

The problem with rating people on the new app Peep

October 2 2015, by Joseph Reagle



How influential are you online? Check your Klout score! Credit: Raul Pacheco-Vega, CC BY-NC-ND

As I write this, [#Peep](#) is the top trending topic in my Twitter sidebar. The web is bemused and irate about an app that will let people rate other people as if they were baubles purchased on Amazon.

Its cofounders, Nicole McCullough and Julia Cordray, plan to launch the app in November. They trace its origins to a conversation about McCullough's frustrations with finding a reliable babysitter. Although inspired by a prosaic concern, their intentions are grander. Their motto is "character is destiny," and, in interviews, [Cordray says](#) that she wants "character to be our new form of currency."

[If legitimate](#), it sounds as if their app is to serve as the digital equivalent of the ancient Fates. Whereas [the three Fates controlled destinies](#) by way of the threads of life, People aims to shape destinies by way of professional, personal and romantic ratings. Supposedly, employers and romantic interests will be able to search for people of good "character," and the company plans to charge for searches beyond a single daily freebie.

Much of the response to the app is negative and ill-informed. The negativity arises because this is a platform through which we might be negatively evaluated (at best) or harassed (at worst) without any say other than to buy into their system. The confusion arises because it's not yet released and their website was inaccessible much of Wednesday – an indication of popularity or the consequence of a denial of service attack.

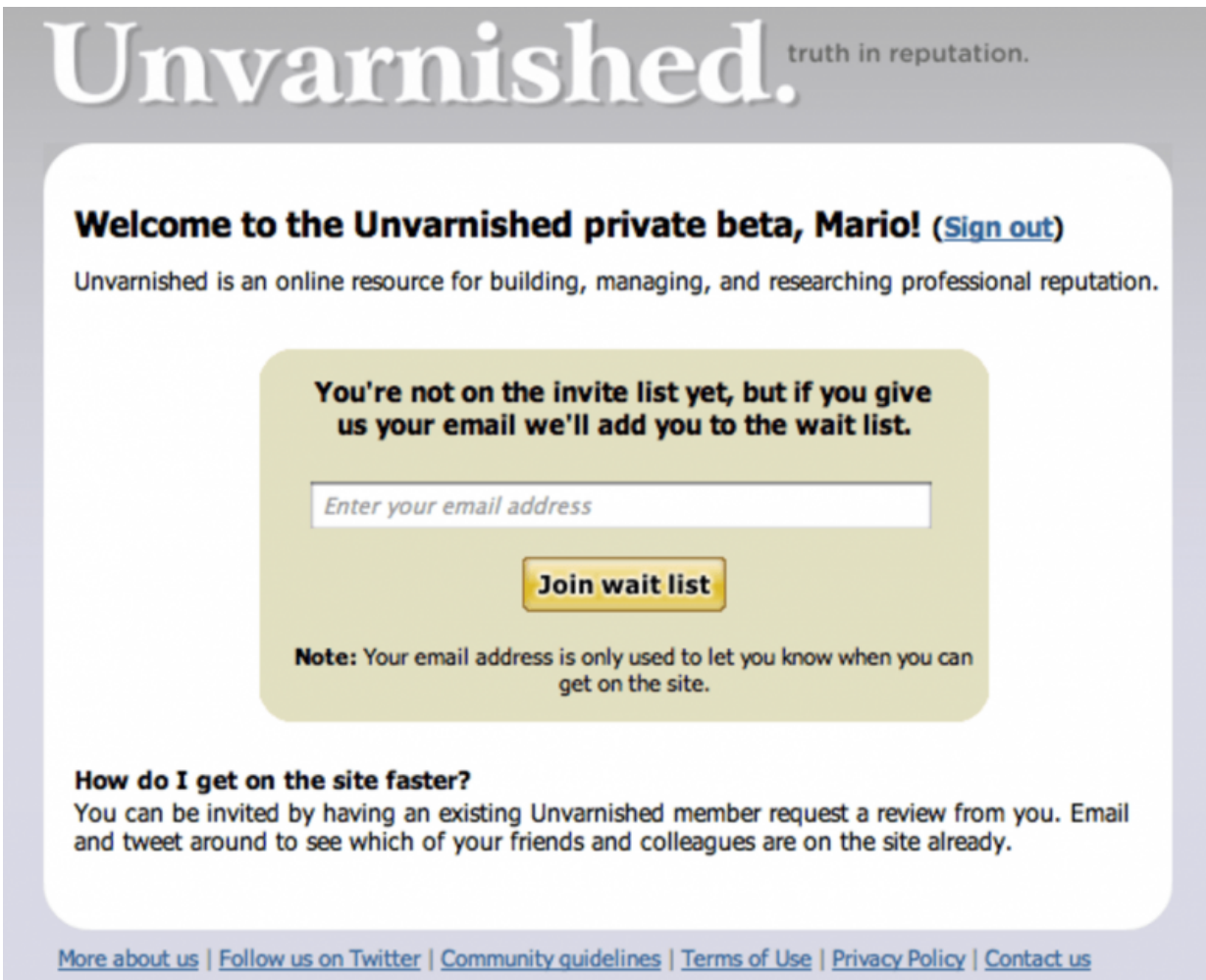
Following in other rating sites' footsteps

I study online communications, especially commenting and rating platforms. In reading a cached version of their [website](#), press interviews and in watching their 10-episode [YouTube mini-series](#), I'm struck by two things about People.

First, McCullough and Cordray claim the idea is novel. People's FAQ (frequently asked questions) section declares that letting people see how they are viewed by others is "a concept that has never been done before in a digital space."

This is not true. In my book [Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web](#), I discuss people's penchant for rating and ranking everything, including other people. Now-defunct services like PersonRatings, Unvarnished and KarmaFile permitted others to rate coworkers. Apps like [Lulu](#) allow women to rate their dates. Services like [Klout](#), [Kred](#), [PeerIndex](#) and [Radian6](#) use information

already on the web to rate people's online influence. The apps Stamped, Oink and [Jotly](#) could be used to rate anything, be it a coworker, side of bacon or ice cube. People's permutation of features and policy may be unique, but the idea is not new.



Unvarnished relied on registration to keep anonymous reviews on the up and up. Credit: m anima, CC BY

The second point of interest, and a genuine novelty, is the positivity

expressed by the founders. Unlike the critical attitude expressed by earlier efforts (such as Unvarnished and Honest), McCullough and Cordray speak of personal ratings as a positive – even virtuous – undertaking. They say Peeples is a "positivity app for positive people." In "An Ode to Courage," a defensive note posted on [Peeples website](#), the cofounders declared:

We know you are amazing, special, and unique individuals and most likely would never shout that from the rooftops. The people who know you will though.... As innovators we want to make your life better and have the opportunity to prove how great it feels to be loved by so many in a public space. We are a positivity app launching in November 2015. Whether you love us or our concept or not; we still welcome everyone to explore this online village of love and abundance for all.

Positivity is a rarity in online rating

To consider the importance of positivity, consider the last service described as a "Yelp about people": PersonRatings, which launched in 2008. Much like Peeples, PersonRatings permitted anyone to opine about others. Unlike Peeples, others could leave comments without even having to register. The site was widely criticized and ridiculed; it went under within the year.

In 2010 Unvarnished launched to similar criticism because it allowed members to anonymously rate others' professional performance. Media published dozens of stories about the site; most were [incredulous](#) of the concept and its success.

Unvarnished did want to encourage its anonymous reviews to be constructive, so it required people to use Facebook to log in. Additionally, one could join only by being invited by a member and reviewing that person, which would likely be positive and snowball into a

constructive culture. The site relaunched as Honestly in the same year, [claiming](#) it had succeeded in creating a positive community: 65% of ratings were five-star, with only 2% being a single star. Yet, in 2012 the organization changed again: both the name of the project and its philosophy of crowd-sourced reviews were dropped.

[KarmaFile](#), launched in 2013, was fairly savvy. People could rate the expertise, motivation and professionalism of their peers. An aggregate score was then created with an associated confidence level – a "score strength." Those reviewed had the ability to see their raters and aggregate scores, but could not link a specific rating to a particular rater. Furthermore, those reviewed could ask the site to reject inappropriate reviews, though the applicant's rationale for the rejection would be part of the profile; they could also choose to hide their profile altogether. By the end of 2013, this site too seemed to have gone dead.

People's positivity plan

Like KarmaFile, People is starting out with an intention of keeping the service from devolving into a morass of negativity and bullying, a frequent outcome of services that allow people to talk about others, especially if they can do so anonymously. To avoid this, People will require a Facebook account and authenticated phone number from raters.

Raters will also have a *positivity* score based on the ratio of positive (three or more stars) to negative ratings they give to others. And although positive ratings will post immediately, negative ratings (two stars or less) will be held for 48 hours so that people can "work it out." I expect People would then serve as an endorsement service: someone listed with a 4+ rating is presumed reputable, anyone else is damned by their absence or faint praise.

Although Peeples *may* have found a formula for keeping the service positive, as it stands, it looks to follow in the mistaken footsteps of PersonRatings and Klout. PersonRatings initially allowed anonymous ratings to create a profile for anyone and there was no ability to opt out. When Klout launched, the *New York Times* [reported](#) on how the service had "dragged the unwitting across the web" by creating profiles and scores for users' Facebook friends, including their children. Can people remove themselves from Peeples? [Their site](#) currently answers: "No. Not at this time. We may consider this feature in the future." If Peeples is to survive its launch, I believe this will have to change.

But even if they do let people opt out, the app may not be a success. People are both *ratingphilic* and *ratingphobic*. The app takes advantage of the fact that people love to rate and peruse the ratings of others. But people are uneasy when the tables turn and the ratings are about them. Even if Peeples survives the maelstrom of its launch, it is hard for such a service to succeed. Yelp is already "the Yelp" of businesses, Lulu is already the Yelp of dudes. In today's crowded marketplace, a service typically has to succeed with a niche before hoping to expand: Peeples is taking on all personal ratings at the start.

Finally, if the site succeeds in its positive mission and manages to create an "online village of love and abundance for all," would people bother? In [my study of ratings at a amateur photography site](#), I found that it's easy for ratings to slip into bland positivity (where everyone is above average, like the children of Lake Woebegone) or bullying negativity (a frequent outcome of comment platforms), with much manipulation in between. Will [people](#) collude to positively rate their friends? Will folks give five stars (to maintain their own positivity) while slighting someone in the prose comment? Or, perhaps haters will give 5-star ratings to folks they don't even know just so they can give their enemies a single star while maintaining their positivity ratio.

PeepLe faces significant challenges. I hope it fails because I, like many, wish to be spared from a public (and likely manipulatable) ratings system to which I did not opt in. Even so, I am pleased to see an attempt that seems to begin with positive intentions and some degree of user accountability.

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