"How Aunt Ammy Gets Her Free Lunch: A Study of the Top-Thousand Customer Reviewers at Amazon.com."

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This report is divided into sections. We give page numbers so readers can move between the topics that interest them most. The key findings are highlighted in bold text throughout.[1]

Introduction

Amazon.com started as an online book store and is now the World's largest virtual store. Worldwide sales of what Amazon refers to as "media products" (books movies and music), were surpassed in 2009 for the first time by sales of other sorts of merchandise.[2] Started by Jeff Bezos in November 1994 as a garage email store for retailing books, Amazon early on established many of its innovative features, such as 1-Click ordering and the role played by customer reviews. The majority of the content of Amazon's site today is provided by its users in the form of these customer reviews.

This report is the first detailed study of Amazon's customer reviewers – a survey of the top-thousand reviewers.[3] We consider the reviewing process and recent changes to it and what it means for reviewers to be in a world where books themselves are starting to play a diminishing role in Amazon's mixture of products.[4] We examine, in particular, recent changes in the way that Amazon ranks its reviewers as well as how reviewers themselves conceive of their efforts in a fast changing world of ecommerce.

Why study customer reviewers? It turns out that although several of these reviewers have shared their own thoughts and experiences in blogs, opinion pieces, and journalistic articles, there has been no systematic study of them as a group. This is surprising and seems worth remedying,

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[2] "Will Amazon become the Wal-Mart of the Web?" The New York Times, September 19, 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/20/business/20amazon.html?scp=1&sq=amazon.com%20%20largest%20store&st=cse.

[3] The New York Times "freakonomics" blog has also posed the question as to why people post reviews at Amazon: http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2005/07/22/why-do-people-post-reviews-on-amazon/

[4] Events are fast moving with books themselves undergoing a digital revolution. Amazon reports that on Christmas day 2009 its sales of kindle books surpassed physical books, http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=176060&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1369429&highlight= In July 2010 Amazon announced kindle books were out-selling hardcovers by a ratio of 143:100.

especially since Amazon is the pioneer of customer reviews, is the largest online retailer, and has developed one of the world's most sophisticated computer systems for interacting with and monitoring its customer base.[5] Furthermore, we live during a time when the book review as an item of literary production has come under increasing strain – several authors bemoan the demise of the book review (e.g. Pool 2007), and with fewer newspapers publishing book reviews, or limiting them to online editions only, the growth of online reviewing seems a subject worth studying in its own right. What role for the future of book reviews do we glimpse through the sometimes frenzied reviewing activities of Amazon's top reviewers, many of whom are authors themselves with a commitment to the literary world?

We take it that all these reasons are justification enough. But underlying our study is a further puzzle. Given that Amazon is the world's largest online retailer why is it that so many people work, in effect, for free for Amazon by providing content for the website for no remuneration? Is this even true? Our study holds an assumption and asks a question: the assumption is that there are no free lunches. So how come Amazon has managed to persuade so many people to give them the morsels from which they have built one of the biggest free lunches ever? That is the question.

Amazon's Origins and Early History

Amazon has come a long way since it first opened its website for business on July 16, 1995 and dispatched orders for books in its first week worth a total of $846. In the early days sales were so rare that all the computers in Amazon's office would emit a "beeping" sound to the

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[5] Amazon has advanced computing in general by offering cheap and scalable computing resources through Amazon Cloud.

accompaniment of a rousing cheer every time a sale occurred (Spector 2000:72). Jeff Bezos, the founder, reportedly decided to "do this crazy thing" and launch an online book company partly because, as Robert Spector, a journalist who wrote the first history of the company notes, "<u>everybody understands what a book is</u>. You didn't have to explain product specifications; the book you'd buy on the Internet would be the same book you could buy at a bricks-and-mortar-store." (Spector 2000:29. His emphasis)

But Amazon did not stay with books for long. From the outset it seems Bezos had ambitions to turn Amazon into a general web retailer. Within three years the company was selling a variety of products, including books, music, videos, electronic cards, auctioned items (for a while Amazon tried to emulate eBay), toys, and consumer electronics. With the introduction of zShops in November 1999 – a means whereby small merchants could sell virtually anything – and which gave customers access to Amazon's famous (and controversial) patented "1-Click Ordering service",[6] Amazon offered over 500,000 products, four times as many products as found in traditional mass retails stores such as Kmart and Target. By January 2011 Amazon could list 28 separate departments.

It seems the goal of Amazon US (there are also subsidiary Amazon stores with their own independent websites in the UK, Canada, China, France, Italy, Germany, and Japan) is to sell all these different products by the same means, from the same common warehouses or through subsidiaries, and by a common web site for browsing, searching, and ordering. The simplicity, ease, and low cost of the shopping experience is the driving motif. It makes no difference if

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[6] The patent case is still working its way through the courts (http://wallstcheatsheet.com/breaking-news/what-does-the-bilski-case-mean-to-the-technology-sector/?p=13607/)

Amazon is selling the complete works of William Shakespeare, a toilet seat, or a packet of cornflakes. By following a simple series of drop down menus and with the aid of Amazon's own search engine, customers can easily browse all the items, find concise product descriptions often with photographs, read product reviews, see what other people have bought when visiting that page, and so on. New features are being added all the time to make it easier and more enticing to buy.

One of the main innovations that Amazon has introduced is the Customer Review (also now patented). The feature of "product review" in general is now found all over the web with companies such as Yelp.com and Epinions.com (now owned by eBay).[7] The product review seems to be a particularly persuasive feature in terms of selling because it allows the potential purchaser access to the experiences and opinions of others who may have bought the very same item or who have an opinion on the item. That these opinions come from "ordinary" people, rather than experts, seems to be part of the appeal and persuasive power of these sorts of reviews. Amazon was one of the first online retailers to realize the importance of allowing its users to offer reviews and it is instructive to revisit the history of how this came about.[8]

Literary Magazine or Web Retailer?

Bezos initially conceived of Amazon as a form of book store combined with an online literary magazine and hired editors to write features and keep customers appraised of what was

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[7] Newer companies, such as Bazaarvoice.com and Power Reviews.com, offer to help companies capitalize upon such reviews.

[8] There are many examples of older review systems predating the online world. For example, in the UK the Automobile Association has for years offered a guide with different levels of stars for different hotels. Similarly the Michelin Guide in France and elsewhere does much the same for restaurants. Many of these earlier guides included customer feedback; but having a process where users could comment so easily and immediately, and rank each others' comments required the web - see (Scott and Orlikowski 2009).

happening in the world of books. These editors initially provided most of the content and it was only almost accidentally over time that Amazon realized that highly paid literary editors could be replaced by ordinary readers writing reviews. And, of course, these ordinary readers offered their content for free!

In the early days Amazon promoted books much in the same way as a literary magazine or book club. Highlighted on its home page each week was a different "spotlight" volume to be sold at a discount of 20% or 30% compared to the normal retail discount of 10%. The website also featured author interviews. Despite the deep discounts offered, the aura of the local neighborhood independent bookshop where you could receive knowledgeable advice was the constant refrain. As Executive Editor, Rick Ayre, commented: "If you spend a lot of time on the site, I hope you get a sense of the quirky, independent, literate voice…" (Spector 2000:131). But things changed rapidly as Amazon expanded.

James Marcus, who was hired as a literary editor in 1996 and became Amazon's fifty-fifth employee, charts his experiences in his book, *Amazonia* (Marcus 2004). According to Marcus one of the concerns in his job interview (conducted in the local Starbucks) was how fast he could write book reviews. "A short one, maybe two hours," Marcus replied, confessing to shave off a few minutes as he perspicuously realized that speed writing reviews might be one of the requirements of the job (Marcus 2004:7). The next question from his interviewer was more daunting: "How fast could you review one hundred books?" Marcus wryly noted (albeit accepting the job), that for Amazon, reviewing sounded less like a literary venture and more like a "pie-eating contest" (Marcus 2004:7). He writes about this experience: "Over the next five

years I would write thousands of reviews, articles, interviews, and miscellaneous bits of copy for Amazon, and was proud to sign my name to just about all of it. Still there was something poignant, and telling, about the fact that I spent my first afternoon there engaged in hack work. For even as the company blew millions and millions of dollars on content – even as Jeff hired an editorial staff larger than that of most magazines… it was clear that art and commerce weren't necessarily the comfiest of bedfellows." (Marcus 2004:23)

In the early days Amazon certainly tried to hang on to its reputation as a place for book lovers where interesting literary events might happen. For example, in the summer of 1997 it launched "The Greatest Tale Ever Told", an intriguing experiment in open-source literary creation. The introductory paragraph was written by John Updike. Budding authors were then invited to contribute forty-four subsequent paragraphs over forty-four days, before Updike picked up the baton to conclude the story, The over 300,000 entries a day were judged by a team of Amazon editors and each winner received a prize of one thousand dollars (as well as the glory of having their paragraph added to the growing story). Although the completed story won no literary plaudits, Amazon was heralded for at least trying the experiment. Updike's cooperation is described by Marcus (2004:103) as "like Mozart appearing on *American Idol*."

The daily literary grind at Amazon, however, seems to have been much more humdrum - churning out reviews. The literary editors hired by Amazon even held an in-house competition as to who could write the most reviews in one week; the winning total was one hundred and thirty seven (Marcus 2004:70). Part of the pressure to write these reviews came from one of the great

"affordances" which the web allows.[9] Unlike with a print magazine, space is hardly a constraint on the internet. In principle there was enough room for each and every book in Amazon's quickly expanding stock to receive its own personal review. Initially it seemed everyone chipped in with reviews. Anyone who worked for the company, including warehouse staff, were asked to write as many as ten reviews a week Displays in nearby book stores in Seattle were culled by editors as a further source of blurbs. Amazon soon realized that timely reviews could simply be purchased and made arrangements with magazines such as, *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus*, and *The Library Journal,* to copy reviews of newly published books. Other reviews from notable opinion leaders such as the *New York Times Book Review* or Oprah Winfrey's book club were added. This is a practice which has continued to this day with these sorts of reviews being labeled, "Editorial Reviews" at the website.

Customer Reviews – A Revolution Unfolds

Customer reviews seem to have originated from a decision to encourage Amazon's customers to share their experiences. Part of the appeal of the website was its famed user-friendliness including its ability to search for any item. The web in 1996 was still seen as a place to build a community of like-minded souls and Amazon encouraged readers to share their experiences of the books they read and submit book reviews which Amazon would post on the website. There were even cash prizes awarded for the best reviews (Spector 2000:132). In short, Amazon, by appealing to the democracy of the web and by being a part of the libertarian thinking underlying

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[9] An "affordance" can be thought of as what a piece of technology or artifact physically enables a user to do with it. For example a chair affords the user to sit on it. The notion was first developed by Gibson (1979) and extended by Norman (1988). For a critique of affordances and its extension to discussions of the internet, see David and Pinch (2006).

the early web, had stumbled upon what was to become a revolution in the way retailing was to be

carried out.

Glen Fleishmann, the catalog manager at Amazon, was the first to use the term "customer

review" (Spector 2000:132). The professional editors at first were glad to receive such reviews.

Of more concern were negative reviews. For instance, an in-house review of well-known

science fiction writer, Robert Heinlein's, <u>Starship Troopers</u> misread the book as supporting child

beating and misogyny. The Amazon custom service manager at the time, Maire Masco, recalled:

"Oh my God! It was like the doors of hell opened! We were inundated with e-mails and counter-

postings. I stopped counting after we posted 300 reviews by readers who condemned that

review." (Spector 2000: 132) The Amazon philosophy was that as long as the negative reviews

attacked the book and not the person they were permissible and as Bezos himself commented,

"You actually have an obligation – if you're going to make the shopping environment one that's

actually conducive to shopping – to let the truth loose. That's what we try to do with customer

reviews."(Spector 2000:132)

It was Amazon's willingness to let such reviews be posted anonymously or under possibly fake

email addresses that was more troubling (the only condition for posting a review is that you must

have made a purchase from Amazon). In June 1999 Amazon posted a review under the headline

"Stupid Book…Don't waste Your time!" by Jeff Bezos with the email listed as

Jeff@amazon.com (Spector 2000: 133).[10] The author of the book complained and it was a week

before Amazon removed the fictitious review. In the early days there were several egregious

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[10] Interestingly Amazon has introduced a badge with the word "THE" before celebrity reviews which authenticates
the celebrity as being the real reviewer. The example given is of Jeff Bezos himself! See, "What do Badges Mean?"
http://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html?ie=UTF8&nodeId=14279681&pop-up=1#what

examples of bogus reviews, for instance "God" reviewed the Bible and a reviewer called "Emily Brontë" reviewed one of her own books (Spector 2000:133). The problem of fake reviews has remained ever since. In 2004 a technical glitch on Amazon's Canadian site revealed for a short period the real email addresses of thousands of customer reviewers (Harmon 2004 and Marcus 2004b). It turned out that many rave reviews were written by friends, husbands, wives, colleagues, and paid professionals working for publishers and their agents.[11] Some authors were even reviewing their own books and of course attacking their rivals. One notable recent case is that of the well-known British historian, Orlando Figes, who, under a fake email account on Amazon's UK site, panned his rivals' books whilst lavishing praise on his own writings. When "outed" Figes at first denied the charges and threatened to sue anyone making such allegations; then he claimed his wife had made the postings, before, finally, admitting his offense and apologizing claiming pressure at work and illness as the cause.[12] The problem of anonymous negative attacks, known on the site as "trolls", has, as we shall see, continued and taken a new form with attacks, not only on authors directly, but also on customer reviews.

The possibility that customer reviews are being plagiarized has also emerged. One of us (Trevor Pinch) found positive Amazon reviews of one of his own books (on the history of the Moog electronic music synthesizer) copied to another rival book on synthesizers (the plagiarized reviews still remain at the Amazon website). Our subsequent study of over 50,000 Amazon reviews of books and CDs using a plagiarism algorithm revealed that about 1% of all text was copied (David and Pinch 2006). This finding has been replicated by a much larger Cornell study

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[11] Fake product reviews are also appearing, e.g. the recent case of fake Belkin product reviews http://news.cnet.com/8301-1001_3-10145399-92.html

[12] See http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/apr/23/historian-orlando-figes-amazon-reviews-rivals,

of over 2 million reviews (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil,C, G. Kossinets, J. Kleinberg, and L. Lee 2009).

The importance of customer reviews for selling books was soon noticed by the publishing industry. Amazon is "not just fulfilling demand, it's creating it," said Kent Carroll of the New York Publishing House, Carroll and Graf (Spector 2000:175). Studies have confirmed this intuition showing the importance of customer reviews in selling books as well as goods in general (Resnick and Varian 1997, Chevalier and Mayzlin 2004, Spool 2009).

Amazon customer reviews have impacted how publishers release books. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, before becoming the international best-sellers whose publication date was coordinated all over the world, was always published first in the UK. When the second book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, came out in the UK months before it appeared in the US, more than 80 rave reviews appeared at the US Amazon site including instructions on how to order the UK version with delivery in less than eight days (Spector 2000:188). Indeed this seems to be one way customer reviews can be used – to point people to other places where the same item can be bought more cheaply or more conveniently.[13]

Amazon Today – Goodbye to Books?

Over time Amazon has come to rely on customer reviews as one of the main ways of producing content at its website. The literary editors, hired in copious numbers in the early years, have mainly left or moved on to other positions in the company. The literary pretensions of Amazon have all but vanished and indeed make little sense for a site where books are no longer the major

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[13] David and Pinch found in their study of plagiarism amongst Amazon reviews that a proportion of the copied text were multiple postings recommending better places to buy items. See David and Pinch 2006.

merchandise on offer. What started as a form of literary venture has become a retailing revolution. With customer reviews playing an increasingly prominent role at the site, Amazon, has continuously introduced new mechanisms for monitoring, sorting, and ranking these reviews; often tinkering with the way the reviews themselves or information about them are presented at the site. Furthermore, Amazon has used the same system that was first introduced for books across all its products.

Anyone who is a registered customer at Amazon can write a review and there is no obligation to have bought the item under review from Amazon or at all (although interestingly Amazon has introduced an "Amazon Verified Purchase" tag to denote that the review is of an item bought from Amazon). Customers can use a pen name or use their real name (denoted by the badge "Real Name"). Anonymous reviews are no longer allowed at the US site (because they were allowed in the past, such reviews remain at the site as anonymous). After uploading, the review is first checked by Amazon for inflammatory and inappropriate content. It is then posted under the item being reviewed.

The major new features Amazon have introduced over the years include: a five star system for ranking an item by the reviewer; a check box for customers to click whether or not they found the review helpful; placement of the reviews found to be "most helpful" at the top of the customer reviews list (as of 2010 top left, with "most recent" reviews placed to the top right)[14]; a table preceding the customer reviews with a summary of the number and distribution of the star rankings, and the average star ranking; a "Report This" button to report, and possibly have removed, defamatory or abusive reviews; ranking of all reviewers and the introduction of a

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[14] Amazon sometimes designates the most helpful reviews as "Spotlight" reviews.

ranking system whereby all reviewers get a rank and special badges for Top-Thousand Reviewer, Top-Five Hundred Reviewer, Top-Fifty Reviewer, Top-Ten Reviewer and # One Reviewer. Amazon has also introduced a feature which allows comments to be left in response to any review (including response to the comments by the author of the review) and a feature to make it easier to see negative reviews (Spool 2009). Overall these features have produced a tiered reputation economy which we refer to as the "Six Stages of Reputation" (David and Pinch 2006).

In October 2008 Amazon caused much consternation by introducing a new way of ranking reviewers.[15] Users have always speculated about the secret ranking formula and some have tried to reverse-engineer it, and there is much talk about whether it is possible to game the system. Also statis had set in at the top, with very little movement amongst the top reviewers. The new ranking system had a dramatic impact on the ranking of some reviewers (including most of the top ten). For instance, long term Number One reviewer, a supposed speed-reading, former acquisitions librarian, Harriet Klausner, dropped to 445 (she is currently in the 700s).[16] Furthermore Amazon added confusion to the consternation by leaving the old ranking system (which in a move reminiscent of Coca Cola was now renamed "classic reviewer rank") displayed alongside the "new reviewer rank" system. [17]

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[15] The new ranking system was introduced in the US on October 23, 2008. It was introduced to Amazon Britain, France, and Germany on March 9, 2010.

[16] Klausner's notoriety and whether she even exists (or is a pool of reviewers) is widely debated online. There are special websites dedicated to her and Amazon reviewing in general, see for instance, the blog "The Harriet Klausner Appreciation Society" http://harriet-rules.blogspot.com/

[17] Everyone who writes product reviews at Amazon receives a ranking. To find your own ranking, click on "Your account", and then scroll down to "Community" and click on "Your public profile". All your reviews and ranking will appear as well as your profile (if you have one).

There has been much debate on the Amazon discussion boards about the new ranking system and much speculation as to how exactly the two systems differ.[18] No one knows for sure as the knowledge is proprietary and Amazon does things such as restrict knowledge of the public rankings of all reviewers below the top ten thousand to prevent sophisticated statistical analyses being generated. Also in the new ranking system everyone has a unique ranking so tied rankings are not possible which makes comparison harder. The introduction of the new ranking system, although it broke the stasis, continues to be hugely controversial and is one of the issues our survey investigates.

In 2008 Amazon also introduced a new program known as "Vine" (seemingly only available to top-thousand reviewers), whereby reviewers are sent free books (in advance of their publication date) and a variety of other free products to be reviewed (and kept by the reviewer if so desired). Such reviews have the tag "Customer Review from the Amazon Vine Program" attached to them and reviewers in the program are given a badge called "Vine Voice". Increasingly reviews carried out by the top-thousand reviewers are of Vine products (see below for more details). This means that reviews for all sorts of products are turning up amongst the top reviewers' book reviews. Reviewers, under the Vine program, are thus receiving some (albeit small) reward for their endeavors directly from Amazon. It is also clear that publishers, agents and savvy authors, increasingly solicit reviews directly from top reviewers who they think might be suitable to review a particular book.[19] Thus the independence of the reviewer from the reviewed is coming increasingly into question.

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[18] See, for instance, http://www.amazon.com/gp/richpub/syltguides/fullview/L1KFFD7OYDYV.
[19] One of Cornell University's best known science writers told Trevor Pinch he did this.

Research Questions

Little is systematically known about customer reviewers at Amazon. One of the few academic studies analyzed Amazon profiles of top-thousand reviewers as part of research on document depositories (Peddibhotia and Subramani 2007). It concluded that reviewers were posting reviews for self satisfaction rather than for any wider social good. The limited data available from profiles posted at Amazon did not enable these researchers to draw any inferences about the review process itself or how the motivations of reviewers have changed over time. Gilbert and Karahalios (2010) interviewed a small sample of 20 Amazon reviewers as part of a wider study of reviewers who published reviews containing information already covered in earlier reviews (what they call deja reviews). They found some of these reviewers were what they called "amateurs", publishing first time reviews, and others "professionals", who had published many reviews and cared about their ranking and what other reviewers thought. The professionals seem similar to our respondents in that their identities are built upon not only judging a product but also upon maintaining their status as a reviewer. An article in Slate (Hallberg 2008) has suggested that some top reviewers are publishing meaningless positive reviews and gaming the rankings via voting circles. There are also a few blogs and journalistic pieces where top reviewers reflect upon their own activities.[20]

Although the reputation system at Amazon and other e-commerce sites has received attention from economist and computer scientists (e.g. Ghose and Ipeirokis 2008, Forman, Ghose and Wiesenfeld 2008, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Kossinets, Kleinberg, and Lee 2009) there has been

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[20] See, for instance, Corrine H. Smith, "Confessions of an Amazon.com Reviewer". Document sent to authors, November 7, 2009. This blog post by a retired librarian offers advice on how to review, http://www.squidoo.com/amazon_reviewer. See also this interviewer with a top reviewer: Mike Musgrove, "Click by Click: Reviewers Gain Clout," *Washington Post*, July 12, 2009 http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/11/AR2009071100057_pf.html.

little systematic research on the reviewers as a group and no survey which directly seeks information from the reviewers as to their motivation, strategies, and reflections on the reviewing system. It is not known who these people, writing sometimes thousands of reviews a year, are, their gender and age, and why they do it. We do not know how and if their motivations have changed over time as reviewing has become a more and more important activity to Amazon. For instance, if reviewers started reviewing for the love of books, how does becoming a ranked reviewer and maintaining that ranking impact their reviews and their motivation to review? Since books are no longer Amazon's mainstay product, are reviewers switching to other products to review, and if so, what sorts of products? Does reviewing media objects, such as books, music and movies, require a different set of skills from reviewing other items such as printers or groceries? Also there are many detailed questions to ask about the reviewing process itself: for instance, what is important in choosing an item to review, do they have preferred styles of reviewing, and so on? Also underlying our interest is the question of economic motive – the free lunch issue. If Amazon has replaced its highly paid literary editors with essentially free content from reviewers, how do reviewers feel about this? Do they even want remuneration?

Methods

We decided to focus attention on the top-thousand reviewers as they had experience of sustained reviewing, are more sensitive to issues of ranking, and feel in a more acute way than ordinary reviewers the dilemmas and pressures we have charted above. Also since this group is identified by Amazon as its "top" reviewers, this makes it a self-selecting group to focus upon. We conducted our research completely independent from any interest or knowledge of Amazon as a company. We identified our respondents from Amazon's public website. Since reviewers'

identities are primarily "Amazon" identities, obtaining independent access was not always easy. We contacted respondents via their public email addresses. Focusing on the top-thousand made this easier because such reviewers are more likely to have a public presence online (in blogs, other reviewing websites, and so on) and hence enable us to identify their email addresses. We combed the web for the email addresses of the top-thousand reviewers and located 409. We assume there are some publicly available email addresses of the top thousand which we failed to locate and others prefer to remain private. We have no way of knowing for sure whether the reviewers with public email addresses are representative of all top-thousand reviewers, but it seems unlikely that a public on-line presence will in itself introduce a serious response bias. We checked the ranking of the 409 potential respondents (in September 2008 when we commenced the research Amazon had only one ranking system) to ensure we had a representative spread.

 Unbeknownst to us, as we prepared our survey, Amazon introduced its new ranking system (on October 23 2008). We were thus fortuitously able to add questions about the new ranking system and solicit more responses because of the added interest and controversy that the new ranking system engendered. On December 3, 2008 we administered the pilot survey to 43 respondents chosen randomly. 19 replied to the pilot (response rate of 44.2%). We fine-tuned our questionnaire before administering the main survey on January 23, 2009 (the full list of questions and three further supplementary questions are given in the Appendix). After three reminders we received a total of 142 replies giving us a response rate of 34.7% (allowing for returned "undeliverable" requests from seemingly invalid email addresses), which is very respectable for an online survey. Furthermore, the respondents, never ones to shy away from writing *more*

rather than less, often replied with long detailed answers to many of the open-ended questions, thus providing more useful data.

Our survey soon became an item on the Amazon discussion boards,[21] and in response to the demand there we created a link to our survey instrument for volunteers who wanted to participate. We obtained 5 volunteer responses, all from top-thousand reviewers (4 on classic ranking and 1 on new ranking), who were not in our original pool of email addresses. Therefore we decided to include them as representative of the experiences of top-thousand reviewers. Since most of the pilot questions replicated the main questions, we have, where appropriate, combined the two sets of data for purposes of analysis. We ended up with a sample of 166 reviewers (R= 166) consisting of 5 top-ten, 11 top-fifty, 19 top-hundred, 63 top-five hundred, and 61 top-thousand (4 reviewers chose not to disclose their rank and 3 were formally unranked - but were in the top-thousand when the sample was drawn up).

From July to September 2009 we collected additional data on all 166 of our respondents: total number of reviews written; URLs for Friends and Interesting people (these are designations on the social-networking part of Amazon's site); number of reviews written in one year (2008-9); the Amazon product categories for each review; whether the reviews were positive, negative or neutral (classified by number of stars); numbers of comments received on reviews; and URLs of all those leaving comments. In November 2009 we also asked a further 3 follow-up questions (R = 121) which we have added in the Appendix. We compiled all our coded data into a master Excel spreadsheet for ease of analysis.

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[21] http://forums.prosperotechnologies.com/n/mb/message.asp?webtag=am-custreview&msg=31107.1&redirCnt=1

We have thus accumulated a large amount of data of different sorts, not all of which are relevant to the findings presented here. We may produce additional reports and papers on other aspects of the data as we conduct further analysis. Our main findings below are given in bold. Pie charts and tables showing some of the responses are given in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Gender profile

Gender	Gender #	Percentage
Male	116	69.88%
Female	50	30.12%
Total	166	
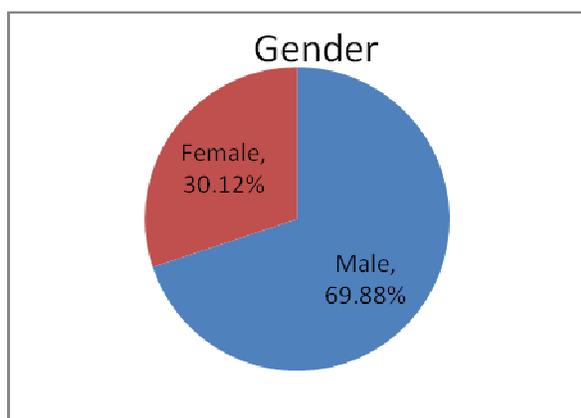
Age profile

Row Labels	Count of Age Band
18-30	5
31-40	25
41-50	27
51-60	34
61-70	24
71-80	4
Over 80	2
Grand Total	**121**

Median (and mode) age band: 51-60 (out of 121 respondents)

Highest Education Level

Row Labels	Count of Highest Education Level
High School	10
Undergraduate	43
Masters	46
Doctorate	22
Grand Total	**121**

Median (and mode) Highest Education Level is 'Masters' (out of 121 respondents)

Time Spent on Amazon:

In a typical DAY how much time in TOTAL do you spend on Amazon NOT writing or posting reviews (e.g. doing other activities such as shopping, browsing, writing comments, checking your ranking, following Friends, on discussion boards etc)?

Row Labels	Count of Time Spent on Amazon
Less than 30 minutes	73
30 minutes to one hour	36
One to two hours	7
More than two hours	5
Grand Total	**121**

Median (and mode) time spent: Less than 30 minutes (out of 121 respondents)

Country of Origin Profile

Countries	Country	Percentage
USA	146	89.02%
Canada	4	2.44%
Australia	4	2.44%
Israel	2	1.22%
England	2	1.22%
South Africa	1	0.61%
Guyana	1	0.61%
Netherlands	1	0.61%
Germany	1	0.61%
Japan	1	0.61%
Malaysia	1	0.61%
Total	164	
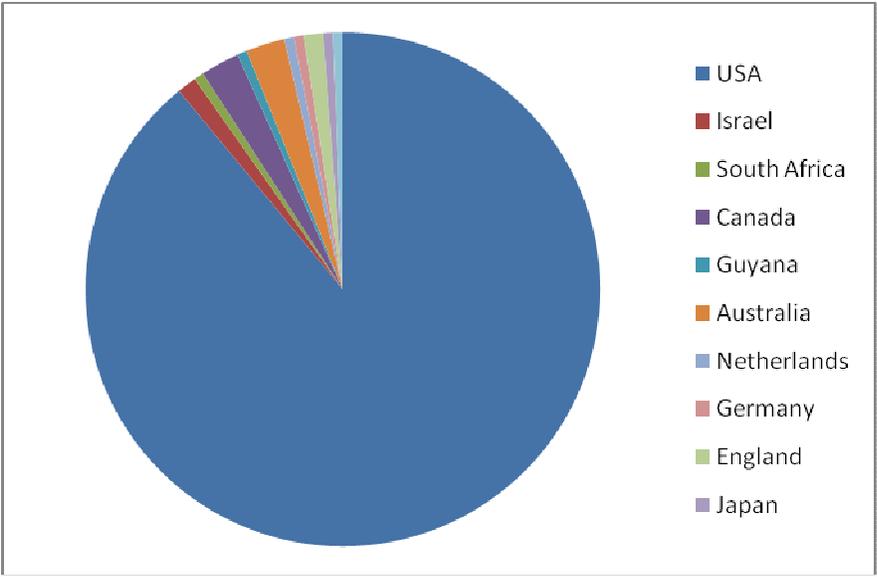
US Region Profile

US Region	US Region	Percentage
Northeast	43	29.45%
South	42	28.77%
West	36	24.66%
Midwest	25	17.12%
Total	146	
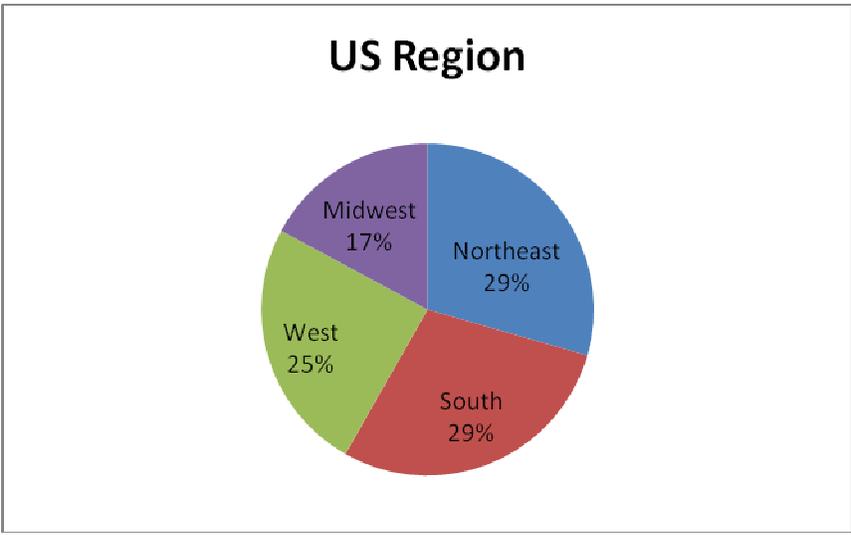
Occupation Profile

Occupation	Occupation	Percentage
Writer	22	14.01%
Educator	20	12.74%
Retired	17	10.83%
Attorney	12	7.64%
Healthcare	9	5.73%
Management	8	5.10%
Unemployed	5	3.18%
Student	4	2.55%
Accountant	4	2.55%
Analyst	4	2.55%
Engineer	4	2.55%
Librarian	3	1.91%
Executive Officer	3	1.91%
Other	42	26.75%
Total	157	
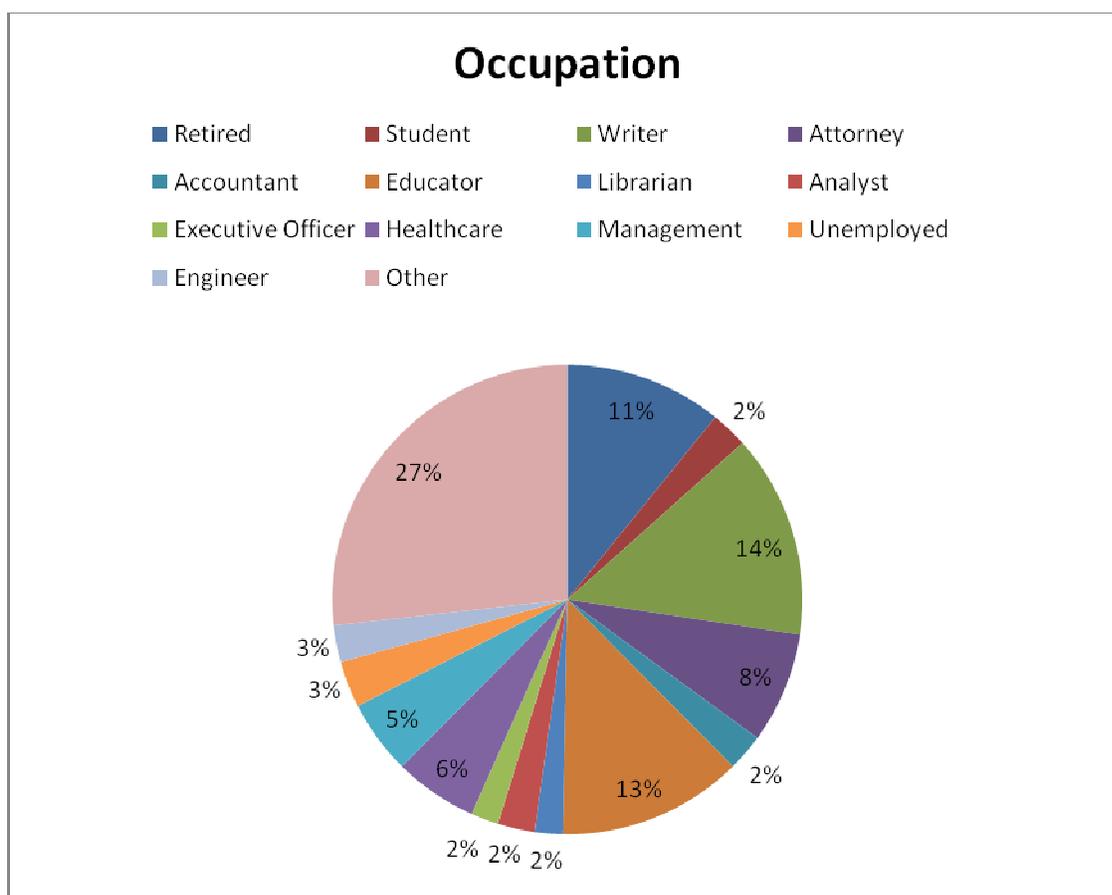
Who are Amazon Top Reviewers? Gender, Age, Location and Occupation

70% of our respondents are male and 30% female. Given that surveys consistently show women read more books than men, the predominance of male reviewers is highly significant. That top reviewers are more than twice as likely to be male as female could have some significance beyond revealing gender inequities because, if the sorts of items reviewed and the styles of reviewing are linked to gender, then there is built-in bias in the information provided by the pool of reviewers who comprise the top-thousand. The prevailing image of Amazon reviewers, associated with the number one reviewer, Harriet Klausner is inaccurate.

Book reviewing in magazines and newspapers in general have shown similar gender inequities (Franklin 2011).[22] Furthermore Franklin (2011) argues that this discrimination reflects a pattern whereby far more books are authored by men than women. Our research shows that a significant number (39%) of top Amazon reviewers are also authors. We wondered if the gender imbalance amongst reviewers is also reflected in the subset who are also authors. Indeed of the 39% of reviewers who are authors, 71% are male and 29% female, showing almost the exact same gender ratio. The gender imbalance is even more dramatic for our thirty most prolific reviewers (see Table 1) with 77% male and 23% female.

It might be thought that the lack of traditional gate keeping mechanisms and the lack of any role played by formal credentials in on-line environments might encourage more participation by

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[22] See also, the statistics on woman book reviewers available at VIDA women in Literary Art website, http://vidaweb.org/the-count-2010.

women.[23] Of course it is possible that outside the top-thousand (classic rank) more women do participate and also that the top-thousand (new rank) may have more female participation (and less authors), but this remains to be ascertained. Information technology as a field, of course, has many more male participants (Matwyshn 2003, Faulkner and Lie 2007), but it would seem that this would not explain the gender bias we have found, as writing book reviews online does not demand particular skills with technology and other web tasks such as social networking show heavy participation by women. The preponderance of male authors amongst the top reviewers explains some of the variance but it seems likely that other factors peculiar to the top thousand may be relevant. For instance, the competitive ethos amongst some top-thousand reviewers (likely to be even more prevalent amongst the most prolific reviewers) may favor the participation of males. One respondent told us explicitly that, in seeking his top reviewer status, he was motivated by "innate male competiveness".

Most respondents are evenly distributed in the age range between 30 years to 70 years with slightly more in the 51—60 band. Only 5 respondents are under the age of 30. One of these 5 told us he had been reviewing since age 16.[24] Given the prevailing image of the young savvy internet user, the disproportionate lack of people in the lowest age band might at first seem surprising. But since our reviewers had on average been reviewing for 9 years, when they started their reviewing careers many were indeed in the lower age band. Because acquiring a high ranking under the classic ranking system takes an inordinate amount of time and effort it is quite possible that younger people subsequently have been put off (and in any case given that the

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[23] Studies of Wikipedia entries indicate even less participation by women. e.g. Noam Cohen, "Define Gender Gap? Look up Wikipedia's Contributor List," *The New York Times* January 30, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/31/business/media/31link.html?_r=1

[24] Respondents had to be at least 18 years old to take part in our survey - no one declined explicitly on the grounds of being too young to participate.

classic ranking system requires accumulating a large corpus of reviews, they would not have had enough time to reach the top rankings today). Conversely people who have plenty of time on their hands, namely retirees, feature prominently. **11% of our respondents describe themselves as retirees.** Many of them say that reviewing for Amazon is a fulfilling retirement hobby. As one told us, "It's a good hobby for an old retired geezer". Clearly writing reviews is a satisfying new hobby for some retirees (several of the retirees were also retired writers and professors). Again this is a finding with some potential significance. If the predominant age profile of the reviewers is very different to the young consumers who are assumed to populate eshopping, then the experiences of significant numbers of the Amazon product reviewers are liable to be out of sync with the majority population of shoppers. For instance, it seems likely that retirees would have very different shopping habits and purchasing requirements than the rest of the population.

Not surprisingly, the educational level of our respondents is very high. **92% have college degrees and 56% possess higher degrees such as a Masters or PhD (R=121).** This also reflects the literary aspirations of our respondents. It would be surprising if, say, at hotel review sites, such a travelocity.com, that one found such well educated reviewers. The degrees held seem important, not in terms of the credentials and skills needed to write reviews per se, but for the knowledge and skills required to review these particular sorts of items (books, and to a lesser extent music and movies).

 90% of our respondents are located in the US and the rest are distributed between a range of countries including Australia, Canada, England, Germany, Guyana, Israel, Malaysia, South Africa, the Netherlands, and Japan. Most of these countries are English-speaking countries or

ones with a high level of English fluency. It is also notable that several are from countries where Amazon has a regional site (Canada, UK, Germany, Japan). Within the US, respondents are evenly distributed between the main geographical regions of North East, South, and West, with a smaller number (17%) coming from the Midwest.

In terms of occupations it has to be stated that three of our respondents are actually librarians (with Harriet Klausner being an ex-librarian the image of Amazon reviewers is often that of a librarian). The largest category is that of "writer" (14%) followed by "educator" (12%). And, of course, many educators write books. **39% of respondents report that they are engaged in or have been engaged in producing the same sorts of material that they review.** All these respondents bar one are authors (the other is a musician who reviews CDs). These respondents are significant because of the cross over between their day-time jobs and their Amazon hobby. Many are employed full-time as writers or educators and include journalists for prominent national newspapers, literary agents, publishers, screen writers, and proof readers.

Many of our respondents are pursuing successful careers in a variety of fields, especially law (8% are attorneys). Three are Presidents and CEOs (two of not-for-profits); another is a Chief Technical Officer for a human resources and consultancy company; and one is a Congressional Aide. The rest are scattered across a variety of professions with heath care, the media, computing, and financial services well represented. Our sample includes a minister and a priest, four students, two homemakers and four unemployed. Apart from the retirees and the unemployed, everyone in the survey seems to be holding down occupations that demand a significant amount of their time (including home making).

Being an Amazon reviewer is thus not the main occupation of our respondents. Amazon reviewing is, however, for a significant number what we might describe as a "crossover" occupation. In other words, their main occupation gives them skills which benefit their Amazon career, and their Amazon career provides benefits to their main career. As mentioned above this is related to many reviewing the same products they produce as for example, the literary writers who review novels, but it goes wider with reviewers reviewing products where they hold a particular expertise from their day time job, such as the dentist who reviews dental products, the art teacher who reviews art materials, and the journalist who reviews the Charlie Rose TV show.

The Most Prolific Reviewers

The impression from reading the huge numbers of reviews posted is that our reviewers must be spending considerable time writing reviews. But how much time are they actually spending?

The first thing to note is that the numbers of reviews posted are heavily skewed by review ranking. The top-ten (classic rank) reviewers have written an enormous number of reviews between them (60,317 as of May 2010) but the number of reviews written tails off outside this Top Ten. Harriet Klausner has 21,870 reviews listed. Number Two reviewer, Lawrence M. Bernabo, has posted 6,666 reviews. Grady Harp, at Number Three has posted 4,562 reviews. The Number Ten reviewer has 4,627 reviews. The Number Five Hundred has 628 reviews, and the Number One Thousand an almost paltry 52 reviews. Visual inspection of this drop off in productivity seems to fit the pattern which Peddibhopla and Subramani (2007) found in their analysis. They examined the numbers of reviews produced by the ten thousand top reviewers by dividing them into bands of 100 each and found the drop off in productivity followed a power law function.

All our respondents have been writing reviews for between 3 and 13 years. **The average length of time spent writing reviews for Amazon is 9.0 years.** Some reviewers told us they were more active in the past, and one reviewer had retired altogether from reviewing (last review posted in June 2009). Our data set reveals a nuanced picture in terms of productivity. **Only 12 out of 166 respondents report writing more than 20 reviews per month.** Indeed around 50% report that they write less than 6 reviews per month (still this is more than one a week and would be quite daunting to most of us). Out of curiosity we asked our reviewers how much time they spent at

the Amazon site not writing or posting reviews but carrying out other activities such as shopping, browsing, writing comments, checking ranking, following Friends, on discussion boards, etc. 60% said they spent half an hour or less there a week, 30% said they spent 30 minutes to an hour a week and 5 respondents (R = 121) confessed to spending more than two hours per week on such activities.

With a few reviewers seemingly writing reviews at an exceptionally fast rate, we wondered how many of the total reviews generated by all respondents were produced by these "fast producers" alone.   We had data for a complete year of reviewing for every respondent. We were thus able to delineate their individual contribution to the total numbers of reviews produced in that one year. Since we had also asked each respondent in our survey to self report how many reviews they wrote a month, the data compiled from the public record could also be used to check the accuracy of respondents' own self assessments of productivity.

Our most prolific reviewer wrote 862 reviews in one year accounting for 4.2% of the total reviews (see Table 1). Our second most prolific reviewer wrote 768 reviews for a total of 3.8%. Our tenth most prolific reviewer (with 417 reviews for the year) accounted for 2.0% of the total. Our top three producers thus accounted for around 11% of the total reviews in one year, our top ten producers for 30%, and we found that approximately 50% of all reviews in one year were written by 16.2 % (27) of our respondents. In terms of productivity our twenty fastest reviewers are on average writing over 20 reviews per month with our fastest reviewer writing 72 reviews per month.

TABLE 1

30 MOST PROLIFIC REVIEWERS FOR 2008-9

Number of Reviews	Percentage of Total of All Reviews by our Respondents
862	4.23%
768	3.77%
613	3.01%
587	2.88%
574	2.82%
489	2.40%
469	2.30%
449	2.20%
441	2.16%
417	2.05%
370	1.82%
360	1.77%
357	1.75%
344	1.69%
309	1.52%
307	1.51%
300	1.47%
267	1.31%
265	1.30%
246	1.21%
231	1.13%
229	1.12%
216	1.06%
214	1.05%
211	1.04%
207	1.02%
206	1.01%
204	1.00%
196	0.96%
189	0.93%

77% of the 30 most prolific reviewers are male and 23% female.

Twenty nine of the top thirty most productive respondents estimated that they wrote more than ten reviews a month. These reviewers were generally accurate in their self assessment that they were high producers when compared with the fifty percent of the reviewers who estimated they wrote less than 5 reviews per month. But estimates of accuracy for those who claimed to write over ten reviews per month varied widely. For instance, those who claimed to be the very fastest (over twenty a month) were scattered throughout our top thirty indicating that in several cases respondents did not have a precise estimate of their own productivity. Our second fastest producer claimed to write 11-15 reviews per month, but his total for one year was 768 which corresponds to a massive rate of 64 reviews per month! Indeed based on their yearly productivity all of our top twenty fastest reviewers should have reported a rate of reviews of over 20/month but only ten did so. **50% of our most prolific reviewers underestimated their own productivity.**

Of course it is unlikely that all reviewers keep exact tabs on how many reviews they are churning out. Also for a high producer, the difference between writing, say, fifteen reviews a month versus twenty might not be as significant, as the difference between, say, writing zero reviews per month and five. In general we probably are better at estimating lower rather than higher rates for everyday activities. Take, for example, a low rate activity for most people, such as visits to the gym per week. This estimate is probably going to be more accurate than for a high rate activity such as the number of glasses of water consumed per week. But this still leaves the question of why the underestimate? We suspect here that it is like for any deliciously time-consuming obsessive vice or hobby, whether it be doing the crossword, playing Sudoku, online scrabble, or Guitar Hero, quilting, collecting exotic corals, keeping your house immaculate,

following your favorite sports team, gardening, hiking, mountain-bike riding, working out, or whatever – we feel a little guilty and embarrassed about how much time we are actually spending as supposedly mature adults on this obsessive pastime and hence tend to play down the real amount of time spent!

The Reviewing Strategies of Prolific Reviewers

We read through a year of customer reviews of our most prolific reviewers to get an impression of their reviewing strategies. This is in itself a rather odd way of reading reviews since most browsers at Amazon search by item rather than by reviewer, and hence do not read all the reviewers' reviews sequentially. The first thing we noticed was that many of these reviewers laced their portfolios of reviews with items that are quick and easy to review such as gadgets, office supplies, beauty products, fashion apparel, household goods, food products (including cereals), theatrical releases of movies, and the like. Some of these items come from the Amazon Vine Program. Some of the gadgets reviewed are totally bizarre – for instance our most prolific reviewer has one of her most recent reviews for a remote-controlled fart machine! There seemed to be a sense of mischief at work with these reviewers – the game being to find the funniest and oddest thing to review. Often these reviews had tongue in cheek comments posted by other top reviewers.

The reviews of our most prolific reviewer, who had only been reviewing for five years, were very short, tending to be only one or two paragraphs and consisted almost entirely of food, beauty products, art materials, clothes, movies and the occasional book. We noticed an interesting source of books for our second most prolific reviewer – the local library plus

interlibrary loans (another of the prolific reviewers mentioned that she pays for the books she reviews on Amazon by cleaning house for other people during the week). This top-fifty reviewer (classic ranking), however, focused most of his reviewing attention on movies. In one of his reviews he noted that he spent much of 2007 and 2008 compiling "thousand-best" lists of movies from a variety of sources and data mining to find those in common, ending up with thirty eight hundred movies. This reviewer was obviously systematic as well as prolific. He tended to post his DVD reviews in bunches – we noticed 27 reviews posted in just one day in 2009. And this was followed by reviews of 5 books (including the Bible) and 10 movies just eleven days later.

Our third most prolific reviewer reviewed almost exclusively music, although we noted that he had a review for a toothbrush (an Amazon Vine item) mixed in with his reviews of heavy metal CDs. Our fourth most prolific reviewer (top fifty classic rank) also reviews books for a national newspaper which he cross-posts to Amazon; in this case enabling his "day time job" to pay direct dividends to his Amazon career. Our fifth most prolific reviewer is a top-ten reviewer who has written her own cookbook to which she provides a link after she reviews cookbooks. She reviews books from the Amazon Vine program as well as many books that have the Amazon "Verified Purchase" badge attached to them (she focuses upon non-fiction and self-help books). We also found short reviews posted for perfumes, Belgium chocolates, teas, spices, lots of beauty products, vacuum cleaner bags and a bottle of Chlorox.

Some of the prolific reviewers take specialization of a genre to extreme lengths. For example one likes to review the Charlie Rose TV show. Of his 574 total reviews for the year, 352 (61.32% or almost one a day) were of the Charlie Rose show. The show dates that he reviewed range from

the mid 1990's and do not appear to follow any obvious pattern. The Charlie Rose show episodes are listed for purchase on Amazon at $24.95 each. If this reviewer were to purchase each of these shows at cost from Amazon, he would have spent $8,782.40 on just the Charlie Rose show for the year. Other reviewers specialize in reviewing items that they are familiar with from their "day time job" such as the dentist who reviews many dental products. We also noticed different editions of books or slight variations on products posted with essentially the same review, thereby enabling reviewers to "up" their productivity at little cost.[25]

With so many reviews being written the issue of copied or plagiarized reviews has surfaced. **Our survey found that 35% of the top reviewers sampled (R= 166) had experienced all or part of their reviews being copied.** This figure is much higher than the 1% found in our own earlier study (David and Pinch 2006) and by a larger Cornell study (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil,C, G. Kossinets, J. Kleinberg,and L. Lee, 2009). This indicates that the problem of plagiarized text may be more prevalent than the earlier studies showed. It seems probable that top reviewers are more likely to have their reviews copied (by dint of their prominence), and also that they are more attentive to text copying and hence ask Amazon to remove the copied text thus lowering the amount actually still residing at the website.

Our most prolific reviewers post numerous carefully crafted and serious reviews. Many are passionate about the subjects they touch upon and express strong political or religious viewpoints. Their styles vary (one reviewer writes many of her reviews in verse, another uses a staccato stream of consciousness format), some are short, some lengthy, some are peppered with quotes from authors, some display great knowledge and learning, some are throw-away, some

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[25] This might be an artefact of Amazon itself cross-posting reviews to different editions.

humorous, some offer their own rankings including "half stars", and go to great lengths in explaining their reviewing scale. In reading their reviews we often found we were adding items to our own Amazon "wish lists". Yes they were that compelling. Since we had read many of the same books, listened to the same music, and watched the same movies, we found we could start to get a feel for which reviewers suited our personal tastes, and which ones were knowledgeable and which ones we didn't trust. Some of these reviewers became our favorite Amazon reviewers. In short we were becoming "fans" of certain reviewers – something which, as we shall see below, Amazon actively discourages with its new way of ranking reviewers.

What Do They Review?

To get a feel for which items our respondents are reviewing we trawled through all the profiles of our respondents we could access on one day (155 were accessible) and noted the latest item reviewed.[26] 63% listed their last item reviewed as a book. The next most popular item was music (16%) followed by movies (12%). 6% of reviews for the last item listed were for miscellaneous items. This very rough measure shows how books, although still prominent, have been displaced by other sorts of products.

We asked all our respondents in the survey to estimate how many of their reviews were specifically of books and how many were of other items. Of the 164 respondents who replied to this question, 92 said they posted either all or mostly book reviews. **Thus only 56% of our respondents review mainly books and this shows the dramatic effect of Amazon changing from a book store to a general retailer.** A further 25 respondents said that half of their output was books, 39 said they posted a few book reviews, and 8 said they posted no book reviews at all.

We asked our respondents who reviewed books what sorts of books they reviewed. Several of them gave answers such as, "all", or "anything", or "various" or "what I like" (n=17). Most review both fiction and non-fiction (n = 86), and non–fiction alone is more popular (n = 48) than fiction (including "literary fiction", "historical fiction" and "children's fiction") (n = 27). "History" is the single most popular genre (n = 51). Within fiction "mysteries" and thrillers" is the most popular genre (n = 30), followed by "science fiction and fantasy" (n =21). The next most popular category of non-fiction is "biography" (n = 21) followed by "politics and current

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[26] Carried out on May 29, 2010.

events" (n = 20). Religious books (including theology) are also extensively reviewed (n= 19) and

several reviewers list books in all the major world's religions as special topics of interest,

including several who refer to specific aspects of Christian writing and Judaica. "Science and

Nature" books are listed by 14 respondents.

Other categories mentioned more than twice are "business" (n= 10), "philosophy" (n= 8),

"poetry" (n= 8), "children's books" (n = 8), "young adult fiction" (n = 6), "memoirs" (n =6),

"horror" (n =6), "romance" (n =6) (but one respondent declared he/she would review "anything

except romance!"), "true crime" (n = 4), "entertainment and popular culture" (n = 4),

"photography" (n=4), "martial arts" (n =4), "erotica" (n =4) (but one of those reviewing erotica

declared they would never review "pornography"), "health" (n= 4), "travel" (n =3), "art" (n =

3), "reference books" (n = 3), and "psychology" (n =3). But what is even more impressive is the

huge number (over 100) of additional genres and topics mentioned. Some of these are popular

categories in publishing such as "cook books" and "self help books" but other reflect a huge

degree of specialization such as "Las Vegas Studies", or "WWII, especially USSR versus

Germany", or particular regions such as the Middle East, or Maine, or very specific topics such

as non-profits, birds, web design, or Tai Chi. In that respondents felt that these were worth listing

they clearly felt they had developed some expertise in these topics.

It seems that our book reviewers are highly selective over which books they choose to review.

Only 35% said they review every book they read. The most common answer as to why

reviewers don't review everything is that reviewers simply don't have the time; in other words

they read many more books than they review. Many read for pleasure and not for review

purposes. As one told us, "Reviews represent work. If I am reading purely for pleasure and recreation, I do not want to turn that into a task." Reviewers also often choose not to post reviews for books they don't like. One respondent remarked, "An author puts an enormous personal effort into a book, and I prefer to praise the ones I love, not damn the ones I did not!"

Reviewers confess to not finishing particularly bad books, "Some that have been gifts are so bad I can't finish them." Another said, "Most books I read are not very good -- and often I only read 10% or so before moving on."   Many top reviewers are inundated with books sent by publishers and authors (see below), giving even more reason to be selective: "I typically write reviews for about 20 -25 percent of books received from major publishers and about 4 percent of self-published." For one respondent not finishing a book did not necessarily disqualify it from being reviewed: "In rare cases I will review a book I didn't finish because it was so bad, I would however state in the review that I didn't finish the book for that reason as a warning to others who might avoid the book for the same reasons." One respondent wouldn't review a book he found offensive: "Sometimes a book has hidden agendas that are evil in my opinion, or porn is stuck in the middle of the book and I will not finish reading it, or it turns out coming against God. In this case I just don't write a review and I let the author know I cannot review the book." This reviewer's strong religious affiliation clearly shaped the material he chose for review as well as the substance of his reviews. He also seems to be referring specifically to requests from authors to review particular books.

So why do reviewers select particular books for review? Obviously overall reviewers select books to review which they feel match their particular expertise. We have already mentioned that

many reviewers specialize in particular genres. But many other factors play a role. Some choose to review particular books they feel are underappreciated. Several reviewers said that they review certain sorts of books to help good causes such as friends who are authors, or underappreciated authors, "small publishers who produce extraordinary books", or particular organizations. One reviewer told us they only review books that "elicit strong opinions." Another told us, "I review books that I have agreed in advance to review (through Vine) and books that I have strong opinions about. Lacking a strong opinion or an obligation to review, I usually don't." One reviewer told us he picks books to review based upon the review choices of another top-hundred reviewer because he "respected his judgment". Some reviewers just pick items to review because of "whim or fancy or passionate desire" or, as another told us, rather mysteriously, for "occult" and "oulipean" reasons.

Several reviewers said they stay away from or are leery of reviewing books that are controversial (e.g. political or religious books). Strategic factors might be a consideration here as with the reviewer who mentioned that "a positive review of a conservative politics title is sure to attract a great number of "not helpful" votes by those who don't like the author's politics." Most reviewers tend to avoid books, CDs or movies that are extremely popular (e.g. Harry Potter), but again some turn to reviewing these books for strategic reasons. One reviewer pointed out that publishing the first review of a popular book that is considered to be "very helpful", "may get more votes in the long run". Books that have a "fanatical following" are, however, avoided because any negative review of that item is likely to be voted "not helpful". Date of release of a book can be important too (more recent means more likely to review) and several make a point of avoiding reviewing books that are out of print.

Whether or not the book had been reviewed at Amazon already and the kind of reviews posted are important for many reviewers. Surprisingly we found that the majority of respondents (54%) claimed to only read the previous reviews <u>after</u> they have written their own review. 43% said they read the reviews before (the remaining 3% claimed never to read the other reviews).

Respondents who posted <u>after</u> reading other reviews often posted a review if they noticed some feature not mentioned in other reviews (one DVD reviewer noted that he included factors like "picture quality" if it was not already discussed in other reviews). If previous reviews had been unfair to an author or book, this was a reason to post a review. One reviewer told us:

> If I think a reviewer is deliberately trying to sink a book, I may read it and give my own viewpoint (this is what started me writing Amazon reviews)

One reviewer said that if there are points of agreement or disagreement with previous reviews they will refer to these earlier reviews in their own review.

Some reviewers are quite strategic about their reviewing choices. One told us:

> I am likely to concentrate on trying to review a recently published book with less than three reviews that will get more traffic and reviews later than a book that I like but which has dozens or hundreds of reviews on it. With the latter type of book my review gets lost in the mass of other reviews and so won't be as visible for people to give helpful points.

Another said:

> If there are a few reviews for a product, then I'm more likely to review it. Likewise, if there are few new reviews, then I'm more likely to review it. However, if I feel strongly positively or negatively about a product, then I may review it even if there are already hundreds of reviews.

One reviewer said he found it "hard to resist" posting a review for a CD that had not yet been reviewed and another said "I really only like to write first-time reviews".

Several respondents were adamant that they wouldn't review a book if there were already several reviews posted. We asked this question of all respondents in the survey and **39% (R=163) said that they were "less likely" to review an item that had many reviews** (61% said it made no difference).

 88% of our respondents reported that they gave either "all" or "most" positive reviews. This fits with the well-known finding that most reviews at the Amazon site are positive ones (Hu, Pavlou and Zhang 2006).[27] Most reviewers avoid writing negative reviews because such reviews are more likely to be found "unhelpful" or might solicit "mean spirited" comments from authors or other reviewers in the Amazon Comments section. Reviewers who themselves produce the same sort of material under review (recall this is true of nearly 40% of our respondents) are particularly cautious about posting negative reviews. As one reviewer told us:

> I don't want to make waves and I don't want to offend the author. ..I'm in the midst of writing a book myself, and I'm thinking it might be prudent not to be TOO overly critical of books that go through the traditional publication process. On the other hand, I have no problem trashing a self-published or vanity press book.

Diversification of Items Reviewed

As mentioned already, books play a less prominent role at Amazon than they once did. We asked the respondents to list what they mainly reviewed. Books (n = 127) are still overwhelmingly mentioned more than any other item, but movies (including current theatrical releases, TV series, DVDs and videos) (n= 31), and music (CDs) (n = 30) are also mentioned a lot. It seems that few reviewers review exclusively books (we only had 11 in our sample), and that most review more

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[27] The actual distribution of reviews is bimodal with reviewers tending to either give mainly very positive (five star) or very negative reviews. See Talwar, Jurca and Faltings, 2007.

than one kind of item. We asked respondents who predominantly review books what other sorts

of item they review. Again movies (n= 69) and music (n = 51) are the most popular items.

Books are mentioned (n = 25) by reviewers who mainly review either music or movies. But it is

in the other products reviewed that the real surprise lay.

We received answers which revealed the extraordinary range of products our respondents

review. These include electronics (n = 21), household and consumer items (n =18), groceries and

food (n= 10), beauty and health (n =9), computer peripherals and software (n= 9), toys (n = 7),

clothes (n= 6), gadgets and appliances (n= 4), and pet-related items (n = 4). There were

numerous other individual items mentioned including baby gear, cameras, video, computer and

board games, garden tools, musical instruments, magazines, websites, sporting goods and one-off

items such as an Italian coffee maker. But it was clear from comments we received that the list is

even longer. Some reviewers told us they review: "pretty much anything", "almost anything",

"just about anything", "everything else", "whatever I feel like reviewing", "I have tried

everything at least once", "in an experimental sense I try a range of different products", "other

items", "miscellaneous", "other products", "products", "anything that interests me", "gifts",

"other things", and "random products". For a few people, however, diversifying is an exception:

as one reviewer told us, "I reviewed my Swiss army knife, but my reviews are 99% books", and

another reviewer (who only did books) confessed that "I reviewed a magazine once". But most

respondents do not exercise such self restraint and review any and everything.

There seem to be four factors which play into this trend towards diversification of items

reviewed: (1) Books, because they must be read first, in general take longer to review than CDs,

movies or household items (more on this later). (2) The expansion of Amazon's merchandize means that there just are more things available to review. (3) Amazon's Vine program, offers a diverse range of free items to selected top-thousand reviewers for review. Half of our respondents told us they were members of the Vine program; by May 2010, 66% of the respondent profiles we accessed displayed the "Vine Voice" badge. (4) The introduction of the new ranking system also encourages diversification (to be discussed later in section on "ranking").

Effect of Diversification When Reading Portfolios of Reviews

If one follows a particular reviewer or scans through all their reviews collected together serially the impression can be startling. For example, a university professor and author has interspersed amongst his reviews of the civil war and American history miscellaneous household items such as light bulbs, cooking foil, laundry stain remover, absorbent towels and items of clothing such as a baseball cap and an overcoat. Another reviewer reviews serious literary fiction followed by sticky labels. A respondent who described himself as a "senior book reviewer" for a magazine carries out reviews of energy pills and post-its. A published poet reviews a volume of poetry followed by a review of a toilet brush. A reviewer who has published no less than 38 novels has, as her latest item reviewed, a pair of left-handed scissors (from the Amazon Vine Program). Later in this report we discuss the consequences of this but here we just want to note that in surfing through the list of reviews of our respondents, it is harder to find a reviewer who has not turned to reviewing the occasional gadget, household product or item of food, than to find one who stays with only books (or on a very few occasions music or movies).

Why Do They Review?

What motivates the top-thousand reviewers? We asked respondents to rank each of seven motivational factors ("self expression", "enjoyment", "developing writing skills", "enhancing understanding", "responsibility to the community", "enhancing status", and "utilitarian") on a scale from 1 to 8 (where 1 was most important and 8 least important). **The results show clearly that "self expression" and "enjoyment" are both highly regarded with approximately 80% of respondents ranking these two motivations in the top three bands of importance.** "Developing writing skills" and "enhancing understanding" of a topic are also seen as important motivations with approximately 60% of respondents ranking them each in the top three bands. "Responsibility" to the community is something that is reported as important by 46% placing it in their top three bands, enhancing status is seen as important by only 34%. **Lastly, "utilitarian", although seen as the most important motivational factor by a few respondents, is widely decried with 65% placing it in the three bands for least importance.**

The answers to the question about additional motivations brought some interesting and also more nuanced responses. **It is clear that "altruism" as a motivation in its own right is very prominent.** We received 25 comments of this type. Some examples are: "Hope to help others decide whether to buy", "Educating readers on other topics", "Introducing others to writers that they might not otherwise know", and "Wanting to share what I have liked with others." Some of these comments are aimed at helping authors as well as readers, for instance: "I know how difficult it is for authors to promote their work. I feel that I can help them by taking the time to read their books and writing a review", and "I take special pride in trying to help talented but unknown writers reach a wider audience." Helping "smaller press" authors sell was another

similar motivation listed. Sometimes the reviewer feels that his or her particular viewpoint could help the community at large, as with the retired reviewer who told us her motivation was: "Adding viewpoint of older person with more experience to that of a younger generation." Sometimes this altruistic viewpoint was expressed as part of a general social good such as, "Getting people to simply read more." This reviewer originally came from Iceland and went on to claim by way of justification, "Citizens of Iceland read more than any other people".

Another important motivation is the potential for developing "a sense of community". This sense of community comes via the bulletin boards, feedback from authors, via Amazon Friends, comments from other reviewers, and the like. We received 7 responses of this sort, e.g. "I also enjoy comments from my Amazon Friends and other readers on my reviews. It's fun to joke around and makes the reviewing process more fun", and, "Developing correspondence and sometimes friendship with my peers and some authors."

An unexpected motivation for reviewing was the reviewers who used the public record of Amazon reviews as a kind of **"memory device"**. We received 5 comments of this type, e.g. "As I grow older, I discover that my memory grows weaker. My main reason for reviewing books and films is to lodge what I read and view more firmly in my memory. Alas! Even that strategy doesn't seem to work anymore!" and "Writing reviews provides me with a personal record (like a blog) of the books I've read and the films I've seen over the years."

Some reviewers used the additional motivation question to expand upon some of the motivations we had already asked about. For instance, as well as developing writing skills, reviewers pointed

out the benefits in developing "reading skills", another reviewer said that they write reviews "To help overcome writer's block when I need to write something else." One reviewer expanded upon the utilitarian motivation which had started them writing reviews, "I am a writer who has published eight books, but has written many more. I thought that the writing of reviews might possibly arouse more interest not only in the books I have had published but in the other manuscripts. Unfortunately it has not worked out that way!" One last additional motivation we noticed was a kind of reactive one where reviewers told us they felt so strongly about existing poor reviews or a book they strongly disagreed with, that they felt the need to put the record straight. e.g. "Strong disagreement with existing reviews on Amazon or elsewhere", and, "To counter views that I disagree with. That often draws a review out of me."' It seems that these reviewers interpreted the question of additional motivation as not about additional general motivations but rather about what might have motivated specific reviews they wrote.

What Makes For a Good Review?

We asked respondents to rate on a scale (always important, sometimes important, seldom important, and never important) seven factors that we thought might be important in writing reviews. These factors are: a personal distinctive style; accurate precise description of the content; demonstrating expertise and familiarity with the topic or genre; using simple vocabulary; being provocative; comparison to other books or products; and a catchy title. **Accurate, concise description of the content is considered overwhelmingly to be the most important factor with 63% saying it is always important and 90% saying it is always or often important. A personal distinctive style is found to be always important by 42% with 77% saying it is always or often important. Demonstrating expertise and familiarity is found by 82% to be always or often important.** The other factors did not stand out as much, and being provocative is seen as being much less important by our respondents with 80% of them ranking it as only sometimes or never important. We asked respondents to list any other factors that might be important in writing reviews. This question elicited some of the most detailed and informative replies of the whole questionnaire. Since these reviewers have been reviewing on average for nine years and have written copious reviews they have given a lot of thought as to what works and what doesn't. Here we can only give examples of the many pieces of concrete advice these reviewers had to offer.

Some of the reviewers pointed to particular attributes needed in good reviewing, the overwhelming one (n = 18) they referred to is "honesty" (sometimes expressed also as "truth"). Perhaps one reason that honesty was explicitly referred to so much was because of the possibility

on Amazon of dishonest reviewing. As one reviewer noted, "Honesty. Don't say you like a book just because an author or publisher sent it to you."

Respondents also noted the importance of being "fair" in a review - it is incumbent upon reviewers to justify their opinions about books. As one reviewer puts it, "I try to convey what might be valuable to a reader and try to add more than my personal likes or dislikes". Another puts it pithily, "A review's job is to help people make a decision, not to make it for them." One reviewer felt that what separated the top reviewers from the rest was the ability to justify an opinion in the review as opposed to simply stating an opinion. There were a lot of comments which pointed to the need for reviewers to attend to where readers were coming from and to do work to situate the book within the wider genre. Typical pieces of advice on this point are: "Establishing the book's place in its genre; historical background of that kind of book", "Clarity about what kind of reader the review is addressed to, e.g. experts or general public", and "Stepping back from the item reviewed after summarizing it and placing it in the greater picture of literature or the arts."

Many reviewers feel that although fairness and honesty are important, it is nevertheless necessary for the reviewer to state an opinion, even a bold one, "Something interesting to say; perhaps a contrarian viewpoint, e.g. a "reality check" on a book that everyone seems to love for no good reason ("The Da Vinci Code"), or standing up for a good book that people don't seem to understand." Another reviewer advised, "For non-fiction put book in context, for fiction go with gut feel". Another reviewer told us, "Make it personal, not trying to show off that one is writing a dissertation." Another's sage words of advice were, "Be honest and entertaining. Make them

laugh; make them angry. Deflate some sacred cows." Indeed humor, where appropriate, is something several reviewers recommend using. As one reviewer comments, "I want readers to enjoy what I write even if they don't agree with it." Many people stress the role of good grammar, editing, sentence and paragraph structure and the like. Also several reviewers noted it is crucial to read the book, often referring to nameless book reviews where it was clear the reviewer had not read the book!

There were all sorts of tips on offer as well as to how to write better reviews. These included writing the review as soon after reading the book as possible; never reading the other reviews before writing your own; putting in the first sentence who might like the item; attending to the last line of the review; writing in a conversational mode; being careful not to put in spoilers for works of fiction; using actual quotes from the book; and, if reviewing a DVD, making sure to describe the special features. Some other homespun tips include:

> I have a unique style of giving family anecdotes in some reviews; makes it earthy and real, and is being widely copied now.

> It's also important to review books you're interested in, so that positive and negative reviews will resonate with readers of them. A guy who hates romance novels shouldn't review them! I try to give a good idea of what the book is about without giving away the entire story. I never bash a book or an author. I try to find good points that others would enjoy from the book.

> Identification with a genre; I want people to give extra credence to my reviews of books about Maine or by Maine writers

It was clear that many reviewers took their responsibilities as reviewers very seriously indeed as in the following comments:

> Letting readers know where the book fits in the current conversation about its topic (esp. for theology books). Informing listeners about lesser-known artists who deserve a wider hearing. Bringing out undisclosed background issues that inform authors' viewpoints that

average readers may not be aware of. Exposing tendentious writing posing as factual or balanced.

To be fair, not to slam new authors but to encourage them if possible, to have a humanistic point of view, to keep your politics in mind.

Brevity and readability (never more than 3 short paragraphs, usually 2); focusing on the strengths of the book and the writer; providing only a set-up (characters, situation, argument) and not giving a synopsis of the plot, recommending a related title, not being overly personal or critical, telling the reader enough so that they can decide whether it's something they care to read.

Respect for alternative viewpoints. Clear examples of flaws in writing/plot/whatever, rather than blanket generalizations.

I am guided by the principle of Pliny, that there is no book so bad that there is not something valuable in it. I thought when I began I would only write about books that I loved, but it has not worked out that way. I unfortunately do from time to time 'clobber' a book especially when it is on a subject which I feel deeply about.

Although most comments were about book reviews, one reviewer gave advice on product

reviews: "Very detailed about even the smallest of features, craftsmanship, ease of use, how it

was used, durability, opinion/reaction from use. Anything you would normally ask someone

when buying a product."

Solicitation of Free Products

85% of our respondents report being sent free books or other products to review by publishers, authors and the like. This is an important finding because it shows that Amazon top reviewers do receive some sort of direct material reward, however small, for their endeavors.

Free books are very rarely sent unsolicited but rather an offer is made from a publisher, author or agent asking a potential reviewer whether they are interested in reviewing the book, and it is only sent if they agree to review it. These books sent in advance of publication are referred to as ARCs (Advance Reading Copies) and are often available up to six months before the formal publication date. ARCs are usually bound in a different way (and without dust jackets) and are marked as "not for sale".[28]

Our research shows ARCs start to be offered to Amazon reviewers when they achieve a top-1000 rank. Our respondents report these initially came from self-published authors, and small agencies which promote authors and books. Upon entering the top-500 the numbers of offers increased but it is only when they reached the upper tiers, such as the top-100, or top-50, that they started to come in great volume. One respondent went into some detail on this point:

> I started getting offers at about rank 800 (Classic Rank). When I got to 500, the offers increased, but I did not get many until I got to about 250. Under 150, it increased some more. At that point is was an average of one offer per week (not including Vine). When my New Rank appeared, placing me in the 50s, I started getting several offers per week, mostly for books. I RARELY accept these offers. They are usually not something I'm interested in. Also, reviewers of fiction and of technical books tend to get a lot more offers than a reviewer such as myself. [reviewer has classic rank in top-100 and reviews mainly DVDs and books in history, investing, and ornithology]

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[28] They sometimes turn up for sale on eBay or in a well-known second-hand book store in New York.

Indeed most respondents report turning down the majority of these offers; something which is not always easy to do:

> When I was a top 100 reviewer I certainly got offered a lot more free books. Of course, many of these offers were from less reputable publishers or more desperate writers, which made the e-mails frequently more of a chore than a pleasure.

Another respondent described the incessant email offers as "annoying". It seems that reviewers who enter the upper tiers are quite aware of their status and ability to request free books, but this does not mean they always get them:

> Once I was in the top 500 I began to be offered books. Now that I am in the top 100 I get most of the books I ask for. Not all, though. And not all publishers provide them. It depends on the title, the imprint, and the publicist.

The Vine Program, with its free offers of merchandise including books, also seems to kick in around the top-thousand ranking, but no one knew for sure exactly what prompted the invitation to join Vine.

Some respondents reported getting very few offers at all to review anything free. For instance, one reviewer mentioned that in her whole Amazon career she sadly only got two offers of free books (this reviewer was ranked just above one thousand and listed as her first category of books she liked reviewing, reference books!) One reviewer, who chose to be unranked, reported, "I was sent more free books when I was ranked. Now that I'm unranked by choice, I get very few solicitations to review. Just as well. Most of the books were pretty awful." Several reviewers noted that since the new ranking system came into place in October 2008 the solicitations had dropped significantly.

We asked whether an author, agent, or publisher had ever approached our respondents to post a review for a specific item on Amazon. **Of the 161 responses only 24 chose no, meaning 85% had been approached.**

Overwhelmingly reviewers choose to review the free books that are offered to them. Of the 133 relevant responses 50 said "always", another 54 "usually" and only 1 replied "never" and 3 "rarely". **This means that large numbers of reviews by the higher-ranked reviewers are for books they have been given free by publishers, authors, or agents.** We have noticed that a few reviewers choose to declare this themselves in their reviews of such material, but unlike with Amazon Vine, where a tag denotes the item as an Amazon-Vine item, there is no way for readers to know for certain whether the item has been given gratis to the reviewer. Reviewers stressed repeatedly that the fact that the item is gratis does not influence their review, but this leaves a lot to trust. The practice of reviewers receiving free books for review is not widely known outside the world of Amazon top reviewers and publishers. Several respondents also mentioned that if they didn't like a free book and felt they could only post a negative review they felt obliged to give the author the choice of whether or not they wanted that review to appear. Invariably the author declined.

With so many free products at their disposal, what do reviewers do with them? Most respondents keep the books they value (one author kept ARCs as he collected them), and give away the rest to family, friends, schools, libraries, hospitals, charities and other good causes. Books that are worthless are trashed or recycled, or as one respondent mentioned: "I leave the real dogs in a coffeehouse bookshelf". 18 respondents sell a few books to second-hand books stores if they

have any value. One respondent was adamant that he would "NEVER sell" and another told us she never sells books as it is against the rules when accepting ARCs. One respondent commented that she keeps everything she is sent on Vine because the Vines rules stipulate that Amazon might call for the return of those items at any time. It seems unlikely that Amazon would ever initiate such a recall.

Classic Versus New Ranking

 In the survey we asked all our reviewers to list both their rankings under the new and old systems, which they preferred, and for what reason. Three of our respondents had chosen to opt out of ranking (and a further one seems to have only their classic rank displayed). Our respondents fared slightly worse under the new ranking system: 84 received a lower rank, and 73 a higher one, and 4 stayed the same. As noted already, the change in ranking for respondents who moved down could be dramatic. One of our respondents remarkably moved from a classic ranked place of 87 to a new place of 5,288,253. Because Amazon retains both ranking systems, this reviewer can still keep his top-100 reviewer badge. Another reviewer dropped from 268 to 98,567, and a third reviewer dropped from 328 to 14,379. If we include these three reviewers with extreme drops, we find that the average drop in rank for those who moved down was a huge 66,528 places. If we exclude the three extreme cases, we find the average drop in ranking was 693 places. On the other hand for those whose rank increased the average increase was 211 places. It is quite possible that reviewers outside the top-thousand, also experienced big increases in their ranking, but we did not sample such reviewers. Indeed our single biggest increase in ranking was for a volunteer survey participant who moved from 4859 (classic) to 497 (new).

Our survey also shows a correlation between the effect of the ranking system upon ranking and preference for that system. Essentially if respondents ranking benefitted they tended to favor that system. Often respondents were quite explicit about this with comments such as "Duh. It made me jump from top-1000 to top-500 without lifting a finger. ☺" (reviewer moved from 774 to 287). "Clearly I like that my "new" ranking is higher than my old" (reviewer moved up from 194 to 154), "Uh…cause I went up" (reviewer went from 41 to 31). Similarly those not liking the

new system had found their rank had suffered: "Puts me way too far back in ranking" (reviewer moved down from 530 to 1445). Another similar comment: "Duh! I went down, down, down and to this day I still haven't worked out why" (reviewer went from 75 to 382).

Not all respondents are obsessed with their rank – we already mentioned that 3 have chosen to opt out of ranking altogether. A reviewer who moved up 583 places into the top-500 told us, "Ranking is something I had to look up for this survey, so it means little to me." Others said they did not care much either way and a couple even pointed out that our survey didn't give them this option in responding. Echoing a similar point, a top-50 reviewer who dropped into the top-100 told us, "I don't follow it closely and I had not noticed the change to a new system until just now while doing this survey. It has little significance to me."

Several respondents professed that they didn't understand the new system sufficiently well to voice an informed opinion: "I have no idea how it works", and another top-500 reviewer who had dropped 2700 places said, "My old reviewer ranking is higher, so I use that. I also don't even understand the basis of the new review [ranking]." Another respondent, who moved down 720 places from the top-thirty made a similar comment:

> I never in fact understood the first system, and do not understand this one. I would prefer a system without ranking. It is all a bit ridiculous. There are many top reviewers who are worthless and many reviews scattered throughout the site which are of first quality. There is too something ridiculous about reviewing books on the same system you review the latest electrical can-opener!

This respondent, however, is something of an exception in that he professionally reviews books for a national newspaper and cross-posts these reviews to Amazon. Several respondents also pointed out that it was too early to fully appraise the new system.

The comments reflecting lack of engagement with the ranking system are a distinct minority. **Overwhelmingly reviewers do care about the ranking system and their place in it**. **Furthermore the majority (66.7%) are unhappy with the new system**. Some reviewers are quite vehement in their rejection of the new system calling it "dishonest", "arbitrary", "confusing", "pointless", "distorted", "ridiculous", "incomprehensible", and "chaotic". The seeming capriciousness and volatility of the new review system led one top-ten reviewer to tell us, "I think it is very contrary to Amazon's stature and business to treat the system the new way." Another reviewer was a little more charitable and told us "Amazon techies, obviously non-users, OVER-fixed a wheel that wasn't that broken!" One respondent cryptically remarked, "There has to be a better way to unseat Klausner".

Many reviewers' resistance to the new system stems from their prior investment in the old system and the rewards they have garnered from it. A top-100 reviewer who had been reviewing for 11 years and who had fallen 158 places told us, "From my personal perspective, my many years of "loyalty" are being devalued unfairly." In a similar vein a top-500 reviewer who had dropped 43 places and been reviewing for 9 years commented, "It does not give me credit for my body of work." Another, commenting on her top-1000 badge said, "I worked hard to review items to the best of my ability. I started off as reviewer 6 million or something, it took a while to get where I am today, I am proud of my reviews." Even a few reviewers who benefited from the new ranking complained about "newbies" getting unjust rewards. In this case the comment comes from a top-fifty reviewer, who has reviewed for 13 years, and who, under the new ranking

system entered the top ten: "It rewards the newbies at the expense of long-term reviewers who have worked for years on the site."

One of the complaints against the new system is that it gives less weight to the accumulated reviews. As one reviewer who dropped out of the top-thousand under the new system and who had been reviewing 11 years told us, "It doesn't seem to reward older reviews, but just ones placed more recently." Another said, "I've been reviewing for Amazon for ten years, and all of a sudden, apparently they valued the newest reviews, knocking me way down the list!" And yet another who had been reviewing for 11 years and who had lost his top-1000 ranking said, "It seems to allow people who have written few reviews to be highly ranked. I have sweated blood for a decade to get that ranking!" Resentment towards the new system and those who succeed in it was expressed by a top-twenty reviewer who had been reviewing nine years and who dropped only 3 places: "I also do not like the fact that the new ranking system basically says that years worth of old reviews (probably at least 2000 of mine) are suddenly meaningless and not worth counting in terms of ranking. The "new" #1 reviewer is someone I have never even heard of (and I stay pretty knowledgeable about many of my peers and those in the top 100 of the real rankings) – and I have written 2260 more reviews than this person." A music reviewer told us, "I don't like the heavy weight given to current reviews. I now write jazz, classical and pop reviews for an online magazine..and I have cut back on my Amazon reviews and consequently, seen my new ranking slip rather precipitously" (reviewer dropped 358 places almost out of top-500).

It is clear that for some the problem is not only the newness of the reviewers but also that the greater weight given to the helpfulness of the reviews (as judged by others) could steer reviewers away from writing heavyweight reviews or choosing less popular material:

> Also problematic is the fact newer reviewers, who have posted relatively few reviews (and steered away from several areas of non-fiction!) can quickly obtain a high Amazon ranking, simply by keeping their reviews light and airy and reviewing only popular fiction (or soda pop and rubber ducks, I suppose). Reviewers who for years have grappled with more "difficult" books are now at a distinct disadvantage" (reviewer with 8 years experience who dropped out of top-1000).

Another reviewer who had dropped out of the top-100 and fallen 784 places comments:

> It makes a well loved review of a product that came out a few years ago but is popular worth less in points than an "omg this is soo good!" review of a current fad product that managed to get a couple of positive votes.

The converse of reviews being found helpful is that they are found to be unhelpful. It is well known at the site that people who disagree with a review will often check it as being "unhelpful". By the new ranking system placing a greater weight on the helpfulness vote respondents worried that reviews would become blander. This was the concern of our reviewer who dropped the largest amount in the rankings:

> It rates you based on how many helpful versus unhelpful votes you receive rather than examining your total number of reviews, total number of votes, and any other factors, such as content of reviews or genres reviewed. Since some people mark reviews as "unhelpful" simply because they disagree with them this means a top reviewer is most likely to be someone who only gives the "correct" review of a book, rather than a more nuanced and balanced review, or critical one. The new system discriminates against minority opinions and seeks homogeneous reviews and fans of those reviews.

This reviewer who is explicitly sympathetic to neo-conservative causes reviewed controversial books on topics such as Islam (according to his profile he is anti-Islamist, but also interestingly anti-Europeanist!) A similar comment came from a respondent who specializes in science and philosophy books:

What this must inevitably mean is that reviews of books with controversial topics (politics, religion, some areas of science) will necessarily drag a reviewer's ranking down. So a reviewer can either be willing to address a controversy OR simply go for a higher Amazon ranking. He cannot do both as Amazon has made them mutually exclusive!

Another respondent stated that he knew a number of people who, "will no longer post critical reviews because of the projected effect on ranking".

The problem of having your reviews being systematically ranked negatively is referred to at the site as being attacked by "trolls". We specifically asked whether our respondents had ever experienced such attacks and 73% said they had. For many respondents this was one of the worst features of the whole reviewing experience. Several respondents felt that the new system should have tackled this problem and indeed, that by putting more emphasis on "helpfulness", it actually might give more encouragement to malicious negative voters. As a top-ten (classic) respondent who fell 21 places in the rankings told us, "It encourages a host of negative comments from always the same band of vitriolic people. I think it is one person with multiple monikers. The comments have nothing to do with the review itself, they just slander the reviewer with nonsense. I have no idea why Amazon allows this slander."

Another vehement complaint about the new ranking system was the removal of so-called "fan" votes. For some reviewers, fan votes were not a sign of trying to game the system, but rather were evidence of legitimate users of the system who just happened to follow particular reviewers. As one top-500 reviewer who had fallen 90 places remarks pithily, "So-called "fan" votes are eliminated. My fans look forward to my reviews." Another reviewer objected to the

labeling of fans who had similar tastes and who consistently read the same reviewer as

"cheating" and removing their votes. Another top-ten reviewer said:

> The discounting of "fan voters" is way, way too strict and doesn't take possible coincidences into account. If you've written two thousand reviews, with two hundred of them in a particular genre, it's entirely possible some person you've never met will actually read and like two of your reviews without being a "fan".

This criticism was echoed by several other respondents. Reviewers were sure they had legitimate

fans because they received emails from them. As one reviewer noted:

> I have had emails from those who have appreciated my reviews. I if understand the logic correctly. I am being penalized because a group of people find my reviews consistently helpful.

Another reviewer disliked the new voting system because it went against the whole idea of

Amazon Friends. This reviewer was one of the best connected in our sample, with many Amazon

friends – she also regularly posted comments on other people's reviews:

> I connected online with people who liked my reviews and emailed me. Now, if they vote for me again, their votes are either not counted or counted against me. The new system destroys the whole idea behind Amazon Friends.

Another put the question even more pointedly, "What is the point of having followers if their

votes do not count?" Another felt that the new system left the trolls in place but damaged friends:

> [It] did not get rid of the trolls giving me NO votes. They pitted me and my best friends against each other by giving her my rank (topsy-turvved us) but we are still best friends. I don't like their not counting YES votes of Amazon Friends whilst counting those of nasty neginnators. They also hurt some of my AFs [Amazon Friends] plummeting them to the 5,000,000 rank! UGH!!!

One respondent felt the removal of votes went against the whole ethos of online voting systems:

> It invites people to vote and then disqualifies their votes if they are held to be "fans". I can't see why anyone would continue voting after that.

The smaller group of respondents (33.3%) who like the new reviewing system, gave much

shorter and less detailed answers as to their reasons. Some clearly felt joy in Harriet Klausner's

demise. "Gets icky Harriet Klausner away from the top", one commented. Another remarked, "…knocked Harriet Klausner off the top – she certainly did not deserve the #1 ranking given the absurd number and nature of her reviews. The new system does seem to give the rankings more credibility." Another said, "It has some glitches but it finally got rid of the number one reviewer." Yet another commented, "Ended domination of top rank by certain reviewers." Many described the new system as "fairer" or "harder to game". A top-ten reviewer whose rank had stayed the same remarked, "The new ranking system seems more fair and I respect the new top reviewers. I've been reading Beth's [Beth Cholette, the then new Number 2 reviewer] reviews for years so I'm happy she is now a top reviewer."

Interestingly the respondents who prefer the new ranking system tend to favor it for precisely the same sorts of reasons that the majority of the reviewers dislike it. They like that it rewards newer reviewers and serves to break the stasis. A reviewer who broke into the top-ten (new) for the first time told us, "The new system seems to allow for more movement." A top-thousand reviewer who had been reviewing for nine years and who entered the top-five hundred for the first time comments: "Allows newer reviewers to move up the ranks. Older, higher ranked reviewers, cannot simply sit on their legacy reviews." A reviewer who had been reviewing 10 years and who had fallen 84 places out of the top-100 comments: "Seems to reflect more accurately votes and overall level of activity." Another reviewer who had fallen 2352 places and hence out of the top thousand altogether also felt the new system's emphasis on more recent reviews was fairer:

> It seems to make more sense and better reflects a user's current use. Sure my classic ranking is better, but I was a far more active reviewer five years ago than I am now, and that should be reflected in the ranks.

And another top-hundred reviewer who had been reviewing six years and had fallen 8 places but remained in the top-100 told us, "It supposedly levels the playing field between new and established reviewers." Another top-500 reviewer who had been reviewing 11 years and who had also gone up under the new ranking (40 places) said:

> Clearly I like that my "new" ranking is higher than my old. I also believe it's valid to give greater weight to newer review and the "helpfulness" votes received from people who read the reviews.

A reviewer who had been reviewing for only 4 years and saw his rank increase 523 places, thereby entering the top-500 and even challenging for a top-100 slot, comments:

> It makes it possible for new reviewers to be ranked higher up more quickly based on the most current helpful reviews. In the past all reviews were equally weighted so you were dealing with people who had a ten year head starts on you.

It was not only people who benefited from the new system who liked it for this reason, one top-100 reviewer who moved down 139 places out of the top-100 told us, "Although it disadvantages me, I like it that new reviews are given priority." This reviewer (our fourth fastest producer) clearly felt that in the long run he would benefit from the new system (and indeed as of May 2010 he has gone up 48 places since taking the survey but has yet to crack the top-100 again).

The greater weight placed upon the helpfulness of reviews is thought to be a good thing by reviewers who favor the new system. In one of the most detailed answers we received, a reviewer, who had moved up 78 places to enter the top-100, remarked:

> No one was going to catch up Harriet Klausner…yet if you looked at her reviews they didn't garner that many helpful votes. It seemed strange that someone who wrote mostly non-helpful reviews could rank up so highly despite so many voters not actually finding her reviewers helpful. Last time I checked she was around 55% helpful votes. Currently I have 88% helpful votes. This means that while I had far less reviews than her I still managed to acquire a rate of more helpful votes.

Another reviewer, who had risen 393 places to enter the top-500, remarked, "I think it is good to have the helpfulness of reviews weighted more heavily rather than sheer numbers of reviews." Another reviewer whose ranking had gone down 139 places taking him out of the top-100 felt that the loss of his own ranking was worth it if it meant that people who gamed the system also suffered, "The new system lowers my ranking, but it also lowers the ranking of loaded reviewers who depend on a cohort of automatic voters."

One reviewer who reviewed a mixture of items as well as books actually welcomed the fact that the new reviewing system "took the emphasis off of books, which is in line with Amazon's new selling philosophy. It isn't just a bookstore any more." Lastly one technical reason given to us as to why a reviewer liked the new system was that under the rules of the new system everyone can occupy only one ranking place whilst under the old system rankings could be shared with say 3 or 4 reviewers having the same number ranking.

<u>Why Ranking Matters</u>

Most of the above comments indicate that our reviewers are very involved with and concerned about the ranking process. Overall they seem to be delivering some rather telling criticisms of the new and old ranking system. That our respondents care about their ranking is also evident from their response to our question concerning whether their top reviewer ranking badge mattered to them. 70% (R = 164) said it did, although several of them qualified their answers by pointing out that it didn't matter a lot or was not a big deal. We asked them to tell us why it mattered. In response we received some of the most interesting responses in the whole survey as to what top Amazon reviewers got out of reviewing and why their rank mattered to them.

Many respondents gave more than one reason in their answers. The major responses as to why it mattered could be sub-categorized into:

(1) **Sense of accomplishment, self satisfaction, ego gratification or other similar personal value**. (n= 23) e.g. "It makes me seem important and smart", "I like the fact that I rank high; I don't rank much higher anywhere else in life", "Who doesn't like status?" "vanity", "self satisfaction", "ego boost", "The ranking system is a great motivator for me. I floundered intellectually after graduate school because I suddenly had no more feedback on any of my intellectual endeavors. I have often said that Amazon "saved me" because it gave me back my passion for writing. In all honesty my Amazon rank has become the foundation of myself worth. I work at a library, but I consider myself a reviewer first and foremost – and that badge tells me that I am accomplishing something." "It's an achievement in a world where pro reviewers have most of the voice."

(2) **Recognition by the community** (n = 20) e.g. "stamp of approval", "modest recognition", "obvious confirmation", "I like the recognition factor. I'm not sure it has any credibility but I like it. "Well…it's nice, y'know? Just a bit of vindication that what I'm doing counts for something", "Some kind of recognition is always pleasant. It's no big deal."

(3) **Reward for hard work, dedication, effort, and commitment** (n = 18) e.g. "It shows the amount of effort I put into reviewing", "It didn't matter before I earned it but that now that I have it, it would seem a step backwards to NOT have it. I've been reviewing since 2004 and feel like I've earned that rank AND MORE", "I worked hard to review items to the best of my ability. I started off as reviewer 6 million or something, it took a while to get where I am today. I am proud of my reviews", "It took several years of contributing (mostly) non-fiction reviews, and sometimes incurring the wrath of readers who disagreed with me, to become a "Top Reviewer". So when it finally happened I felt very much like something had been "earned"", "Why put in that much time and effort for nothing?"

(4) **Usefulness or helpfulness to the community at large** (n = 17) e. g. "Usefulness to people", "It indicates that at least a few people must have found my reviews to be useful", "My purpose in writing reviews is to assist potential customers in assessing whether a book will be of value to them. That I am a "top reviewer" may lead may lead someone to read my review assuming, I would say correctly, that I am knowledgeable in the area."

(5) **Credibility, a sign that a reviewer is taken seriously, that their reviews are in fact high quality because it gives the reviewer credibility, validity, or legitimacy** (n = 16). Typical

responses are: "It shows credibility", "I think it gives my reviews credibility", "It lends me credibility", "Perhaps gives my reviews more credence", "Because it reflects the fact that my reviews are, indeed, high quality (but I don't need a badge to tell me that!)"

(6) **Utility** (n = 14) e.g. "It helps me sell my own book", "It makes authors/publishers much more likely to send me review copies of books", "I receive requests to review certain books that are sent to me gratis", "Increased chance of being 'discovered' by someone who could offer me a job reviewing books", "I want people to notice and come to my website", "Results in all sorts of solicitations sent to me offering me free products", "I think it helps draw more attention to my reviews", "Well it does not matter to me much anymore. It mattered to me years ago, when I was trying to make the Top 100 and we were rewarded with a graphic badge. I thought the badge might attract more attention to my reviews as on the product pages (it didn't). Now the "badges" are illegible, and anyone can get one by claiming to use a Real Name. So a ranking badge seems not to matter" (reviewer checked that the badge did matter).

We asked specifically if our reviewers referred to their top reviewing status outside of Amazon and if so what for. 25% said that they did, indicating a slightly larger utility value than in the responses above. Most referred to it on their resumés or Linkedin profiles, or on blogs and listserves; some might occasionally mention it on a job application or a proposal to a publisher. It was also found to be useful by some respondents when requesting books or CDs for reviewing from publishers and record companies. One respondent mentioned that he was introduced to speaker groups as a "Top Amazon Reviewer." A top-ten reviewer said he used in on book blurbs and another (an English professor) mentioned that he put it on his syllabi. One respondent

referred to it in their email signature as well as for performance appraisal purposes at work as a software developer.

(7) **Fun or amusement** (n = 10) e.g. "It's kinda cool;) But on the other hand, it's just for fun and I'm not obsessed over it", "Because it is high camp and my students are impressed by it", "I'm not getting paid to review. I do it for fun" (reviewer checked "no it didn't matter"), "kinda fun", "I'm amused by it. People send me death threats, hate mail, I get these from all over the world. People are passionate and hate anyone who disagrees with them", "People write to me from all over the world and I enjoy that."

(8) **Competition** (n = 8) e.g. "Innate male competitiveness", "Way to keep score", "It's a competition innit? Harriet's got a big bullseye on her back, and we're all taking aim. Just like any other competition but arguably, more pathetic", "There is a competitive aspect regarding rank amongst Top reviewers. Through the discussion Board we have become a relatively tight knit community and many of us have met in person."

Interestingly a couple of reviewers told us that the badges and ranking had become a form of addiction: "It's totally irrational. I don't get anything from it. Hardly any of my friends or students ever see my reviews. But I started out at number 85 and have fallen steadily over the years. This irks me, though it's meaningless I admit." Another said, "It shouldn't matter to me, but it does. I check it multiple times a day just to massage my ego. I may need a 12-step program to help me deal with this addiction…As soon as I figured out that more votes meant a higher rating, I started targeting best-sellers in response."

For some the badge becomes a motivator in its own right as with the reviewer who told us it was "an incentive to review". Another said, "It challenges me to keep writing reviews. I'm a book dork and I like that I'm writing more than the millions of ppl out there."

Discussion of Ranking Badges

The responses on ranking badges reveal nicely how Amazon top reviewing occupies an interesting space in terms of how we think about work, leisure and community. It also gets at the free lunch issue. Reviewing for Amazon clearly is work, and for these top reviewers hard work, and more to the point work deserving of reward. But it can also be fun and passionate work. What comes through time and time again is that people really care about books (and music and movies) and reviewing them. It is something that can bring a personal sense of accomplishment and offers rewards not available by traditional means. We are struck by the comments of the respondent who said, "Amazon saved my life" and by the fact that Amazon reviewing for some people provides a means of accomplishing something in their lives outside of orthodox careers.

It is also a form of work that can on occasions become frustrating and even addictive. And it is a form of work that can sometimes bring rewards beyond the activity itself in terms of utilitarian benefits that can accumulate to some top reviewers. It can be a source of family pride as with the reviewer who told us that her family got a "kick" out of her ranking badge. It can be a form of competition but it is special form of competition because the rewards are bestowed by the community and give the winner increasing recognition in that community. This contrasts with say a competition to win a race where your medal is all about what you personally did rather than also about how you have helped your community.

Reviewing for Amazon is an activity that is different from a solitary hobby such as stamp collecting where the rewards are largely individual. It is both carried out for the individual but brings benefits to the community at large; and having that community recognize your contributions whether by increased credibility or just simple recognition is of course important as it further validates your efforts. But recognition, as we all know, can be fleeting and hard to translate into anything tangible. **The ranking badges play an important symbolic function in the community by serving as markers of that recognition.** As many respondents note, it is not a big deal, but it is an important deal in a community dispersed geographically and who may only have access to each other via electronic traces and texts. We sensed from the reaction to the changes in the ranking system that our respondents really care about the fine details of how their community is organized and how reputations are bestowed. That it involves such a widespread diverse community is important to some respondents who note specifically that they are connecting with a much wider community than they would otherwise.

The power of the internet must not be forgotten in all this. It is a remarkable human and technological achievement that people typing in front of screens in many dispersed locations can be part of a functioning and flourishing community which offers engagement, work, fun, rewards, frustrations and disappointments. There are also hints in the responses about the communal nature of the world the Amazon top reviewers inhabit – that they are "tight knit," "know each other", "are in friendly competition with each other," and so on. Many follow their favorite reviewers (or "interesting people") via Amazon Friends to keep tabs on who is

reviewing what**. 58% of our respondents report using Amazon Friends. Furthermore 68% of this subset of respondents use Amazon Friends to read and rate others' reviews – indeed 45% of this subset read, rate, and comment upon others' reviews. 69% of this same subset also report receiving comments upon their reviews from their Amazon Friends**. This reveals not only the important communal role played by Amazon Friends but also how it might serve as a means of directly benefitting reviewers' rankings. The data show clearly that those who comment upon Friends' reviews receive comments in return. Many of these comments take the form of "nice review" and simply show that the Friend has seen the review and appreciated it. We can surmise that many of these comments are reciprocal positive endorsements. As has been noted in our study of the music reviewing website ACIDplanet.com (Pinch and Athanasiades 2011), positive reviews of a piece of music at the site will often generate in response a reciprocal positive review of the author of the review's own music (a process known at the site as R=R). In the Amazon case it seems likely that checking a Friend's review as being "helpful" and commenting upon it will in return generate reciprocal "helpful" checks and positive comments.

This might be taken to be the process of "gaming" the system by "rings" of top reviewers bolstering each others' work referred to by Hallberg (2008). And, of course, the new ranking system is professedly designed to overcome this problem by eliminating helpful votes that accrue from repeated checking of the helpful button for the reviews of the same reviewer (so-called "fan" votes). In the conclusion we give this appreciation of top reviewers of each others' work a rather different sort of inflection.

Amazon's social networking capability because it is focused upon a specific activity – reviewing – thus strengthens the ties between respondents who use it. The social networking aspects of Amazon thus further reinforces it as a community where reputations are garnered, recognized, and matter.

Aunt Ammy and the Free Lunch

The pride in obtaining and recognition bestowed by the ranking badges also throws light on the free lunch issue. Amazon is getting its free lunch but the reviewers <u>are</u> getting their lunch too; they are rewarded by recognition, status, self-fulfillment, satisfaction, and the small utilitarian benefits we have noted. Their relationship with Amazon the company is, however, ambiguous. They of course are well aware that in a sense they owe it all to Amazon, but their relationship to Amazon, who they affectionately refer to as "Ammy", is rather as if to a distant, powerful, and extremely wealthy, Great-aunt. They do small menial work for the family business and Aunt Ammy, who owns it, is careful to pat them on the back while she gets richer and richer; and there is nothing they like to do better than bitch about this and Ammy's latest whims!

For the reviewers brought up on the old ranking system it is as if, with the new ranking system, Aunt Ammy has introduced a new member into the family. This brash young upstart is winning all the plaudits, is breaking all the well-established rules, is generating more wealth for the family, and garnering all of the attention. And the older, well-established family members, despite their inclination to keep their heads down, find they can even start to do some of the things that the energetic new young family members do and get rewarded for it! But just as the reviewers' relationship with Aunt Ammy is ambiguous, Aunt Ammy is ambiguous about her relationship with her former favorite nephew. She is not able to cast him adrift, but keeps him hanging on in the form of "classic ranking".

Aunt Ammy loves her new favorite nephew of course. The new ranking system makes the old family business suddenly look cool again and the new nephew is excited to take part and

whitewash the fence. He can also feel good about himself – he may not have worked so long and hard at his reviewing but, unlike his more senior cousin, he carries no taint of having gamed the system. The diversity of products he reviews is amazing. Aunt Ammy smiles to herself; who would ever have thought that book reviewing would have come to this!

Conclusions

It turns out that we have examined the product review system at a time of change and upheaval and this, we feel, makes our findings even more interesting. As we have indicated, Amazon over its history has gone from an online literary-style book seller to the largest general eretailer on the planet. In the process it has given birth to the new phenomenon of the product review and a new tiered economy of reputation built on the reviewer ranking system. Reputation, as we have shown, matters, and the "classic" Amazon ranking system bestows an ordered and credible system of reputation that for a while worked. It may not have been perfect but it enabled people from outside the world of books to gain a toe-hold in the literary field and build a reputation, and at the same time provided Amazon with free copy and a way to sell millions of books. It provided, and still provides, many people with a fascinating second life, a network of friends and authors, a sense of accomplishment, and a rewarding hobby.

In the days of an online bookstore and overt literary values it made sense for reviewers to treat the system as a new way to gain a reputation and place in the wider world of literature. Our respondents reflect many of these old literary values, caring about books, about literature, art, about not being corrupted by utilitarian values and so on. Reviewers were, and are, building a portfolio of serious work that other people read and recognize for its value. We ourselves have realized this value as we have followed our favorite reviewers. But as we have seen this technologically mediated system is full of contradictions. And as Amazon has grown in size and ambition these contradictions have also grown.

We see from our survey that the top reviewers (remember we contacted our respondents based upon the classic reviewing system) are still mainly based in the world of books (and to a lesser extent movies and music), are starting to age, and that they are over-represented by male reviewers, despite Amazon's best known reviewer being a woman, Harriet Klausner. With their reputations established, they know how to keep the system working for them by churning out more and more reviews. The top reviewers, as we have also seen, on the whole derive a strong sense of identity from their reviewing activity – they really care about their rank and reputations. Their sense of community is further enhanced by the new affordances the internet technology offers - discussion boards and Amazon's social networking system which enables top reviewers to easily stay in touch and monitor and comment upon each other's activities. But all is not pure in the top-reviewers' world. Reviewers are increasingly rewarded with free books, reviews are directly solicited, there is the possibility of gaming the system, and in order to maintain their ranking, a level of productivity is demanded that seems to go against the grain of serious book reviewing. Reviewers, especially the more prolific ones, are starting to cut corners and find ways of upping their productivity. Of course they protest that this does not mean their reviews are biased or corrupted by the process. But she who doth protest too loud risks courting more attention and the fact is that most readers of these reviews do not know that there is any relationship at all, never mind a direct one, between the producer of the product and the reviewer.

In any case with Amazon changing from a book store to an online retail store, books are no longer its most important product. The goal is much more ambitious - sell everything and encourage product reviews of everything. It is Amazon's audacity and conceit to think that books

are like everything else: like light bulbs, like deodorants, like chocolate, like toilet brushes – simply another product to be marketed, reviewed, shipped, and sold**.** As Amazon begins to sell more and more different sorts of goods, reviewers too begin to realize (with encouragement from the Vine program) that they can gain even more freebies by reviewing such items and also that such items can be reviewed rather quickly and hence are good for upping productivity. Belgian chocolate can be digested slightly more quickly than the works of Proust. Although reviewers are being tempted into reviewing other products, as we have seen, the classic ranking system is still dominated by books (and to a lesser extent music and movies). This was a problem for Amazon. The solution was to point to the failures of the old ranking system as the justification for "the new and better ranking system". Stasis had set in and "fans" were perceived to be gaming the system. The new ranking system could also give new and younger reviewers a chance to strut their stuff   - and hey, they just might prefer reviewing beauty products, printers and the like over books. And lo and behold this largely seems to be what has happened (although systematic research on the new ranking system has yet to be carried out).

But to have two review systems built on very different sets of values risks damaging the whole delicate reputation system. As we have seen, a lot of top reviewers are rather unhappy and a few are disengaging from reviewing for Amazon altogether. The credibility of the whole process is at risk and the energy and good will of these volunteer reviewers who work for scant rewards is in jeopardy. Our survey shows that people really care about their review ranking and have worked hard for it.

It is the attack on the old ranking system which reveals Amazon's stake in all this. One of the things the top reviewers most strongly object to is the idea that appreciating someone's corpus of work makes you an illegitimate "fan" – as though the derogatory "fan boy" term from pop music somehow translates into the world of book reviewing. It is true, as we have seen, that some top reviewers, aided by Amazon Friends, are checking each others' reviews as "helpful". But this activity might not necessarily be mendacious but instead be a normal part of how a "community of practice" (Lave and Wegner 1991) operates – a community where a set of common interests and practices are shared. Our survey shows that top reviewers have heavily invested in building their community. Thus it is not implausible that they express their support for their friends and their reviews with the common norm of reciprocation. The community may be a technologically mediated space where "friendship" is only a click away, and where rewarding someone's endeavors by a "helpful" vote is only another click away, but it is still a community built upon a sense of norms, responsibility, and a shared endeavor. For Amazon to call people who engage in a shared activity and appreciate who are good at it, "fans", and to disqualify their votes, is possibly to misunderstand the whole nature of the reviewing enterprise. And here understanding the switch from books to other products is the key.

Books, and arguably movies and music, are art and media works that require serious engagement to evaluate. In other words they generate a community of practice who appreciate the nuances of style, the meaning of art and its difference from entertainment, the importance of accurate information, the intricacies and complexities of plot, character development, the role of humor, and so on. Perhaps other items such as toothpaste, baseball caps, post its, and printers could eventually spawn a similar culture of taste but it would take time and for sure someone who is

the arbiter of taste in books is unlikely to be the arbiter of taste in light bulbs. The conceit Amazon has, that all products can be sold the same way, may be correct, but a reputation system that levels the playing field such that a reputation for reviewing light bulbs is commensurable with one gained from reviewing a work of literature runs the risk of one day being exposed as a sham.

Amazon's innovation is to make customer reviews part of a standardized selling process but this fails to differentiate between the different ways the products are <u>sold</u> and are actually <u>used</u>. The customer review is in essence an appreciation – a report – of how the item is used. A book review is a report on the user's experience of reading that book. In short <u>selling</u> a product and <u>using and consuming</u> a product (which is what the review actually pertains to) are very different things. Because everything can be sold the same way does not mean that they can be evaluated the same way.

Amazon has increasingly expanded from the world of ecommerce to the world of social commerce, not only to keep its reviewers happy by providing a way for them to contact each other, but with the implication that friends share similar likes and dislikes (if my friend likes this product I should like it too). This works well for books where the reviewers share common practices and develop shared tastes. For many such reviewers Amazon provides a social outlet, more specific and focused than general social networks, and thus more valuable to practitioners and also for commercial interests such as Amazon. To risk losing this sense of community while attempting to fix the "ranking problem" may turn out to be counterproductive.

Is there a way forward? As we have said this is time of upheaval as the traditional world of book reviewing meets a rampant ecommerce culture, but perhaps one solution would be to attempt to improve the ranking system. Instead of relying on freebies and non transparent relationships between producers and reviewers, standardizing the whole product reviewing enterprise and if need be offering the proper remuneration to reviewers might actually make the system work better. It would mean that reviews would become like any commodity and attract a market price, but it would also mean that reviews might also start to hold their value such that the good, the bad, and the commensurable could be sorted out. But to do so would also run counter to the values and identity of many of the reviewers we surveyed whom feel that to receive remuneration for their reviews would further undermine the literary value of their endeavors and lead them open to even more accusations of reviewing for gain and with possible bias. A counter to this is that currently reviewers for organs such as the *New York Times Book Review* are paid for their labor and meet few accusations of bias simply by fiat of being paid. A further way to solve the commensuration problem is simply to acknowledge it and introduce separate rankings for each product category. Thereby reviewers would gain their reputation in particular domains of expertise. But this of course would destroy the famed simplicity and elegance of Amazon's buying and selling system, but it has to be said that having two ranking systems for the same product itself risks destroying that elegance.

The current danger of two ranking systems that seem to offer commensuration between reviews of incommensurable objects is that disillusionment and cynicism might replace the good will and energy of these volunteer reviewers which we have tapped into in this survey. We do not know what the solution is. But some way of harnessing the energy, ability, and imagination of this

extraordinary community is needed such that a viable reputation economy can be put in place.[29]

If not the customer review is in danger of becoming an unwitting victim - itself losing credibility

because there is, paradoxically no proper way to establish reputation. Words really do matter, but

getting them to matter in the right way is never easy.

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[29] One of the motivations for our own research was the idea that a system which provided adequate and fair remuneration for reviews might solve some of these difficulties. One of us FilipKesler, is in the process of developing such a system.

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APPENDIX

<u>Survey</u>

What is your gender?

What is your occupation?

Where are you located? (City + State + Country)

How many reviews do you typically write *per month* for Amazon (include all items, e.g. books, movies, games, electrical appliances, etc)?

How many of these reviews (per month) are of books?

Have you ever posted reviews at web sites other than Amazon?

If YES, please list sites (e.g. Barnes and Noble, YouTube, Netflix GarageBand, Epinions, etc.) and typical number of reviews per month per site.

If YES, do you post the same review for the same item on all sites?

Do you contribute to a blog about the sorts of items you review (e.g. books, DVDs, beauty products, etc)?

If YES, please add a link or list the URL of your blog.

Do you have more than one active Amazon account/profile?

If YES, why?

Please give the name of your primary Amazon profile.

Do you use the same profile/ID/Name/nickname on all reviewing sites?

If NO, why do you use different profiles/ID/name/nicknames for different sites?

Which of the following Amazon activities do you also participate in?
Amazon Vine
Amazon Seller
Amazon Associate
Friends
Interesting People
Discussion Boards
Listmania!
SYLT Guides
Others (please list)
What is your Amazon reviewer ranking number today under the "classic" system?

What is your Amazon reviewer ranking number today under the new system introduced in October '08?

Do you prefer the new ranking system?

Please explain why

Does your Amazon Top Reviewer ranking badge (if you have one) matter to you?

If YES, why?

Do you refer to your Amazon review ranking in other activities, e.g. on your resumé, blogs, endorsing books or products, in chat rooms or other forums to add credibility to your comments, etc?

If YES, give an example of how you might use your ranking

Name the kind of item (e.g. books, DVD, beauty products, etc.) you review the most on Amazon.

What other products do you review?

If you review books, which genre(s) of books do you review?

Do you review every book you read?

If NO, why not?

Have you ever written a book, or played a significant role in producing the sort of item you review (e.g. made music, programmed computer games, etc)?

How long on average does it take you to write a book review including reading the book?

Do you type your review directly to the website or cut and paste from a word processing file?

Which of the following are important in writing a review (of books or other products):

A personal distinctive style?
Accurate, concise description of the content (or features if not a book)?
Demonstrating expertise and familiarity with topic or genre (or use of product if a product)?
Using simple vocabulary?
Being provocative?
Comparison to other books/products?
A catchy title?

Please list any other factors which are important in writing reviews

When you write reviews of similar genre books or products do you use or copy similar passages from your earlier reviews perhaps changing a word or two?

Have you ever found your reviews or part of them copied by other reviewers?

How many of your reviews are what you consider to be positive?

Please rank the following motivations for writing reviews (1=most important; 8=least important)

Self expression, e.g. opportunity to express your opinion.
Developing writing skills, e.g. to use or further develop your writing skills.
Enhancing understanding of topic, e.g. to clarify and organize your own thoughts.
Utilitarian, e.g. to receive free books and other material rewards such as money.
Enhancing status, e.g. to receive positive feedback and increase status as a reviewer.
Self enjoyment, e.g. for personal fun.
Responsibility to community, e.g. serving wider community by informing them what a good product the item is or warning them about its deficiencies.
Promoting a subject, person, place or viewpoint that you have a strong belief in.

Please list any other motivations for writing reviews.

Do you find that your motivation for writing reviews has changed as you have written more and more reviews, and if so in what way?

Do you purchase your books or other items to review from Amazon?

Are you sent free books (or other items) to review by publishers and/or companies?

If YES, are you sent only the sort of item you review (e.g. books if you review books, DVDs if you review DVDs, etc.)?

If YES, do you actually review those books or items?

Did your review ranking seem to affect the amount of free books or other items you were sent?

If YES, in what way?

What do you do with any free items you are sent (e.g. keep them for personal use, give them to friends, donate them, sell them, etc.)?

Has anyone invited you to review a book or product negatively or positively?

Has anyone invited you to rate the usefulness of another review negatively or positively?

Has an author or their representative (e.g. agent or publisher) ever asked you to post a book review on Amazon?

If YES, did you write and post that review?

Have you ever sent your book review to the author of that book or their publisher for a preview?

If YES, did you incorporate their feedback into the review such that you modified the content significantly?

Do you read other peoples' Amazon reviews of the same item you are reviewing?

Do you rate the usefulness of the other posted reviews for the same item you are reviewing?

If an item has many reviews posted are you more or less likely to review it?

Are there any other considerations that influence your decision to review an item? If so please list these considerations.

Are you a member of a social networking site such as Facebook, MySpace or LinkedIn, and if so, which one(s)?

If you use Amazon Friends or Amazon Interesting People, do you
Monitor their Amazon activity using the RSS feature?
Read their reviews?
Comment upon their reviews?
Rate the usefulness of their reviews?

If you use Friends, do your Amazon Friends comment upon your reviews?

Have your reviews ever suffered from what you believe to be deliberate negative votes by so-called trolls?

If YES, under what circumstances?

What do you like best about the experience of writing reviews?

What do you like least?

Do you make money from your reviewing activity?

If YES, how?

Do you agree that online reviewers such as yourself should be compensated for your work?

Never?
Whenever you post a review?
Only when you post a useful review (i.e. rated useful by other reviewers)?
Only when you post a review that drives up sales of the item reviewed?
Only when you post a review rated as especially deserving of attention on some other criteria?

If you checked "some other criteria" on the last answer please state explicitly what you think the criteria for rewarding reviewers should be.

If there was a website which posted your reviews to multiple websites (including Amazon) and enabled you to be rewarded for posting reviews would you use it?

If NO, why not?

Would you be interested in testing such a system?

If NO, why not?

If YES, could we contact you when such a system is available?

Any other comments? Please write here:

Would you like to receive a copy of the results of this survey?

If YES, please enter your email address.

Follow up questions sent after main survey:

 Age: Put an X beside relevant band.
 18-30

31-40
41-50
51-60
61-70
71-80
Over 80

Please tell us your highest educational qualification (if any):

In a typical DAY how much time in TOTAL do you spend on Amazon NOT writing or posting reviews (e.g. doing other activities such as shopping, browsing, writing comments, checking your ranking, following Friends, on discussion boards etc)? Mark the band below with an X:

Less than 30 minutes:
30 minutes to one hour:
One to two hours:
More than two hours: