Sorting Things Out: Classification And Its Consequences (Inside Technology)

Synopsis

What do a seventeenth-century mortality table (whose causes of death include "fainted in a bath," "frighted," and "itch"); the identification of South Africans during apartheid as European, Asian, colored, or black; and the separation of machine- from hand-washables have in common? All are examples of classification -- the scaffolding of information infrastructures.In Sorting Things Out, Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star explore the role of categories and standards in shaping the modern world. In a clear and lively style, they investigate a variety of classification systems, including the International Classification of Diseases, the Nursing Interventions Classification, race classification under apartheid in South Africa, and the classification of viruses and of tuberculosis.The authors emphasize the role of invisibility in the process by which classification orders human interaction. They examine how categories are made and kept invisible, and how people can change this invisibility when necessary. They also explore systems of classification as part of the built information environment. Much as an urban historian would review highway permits and zoning decisions to tell a city’s story, the authors review archives of classification design to understand how decisions have been made. Sorting Things Out has a moral agenda, for each standard and category valorizes some point of view and silences another. Standards and classifications produce advantage or suffering. Jobs are made and lost; some regions benefit at the expense of others. How these choices are made and how we think about that process are at the moral and political core of this work. The book is an important empirical source for understanding the building of information infrastructures.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This tragic book is full of important ideas and significant research, but it’s so poorly written you hardly notice. Other reviews kindly describe its style as "academic," but it’s just bad writing. It’s really shocking that publishers still consider this kind of jargon-filled nonsense acceptable to publish outside of the UMI thesis-reprint circuit. (I write professionally, so I’m not unqualified to make this assertion.)After making a cogent point with examples and internal references, the authors feel the need to bridge to the next section with this clotted delight:"Leaking out of the freeze frame, comes the insertion of biography, negotiation, and struggles with a shifting infrastructure of classification and treatment. Turning now to other presentation and classification of tuberculosis by a novelist and a sociologist, we will see the complex dialectic of irrevocably local biography and of standard classification."Wha? What you mean to say is:"This tension between personal experience and clinical priorities plays a large part in our current understanding of ’tuberculosis.’ To further examine this tension, we will now examine the personal tuberculosis stories of a novelist and a sociologist."The former kind of self-important, get-it-all-down academic writing is as embarrassing to read as adolescent poetry; they’re both driven by a desire to make sure the reader gets every last nuance, and the lack of subtlety makes you want to toss the book across the room.But the ideas buried within this book...the ideas are so sweet. If only they’d had the sense to ghostwrite this book. It could be a classic.

Most everything in modern societies rests on rules, standards, and regulations of one kind or another. Where do these endless detailed lists and definitions come from? This book is really unprecedented in the way it takes apart the practice of rule-making and nomenclature, to show us that there is a social and cultural process that lies behind the faceless lists. For me, it was like having the curtain of OZ lifted aside, so I could see for once the messy, petty, and often political way that things are sorted into categories and labeled.I disagee that the book is badly written. I found it better than the average academic title in studies of technology and society, where thick jargon is the primordial soup. This was one of the most original books about technological systems I have read in years, with wide application in many different fields.

A major advance in the study of classification infrastructures -- the definitions of infrastructure,

socially salient examples, and discussions of places where classification systems fail are invaluable!

Just about the best book ever on the hidden world of classifications and the way they teach us to look upon the world!

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