
Feedback: Checking out Reviews

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This is the second post in a mini-series on the AAAS Sci on the Fly blog that will explore questions about feedback. The first post on real-time feedback can be read [here](https://www.aaaspolicyfellowships.org/blog/feedback-turning-directions) (<https://www.aaaspolicyfellowships.org/blog/feedback-turning-directions>). This post asks: How could feedback from five-star-style reviews and public comments improve the government?

Last year the [Government Services Administration \(GSA\) DigitalGov team partnered with Yelp](https://www.digitalgov.gov/2015/08/07/five-star-customer-experience-in-public-service-with-yelp/) (<https://www.digitalgov.gov/2015/08/07/five-star-customer-experience-in-public-service-with-yelp/>), the online review website, to allow the public to rate federal and local government. No longer limited to reviewing restaurants, hair salons and dentists, citizens can now leave public feedback in the form of a one-to-five star rating along with comments for government departments, agencies, landmarks, offices, and even national parks. The goal of this partnership is intended to allow agencies to “find new ways to use customer insights to improve citizen services.”

While the GSA’s rating initiative modernizes the age-old comment card, it raises questions regarding the potential impact of easily-accessible public ratings of government services. For example, public reviews of businesses are typically intended to inform the public regarding a business’s quality and improve a business’s goods and services. Do these functions translate similarly to reviews of the government? Do public, online reviews contain enough fidelity to stimulate change? And, are there other factors at play that might alter the honesty and value of such reviews?

In seeking to inform the public, the lack of choice and competition inherent in government limits some potential benefits of government reviews. A crucial distinction between a local restaurant and the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) is that we have a choice between restaurants, but rarely do we have a choice between DMVs. A bad review could steer a customer away from a restaurant, but that is unlikely in the case of the DMV. More likely, reviews of the government would provide practical information to help facilitate interactions. Perhaps a review's comments explain how to fill out a form more clearly than the provided instructions, or maybe multiple reviews indicate that 3 pm on a Tuesday is the least busy and, therefore, best time to renew a license at the DMV.

On a positive note, government reviews would avoid some of the distortions that [plague consumer-oriented reviews \(https://www.eater.com/2016/5/3/11578978/yelp-fake-reviews\)](https://www.eater.com/2016/5/3/11578978/yelp-fake-reviews). The Department of Energy, for example, has little to gain from paying for positive reviews, unlike a local pizzeria trying to increase its lunch crowd. And, of course, the government would be restricted from offering free products or services in exchange for a positive review. Reviews of the government are also unlikely to see negative posts written by "competitors," while such actions have played out between [rival jewelry stores \(http://www.necn.com/news/new-england/Jeweler-Ordered-to-Pay-Out-for-Posting-Fake-Yelp-Review-to-Rivals-Page-418366213.html\)](http://www.necn.com/news/new-england/Jeweler-Ordered-to-Pay-Out-for-Posting-Fake-Yelp-Review-to-Rivals-Page-418366213.html), for example.

With respect to improving services, the government is no stranger to public comment. New rules and regulations require a public comment period where individuals and organizations can supply their feedback and voice their opinion. In many cases, the rules or regulations are modified in response. Such feedback is beneficial because it is focused and specific. This stands in contrast, however, to the breadth of commentary and aggregate information that could be reasonably expected in reviews of the government. It is difficult to imagine, for example, how the Department of Commerce would change in an attempt to improve an average three-star rating. Additionally, politically motivated reviews raise another concern: can we trust the "grassroots" feedback of a politically-polarizing agency or department? What, if any, changes "to improve citizen services" should occur as a result of a low rating if that rating were due largely to a polarizing regulation, memorandum, or secretary?

Another point to consider when examining the usefulness of government reviews is that misunderstandings about the role and responsibility of the government could also limit their value. Take the Global Positioning System that the Air Force operates, as an example. A common reason that people visit [GPS.gov \(http://www.gps.gov/\)](http://www.gps.gov/) is to report an incorrect map on their phone or in-car navigation device. The government operates and maintains the satellites but not the mapping services, yet enough people have made this mistake that [the GPS website features a prominent notice about map errors \(http://www.gps.gov/support/user/mapfix/\)](http://www.gps.gov/support/user/mapfix/) to route complaints to the responsible business instead. It is easy to envision reviews that could ding the Air Force for out-of-date maps that are not their responsibility.

In light of these concerns, a host of alternative metrics or "[altmetrics \(http://altmetrics.org/manifesto/\)](http://altmetrics.org/manifesto/)" (*n.b.*, the term altmetrics has no connection to "alternative facts" or other ongoing alternative political movements) coupled with reviews could help the government overcome such challenges. In addition to their agency's star rating, agencies could track and analyze dozens of "altmetrics," including how often their website is visited, the number of calls to their hotlines, or the number of downloads of their reports. Other attempts at government outreach, such as the popular [@askTSA \(https://www.dhs.gov/blog/2016/07/07/have-question-now-you-can-ask-tsa-facebook\)](https://www.dhs.gov/blog/2016/07/07/have-question-now-you-can-ask-tsa-facebook) Twitter and Facebook hotlines, have also facilitated and improved government-citizen interactions, potentially more than the opportunity to leave feedback ever could.

Ultimately, the goal of improving the government will always get five stars, but whether online reviews

of the government will create feedback that improves the government and better informs citizens is still an idea pending review.

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