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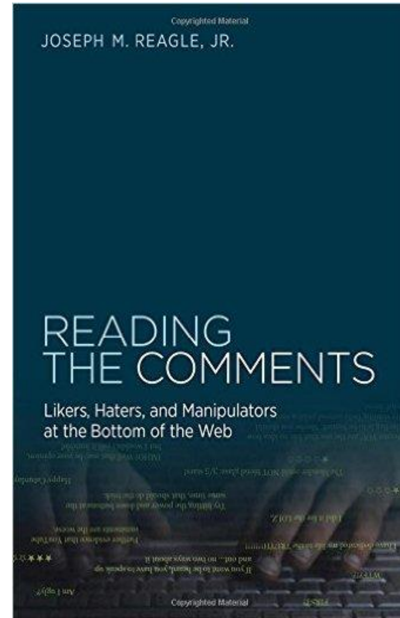
Joseph M. Reagle, Jr., **Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web.** Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015, 241 pp., $27.95 (hardcover).



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In ***Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web***, Joseph M. Reagle Jr. begins with a Tweet from @AvoidComments (Shane Liesegang): "There's a reason that comments are typically put on the bottom half of the Internet" (p. 1). The notion of "Don't feed the trolls" has become an all-too-common warning among online users to avoid those who speak with the intent to provoke or annoy. Reagle takes on this challenge. In this book, he sees a little-understood but important part of our digital lives. Why should we study user comments? Are we better off avoiding comments? Reagle argues that comments are a genre or type of communication because they are meant to be seen. *Reading the Comments* is written for individuals who have a working knowledge of how the social aspects of the Internet work but at the same time the book is written in language that is not out of reach for undergraduates and non-academics interested in this topic.

Reagle begins with a concise definition of what comments are and what they mean for him. Comments are short, asynchronious (not bound by time), and reactive. There is always a source, an audience, content, and intention or effect. He argues that despite the fact that comments tend to be ignored and/or not taken seriously, "we can learn much about ourselves and the ways that other people seek to exploit the value of our social selves" (p. 3). This book is timely, given the attention given of late on the myriad ways user comments impact and continue to pervade our social lives, influencing how we see and interpret the world around us.

Though not intending to examine comments chronologically, Reagle unintentionally does so, beginning with the early stages of social media. In what he calls intimate serendipity, Reagle describes a moment in time when Twitter, and by extension, all social media, "felt edgy and intimate" (p. 13). In this intimate setting, users felt they were able to express themselves in what was a seemingly safe place. Of course, Reagle also mentions that this intimate serendipity disappeared over time as social media sites matured and an influx of users signed up for the services.

For Reagle, comments are ordinary in the sense that they are something we encounter daily. That is what he is interested in investigating. In the appropriately named second chapter, "Informed: I Don't Know. I Gotta Get the Best One," Reagle takes a similar approach to Henry Jenkins's seminal work, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2006), in which Jenkins argues that

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collective intelligence, unlike a hive mind, encourages multiple ways of knowing rather than suppressing individual voices. For Jenkins, this is the premise behind fandom in that "fans inform each other about program history or recent developments because no single fan can know everything necessary to fully appreciate the series" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 139). Taking a cue from Alfred Hermida (2014), who argues that sharing information is adaptive to our species' survival, Reagle contends that "we express our thoughts for the benefit of others, and others seek them out to understand and make decisions" (p. 23).

The question Reagle continues to ask throughout this book is "Who gets to be the critic?" Do users and consumers depend on public input or expert advice? Comments are, in the most utopian sense, welcoming or encouraging of public debate and discussion. It is the very basis of Habermas's notion of the public sphere. Reagle focuses on the naturalness and the fact that comments are nothing new, nor are they unique to the Web, as comments have always been around, long before the spread of Internet spaces. In fact, other scholars attribute the dissemination and spread of knowledge to previous technological advances such as the printing press. What is new about online comments is not only the vast number of them on the Web, but how easy it is for everyone with an Internet connection to view comments.

About halfway through the book, we see the author discussing the ways in which comments can be (and are) manipulated. He premises this on just how much the current post-Fordist-inspired culture stresses the importance of the "sink or swim" mentality. For businesses, the user review is an important tool, as it can make or break the success of a business. Due to the pervasiveness of online comments, it is unsurprising that Reagle would move toward a discussion of comments as a valued commodity for businesses. As such, there are a myriad of ways a business can manipulate the online system. For example, a business can hire reviewers and create fake users to fabricate positive (albeit false) reviews about the business.

But what does this achieve? What are the consequences (if any) if individuals are caught falsifying information? What safeguards do we have in place to differentiate between a real and a fake review? While others (e.g. Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) have suggested that readers ask themselves a series of questions to discern a false review from a real one, Reagle does not do that. Rather, he emphasizes that despite the fact that there are fake comments out there, we still place a high value on comments, whether we are seeking them or creating them.

Given what Reagle mentioned earlier in the book—that comments (and feedback) are nothing new—in the digital realm, commenting has grown to the extent that context can be easily lost, especially since online commenting is asynchronious. Therefore, it is easier to be mean and to create and facilitate destructive conversation. In the last chapters, Reagle examines the work of Gabriella Coleman, who argues that trolls, haters, and bullies go through a loss of self and an abandonment of social norms that may be the result of depersonalization (as cited by Reagle). Reagle differentiates depersonalization to that of deindividuation, in which users lose a sense of themselves. In bringing up the worst part of the Internet, Reagle poses the question what do we do when we see an obvious instance of trolling? Do we allow those users to continue trolling (and we are miserable) or do we ban them, an action that some would argue goes against free speech? Reagle argues that we should "not ignore the trolls. Just as we

should not ignore comments but curate them, we should identify abusive behavior as odious and unwelcome and support targets of abuse—whether emotionally, finally, or legally” (p. 119). The question of how to go about doing this is left out of this book.

By the end of the book, Reagle comes back full circle by discussing how comments affect our self-esteem and by extension, how that affects the way we comment. Referencing Sherry Turkle, who wrote, “We seem to have found [in the Internet] a way to spend time with others without being present, which seems magical at first” (as cited by Reagle, p. 136), Reagle touches upon a Heideggerrian notion of what technology is used for. For Heidegger (1977), if technology is merely a tool, then it should not affect us. However, what we are seeing (and what Reagle indirectly alludes to) is that the ways in which we use the Internet through our comments has an immense affect, both positive and negative. Reagle pays particular attention to the notion that our preoccupation with the Internet has led to “a narcissistic epidemic.” This notion that there is a high correlation between narcissistic traits and social media use is something that has been gaining attention in the past few years, in both academia and public discussions. However, Reagle reminds us that (in the case of academic publications) correlations remain just that and do not infer any kind of causation. In addition, he writes that “even finding a correlation between narcissistic personality traits and media use does not mean that people have a clinical disorder” (p. 139).

Throughout *Reading the Comments*, Reagle addresses both the positive and the negative. It is important to discuss the negative aspects of online commenting, but I see Reagle as one of the optimists. Reagle is a scholar who, like Jenkins and Hermida before him, see the importance of online discussions in terms of community building and in bringing awareness to public debate. However, unlike Jenkins and Hermida, who focus on the spectacular and the things that go viral, Reagle set out to problematize something as mundane and ordinary as user comments. I think of it this way: If Reagle was pessimistic or even neutral about comments, he would not have devoted an entire book on user comments and would have brushed them off as irrelevant. In fact, he returns to his question of whether or not we should avoid comments. I believe in this book he makes it clear that regardless of whether comments have a positive or negative effect on us, they are worthy of academic analysis. To that end, he leaves us with the challenge of figuring out how to effectively use comments as educators, industry professionals, policy makers, and users. It is an ambitious and worthwhile challenge for anyone who wishes to take it on.

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