Plastic does not necessarily ensure a harmonious community of users. “Meta-discussions” involving litanies of complaints about being “modded down” unfairly—or being a victim of “downmod” attacks, where a moderator flushes out all your postings and moderates them down regardless of content—are common. One disgruntled user even went so far as to equate downmod attacks with terrorism:

Well, to get back to the point I was making, there is a type of attack for which Plastic.com is almost uniquely susceptible. In this type of attack, the terrorist chooses a victim. Then, when he [is] given the opportunity to moderate, he strikes. He goes through the victim’s list of comments and then, ignoring Plastic’s moderation guidelines, he moderates each of the comments downward. He does not care whether his moderation votes make sense, only that it drives down the rating of the comment. The terrorist’s goal is to drive the victim’s presence on Plastic “under the Radar,” below the filtering level of most of the Plastic audience. He also wants to put the victim’s Karma into a nose-dive. (Gravityzone, 2001: 1)

Other users are accused of being “karma whores” if they appear to be “sucking up to” or worming their way into the favor of Plastic editors in the hopes of getting more stories accepted than other users or having their comments modded up. As one poster put it bluntly to another, “Tyler, kissing Bart’s ass won’t get you more stories posted” (jbou, 2002: 1) in response to Tyler’s comment in a heated discussion of the U.S.’s threats to invade Iraq again. Tyler made reference to Bart, one of Plastic’s editors and had written in part: “My, we’re feeling self-important today, aren’t we jbou? Could you please point to Bart’s ‘warmongering’ posts? And why should he have to answer to you, or to anyone else, on command?” (tylerh, 2002: 1).

And, despite some posters loudly and repeatedly protesting that they don’t care about their overall karma, karma ratings—and the moderation system—are indeed “a new arithmetic of self-esteem” on Plastic (Shroedinger’s Cat, 2002: 1). At stake is public recognition of a poster’s incisive mind, keen-edged humor, “innate hipness,” and of being “plugged in” (Plastic, 2002a: 1).

Complexities

The point at which we began, with the idea of website communities that are organized around easy-to-use and read ratings systems as being new socializing spaces that shape people into becoming appropriate users of new cyber spaces, now appears much more complex—indeed, contradictory.

On one hand, eBay’s community feedback ratings system has been an important factor in its stunning success to date. In part this is because it has helped establish eBay’s mission and identity as a helpful broker, with its clients’ best interests at heart, and as a responsible cyber force with whom people who want to be part of the project of building a successful tradition of e-commerce seek to be associated. Moreover, as emulators like Plastic have found, engaging participants in active roles of evaluators—and content producers—encourages further participation, “hooking” people in by publicly valuing their contributions. In addition, however, it appears that part of the success of ratings systems in web spaces such as eBay and Plastic has to do with the fact that it helps meet a range of personal needs, including identity and esteem needs. Both “services” actively recruit membership to an affinity group with which one can identify (Gee, 2001) and offer individuals and groups a way of attaining a visible and enviable presence. *susygirl* sums up this aspect of eBay nicely:

For me it is a kind of therapy. I like it too because i become susygirl and not some English professor. I like to hide behind my new identity. (email interview, 12/02/2001)

MayorBob, a well respected member of the Plastic community, explains it this way: “The nice thing about the karma [rating system] is that, when you’re not getting downmod assaulted, you do get a little feedback on whether you are making sense or getting your point across” (MayorBob, 2001: 1). In other words, besides providing a means for mediating responsible and satisfying commercial or intellectual exchange, the ratings system also offers a service to personal identity formation and to what is fast becoming a highly valued “currency”—an exemplary personal ratings profile.

On the other hand, however, the practice of promoting written feedback and ratings in response to eBay transactions has become a space in which many participants engage in purposes that do not merely contradict the “cyber civic” goal of eBay, but actually involve a range of malicious, preying, nasty, hurt-causing acts toward others (some of whom doubtless contribute to their own pain by investing more than is wise in the discourse and otherwise taking their “profile” or “identity” more seriously than the context merits). Some of the data concerning eBay we have presented smells of interpersonal power-tripping, petty acts of malice, and the desire to belittle others (which is endemic in internet spaces). Similarly, Plastic discussions readily collapse into searing vitriolic exchanges of hate-laced postings and taunting challenges.

It goes without saying, then, that dynamic relationships exist between technologies and the practices in which they are employed. On one hand, the development of new technologies creates conditions in which people can change existing social practices and develop new ones, as well as change and develop new literacies that are integral parts of these new or changing practices. On the other hand, these practices simultaneously “constitute” the technologies involved as cultural tools and shape what they *mean* and, indeed, what they *are* within the various contexts in which people use them. In its complexity and contradictoriness, the “ratings game” is par for the course so far as literacy and technology are concerned. The point here is simple and well rehearsed, but bears reinforcing in the present context, since there are still many people who think the internet unleashes all sorts of undesirable forces that are not equally present in the social practices of physical space.

Literacy and technology are never “singular,” never the “same thing.” They are always “so many things” when in so many hands. The same alphabetic code can be used for writing notes to one’s children or for publishing sophisticated experimental findings in learned journals. It can be used for writing good wishes to friends and for writing extortion notes to intended victims. The same kind of ambiguity and range is open to practically any tool or body of knowledge and information we care to name. The same is true of more specific literacies, including different forms of feedback and rating genres. We need only to think of the uses to which various kinds of referees’ reports can be put for the point to be perfectly clear.

The particular “new literacy” of producing (or withholding) ratings and feedback shares the formal character of all literacies (different people put it to different uses, understand it differently, etc.). It is susceptible, then, to the same “play” of moral, civic, and emotional forces—the way that people are and how they live out their (in)securities, pleasures and pains, values and aspirations, and so on.

Strategies and Uses: Reading the Social Practice of Rating Others and Feeding Back

Among the multiple ways we might try to describe and understand some of this complexity, we find the option offered by Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concept of consumer “uses” particularly fruitful (see also Chapter 12 in this volume).

de Certeau develops a distinction between “producers” and “consumers” that is much wider than—but incorporates—our usual distinction drawn from the domain of commodity production. In this larger sense, producers are those with the power—and, hence, a “place” (a “proper”)—from which to shape discourses and discursive formation in all spheres of human life. Institutions like universities mediate the producer role to the extent that they are sites where social actors with the acknowledged power to do so can maintain and police what counts as “science.” Consumers are those (scientists themselves) who “consume” the discourses by participating in them. The same distinction works all the way down to the level at which consumers consume specific artifacts of commodified popular culture, such as television fare as packaged entertainment. The strength of de Certeau’s formulation is that it directs attention away from a narrow focus on particular acts of consuming artifacts and toward a wider and deeper understanding of social *practices*—in which individual acts *participate* but by no means *constitute*. Just as the “operations” of producers are deeper and larger than we often think—they *produce* the discourse that *constitutes* a TV program as *entertainment* in the first place, not merely the program—so too are the “operations” (*practices*) of consumers.

de Certeau develops a set of concepts including “strategies,” “uses,” and “tactics” as part of a framework for investigating the nature and politics of cultural production within the practice of everyday life. He is keen to redress perceptions of consumers as passive effects or reflexes of the practices of producers, without denying the relations of differential power that play out across social and cultural groupings everywhere. He nonetheless wants to identify, understand, and explain the power by which the “weak” maneuver within the spaces constituted strategically by producers to make them habitable and to meet their own purposes as best they can.

Producers, who have established and defined their own place from which to manage relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats, can develop

strategies to this end. Strategy is an art of the strong (cf. scientific institutions that define and regulate “knowledge” through the power to provide themselves with their own place). Through strategic practices producers define the spaces to be lived in by all. Consumers, or the “weak,” cannot strategize. Instead, they can maneuver within the constraining order of regulatory fields within which they are obliged to operate by “making use of” the constraining order and by employing “tactics.” We will focus here only on “uses.”

de Certeau illustrates “use” by examples like that of North African migrants being obliged to live in a low-income housing estate in France and to use the French of Paris or Roubaix (see de Certeau, 1984: 30–32). These people might insinuate into the system imposed on them “the ways of ‘dwelling’ (in a house or in a language) peculiar to [their] native Kabylia” (de Certeau, 1984: 32). This introduces a degree of plurality into the system. It also confirms consumers as *active* to that extent—albeit still *subordinate*—in working to make such spaces “habitable.”

We want to argue that this dialectic is present in every case of literacy and technology. In the present context, eBay’s “feedback and ratings” practice and the specific practices of literacy it engenders is a case in point. Where Friedman (2000) talks of eBay as a “shaper” we may equally speak of eBay as a producer. As a constitutive element of shaping the field of commercial exchange in cyberspace—even if it is trying to do so in “good” and “civil” ways according to recognized discursive constructions of these; after all, there is nothing inherently “wicked” about producers and their productions, since we are talking contingencies of power here as distinct from ethics *per se*—the community feedback and ratings system forms part of a constraining order. One can choose whether or not to *be* a “consumer” within this space, but if one chooses to participate in this space, then its order applies.

What we think we see in the snippets of data presented above are varying “ways” of consumers “making use of” the ratings game. They are “insinuating” into the system produced for them ways of “dwelling” with which they are familiar, adept, or which they otherwise find satisfying or reinforcing—no matter how unpleasant we may find some of these. The “new literacy” of ratings, then, can best be understood as endlessly complex and multiple. “It” is flexed into myriad uses. “It” is susceptible to policing and “moralizing” on the part of producers and other consumers alike, just as much as and in parallel manners to the literacies of physical spaces like schools—where the “players” involved are also inclined to invoke notions of fairness, propriety, and “getting it right.”

In the end, online community feedback and ratings systems are often an illuminating microcosm of literacy and social practice at large. We may, if we choose, use it as a reference point from which to consider the dialectics of production and consumption of the official literacies of school. We might consider where we, personally, are positioned in these and with what consequences for learners whose

“right” to consume is, precisely, an obligation in the way that the participation rights of eBay members or Plastic users are not.

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PART FOUR

