

# Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences (Inside Technology)

*Geoffrey C. Bowker, Susan Leigh Star*

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**Geoffrey C. Bowker, Susan Leigh Star : *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences (Inside Technology)*** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences (Inside Technology)*:

30 of 30 people found the following review helpful. A real advance in knowledge - inspiring. By CustomerMost

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 disagree 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. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Important work on classification and its limitations. By K. Stein 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! 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Need to have. By Annette Just about the best book ever on the hidden world of classifications and the way they teach us to look upon the world!

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.

.com 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 From *Library Journal* 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 classification. A 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. A Sheila S. Intner, GSLIS, Simmons Coll., Boston Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. This book provides a tool to help all of us --

from designers of technical systems to users of e-mail -- understand and knowledgeably influence the infrastructures that shape our lives. (JoAnne Yates, Professor of Communication, Information, and Organization Studies, Sloan School of Management, MIT) *Sorting Things Out* is a brilliant dissection of a fundamental facet of social life. Its analytic comparisons shed new light on familiar problems which plague all the social sciences. (Howard S. Becker, University of California-Santa Barbara)