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Theme issue editorial

# Experiences of Digitized Valuation

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In the editorial to the first part of this themed issue (Lee et al. 2022), we suggested that digitization is not simply a process of turning existing valuation instruments and practices into code. Rather, digitizing valuations can have unique implications for how social order is established, challenged, and maintained. To help us think about the dynamics of digitized valuation, we outlined six initial themes: digitization, infrastructure, power and agency, automation and judgment, accountability and fairness, as well as generativity and performativity. Each of these themes raised a number of questions, some of which have been addressed by papers in this double issue and some of which will be addressed in future work. Instead of adding further to the list, this closing editorial attempts to shift perspectives and explore an aspect of digitized valuation that has not yet been given much attention in the context of this journal, namely the relationship

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between practices and *experiences* of valuation. We suggest that it can be fruitful to revisit and examine more explicitly how experience is mediated, challenged, and constituted in contexts of digitized valuation practices (see also Ziewitz forthcoming).

A focus on the lived experiences of people as a way of understanding social life is of course not new. Philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and many others have long wondered how we, as human beings, make sense of and comprehend the world (see, e.g., Berger and Luckman 1967; Schutz 1967; Jay 2005). In the Modern American and European tradition, experience tends to be seen as an inward-looking awareness of the world – or as the anthropologist Robert Desjarlais (1994: 888) put it, a state that "readily equates with a person's inner life of consciousness and is often synonymous with subjectivity." We propose a different approach to the study of experience, namely one that is aligned with developments in science and technology studies (STS) and work associated with the so-called postphenomenological turn. Postphenomenology, as Ihde (2009) and Verbeek (2005) explain, substitutes embodiment for subjectivity. It is an attempt to overcome the modernist dichotomy between subject and object, human and world, by replacing it with a mutual interrelation (Verbeek 2005: 110). The subjectivity and objectivity of experience are constituted in relation to each other (see also Vindenes and Wasson 2021). At the same time, there has been a growing interest in the "sciences of subjectivity" as a form of world-making in STS and related fields (Shapin 2012: 179), focusing on subjectivity as a practical accomplishment and challenging the subjective-objective divide (e.g., Stenner 2008; Liberman 2014).

In other words, rather than taking experience or the existence of experiencing subjects for granted, we would like to ask how self-concepts are constituted through repeated encounters with digitized evaluation. Although researchers have already begun to broaden the scope of their investigations from a focus on data-driven technologies to the experiences of those who are subjected to these technologies, we suggest that stronger connections can be made to the notion of experience. While there is, by now, a rich literature on different valuation practices and devices (see the articles published in this journal over the years), less is known about the subjects of evaluation and their experiences of being valued, especially if they are not actively involved in valuation or digitization processes. As Ziewitz (forthcoming) points out:

> This area of concern… has become particularly salient with the rise of computational and other automated forms of valuation that tend to track and trace their subjects often without them being aware of their predicament, as in the case of predictive policing, credit scoring, and workplace monitoring.

Furthermore, as examples of "user experience" and "patient experience" have shown, experience has become a commodity and object of evaluation in its own right (Ziewitz 2017). It is this duality of experiencing valuing and evaluating experience that deserves more attention. How have (e)valuations of user experience changed with the rise of new digital technologies? How are such (e)valuations experienced by those subjected to them?

Exploring experience in the context of digitized valuation in this way can help us address a number of important issues. For one, as we already observed, subjects of evaluation are often not aware that they are being tracked and measured, raising questions of transparency and agency in the shadow of these systems. But even when people are aware of digital surveillance, it is often not quite clear how exactly experiences are turned into ratings, scores, and rankings, making it difficult to challenge judgments after the fact. For the most part, data subjects are told to "be themselves" in order not to interfere with processes of measurement, keeping them "scientific" and "objective" (Ziewitz and Singh 2021: 2). While such behavioral imperatives make sense from the perspective of managers and engineers, they tend to take on different lives in practice. As scholars have shown, people subject to evaluation engage in a range of reactive practices, developing new forms of adjustment, contestation, and resistance (e.g. Espeland and Sauder 2007; Ziewitz 2019; Rahman 2021; Ossandón 2022).

A good illustration of the dissonances that can emerge between digitally controlled experiences and what users are actually looking for is Lury et al.'s article (this issue) on "Digital Valuation: Lessons in Relevance from the Prototyping of a Recommendation App." Studying how people experience digital music recommendations in a world in which machines cannot grasp a lot of social context, the authors show how music recommendation apps may include people in categories that may not match their social world. An evening of listening to Elvis Presley with your mum, for instance, does not make you an aficionado of 1960s rock'n roll. Systems may process the world differently, missing important clues about what is happening in the user's world.

The article thus highlights an interesting facet of being valued by and valuing through digital systems. When users' experiences are mediated through data, applications, and infrastructures, questions about the nature of experience gain new salience. Whose experience are we talking about? Where is experience located? Where and how is the interaction ordered? In these cases, users try to make sense of systems and their own experiences with them. Trying to understand how systems work will arguably lead to speculation about why a system recommends a particular item. Think of folktales about Facebook listening to your conversations and then starting to display "related" ads. Why is the system constantly inserting Kanye West into

your life? Such experiences provoke a shift in analytical perspective. Rather than asking how valuation is being digitized – focusing on the roles and relevance of automated systems or databases – we are prompted to explore how digitization is made meaningful by those who are being algorithmically categorized, rated, and ranked.

The question of meaning-making is foregrounded in Wagenknecht et al.'s article (this issue) on "Digitised Valuation in Videoconference Workshops: Attaching Online Data to Stakes, Selves, and Other Data." The authors highlight the subjective, situated dimension of making online data meaningful and relevant, and thereby valuable. Drawing on ethnographic observations of two virtual workshops on the scarcity of water, they investigate how workshop participants understood and valued different types of data through "attachments" (Hennion 2007, 2017), i.e., relations they created between themselves, their experiences, the stakes of their task, and various data types. The analysis shows that for data to become valuable to people, they have to be made relatable and manageable. Giving data value requires grappling with, and modifying, the situatedness of data in complex relations.

Statements like "this data is beautiful," "this data is ugly," and "this data is relevant" illustrate the processes whereby seemingly objective data are imbued with users' valuations and experiences. The work of cleaning, selecting, and relating data to different experiences, value registers, and tastes is always situated; data are made present, apprehended, and endowed with worth through everyday relations. This observation points to how digital systems are not only mediating human experience, but also are themselves being mediated through experience. Just as realities are performed for users through digital systems, realities are performed for digital systems by users.

Of course, the formation of attachments, concerns, and subjectivities in digitized valuation is likely to be experienced differently depending on one's position and role in these emerging domains. We ought to take seriously the politics of experience and the challenges of popular calls for "giving people a voice." Digitized infrastructures of classification and valuation affect whose experiences count and generate new forms of inclusion and exclusion (Fourcade and Healy 2013). We need to understand the political implications of exploring digitized valuation experiences. As Scott (1991: 797) reminds us, "what counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political."

The final article in this themed issue is Justesen and Plesner's study of "Angry Citizens and Black Belt Employees: Cascading Classifications of and around a Predictive Algorithm." The article traces the development, roles, and effects of a predictive algorithm in a debt-collecting public sector organization. Drawing on concepts of nominal and ordinal classification (Fourcade 2016), they examine how

intended non-hierarchical classifications glide into new hierarchical valuations of both citizens and employees. In their terminology, classifications were cascading. Classifications provided by the algorithm, such as classification of citizens in terms of their "readiness to pay," became entangled with other classifications. As Justesen and Plesner (this issue: 11) write:

> Organizational actors superimposed new and different classifications onto those provided by the algorithm. The latter became entangled with classification of citizens in terms of motivation or attitude (who is willing to pay), the potential trouble they might cause (who is a 'difficult' person), or their emotional state (who is an 'angry' person). At the same time, employees had to be recategorized to match the algorithm's proposed citizen categories.

The notion of "cascading classifications" thus draws attention not only to the dynamic and unstable relationship between algorithmic, organizational and individual valuation practices, but also to the political consequences of digitized valuation.

A focus on experience thus changes how we understand and approach the study of digitized valuation's political implications, how people are made (in)visible, how they can (or cannot) participate in processes that reclassify and evaluate them. A concern with experience can help us trace the unarticulated import of assumptions about social, political, and other differences. Since we are already confronted with digitized evaluative infrastructures (Kornberger et al. 2017) in our everyday lives, analyzing the lived experiences of data subjects – and data producers – can help us to reflect on how we understand the new categories, roles, and processes of defining value that are emerging, as well as how users' experience mediates systems' experience. It allows us to explore what it means to be measured in these situations or how people perceive their agency in digitized spaces. This focus might further help us understand how someone sees the concealment of human input or the embedding of biases in algorithmic systems; or whether there are new forms of intersubjective agency that may emerge as a result. Similarly, we could ask what it feels like to be involved in accountability dynamics generated by digitized valuation, or what kinds of experiences and subjectivities lead to the resistance, use, appropriation, and creation of different digital valuations.

Together, the three articles provide a wealth of inspiration for studying the intersection of experience and digitized valuation. Each article raises a unique set of questions about the methodological, theoretical, and political dimensions of experience as both a topic and a resource for inquiry. In doing so, they also contribute more generally to the study of valuation as a "problem" (Board of Editors 2020) – not in the normative sense of claiming there is something wrong with forms of digitized valuation (although we can discuss that, too), but in

the sense of studying the "problems of those who value and are subject to valuation" (p. 2). Just as "raw data" is an oxymoron (Gitelman 2013), "raw valuation" is a contradiction in terms. Digitization, experience, and valuation are always already folded into one another and should be studied accordingly.

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