Communities of Evaluating

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

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

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Enacting Multivalence? Infrastructuring Evaluation in Social Media Platforms

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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.

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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.

Communities of Evaluating

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

Valuating and evaluating are ubiquitous social practices that have been increasingly analyzed as powerful processes in various social fields (Kjellberg et al. 2013; Lamont 2012). However, practices of evaluating, reviewing, rating and ranking cannot be seen as isolated interactions between a single user and the respective evaluation tool. Rather they are embedded in particular sociotechnical arrangements that might include various (human and non-human) actors and can be understood as "communities of evaluating".

These communities each imply specific devices, instruments, practices and cultures of evaluation which distinguishes them from one another (Mellet et al. 2014). Therefore, they differ significantly in their levels of visibility for the affected users and the implemented control instruments and tools (Luca/Zervas 2016; Bialski 2016).

The study of online communities is a promising approach to start exploring communities of evaluation since the review system became a crucial and common part of most online services and activities. Facebook, for example, relies heavily on users that express affirmation and moods by a simple mouse click, thus influencing the composition and visibility of content available (Gerlitz/Helmond 2013). Review systems are also an integral part of platforms like Airbnb, where hosts and guests are asked to evaluate their experience afterwards in order to gain trust between users (Oskam/Boswijk 2016). Dating apps like Tinder require a primarily optical evaluation of potential dating partners without making the results of these processes transparent for all users (Chase 2015; Pierce 2016). Finally, review and evaluation practices are at the heart of the business model of user-generated content websites such as Yelp or TripAdvisor, where they influence destination planning, accommodation booking or picking a restaurant (Baka 2015; Jeacle/Carter 2011).

These examples show that, on the one hand, communities of evaluating are constituted by the very act of evaluating which is generally addressing other users of the same platform or service and can be interpreted as immaterial and affective work. It might help users to facilitate decisions or provides newbies with a valuable orientation guideline. On the other hand these practices are decisively shaped by the design of the implemented review system and the used devices. They become part of the community and form the ways these communities are imagined by their users.

Therefore, communities of evaluating are characterized by specific cultures of evaluation. Some cultures might be based on reciprocity or the desire to establish trust amongst users whereas others are built upon one-way reviews and subjective recommendations. The culture of evaluation provides the framework for the kind and mode of evaluation practices that are carried out (Bridges/Vásquez 2016; Bissell 2011; Scott/Orlikowski 2012; Otterbacher 2013).

The workshop examines how communities of evaluating are produced and consolidated. It considers their (pre)conditions, their enabling and obstructing potentials and their normalizing and standardizing processes.