

Fake Internet Reviews

Those who know me also know that I love to travel, usually managing to get away fairly often to places I consider fun or exotic. I also occasionally travel on business, and that has taken me to New York City twice this year. My first visit in late April was most pleasant. I stayed in a well-known hotel between Times Square and Central Park, and generally had a good experience. New York hotels are notoriously overpriced, often with small rooms and mediocre service.



When I had to return for several nights in late June, I considered staying in the same hotel. But my business this time was a few dozen blocks to the south, so I started searching for good hotels in the area that would allow me to walk to my meetings. And I found one on Trip Advisor and Hotels.com, booking through the latter site. Like many who use the internet for shopping (or booking reservations in this case), I tend to rely heavily on customer reviews. The vast majority of the reviews for this hotel were stunning. Four and Five Stars, full of superlatives about the staff, the rooms, the location and the general atmosphere. Best of all, rooms were about the same price I'd paid for the previous hotel. I booked it and paid in advance.

The hotel sucked. I can't think of a nicer way to put it. It had been built more than 80 years ago, but the rooms and bathrooms had been only minimally updated. My room was the size of a large closet, and lacked the most basic amenities one expects from any "Five Star" hotel that costs in excess of \$300 per night. Occupancy was so poor that part of the old building was being used as a dorm for college students. A menacing bouncer demanded my ID every time I tried to access the elevator to my room. Housekeeping "forgot" to make up my bed, and I had trouble getting clean towels. I could go on, but you get the idea.

A few days after my return, I posted a scathingly negative review on Hotels.com, only to find later it had been inexplicably upgraded to a Three Star rating. I don't know how this happened, but I have subsequently found that the hotel employs a person whose job is to monitor and respond to bad internet reviews.

I had suppressed all these negative memories until a recent *New York Times* article reminded me that the huge proportion of internet reviews are likely fakes. According to the article, a University of Chicago researcher estimates that about one-third are fraudulent, often written by someone with a vested interest in seeing that the product or service sells well. And we often believe them. As one commentator pointed out, we existed as human beings for tens of thousands of years before the written word became the definitive standard of communication. We are programmed to listen to the opinions and advice of others, instinctively making this a part of our decision making process. Hence, we can be easily fooled.

This is especially true with book reviews. I sometimes fancy myself a writer, and try to keep an eye on what's popular, and what's selling well. But knowing literary tastes as I do, it's highly unusual for any book, even a well-written one, to garner all four and five-star reviews. Many do, and here's why.

Back a few decades ago, the number of new titles published in the US was numbered in the tens of thousands. By the 1990s, it had risen to the hundreds of thousands. Sometime last decade, the number broke one million. Today, anybody with a computer and a few dollars can be a "published author." The "books" don't even have to physically exist—electronic book sales surpassed physical book sales on amazon.com in May 2011 and have continued to grow. Many are "self-published," that is, they went directly from the author to the market. The company that keeps up with such things (Bowker) estimates more than 300,000 self-published titles were issued last year. Without a conventional publisher to handle marketing (the main driver of fiction sales, by the way), authors have often turned to not-so-objective reviews. Some are self-written under fake names. Others are solicited, or worse, purchased.

Much has been said about cracking down on fake reviews. The Federal Trade Commission has guidelines out there, but they seem to be rarely enforced for multiple reasons, the main one in my opinion being the impossible logistics of the job.

A group of researchers at Cornell had the idea of seeing if a panel of human reviewers could tell the difference between real and fake. They couldn't. So they tried developing an electronic algorithm to do the job. It turns out that fraudulent reviews more often tended to use adverbs, like "really" or "very," and used more exclamation points ("!") than the real ones. But we are not computers, and like the panel of reviewers, many of us are likely to take them at face value as I did when booking my hotel.

There is no simple solution here. Amazon.com has tried to help suppress fake reviews by noting that the purchase was made by the person who bought the item, referred to as an "Amazon Verified Purchase." But most sites don't go to such lengths. My personal solution is to read all of the negative reviews before I read the positive ones. That seems to work in alerting me to potential problems the positive reviewers may have deliberately overlooked. The world changes, but the old Latin adage remains a good one: *Caveat emptor!* Let the buyer beware!