



Reconfiguring relations of accountability: Materialization of social media in the travel sector

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A B S T R A C T

Expanding use of Web 2.0 technologies has generated complex information dynamics that are propelling organizations in unexpected directions, redrawing boundaries and shifting relationships. Using research on user-generated content, we examine online rating and ranking mechanisms and analyze how their performance reconfigures relations of accountability. Our specific interest is in the use of so-called “social media” such as TripAdvisor, where participant reviews are used to rank the popularity of services provided by the travel sector. Although ranking mechanisms are not new, they become “power-charged”—to use Donna Haraway’s term—when enacted through Web 2.0 technologies. As such, they perform a substantial redistribution of accountability. We draw on data from an on-going field study of small businesses in a remote geographical area for whom TripAdvisor has changed ‘the rules of the game,’ and we explore the moral and strategic implication of this transformation.

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Introduction

As has been well documented by numerous scholars (Miller & Rose, 2008; Munro & Mouritsen, 1996; Neyland & Woolgar, 2002; Pentland, 2000; Power, 1994, 1996, 1997; Strathern, 2000), the recent decades have witnessed an explosion in demands for transparency and accountability, and the emergence of what Power (1997) calls the “audit society.” As Willmott (1996, p. 24) notes, “Accountability is endemic to our lives. As human beings, we are continuously engaged in the activity of making sense of the world, including the sense of self in the world, by giving and receiving accounts.” The consequences for organizations of this increased attention on indicators, evaluation, and performance is both considerable and controversial (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). On the one hand, evaluative measures and performance indicators can make

organizations more accountable to their constituencies by rendering information about operations available and accessible. On the other hand, they can give rise to negative unintended consequences as scrutiny and surveillance intensifies and organizations become overly focused on metrics rather than on the qualities the metrics are intended to assess. In an era where more and more contexts are rendered “auditable” (Jeacle & Carter, 2009)—a process Pentland (2000) refers to as the “verification of everything”—how these different consequences play out and in what conditions is thus an important empirical question with significant salience for organizational practices. Drawing on the work of Roberts (1991, 2005), Miller (1996), Espeland and Sauder (2007), and Stark (2009a), we take up this question in the context of the travel sector, specifically from the point of view of hotels faced with the recent intensification of interest in online verification mechanisms.

The aim of this paper is to understand how accountability is performed online using social media websites. It is widely recognized that the World Wide Web can form a

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key part of processes that give local phenomena greater scale, scope and reach but this is where many studies end. We need to move beyond the hubris and speculation that surrounded the emergence of the web to examine empirical-founded implications and reconsider the boundaries of the debate. To this end, we move the discussion surrounding its consequences to include the material grounds of performed accountability.

The use of online verification mechanisms is a recent development, emerging out of the evolution over the past decade of so-called Web 2.0 technologies¹—technologies that facilitate active participation in websites on the part of the users. These web technologies are in specific contrast to the prior Web 1.0 technologies, which facilitated largely one-way information publication and distribution with limited opportunities for user engagement and interaction. Web 2.0 technologies have also come to be known as “social media,” highlighting their central distinguishing feature—the active creation of content by their users or members. A variety of social media websites have emerged and while these categories overlap, they highlight differences in the website’s primary purpose: *content development* (e.g., websites such as Wikipedia and Digg), *networking* where members build and maintain relationships with friends or colleagues (e.g., websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn), and *common interest* where participants with similar interests can share ideas, views, and information (e.g., websites such as Epinions and TripAdvisor). Our focus on this paper is on the third type of social media, the common interest website.

A characteristic aspect of common interest social media websites is the active, online sharing of recommendations, reviews, and advice among users that assess and rank the quality of a range of products and services such as books (Amazon), movies (Netflix), home services (AngiesList), healthcare (PatientsLikeMe), teachers (RateMyProfessor), and many more. The novelty of these websites, as Dellarocas (2003, p. 1407) notes, is that they enable individuals to “make their personal thoughts, reactions and opinions easily accessible to the global community.”

The convergence of increasing demands for accountability and transparency with the rise of social media and user-generated content creates a powerful combination. While public measures of performance and ranking mechanisms are not new, they become “power-charged”—to use Haraway’s (1988) term—when enacted through Web 2.0 technologies. In this paper, we focus specifically on TripAdvisor² where members share tips and post reviews of travel destinations, which are then used by the website infrastructure to rank the popularity and quality of services provided by the travel sector. One of TripAdvisor’s defining tag lines is “Get the truth, then go”. We examine the production and entailments of TripAdvisor’s “truth,” and consider how the knowledge produced through the website’s dynamic ranking mechanism performs a substantial redistribution of accountability. We conclude by discussing some of the implications of such a shift in accountability. Before turning

to the travel sector and the expanding use of online reviews, we first discuss accountability and why considerations of accountability have taken on such a particular resonance in the contemporary information age.

Accountability and ranking mechanisms

The rise of web content has been discussed in the Information Systems literature in multiple ways including “information accountability” (Weitzner et al., 2008) focusing on ethics of design, access controls, privacy, copyright infringement, identify theft, intellectual property, and fair information use (Friedman, Kahn, & Borning, 2006; Introna, 2000; Mingers & Walsham, 2010; Nissenbaum, 1996). While these matters are crucially important, our emphasis in this paper is on a more encompassing notion of accountability (Miller, 1996; Roberts, 1991).

The past few decades have seen an escalation of interest in forms of accountability, both that of institutions and individuals (Munro & Mouritsen, 1996). Our interest in this paper is in institutional accountability, both how organizations are being held to account by various constituencies (e.g., publics, governments, clients, interest groups, etc.) and how they hold themselves to account in response. The starting point for our analysis is Robert’s (1991) notion of accountability which he defines as “a social practice that seeks to reflect symbolically upon the practical interdependence of action, an interdependence that always has both moral and strategic dimensions” (p. 356). In line with critical scholarship in this area, this notion counters the presentation of accounting as a “neutral arbiter of organizational truth” (Roberts, 1991, p. 355) and reconceptualizes it as a form of instrumentality closely bound up with forms of governance, institutional norms and social practices.

A number of scholars have written extensively about the implications of increased demands for accountability and transparency (Miller & Rose, 2008; Munro & Mouritsen, 1996; Pentland, 2000; Power, 1994, 1996; Strathern, 2000). Miller and Rose (2008, p. 213) note that we become tied to novel techniques of accountability through the inscription of particular standards, norms, and modes of calculation into everyday practices: “Contracts, targets, indicators, performance measures, monitoring and evaluation are used to govern [our] conduct while according [us] a certain autonomy of decisional power and responsibility for [our] actions.” Espeland and Sauder (2007, p. 2) – who have examined the pervasive and invasive expansion of rating and ranking mechanisms within professional law schools – write: “The growing use of quantitative indicators has transformed the meaning of accountability. . . Where accountability once included many different practices, making institutions accountable now usually means making them “auditable,” which often involves devising indicators to measure performance.” To this end, as they subsequently note (Sauder & Espeland, 2009, p. 64):

Accountability has become an expansive and elastic term for transparency, improving decision making, containing bias, and enhancing productivity. Audits, assessments,

¹ Schroeder, S. “The Web in Numbers: The Rise of Social Media,” April 17, 2009: <http://www.rainierdigital.com/the-web-in-numbers-the-rise-of-social-media-mashable.com/>.

² www.tripadvisor.com.

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