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Wanna get Amen? Reflections on the Culture of Opining in Social Networks

Like it or not

Today the WorldWideWeb is much more than a technical gimmick. It is the expression of the digital revolution and has emerged as a tool for everyday action and interaction. Nowadays people live on the internet. Social Networks have made life on the internet more comfortable and structured. A website as Facebook does not only connect people, it offers a platform for self-presentation on the web. The applications of Facebook resolve the individual to trackable details and give the users the means to present his or her persona to the others, may it be by showing how one looks (photos), what one does (videos, pictures, text etc.), what one thinks (the wall and the status update), where one is (geo-tagging) or what one likes.

The latter might be one of the most important currencies on the web. The "like"-button, the universal sign of approval in the Facebook-World, has even found its way out of the Facebook page an on websites of any kind. The idea is to make a statement about something and share it with the rest of your community. The idea is also, to make your content more popular and better known, in order to gain more profit. The "like"-button is the most basic expression of opinion. Still it is invaluable, because it gives structure to a hard to structure environment. A byproduct of the digital revolution and the interconnected world is a sheer unstoppable and confusing flow of information. Therefore society slowly changes its approach towards knowledge. With every historical, statistical or scientific fact accessible on the internet, it becomes impossible to be sure, what is worth knowing and what is not. If every piece of music is accessible via the internet, the most important thing becomes, not to know all the music in the world, but to find out, which song is the best of them all.

This need for opinion, which is basically a need for structure, is not only acknowledged by journalists, who claim that orientation is the most important service they can do for their readers nowadays (Pöttker, 2012), but also by the internet community itself, where the Top 10 or Top 5 or any other hit list has become the dominant format of display (Time, 2011).

Can I get an Amen? Please?

The German startup "*Amen*" has taken the like function as we know it from Facebook, modified it and made it the core of its platform. On getamen.com the users are supplied with the syntactical construction stones for an expression of opinion. People may claim what is "the best ever" or the "the worst ever", constructing claims as "Swiss cheese is the best cheese ever" or "Zidane is the best football player ever". Other users can comment on these opinions in the affirmative by clicking the so called "Amen"-button, or in the negative by pressing the "Hell No"-button. In the latter case, they have to offer an alternative using the same corset of opinion claims. "Hell No! French cheese is the best cheese in the world". By these claims, affirmations and refusals, the website creates a hit list about different topics. It brings order to chaos via opinion.
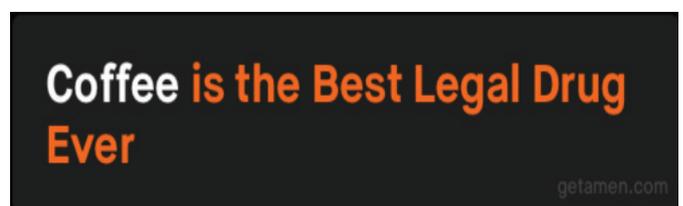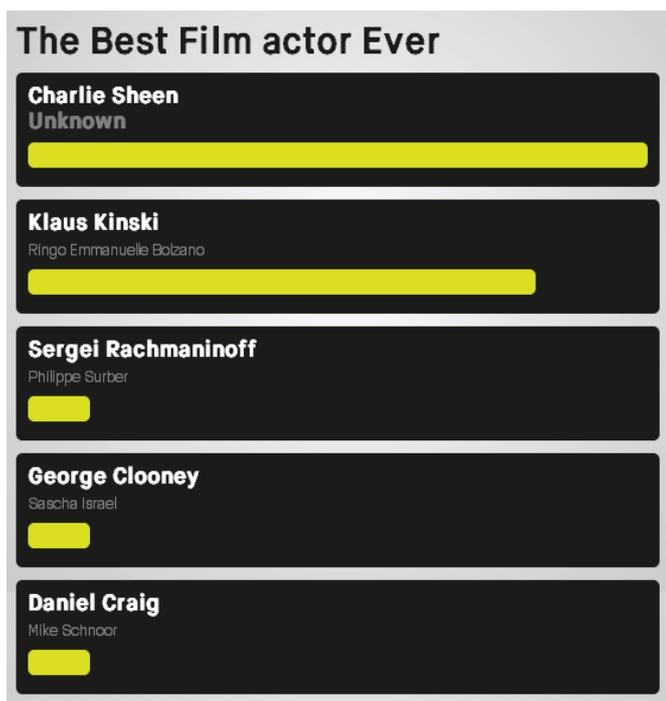

Source: getamen.com

As a producer of opinion, *Amen* recognizes the demand for it. It has identified a market for opinion. The vital question for the producer and its product is: can it be profitable, in an economic as well in a social way? In other words, can the opinion produced on *Amen* be turned into profit and do the *Amen* user actually benefit from these opinions.

Media Hype or Advertising Evangelist ?

There are different indicators supporting the one and the other. From an economic point of view, *Amen* in fact emerged within the scope of a massive media hype. When it became public that the famous American actor and outspoken social media addict Ashton Kutcher would support the platform with an investment of about 2 million US-Dollars (Kolawole, 2011) various media outlets jumped on that bandwagon and praised *Amen* as the new star in the social media world. Additionally it became known that one of the *Amen* founders had been a programmer for the very successful social network Twitter, a fact that made the platform look even more promising than before (Knoke, 2011). Further investments followed and the story about a successful start-up initiated in the creative environment of Berlin seemed to be perfect. Multiple feature stories as well as interviews with the founders were the consequence and the platform gained attention not only throughout the social media world.

The Best Film actor Ever

Charlie Sheen
Unknown

Klaus Kinski
Ringo Emmanuelle Bolzano

Sergei Rachmaninoff
Philippe Surber

George Clooney
Sascha Israel

Daniel Craig
Mike Schnoor

Source: http://blog.atomlabor.de/2011/09/get-amen-das-nachste-soziale-netzwerk.html

The question to be raised at this point is whether the hype about *Amen* turns out to be nothing more than a media bubble or whether the platform will manage not only to increase the amount of users but even more important whether it will manage to make *Amen* commercially usable. The latest statistics talks about approximately 50.000 users and around 1.000 posts per day (Vogl, 2012). In comparison Facebook counts about 850 Million users with 2,7 billion ‚likes' per day (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2012)

and Twitter has approximately 460 Million registered users (Bennet, 2012). Nobody will expect that *Amen* can compete with those two social media giants and as a result the comparison might not put the actual case into context. But when looking at the numbers of rather new members of the social media world such as Pinterest with about 8 million users (Haak, 2012) it gets clear that *Amen* is far away from entering a level at which advertisers get interested.

Even if they were, *Amen* does not really have something to offer to them at the moment. There might be a sense that the listing function and especially the simplistic syntax corset, such as „best cheese ever" imply the potential for using those rankings or even directly the formulations used on the platform for advertising purposes. Nevertheless it seems to be very difficult to transfer the majority of statements that deal with rather trivial topics into a hitlist for marketers. In addition to this it may also be the lack of sense and purpose that makes *Amen* desirable to use for most of the users and as a result the reaction to advertisement posts on the site might be very objective. In order to check whether this assumption holds true *Amen* will definitely have to prove whether the initial hype can be backed up with increasing user numbers and whether it can be successful as a pool and indicator for opinions.

The end of publicly announced opinions beyond main stream?!

Regarding the social impact of opinion production, there are different indicators that imply the way get *Amen* works, is actually beneficial to the user. The flow of communication on *Amen*, is in accordance with modern day's communicative demands. Turkle (2011), a scholar of social sciences at the MIT, draws the picture of a youth reluctant to communicate in real-time with each other, focusing on indirect means of communication instead. In one of her works she analyzed how pupils interact and found, as we interpret it for this case study, a contradiction: While the spread of sophisticated means of communications allows us to talk to virtually any person with a cell phone in the world, a young generation increasingly refrains from doing so. Instead, usage shifts from these direct ways of interaction to indirect ways, e.g. communicating in near real-time or time-delayed. This basically refers to a shift from voice services towards text and data services. To name a few: text messages, online social networks like Facebook or instant messaging services like WhatsApp.

Taking a look at the reasons behind this development, scholars argue that users claim an added convenience of indirect ways. Phone users "claim exhaustion and lack of time; always on call, with their time highly leveraged through multitasking, they avoid voice communication

outside of a small circle because it demands their full attention when they don't want to give it away." (Turkle, p. 188) This draws almost a scene of fear, where sticking to indirect means is regarded as "a place to hide" (Turkle, p. 187), one of the participants of Turkle's study explain.

A parallel in the usage of *Amen* can be found, reinforcing and further developing these claims by connecting to spiral of silence theory. Central aspect of this theory is that an opinion, which is perceived as a minorities' opinion, is not publicly expressed, fearing social isolation. In this context, the platform enables you to anonymously post one's personal opinion and checking for mass compatibility before going public with it. Posting an opinion can basically be regarded as floating a trial balloon.
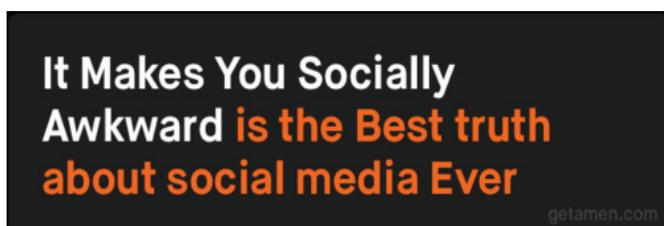
Source: getamen.com

If the published opinion receives a number of "Amen" perceived as favorable to one's personal needs, it is subjectively regarded as a mass opinion and can be subsequently used in further text communication without fearing social isolation. On a contrast, opinions not receiving "Amen" or even a contradictory "Hell no" with an opposing opinion, are perceived as an incompatible opinion towards mass' taste. Following the theory, the latter opinion with "negative" feedback would not make it public. Leaving thoughts of fear and anonymity behind us, there could be another usage-case: pushing your self-esteem by receiving affirmation. *Amen* allows you to connect with your Facebook account in order to reveal your statements and (positive) votes on the social network. Present yourself as the opinion leader with your peer group.

Social Media Quo Vadis ?

Looking ahead, we have to ask ourselves what the possible impact could be for the future? Does our society and publicly announced opinions become more mainstream? Will there still be a place for opposing niche opinions? And in the context of social media one can pose the question whether platforms using more and more simplistic approaches represent just another phenomenon or whether it stands for a trend which will lead the path to the future. And if the latter is the case what would that mean for the culture of digital media. Are we heading to

a culture in the digital world in which nothing can be left uncommented and if so does it always have to be opinions that are black or white? And how much are these ad-hoc opinion polls worth? Is it important where the opinion comes from and what kind of structure it offers? And if not how does this change power structures, the role of intellectualism, means and goals of education? Does it become more important to opine than to know?

All those questions are not to be answered within the scope of this case study but to be kept in mind when evaluating phenomena such as *Amen* and other social media outlets. Because it is essential to understand that no matter how trivial or how pointless some trends may be, they may incorporate the power to affect the culture we live in. Whether this can be the case for *Amen* remains doubtful but only time will tell.

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