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Reply to my Commentator - Fields

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Reply to my Commentator

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I thank Jean Goodwin for her extremely helpful comments on my paper. Although we may divide up quite differently the question of student culpability, we are in fundamental agreement about the nature of the issue and the proper way in which to address it. With regard to student gullibility, I regard them as non-culpable primarily because they are using a given set of norms that is appropriate in one case and applying it in a case where they simply lack the knowledge to know that it is inappropriate. They are beguiled by words like "community" and "global village" and "chat rooms" into believing that there are real online communities that will perform the required reputation checks.

But Goodwin disabuses us of this notion. As she points out in her Google example, it is the genuine community of actors outside of the Internet—actors that participate in public trading on the New York Stock Exchange, for example—that helps to provide the foundation of reputation-rating that is needed here and indeed the stability of identity that is necessary for a reputation to be built. For, make no mistake, one of the strong subtexts of Goodwin's response and a challenge to using the Commitment View to model authority online is the inherent instability of online identity. So my avatar got a bad rap? Tomorrow, I'll just "sock puppet" my way into providing him with a good one: that is, I'll build him up be creating a second identity whose sole job will be to provide him with the necessary kudos.

We live at an unsettling time in the history of human communication. Most of us at this conference were so used to growing up with messages from a wider world that had already been pruned or enhanced or simply let though by some acknowledge expert: a publisher, an editor, a government. Underground or alternative messages were present. But they were inherently suspicious. They even looked it, because of the inferior materials of which they were often made.

Now the situation is different. There are no intervening authority structures for a vast number of very complicated messages that one can receive—and often no apparent diminution in quality in the format in which they are presented. What we have today is a priesthood of all believers—or a priesthood of all receivers, if you will. Given the way things are going, we each of us need more and more to become personally proficient at assessing the worth of a world-wide host of claims. And to do this, we need an accurate understanding of how such assessments operate, both in the more traditional cases and in the new communication environment.

Link to commentary

Link to paper