

Book Review: Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web

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Despite their lowly reputation as a kind of dark collective unconscious of the Internet, the process of commenting and the comments themselves are everyday activities that not only provide outlets for our negative side, weaknesses, and vanity but also structure our lives significantly. **Ignas Kalpokas** finds three significant contributions that **Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web** provides to the existing literature.

Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web. Joseph M. Reagle, Jr. MIT Press. 2015.

In line with the book's take on online (and offline) reviews, I should perhaps first remind what the readers are probably well aware of: I received a free copy of this book for review purposes. Whether or not this has impacted upon my (overall favourable) evaluation is for the reader to decide. This acknowledgement should immediately draw attention to one of the emphases of the book – reflexivity with regards to the context, circumstances, nature, and purpose of comments.

Essentially, this book is exactly what it says on the cover: a reading of the comments and an intellectual reflection on the *process* of reading (and, occasionally, on writing) them. No unified *theory of reading* is provided.

Those expecting a grandiose integrated *theory of the comment* would also be left frustrated. And yet, theory-making is neither the explicit nor the implicit aim of the book. Nor is its aim to provide an integrated and well-organised account of any sort – at least this is how the book reads. Instead, the author appears to have settled for a rather disjointed and eclectic organisation in which chapters and the subchapters within them only very loosely relate with each other while the same cases and occurrences appear multiple times throughout the book, almost hypertextually. Frustrating as this disorganised organisation might be, that is, perhaps, the only truly viable way of writing about online comments in general: one that adopts, or at least parallels, the murky structureless nature of 'the bottom of the Web'.

The topic is, after all, an extremely important one. Despite their lowly reputation as a kind of dark collective unconscious of the Internet, the process of commenting and the comments themselves are everyday activities that not only provide outlets for our negative side, weaknesses, and vanity but also structure our lives significantly. That is especially so if comments are understood in a broad sense to include not only forum posts and commenting on blogs or news websites but also product reviews, social media posts etc. To that extent, comments are about our everyday choices, social standing, and self-esteem, with the potential of affecting them both positively and negatively, and thus have to be taken seriously. This emphasis on Internet comments as something serious and worthy of extensive analysis not only for the sake of curiosity, but also in order to understand the fabric of today's life, is the first major contribution of this book.

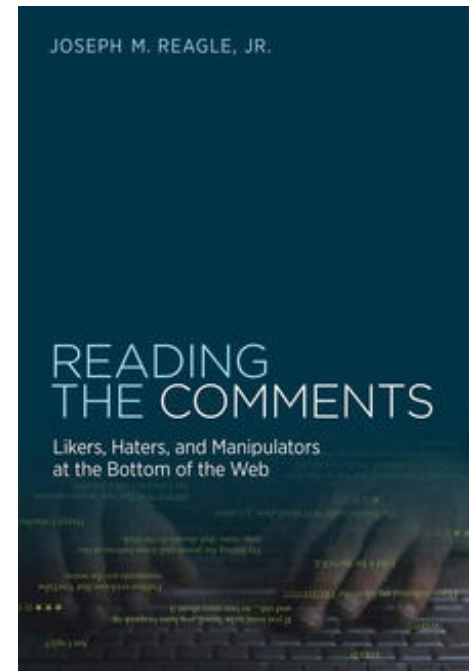




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The second major contribution of the book is the contextualisation of online comments. A major and surprisingly common fallacy of many analyses of the Internet and online phenomena are their lack of perspective. Since the online environment is still a relatively new one, it is very tempting to presume that its uses are completely new – or at least significantly different – as well. Contrary to that trend, the author traces the offline precursors and equivalents of the different types of comments. These, in fact, reveal a long and rich history, deeply engrained in human nature. As for human nature itself, connecting online activities with some interesting research in anthropology, sociology, and psychology helps to better understand the drives causing people to act (in this case, comment) in certain ways, thus further challenging the myth of the online environment's specificity. Although much of this research is not particularly new (such as Zimbardo's classic experiments in role-play and violence), the application of their findings to the online environment and, especially, to comments is a novel addition to the discipline.

In fact, the scope of literature and disciplines employed in reading (again, not necessarily analysing or conceptualising) the comments is rather impressive. Herein also lies the third major contribution of the book: connecting online comments with overall social trends and market forces. Although comments are frequently perceived as the Internet's collective unconscious, there is no reason to automatically presume that they are somehow autonomous and spontaneous. On the contrary, online comments are reflective of and great tools for: the general drive for quantification (of comments, stars, 'likes' etc.), shaping the market through bogus comments and reviews (e.g. promoting or derogating certain products), and operating under the laws of supply and demand, and so on. To that extent, there is no autonomous space of the comment. Such contextualisation is not exhaustive, though. For example, it could be extended to political processes (although campaigning is briefly touched upon), including the use of comments in psychological operations and hybrid conflicts. However, to continue with this book's emphasis on (self-)reflexivity in reading (and, perhaps, writing) comments, that criticism is just the reviewer being biased towards his own research.

By way of concluding, one has to reiterate the ubiquity of comments in today's life. As the author himself notes, '[c]omment is a characteristic of contemporary life: it can inform, improve, and shape people for the better, and it can alienate, manipulate, and shape people for the worse'. The statement itself is rather trivial – the same can be said about many other phenomena. But that is precisely the case: by rendering the comments trivial and banal rather than exceptionally nasty or the domain of a distinct class of commentators, the book opens a way of analysing them as part of everyday life along social and temporal axes. As such, the book is an essential read for everyone with a broad interest in the social sciences.

Ignas Kalpokas is a PhD student in Politics at the University of Nottingham, working on a dissertation on Baruch Spinoza, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Schmitt. He holds his Masters degree in Social and Political Critical Theory and Bachelors degree in Politics from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania). He has also worked on various educational projects and initiatives. Ignas' research interests lie in the investigation of interrelated concepts of sovereignty, the state, and the political as well as the formation and maintenance of (national) identities. In addition, his research also involves history, literature, and international relations theory. His preferred theoretical framework is mostly Continental philosophy.

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