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# Amazon Glitch Unmasks War Of Reviewers

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"It's interesting that they find some negative reviews and assume that the reason for it must be partisan ax-grinding and not real taste," Mr. Jackman said. "I mean, there's no accounting for taste, is there?" Whether it is arrogance, paranoia or simply common sense, positive reviews come under suspicion, too.

"Could the five-star reviews (so far all but one from NY, NY) be the work of the author's friends?" asked a one-star review by "A reader from Washington, DC" on the review page for Susan Braudy's "Family Circle," a biography of Kathy Boudin, the former member of the Weather Underground, and her family.

Reviews are not the only features writers take advantage of to improve their image on Amazon. Many have been known to list their own books as alternate recommendations for any given book, and to compile lists of favorite books with their own at the top. Not unlike authors who have manipulated newspaper best-seller lists by buying copies of their own books, one ordered books through Amazon to raise his ranking there.

Books are far from the only products subject to anonymous reviewing these days. The growth of electronic commerce has spawned a new kind of critical authority -- one's peers. On Amazon alone, customers depend on one another for advice on CD's, DVD's, garden tools and electronic equipment. On dozens of other Web sites, average citizens anonymously review restaurants, software, even teachers.

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The word-of-mouth advice is widely seen as empowering to consumers who no longer have to rely on privileged critics with access to a television station or printing press to disseminate their opinions. But the reliability of the new authorities is the subject of increasing debate, at least among active Amazon users.

As the Amazon sites expand their visitors are seen as an increasingly important. Mark Moskowitz, an independent filmmaker, sent an e-mail message to about 3,000 people this week asking them to review the DVD of his film "Stone Reader," which goes on sale soon.

"If you didn't see it but heard it was good, go ahead and post anyway, (what the heck)," Mr. Moskowitz told them. "It doesn't obligate you for anything, even the truth."

Despite the widespread presumption that the reviews are stacked, both readers and writers say they affect sales, especially for new writers whose books are not widely reviewed elsewhere.

To increase the credibility of the reader reviews, Amazon has introduced a means for users to

vote on the quality of each review, and a corresponding ranking of the top 1,000 reviewers. But the site's discussion boards are full of carping about how people are trying to play that system, too. Many prolific reviewers speculate that Harriet Klausner, 55, who has long reigned as No. 1, cannot possibly read all the books she reviews.

In a telephone interview, Ms. Klausner, in turn, accused the No. 2 reviewer of getting people to vote for him and against her in a "desperate attempt to be No. 1."

But such concerns among reviewers pale beside those shared by a range of naturally obsessive authors.

Late last month on her radio talk show, Dr. Laura Schlessinger used a call about an anonymous letter to vent her distress over some of her Amazon reviewers, who she described as "scummy, creepy people."

The feminist author Katha Pollitt mentioned in a recent New Yorker article that she had considered anonymously posting a nasty review on her ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend's Amazon page, but refrained from doing so. In an interview, however, she said she had chastised a friend whose book had no reviews on Amazon when it came out, telling her to have friends to post some. The friend followed her advice, but Ms. Pollitt was disappointed. "I'm thinking what kind of friends are these? They've only written one sentence."

The novelist A. M. Homes said the one Amazon review that had stuck in her mind was a negative one from someone who signed off "A reader from Chevy Chase," which is her hometown.

"The world of books is a very small world these days, and any time someone takes the time to share their opinion it's incredible," Ms. Homes said. "But I do want to know who that person from Chevy Chase was and what their problem with me really is."

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