



Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life (Cornell Paperbacks)

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Standardization is one of the defining aspects of modern life, its presence so pervasive that it is usually taken for granted. However cumbersome, onerous, or simply puzzling certain standards may be, their fundamental purpose in streamlining procedures, regulating behaviors, and predicting results is rarely questioned. Indeed, the invisibility of infrastructure and the imperative of standardizing processes signify their absolute necessity. Increasingly, however, social scientists are beginning to examine the origins and effects of the standards that underpin the technology and practices of everyday life. *Standards and Their Stories* explores how we interact with the network of standards that shape our lives in ways both obvious and invisible. The main chapters analyze standardization in biomedical research, government bureaucracies, the insurance industry, labor markets, and computer technology, providing detailed accounts of the invention of "standard humans" for medical testing and life insurance actuarial tables, the imposition of chronological age as a biographical determinant, the accepted means of determining labor productivity, the creation of international standards for the preservation and access of metadata, and the global consequences of "ASCII imperialism" and the use of English as the lingua franca of the Internet. Accompanying these in-depth critiques are a series of examples that depict an almost infinite variety of standards, from the controversies surrounding the European Union's supposed regulation of banana curvature to the minimum health requirements for immigrants at Ellis Island, conflicting (and ever-increasing) food portion sizes, and the impact of standardized punishment metrics like "Three Strikes" laws. The volume begins with a pioneering essay from Susan Leigh Star and Martha Lampland on the nature of standards in everyday life that brings together strands from the several fields represented in the book. In an appendix, the editors provide a guide for teaching courses in this emerging interdisciplinary field, which they term "infrastructure studies," making *Standards and Their Stories* ideal for scholars, students, and those curious about why coffins are becoming wider, for instance, or why the Financial Accounting Standards Board refused to classify September 11 as an "extraordinary" event.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Standards and Their Stories is an important, well-written, and extraordinarily provocative examination of a part of the world usually hidden from any sort of public view. The authors show how much of what we take for granted is the result of negotiation, compromise, and occasionally coercion. They do so by inventing a suite of new and innovative research methods. As a result, this book is likely to become not only 'the standard' for studies of this sort but also the starting point for new ways of investigating sociotechnical processes."—Lawrence Busch, Michigan State University

"I sat down to read the book, read the first page, and paused while my face broke into a smile and a comfortable warm feeling came over my body. Yup, this was going to be a great book. Further reading confirmed the impression. Standards rule our lives. Yeah, standards, that dull, frustrating, topic studied by 'The Society of People Interested in Boring Things.' But this book proves that far from being dull, the stories behind standards are interesting, insightful, and revealing of the workings of bureaucracy. Standards are essential for different stuff made by different companies in different countries to work well together. Whether it is bananas or chocolate, application forms for terrorist training, or the sizes of people's rear ends (critical for airline seats), standards are essential part of life today (all these are covered in the book). This engaging book serves several purposes. It explains much of the history, rationale, and politics of standards. It shows why they have huge social impact, far beyond what most of us realize, often far beyond what was intended. And best of all, it is fun to read."—Don Norman, Northwestern University, author of *The Design of Future Things*

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

Susan Leigh Star was Doreen Boyce Chair for Library and Information Science, University of Pittsburgh.

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Everyday Life (Cornell Paperbacks) is kind of publication which is giving the reader unpredictable experience.

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