

A **Social Interaction Design** (SxD) White Paper

The Social Engine that drives Review Sites

First draft

Tuesday, January 30, 2007



© 2007 by Adrian Chan
Adrian@gravity7.com
<http://www.gravity7.com>

Introduction: Review Sites and the Marketing of Taste

The rise in the popularity of user reviews on social media sites has a lot of people talking. Here is a mode of social interaction online that doesn't require joining MySpace and putting one's Self on the line. At least, not in the manner that many of the community-oriented social software sites would have us do it. In contrast to their more fully-functioned brethren, review sites present a relatively simple value proposition: associate yourself with something, preferable something you like (product, place, experience, travel, it makes little difference for now), and describe it for us in your words. In other words, disclose some of your interests, your style, personality, habits, and preferences, by reviewing something that we can all relate to.

Review sites, because they depend on user participation around objects, experiences, places, products, and so on, make for an interesting case study in the role that social architecture plays in facilitating a good and growing user community. They also present us with an opportunity to consider the impact that commercialization has or will have on preserving user motivation and participation. If Yelp suddenly brought in businesses and permitted them to advertise through reviewers, would it lose its user base? What would people write? Would they write differently? If this were to happen in MySpace? What if YouTube were able to embed as much movie and TV programming it wanted, free of legal repercussions? If, in short, studios and content owners determined that it was to their benefit to participate in the circulation of product in the hopes of becoming subject of the occasional meme, thus gaining what they could never buy outright: authenticity? Would early adopters go elsewhere, as they always do?

User-generated content sites offer the promise of *authenticity*, and for a simple reason. Unlike marketing, advertising, and sales-oriented sites, user-generated content is by the people, of the people, for the people. Content is written, filmed, recorded, posted, and commented on by users, for consumption by users. The idea being that by eliminating a middle man, broker, institution, publisher, or what have you, users are free to speak their minds.

To support this user disposition, the codes of interaction on social media sites tend to be informal, and the proceedings are largely unstructured. There are a few categorization and publishing requirements, of course, but just a few. The system handles the reviews, attaching them to things reviewed, making them search-able, find-able, and organizing reviews collected according to modes of distinction (relevance) by-and-large inherited from search engines and common social software practices.

To the reviewer (user), then, the frame of interaction and value proposition seem fairly straightforward. Where it gets interesting is in what happens next, for review sites involve much more than just reviews. Reviews can be written for all kinds of reasons, some of them having little to do with the Things reviewed. They might also be written to any number of users, for reasons that vary from the highly personal to clichéd. And interactions among reviewers and their readers, too, run from personal and enthusiastic agreement to cold-shouldered neglect. These variations exceed the value proposition of user-generated reviews and give us a compelling case study in social media.

So as social media designers, we need to address two different user experiences, the reader's and the writer's. Our need to motivate and engage the reviewer's participation requires that we design a system to support the writer's subjective experience of writing review. We need to supply an audience, topics, stylistic differences, a participatory genre, if you will. Reviewing Things has to be interesting and compelling and must have purpose, if the writer is it hand over his or her attention to it. But for similar reasons, we to provide the reader with value also. In theory, at least, reviews should display as much objectivity as possible—enough to warrant their utility as reviews (and not just as opinion pieces). Do these two user experience propositions stand in a fundamental conflict?

Finally, we need to examine whether the design of social media can structure the axes of use on either side (reviewer/reader) such that the value produced is the value consumed. This is the nature of the challenge that often faces social media designers: creating an efficient marketplace, without use of real money or real incentives, by enabling the production and consumption of knowledge such that benefits are captured on both the production and consumption side of the equation.

Take the popular review site Yelp.com, for example. Now this site is fascinating, truly excellent in many ways, for it has succeeded in surviving without merchant participation.

The fact that Yelp.com comprises user reviews written without any merchant presence preserves the site's integrity. Reviewers are under no obligation to do anyone a favor; nor do their reviews benefit them in any fungible way. So the system provides a forum in which reviewers may write from whichever position motivates them. And because nobody's going to spend time writing about stuff unless they believe somebody might read it (this, at least, is my hope), Yelp's members tend write for each other.

Out pops the Social, and reviews become a means by which members get attention; describe and reveal themselves through things they know something

about; show wit, style, pictures and collections of compliments (which span a range of review-oriented to the unquestionably-no-use-for-this-icon-but-to-flirt); make friends; find popular things and review them because they've been reviewed so many times; become domain experts; wander widely off topic; and so on. And please don't get me wrong—it's hellafun. Indeed Yelp has become an interesting case study in the importance of anticipating the social forces that emerge when a system is launched into the world, and interactions begin to pile up one on the other. For users don't read manuals, or the fine print in the terms of agreement, to learn how the system works or how to use it. Users, and I should simply say "we," look at what others are doing. This tells us what's going on, and with that, how to proceed. If it's empty, well then no point in trying to become popular. If it's full of people, then whatsup and whatsgoingon?!

Social media sites are built on the contributions of users who themselves orient their contributions to the site's organization, theme, and audience. On Yelp.com, for example, some write many; some write deeply; some write to write to others; some write their secret discoveries; others can't believe it when a member holds out that local nugget for all to see (I committed this neighborly faux pas when I revealed that a local grocer squeezes its own orange juice). ;-). Some, having written a few, find those who have written about the same; while others find members they like, and comment on their writings for the association. Some—and don't get me wrong, I do this, and there are no write and wrongs here!—write to the author, some to their scene, some write about themselves with utter sincerity, and some write to cover, dodge, and cloak with seductive mystery all around.

Indeed, the social practices emerging around social media become particularly pregnant in the case of review sites. It is now a bonified genre, though some sites participate thinly, others richly. Contributions are codified across categories, horizontally and vertically. This serves the needs of site and content navigation. In each vertical we have "best of's, lists, recent, trends, price and other qualifications. Vertical organization is simple, as it's vertically organized: books, music, blogs, dvds, consumer electronics, nannies, and (yes, we're that far along) review sites themselves. And of course reviewers, too, are presented by similar qualifying criteria.

Now it would seem that the disinterested review is the most useful. But we're in social media-land now, and a) there's virtually no such thing as taking a disinterested relation to a Thing that is liked; and b) because a writer's reviews are hung out for others to read and know them by, even if it were possible in our write up a disinterested review of the Thing At Hand, *social* interest (getting noticed, being accepted, liked, and other warm fuzzies) rather blows that all away. Let's be honest here: nobody's going to spend time writing about stuff unless they believe somebody might read it.

We just split the practice along two axes and user experiences: reader and writer. So now let's integrate the social back into the two axes then. No user review on any user-generated content site is published without containing within it some negotiation of the possibility that a post/review/comment may be taken up in communication. Reviews are now a form of talk. Users are interested in each other (even when this takes shape only *within their minds* only), and this interest can overrun the objectivity that would most benefit the stated purpose of review sites, to wit, qualifying the Thing At Hand with unmotivated user evaluation. Interest in people; interest in content. Does the split pose a problem to the genre?

Social participation is essential if anybody's going to be bothered to write. But social participation may also transform expertise and utility into a popularity contest for compliments and friends and sheer volume of reviews. My personal preference is movies, because I've seen a boat load of them. For many it's food, dining out, bars and restaurants and all that fun stuff that people do when they're not cracking their craniums on the inner workings of social software. Everyday Things belong to familiar turf and territory: good for self-disclosure and personal opinionating. But how will the marketers and markets integrate it all? Because ultimately, business wants a piece of this, and the word is out: there's gold in them thar hills.

Ideally, the axis along which a user writes his or her review would align with the axis of value added by the review. Which is to say that in an ideal (online) world, a writer's interest would contain what the reader is interested in obtaining. The writer's interest would mirror the reader's interest. Information produced would be that which is consumed. Motives would be irrelevant, because the motive behind production would be identical to the motive behind its consumption. But we've just shown that this is unlikely, if not unattainable. The writer's interest in reviewing the Thing At Hand makes a circuit through his or her own self-image and sense of place/position within a social field. This circuit, in which the writer writes for an audience, results not only in a "review," it results in a recommendation. Viewed from the analysis of reviews as talk, there is the-thing-said and the to-whom-it-is-addressed. Now, we know that this is problematic online, because we're in some ways both simultaneously talking to ourselves (when we post) and talking to (our sense of) our audience. A recommendation, which is advice packaged as a review, takes the form: "I recommend this Thing to you." For reasons not unlike the silliness noted earlier, the "to you" is aborted. The money is in what's been aborted.

The social in social media is somehow about relationships. Real and actual relationships among friends, or online friendsters, as well as the possibility of relationships. Not to mention relationships among things deemed to be alike or

similar. Split, again, and this time for the last time. To like a person is not the same as things that are alike. It's not the same "like." That Winged Migration and March of the Penguins fall into the same category of "Amazing Things that Animals Do, Naturally ((But Which Only Teams of European Gearheads Can Capture) And Which For This Reason We Must See)" means we can relate them (at the data level) as similar, or like one another. But that two DVD's are similar doesn't mean that I, liking one, like the other. That would be to suggest that my own tastes reflect the taxonomic hierarchy of things. Yes, money is being made hand over fist at the long end of the tail. Links among related products and services bring them to the surface, and finding one can mean finding a whole bucketful, which is a good thing in the online world of lost treasures and islands of expertise unknown to one another (though Yelp is changing that). But to like a person is a different kind of liking, a different kind of interest. Some call it trust, but I don't think it's trust plain and simple, unless trust and affection or interest are one and the same.

There is an investment and relationship taken up to the person whom we like in which trust as sincerity and integrity come into play. The inter-personal relation in which I take an interest in another—enough to make a recommendation—suggests a history and knowledge of that person, enough to permit my saying "I know you (well enough) to recommend this Thing at Hand (to you, personally)." This is where the money is, or will be, for marketers. When we get there with social media, we'll stop duplicating the relational model which first clustered together and linked up similar Things, and get to a relational model able to capture, captivate, and leverage human interests in other humans. In the first model, the Thing relation creates the possibility that personal relationships might assemble themselves over time as people find one another through common interests. Which is where Yelp is at. But the next step out on the limb of this metaphor will materialize (I hope!) when interests in others form the vehicle into which are packed all manner of mutually beneficial loot and booty. Affinities among people differ from affinities among things, as much so as the subjective world and objective world differ. The Grail for Holy Marketers will be somewhere between MySpace (which involves explication of the personal) and Yelp (which involves explication of the things). If I want a recommendation for a bagel shop, I want a bageleur who knows me to tell me. Bagel shop reviews, well they're a dime a baker's dozen.

The Value Add of User-Generated Content

Social interaction design is concerned with the social architecture of a site in which users, motivated of their own accord and for their own reasons, produce a satisfactory experience (content and communication). I put it that way lest we

think in terms of user needs, goals, and the results that would provide a measure of success. I don't believe that we can measure the success of user experience "goals" or "objectives" in social interaction or communication using the criteria we apply to conventional user interactions and user experiences (e.g. transferring funds from one online banking account to another). *Communication is not a discrete affair*, by which I mean that it's organized over time, through multiple iterations with numerous known or unknown participants. Social media sites keep communication open. Most software interaction, by contrast, is more easily observed according to its successful or failed service to the user: files uploaded or not; actions completed or not; pages published or not; changes saved or not. But whether a member comment has been replied to, or not, is not a matter of the software's success. A reply on a comment is an act of communication, and of course it involves a meaningful exchange of content as well as acknowledgement of one another's presence at some fundamental level. In short, we can't simply look at the actions and results of social media UI design; we have to look at their second order social interactions and effects.

Review sites are interesting because what motivates the writer is not what motivates the reader, and yet users who write provide value to the readers who consume it. No doubt, many of these sites are communities of reader/writers. But businesses would not be interested in simply assembling large market research communities unless they offered enough brands or services to make it worth their while. The success of review sites is proof of the relevance of social interaction design, and of designing for social practices and not just individual the user experience. Review sites succeed precisely because their architectures and design are enabling to the contributor, but constraining enough that value created by writers is value that can be enjoyed by readers (*even if this value involves a kind of online socializing*). The writer must enjoy writing a review enough to write it; or must feel motivated by something (accurately or not) to write. The reader must find them easily enough, and must find enough value in the reviews to read them and share them. It's true that we don't know the degree to which reviews further motivate a reader's behavior, nor do we know if "social" reviews are less effective than "objective" review. The point I'm making is that social media succeed when they simply facilitate forms of social interaction, enable but constrain the presentation of information, communication, and so on, such that the net aggregate result creates benefits for the two user groups involved (reader and writer); benefits to business were not material to Yelp's original strategy (though they may have to be).

The emphasis here is on the aggregate, for social media must motivate the *individual* user while creating value for *collective* users. One review would do no good. Nor would a system in which reviews were written when asked for. User-generated sites like this require a certain amount volume, scope of review, reach of directory, diversity of topic, style, rating, and so on. In fact we're already at

the point at which ratings are losing their value, for they're hardly interesting to us unless they're at one or the other end of the spectrum. Most ratings are, for the most part, the same; or similar enough that they don't offer the distinction they once did. I rarely see a 10 or a 1 rating on Imbd.com; but if I did I'd take notice. (All good films are 7's. Really good films are 8's.)

We're familiar with the basic requirements of marketplace, the importance of supply and demand meeting around a price and product that can be provided effectively and efficiently on the supply side, and easily obtained and enjoyed on the demand side. Social media offer a new kind of challenge because the difference between manufacturing and consuming product is not of the same order. In many cases consumers are the manufacturers; there's no price; exchanges and transactions are conducted through talk, messaging, posting and commenting, and not through conventional distribution networks. The supply and demand curves are shaped by social and cultural forces, by emerging trends, popularity, visibility, celebrity, all facilitated and put into motion by early adopters, trend-setters, influencers, connectors, mavens, bridges and so on. There is in other words a consistency across, up, and down the site's organization and use.

But in some cases of social media, the gap between production and consumption is quite wide. Take YouTube, for example. What is the act of posting a video versus watching a video? It's profound. Many respected film-makers don't watch that many films, and not because they're too busy making them, but because they enjoy making them, thinking about them, casting and scripting them, shooting or posting them much more than they enjoy watching them. It's been said that capitalism was born at the moment in which manufacture was divorced from consumption: when we began making things we didn't consume ourselves but which were made for consumption by others. A great deal of the attention to YouTube, I suspect, is in watching what's being watched more than actually watching. (Note that I said "attention to Youtube".) I do a lot more scanning on YouTube than actually playing videos all the way through. YouTube's success may owe more to offering a vast menu of video bits and pieces organized by social criteria, thus serving as a quick social commentary on TV, movies, and stupid human tricks (not a dig, I love them too), rather than to the service of hosting videos for on-demand viewing. Flow, change, and speed contribute a great deal to viewer interaction with the site, enabling a kind of "whats-on?" channel surfing and browsing videos. In this sense Youtube presages a future of TV On Demand better than Netflix (which gets Movies On Demand). But I digress.

Movies and TV are as different from one another as books and magazines. The point here was to contrast the user experience of writing reviews with the user experience of reading reviews, in light of the challenge of facilitating writing,

organizing written results, and making them available and interesting, if not useful, to readers.

Review Writing

The inner experience of writing a review involves a large number of things, and without going into any in depth, we need to acknowledge at least several of them. There is the thing reviewed. There is whom it is written for—this might be “yelpers” or “anyone” or “mommydaddy” or “friend,” “stalker,” “business owner,” “the Almighty,” or “the cute Yelper who just requested my friendship.” There is the style of writing, which might hew close to the utility of reviewing or stray off into personal rambles, flashes of wit, hooks and lines designed to get attention, and so on. There is the use of qualifying observations by which a reader can glean, for him or herself and not because the author has said so, the salient selling points of the thing reviewed. There is then, as just mentioned, the recommendation or advice given within the recommendation, which itself can vary among all shades of “should,” “perhaps” “tentatively” “confidently” “ought” “must” and “not.” There is the revealing of the depth and scope of one’s authority on the matter, or not, or lack of it (which is not the same as not revealing, it’s a matter of not admitting!). There is the difference between being the first to review, in which case the review may inform subsequent reviewers, because a review can easily be a response to a review, to reviews in a series, or to reviews overall, depending on where the author puts him or herself in his/her emotional/mental relation to the whole proceeding. There is the review as comment to, or commentary on; and in commenting to, one might address reviewers, commenters, their reviews or their comments, though it may be hard for the reader to tell which is which.

The experience of writing a review is in fact complex indeed, and that’s not including the potential for misspellings, errors in fact, misinformed or inaccurately attributed perspectives and observations. Nor is it including the post window, tags, and now the addition of icons that can be used to represent a gestural remark, which again may indicate to some a reflection on the review, or the reviewer, and it can be hard to tell which is which since we can’t ask the person who selected them. And none of this includes the context of the review, which is to say some reviewers choose a time of day, or a category, an oft-reviewed Thing, trend, or bit of news as a means of attracting more attention (to themselves, their review, the view of themselves as manifest in the review, or perhaps to others. Or the Thing, even!). And again, none of this addresses the site in which the review is posted, its “branding” and community, and the sense that each user may have of what those are, how it serves them, or whom is served, and so on and so forth. The production of a review, as we see, is not so simple as the posting window would have it. From the perspective of social interaction design, at least.

Review Reading

The consumption of reviews is equally tricky, but in case you are as nervous now as I am, I'll run through the complexity of the reader end of the user experience with greater efficiency. The reader of reviews may be motivated, like the user, for a number of reasons, the most obvious among them being a search. Search is ubiquitous online, and structures in some ways the general mode of use of online media. But searching, finding, browsing, and consuming (for there is scanning results and then reading, watching, or listening to a particular result) vary in many ways. There's time-sensitive searching, and casual browsing. There's reading for the author's character, or for topical and substantive utility. The reader may have a particular interest in the Thing, or a domain interest in the thing's domain. She may have an interest in finding the best review, or may wish to judge from many reviews. She may trust one review for its content, or another for the author's integrity. And I should note here that I assumed that the reviewer above was being sincere, a big assumption to make, though one which got me around the problem of fake reviews, spam, and malicious, false, manipulative, or otherwise biased contributions and contributors.

Trust is, in fact, interesting; it is at best gleaned from a single review, but when it occurs in a relationship, what is on the face of it a risky proposition (trusting a review and reviewer we don't know) becomes less risky. That said, trust in the review or reviewer doesn't mean that the reviewer has the authority, expertise, experience or other qualification across all Things; in short, trust can be deceptive, if not misplaced or misleading. Hence the benefits provided by aggregation of ratings and reviews.

But here, again, the reader may assume (or not) that ratings are sincere, gamed, useless, meaningful, and so on, depending on his perception of the rating and reviewing community, its depth of knowledge, breadth of experience, motivation and intentions, all of which may be reflected in the site's brand, theme, purpose, average age, activity level, and presence of commerce, sales, advertising, and so on. I have only touched on the complexity of reading user-generated content.

What's fascinating is that all of the above, we do all the time, without thinking about it. Social practices are so richly textured, frames of reference so informing and our own competence in media, in talk, in communication, in the psychology of individuals as well as in the psychology of groups and audiences so developed, that one might achieve virtually anything in talk, online talk included. It nearly begs the question: Why bother explicating something that we practice unconsciously? Why bring all this into the design of what is, basically, a web site—if all of this belongs simply to negotiation of the everyday? The answer might be in the small number of these kinds of sites that have actually succeeded. For each review site that breaks into the market, many have perished. And not for technical reasons, mind you.

Before moving into an outline of the elements of review sites, we need to draw some lines around the specificity of the site's organization. We've addressed the user experience of the reviewer and the user experience of the reader. The site's organization is how these come together (otherwise they could just email each other).

Temporality

There is a dimension that is rarely noted in commentary on social media, and that is time, or temporality. Social media sites have speeds, rhythms, periods of activity, periods of rest. They operate at different speeds because they're populated by people, and people interact with varying intensity. It's no surprise that this is reflected in social software use. Take Digg.com, for example, which is a binary vote system (approve/disapprove) that lives on speed. It's good for qualifying news and new information, something the site's management saw and amplified with the Digg spy page. Digg.com captures the value of the long tail because it stores (as do most systems) votes over time. But its popularity owes to its daily relevance as aggregators, where its speed serves it well. By contrast Yelp breathes more slowly; a reason perhaps that the site has a "Yelp Talk" section in which members can converse on around questions posed and answered. This is also the mode employed at Yahoo Answers, which organizes contributions according to stated queries, and which, if you have used it, is very quick at providing answers. YahooAnswers, in some ways, demonstrates that a line connecting blogging and chat might be taking shape: a line we could characterize as degrees of duration as much as length or depth of contribution (blog posts = articles, yahooAnswers = post-its).

Affinities

Content on review sites is usually organized into categories, according taxonomies that are supposed to describe relations drawn among Things according their own affinities. In the introduction to this paper I suggested that there's a qualitative difference between liking the Thing and two alike Things. The former is a personal affinity for, liking of, an expression of taste or preference that's motivated by our taking an interest in the Thing. We touched on the potential conflict of interest between disinterestedness and interestedness. Things for review may be organized according to categories for the purpose of content organization and navigation. And they may be organized by how much they are liked by their reviewers. As long as there's no effort made to merge categories and personal tastes, there shouldn't be danger of conflict among between the affinity that content items share (categorically) and the affinity people have with them. Insofar as sites attempt to recommend Things on the basis of affinities shared with other Things, reviews qualify individual items, not the category overall. Insofar as reviews are associated with a person, and

serve to describe that person's taste and interests, categories are unnecessary as a means of identifying associated content.

Making markets out of taste

The business of taste is, after all, business. Marketing to, or creating markets from, taste, taste-makers, and taste-oriented consumers, must produce either direct sales, advertising revenues, demand, or at a minimum good market research. (An acquisition you say? Uh, sure, let me just talk to my lawyer....)

A business built on user reviews organizes:

- The production of taste
- On the basis of agreeability
- Which may be among people, based on connections established by people with similar tastes
- Or which may be among things, events, brands, services, places, beliefs, values, and other cultural references perceived to be similar or to reflect
- Similar qualities and values
- Associations are based on similarities
- The market is defined by a surplus, not scarcity, of choices
- And an excess of communication
- Which sets up the need to sort and filter information and choices
- Information can be sorted and qualified according to relations intrinsic to its domain
- Or to relations suggested by reviewers, recommendations
- By qualities described in relations among similar things: price, popularity, ratings, features, performance, etc.
- By personal recommendations
- Or extension of personal relationships and social networks

Regardless of which we think it is, the value of Things is not what drives review sites. If it were that simple, there would be no reason to review Things in the first place. The good, the true, and the best would rise to the top and we would know what they were. Review sites work because they allow people like us to "talk" about what we like, why we like it, and why others should like it. In our case, value is most certainly social in nature, and it's as much about telling others what we think as it is about the Things we like to talk about.

Social Networks and Social Relations

Which brings us to social networking. Now it's been assumed since Friendster kicked this whole thing off, at least in a big way, that social networks are a meaningful manner in which to organize or structure, and encourage, user participation. But we know better now that there are friends and there are

friends. Trust between “real friends” involves knowing a person personally. I think the use of trust in social networking, as in trust circles, is better described as confidence. I have confidence in another member’s reviews, in his or her experience and expertise, and I can have that confidence without knowing the person. Confidence can be gleaned from writings, ratings, and the overall volume and impact of a member’s contributions. And in fact, I will trust some members’ recommendations more than I will those of my friends, if that member has shown domain expertise (or has tastes like mine).

Social context informs social interaction, which in turn grounds the basis on which friendships or connections with other members are established. Social networks inform relationships according to their thematic organization (dating, jobs, reviews, etc), their participation demands, their exposure to the public, and much more. (I’ve covered this in other white papers.) By thematic organization we mean simply what the site is about. Dating, jobs, blogging, or review communities each suggest different kinds of relationships and corresponding codes of conduct. Granted, these are loose and minimally-enforced (for the most part), but we would kid around less and be more professional in a career networking site like LinkedIn, kid around more in a review site, take personal messages more personally on a dating site, and so on.

When it comes to a site’s participation requirements, a site that demands a high degree of participation may see churn among those who simply don’t have the time to put into getting noticed. Unmotivated to compete for attention, these users might then become readers of a site, contributing only occasionally, and likely making a small number of new “friends” with whom communication may occur behind the scenes, through one-on-one messaging. Then there are matters of private and public, younger generations being more inclined to talk about themselves personally than older generations. This is a gross generalization of course, but there’s some truth to it. The point being that a site’s activity level inform its use of social networking.

Social networking is influenced by a site’s use of direct communication. Communication channels are enabled within social media sites by integration of direct messaging tools, group messaging tools, and public posting and commenting tools. For now we count chat, IM, mail, email, shout-outs, comments, compliments (winks, votes, user ratings, etc), blogging, discussions and message boards, and to some degree bookmarking and tagging as communication tools. But videos, text messaging, live webcam and podcasting will grow in use. By a site’s vertical organization I mean its content differentiation. If a review site focuses on one domain or genre only, expertise can be established fairly easily without need for use of social networks as a filter applied to the site’s audience. No need, for example, to structure relationships around degrees of proximity (friends, friends of friends, friends of friends of

friends, etc.) if the topic is movies. It would matter more that a reviewer knows foreign films, or French New Wave, or Indie films than it would matter that they are counted by a friend of a friend, as a friend.

Commenting is practically a topic in its own right, but for the reason that comments are frequently addressed to the author of a review. Yelp has codified this to a degree by offering packaged comments as icons. In addition to those oriented towards the review itself (useful!) there are those designed to encourage the author to write more, and those designed for no reason other than flirtation. That being the dirty little secret I've no need to discuss here because we all know that any social media site that involves pictures by necessity involves flirting.

So then, how effective is the social networking aspect of review sites? Do they involve members more? Do they help members distinguish the value of reviews? Do they motivate participation? There's no way to know. Firstly, we see only what people post; we don't see what's reserved, or what goes "un-posted," so to speak. Because communication can occur only when participants take up a "round" of talk, some amount of the communication we see on social media is there to spark conversation, to keep it alive, and much of the time this involves simply posting to sustain presence and to keep continuity. Conversations and discussions fade quickly when they have only a small number of infrequently active members. I think it is safe to say that a great deal of the contributions to social media sites that seem to solicit communication and response are there to sustain communication; without them members simply lose interest. Relationships, or the possibility of them, the inauguration of them, the maintenance of them, and the leaving them, motivate much of social media use. And perhaps that is where social networking makes the biggest difference: in motivating, though not by itself fulfilling, our interest in others.

Conclusion: The social market place

We have seen that by engaging social forces and factors in something as uncomplicated as product reviews, a myriad of developments can take over a site, as users use it for self-disclosing and personal reasons. Businesses would like to leverage this popularity and success of the review as a social practice and form of online communication and participation. But the very threat of business participation could of course spark a member mutiny. At Yelp, for example, the community's sense of authenticity and the integrity of reviews, insofar as they don't represent business interests, is the site's sole insurance policy. But we have seen why business participation would seem parasitical, and thus possibly life-threatening to a site like Yelp. A site that organizes the giving and getting of attention, and which makes participation visible, around member reviews of Things (rather than member reviews of themselves, a la MySpace), has invested

those reviews of Things with personal content that can only be “used” fairly by those involved. Use by others, for the purposes of marketing, for example, would be considered illegitimate participation. By increasing the personal appeal of its service, Yelp has created a sort of personal profiling system around things that members can talk about and through which they give themselves away. But they give themselves away to the user community—not to businesses or other third parties. What has worked to motivate participation has possibly foreclosed the possibility of engaging business (if that were Yelp’s intent), at least as the site is currently organized. But I think that the engagement of businesses, and the successful embedding of their interests and motives, can be organized in social software and social sites. The system would first have to be more complex, would have to be more differentiated, such that social motivations were woven into but not serving the sole foundation of user participation. Review sites that operate on a pairing of writer and reader are hampered by the form of the dyadic, or couple, relation. A relation of two always resists the arrival of a third.

I have thoughts on what would work, but that, would of course, be another paper.