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

SORTING THINGS OUT

CLASSIFICATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

GEOFFREY C. BOWKER AND SUSAN LEIGH STAR

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.

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Customer Reviews

Is this book sociology, anthropology, or taxonomy? Sorting Things Out, by communications theorists Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, covers a lot of conceptual ground in its effort to sort out exactly how and why we classify and categorize the things and concepts we encounter day to day. But the analysis doesn't stop there; the authors go on to explore what happens to our thinking as a result of our classifications. With great insight and precise academic language, they pick apart our information systems and language structures that lie deeper than the everyday categories we use. The authors focus first on the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), a widely used scheme used by health professionals worldwide, but also look at other health information systems, racial classifications used by South Africa during apartheid, and more. Though it comes off as a bit too academic at times (by the end of the 20th century, most writers should be able to get the spelling of McDonald's restaurant right), the book has a clever charm that thoughtful readers will surely appreciate. A sly sense of humor sneaks into the writing, giving rise to the chapter title "The Kindness of Strangers," for example. After arguing that categorization is both strongly influenced by and a powerful reinforcer of ideology, it follows that revolutions (political or scientific) must change the way things are sorted in order to throw over the old system. Who knew that such simple, basic elements of thought could have such far-reaching consequences? Whether you ultimately place it with social science, linguistics, or (as the authors fear) fantasy, make sure you put Sorting Things Out in your reading pile. --Rob Lightner --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Classification theory is tough reading, but this is an important book that expounds the basics in a new fashion. Bowker and Star, both professors in the department of communication at the University of California, San Diego, emphasize (and show how) classification becomes invisible as it gains acceptance and exerts ever greater influence over our daily lives. They explore three issues: the role of classification in large infrastructures; classification and biography; and classification and work practice. The authors analyze the International Classification of Diseases, the Nursing Interventions Classification, the South African race classification under apartheid, and other working systems to illustrate their points about the inevitable social, political, and economic impacts of classification on people, mainly because we take them for granted, assume they represent the

"natural" way of the world, and therefore that we must conform to them. The closing chapter, "Why Classifications Matter," should be required reading for every librarian. It sums up what has gone before and sensitizes us to the power of classificationAa power we wield as organizers of information. Highly recommended for library and information science educators, students, and practicing classifiers; this book is a must for all professional bookshelves, not just for those of library schools and research institutions.ASheila S. Intner, GSLIS, Simmons Coll., Boston Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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!

This is a quintessentially academic book: Much of the subject matter is absolutely fascinating, particularly the chapter on the fraught process of distinguishing black from white in South Africa under apartheid, where many fell into a mixed-race purgatory unrecognized by the state apparatus; yet most of the authors' analysis is less interesting than they presume. They ask the right questions about the problematic nature of categories, but provide few answers, instead falling back to arching assertions such as "all category systems are moral and political entities," a statement that is so plainly false that the authors don't even bother to justify it.I would recommend the apartheid section of this book to anyone interested in that chapter of history, but the other examples the authors use (the ICD and the DSMIV) have been explored elsewhere to greater effect.

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.

Well, the topic is interesting. Standards, classifications, information infrastructures, etc. Susan Leigh Star explains that growing up as a Jew in a Catholic neighbourhood in New Jersey made her having problems with classifications. Perhaps this is her way of doing a public self-analysis by talking endlessly about standards and classifications, and the problems that such structures do not exist in a social vacuum, does not really add much insight onto the phenomenon. What's the point of this text? Does it help us improving the way we make standards and classifications? No. This is descriptive writing without any practical use.

This is an excellent book on classification as discourse. The authors do an excellent job of discussing this topic in terms of its social, political, and professional history and implications. It is an important title in the cultural studies of information and should be familiar to all concerned with this area of study.

Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences (Inside Technology) Symbolism, Its Origins

and Its Consequences (Art, Literature and Music in Symbolism, Its Origins and Its) The Wonders of the Colorado Desert (Southern California), Vol. 1 of 2: Its Rivers and Its Mountains, Its Canyons and Its Springs, Its Life and Its ... Journey Made Down the Overflow of the Colo WHO Classification of Tumours of Haematopoietic and Lymphoid Tissues (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) WHO Classification of Head and Neck Tumours (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) WHO Classification of Tumours of the Lung, Pleura, Thymus and Heart (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) WHO Classification of Tumours of the Urinary System and Male Genital Organs (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) WHO Classification of Tumours of Soft Tissue and Bone (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) WHO Classification of Tumours of Haematopoietic and Lymphoid Tissue [OP] (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) WHO Classification of Tumours of Endocrine Organs (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) WHO Classification of Tumours of the Central Nervous System (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) WHO Classification of Tumours of the Digestive System (IARC WHO Classification of Tumours) War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences Metamorphic, Igneous and Sedimentary Rocks : Sorting Them Out - Geology for Kids | Children's Earth Sciences Books Sorting It Out: Discerning God's Call to Ministry Child Size Masterpieces of Steps 1, 2, 3 - Matching, Pairing, and Sorting - Level 1 Easy Bundle of Algorithms in C++, Parts 1-5: Fundamentals, Data Structures, Sorting, Searching, and Graph Algorithms (3rd Edition) (Pts. 1-5) A Second Look at the Second Coming (Sorting Through the Speculations) Sorting (Math Counts) Algorithms in C++, Parts 1-4: Fundamentals, Data Structure, Sorting, Searching, Third Edition