

Volatile Measures: the Financialization of Online Reputation

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Abstract

Online reputation has been pervasively quantified. Platforms implement Online Reputation Systems (such as star-rating interfaces) to facilitate trust between buyers and sellers, hosts and renters, posters and commenters – often across highly dispersed, partially anonymous networks. Reputation scores comprise a form of networked social capital that can help, or hurt, an online user’s chances of finding a loan, renting a flat, or getting a gig. ‘Likes’, star ratings, friend counts and retweet tallies extend the social logic of the credit score, metrifying reputations and making them highly visible and actionable. As key components of the visual cultures and social logics of creditworthiness, signs of online reputation play a foregrounded role in instantiating financialized forms of selfhood – what Alison Hearn refers to as the ‘speculative self,’ who constantly partakes in acts of rating and being ranked.

What happens when ubiquitous online reputation-calculation leads, paradoxically, not to more precise expressions of reputation capital, but to more systemic volatility in the spheres of reputation? This paper argues that there has been a recent shift between two conceptions of optimization in online reputation, which enact opposing attitudes about the relation between reputation and the calculable. Prior to 2016, and made particularly visible by the ‘sharing economy,’ a predominant narrative surrounding online reputation was tied to histories of optimizing private credit. In an environment filled with myriad metrifying apparatuses for online reputation, users strove to achieve the highest possible scores, thereby performing the presumption that reputation could, to a certain extent, be consistently measured within relatively stable spheres of reputational value.

Yet the constant measurement of reputation has had unexpected consequences. Ubiquitous numerical imagery directly or indirectly related to users’ reputations (such as numbers of ‘likes’ and retweets) tends to increase reputational *volatility* – in other words, the visible range of possible measurable and actionable values associated with reputations. Persistent tallies of ‘likes’ or friends produce palpable meta-images of the possible range of reputational values that can be accrued on various platforms. Further, ‘likes’ beget more ‘likes’, and retweets feed into Twitter algorithms, thereby giving even more potential visibility to highly engaging tweets. This tends to increase the range of extreme veneration or shame instantiated on platforms. Thus, in the past few years, a more indirect understanding of reputation-optimization has come to prominence, which capitalizes on the systemic volatility exacerbated by reputation’s ubiquitous calculation online. For instance, recent political campaigns that mobilize online trolls to attack opponents’ reputations (instigated by Steve Bannon and others) indirectly optimize the value of online reputation, by understanding reputational volatility as itself a source of value. Such indirect understandings of the value of online reputation are best understood as financial in their logic. For instance, Bannon’s use of online reputational attack in the 2016 Trump campaign might best be understood through real options theory – which addresses investment decisions pertaining to real assets in an uncertain future. Bannon actively understood himself to be tapping into the “monster power”

of rootless white males online, who would attack Hillary Clinton and venerate Donald Trump. By setting up the campaign such that it fed from this “monster power,” Bannon effectively purchased an option on reputational volatility fomented outside of the official campaign on sites such as 4chan and 8chan –which he could either identify with or abandon as expedient.

Tracing a discursive shift from reputation capital to reputation warfare, this article argues the need for a nuanced understanding of the financialization of reputation – including the emergence of indirect means to capitalize on its volatility. Understanding online reputation warfare as part of a cultural logic of volatility involves understanding systemic volatility itself as financiers do – as a horizon of opportunity.

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