



Put to the Test: Critical Evaluations of Testing

CONTRIBUTIONS

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Organizers: Noortje Marres and David Stark, University of Warwick

1. Introduction

Noortje Marres and David Stark, University of Warwick

2. Sex reckoning: pregnancy testing and intimate life.

Joan Robinson, Columbia University

Health tests are moving rapidly from labs to laypeople – “into the wild” (Hutchins 1995; Robinson 2016). This paper seeks to examine the movement of one particular test, the home pregnancy test, and its use in contemporary intimate life. It asks, what is the pregnancy test testing? More broadly, what happens when any test becomes mobile? To investigate this, I used 85 interviews with users and partners, interviews with inventors, and a focus group. I find that when the test went “into the wild,” it became available for a wider variety of uses and users than intended. I argue, a mobile test’s 1) *application* and 2) *information* reveals a lot about power. The *control* and *negotiation* of these two features show how power circulates in the context of a test. In this case, I show how power circulates around sex, women’s potentially pregnant bodies, and reproduction in contemporary intimate life.

3. Border as test. The state and the testing concurs of citizenship.

Willem Schinkel – Erasmus University Rotterdam

This paper discusses three types of citizenship testing currently being implemented in the Netherlands, and evaluates these as forms of ‘state work’ on the problem of migration: a) literal

‘citizenship tests’ conducted with prospective citizens migrating to the country; b) the asylum process, in which ‘being gay’ can be reason for granting asylum, but where ‘being gay’ is also the outcome of an examination organized by suspicion, and c) the measurement of immigrants’ ‘integration’, comprised of a testing process in which factishes like ‘being a member of society’ and ‘being modern’ surface. The chapter argues that each of these tests enacts a ‘border crossing’, which then requires an identity test configured by deceptibility; Using the epistemic frame of ‘border as method’ (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013), it analyses citizenship as accrued and (re)configured along a migration trajectory that takes shape as a *testing concours*.

4. The (Developing) World as a Laboratory: The Use of Randomized Controlled Trials in International Development.

Luciana de Souza Leão – Columbia University

In the last 15 years, the drive for evidence-based policymaking has been coupled with a concurrent push for the use of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) as the “gold standard” for generating rigorous evidence on whether or not development interventions work. This paper takes the widespread adoption of RCTs in international development as an invitation to examine the political and scientific processes through which a test can be successful, even when (or because) the policy being tested fails. I investigate how proponents of RCTs attempt to disentangle the purposes and merits of *testing* development projects from *doing* them, as a way to bypass the political and ethical problems presented by adopting the experimental method with foreign aid beneficiaries in poor countries. I also examine cases where this didn’t work, in order to highlight the controversies associated with implementing RCTs in international development.

5. How does testing redefine (or not) our esthetic and political identities? The forging of musical taste and the sorting of migrants in France.

Antoine Hennion, CSI, Mines ParisTech, PSL University/CNRS, France

The paper questions the use of tests in two contrasted cases. One, concerning aesthetics, addresses a classic issue in music ‘testing studies’: do tests reveal taste or produce it? Does having a ‘personal’ taste mean anything? How do tests redefine (or not) aesthetic pluralism? The second case explores the margins of testing, raising political stakes: how do French public officers decide whether one is an ‘economic migrant’ to be possibly forced out, or a ‘political refugee’ to be granted asylum? No characters are ‘already-there’: to define criteria and ‘find’ them ‘there’ is simultaneously an abstract selective process, and a concrete performance in a situation. We

examine such 'épreuves' (referring to proofs, but also challenges, even hard times) in a pragmatic and pluralistic view. Do 'épreuves' help us realize underlying 'orders of worth' or do they force us to confront the radical disorder of open realities?

6. Prototype intervention with humans and more-than-humans: Exploring the political effects of design testing.

Martin Tironi, School of Design at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.

Testing practices using physical prototypes has become a common strategy in the innovation of services and products and increasingly in modes of implementing 'smart' urban policies through living-labs or pilots. As a technique for validating hypotheses about the future functioning of products or policies, prototyping would be based on the idea of generating original knowledge through the failures produced during the testing process. Drawing on the comparison of prototyping interventions in the city with human users and in the zoo with non-human users, I examine two conflicting capacities of prototyping: as a mechanism of conscription and enrollment that seeks to 'colonize' and prescribe normativities and prototyping as a fragile, careful event that can make frictions tangible, articulating matters of concerns and ways to speculate alternative scenarios. Through this contrast -problem solving prototype/problem making prototype- I contribute to the discussion of the political and ontological effects of 'design testing' in society.

7. Testing the Limits of the City in Shenzhen.

Jonathan Bach, The New School

Seldom has a city embodied the ethos of "testing" as much as Shenzhen, China—"an experiment to grow capitalism in a test tube"—which developed from an economic zone into a mega-city in little over one generation. This essay explores the relation between the city as a *test case* for political and social ends, as a *testing ground* for policies, and as a *test bed* for specific kinds of technical experiments. Through examining Shenzhen's experiments with policy reforms, street-level tests of digital infrastructures, and the city's informal ecosystem of copying, rumors and fakes, this essay will raise epistemological questions about what testing at such complex, interrelated scales enables and disallows, affirms and disavows. Drawing on the longer history of model making in both socialist and capitalist contexts, Shenzhen is an exemplary case for examining how urban space functions, challenges, and complicates the recent proliferation of forms and genres of testing.

8. Agential Gerrymandering: Testing objects and social relations.

Janet Vertesi – Princeton University

How do we know whether a test is successful when the object or tools of investigation is distant or otherwise unknown? Using ethnographic data gathered among NASA's Europa orbiter and lander teams, I show how scientists explain or otherwise resolve inconclusive evidence from their probes and planets in the field of planetary science: by describing faraway objects and instruments as unruly or uncooperative when an experiment fails, but as passive objects or invisible proxies when all goes as planned. I draw on Steve Woolgar and Dorothy Pawlich's concept of "ontological gerrymandering" in social problems explanations (1985) to describe this as a form of "agential gerrymandering" in the field, and demonstrate how this attribution of agency to objects and instruments shifts based on social positioning, arguments within the field, and concerns for resource distribution. Among scientists, accounts of agency are put to use to justify the failed outcomes of past experiments.

9. Testing (in)tangible futures: the counterfactual and the economic design of the social.

Daniel Neyland and Vera Ehrenstein, Goldsmiths London

Extending economic designs to social goods involves bringing into being diverse matters that shift between the tangible and intangible. In this paper we examine the counterfactual as an economic instrument to gain purchase on (in)tangibles by exploring a set of temporally inflected tests including the EU Emissions Trading System, a Social Impact Bond for children at-risk of going into care, and an Advanced Market Commitment for corralling overseas aid into a child immunization programme. Each case involves a distinct counterfactual with a particular temporal orientation toward the real-time, retrospective or prospective organisation of testing. At the centre of these arrangements, the counterfactual provides a means to put the (in)tangible to the test as a means for economically designing and testing future social arrangements.

10. Co-existence or displacement? Street trials of driverless cars as experiments in society.

Noortje Marres – University of Warwick

This paper examines recent street trials of autonomous vehicles in the UK and the US, in order to evaluate a normative claim advanced by industry and government: introducing AI into the street will enable society to move beyond individualistic models of automobility. Drawing on fieldwork and social media analysis, I show how the tests in question materialize this claim by

methodological means: they bring the interactional capacities of intelligent vehicles - their ability to co-exist peacefully with other road users like pedestrians - within the remit of real-world experimentation (Vinkhuyzen and Cefkin, 2016). I will then show iterations of street testing undo this proposition and compel its reformulation. Current street test designs are limited by their narrow conception of sociality in terms of interaction between machines and road users. Only by extending the experimental frame beyond this can we grasp the conflicts and possibilities for resolution between the entities involved.

11. Testing the creative identity: personas as probes in underground electronic music.

Giovanni Formilan and David Stark, University of Warwick

In many creative fields, distinctive identities are shaped around named personas – pen names in literature, stage names in the performing arts, aliases in music. More than just responding to the need for artistic recognition, these personas also serve as test devices to navigate the complexity and unpredictability of one’s presence in the creative journey. Drawing evidence from the underground electronic music scene, a field where both genres and aliases proliferate, we outline dynamics of anonymity, pseudonymity, and visibility that surround the use of aliases. We argue that the alias is both a tool artists use to probe the creative environment and a pragmatic device to recursively put one’s creative identity to the test. Representing *a part* of the artist, the alias is projected *apart* from the artist and, through this curious distance, creative identity develops as a process of ongoing curation.

12. The ambiguities of testing in crime control: producing lingering technologies and suspicions.

Francisca Grommé, Goldsmiths, University of London

Police surveillance technologies are reconfiguring who is suspect and who can intervene. Their development and application often relies on pilot studies and trials, which in some cases are repeated without prospect of permanent application. This article examines two pilot studies in Dutch law enforcement on data mining and synthetic DNA. I propose that these pilots lack clear criteria for the evaluation of success and failure and argue that these ambiguous qualities are best understood as achieved outcomes. My fieldwork shows that pilot study narratives mix spatial and temporal dynamics, producing (in)determinacy and (non-) coherence. To conclude, ambiguity can enable the inclusion of a multiplicity of actors and forms of expertise. Yet, ambiguous narratives also limit opportunities for effective participation and problem articulation of this mode of testing.

13. Testing the future or performing the present? Central bank stress tests as a new conception of regulatory control.

Nathan Coombs

Since the famously successful stress test orchestrated by the U.S. Treasury and Federal Reserve at the height of financial crisis, central bank stress tests have become a ubiquitous feature of banking regulation. Regulatory authorities devise an extreme, hypothetical macroeconomic scenario and the effects are simulated on banks' balance sheets to test their resilience to future crises. Or so the story goes. As regulators also concede, another use of the tests is in driving higher capitalization across the banking sector. This raises the question: what exactly is being tested? Providing an alternative to Foucauldian interpretations of stress testing as well as existing framings in terms of Jens Beckert's concept of 'fictional expectations', this paper argues that while the tests are future-oriented their primary aim is an instrumental performance of the present. 'Performance' here is not meant in the same sense as central banks' expectation management in monetary policy. Rather, drawing on a neglected terminology in organizational theory, what is performed is a new conception of regulatory control where hypothetical expectations are used to justify discretionary supervisory powers to control banks' capital levels and governance processes. The analysis is informed by interviews with regulatory and financial practitioners implementing the Bank of England's stress tests as well as a large body of documents on international stress testing regimes, including those of the U.S. Federal Reserve and European Central Bank.