



ISM SEMINAR

Autumn Term 2014-15

Speaker: Professor Daniel Neyland, Goldsmiths, University of London

Title: Algorithmic Accountability

Date: Wednesday 29 October 2014

Venue: M2, WBS Teaching Centre

Time: 11am

Abstract: Across recent popular and academic reports we are told that algorithms trap us and control our lives, undermine our privacy, have power and an independent agential impact. This has led to calls for algorithms to be subjected to forms of governance. However, the same compelling narratives that talk of agency and power, also frequently suggest that algorithms are inaccessible, or even on occasions operate beyond human cognition, thus posing problems for the very idea of governance. This presentation will argue that in order to govern algorithms, an important prior step is to prepare what might otherwise be obscure and inaccessible algorithms, to be held to account.

The presentation will suggest that two sensibilities (derived from Science and Technology Studies) can provide a basis for scrutinising the terms of the compelling narrative, alongside offering a methodological starting point for close and critical scrutiny of the algorithm in action. These comprise a post-essentialist sensibility to disturb the notion that algorithms have a single, essential characteristic and a post-determinist sensibility to counter the claim that algorithms have a predictable power or agency. The sensibilities provide opportunities for instigating an ontologically sceptical accountability, posing questions such as: What natures are attributed to algorithms, from where and how do these emerge, in what kinds of actions are algorithms involved, how are those actions enabled by complex sets of relationships, to what extent do these relationships endure over time? These questions are addressed in this presentation through an ethnographic study of an attempt to develop an 'ethical,' algorithmic surveillance system. The study became particularly focused around the practices through which something as apparently obscure and inaccessible as an algorithm could be rendered able to be held to account (including questions of whether or not the algorithm could hold itself to account). The paper argues that the hyphenated version of the term – account-ability – is useful for analysing the distribution, responsibilities and consequences of witnessing the algorithm in action and hence rendering it account-able.

Biography: Professor Daniel Neyland is a sociologist with research interests in issues of governance, accountability and ethics in forms of science, technology and organization. He draws on ideas from ethnomethodology, science and technology studies (in particular forms of radical and reflexive scepticism, constructivism, Actor-Network Theory and the recent STS turn to markets and other forms of organizing) and his research is ethnographic in orientation. In particular he is interested in the question of how entities (objects, values, relationships, processes and also people) become of the world.

Daniel's substantive interests are quite varied. Across a number of research projects he has ethnographically engaged with: security and surveillance, traffic management, waste, airports, biometrics, parking, signposts, malaria vaccines, Universities, algorithms and speeding drivers. Through these projects he has looked into ontology, notions of equivalence, parasitism, the mundane, market failures, problems and solutions, deleting, value and the utility of social science.

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