

Call for presentations (2023-2024): the limits and companions of quantification

The social studies of quantification focus greatly on examining the production processes of numbers as well as their use in their search for trust (Porter 2020). There are public and political implications of numbers: they do not just describe but “perform” the social phenomena they encapture (Didier, 2007). For example, Thomas Stapleford (2009) reviews the history of the US price index focusing on how the index was constructed and used. Emmanuel Didier (2020) examines the rise of sampling by tracing the production and use of agricultural statistics and of the unemployment rate in the United States.

Across their “journeys,” statistics acquire a life of their own (Leonelli, Tempini, 2021) and carry a variety of “companions.” (Morgan 2011). Companions to numbers include narratives (Morgan et al., 2022), visualisations (Friendly and Wainer, 2021), or even humour (Porter 2012).

If statistics can be standalone objects, why do they need “good companions”? What roles do networks of people play as travelling companions of statistics? Who constructs these companions and how? How do users or audiences receive and unpack them?

Despite their seemingly neutral packaging and labelling, nothing guarantees that statistics will travel unaltered. They might be accompanied by “bad companions” who alter them to subvert, re-label, cast doubt, and discredit them or certain arguments (Morgan 2011). How do “bad companions” shape how statistics are used and interpreted? How do “bad companions” limit trust in numbers and the uses of quantification? Who draws the boundaries between “good” and “bad” companions? Does the absence of companions limit the efficacy or trust of statistics?

To contribute to this thematic cycle and propose a presentation for the SSSQ seminar, please send an abstract before the 15th of June to sssq.seminar@gmail.com

Didier, Emmanuel. "Do statistics 'perform' the economy?." Do economists make markets? On the performativity of economics (2007): 276-310.

Didier, E. (2020). *America by the Numbers: Quantification, Democracy, and the Birth of National Statistics*. MIT Press.

Friendly, Michael, and Howard Wainer. *A history of data visualization and graphic communication*. Harvard University Press, 2021.

Leonelli, Sabina, and Niccolò Tempini. *Data journeys in the sciences*. Springer Nature, 2020.

Morgan, M.S. (2011). Travelling Facts. In Howlett P. and Morgan, M.S. *How well do facts travel? The Dissemination of Reliable Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press.

Morgan, Mary S., Kim M. Hajek, and Dominic J. Berry, eds. *Narrative Science*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Porter, T. M. (2020). *Trust in Numbers*. Princeton University Press.

Porter, Theodore M. "Funny numbers." *Culture Unbound* 4.4 (2012): 585-598.

Stapleford, T. A. (2009). *The Cost of Living in America. A Political History of Economic Statistics*. Cambridge University Press.