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Playing the evaluation accumulation game: How rival platforms compete in digital fields of power

Digital evaluations having no standard criteria, they undermine our understanding of the power relationships attached to evaluation. Research explains that digital evaluations produce new effects on evaluated actors' behaviors, but overlooks that in non-digital settings, former effects used to depend on and produce power relationships between competing actors diffusing evaluations. In this article, we introduce the competition between platforms in the analysis of the power shifts associated to the digitalization of evaluations, by leveraging Bourdieu's take on markets as fields. Our study of the French jobbing market reveals that an 'evaluation accumulation game' shapes platform managers' access to resources in a self-reproducing manner. We also found that platforms attempt to improve their market position by tailoring the algorithmic use of accumulated evaluations and by playing (with) the rules of the game. By showing that the relative amount of digital evaluations accumulated by a given platform redefines its power relationships with its competitors and users, we offer a theory of power relationships in digital fields that extends current analyses of platform competition and updates Bourdieu's theory of fields.

Keywords: online platforms; algorithms; data; fields, power; online reviews; evaluation; gig economy.

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