



Book Review

Solove, Daniel. 2007. *The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumour, and Privacy on the Internet*. London: Yale University Press.

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Solove's new book engages with the tricky area of Internet interaction and asks difficult questions about our identity, integrity and personal information – in short our reputation – in on-line settings. The book investigates how reputations historically have been made and un-made, how the internet raises new questions for how we deal with reputation and makes suggestions on how the internet might be governed (if indeed this is possible).

The text is packed full of challenging examples and provocative suggestions which navigate a path through some of the murky and messy worlds of the web. Solove dumps us in this mess quite literally. His first example is 'dog shit girl,' a South Korean subway passenger who allowed her dog to defecate on public transport, refused to clean up the mess, was photographed and then had her image broadcast to millions through the internet. She featured in blogs (web-logs) calling for further personal information about her to be made available, was named and shamed, parodied and pilloried, and eventually dropped out of university. Did she deserve privacy after her blatant norm transgression? Who should police these norms? Is net-based norm vigilantism a reasonable way to police the Internet? These are just some of the questions we readers are challenged to address.

While dog shit girl (along with many of Solove's other fantastic, intriguing and weird examples) raises questions regarding how we might invade each others privacy, another category of examples raises different kinds of privacy questions. For example, the Washingtonienne was a blog started by a young woman working for a U.S. senator. The blog included explicit details of her affair with an attorney employed in Washington. This generated a minor political scandal and led to her losing her job and the attorney filing a lawsuit complaining that the blog revealed intimate information to the world he would have rather kept private. The blogger went on to get a book deal and a job working on another blog. The important questions we as readers are posed is how should this kind of communication be regulated? Is it possible to regulate it at all? What kinds of safeguards could be put in place to manage, for example, blogs? If we are intimately involved in a situation does that give us the right to broadcast accurate information about that situation?

A further category of examples is exemplified by 'Star Wars Boy' who filmed himself acting out a scene from the film which was subsequently made available through the internet. He became the subject of ridicule, jokes, more parodies and a kind of internet-based bullying. Solove asks whether (based on this and other examples he uses) this means we are now participants in invading our own privacy? "We're invading each others' privacy and we're also invading our own" (vii).

What kinds of challenges does this pose for our understanding of reputation, ideas of shame and the consequences of gossip? Do we need protection from our own actions? Are participants in Internet interaction sufficiently aware of the potential consequences of communication to manage their own

information? This third area of questioning is particularly difficult to deal with as most forms of privacy protection depend upon knowing subjects doing what they can to protect their privacy and avoid having that violated. Participating in one's own violation then raises difficult questions about knowledge (who knows what about the internet and who should know what) and intentionality (to what extent are people able to control, manage or predict the consequences of their action).

Solove addresses questions about reputation, identity, gossip and shaming via a historical amble through various examples of reputations (and how they have traditionally been a subject to defend), gossip (and its local consequences) and shaming (with various degrees of permanence). The text ranges across duels and the importance of one's standing, the scarlet letter and public shame, gossip in communities and witchcraft trials and refusals to admit guilt. The central difference for considering the Internet and issues of reputation appears to be one of scale. Thus dog shit girl acted in public, but only to those immediately witnessing her act. Washingtonienne blogged her actions but, she claimed, only to keep her friends up to date. Star Wars Boy filmed himself acting out a scene, but without consideration of audience. Solove tells us that the audience for Internet postings is ever increasing and is in the scale of potential millions. Hence historical cases of local gossip appear to operate on a different scale from blogged gossip, even if the author's intent is narrow. Now the Internet has opened up means of authorship and communication to millions, the scale of reputational damage, rumour and gossip has potentially escalated. Of course, as the scale of information escalates, the number of readers who pay attention to that information may decrease with some blogs being read by few if anyone.

However, given the potential for such a scale of communication and such a broad dispersal of authorship, how might the Internet be governed and regulated? Solove sets out three approaches. First there is the libertarian approach – extolling freedom of speech and the free flow of information, but not offering any explicit protections to privacy. Second there is the authoritarian approach – focusing on censorship, content control and the management of on-line data, but limiting the free-speech potential of on-line interaction. Third, there is the middle ground approach – including privacy protection and the threat of lawsuits to protect against defamation, but involving tricky questions regarding how much, of what kind of privacy, for whom, should rights bestow.

I greatly enjoyed this text, particularly the number of examples packed in, along with the recognisable strangeness of internet encounters made available for consideration, and some outstandingly weird examples with which I was completely unfamiliar. As I am not a legal scholar, I found the sections dedicated to governance and regulation a little less interesting than the early parts of the book. I thought a comparison between the US and European situation on privacy protection could have been dealt with in more extensive detail. It will also be interesting to see how this text fits alongside other emerging analyses of the future of the Internet and regulation (see, for example, Zittrain, 2008). Furthermore, the book lacked a reflexive angle; to what extent does Solove's text (and indeed this review) participate in further invading the privacy of, for example, dog shit girl? In sum, this is a fantastic book for initiating debate about the Internet, issues of privacy and the potential challenges of regulation. It contains all the necessary material to spark life into the debate. Although the questions of reputation, gossip, privacy and shaming on the Internet are unanswerable in a clear, singular fashion, this book goes to great lengths to engage readers in thinking about the terms of the debate.

Reference

Zittrain, J. 2008. *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*. London: Yale University Press.