

From Reputation Capital to Reputation Warfare: Online Reputation, Trolling, and the Cultural Logic of Volatility

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What happens when the ubiquitous calculation of online reputation leads not to more precise expressions of reputation capital, but to more systemic reputational volatility? This paper contrasts two conceptions of online reputation, which enact opposing attitudes about the relation between reputation and the calculable. An early online reputation paradigm – reputation capital – linked reputation to histories of optimizing private credit; users strove to achieve high scores, performing the presumption that reputation could be consistently measured within relatively stable spheres of value. Yet ubiquitous calculation led not to more precise measurements of reputation, but rather to the increasing volatility of online reputation. Thus, a second online reputation paradigm – reputation warfare – has become increasingly prevalent, which indirectly capitalizes on systemic volatility produced by reputation's ubiquitous online calculation. Steve Bannon's 2016 Trump campaign strategy, which mobilized trolls, exemplifies the indirect optimization of online reputation, by placing an option on reputational volatility.