

# The Reputation Engine

By **Michael Ridley**

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Quality is something libraries are concerned about. Our users expect us to provide access to the best resources. Of course, what we really mean by this is quality books, films, websites, and other information sources. Quality is about stuff. Why isn't quality about people? We judge the quality of resources; why don't we judge the quality of people? Ah yes, judging people, now there's a popular growth industry.

The internet has demonstrated that information is now ubiquitous and social networking has shown us that connections matter as much as (or more than?) content. When we look at information-seeking behaviour, friends or the colleague down the hall tend to rank number one among the most trusted sources of information.

Facebook and Twitter are the new search. We used to say it's not about what you know (knowledge), but your ability to find out about what you don't know (information literacy). Now we are back to an old standard: it's not what you know, but who you know. More and more we get information from other people. Interactive, always-connected tools (e.g., texting, tweets, status updates) mean that we always have access to the insights, experience, and expertise of others.

If people are the ultimate information resource, how do we know who to pay attention to or whom to trust? One determinate of trust is reputation. Reputations are earned in some sort of objective manner and based on that we confer our trust on those people. With this tenuous trust we allow those people to influence our ideas and actions.

What if, when you search Google (or are about to "friend" or "follow" someone), your browser automatically (and perhaps behind the scenes) does a reputation check first? It queries a system to determine if and why (or why not) you should trust this person or author. Imagine this as a "reputation engine." A service that would augment other services by informing you (or maybe just inform the operation you are performing) about the relative trust or reputation of the individual. Could a reputation engine meaningfully and usefully sift a Google search or make sense of

the Twitterverse? What would the criteria be for such an engine? How would reputation be won and lost?

In the academic realm, techniques like the citation tools first developed by Eugene Garfield for the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) identified not just important articles (those receiving lots of citations) but, indirectly, important authors. Of course, authors are cited for both positive and negative reasons. High citation counts could suggest importance or infamy.

The poster kid for the sort of reputation management we are talking about (in a limited, constrained way) is eBay. The rating system that evaluates buyers and sellers is such that it puts checks on both parties. Because it is in the interest of both parties to be honest (each group validates the other), it is an effective confidence rating for those new to buying or selling.

So, should libraries operate the reputation engines? If not us, who else? Libraries already are among the most trusted organizations – we have the confidence of our communities. The value of a reputation engine seems self-evident, but the potential lawsuits also seem inevitable. All this suggests “reputation” is not a good way to describe the kind of measure we are looking for. We need a good euphemism.

Whatever the nature or criteria the system uses, to be truly effective it should reinforce the underlying principles that libraries promote: information literacy, open communication, honesty, intellectual freedom, reciprocity, and quality. Just as eBay creates a system that promotes and fosters reliable business transactions, so too must the reputation engine enable and support notions of the public good.

The reputation engine is likely to be some sort of data-driven matrix with input from a wide variety of sources. It would have to be a multi-dimensional score or confidence factor that incorporates contextual information relevant to the trust being sought. Conventional measures such as position, associates, publications, and awards would be augmented by proximity measures with respect to friends

and friends-of-friends. Measures relating to your contacts on LinkedIn or your followers on Twitter will assist in assessing your position within a trusted or informed community. For example, according to Twitter Ratio (a tool that measures the quality and nature of my tweets and my followers), I am “respected among peer group.” My wife suggested that this made me a “respected twit.” Nice. At any rate, is this a result that could be accessed and used in interpreting whether a complete stranger should pay attention to what I say or what I might know?

Recently, the entry my class and I were trying to post to Wikipedia was rejected ... several times. Other pertinent issues aside, part of the concerns was, bluntly, “Who is this guy?” Wikipedia has a number of trust processes and I got caught in them. Depending on your perspective, this may indicate that the system is broken or, indeed, that the system works very well. This story does illustrate that in the confidence marketplace or reputation agora, there need to be tools and processes sophisticated enough to deal with some very subtle relationships.

It seems likely that multiple reputation engines will emerge with different criteria and different target audiences determining the nature of the service. In fact, monetizing reputation may be the next big thing. A very interesting service called Aardvark (vark.com) has started up recently. Essentially you ask it a question and it uses your friends (or friends of friends) as the source of answers – an interesting combination of information and reputation. Who do you know?

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