

THE REPUTATION SOCIETY: How Online Opinions Are Reshaping the Offline World

Edited by Hassan Masum and Mark Tovey

The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011, ISBN 978-0-262-01664-3

To be Published December 2011, pp. 211

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Journal of High Technology Law

Suffolk University Law School

Editors Hassan Masum and Mark Tovey put together a compilation of articles discussing the implications of social networking and other internet tools in the shaping of systems throughout the world in *The Reputation Society: How Online Opinions Are Reshaping the Offline World*.¹ Hassan Masum is Innovation Lead at the McLaughlin-Rotman Centre for Global Health, Affiliate Researcher at the Waterloo Institute for Complexity and Innovation, and past team leader in the Ethical, Social, Cultural project of the International Grand Challenges in Global Health initiative. Also a researcher and author, Masum has published in various venues and contributed chapters to two books. Masum coauthored *Manifesto for the Reputation Society* within this book. Mark Tovey completed his Ph.D in Cognitive Science in the Advanced Cognitive Engineering Lab at Carleton University. Tovey edited *Collective Intelligence: Creating a Prosperous World at Peace*, and was previously the editor of Worldchanging Canada from 2006-2010. Tovey has served as a panelist at various conferences.

Masum and Tovey begin their compilation work with an *Introduction: Building the Reputation Society*, along with author Yi-Cheng Zhang. In the introduction, Masum, Tovey, and Yi-Cheng Zhang lay out the framework for the book, stating that “[r]eputation has always operated within networks and relationships.”² However, in today’s society it is difficult to

¹ THE REPUTATION SOCIETY: How Online Opinions Are Reshaping the Offline World, (Hassan Masum and Mark Tovey, eds., The MIT Press) (2011).

² *Id.* at xv.

determine who to trust as technology has taken over many of the basic relationship functions that used to exist. The authors lay out the framework for the work, indicating that reputation systems can implicate people's daily activities, such as buying wisely, achieving sustainability, upgrading politics, making individuals more accountable for their actions, and safeguarding one's reputation. The introduction provides a sound base of knowledge for the reader, allowing any reader to understand the basic framework of reputation systems.

In exploring reputation systems, the editors group the articles into the categories of: Understanding Reputation, Regulating Societies, Amplifying Signals, Supporting Science, Improving Policy, and The Reputation Society. In order to fully explore the implications of reputation systems, the editors first introduce the reader to the concept by delving into what online reputation systems are and what they do. Chrysanthos Dellarocas' *Designing Reputation Systems for the Social Web* defines a reputation system as "an information system that mediates and facilitates the process of assessing reputations within the context of a specific community."³ Randy Farmer, in his article *Web Reputation Systems and the Real World*, defines reputation as "information used to make a value judgment about an object or a person."⁴ The book discusses how internet sites like Yelp, Ebay, and Amazon implement reputation systems on their sites so users feel more comfortable purchasing from their site or trying out a new vendor based on the reviews of others. The editors through the book describe the overall importance of reputation systems in this new highly technological world, where the community has become larger, opening it up from those who live in your small town to the global internet world. In order to make sure people feel comfortable in today's technological society, where real world relationships and reputation is unknown, these systems make it easier for people to trust what

³ *Id.* at 4.

⁴ *Id.* at 13.

and whom they are actually dealing with. The various articles in Part I give the reader a broader understanding of various uses of reputation systems, how they are, and can be used, to strengthen relationships. Through their introduction, Masum and Tovey do a good job of pulling three authors who understand and explain in plain terms reputations systems by their design, how they are utilized in today's world, and how they may be effective. This introduction gives a thorough explanation of reputations systems, thus allowing for the building blocks necessary for the reader to comprehend the future chapters.

After exploring what reputation systems are and how they work in today's society, the next section of the book, titled *Regulating Societies*, discusses, through a variety of articles, how reputation systems can promote cooperation. Author John Whitfield discusses in his article, *The Biology of Reputation*, how technology allows people's views and past decisions to be public, and when information becomes more public, individuals tend to become less tolerant of bad deals, higher costs, and negative treatment.⁵ Through this cooperation, the need for punishment may be reduced because people are self-regulating. Therefore, the transparency of systems and people through reputation systems on the internet helps reduce cheating and other negative behaviors because all behavior is easily known to one another.

Further discussion of regulation in the book includes Eric Goldman's article, *Regulating Reputation*, where the author considers the role of reputational information in the marketplace and society.⁶ In stating that reputation is all about impressions and perceptions, the author states that reputational information helps people predict another person's "future ability to perform or to satisfy the decision-maker's preferences."⁷ With sites that allow consumers to review just about anything, reputational information is becoming more and more crucial in today's

⁵ *Id.* at 43.

⁶ *Id.* at 52.

⁷ *Id.* at 51.

marketplace. The author indicates that regulatory schemes have interacted with reputation systems, citing to 47 U.S.C. § 230 which was passed in 1996 to protect online publishers from liability for third party content.⁸ These websites that post third party reviews are about encouraging reviewers to state their mind, openly and honestly, without the publisher website facing liability. The author discusses the importance of this regulation, which protects the marketplace, because it allows people to better trust the reviews posted on various sites. However, the author also discusses that, while regulating reputation systems is helpful in many regards, there are regulations that may be harmful to the open marketplace—stating that much of what is done through reputation systems is self regulating, and where self-regulation works, further government regulation is unnecessary.

Finally, in Lior Jacob Strahilevitz's article *Less Regulation, More Reputation*, the discussion of regulation and reputation systems takes the discussion a step further as the author discusses how greater access to reputational information has aided the public in areas such as landlord-tenant relationships, antidiscrimination law, and commercial disputes. For instance, the more information tenants have about a bad or bullying landlord, the more informed they are and less likely to get into a bad position. Furthermore, reputation sites are able to aid people with legal disputes where it will be more costly to have them resolved in court. By placing negative reviews about the individual's experiences on the reputation site, the aggrieved individual goes away knowing that others may not be put in the same position and the company involved will have a bad reputation as a result. While reputation tracking is not able to solve all of an individual's problems, further government publication, containing readily known and available information about companies and agencies doing illegal and bad things working in collaboration with the public's reputational reports, will help protect against things like discrimination, fraud,

⁸ *Id.* at 55.

and the like. This section on regulation is a must read for any legal scholar who is interested in how online systems are affecting basic legal concepts and functions, and how regulation in this area has, and will, affect how the law functions.

The articles compiled by Masum and Tovey in this chapter provides thought provoking content of how reputations systems have an effect on people and the legal system. The section allows a novice to the legal field to understand how reputation systems may provide a sound basis for justice, and possibly recovery, where actual legal remedies have failed or have yet to be tried for financial reasons. The articles and their authors also provided a sound, but quick, discussion of the various areas of law that affect reputation systems, allowing legal professionals to quickly gain insight into the regulatory systems in place for reputations systems today, as well as the greatest point of their impact in the legal field.

Various legal implications of reputation systems are also exposed in chapter VI: *The Reputation Society*, where author's Michael Zimmer and Anthony Hoffman discuss the privacy implications of personal information sharing online.⁹ The authors discuss how web tools often allow posted information to be visible to more outlets than individuals presume exist. While sharing used to be voluntary, in today's society sites like Facebook and Twitter allow users to share very personal information with virtual strangers. Many times these sites are being directly fed into other sites, and as the authors state, "obscure Twitter utterances become archived by the Library of Congress."¹⁰ Zimmer and Hoffman state that these new information tools bring an increased risk for both informational and reputational privacy. While there are dangers of being labeled as an "oversharer," the author states that personal information and what constitutes an

⁹ *Id.* at 176.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 176.

overshare situation is contextual and the lines of private and public information may be blurred in today's society, thus urging that future systems be better designed.

The chapters discussed above provide an excellent source of information for a legal professional or student seeking to understand the role and effect of reputation systems, as well as the areas of the law that are most effected by reputation systems on the internet today. While *The Reputation Society* itself does not provide an all inclusive guide to the legal professional on how reputation systems are affecting the legal world, the book as a whole provides insight into how legal professionals may better deal with clients in this new technological age. An example of this is the privacy issues discussed above, giving attorneys one more area to discuss with clients to be weary of for privilege concerns.

While my focus was on the legal aspects of reputation systems, *The Reputation Society* does a great deal more. By giving the reader a broad understanding of the positive and negative aspects of reputation systems out there, the compilation of authors' works touches upon almost all aspects of society affected by these online systems. Many of the authors also discuss next steps in how to improve reputation systems or restructure them to allow them to better serve the public good, whether it be in the realm of science, philanthropy, or justice.