Social Media

Stop Censoring Fake Reviews

Review platforms are effective only if a consumer can trust the content. To that end, they deploy sophisticated algorithms that can accurately detect fraudulent reviews. The question then becomes: What to do with the results?

Some sites, including Amazon, censor fake reviews and publicize that fact—indeed, they sometimes sue the suspected perpetrators. Others, such as Google Local and Flipkart, quietly delete them. Still others—most notably Yelp—leave them up while flagging them as potentially fraudulent. A research team devised a series of experiments to determine which tactic works best.

In the first experiment, the researchers created two versions of a review site and asked participants to log on and choose the restaurant they thought was best. Half saw fraudulent reviews, tagged as such, along with legitimate ones; the other half saw only legitimate reviews. Members of the first group clicked on more restaurants than did members of the second and spent more time making a selection, suggesting a higher degree of engagement. A subsequent experiment explored a broader range of scenarios. It showed that consumers exhibited the most confidence in a platform when questionable reviews were not only displayed but accompanied by a “trust score” that made it easier for people to assess them. The scenario in which fake reviews were deleted without any mention of their existence—the most common approach in practice—performed the worst of all. A supplemental survey showed that the inclusion of clearly identified fraudulent reviews increased trust in the platform because users believed that fear of exposure would curtail dishonest posts. And a third experiment showed that transparency about fake reviews had the greatest impact when participants were uncertain about the quality of the offering—when legitimate reviews were mixed.

Platforms can increase trust by leaving potentially fraudulent reviews on their sites along with a decision heuristic to aid consumers, the researchers say. “Any decrease in trust...from admitting to naive users that there is fraud on their site is dominated by the increase in trust from consumers who already believed that there was fraud and now know that something is being done to alleviate it.”

About the Research

“A Tangled Web: Should Online Review Portals Display Fraudulent Reviews?” by Uttara M. Ananthakrishnan, Beibei Li, and Michael D. Smith (Information Systems Research, forthcoming)