Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star are both Professors in the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego. They are coauthors of Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences (MIT Press, 1999).

Address: Department of Communication, University of California, San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, California 92093–0503, USA; fax: +1 619 534 7315; emails: bowker@ucsd.edu; lstar@ucsd.edu

COMMENT (continued)

Opening the Democracy Box

John Carson

In November 2000, Americans witnessed an extraordinary political spectacle. As is well known, this was not the quick and virtually mechanical process of voting, tabulating, and announcing winners to which the American public had become accustomed. Instead, the presidential vote was so close that it took weeks to produce a result, and generated a raft of lawsuits that subjected numerous aspects of the election procedures to intense public and legal scrutiny. In the end, both victor and defeated were left questioning the system and its legitimacy, and numerous commentators wondered what, if anything, had gone wrong. Was the problem character flaws in the candidates, the litigious nature of American society, the deep divisions within the electorate, or the reliance on an 'antiquated' balloting technology? From a science studies perspective, however, another sort of response might have been proffered: a technology that was supposed to remain invisible – the voting punch card with its soon-to-be notorious perforated chads – became visible, and a transparency that was supposed to be produced – the connection between voter and vote – was instead rendered opaque. As methods of counting proliferated and arguments raged back and forth around the relative objectivity and accuracy of machine versus hand counts, it quickly became clear just how much social/political work voting machinery routinely performed.

It is not that punch-card counters made no decisions, as some advocates for the objectivity of machines over people argued. Stacks of uncounted (because machine-uncountable) ballots testified to a process of vote tabulation in which machines determined card-by-card which candidates, if any, the voters had chosen. Rather, the delegation of certain tasks to non-human agents allowed much of the voting process to be ‘black-boxed’.
Under normal circumstances the assumption was routinely made that
machines produced accurate (or accurate enough) counts by seeming to
remove subjectivity from the system, so that voting machinery could
remain an unnoticed and uninteresting aspect of an election. With this
state of invisibility achieved, the election outcome could be viewed as tied
directly to the actions of the voters, and the voters as disciplined to vote in
manners consonant with the rules of the state. Once the ‘black box’ was
prised open, however, issues of objectivity, accuracy and politics mingled
everywhere, and the sense of direct connection between voter and state
became problematic at best.

Everyday technologies of regulation and power rarely get subjected to
such public scrutiny. As Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar pointed out over
two decades ago in regard to laboratory black boxes, the costs, in every
sense of the term, are normally too great, especially once such machinery
has become a mundane part of the ways in which social order is created
and maintained. Nevertheless, at such moments when one of these social
technologies is made visible, the constructed and mediated nature of the
links between rulers and ruled can be seen. In one regard, of course, this is
simply to state the obvious: virtually all self-described democratic nations,
and many non-democratic ones as well for that matter, rely on systems of
representatives to act as intermediaries between the will of the people and
the actions of the government. But representatives of this sort are intended
to be visible, and to act, not as simple conduits for the desires of their
constituents, but rather as filters, making choices based on their own
calculated and even subjective assessments of citizens’ preferences and
national needs. Voting machines, however, and all of the social technologies
like them, are not typically invested with such authority. Their rôle is to act
as transmission mechanisms, ways of maintaining uninterrupted and un-
modulated lines of sight and communication from the citizenry to the
state, or from the state to the citizenry. Indeed, their communicative and
regulative functions depend precisely on their ability to produce the sense
that they add nothing to the process, that they marshal technology and
expertise in the service of impersonal and objective fact.

So what happened once that link was, at least momentarily, ruptured?
Questions of legitimacy, as we saw, spewed forth all over the place, only to
be settled by human actors representing themselves as making decisions in
machine-like ways. The county election boards attempted to specify pre-
cisely the difference between ‘hanging’, ‘pregnant’ and ‘dimpled’ chads, for
example, and the US Supreme Court acted in deus-ex-machina style to
confer legitimacy by seeming ‘mechanically’ to apply law and precedent. In
the aftermath of the election, as well, the immediate response has been to
call for better technology, new methods that will ‘restore’ the broken
linkage in the system, and allow all to return to normal. Certainly that is
the outcome most likely to occur, given a Congress and a new President
little disposed to looking more deeply into matters. But two other possible
paths merit at least some consideration.
The first, as Sheila Jasanoff convincingly argues in her contribution to this forum, is to see the 2000 Presidential election, not as revealing pathology in US election technology, but as a perfectly viable system dealing with an election too close to call. From this perspective there was no problem: the electorate, faced with two lacklustre candidates, indifferently chose between them and the result was truly, within errors of measurement, a tie, exactly the outcome that the voting machinery provided. Under such an interpretation, better technology is not the answer, but rather a rethinking of the nature of an election. One might imagine, for example, resorting to the New Mexico model, where close votes are decided by a hand in a poker game, or some other game of chance (perhaps with the candidates decked out in Western finery, just to enhance the effect). Or one might imagine various schemata using multiple voting under the requirement that the winner must attain an absolute majority. While certain complications might arise for the notion that a direct connection exists between the winner and 'the will of the people', the compensation might be some interrogation of the concept of democracy, what it practically means, and how it can be better realized within a large and diverse nation.

Second, one might also use the unmasking of the black boxes that the Presidential election provided to initiate an even more fundamental questioning of the whole machinery of governance and its relation to the will of those governed. From this perspective, the point would be to bring greater visibility and accountability to every aspect of the process, to make clear all the ways in which the techno-scientific objects and expertise relied on to create an ordered state are not simply neutral conduits of the will of rulers or ruled, but themselves actors shaping what gets transmitted and what meanings such transmissions contain. Viewed in this way, the solution to the confusions of the 2000 Presidential election is not simply to eliminate the punch-card ballot (as desirable as that may be), but to try to ensure, through a system of citizen oversight, that whatever messages the voters send to their representatives are received, and that these voices include not just those of well-tended suburbanites, but also those, like many African Americans in Broward and Miami-Dade counties, who are regularly disenfranchised and overlooked whenever elections are held.

Notes

John Carson is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Michigan. His research is primarily in the history of the human sciences, and he is currently at work on a book manuscript tentatively entitled Making
What is TWAP?

Three Notes on the American Election in the Year 2000

Harry Collins, with Sam Finn and Patrick Sutton

Holiday Inn, Arlington, Virginia, 11 December 2000 – the height of the legal debate following the election: CNN runs an advertisement showing touring car races and the Audi Quattro which ‘has such unbelievable traction that they banned it for having an unfair advantage’. An actor representing a typical American car-buyer says: ‘I’ll take all the unfair advantage I can get’.

Joke overheard in Louisiana State University refectory: ‘After the 2000 election the old Florida voting machines were sold to China for use in a snap election. George Bush won’.

Examiners’ Boards

The 2000 US election may be the biggest breaching experiment of all time, but something similar happens every year in most UK university departments. In Britain, undergraduate honours degrees have to be fitted into one of four classes: 1st, 2.1, 2.2, and 3rd. (Students can also fail.) At these universities’ annual ‘Examiners’ Boards’, a student’s essay and examination marks are aggregated and averaged, then converted into a class. The average is then lost to view forever, and the class of degree is the only thing that remains. Most students’ averages fall readily into one of the four classes, but there are always some borderline cases. Thus, in many universities the divide between 2.2 and 2.1 is a mark of 60%: the question that often arises is, what do you do with students whose average turns out to be around 59%? What the Examining Board has in common with the 2000