

Communities of Evaluating

Practices and socio-technical infrastructures of rating, ranking and reviewing

Ingrid Jeacle/Chris Carter (Edinburgh)

Rankings, League Tables and User Reviews: The Apparatus of Evaluation and Assurance in Contemporary Life

Carolin Gerlitz (Siegen)

Enacting Multivalence? Infrastructuring Evaluation in Social Media Platforms

Öffentliche Vorträge

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Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, Hörsaal M

mediaandparticipation.com

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Rankings, League Tables and User Reviews: The Apparatus of Evaluation and Assurance in Contemporary Life

Increasingly we live in a world dominated by league tables, rankings and user reviews. League tables (such as Anholt) reduce qualities to quantities, create a hierarchical order amongst a heterogeneous ensemble of entities and justify and legitimize the allocation of resources. Ranking mechanisms seek to rate the performance of a increasing proliferation of products and services while internet generated user reviews have emerged as the democratic voice within social media, creating important distinctions and meaningful evaluations. Together, these mechanisms are producing judgements on increasing areas of social and economic life. They represent new modes of trust with powerful symbolic and material effects. Digitalization has created the conditions for these new knowledge vistas and enabled such knowledge to be increasingly embedded in lay opinion as opposed to professional expertise. Not surprisingly, this phenomenon has started to attract academic attention in an attempt to understand and explain the growing presence and influence of these new arbitrators of authority. Our own research on rankings and user reviews (based on studies of TripAdvisor and Amazon) leads us to suggest that the rising success and scope of these new mechanisms is based on a combination of factors: trust in the systems that produce such rankings (Giddens, 1990, 1991), the objective power of the single number (Miller, 2001; Porter 1995), and the continual demand for checking and verification in an Audit Society (Power, 1997). Consequently, we argue that rankings, league tables and user reviews are the new apparatus of evaluation and assurance in contemporary life.

Carolin Gerlitz (Siegen)

Enacting Multivalence? Infrastructuring Evaluation in Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms are characterized by providing but also being part of socio-technical infrastructures which enable a variety of stakeholders and communities to utilize platforms for their respective heterogeneous aims. Central elements of platform infrastructures are grammatised platform actions and corresponding platform data (Agre 1994) that are standardized in form, yet to certain degree open to interpretation in meaning and value. Platform features and data are produced to be multivalent, that is speaking to and being amendable to heterogeneous valuation regimes – as a post may be of social value for private users, of commercial value to platforms and of informational value for developers, whilst also connecting these valuation regimes. In this talk I will propose a socio-technical account of communities of valuation, suggesting that platforms both offer and are part of infrastructures which assemble different communities and enable them to enact the multivalence of platform data. Neither the communities nor the infrastructures are confined by the boundaries of the platform but are constantly reconfigured. The interplay between infrastructure, community and valuation will be explored by engaging with two sites, firstly apps built on top of platforms in order to re-evaluate platform data, and secondly platform reviews on YouTube. It is through the entanglement between infrastructures (application programming interfaces, intermediary software built on top of platforms) and their respective communities of practice that evaluation can operate across different scales and potentially speak to different orders of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006) at the same time.