

Website that rates people triggers controversy

April 8 2010, By Jessica Guynn

Peter Kazanjy, a little-known San Francisco entrepreneur, has launched a controversial new Web site that overnight has turned him into a very public and not very popular figure.

His site, Unvarnished, is like [Yelp](#) for people, a "reputation marketplace" where anyone can post anonymous reviews about anyone else.

Kazanjy, 30, says reviewing people is an inevitable step in the evolution of social media technologies that are stripping away the remaining layers of online privacy and exposing more details about people's lives to the world. His critics say the site is a clever social extortion racket.

"This is big and scary," Kazanjy acknowledged.

He should know. He has had to develop a thick hide as tech pundits reviewed his review site.

"A clean, well-lighted place for defamation," one blogger said.

"Unvarnished could cost you your next job," warned another.

Even gossip site Gawker ripped Unvarnished as "the completely evil social network" which holds people's careers hostage.

Kazanjy and his two cohorts, Jason Heidema, a former group manager at

[eBay](#), and Danis Dayanov, a former [LinkedIn](#) employee, don't see it that way. Their vision: A site that encourages candid and nuanced information about prospective hires, bosses and business partners.

So far Unvarnished, which is in private testing, has hundreds of users and thousands of reviews. The company preloaded 400,000 professional profiles, mostly in Silicon Valley.

Critics there say Unvarnished gives a bully pulpit to unscrupulous users who will unfairly sully the professional reputations of others, harming their ability to land new jobs and promotions. Lawyers say the site is a "litigation nightmare."

Unvarnished faces another significant challenge: Taking on LinkedIn.com, the popular career management site where more than 60 million members have logged on to create profiles, upload their employment histories and build connections. LinkedIn gives its users control over what appears on their profiles including recommendations that tend to be glowing.

"Whether the content on Unvarnished will just be trash talk or if it will be substantive remains to be seen," Web strategist Jeremiah Owyang said.

How Unvarnished works: You access the site through Facebook, a measure designed to verify identity and keep out people who want to set up fake accounts to grind axes or settle scores. You have to be invited by a current user. You can only register when you have written a review of that person.

Any member can create a profile for any other member. The person being reviewed cannot remove the profile and has to accept every review no matter how mean-spirited. The idea is that you have to manage your

reputation by posting updates or requesting reviews. Fellow users moderate reviews and report abuse. If a person's reviews are considered too negative or unfair, his or her ranking drops and reviews become less visible on the site.

Kazanji's own Unvarnished profile boasts 42 reviews and an average five-star rating. He was panned in one two-star rating by a former colleague who contends he didn't work well with others at software developer VMware, a critique that he says is not completely undeserved.

"This is a case study that shows me that Unvarnished is working," Kazanji said. "Unlike a smear campaign in the offline world that I don't hear about, on Unvarnished I can address it and have other people refute it."

The Internet has turned everyone into a reviewer. TheFunded.com rates venture capitalists. Glassdoor.com rates companies and bosses. TripAdvisor rates hotels and vacation spots. These sites would be all but useless if the business owners could delete any review they didn't like, Kazanji said.

"The idea is to create a place, not where people only give F-minuses, but a place where people can feel comfortable to give B-pluses or A-minuses," he said. "Reviews then actually mean something."

The idea of reviewing people has alarmed many in [Silicon Valley](#) who fear an uptick in anonymous online attacks which, because they cannot be edited or removed, will haunt them forever on the Web. Venture capitalist Saar Gur says the concept of Unvarnished intrigues him, but understands the anxiety it produces.

"Most people are very uncomfortable with information they can't control existing on the Web," said venture capitalist Saar Gur. "This is very

personal."

Observers say Unvarnished is a wake-up call to protect your online reputation vulnerable to anyone with an opinion and an Internet connection.

"The skeletons are coming out of the closet and onto the front porch," TechCrunch's Michael Arrington wrote on his blog. "Today we have quick fire and semi or completely anonymous attacks on people, brands, businesses and just about everything else. ... Twitter, Yelp, Facebook, etc. are the new printing presses, and absolutely everyone, even the random wingnuts, have access."

Harvard academic Umair Haque says Unvarnished marks a disturbing turning point for social media.

"I'm going to mark it as the day the 'social web' became antisocial," Haque wrote on his blog. "Increasingly, today's 'social web' doesn't empower people. It empowers hate, exclusion and polarization."

If Kazanjy wants Unvarnished to get traction, he may have to do a better job of managing its reputation.

"Unvarnished is no threat to anyone unless it can attract users," Ryan Tate wrote on Gawker. "So the best thing to do is to not talk about it. But that train has already left the station, and that might be the scariest thing about the would-be social network: It might take off not despite the fact that it's so repulsively evil, but because of it."

(c) 2010, Los Angeles Times.

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Website that rates people triggers controversy (2010, April 8) retrieved 23 April 2024

from <https://phys.org/news/2010-04-website-people-triggers-controversy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.