



Professionals and nonprofessionals on Goodreads: Behavior standards for authors, reviewers, and readers

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Abstract

In 2013, Goodreads, a social media Website for book lovers, announced policy changes that included the deletion of reviews that discuss an author's behavior. These changes occurred after a series of author/reviewer incidents in 2012 and 2013. This article presents a case study of one of those incidents in 2012, when a Goodreads reviewer wrote a negative review of a novel, the author and agent responded on Twitter, and a public discussion ensued around behavior standards for both literary professionals and nonprofessionals. The above incident, and how it does or does not foreshadow the later changes in Goodreads policy, offers a lens through which to examine evolving reading and writing practices and literary censorship, as well as how nonprofessional book reviewers and readers conceive of their and literary professionals' roles in a complex social media literary landscape.

Keywords

Artist/audience dynamics, authors, behavior norms, Goodreads, online communities, readers, social media spaces

Introduction

Writing and reading practices have played critical roles in societal developments (Baron et al., 2007; Brantlinger, 1998; Eisenstein, 1980). Although the two are sometimes thought of as solo processes, in the West they have social roots. Authors and the nature

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of authorship have evolved with book production means and changing laws on ownership and copyright (Cavallo and Chartier, 2003; Finkelstein and McCleery, 2012; Rose, 1995; Woodmansee and Jaszi, 1994). Authors' roles, along with their and readers' relationships, continue to be redefined today, particularly due to emergent digital practices where literary production and distribution are faster than ever, and readers' opinions on authors' works are more easily disseminated, too.

This article examines Goodreads, an online cataloging site where users recommend, rate, and discuss books, and how its members articulate and negotiate the meaning of being an author and reader in a social media world. Specifically, this study asks the following questions:

RQ1. How do readers conceive of literary professionals' roles, especially around what is or isn't acceptable behavior in a public sphere?

RQ2. How do nonprofessional book readers and reviewers conceive of their own roles?

Answers to these questions speak to the changing dynamics between artists and their audience, as well as allow for a lens through which to understand the evolving behavior norms of literary practices in digital spaces. Furthermore, readers' perception of roles provides a context to also consider policy changes that were enacted on Goodreads and the censorship charges allegations that followed, and how—or if—the charge actually fits.

In September 2013, Goodreads announced several changes to how it would moderate content. Reviews that focused on authors and/or their behavior would be deleted from the site. Members' personal online bookshelves, which are located on their profile page and list what they have read, intend to read, refuse to read, or didn't finish for various reasons, would also be deleted if deemed similarly inappropriate (Goodreads, 2013).

The site's author guidelines were further revised, too, because "some problems have come up because some authors who are new to Goodreads don't know what's appropriate on Goodreads and/or take matters into their own hands rather than flagging content that they feel is inappropriate" (Goodreads, 2013). The revised guidelines suggest that authors do not "respond to negative reviews" (Goodreads, 2014).

Initially, these policies were enacted by deleting members' reviews and bookshelves without any notification. However, due to backlash, Goodreads (2013) amended the rule; members would be notified first and allowed "time to decide what to do." The announcement post—including amendments and updates—has attracted over 6000 responses on Goodreads alone in addition to across the Web, with reactions varying (e.g. Absolutewrite, 2013; Hazard Owen, 2013; Hiddenreviews, 2013–2014; Hoffelder, 2013; Miller, 2013a; Reddit, 2013; The Passive Voice, 2013).

A portion of readers and reviewers saw the change as a possible step toward curbing the escalating tensions between authors and readers, as well as the perceived over-the-top antics by certain members on the site. Other readers neither agreed nor disagreed with the changes per se but accepted that Goodreads could maintain whatever rules they like. Some members noticed no difference in the community, while others actively protested the changes and claimed this was censorship. Goodreads (2013) responded that "This is not censorship—this is setting an appropriate tone for a community site."

When a new media is introduced, questions of appropriateness, access, content quality, and censorship inevitably enter into discussion about them (Wartella and Jennings, 2000). Reading and writing has been subjected to controversy the same as film, television, and radio. Debates in the 19th century occurred on “whether fiction could safely be read by young people” (Donelson, 1981: 5) or at all in libraries, which were seen as a potentially corrupting force due to the range of low-brow content they might possess. Then, once libraries gained social acceptance and made deals with publishing houses to control literary content distribution (or refused to carry certain books due to school board pressure, the librarian’s viewpoint, or other factors), they also became seen as potential forces to reinforce institutional censorship (Bassett, 2005; Brantlinger, 1998; Donelson, 1981). There was also regulation of women’s literary activities based on the prevailing views of what was appropriate for their gender of marital status (Becker-Cantarino and Clausen, 1995). Then, there were the *masses*.

The “Victorian information explosion” (Wright, 2009: 60) saw the rise of popular, sensationalist tales due to the cheaper production of books and serials that allowed for wider distribution to the general populace. This tied directly to the moral censorship movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries that sought to target this type of literature for the spread of obscenity among the masses (Petersen, 1992; Saunders, 1990). High- and low-brow cultures, and what is or is not appropriate for people to say or do in response to cultural works, are constantly in flux (Baumann, 2007; DiMaggio, 1982; Levine, 1990).

The policy changes by Goodreads were preceded by a series of incidents on the site over (negative) reviews of books and the author/reader/reviewer responses to them. This article presents a case study of one these incidents and how it foreshadows the changes in Goodreads policy and whether claims of censorship are justified; it also allows for a prime opportunity to explore the research questions stated at the beginning of this introduction about how readers understand their and authors’ roles in social media spaces.

The incident: a case study

In January 2012, a reviewer on Goodreads posted a 1 star review of a debut novel. By the following day, the novel’s agent and author had a Twitter exchange. The agent called the reviewer a derogatory name and said she’d try to “like” positive reviews in order to bump the negative review off the novel’s first page. The author said she might “ask a few friends” to like positive reviews, too. This occurred after several other author/reviewer clashes in the previous 2 weeks. Combined with this reviewer being ranked among the top 2 reviewers on the site and the top 20 for most followed (Fidelman, 2012), the matter spread across the book sphere (e.g. Bertagna, 2012; Kagawa, 2012; Kennedy, 2012a, 2012b; Roth, 2012; Springen, 2012).

Research on online reviews has been primarily quantitative (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2009; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Otterbacher, 2011; Verboord, 2010, 2013; Zhang and Varadarajan, 2006). Vannini’s (2004) qualitative analysis on online reviews of Avril Lavigne’s music concentrated on the interpretive practices of consumers in regard to the artist’s public persona. In contrast, this study focuses not on the review itself but on the Goodreads users’ reception to the review and/or the author/agent’s response to the review.

Methods

Data

I collected the one 1 star review, screencaps of the author/agent's tweets, and the comments made in the reviewer's Goodreads thread. Discussion about the incident took place across multiple sites. The reviewer posted her review on her blog and on Goodreads. Other authors and reviewers commented on their blogs. There was Twitter activity beyond the initial author/agent exchange. However, I focused on the comments made in the Goodreads thread, which served as a hub for the public discourse.

Analysis

Scherer-Bassani (2011) distinguished between "unit of record," or one message in a forum, and "units of context," which "relate to the way that different units of record are grouped together under a single discussion topic on the forum" (935). The Goodreads thread was analyzed as a "unit of context" rather than each post or "unit of record" being the unit of analysis. Thus, while most individual posts were coded in some capacity, not all were.

I read through and open coded the entire thread, containing 1858 posts through August 2013. Through an interactive process, four broad categories emerged as a means to analyze the thread: (1) People/Roles, (2) Behavior, (3) Spaces, and (4) Products.

People/Roles were codes that identified the players who were involved in incident or were later brought into the discussion in the thread, as well as the terms explicitly used by members to describe their perceived roles in the literary landscape. This category was sub-coded for (1) the *main author* whose book was given the 1 star review, (2) the *agent* of this author, (3) the *main reviewer* who gave the 1 star, (4) *other authors* who were referenced in the thread, (5) *other nonprofessional reviewers* who weren't the main reviewer, (6) *other literary or entertainment professionals*, and (7) *professional reviewers*.

In addition to the ones above, participants in the thread tended to ascribe a second set of roles which were also sub-coded. These were (1) *top reviewers*, (2) *private citizens*, (3) *public figures*, (4) *readers*, and (5) *friends and fans*. These terms could have overlap with the first-set sub-codes or be used by participants separately. For example, the main reviewer might be identified as a top reviewer, but another member might refer to top reviewers generally rather with a specific person, which would only receive one sub-code.

Behavior codes included people's actual behavior and judgments of people's behavior. Sub-codes were thread discussions of (1) the physical act of *liking* someone's review through the site's like feature, (2) attempting to *game the system* through likes and other tactics, (3) the practice of *blacklisting* authors because of behavior, (4) *name calls* of other people and their appropriateness, (5) instances when people *disagreed* with one another, (6) ways to *handle criticism*, (7) *sharing opinion*, and (8) what it means to conduct oneself *professionally*.

Spaces were coded for discussion about where the behavior took place and its relationship to and effect on roles and behavior. Its sub-codes were (1) *Twitter*, (2) the reviewer's Goodreads *thread*, (3) *blogs*, (4) *Goodreads broadly*, (5) *Web and social*

media broadly, and (6) *email/phone*. Sub-codes were also devised for whether a space was defined by members as *public* or *private*.

Products were items such as (1) the main novel, (2) the main review, (3) other novels, (4) other reviews, (5) opinions, and (6) other creative works.

I limited analysis to posts through February 2012, as I was interested in immediate reactions following the incident. This resulted in 1366 posts by 212 members. These numbers reflect the thread at data collection and don't include posts that were deleted either before or after. Posts where users' names were deleted due to closing their accounts were counted, but whoever wrote the post wasn't counted when tallying members.

After the 1366 posts were re-coded with the categories and sub-codes described, I analyzed concurrences and other relationship dynamics that led to the themes explored in the results. The main author and agent are called Author A and Agent B. Posts made by the reviewer of the 1 star review are indicated by RD. I've redacted all other names.

Results

Overview

There was no consensus among the thread participants for what the standards are for readers, reviewers, or authors. Dissension arose around the author's behavior and her culpability relative to her agent's behavior. Although the discussion began with a lens on literary professionals, this led to the readers and reviewers considering their role in relation to them, as well as whether there should be limits on nonprofessional behavior too. The first half of the results explores the nonprofessionals' perspective on the professionals. The second half focuses on the nonprofessionals' perspective on themselves.

The terms authors/agents, professionals, and public figures are used interchangeably as are private citizens, nonprofessionals, and readers/reviewers because they were conflated by Goodreads members in the thread. My usage in the results reflects their usage. Any spelling or grammar mistakes in the posts are how they appeared in the thread originally.

Nonprofessionals on professionals

Handling criticism and public name calls. Some readers and reviewers took issue with Author A and Agent B responding to the negative review at all. They felt that as literary professionals, authors should understand a variety of reviews are part of the job and handle the criticism accordingly:

If you can't deal with the critique of your art then don't distribute it publicly. GROW UP already.

:/ I hate it when authors do that. instead of taking low ratings as constructive criticism to improve on next books they just complain and insult readers ...

"Grow Up" implies that not only is this behavior unacceptable because it is part of the author's role to handle critique but also because it is counter to how an adult should behave. Readers understood that an author (and to an extent the agent) might be upset

over the review and wish to express their frustration. The sticking point was where and how the professionals chose to be upset. People thought it inappropriate that the reviewer was name-called for her review, but they believed it was doubly inappropriate that she was name-called in what they perceived to be a public space:

I cannot believe they called you a foul name like that in a public venue like Twitter! It is so far past unprofessional that I am speechless. I can even understand the Author being upset about a negative review with such a large response and venting in private! to her friend or agent or whoever but kind of stupid to handle it on Twitter.

Even if you were a bitch, that is so wrong to say it a Twitter Feed for the world to read.

Although social media is a means for celebrities to interact and share information with their fans, creating a sense of intimacy (Marwick and boyd, 2011), in this instance, readers wished the author had *not* shared with them. For some members, there are limits on what the professionals should express in social media spaces. It was irrelevant that Author A and Agent B tweeted to each other; it was enough that others could see it:

Do these people even know what private email is?

Why do they need to tweet everything? Didn't they know it's the Internet, and like, once posted it's there forever?

WHY on earth would they even have that conversation in public? Over the phone, fine. Then no one will know and think poorly of them.

Here, email was private because its content was perceived as unavailable to the public. People viewed the telephone as an alternative form of private communication too. The Web is considered a place of permanence, the safety of delete gone. Readers weren't just criticizing the professionals' behavior, but the judgment behind the behavior. Literary professionals should know that online actions have consequences. However, some commentators separated the author's behavior from her agent's, and the culpability of the two became a point of debate.

The blame game. Some people felt that Author A should not be "punished" because she wasn't the one who called the reviewer the derogatory name. Some were additionally lenient because Author A was a debut novelist who may not yet understand her role as a professional. The agent, conversely for readers, had no excuse because she was perceived as having been in the business longer. Expectations for conduct were tied to how long one had been in a professional role. The more experience one has, the more one should know how to behave:

I'm willing to allow that the author is just too new to know better and isn't aware of how badly the general public reacts to stuff like this, but the agent absolutely should. It's only her job to act as a professional, you know.

She [Author A] didn't call you a bitch. She was all "meh, whatever" about the negative review being the displayed one ... [Author A's] a classy lady, I highly doubt she's the one who left the comments on your blog. I'd like to say that [Author A's] fans know better than to do that but I just can't honestly say it. We can get a little obsessive and some of us, clearly, don't think things through.

Not only does the member in the second post separate the author and agent's behavior but further frames Author A in a positive light with adjectives such as "classy," and "I highly doubt she's the one who left comments on your blog." As stated earlier, reviewer RD posted the review on her blog and received comments there too, which is to what the member refers to. This participant, who identified as a fan of Author A, attempted to also shift the blame to Author A's "fans," who "can get a little obsessive." However, some members felt that if Agent B or fans behaved "worse," Author A was still no innocent either:

... As far as I know, [Author A] did not object when her agent called [RD] a bitch. If she did, correct me ... Her agent behaved worse overall, but [Author A] was hardly any better.

RD: I realize the author herself wasn't the one who trolled and called me a bitch, but nor did she stop her cohort from doing so.

Author A was deemed guilty of unprofessional behavior because she didn't "object" or "stop her cohort" in their bad behavior, although it should be noted that there were others in the thread who countered by saying Author A couldn't be expected to rein in her agent or fans, nor did they understand why she was being censured for her and her supporters liking positive reviews on Goodreads:

I don't understand why an author's friends or followers have no right to like reviews of the author's book. I mean, I follow a handful of authors here on GoodReads, and I'm pretty sure I've liked some positive (and negative, for that matter) reviews of their books. Do you think that what I did was what I did wrong?

Other commentators are quick to point out, however, that the difference is Author A wanted to "game the system" by trying to knock RD's review off the novel's first page on Goodreads. This was seen as the greatest offense by some readers because the act interferes with the natural order of "their" space:

People are upset with [Author A] because she planned on contacting people to help her screw around with the goodreads rating system. Her agent originally complained about the way goodreads ranks reviews, but [Author A] happily added her own plans to cheat the system and push [RD's] review into oblivion ... She sounds like a real gem.

Authors have their chance at convincing readers to read their books with their blurb, marketing, and other book promotions. Once your book hits the hands of readers, you do not get to screw with their reviews and opinions. Tasteless.

Authors have "their chance" to find readers through promotional efforts. After the book is out for consumption, some believe they have no right to "screw" with readers'

“reviews and opinions.” Yet, there were still readers who felt that people were being unfair:

It genuinely disturbs me to see the author called immature, unprofessional, a cheat, stupid, etc., because she asked three friends to like some positive reviews on Goodreads ... I'm not saying there aren't authors who behave badly—there certainly are—but hanging this poor kid out to dry because of a couple off-hand Twitter comments? I can't be a part of that.

I looked up her [Author A's] Twitter account so I could see for myself what was really said. What I got was that she “might” ask a few friends who had accounts to like the positive reviews. Eh. I'm not having much problem with this.

Although readers have been upset with Agent B for calling RD a derogatory name, there were comments throughout the thread that discussed Author A and Agent B in personal terms. No one used the derogatory name directed at RD, but comments about the author's supposed character emerged. Some readers found these comments inappropriate, highlighting a divide about what is or is not an acceptable language for discussing an author. Some readers didn't see Author A's part in the incident as equal to the level of censure she received. Agent B was condemned, even from those who supported the author, with statements such as Author A might consider “a new agent.” Some members additionally took to Twitter, leaving comments in the thread about what they tweeted. Several of the comments directed at Agent B became even more personal than those directed at Author A, echoing the public name calls the agent herself was criticized for:

I left a sweet and simple tweet for [Agent B] to wake to. These people make my one year old nephew look like fucking einstein.

: i'm not surprised that [Agent B] reacted like this. she's a bitter woman. i had her on my query list and followed her on twitter until i realized all she did was bitch about her sucky life.

Before the incident, positive assessments were made about Author A from people who later criticized her that she had “seemed sweet” from her presentation in social media or that her YouTube Channel and videos were “hilarious.” After the negative review was posted (prior to the Twitter incident), one reader felt it was “unfortunate” that RD disliked the book because “the author seems so cute ...” Personal excuses continued for the author after the incident because she was “pregnant” and hormonal, once more shifting the blame to Agent B:

For me, I think somewhere between her having a two year old and crying in grocery stores because she's pregnant, she's maybe not in the best frame of mind to be making decisions like this and her ***agent*** didn't tell her not to do this stuff.

Most readers viewed the pregnancy excuse as “ridiculous and out-dated.” However, one response in particular approached the above comment from a different angle:

I don't feel like you're a completely objective voice here. You sound more like a personal friend of hers than just a fan or reader.

An assumption is made that the reader who offered the pregnancy excuse must be Author A's "friend" due to the personal knowledge provided. Whether true or not, what's interesting is the explicit distinction drawn in the post between being the author's "friend" versus "just a fan or reader."

Comparisons. Readers also assessed behavior standards by comparing Author A's actions to other literary professionals. As previously stated, one of the reasons this incident received the level of attention it did was due to it occurring after other author/reviewer incidents. Members not only referenced these authors but also authors with whom they had had more positive interactions:

Recently I wrote a pretty negative review for the book [name]. The author actually got on my blog and commented. He has my complete respect because he had such an amazing attitude about it. I was pretty harsh and he was super nice about it and thanked me for taking the time to read and review his book. THAT is the kind of thing that gets authors a second chance.

RD: This is a social media site, we are not paid for our opinions. Authors or their affiliates who gang up on private citizens will have to accept that their public behavior has an influence on how people perceive them and their product. Does [director's name] go on imdb and yell at someone for criticizing [name of film]? Or [producer's name] to join in? I assure you, he does not. Firstly, because he is a professional.

Initially, participants in the thread had stated that authors shouldn't respond at all if they were unable to handle criticism, but this position is amended as the discussion evolves. Authors may respond to a critical review, but should be with "an amazing attitude," as that type of behavior earned them a "second chance" from reviewers.

Along with comparisons to other authors, members also contrasted Author A's actions with other entertainment professionals such as famous filmmakers who don't go on message boards to "yell" at people who criticized their films, as in the second post above. RD also emphasizes that reviewers like herself are "private citizens" who are "not paid for our opinions." Money—who earns and spends it—became an important issue as participants negotiated whether they as nonprofessional should be held to any standards in their Goodreads reviews. Understanding expectations for nonprofessional behavior is the other (and equally) side of understanding expectations for professional behavior.

Nonprofessionals on the nonprofessionals

Who's the professional? Some members saw no need for nonprofessional reviewers to maintain any standards because they were the ones who spent money rather than received money:

For me, it boils down to this: there are no rules to how I review something because it's MY time and MY money and it's also a hobby and not my JOB.

what's this nonsense about US needing to be professional?

Start paying me a salary if you want that.

This site is SOCIAL and we can review and discuss books however we want. It makes no difference that it is the internet and public.

As in RD's previous post, Goodreads was invoked as a "social" space where readers "discuss books however we want" because they're unpaid and the consumer ("MY money"). The Web was still characterized as "public," yet behavior standards changed because the individual's role was perceived differently. Professionals are expected to restrict their statements in public. Private citizens' "social" discussions and reviews are entitled to free reign, at least for some members. Yet, the nature of a review, particularly the right to post a negative or Did Not Finish (DNF) review, was contentious.

Writing and liking reviews. Some members questioned the value of negative reviews at all. For them, why review books one didn't enjoy? Others allowed for negative reviews but felt they should be reserved for only books that were read to the end. Some, however, questioned why anyone would "like" other people's negative reviews, such as in RD's case:

I'll never understand how negative reviews get such positive reactions from commenters especially if you haven't even read the book. Why like negativity? It's just stupid.

Liking this review is akin to liking hate. I'm fine with negative reviews and have read plenty written by my fellow bloggers ... This was just a harsh review of a book that was mostly skimmed ... I'm not going to place my faith in someone who hasn't finished the book.

Those members with opposing stances argued that positive and negative reviews were equally beneficial as were DNFs because being unable to finish a book was a review in itself:

What if a book is so bad you can't make it until the end? That right there is a problem in itself that should be addressed. I hate when anyone make this argument.

I personally don't want to use limited resources (time, money) on reading a book I won't enjoy ... She [RD] is one of the best reviewers on Goodreads, and we value her opinion because of her experience ... and how she expresses her opinion in honest, fair reviews.

Once again, money factors into reasons for supporting negative reviews. Readers are consumers trying to decide on a product to buy. If a product is not something they'll enjoy, they "value" information that helps them not to "use limited resources." However, books are not the only products. RD is perceived as one of "the best reviewers" because of her "opinion in honest, fair reviews," which have become a commodity. Although people don't spend money on reviews, reviews are a means through which they decide what other products to buy, and some reviews are given more value than others through their accumulation of "likes."

Although a number of thread participants believed positive and negative reviews had their place, there was an acknowledgment that the negative reviews sometimes received greater traction than the positive ones:

My claim to fame is a rant-review of [other author] by [other book]. It's not something I'm all that proud of. It's my least articulate review ... It's just I could not for the life of me understand why such a piece of trash had hundreds of 5-star reviews and no 1-star reviews ... It felt like I was doing some sort of public service by posting it, letting other people know [book] isn't necessarily "amazing."

The member expresses a level of dissatisfaction that her "claim to fame is a rant-review" on Goodreads that was also her "least articulate." The admittance that she's "not that proud" of what she wrote further seems to indicate that there might be implicit standards reviewers hold to, at least in terms of how they write and present their thoughts. However, although the reviewer above might be displeased that her most negative review was the one to bring her the most attention, she doesn't express regret for the opinion she had on the novel, adding that she "felt like I was doing some sort of public service."

In contrast, there were reviewers in the thread who grew dissatisfied with the possibility that their positive reviews gained attention for reasons other than its quality:

I was wondering why my (very positive) review of this book was getting so many "likes" in the past couple of days, and I'm sad to see that it's just another instance of people playing around the rankings to try to hide critical reviews.

Some members were against anyone "gaming the system," be it the professionals or other readers. Also, it was felt by a portion of members that no one, including fellow readers and reviewers, had the right to dictate how anyone wrote about or liked books or reviews:

With all due respect, you do not have the right to articulate how a reader should take a book ... I'm not going to say that you don't have the right to have your opinion as to what reviews or commentaries you trust, but I'll say—again—it's not your right to tell other people what to think, how to feel, or how to express themselves when it comes to perceptions of literature in any capacity.

Like I've said before in other places, people can say whatever they want in their reviews, as long as it doesn't violate this site's TOS.

On the one hand, participants felt that every reader has a right to their opinion and how they respond to books. However, readers and reviewers can't project their opinions on to others nor say that their standards for responding to books must be upheld by others. To simplify the matter even more, for some members, readers and reviewers can do whatever they want as long as it is in keeping with the site's Terms of Service (TOS). In this instance, personal standards were measured against and regulated by the broad standards of the Goodreads space, although a reviewer's thread, such as the one of this case, was separated out as the reviewer's personal space, where certain etiquette rules and standards should be adhered to:

... There is an etiquette to interacting with your fellow readers, especially when you disagree about a book. Deliberately antagonizing a reviewer on his or her review space is incredibly rude, and will never, ever lead to the reviewer being open to your point of view.

Here, the thread is seen as the reviewer's "space," and although members of the community have a right to their opinions, there is an "etiquette" for how other readers should behave in the discussion depending on where (or in whose space) it takes place.

Consequences and blacklisting practices

I think it's time for me to make an "authors to avoid" shelf—it would be pretty awesome if everyone did that and it became one of the top shelves for this book—can you imagine ;p

A debate around creating "authors to avoid" list developed in the thread. Some equated the practice with blacklisting and believed it would hinder the relations between reviewers/readers and authors because authors would be hesitant to fully participate on Goodreads and other sites without fear of consequences. These members then began to consider their actions through the prism of how they might affect authors, which led to a few standards potentially arising for the nonprofessionals:

I think the practice here can potentially have much the same effects that blacklists have historically: people can be accused of being guilty by association or due to a misreading of events ... Still, for me the biggest reason to avoid the practice is that I suspect that generally it contributes to loaded and icky environment between writers and reviewers, and for that reason, it feels like a good idea for me to avoid it—because I'm trying to be kinder than I might normally feel that I need to be, if that makes any sense.

This participant is not only considering the author's position along with readers and reviewers but also elaborates on why she chooses not blacklisting by saying it is her attempt "to be kinder than I might normally feel that I need to be," which highlights an active refraining from behavior she might otherwise engage in. RD, however, became uncomfortable with "blacklist" being applied to the practices some suggested because of the connotations associated with it:

RD: I don't like the term "blacklist" because it implies a sort of witch hunt or targeted campaign, and those who happen to be on the list can then plead victimization. Applying that label to a personal shelf contributes to the "icky" relations, in my opinion ... I interact with a great many readers here and maintain a public profile, but my shelves are definitely my own affair.

Note that the issue was applying the term to a "personal shelf." Although RD "interacts with a great many readers" and "maintain(s) a public profile," her shelves are her "own affair." It is also interesting that RD didn't wish for authors to be able to "plead victimization," as if the recognition of blacklist practices somehow lessened whatever reasons authors were put on the list in the first place.

Other participants freely acknowledged they blacklisted and had no problem with the term being applied to their practices:

I am blacklisting them. I will come right out and say that. I don't want to give these authors my money, I don't want to spend my time reading what they've written, I'm not interested in their ideas, I will not recommend them to my friends.

Reference is again made to money, and where readers do or don't spend it, although there were others who looked at blacklisting from the monetary perspective of the author:

Is it really fair to not buy the book just because she [Author A] has a bad agent? ... The agent is still getting paid while you are taking away money from the author ... I do agree that the agent was tots out of line but really the author did nothing but is getting the blame.

This comment links to previous points about Author A's culpability. Not only did this poster believe Author A should not be censured with her agent, but there is an attempt to negotiate a standard for readers with the position that it wasn't "fair to not buy the book," when Agent B is "still getting paid while you are taking money away from the author."

Still, there were members who didn't view the nonprofessionals' and professionals' behavior or judgments of behavior as comparable, which was stated most clearly by RD:

RD: The difference to me is, authors are public figures, particularly when they are active participants in social media with a stake in how they are perceived. These reviews in question are written by readers or the general public, and I just don't understand how anyone thinks it's okay or advisable to attack a private citizen for her opinions ...

Ultimately, authors and agents are the professionals, and their behavior toward a "private citizen" such as RD is unacceptable, whereas nonprofessional reviews are "written by readers or the general public."

Discussion

Literary censorship has reflected an era, nation, or institution's political, social, economic, and/or religious concerns (Bassett, 2005; Burroughs, 1962; Donelson, 1981; Goldzweig, 1980; Petersen, 1992; Saunders, 1990), and the Web continues to raise complex issues for literary practices, censorship, and artist/audience dynamics. Fans can be an invaluable means of promotion for professionals with some of them delving into the "production of their own content and events, becoming centers of fan activity in their own right" (Baym and Burnett, 2009: 438). Nonprofessional, fan-produced content existed long before the digital era, but the Web "provides a powerful and new distribution channel for amateur cultural production" (Jenkins, 2006: 135–136). Book reviewers and bloggers are among these amateur producers, yet their content, along with the online spaces where they display their work, must now negotiate behavior standards for their actions.

Censorship charges were lodged at Goodreads due to its new policy of deleting reviews and digital shelves that discuss an author's behavior. However, separate from whether the claim has a legitimate basis is the fact that Goodreads is a privately owned site, with a TOS members can either agree to or not. Even in the case study, a member states, "people can say whatever they want in their reviews" provided it doesn't "violate" the community's TOS. As other responders to the policy change have noted, Goodreads can do as *they* like because it is their site. This highlights a disconnect that seems to exist for some Web users in regard to their perception of online spaces versus reality.

The Web was perceived as “public” by Goodreads members in the thread, yet a majority of online activities take place on sites owned and operated by a group, company, or individual other than the people involved. Author A and Agent B were criticized for not only their behavior but that it occurred in the “public venue” of Twitter. Yet, just as it was argued that the Goodreads thread was RD’s personal review space, one could argue that the Twitter conversation was an exchange in two people’s personal tweeting space. Both conversations are visible to anyone who stumbles upon them unless deleted. Twitter and Goodreads are as public or private as the other, and a registered user who consented to the TOS is ultimately beholden to them should a contentious issue arise and they wish to remain on the site.

However, where historical censorship had legal repercussions and sometimes personal/financial/social consequences for someone who chose not to abide by the rules, Goodreads members have the option to leave, although as Miller (2013b) noted, driving away members is usually not the desired intent. Sites want their users to feel like it is “their” space, to build up and maintain a community to which they have the freedom to express themselves and can contribute to the shaping of its environment. Still, freedom is within the TOS and moderator choices, which some people don’t think about often because it has no effect on their activities in that space—until it does.

Nonprofessional readers and reviewers were far from in agreement about how either they or the professionals should behave in social media spaces. Behavior standards tend to develop in online communities anyway (Baym, 1998; Martey and Stromer-Galley, 2007), and as seen in this article, the policy changes were already being foreshadowed by some members’ statements, such as not wishing to contribute to an “icky environment.” A positive development for one sect in the community is cause for protest or abandonment for another.

Behavior standards for Goodreads members were also influenced by the perceived role of the individual, but inconsistencies in how spaces were understood persisted. A member emphasized that Goodreads is “SOCIAL and we can review and discuss books however we want,” yet also says it “makes no difference that it is the internet and public.” In one sense, the social aspect of the site is a justification for behavior, but there is a contradictory element in the next sentence that people can say whatever they want *despite* it being a public space. Another post suggested Author A and Agent B should make use of email or phone, yet in one of the prior author/reviewer incidents, an author’s email was circulated and still became controversial because of the comments it contained. Private venues aren’t always private or treated as private when unfavorable content is exposed to a wider audience anyway. Also, if the original Twitter exchange had happened between two nonprofessional reviewers about another nonprofessional reviewer, what would’ve been the response?

This study presented the behavioral expectations nonprofessionals had for professionals and themselves, which were negotiations for what, if any, responsibilities both sides had for interacting with one another.

For some reviewers, authors and agents should realize it was part of their job to handle criticism and not respond to negative reviews, or have a positive attitude should they decide to respond. Other readers and reviewers were more sympathetic toward Author A and separated her behavior from Agent B’s because she was a less experienced professional. On the

one hand, one could say that Author A was able to maintain support because it was Agent B who used the derogatory name, but one wonders whether the author would have had support even if she had been the one to name call the reviewer? Perhaps readers feel more of a personal connection with the authors whose work they read and like or love. Recall how readers had thought Author A “cute” prior to the incident on Twitter. Of course, increasingly agents are maintaining blogs, too, and it would be interesting to study their evolving dynamics with readers, reviewers, and potential authors.

The dissension on negative reviews is worth noting. Previous research on sites such as Amazon.com and IMD have shown an overall trend toward positive reviews, with negative reviews typically seen as “less helpful” and less prominently displayed (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2009; Otterbacher, 2011). A future study should examine whether the trend continues on Goodreads. RD’s review received many “likes” because of her position and in support for what happened to her, yet there was an acknowledgment from other participants that in certain instances, negative reviews gain more attention than their positive counterparts. If positive reviews are found to be the norm, what are the circumstances under which negative reviews become highly prominent and commented upon?

The conflation of terms is also interesting. Was the usage specific to this instance because Author A happened to be a public figure and a professional writer? It would be useful to interview people in a future study to gain a clearer understanding of how they think about these terms and ascribe them to people, particularly as the Web introduces murky waters for divisions.

As already mentioned, an individual’s perceived role as a professional versus nonprofessional was a dividing factor in acceptable behavior. For some members, monetary compensation and accountability became points of negotiation for defining norms. Specifically, certain readers felt that their spending and not receiving money meant there were no “rules” for how they reviewed and that professionals shouldn’t “attack” private citizen reviewers who were also consumers. But the term private citizen carries a lot of political, legal, and historical baggage. Although it appeared to be used in this thread for someone who is not a paid professional, are nonprofessional reviewers with thousands of followers who maintain public identities and engage in micro-celebrity practices (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Senft, 2013) truly private citizens? Perhaps they are not public figures in the traditional sense, but something in between. RD was able to drum up public support after the Twitter incident because she had an audience who looked forward to and respected her reviews.

A limitation of this study, and one that leads to future research, is the author/agent’s perspectives and how authors and other literary professionals must navigate the digital landscape, as well as how they conceive of their and nonprofessionals’ roles. This study is one side, one incident, but it provides insight into how nonprofessional book reviewers and readers attempt to negotiate how they should treat one another and literary professionals.

In some respects, the more social aspects of reading and writing are on the rise once more due to the Web and online communities in particular. Digital serial publishing, fan fiction, flash fiction, and collective hybrid storytelling have roots and parallel to historical practices in earlier centuries. Historical analysis, ethnography, content analysis, big data, and more will all be needed to make of an ever-evolving literary landscape.

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