Everything in Moderation

THE REGULATING ASPECTS OF CRAIGSLIST AND
THE MORAL ASSERTIONS OF “COMMUNITY FLAGGING”

The similarities between eBay and craigslist point to some larger tendencies in Internet settings and important research questions. craigslist’s “factsheet” describes the site in this way: “Local classifieds and forums - community moderated” through flagging “and largely free.”1 The parallels between this description and eBay’s narratives encourage further considerations of the meaning of “community” and “local” in Internet settings, the functions of community moderation, the relationship between the sites’ values and members’ identities and desires, the significance of “largely free” for consumers and citizens, and the responsibilities of individuals who are conceptualized as a community. eBay and craigslist also make related claims about sexual freedom and institute community morals and rules. Craig Newmark, the site’s developer, heard about a woman arranging sexual encounters through craigslist and argued that the setting reflects “basic American values, and freedom of choice couldn’t be any more basic.”2 craigslist promises women a tolerant and erotically liberating experience, gains their trust in local sites and community moderation, and then regulates their gendered roles and sexuality. For instance, craigslist facilitates the “flagging” and removal of women’s dating advertisements. My studies throughout this book and research by Nelly Oudshoorn, Els Rommes, and Marcelle Stienstra indicate how Internet sites promise universal access while configuring—and, in some cases,
effacing—members’ identities and behavior. By critically addressing these issues through the literature on brand community, configuring the user, organizational logic, and sexual citizenship, I provide theoretical models for thinking about Internet settings and new media studies.

Community is a key structuring device in Internet settings and other spheres because it seems to embrace everyone while using the problems arising from inclusiveness to justify rules and values. For instance, some individuals request and enforce delimiting structures when confronted by the profusion of Internet settings and the lack of clearly organized arrangements. Listserv and forum participants often regulate the topics that are “appropriate” and even the ways posts are titled. A willing group of craigslist readers flags and removes postings that do not fit into the selected category. With eBay, such wonderfully unruly forms of sexual citizenship as gay men’s representations of their nearly naked bodies are removed and thereby articulate the company’s rules and norms. In a related manner, reality television programs such as A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila, The Real Housewives of Orange County (and Atlanta, Beverly Hills, DC, New Jersey, and New York City), Rock of Love with Bret Michaels, and Rock of Love Bus with Bret Michaels depict women’s bodies as visually accessible and out of control. Viewers of the programs are thereby justified in watching, schooling, and bringing women into cultural conformity for what is purportedly their own good.

Television programs like Rock of Love: Charm School claim to re-educate the hypersexual women who have failed to win Michaels’s permanent affection in Rock of Love. Such texts validate the regulation of women by having female participants reflect on their comportment and ask to be normed. Women also seem to ask for schooling, and are scripted as initiates who need training in the rules of the community and technology, when their dating posts on craigslist are flagged and removed and they request assistance in the flag help forum. This regulation is produced at an organizational level because aspects of the site, including the option to flag, the email directing people with flagged posts to consult the forum, and the wide-scale flagging of women’s personal ads, create a culture in which women need support and need to be socially reformed to remain members of the craigslist system. The number of flags required to remove posts is extremely low in the “women seeking men” (w4m) part of the site, ostensibly so members can flag spam and fake ads. Nevertheless, the site’s structure and flagging processes enable members to remove what they identify as not fitting or conforming.
The craigslist Company and Community

Newmark started craigslist as an email list in 1995 to tell people from San Francisco about events and “help out, in a very small way.” Company and media narratives about Newmark beginning craigslist to support the needs of others are similar to accounts about Pierre Omidyar starting eBay, also in 1995, to help out Pam Wesley. Newmark identifies as “just” a customer-service representative and politically deploys humility even though he controls a significant portion of craigslist’s stock. craigslist has eschewed being bought out by larger companies, raising revenue through banner ads, and charging higher fees for services. Newmark argues, “Who needs the money? We don’t really care.”

Newmark and the company align themselves with the brand community, which is invested in the craigslist culture. Of course, craigslist’s purportedly distinctive ethos and Newmark’s service to members also generate consumer loyalty and profits. In 2010, craigslist’s revenue was estimated at about 122 million U.S. dollars, with a 22 percent increase from the previous year.

Newmark, in similar ways to Whitman, has been involved in recent U.S. politics. Newmark identifies as a “community organizer” and presents himself as an activist and local political figure. During Barack Obama’s run for the 2008 presidency, Newmark campaigned for him, acted as his “official technology surrogate,” and blogged and spoke about Obama’s technology platform. Newmark also contributed funds to the U.S. Democratic National Committee and to Obama’s campaign. Obama planned and has now set up what he describes as a “craigslist for service” to increase volunteer work. The site makes a call to community, collective, and the “Power of We.” Obama’s proposal has been lauded in the media, particularly among technology pundits and programmers. However, craigslist’s organizational logic, with its underlying assertions of gender and sexuality norms, makes such connections troubling.

eBay has an economic stake in craigslist because of its purchase of about 25 percent of the company in 2004 from a former employee, Phillip Knowlton. eBay had a member on the craigslist board and pledged not to interfere with the running of the company. However, lawsuits were initiated in 2008 after eBay introduced its own classified site into the American market and craigslist reorganized its stock allocations to remove eBay from its board. After the legal filing, Kim Rubey, an eBay spokesperson, articulated the companies’ similar brand ethos: eBay “believes in Craigslist, shares its values...
and acts with openness, honesty and integrity in its dealings with Craigslist’s board and the online community.” Newmark and Jim Buckmaster, CEO of craigslist, were initially comfortable with the stock sale because of comparable brand community identities. During the stock transfer, Newmark noted that both companies emphasize “trustworthiness and reputation,” are “about building community,” and are focused on “humanizing and democratizing the net.” eBay’s and craigslist’s related narratives about trust and co-production highlight how such tendencies structure Internet operations.

Craigslist constitutes community by making assertions about localness and affinity. For instance, craigslist uses the San Francisco Bay Area as the default site to connect the company to the city where the site was started. Each regional craigslist includes a section entitled “community” with such place-specific categories as “lost+found,” “local news,” and “rideshare.” According to the frequently asked questions (FAQ), individuals should ordinarily post to “the site closest to where you are located. If your ad is equally relevant to all locations, your ad does not belong on local craigslist.” The company has also stopped third-party developers from offering search engines that provide results from across the sites because they go “against the basic intent of Craigslist to be a local tool.” Craigslist is related to early versions of Facebook, which situated members within an academic setting and allowed them to access full information only about people in their network, even though individuals from different locations used the site. All of this makes people feel that only individuals like them, who are in their area and cohort, are engaging. These features support trust and consciousness of a kind and help foster brand community formation.

Craigslist is supposed to reflect members’ desires. People “would suggest things,” Newmark would figure out what “people were asking for,” and then he would “do it.” Even with the astronomic expansion of craigslist, the site design is imagined to be “almost 100 percent based on what people ask” for. Craigslist does not charge people for posting except for “jobs” and “housing” advertisements in a few cities and “therapeutic services.” However, in return for craigslist’s features, members are expected to do other sorts of labor, including reviewing the site for illegal activities and acting as a form of customer-service representative in the help forums. According to the author Jessica Livingston, Newmark has built a “community on the Internet,” kept “craigslist as free as possible,” and is “able to operate cheaply” by letting “users do much of the work.” This model allows the company to pay only about thirty employees. Yet the reporter Adam Lashinsky argues that the
company is not community-centered because the “content comes from the site’s devoted users, who provide the listings that are its lifeblood, for free” and that craigslist “is indifferent to money” but “gushes profits.” In addition, self-identified advisers in the flag help forum instruct people in appropriate positions and roles rather than facilitate what individuals want. Since “helping” encourages a combination of assistance and schooling, this raises questions about how Internet and computer help systems support people, configure members, and produce knowledge.

eBay references an array of objects and desires while associating the company and good members with heterosexuality. In a similar manner, media accounts about craigslist mention the diverse sexual subjects who use the site and the ways it is “empowering a new generation of swingers” while equating the relationship between Buckmaster and Susan MacTavish Best, the craigslist publicist, to the company and its ethos. In these reports, Best’s job as “spokeswoman” is connected to her position as Buckmaster’s “girlfriend.” Newmark’s partner, Eileen Whelpley, insists that her correct name be used in news reports, but both women are often referred to as the “girlfriend.” In a related way, Wesley is frequently identified as Omidyar’s “wife.” eBay, craigslist, and other interfaces employ narratives about wives and girlfriends to prop up the status of their male inventors. In Internet forums such as Digg and Slashdot and media texts such as Dark Angel, Hackers, Fringe, and numb3rs, technologies are associated with skill, power, and poorly socialized men who cannot engage with women. Technologies thereby threaten to feminize men if they are not managed. Accounts about inventors’ girlfriends differentiate between empowered male producers and women who act as inspiration and users. These narratives incorporate heterosexual identity positions and the standards of sexual citizenship into the founding and continuance of these settings.

craigslist, in a similar manner to eBay, claims to facilitate sexual freedom. For instance, Newmark argues that legal “adult ads,” including people seeking casual sex, fit with the “moral compasses” of participants. Nevertheless, legal representatives from several U.S. states and other countries have challenged craigslist about the appearance of sex workers’ advertisements in the “adult services” category, and the company began removing this part of the site in 2010. craigslist referred to these legal and cultural pressures as censorship and performed a kind of consumer and brand community critique of政府ality. After removing the adult services category, craigslist replaced the link on the opening part of the site with “a black bar reading
‘censored.’” However, some female posters also refer to their flagged and removed ads as “censorship” and perform a consumer critique of craigslist’s claims about freedom. The opportunity to flag and the ways women are advised in the flag help forum reassert normative sexuality.

**Community Flagging**

Community flagging is supposed to keep the site safe and people honest and, as on eBay, facilitate transactions. If enough people flag an ad—and this number is determined by the company, is not shared with readers, and varies based on city and type of listing—then the advertisement is removed, and the person who posted the ad receives a notification. When people's ads are flagged and removed, they are marked as bad, denied the ability to express themselves, and prevented from engaging with craigslist. They can repost advertisements, although reposted ads are even more likely to be flagged, and members are prevented from posting after too many listings have been deleted. craigslist only makes personal ad readers “agree to flag as ‘prohibited’ anything illegal or in violation of the craigslist terms of use” and constitutes intimate relationships between people as initially and inherently regulatory and under the watchful gaze of the community. craigslist also makes it seem as if it can be liberatory only by getting members to be regulators and that identity, membership, and citizenship must always have limits and limiters. As Diane Richardson argues, sexual minorities are allowed to become full citizens only when their claims of normalcy and good citizenship are accepted. Some craigslist posters, as I suggest in more detail later, are flagged as undesirable by their “community,” prevented from having full rights, instructed to be better citizens by flagging and doing other sorts of labor, and chided or even humiliated in the flag help forum.

There are “issues” with craigslist, notes Newmark, “but we do trust people. That’s why we have a flagging mechanism, which is how people who use the community can deal with bad stuff.” Newmark’s narratives about “shared values” and trust are related to Omidyar’s claims that people are basically good. The unofficial FAQ, which is mentioned in the craigslist help document and referenced by self-appointed advisers, argues that members need to create the sort of setting they want. It encourages members to flag: “You are the ‘community’ part of ‘Community moderation.’” Members’ work is constituted as positive, but the rights of craigslist participants are less clearly articulated. When confronted by such conceptions of community, it makes sense
to consider the cost to the individuals doing the work and the toll on people who are controlled and constituted by their labor.

craigslist claims to facilitate open dialogue and connections between people. “The Internet is about inclusion,” proposes Newmark. “On the Net, no one should be left out.” However, readers of craigslist’s FAQ are advised, “If you feel the need to give your opinion, please respond to the poster directly via email, rather than posting a reply. Discussion postings belong only in” the “discussion forums.” The unofficial FAQ also indicates that “discussions in the classified categories are unwieldy and unpopular with most users.” Of course, craigslist never addresses how a community might be constituted, or its positions might be negotiated, when members cannot communicate in the setting where the practices are occurring. craigslist articulates collaborative dialogue, consensus, and the development of group values at the same time that it prevents these arrangements from being formed among participants. In a similar manner, eBay promises community but does not guarantee communication unless individuals are engaged in an economic transaction.

craigslist’s rule about not replying to advertisements prevents discussions about issues, including considerations of the process of flagging and removing posts, where most people would see them. Personal posters who ask individuals not to flag them are particularly likely to be flagged and removed. When individuals try to have a discussion about flagging or community in the flag help forum, where replies purportedly are allowed, they are informed by advisers that they should not interfere in other members’ problems. People who are critical of craigslist’s policies, or who want to comment on its systems, are prevented from finding each other, intervening in most aspects of the setting, collaboratively considering things, and forming community. In the advertising sections, craigslist does not have linked and traceable posts, a design feature that enables engagement in many Internet settings. Each craigslist ad is an isolated text rather than part of a connected and developing culture. The dearth of stable IDs because most ads are anonymized, the lack of threaded posts, and the rules against commenting on listings stymie individuals who want to engage, provide warnings, or locate members who are acting duplicitously. Enabling these features would start to make craigslist into a setting where dialogue is facilitated rather than just promised.

craigslist states that “Millions of postings” are “removed through community flagging each month,” “98–99% are in violation of the craigslist terms of use or other posted guidelines,” and “craigslist would quickly become unusable” without flagging. Members’ investments in posts and concerns
about the politics of flagging are discouraged. According to the unofficial FAQ, it is not appropriate to be angry over the removal of a free ad: “If you are getting a big emotional reaction over it stop reading right about now. You have emotional issues. You need a therapist, not a FAQ.”39 In a similar manner, a respondent in the flag help forum advises, “If having your free personal ad flagged down is making you angry, you need to run, not walk, to a mental health care professional.”40 Advisers never consider that members’ work establishes a social contract, and individuals have thereby earned the right for posts to remain. By framing responses to flagging as unwarranted and unhealthy, the site and many of its members discourage considerations of the ideological influences of such behavior and community formations. They also downplay the processes of flagging and removal in forming the craigslist interface. The organization of craigslist, particularly its rules about posting in the right category and not replying to other people’s posts, results in most people not being aware of the regulatory experiences individuals have with the setting.

Moderation of posts is supposed to be based in local communities and their values, but some participants use craigslist forums to facilitate massive site-wide flagging of advertisements. Listings for women seeking men and for pets are most often flagged and removed. Pet-sale listings are flagged because this is not allowed on the site. Pet-adoption listings are supported by the terms of use but are constantly flagged because many readers suspect they are from dog breeders who are widely vilified, think that the allowable rehoming fee is too high, believe that all pets should be spayed or neutered before being put up for adoption, and disapprove of people giving their pets away. Widescale flagging has caused a lot of people to give up on listing their animals and resulted in the abandonment and death of pets that otherwise might have been adopted. The intensity of such actions has led members who are involved in this category to write letters to Newmark and the company. They want Newmark to “show you care about your users” by stopping the “control-freaks who apparently enjoy harassing craigslist users”; “have hijacked your list”; “form ‘flagging groups’”; “conspire with one another to ‘gang flag’ posts”; and flag “posts that don’t in any way, shape or form violate craigslist rules.”41 These members seek Newmark’s care and expressions of community support, which he identifies as key aspects of craigslist. However, he has not helped them.

Advertisements from women seeking men are frequently flagged and removed on the craigslist site, even though community flagging is supposed to
support different moral codes. According to the help section for flagging, the “system allows craigslist users to mark inappropriate postings for speedy removal, while preserving everyone’s ability to express themselves freely.” Yet women—and particularly women who are older, larger, differently classed, and deemed less physically perfect than social norms and who try to assert some form of power and politics—come under extreme forms of scrutiny and dismissal. Understanding how instruction, regulation, and the constitution of normalized subjects occur in these settings is imperative because academic and popular discourses tend to depict craigslist and more recent social networking sites as deeply liberating. With craigslist, an overt sexual outpouring, even a subcultural expression of less conventional forms of sex and desire, is coupled to the limiting of women’s roles and the unlikelihood of these women living culturally acceptable lives.

The flagging and removal of women-seeking-men ads are acknowledged and widely accepted by the people offering assistance in the flag help forum. A forum adviser asks, “Why does the w4m section get so many more flags than the m4w section?” Another adviser responds, “Men flag more. Men get more scams. Men are fed up.” Ninety percent of the “flagged off personal ads that come in here for help are posted by women,” writes lovesleo, and “rather than a double standard, women simply need to flag more.” Yet such arguments direct women toward a form of agency that is not available. Women’s deployment of flagging would not change the status of their ads, and there is no way to locate individuals who are flagging and regulate them. Instead of women flagging more, craigslist might require people to sign in before they can flag, reduce the number of flags individuals can assign, require more information about why an ad has been flagged, and increase the number of flags needed to remove women’s advertisements.

Self-appointed advisers in the flag help forum often argue that it is the poster’s geographic community rather than anyone in the forum or company that flags posts and repeat craigslist’s notion of local community. Advisers such as FunkyshoeZ “don’t flag ads here,” “just look at ads and give suggestions on how they can stay up,” and “don’t control the community.” Other advisers, such as no_spammers, tell posters what “your community did not like about your post.” Nevertheless, advisers tend to constitute community desires, include personal values in their comments, and direct women to do gender more conventionally. The processes of doing gender, according to the sociologists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, involve “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical ac-

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Activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures.’ Advisers and flaggers assert community and gender norms and the organizational aspects of the site. Yet many individuals do not notice craigslist’s regulating aspects and traditional values.

People who have their advertisements flagged and removed often express extreme surprise. Posts to the flag help forum are typically entitled “Why??” and “why is this being flagged?” karakicks would “be amazed if” the advisers found “something offensive” or “miscategorized” with her advertisement. When imakittykitty learns that readers can flag for any reason, she asks, “So people are flagging my ad because they simply don’t like it?? I’ve done nothing to violate ANY terms of service and it seems so ignorant for people to just flag me for no reason other than they don’t like the way I set it up.” Posters tend to list the reasons craigslist provides for flagging (miscategorized, prohibited, and spam/overpost) because they cannot understand how these violations relate to what the “community” does not like in their ads. Nevertheless, active cohorts who flag are the community and de facto law. If craigslist required these individuals to log in and provide reasons for flagging ads, this information could be forwarded to flagged members, used to evaluate the system and flaggers’ behavior, and reviewed by employees to reinstitute ads. This would also make the labor of flagging and its social functions more apparent.

Women are ideologically and sexually controlled and directed to do gender and sexuality more conventionally when their ads are flagged and removed and they are advised in the forum. For instance, women who appear to be looking for extramarital relationships are likely to have their posts removed. Advisers then tend to inform women that their “community has some shred of decency and is trying to tell you just how much they hate cheaters.” Gail54321 was removed in the strictly platonic section for asking, “Are you wicked smart? Wanna chat with someone else who is too?” and for indicating she was “married but not happily” and was “NOT looking for someone to rescue” her “or listen to” her “whine.” “If you post as married unhappily,” paul_baumer advises, even “if you say you don’t want him to listen to you complain about it, it’s assumed you want to cheat on your hubby.” He also argues that “it’s fine for people to flag if they think Gail was cheating! That’s what community moderation means.” Gail54321 is rightfully shocked that she “can’t request platonic friends” and is thereby required to filter her life through that of her husband, even when they are not getting along. Women like Gail54321 question the processes of flagging but help forum ad-
Visers tend to suggest that flaggers’ actions constitute site policy. According to an adviser, cheating is “seen as immoral by almost everyone and in some states such as the one I reside in it’s also illegal. I would flag every cheater ad and prostitute ad and any other ad that encourages others to engage in amoral and or illegal activities. Flagging is community moderation and that’s not the kind of thing I want going on in my community.” In such instances, advisers reveal that they are deeply identified with flaggers and resist everything but the most conventional forms of gender and sexuality.

Advisers also use sex workers’ advertisements to render all women as sexually suspect. For example, a woman who is looking “to hook up for some NSA fun,” a “no strings attached” sexual encounter, is told that “95% of w4m ads are either spam or hookers” and “your ad sounded just like them.” Women who appear to be looking for any kind of support from men are identified as whores, goldiggers, and prostitutes and summarily dismissed. These terms are used to shame women. For instance, curves82_la, who is advertising for “a mentor, benefactor, friend anything rather than ‘sugar daddy,’” is told to “peddle your gold diggin’ whore ass -elsewhere- you ain’t wanted on CL.” tigerlili555 is labeled a “whore”; advised, “Your ad is prohibited, penis breath”; and told “to lose the ‘friend$$’ phrasing “because that tips people off that you’re a prostitute.” pythagorus is informed, “prostitution is not wanted here. Go elsewhere to advertise you desease ridden wares.”

Advisers imagine that women’s bodies are rotten, repulsive, and abject when they extend beyond advice givers’ acceptable limits for women’s roles. According to Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory, people experience abjection when something “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions,” and “rules” and try to expel this experience or thing. Sex workers actively profit from their bodies and sexuality and thereby threaten the terms of traditional gender relationships. Openly sexual women who are not looking for a single male partner also threaten cultural understandings of dyadic gender relationships. Male flaggers and advisers therefore try to excise them from the system. Advisers also work to remove these posters from the discussion forum because they are imagined to be beyond instruction. This exclusion succeeds with AppleCure. She finds the advisers’ comments “brutal” and the respondents to be “bullies on the playground.” AppleCure tells them that she is sorry she “came here asking for help. Don’t worry, it won’t happen again.” In such instances, advisers constitute women as undesirable sexual citizens, inform them that they have no place in the setting or claim to community membership, and insult them until they stop posting.
A cohort of readers also vilifies large women because they do not embody femininity as it is normatively conceived and because they have not met the desires and instructions of most men. In being, but not corporeally assenting to the ways many men want women to appear, these women represent a site of resistance to men’s values and are removed from the system. Women are advised, “BBW is a trigger phrase that draws flags” and that “some men will flag ANY woman who uses” big beautiful woman (BBW) in her ad. Hazelcat, who was flagged and advised not to use the term BBW, wonders why a poster should “have to hide who she is?” She asserts that women are being “discriminated against by the small minded, negative, low, loathsome, pigs of the world who think they’re better than a big woman. What gives them the right to decide who posts an ad?” Jane1010 writes that flagging for the use of the term BBW is “just plain discriminatory--on their part and on the part of anyone who permits it.” These consumer critiques have little influence because they appear in the flag help forum, where few people read them. Jane1010 is told “complain all you want, but that’s not going to change,” “Craigslist allows anyone to flag anything they want,” and “obviously a lot of guys hate the phrase BBW (can’t say I blame them).” Advisers’ comments reduce the value of critiques and further the patriarchal control of women. However, women’s irritated observations are important. They highlight the failures of the interface and its broken promises of equity. Newmark is believed to have designed Craigslist to fulfill members’ desires, and he is supposed to be responsive to their requests. Nevertheless, women’s commentary and the low number of flags required to remove their ads present a different account of the site. Their critiques also point to problems with other flagging and rating systems, including Digg and Slashdot.

Advisers school women to do gender, be more affable, provide physiognomic details, and make themselves into objects. Posters are instructed to “leave out the bitching,” tone “down the ’tude,” and “Be nicer.” Advisers’ indications that women should be pleasant and attractive could be appended with the phrase “for men.” These mandates extend beyond dating advertisements and suggest that women should create themselves according to the terms of men’s desires in other settings. Instruction is something that is done to women in these settings but is not a process that is available to them as posters or help seekers. Instead, women are chided for “doling out instructions in their dating ads.” Women are expected to avoid negativity and the kinds of deep and personal thinking that might cause them to resist the social constraints of sexual citizenship. Directives for women to be empathetic may
always be at the cost of their own psychic lives. Nevertheless, many individuals consent to this configuration. For instance, SexySingleSweetie is looking to “post without getting flagged and be educated about the errors so” she does not “repeat them.”

The site advisers and the interface reference community while discouraging women from collaboratively engaging. When karakicks describes how “people are abusing their powers” in flagging, other removed members respond. myadbeingflagged adds that she “had the same thing happen” and is “so upset about it.” However, Snappy_Comeback dismisses this commentary and indicates that karakicks “got threadjacked by yet another person complaining, but totally ignoring the directions.” Loku_v7 provides viable suggestions about how advisers can convey site policies without supporting intolerant flagging but is told to stop posting in “other people’s threads spouting your personal opinions.” Help seekers are advised to “please ignore Loku_v7. Just a silly troll bent on” giving “bad advice and causing ill feelings here in this forum.” Loku_v7’s posts were given negative numbers, which discourages people from reading them. Through such actions, the advisers support their power, defend the instructional aspects of the forum, resist the constitution of alternative communities, and stymie a larger interrogation of the ideology behind flagging women.

Posters perform a kind of critique when they relate their advertisements to other listings. For example, karakicks argues that her self-portrayals are “not suggestive,” while men are “posting pictures of” their “dicks in men seeking woman.” When jpoqalot is informed, “Negativity draws flags,” she points to the need to flag “the enormous amount of guys posting pics of their dicks” because “that makes more sense.” Rather than addressing the possibility that women are flagged in particularly egregious ways, yasuragi replies, “Do you flag the cock shots? If you don’t flag them, they won’t go away.” Women’s critiques of morals and behavior are directed back at them and used to mandate their work. Women who advocate change are told to adopt the current system and follow its codes and are thereby incorporated into the brand community.

Conclusion: The Politics of Community

Members of eBay, craigslist, and many other Internet settings are expected to give to the interface but only the most normalized and involved individuals can expect empathy or response in kind, even though care and goodness are
scripted as key aspects of these settings. In a similar manner, women seeking men are instructed on craigslist not to anticipate and not to ask for anything. Feminists who expect equity, women who identify their desires, and women who are looking for support from men are all dismissed as controlling and repulsive. Women's irritated responses to flagging do not change the craigslist interface, but they do offer a model for critically engaging. Newmark proposes that “using any kind of public forum for support means that a company will be faced with disgruntled customers. But much of the time, disgruntled customers are right -- and they’re giving you valuable feedback.”80 This idea is important even though Newmark does not use it to consider craigslist’s flagging mechanism. Internet and new media scholars should look to disgruntled customers and their critiques as ways to understand the problematic aspects of Internet settings. The interactions in help forums, posted conflicts between brand community members, angry video responses, mass circulation of dialogues between consumers and customer-service representatives, and sites about how companies and settings “suck” provide researchers with valuable information and feedback, but they have been understudied.

Studying the controlling aspects of eBay and craigslist points to how promises of tolerance and freedom act as a screen. Disparities between the assurances and functions of Internet settings should encourage consumer critiques when using, reading, and writing about these sites. Researchers are also adopters of software and settings, which makes it imperative to analyze the ways academic language and use can repeat the extremely positive sentiments of producers and traditional structures of commercial enterprises. Internet studies scholars might therefore pose methods of irritated and critical use in addition to exhibiting enthusiasm and fandom. Such methods can allow researchers to acknowledge the ways settings positively engage members, configure individuals, and create an alienated other. For instance, a closer attention to the academic and popular use of the term “community” in Internet settings and other spheres is advisable. Newmark’s identification as a “community organizer” encourages an address to how people are formed into societies, as well as the functions of already constituted communities.81 After all, the term “organized” also means that something is controlled.

Internet studies is the examination of governmentality, social regulation, and resistance. The designers and corporate employees of eBay, craigslist, and other Internet settings may be the new political and ruling class, even though they ignore many constituencies. BusinessWeek magazine identifies Newmark as one of the twenty-five most influential people on the web.82 In
a related manner, craigslist is described as “a profoundly collaborative venture, with political potential.” Government and political figures use social networking models and become more intermeshed with sites and designers. For instance, Obama is working to “harness new technologies to put information” about the operations and decisions of executive departments and agencies “online” and to make this information “readily available to the public.” News reviews of these plans identify social networking technologies as “the clearest path to an open government” and assume that these technologies address and are available to everyone. Problems with craigslist’s flagging demonstrate that technologies are not inherently free of bias or transparent, but these issues remain largely unnoted. Yet some of these issues are foregrounded by the Obama campaign’s practices. His campaign deployed change.org to take questions from the public but then deleted inquiries about whether Governor Rod Blagojevich of Illinois had tried to sell Obama’s Senate seat. When Obama’s weekly address was first included on YouTube, viewers were not provided with the option to post comments.

Newmark is often consulted about plans for Internet-facilitated citizenship. However, there is never any recognition that craigslist has deleted and alienated a large cohort of women. When the craigslist model is applied at the government level, members’ concerns that flagging curtails freedom of speech are even more worrisome. eBay’s and craigslist’s intermeshed promises of inclusion and rendering of traditional identities and social control are too likely to work with state models of norming and regulation. Whether referenced by the U.S. government or presented as models for new forms of generosity, including the microfinancing site Kiva’s mention of craigslist, these settings are helping to produce our embodied limits and worldview. The bodies and regulatory strategies that are produced in these settings are therefore likely to constitute our lives and rights. Researchers can interrogate these settings by attending to the ideologies that accompany promises of empowerment and participants’ angry evaluations. It is not easy to note the kinds of individuals who are removed from systems or invisible to most members, but such tactics are vital for developing critical forms of Internet and new media studies and more functional interfaces and settings.