Stars, Scores, and Rankings: Evaluation and Society

Tuesday, 10.10-12.05pm – Statler Hall 441
STS 4561 – INFO 4561 – SOC 4560

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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 class is a senior seminar and not a lecture course. The goal is to facilitate research, understanding, and discussion and encourage independent thinking and inquiry. This involves:

Weekly reading responses 20%
Seminar leadership 20%
Case study 40%

Field notes (15%)
Final report (25%)
Class participation 20%

Weekly reading responses: You are expected to produce a 2-3 page response to each week’s readings. A reading response allows you to think out loud about key concepts and ideas, connections between readings, and the broader conversations they are situated in. Reading responses are also a good place to develop any questions you might have about the readings.

Responses are due 9 p.m. the day before class on Canvas (under ‘Discussions’). Get a sense of other students’ responses before class. Reading responses are not graded, but I will give feedback and advice whenever useful.

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 collaboratively written 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-ended!) questions. Due on Canvas no later than 9 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 and are welcome to find original and creative ways to engage and entertain the rest of us.

Seminar leaders do NOT produce a reading response in addition to their thought piece.

Case study: Starting in week 1, you will identify and study a controversy involving a practice and/or technology of evaluation. You are free to pick any social setting in which evaluation is salient and consequential. Past projects have tackled 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.

Over the course of the semester, you will be expected to research your case and keep a document of field notes. Field notes are notes you take as you are ‘in the field,’ learning about your case. Like a diary or lab notebook, these notes are organized by date and time and log your observations, ideas, and materials consulted. Typically, this includes reflections on your evolving
research interest and concern; 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.

At two points in the semester, you will be expected to share your field notes to date (at least five pages each). You will share these field notes for feedback on Canvas by 9 p.m. on Thu, Feb 21, and Wed, Mar 21.

You will produce a 10-12 page (double-spaced) final report on your case that engages theoretical and/or methodological themes from the course. By April 18, I’d like to see a formal proposal, consisting of 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 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 peer review session on April 23.

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

Class participation: This is a fun and 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.

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) 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 a plan to help ensure that, if at all possible, you are able to complete this seminar in good standing.

Acknowledgments

This seminar draws on 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 Technologies of Valuation for feedback and advice.
Schedule

Session 1: What’s Valuable? (Jan 22)

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 29)


Optional:


*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 (Feb 5)


Session 4: Accounting and Organization (Feb 12)


Session 5: Audit and Accountability (Feb 19)


[DEADLINE: Fieldnote Check-in I due Thu, Feb 21, 9 p.m.]

— NO CLASS: FEBRUARY BREAK (Feb 26) —
**Session 6: Measurement and Metrics (Mar 5)**


**Session 7: Comparison and Commensuration (Mar 12)**


**Session 8: Automation and Delegation (Mar 19)**


[DEADLINE: Fieldnote Check-in II due Thu, March 21, 9 p.m.]

**Session 9: Project Discussions (Mar 26)**

No readings. We’ll discuss your projects.
Session 10: Reviewers and Critics (Apr 9)


Session 11: Taste and Tasting (Apr 16)


*We will conduct a tasting in class.*

[DEADLINE: Report proposal due Thu, Apr 18, 9 p.m.]

Session 12: Peer Review (Apr 23)


*Plus: Peer review workshop in class.*
Session 13: Compliments and Prizes (Apr 30)


Session 14: Lessons and Leftovers (May 7)

No readings.

[DEADLINE: Final reports due: 5 p.m. on TBD (Word doc via e-mail).]