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Who you gonna trust?

Language Matters

What's the weirdest thing you've ever reviewed? For me, it's a toss up between an airport toilet, an overpriced cheese-grater and an online reviewing platform (a review within a review, like a grim Groundhog Day).

Reviewing, especially online, is big business, not least because eWOM (electronic word of mouth) travels fast, sealing the fates of businesses not least because a star-rating, usually out of 5 or 10. Second, an evaluation, often expressed by an adjective (“good”, “delicious”, “terrible”), maybe an intensifier (“very”, “extremely”, “awfully”) and sometimes a fixed phrase (“won’t go back”, “definitely recommend”).

Typically, reviews have at least three components. First, a star rating, usually out of 5 or 10. Second, an evaluation, often expressed by an adjective (“good”, “delicious”, “terrible”), maybe an intensifier (“very”, “extremely”, “awfully”) and sometimes a fixed phrase (“won’t go back”, “definitely recommend”).

This is the formulaic and predictable part. But even here, there can be surprises as not all adjectives behave the same. “Good” can be both a marker of approval (“this is very good”) and disapproval (“this is not very good”), whereas “delicious” does not occur in negative reviews.

Third, there is a strategy for engendering trust from readers. The best way to sell a review turns out to be by striking a shared bond with the audience. We trust people we can relate to and who speak like us. Regardless of knowledge of the product being reviewed, if Janet is also a full-time-working-mum-of-two, then I’m inclined to trust her opinion on cheese graters.

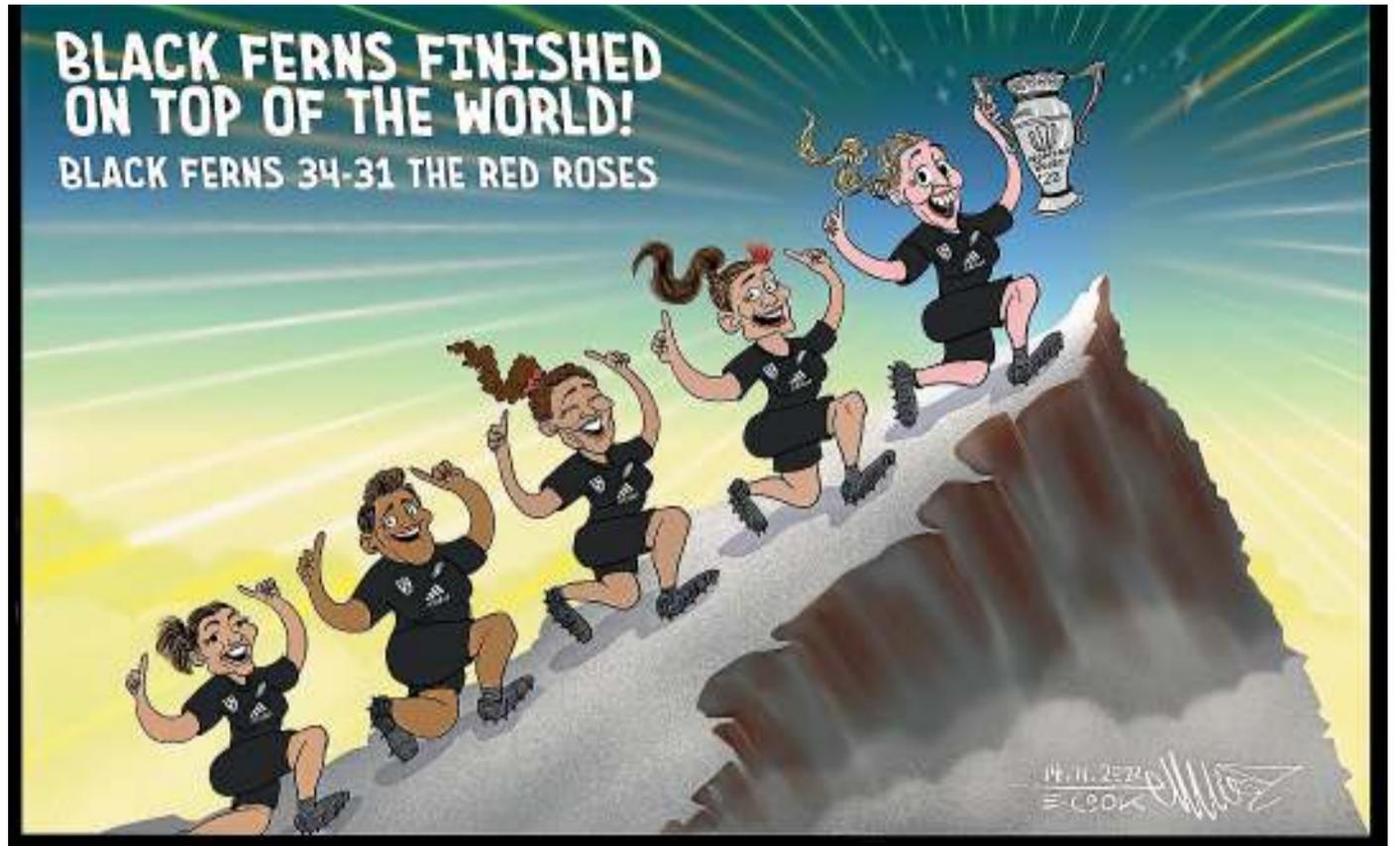
Researcher Camilla Vásquez has analysed the language of online reviews. She writes in *The Discourse of Online Consumer Reviews* (Bloomsbury, 2014) that, although some reviewers construct their opinion by providing details of actual expertise, for instance by claiming a relevant occupation (“As a yoga instructor, this yoga mat . . .”), reviews involve many identity cues that have nothing to do with expertise at all. Trust is manufactured by providing personal information about the reviewer’s life(style) in order to strike a shared connection with the reader. And this permeates right down to individual word choices, from slang (“meh”) to usernames (“momof2_1954”), because speaking in familiar ways increases trust.

However, if the avalanche of required review-reading in the upcoming holiday season fills you with dread, you will be pleased to learn that some reviewers have gone out of their way to make your reading experience a pleasant one. One reviewer of Tuscan Milk (a product that has surprisingly received more than 1500 reviews on Amazon alone!) parodies Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnet 43*:

*How do I drink thee?
Let me count the ways.
I drink thee in the kitchen and living room and every other room
My steps can reach, when feeling deep in gloom*

More of a Shakespeare fan? There’s a review written as a play in two acts. There is also an Emily Dickinson parody and, for Milton fans, one in the vein of *Paradise Lost* or *Paradise Regained*.

Of course, these reviews are not trying to provide a complete and accurate evaluation of the product at hand; they aim to amuse and entertain. In a world obsessed with the “perfect” product or experience, we are bombarded to assess everything, down to the most mundane things. It is no wonder comic relief is needed, even in a genre not usually associated with gripping reading.



We have much to learn about Iran’s uprising



Donna Miles

Iranian-Kiwi writer based in Christchurch

As I write this, Iran has entered its 55th day of protests, triggered by the death in custody of 22-year-old Kurdish woman Jina Amini, commonly known as Mahsa Amini.

Despite the usual denials of Iranian police, Amini is widely believed to have died as a result of blows to her head by the morality police, who arrested her for her improper hijab.

Post-revolutionary Iran has strict rules about the way women must dress in public and, although these rules are regularly flouted by many daring women, the arbitrary harassment and detention over hijab laws remain the bane of women’s lives in Iran, especially after the coming to power, in June last year, of hardline president Ebrahim Raisi.

At the time of writing, the regime’s violent crackdown on protests has resulted in the deaths of 328 people, 50 of them children and teenagers under 18. Furthermore, the regime has arrested astonishing 14,825 people so far, including 431 students.

For me, and many other Iranians I am sure, the past 55 days have been a surreal whirlwind of mixed emotions: sadness, hope, frustration, elation and fear.

Sadness: for all the bloodshed and grieving families. Hope: for the real possibility of a modern secular democracy in Iran. Frustration: at the shallow media coverage of the protests that continuously overlooks, even censors, the key ethnic driver of this historic movement. Elation: for the incredible energy that keeps the fire of

this movement alive with revolutionary fervour, both inside and outside Iran. And finally fear: for the invisible hands in whose interest it is to see Iran wrecked and weakened, and turned into yet another Iraq, Syria or Libya.

It has to be said that, much like the Ukraine war, any nuanced analysis of the Iran movement is generally met with harsh criticism and ridiculous accusations of being an apologist for the regime or, worse, its paid agent.

I must say, part of me understands the oversensitivity of some opposition groups over questions about what might come next. This is because of the war-like situation the Iranian regime has created by turning bullets on its own people, killing, among others, children and teenagers.

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But I also understand the frustration of ethnic minorities (Baluchi and Kurds in particular), who are paying the highest cost for this movement (in terms of lives lost and the economic hardship that comes from general strikes) – and yet, their struggles and their demands are not elevated in the media.

Instead, they are regularly accused of being separatists and disloyal to Iran, especially the moment they assert their right to self-determination.

My own close observation and participation in lengthy online public debates and private discussions have convinced me that there is no overarching desire among the ethnic groups for separatism and these accusations are manufactured as yet another instrument of suppression over ethnic minorities such as Baluchs, Arabs, Kurds and Turks.

Rather than a threat to unity,

debate should be seen as an opportunity to see democracy in action and bring together disparate opposition groups.

In this regard, the ethnic groups are, yet again, leading the charge by forming the “Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran”. Among the coalition are political parties and groups I had not even heard of. This shows how much more there is for us to learn about Iran and the history of resistance among its feminist and ethnic activists.

The slogan *Woman, Life, Freedom*, which has become the manifesto of Iran’s movement, has Kurdish roots.

For this reason, the well-known Iranian actress Taraneh Alidoosti chose to write the Kurdish, not Farsi, version of the slogan (*Zhen, Zhiyan, Azadi*) on a placard she held as she bravely posed for a photo with her hair uncovered. Despite living and working in Iran, she posted the photo on her Instagram page, which has 7.9 million followers.

Unsurprisingly, the news went viral. Disappointingly, some coverage, which showed the photo, cut off the placard altogether, and showed only Alidoosti’s face. To many Kurdish people it was seen as yet another ignorant act in the continuous assault on their language and political struggle. Other major media showed a more attractive photo of Alidoosti’s face with her hair fashionably covered, choosing to elevate her allure over her act of resistance.

All this tells me that the media have much to learn about Iran’s new movement which, activists say, has feminism, ethnic and climate issues at its heart.

In the past 55 days, I have learnt much about the ongoing work of activists and researchers in Iran and hope others are inspired to do the same, by looking beyond the romantic and celebrity elements of this movement and paying more attention to its core drivers.