

# Stars, Scores, and Rankings: Evaluation and Society

Tuesday, 10.10-12.05pm – Rockefeller Hall 110

STS 4561 – INFO 4561 – SOC 4560

Professor Malte Ziewitz  
Department of Science & Technology Studies  
313 Morrill Hall  
[mcz35@cornell.edu](mailto:mcz35@cornell.edu)

Senior Seminar  
Spring 2017

Office hours: <https://ziewitz.youcanbook.me/>

Evaluation is a pervasive feature of contemporary life. Professors, doctors, countries, hotels, pollution, books, intelligence: there is hardly anything that is not subject to some form of review, rating, or ranking these days. This senior seminar examines the practices, cultures, and technologies of evaluation and asks how value is established, maintained, compared, subverted, resisted, and institutionalized in a range of different settings. Topics include user reviews, institutional audit, ranking and commensuration, algorithmic evaluation, tasting, gossip, and awards. Drawing on case studies from science, technology, culture, accounting, art, environment, and everyday life, we shall explore how evaluation comes to order our lives – and why it is so difficult to resist.

## Learning objectives

Upon completion of this course, you will be able to:

- **Understand and apply key concepts and methods from the growing field of (e)valuation studies**, including science & technology studies, economic sociology, and anthropology;
- **Challenge and unpack entrenched assumptions about evaluation** with a particular focus on its social implications;
- **Design and conduct innovative and effective programs of research** into evaluation cultures;
- **Write concise and effective literature reviews and reports** of original research.

## Course requirements

This senior seminar is all about problematizing practices of (e)valuation. The following course requirements will be useful to facilitate our conversations:

Weekly reading response	20%
Seminar leadership	20%
Case study	50%
<i>Field notes (15%)</i>	
<i>Final report (35%)</i>	
Class participation	10%

**Weekly reading response:** You will be expected to produce a 2-3-page response each week that engages key arguments, insights, and findings from the readings. Reading notes are due 6 p.m. the day before class on Blackboard. Get a sense of other students' notes before class.

**Seminar leadership:** In groups of 2-3, you will be responsible for introducing and opening discussion of two of the weekly reading sets. This involves:

1. A 2-3-page thought piece that pulls out what you as a group find most thought-provoking about the readings. Do not produce a mere summary, but a text that grounds, guides, and provokes discussion, including a set of (open!) discussion questions. Due on Blackboard no later than 6 p.m. the day before class.
2. An in-class introduction to the readings and themes, drawing on the thought piece. You will have 15 minutes for this.

Discussion leads do NOT produce a reading response in addition to the thought piece.

**Case study:** Starting in week 1, you will be required to identify and study a specific *culture of evaluation*. This can be a any social setting in which evaluation is salient and consequential. Past projects included environmental auctions, football player ratings, a Bikram yoga competition, the legal valuation of honeybees, consumer credit scoring, wine tastings, the politics of karma on Reddit, or law school rankings. You should decide on your case by week 2 (January 7).

At three points in the semester, you will be expected to share your running **field notes** with the class (at least five pages each). Field notes are notes you take as you are learning about your case. Like a personal diary or lab notebook, they are organized by day and log all the things, ideas, and materials consulted as you learned more about your case. Typically, this includes reflections on your evolving research question; new insights and ideas at each stage of the investigation; any ethical issues you encounter; tie-ins with readings of the week and class discussions; observations on the process of discovery (where you looked first, what worked, what didn't, dead ends, etc.); a running list of references consulted during your investigation and

notes about them. You will share these field notes for feedback by 5 p.m. on the following three Fridays: March 3, March 17, and Apr 14.

You will be required to produce a 10-12 page (double-spaced) **final report** on your case that engages with theoretical and/or methodological themes from the course. By April 6, I'd like to see a formal proposal, including a 1-2 paragraph description of the main argument or question; an outline of the anticipated structure of the report; a description of the empirical evidence (if any) you plan to use; and a list of 5-10 published sources you plan to cite or draw on in making your argument. In addition to my comments, you'll receive feedback from your classmates in a dedicated review session on April 25.

Final reports are due in electronic form on [TBD – will be announced once exam schedule is published]. Per standard university guidelines governing plagiarism and academic honesty, all work for the course is expected to be original or appropriately acknowledged.

**Class participation:** This is a fun but challenging senior seminar with a significant reading load. If you're struggling with the course in any way, please come and see me as early as possible and we'll talk about strategies, workarounds, and possible accommodations to help you.

### **Students with disabilities**

If you need accommodations because of a disability, please make sure you identify yourself as early in the semester as possible. This will give me time to make arrangements. Please feel free to come to office hours to ensure confidentiality. We will work with Cornell's Student Disability Services ([sds\\_cu@cornell.edu](mailto:sds_cu@cornell.edu)) to come up with a plan of action.

### **Life happens**

Life events occur, and I will do my best to ensure that your needs are met at these times. It is imperative that you contact me as soon as possible when something comes up that will prevent you from coming to class or doing an assignment. This will allow us to come up with an appropriate plan to help ensure that, if at all possible, you are able to complete this seminar in good standing.

### **Acknowledgments**

This seminar is drawing on other excellent seminars, including Steve Jackson's *Information Technology and Society* (Cornell) and Martha Lampland & Susan Leigh Star's *Standardization and Quantification* (UC San Diego). Thanks to Stefan Beljean, Mike Lynch, and the 2015 and 2016 participants of *STS-6561 Technologies of Valuation* for valuable feedback and advice.

## Schedule

### Session 1: What's Valuable? (Jan 31)

---

No readings today. We'll familiarize ourselves with the key themes and concerns of the seminar, discuss course mechanics, and start thinking about what's valuable.

### Session 2: Value, Values, Valuation (Jan 7)

---

*A Guide to Evaluating Prevention Programs* (2010) Washington, DC: International Center for Alcohol Policies.

Fine GA (1986) The social organization of adolescent gossip: the rhetoric of moral evaluation. In: Cook-Gumperz J, Corsaro WA, and Streeck J (eds), *Children's worlds and children's language*, Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 405–423.

Smith BH (1979) Fixed Marks and Variable Constancies: A Parable of Literary Value. *Poetics Today* 1(1/2): 7–22.

Kjellberg H and Mallard A (2013) Valuation Studies? Our Collective Two Cents. *Valuation Studies*, 1(1), 11–30.

*In this session, we will also discuss your ideas for practices of evaluation to explore as your class project. Please bring ideas and be ready to share them.*

### Session 3: Economies of Worth (Jan 14)

---

Marx K (1867) *Capital: critique of political economy*. New York: Penguin, Book 1, Section 1.

Callon M, Méadel C and Rabeharisoa V (2002) The economy of qualities. *Economy and Society*, 31(2), 194–217.

Fourcade M (2011) Cents and Sensibility: Economic Valuation and the Nature of 'Nature'. *American Journal of Sociology*, 116(6), 1721–77.

Beunza D and Stark D (2004) Tools of the trade: the socio-technology of arbitrage in a Wall Street trading room. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 13(2), 369–400.

— NO CLASS: FEBRUARY BREAK —

**Session 4: Accounting and Organization (Feb 28)**

---

Foucault M (1991) Governmentality. In: Burchell G, Gordon C, and Miller P (eds), *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 87–104.

Rose N (1988) Calculable minds and manageable individuals. *History of the Human Sciences*, 1(2), 179–200.

Miller P (1992) Accounting and objectivity: The invention of calculating selves and calculable spaces. *Annals of Scholarship*, 8(1/2), 61–85.

Harper R (2000) The social organization of the IMF's mission work: An examination of international auditing. In: Strathern M (ed.), *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics, and the academy*, London: Routledge, pp. 21–53.

[DEADLINE: Fieldnote check-in I due Fri, March 3, 5 p.m.]

**Session 5: Audit and Accountability (Mar 7)**

---

Neyland D and Woolgar S (2002) Accountability in action?: the case of a database purchasing decision. *British Journal of Sociology*, 53(2), 259–274.

Hoskin K (1996) The 'awful idea of accountability': Inscribing people into the measurement of objects. In: Munro R and Mouritsen J (eds), *Accountability: Power, ethos and the Technologies of Managing*, London: International Thomson Business Press, pp. 265–282.

Strathern M (2000) The tyranny of transparency. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26(3), 309–321.

Kimbell L (2002) *Lucy Kimbell: Audit*. London: Book Works.

**Session 6: Measurement and Metrics (Mar 14)**

---

Sacks H (1988) On members' measurement systems. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 22(1-4), 45–60.

Mirowski P (1992) Looking for Those Natural Numbers: Dimensionless Constants and the Idea of Natural Measurement. *Science in Context*, 5(01), 165–188.

O'Connell J (1993) Metrology: The Creation of Universality by the Circulation of Particulars. *Social Studies of Science*, 23(1), 129–173.

[DEADLINE: Fieldnote update II due Fri, March 17, 5 p.m.]

### **Session 7: Comparison and Commensuration (Mar 21)**

---

Espeland WN and Sauder M (2007) Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds. *American Journal of Sociology*, 113(1), 1–40.

Mol A (2002) Cutting surgeons, walking patients: Some complexities involved in comparing. In: Law J and Mol A (eds), *Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices*, Durham: Duke University Press Books, pp. 218–257.

Woolgar S (1991) Beyond the citation debate: towards a sociology of measurement technologies and their use in science policy. *Science and Public Policy*, 18(5), 319–326.

### **Session 8: Automation and Delegation (Mar 28)**

---

Helmreich S (1998) Recombination, Rationality, Reductionism and Romantic Reactions: Culture, Computers, and the Genetic Algorithm. *Social Studies of Science* 28(1): 39–71.

Muniesa F (2011) Is a Stock Exchange a Computer Solution?: Explicitness, Algorithms and the Arizona Stock Exchange. *International Journal of Actor-Network Theory and Technological Innovation*, 3(1), 1–15.

Sweeney L (2013) Discrimination in online ad delivery. *Communications of the ACM*, 56(5), 44–54.

— NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK —

### **Session 9: Reviewers and Critics (Apr 11)**

---

Blank G (2006) *Critics, Ratings, and Society: The Sociology of Reviews*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, chapters 2, 3, 4, 6.

Chong P (2013) Legitimate judgment in art, the scientific world reversed? Maintaining critical distance in evaluation. *Social Studies of Science*, 43(2), 265–281.

Pinch T (2012) Book Reviewing for Amazon.com: How Socio-technical Systems Struggle to Make Less from More. In: Czarniawska B and Löfgren O (eds), *Managing overflow in affluent societies*, New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 68–87.

[DEADLINE: Fieldnote update III due Fri, April 14, 5 p.m.]

### **Session 10: Taste and Tasting (Apr 18)**

---

Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 183-208.

Hennion A (2007) Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology. *Cultural Sociology*, 1(1), 97–114.

Lieberman K (2014) *More Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Reprint edition. State University of New York Press, chapter 8, ‘Phenomenology of Coffee Tasting,’ pp. 215-266.

*We will conduct a chocolate tasting in class.*

[DEADLINE: Report proposal due Fri, April 21, 5 p.m.]

### **Session 11: Peer Review (Apr 25)**

---

Biagioli M (2002) From Book Censorship to Academic Peer Review. *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media & Composite Cultures*, 12(1), 11–45.

Hirschauer S (2010) Editorial Judgments: A Praxeology of ‘Voting’ in Peer Review. *Social Studies of Science*, 40(1), 71–103.

Jasanoff S (1998) *The Fifth Branch: Science Advisers as Policymakers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, chapter 4, ‘Peer Review and Regulatory Science,’ pp. 61-83.

*Plus: Peer review workshop in class.*

### **Session 12: Compliments and Prizes (May 2)**

---

Mulkay M (1984) The Ultimate Compliment: A Sociological Analysis of Ceremonial Discourse. *Sociology*, 18(4), 531–549.

Frey BS (2006) Giving and Receiving Awards. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1(4), 377–388.

English JF (2009) *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. [EXCERPTS]

**Session 13: Lessons and Leftovers (May 9)**

---

No readings, except for pre-circulated drafts.

DEADLINE: Final papers due (electronically): 5 p.m. on TBD.