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### ARTICLE

# Spectacular Colleges and Spectacular Rankings

The 'US News' rankings of American 'best' colleges

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*Abstract.* This article applies Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle to the institutional field of contemporary American higher education. Our case study examines the *US News & World Report* system of college rankings, which has come to acquire a powerful role in determining exchange values among colleges and universities. Based on a document analysis of 12 issues of the *USN*, we present three processes by which it accomplishes the construction of the rankings spectacle: abstraction, valuation and legitimation. First, the *USN* abstracts *images* of colleges and universities in the form of discrete numbers. Second, these numbers are valued, compared and ranked as exchangeable commodities. Finally, we examine the discursive strategies employed by the *USN* to legitimize its rankings as accurate and useful. As higher education is a unique social institution associated with the notions of truth, knowledge, rationality and science, the widespread consumption and influence of the *USN* rankings illuminate the degree to which the society of the spectacle has arrived upon today's American society.

### *Key words*

abstraction • commodification • culture • Debord • education • spectacle

**IN THE ERA OF THE** so-called 'knowledge economy' and global capitalism, a college education has increasingly become like a commodity, at least in the United States. Instead of being simply embedded in an economy exchanging labor and material products, social institutions, such as

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American higher education, are now also immersed in a new social economy arising from the exchange of representations, signs, symbols, images or 'spectacles', a term coined by critical theorist Guy Debord.<sup>1</sup> According to our observation, a spectacular economy of education has been created. Not only has education become a commodity, it is also becoming a spectacle.

'Spectacles', in the theory formulated by Debord, refer to abstract representations and images that convey meanings radically divorced from the material qualities of the objects or phenomena represented. Spectacles have increasingly conquered society, as individuals rely on abstract representations to see the world rather than attempting to understand society through a grasp of material relations.<sup>2</sup> More precisely, Debord observes how abstraction increasingly becomes institutionalized into the 'society of the spectacle', an economy of commodities circulating in a realm detached from material relations. In contemporary American society, as Douglas Kellner (2003a, b) demonstrates, the exchange values of clothes and shoes are heavily connected to images created by costly advertisement rather than their use values. Likewise, the commercial success of movies is based on images of big names created by widespread publicity, TV news is written according to potential size of audience rather than the truth values of reporting, and electoral votes are based as much on the political image of a candidate as their policy position. Importantly, the society of the spectacle is not a society of inaccurate misrepresentations. It is, rather, a society in which abstract images have come to stand in for the real and may therefore be exchanged and compared as 'real' commodities of a spectacular economy.

This article examines the degree to which this society of the spectacle has arrived by looking at how it is penetrating the institutional field of American higher education. Examples include ranking colleges through students' standardized test scores, promoting faculty based solely on their number of prestigious journal publications and judging program effectiveness and faculty productiveness through arbitrary statistical data (Kirp, 2004; Miyoshi, 2000; Readings, 1996). Our specific case study examines the *US News & World Report* (hereafter referred to as the *USN*) college rankings as the type of spectacle described by Debord. This study will demonstrate three processes by which the *USN* constructs the rankings spectacle: abstraction, valuation and legitimation. First, the material conditions of universities and colleges are abstracted as images. Second, these images are quantified and evaluated as exchangeable commodities. And, finally, the *USN* employs discourse strategies to maximize its legitimacy. The end result

is a spectacular economy of education, in which abstract rankings become images of educational institutions and the exchange values of these spectacular images replace the use values of the institutions themselves.

*USN* college rankings make an interesting and important theoretical study of a spectacle. Debord's theory has traditionally been applied to analyze representations associated with the realms of art, aesthetics and sensation. The *USN* spectacle, in contrast, arises through written texts and statistical analyses.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many entertainment spectacles – movies, festivals, advertisements, theatrical performances – seem to come and go, frequently changing, appearing once and then quickly replaced by another, whereas the *USN* college rankings offer a model of a more stabilized spectacle. After quickly rising to prominence, the *USN* rankings have persisted for over two decades in a relatively consistent and institutionalized form. These differences provoke a different set of questions, but they also expand Debord's theory to make sense of phenomena happening in the realms of 'scientific rankings' and social science.

### THE 'USN' RANKINGS AS DEBORD'S SPECTACLES

A recent invention that began in 1983, the annual *USN* college rankings quickly became the pre-eminent marker of educational value and quality among the US public and beyond. As a commercial publication, the *USN* evaluates colleges and universities and then assigns these institutions to categories (first tier, second tier, and so on). These categories have tangible consequences on the institutions' social relations and the material organization of higher education along several fronts. First, the *USN* rankings maintain a sizeable audience. The publication sells over 2.2 million copies of each annual college rankings issue (McDonough et al., 1998: 514). Second, according to a major survey conducted by McDonough and colleagues (1998), 40 percent of college freshmen consider rankings to be either somewhat important (30 percent) or very important (10 percent) in their choice of institution. The importance of college rankings increases with the students' socioeconomic backgrounds as well as the selectivity of the colleges. Over 75 percent of the students in the most selective institutions and nearly 50 percent of all upper-income students acknowledge rankings as very important or somewhat important in their choice of college. Thus, the *USN* rankings influence the student demographic and institutional configurations of the most selective institutions in the country. Third, the *USN* rankings tangibly influence the institutional arrangements of colleges in terms of personnel, admission practices, administrative practices or popularity (Ehrenberg, 2002; Espeland and Stevens, 2002; Kirp,

2004; McDonough et al., 1998; McPherson, 2000; Machung, 1998; Monks and Ehrenberg, 1999; Thompson, 2000; Winter, 2003).

Monks and Ehrenberg's quantitative study (1999) finds that a lowered *USN* ranking in one year leads that institution to have a higher acceptance rate, an entering class with lower SAT scores and a lower enrollment rate among the admitted students in the following year. Espeland and Stevens's work (2002) on selective liberal arts colleges and law schools documents the following effects of college rankings: the institutional use of rankings as advertising instruments; the devotion of institutional resources to solicit more applications; the elimination of a football program; the change of admission criteria; the change in student attitudes towards the schools; increased use of graduate students and temporary adjunct lecturers as teachers; and the increased printing of glossy advertising brochures for *USN* reputation evaluators.

We connect these effects with Debord's theory of spectacle by conceptualizing the *USN* system of rankings not only as a representation, but as an *image that has a peculiar relationship with social relations*: 'The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people mediated by images' (Debord, 1967: para. 4). The society of the spectacle is an economy of images that actively shapes social relations. McDonald's, for example, has a public image associated with the golden arches, but the McDonald's corporation is hardly limited to the golden arches. It also involves the multiple histories, multiple discourses, complex labor relations and varying financial conditions surrounding the company. These criteria, however, are not relevant to a McDonald's advertisement. Instead, advertisements abstract the golden arches as an image of the entire corporation and provide this abstract image for consumers as a way to relate to the company.

Likewise, the *USN* creates powerful images of colleges and universities. The *USN* rankings transform institutions of higher education by selectively extracting attributes that can be measured and quantified. Such abstracted attributes can then be compared, listed and exchanged as images of educational quality. These images appear in the forms of numbers and lists rather than pictures. But, in the economy of the spectacle, these two types of images fulfill similar roles. Like an advertising logo, they offer a simple 'picture' through which consumers, parents and students can 'see' an institution. More specifically, students see an institution's place (i.e. its 'value') in the hierarchical order of a *USN*-created spectacular economy.

Most scholarly critiques of the *USN* target specific technical aspects of the rankings, usually about its reliability and validity of measurement. This

article weaves together and elaborates on many scholarly critiques, showing how these various problems are systematically related to a larger phenomenon. We demonstrate that these problems are not only technical fallacies, but are part of a central process through which the *USN* creates a spectacular economy by abstracting images from institutions of higher education. To accomplish this task, the article provides a global critique encompassing an analysis of the *USN*'s ranking methods, its written texts and justifications and its relations with higher education.

### LOOKING AT THE 'USN' RANKINGS SPECTACLE

As discussed above, the *USN* rankings have come to acquire a powerful role in determining the material conditions of colleges and universities. In the case study below, we analyze three processes through which the *USN* places colleges in a hierarchical plane of rankings and then legitimizes the rankings to consumers. First, the *USN* creates an abstracted representation from things that cannot be accurately abstracted. Second, the *USN* imposes a 'personal' (or institutional) judgement as an 'objective' authoritative standard of academic excellence upon the institutions it evaluates. Finally, the *USN* attempts to maximize the legitimacy of its rankings to its audience through discursive invocation of scientific symbols, ideology, metaphors, as well as an argumentative appeal to non-scientific utilities. The main corpus of the data consists of 12 issues of *America's Best Colleges* published by the *USN* between the years 1989 and 2003.<sup>4</sup> Secondary sources (such as academic studies, research reports and newspaper articles) were also consulted to determine the influence of the *USN* and criticize its methods. Overall, the article aims to expose the spectacle holding a powerful influence over the unique social institution of higher education.

Colleges and universities have very different characteristics: size of student body, transportation and traffic condition, building aesthetic, urbanity, weather conditions, geographic location, program emphasis, religious orientation, educational philosophy, relation to the local community, diversity of students and faculty, fashion styles, and so on. It is perhaps possible to rank *some* characteristics in highly circumscribed contexts while maintaining a high degree of scientific validity. Dormitories, for instance, may be ranked by number of students per room. Some qualities, however, are impossible to abstract as simple numerical representations without severely sacrificing scientific validity, for example, student and faculty quality. Abstracting numerous qualities from hundreds of colleges with widely different characteristics<sup>5</sup> and then ranking all these characteristics with one general idea of academic excellence is a fantasy – a fantasy

that can be elaborately presented in a spectacle, but is yet to be realized as a valid form of social science.

### 1. Abstracting the non-measurable

In the 1990 edition of the *USN* college rankings (the earliest issue in our corpus), the *USN* staff note in the methodology section:

Higher education in America comes in an infinite variety of styles, sizes and, in effect, prices. Yet, even the experts have trouble agreeing on a single formula to help consumers measure the value of what they're getting for their thousands – and tens of thousands – of tuition dollars. In interviews with dozens of authorities, from high school guidance counselors to Ivy League administrators, *US News* learned that most experts do, in fact, agree on the key ingredients of academic excellence:

- A strong faculty that is both dedicated to classroom teaching and is readily accessible to students.
- A student body composed of bright, inquisitive and energetic scholars, who are genuinely interested in learning.
- An administration that provides the necessary financial support and institutional leadership. (*USN*, 1990 edition: 10)

This statement reveals several important points. First, the *USN* acknowledges the incredible diversity of colleges in America. The *USN* also finds no consensus among the experts to make commensurate the use values of colleges under 'a single formula'. The *USN* then stresses the importance of coming up with an evaluation formula, even though experts could not do so with sufficient scientific validity or consensus. This endeavor of abstraction is based on an economic motive: to determine the exchange values of commodities (i.e. various colleges) for 'consumers' because college education costs 'tens of thousands' of tuition dollars. Hence, the *USN* establishes itself as an institution for evaluating 'academic excellence' in order to create an index of convertibility between a certain amount of money and the use values of objects.

The *USN* begins its abstraction process by determining the fundamental unit for commensuration and comparison. The basis is not students' enrichment of life, not the weather conditions, not the cultures of the faculty, but 'academic excellence',<sup>6</sup> a content-empty term that begs the question (Readings, 1996). The ingredients of academic excellence are identified for the *USN* by 'experts' and 'authorities' who provide social

legitimacy for the valuation scale. In this case, the experts are ‘dozens of authorities’, including high school counselors and Ivy League administrators (and we hope that they also include community college teachers and educational philosophers). Since the group of experts consulted by the *USN* cannot agree on a common formula for ranking colleges, the *USN* becomes the agency that constructs such a formula to measure the ‘key ingredients’ for ‘academic excellence’. The result is the following:

based largely upon objective data provided by the colleges themselves, schools were ranked in the five key academic areas: quality of the student body as determined by the school’s selectivity; strength of faculty; financial resources; ability to retain graduate students, and reputation for academic excellence. With the exception of reputation, which was based on the exclusive *US News* annual survey of college presidents and deans, each criterion was determined by two or more subattributes. (*USN*, 1990 edition: 10)

The bases of *USN* abstract representations (i.e. the ‘objective data’ it collects) are disconnected to the values expressed by the *USN*’s own expert consultants. For example, what experts previously described as a ‘strong faculty’ (dedication to teaching and accessible to students) is represented by structural measures of student/teacher ratio, percentage of faculty with a doctorate and faculty salaries. This action replaces a unit that experts do not know how to measure (i.e. quality of faculty) with an abstract image that supposedly represents it. Likewise, what experts previously described as a quality student body (‘bright, inquisitive and energetic scholars, who are genuinely interested in learning’) is represented by the structural measure of standardized test scores, institutional rejection rates and class standing. The *USN* thus assumes a parallel between demonstrated academic achievement and the images abstracted from measurable qualities. This is the methodical way by which the *USN* constructs images that stand for qualities, and these images embody various ‘qualities’ that are absent in the measures. Although the *USN* modifies the precise measurement process over the years, the methodological deficiency of abstracting the non-measurable as measurable persists.

### Faculty resources

In all the issues examined, faculty resources remain a proxy for ‘top quality instruction’. These resources construct a measurement from a complex equation of student/faculty ratio, percentage of faculty with a doctorate,



class size, percentage of full-time faculty and faculty salaries and benefits. The equation assumes that such measures create top quality instruction. This assumption overlooks a common understanding that faculty resources are more likely to measure institutional devotion to research rather than to teaching.<sup>7</sup> Other attributes of the faculty resource equation, including class size, student/faculty ratio and percentage of full-time faculty, are also highly questionable indicators of student learning. Since research institutions have a tendency to deny teaching-aspired teachers full-time positions, a higher percentage of full-time faculty in the classroom may indicate an increased likelihood for research-aspired faculty to teach. And the quality of instruction from research faculty may (but, equally likely, may not) be better.

In the *USN* equation, class size and student/faculty ratio are two conditions contributing to quality of instruction and positive interaction with faculty. But many more pertinent factors, such as dedication to teaching, communication skills and content of instruction, cannot be measured by resources or expenditure. Our belief is supported by examining a student-run annual publication of the University of California, San Diego, *Course and Professor Evaluations (CAPE)*, which contains numerous examples of small courses with low recommendation ratings as well as large courses with high recommendation ratings. Just to list one example for the purpose of demonstration, a course entitled Quantitative Computer Skills with an enrollment of 62 has a course recommendation rating of 13 percent and an instructor recommendation rating of 10 percent. The same course taught by another professor, with a much higher enrollment of 141, has a course recommendation rating of 92 percent and an instructor recommendation rating of 95 percent.<sup>8</sup> While we are not suggesting that collected students' opinions define the quality of teaching, they do raise serious questions as to the role of class size and they emphasize the role of instructors' teaching commitments, classroom communication and delivery skills in determining student satisfaction.

### Retention rate and graduate rate performance

Although the weight of retention has increased from 5 percent in the 1991 edition to 20 percent in the 2004 edition, the *USN* lacks a clear and consistent explanation of what retention measures. The three statements below show that, one year, while retention claims to measure institutional 'commitment to students', another year, retention measures 'student satisfaction' and, yet another year, retention is said to measure the offering of 'classes and services' needed for students to succeed:

Retention: A school's ability to see freshmen through to graduation says a lot about its *commitment to students*. (USN, 1990 edition: 11, emphasis added)

And the *measurement of student satisfaction* used the average percentage of students in the 1983 to 1985 freshmen classes who graduated within five years of the year they enrolled. (USN, 1992 edition: 9, emphasis added)

The higher the proportion of freshmen who return to campus and complete their studies, the better a school is likely to be at offering the classes *and services students need to succeed*. (USN, 2000 edition: 27, emphasis added)

Despite the incoherence across these definitions, there are further problems. If retention rate measures 'student satisfaction', as the statement in the 1992 edition suggests, then the USN has yet to explain why a separate category, 'alumni giving rate', has been necessary since 1994. If both retention rate and alumni giving rate are equally valid indicators of student satisfaction, the weight of each measure should be averaged so that student satisfaction is not weighted twice in the final equation. But no such measures seem to have been taken by the USN or any explanations offered on this matter.<sup>9</sup> By the 2004 edition, three distinct measures of student satisfaction account for 30 percent of the total ranking: 'retention' counts for 20 percent by itself, alumni giving rate counts for 5 percent and a new category, 'graduate rate performance', counts for another 5 percent.

If the USN wishes to measure all three definitions of retention listed above – institutional commitment to students, student satisfaction and services needed to succeed<sup>10</sup> – why does the USN not simply rely upon the new added value measurement of 'graduate rate performance'? Graduate rate performance is a retention-related measure developed by the USN to account for the difference between 'predicted' versus 'actual' graduation rate:

Graduation rate performance (5 percent; only in national universities and liberal arts colleges). This indicator of 'added value' was developed to include *the effect of the college's programs and policies on the graduation rate of students after controlling for spending and student aptitude* [as measured by test scores]. We measure the difference between a school's six-year graduation rate for the class that entered in 1996 and the predicted rate for the class. (USN, 2004 edition: 81, emphasis added)

The need for this measure arises from the common problem of using retention/graduation rate as a measure of 'academic excellence'; who graduates from an institution depends mostly on who enters that institution (Astin, 1991, 2001). Institutional environment plays a significant, but only contributive, role. Thus, according to the *USN's* explanation, the graduate rate performance measures 'added value' upon controlling for the colleges' educational expenditures and 'student aptitude'.

If we substitute retention rate and alumni giving rate with graduate rate performance, the hierarchical arrangement changes dramatically. Harvard University (ranked 1 overall) is far better than Cal Tech (ranked 5) and MIT (ranked 4) in graduate rate performance. However, Harvard's score in graduate rate performance is just as good as Iowa State University (ranked 87) and SUNY-Binghamton (ranked 78) and is worse than University of New Hampshire (ranked 95), University of Alabama (ranked 99) and University of San Francisco (ranked 117). By our calculation, the average graduate rate performance index of the institutions ranked between 51 and 99 is twice as high as the scores of the institutions ranked between 1 and 50.<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to the internal rationale of the *USN*, 'second tier' institutions are more committed to students and more effective in offering classes and services for student 'success' (i.e. graduation) than their 'top tier' counterparts. And, after controlling for the academic preparation of students, students in 'second tier' institutions are also more satisfied with their institutions than students in the 'top tier' schools.

Conversely, as Gerhard Casper (1996), former president of Stanford University, points out, graduate rate could equally measure academic non-excellence. If an institution seldom 'flunks out' its students due to the ease of academic programs, then retention may measure lack of commitment to quality teaching, a possibility diametrically opposed to the *USN's* narration. Program rigor, however, is only one factor that the *USN* excludes from discussion and calculation. Research in higher education has also shown that graduation rate relates to the socioeconomic background of students (St John et al., 2001) and the racial composition of the student body (Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 2000). Thus, it remains unclear what retention rate does measure,<sup>12</sup> but within the spectacle of *USN* rankings, retention rate and graduate rate performance nevertheless become abstracted as unambiguous indicators of academic excellence.

In sum, the *USN* creates abstract images that stand for certain realities that are generally conceived as non-measurable according to expert conventions. The incoherence, inconsistency and assumptive leaps of this process are not merely technical errors; rather, they manifest a process

central to the making of the *USN* ranking enterprise: abstracting the non-measurable. In the next section, we examine how these images get developed into a spectacular economy.

## 2. Imposing a standardized valuation for academic excellence

If it seems so difficult to find valid indicators for academic excellence, it is largely due to the subjective values that people possess and, consequentially, the diverse meanings that the term embodies. Despite this difficulty, the *USN* claims that colleges are ranked 'objectively': 'Certainly, the college experience consists of a host of intangibles that cannot be reduced to mere numbers. But we believe that it is possible to *objectively compare schools on one key attribute: academic excellence*' (*USN*, 2001 edition: 28, emphasis added).

But how does this myth come to be? Using academic excellence as the common point of reference of evaluation sidesteps the question of what excellence entails. Readings (1996) observes the pervasiveness of a 'discourse of excellence' in modern higher education, where the need for 'excellence' is uncontested: 'The need for excellence is what we all agree on. And we all agree upon it because it is not an ideology, in the sense that it has no external referent or internal content' (1996: 23). Since everyone has his/her notion of what excellence means, the discourse of excellence is characterized by universal appeal and semantic meaninglessness; the term holds 'no meaning' except for subjectively endowed meanings. In the *USN* reports, the term academic excellence does not explicitly refer to any external referents and it can therefore be perceived as referring to a variety of texts, beliefs or doctrines that suggest different notions of excellence. Precisely because the term suggests infinite possible meanings and standards, no one disagrees with a need for academic 'excellence' and it therefore creates universal appeal. But, in practice, the discourse of excellence is hardly content-neutral. As Readings elaborates, deployment of a discourse of excellence often imposes a conception of excellence by a specific group of people who hold superior social power within specific fields. For example, a committee of judges for a fellowship program which advertises the 'excellence of the proposed scholarship' as a major evaluation criterion is doing little other than saying that it does not reveal the criteria used to judge applications (Readings, 1996: 24). Similarly, by explaining that the *USN* college ranking system uses academic excellence as a common objective reference point, the *USN* encloses the definition of excellence within itself.

In the 1990 edition, the *USN* used five evaluation categories in their calculation of the overall scores for academic excellence: 1) academic reputation (25%); 2) student selectivity (25%); 3) retention patterns (12.5%); 4)

faculty quality (25%); and 5) financial resources (12.5%). By the 2004 edition, the number of categories increased to seven: 1) peer assessment (25%); 2) retention (20%); 3) faculty resources (20%); 4) student selectivity (15%); 5) financial resources (10%); 6) graduation rate performance (5%); and 7) alumni giving rate (5%). It remains a mystery as to why certain categories are given certain weights. How does one determine, for instance, that academic reputation is twice as important as student retention or financial resources? Furthermore, if academic excellence is based on one objective universal standard, why does the *USN* shift its weighting of categories almost every year? The following quotation represents a typical response offered by the *USN* staff on this issue:

How did *US News* decide how much weight to give each indicator in its ranking formula? Analysts at *US News* have chosen the weights used in the ranking formula. Our views of the appropriate weights *may differ from those of other higher-education experts*. The weights were chosen based on *years of reporting about education, on reviews of research about education, and after consultation with experts in higher education*. (*USN*, 2005 edition, emphasis added)

A brief examination of the above statement reveals that the *USN* lacks any objective basis for weighing the criteria. First, the *USN* staff determine which experts to consider and which to discard. Similarly, the 'reviews of research about higher education' are conducted by *USN* staff, and the *USN* never explains to the public who the staff have reviewed, why they have chosen that body of literature to review, whether the research is conducted explicitly for the purpose of 'college rankings' or how the results have been interpreted. Explaining these actions would perhaps limit the scope of the *USN*'s appeal to academic excellence. More significantly, if the *USN*-consulted experts cannot agree on a formula of evaluation with sufficient scientific justification, how can the *USN* staff do so simply based on 'years of reporting about education'? Regardless of the number of years that the *USN* has reported on education, its valuation of colleges is highly subjective and lacks any scientific or objective basis. Backed by material and social power, the subjectivity of the *USN* staff (rather than its consulted experts) becomes the neutral, universal and objective measure. Hence, the *USN* does not only represent the hierarchical order of colleges as the way it *should be*; the order is represented as the way it *is*.<sup>13</sup>

As with the various methodological flaws that we reviewed in the last section, the critical shortcoming we have reviewed in this section (i.e. the

imposition of subjective values) should not be conceptualized as a mere technical error. Rather, it is a basic mechanism constituting the *USN* rankings spectacle. The spectacle of *USN* college rankings systematically sacrifices scientific rigor (or 'going beyond expert convention') to create an otherwise impossible phenomenon: a universally valid scale for comparing the quality of colleges and universities. Precisely by not acting in accordance with the methodological convention that constrains academics and professionals, the *USN* accomplishes the activity of constructing abstracted images of academic excellence and develops a spectacular economy of higher education.

### 3. Legitimation by narrative

The *USN* employs numerous discourse strategies to justify its rankings, three of which will be examined in this section: 1) appeal to scientific ideology and experts; 2) deployment of a technology-in-progress metaphor; and 3) appeal to non-scientific utilities.

#### Appeal to scientific ideology and scientific experts

The primary discourse strategy adopted by the *USN* rankings staff is the presentation of the college rankings as a rigorous work of science and social science rather than just a commercial chart (such as a *New York Times* best-seller list or the Billboard Hot 100 of music). Once they are abstracted as numbers, institutional rankings attain an objective appeal as trustworthy images of academic excellence. The institutions of science maintain a special status in western society and the more the *USN* can convince the public that the rankings are scientifically based, the more it can secure legitimacy (see Porter, 1995). These number images, unlike the institutions themselves, are interchangeable. They may therefore be compared and exchanged in a spectacular economy of higher education, an economy that appears to have a scientific basis.

The following quotation represents a typical strategy by which the *USN* develops a scientific appearance by appealing to conceptions of objectivity and standardization:

Are the rankings objective and fair? We do our utmost to be so. Each school's rank (within its group of peer institutions) is based on the *same set* of quality measures. Furthermore, 75 percent of a school's ranking is based on a *formula* that uses *objective measures* of academic quality such as graduation rates. The remaining 25 percent is based on a peer assessment survey. . . . While peer

assessments are *subjective*, they are also important – a diploma from a distinguished college helps graduates get good jobs and gain admission to top-notch graduate programs. (*USN*, 2004 edition, emphasis added)

By declaring the peer assessment survey the only 'subjective' measure, the *USN* shows the public that it frowns upon the conception of subjectivity, while implying that other measures are 'objective'. The *USN* also elaborates on the scientific procedures that construct the rankings, citing the use of the 'same set' of measures (i.e. standardization) and the use of a 'formula' (i.e. mathematics). These cited facts are not necessarily false; much of the data in the *USN* are gathered and calculated systematically. The fundamental problem is that the *USN* presents *only* the scientific elements. The non-scientific procedures for constructing rankings, which are the *necessary* procedures, remain unmentioned or downplayed. Considering this point, we understand the *USN* ranking system to be a spectacle constructed upon both scientific and non-scientific processes. It uses systematic data very unsystematically, utilizing scientific methods where it can, but accomplishing the scientifically impossible via non-scientific means.

Referencing 'experts' is another strategy towards developing an appearance of scientific legitimacy. Earlier statements we have cited show how extensive references to 'experts' (primarily academic scholars and researchers) justify the *USN* system. Again, these claims are not false; the *USN* staff have 'reviewed' academic research and 'consulted' different experts. But aside from the problems associated with the non-skeptical use of 'experts' as a source of knowledge, the main problem is that academic experts on higher education often disagree with each other. Experts have their own conceptions of what academic excellence is and their conceptions are based on particular epistemological paradigms or intellectual worldviews, both 'scientific' and otherwise. But these experts hold a tremendous lack of consensus on the issue of what counts as academic excellence. At the point where the power of expert knowledge apparently hits the ceiling, the *USN* enters and breaks the ceiling with *USN* staff knowledge.

### The metaphorical representation of technology-in-progress

Acknowledging that the college rankings have weaknesses, the *USN* never argues that the rankings are completely objective, scientific, unbiased and accurate. Instead, the *USN* implicitly represents the rankings as similar to technology-in-progress. The following statement by a *USN* staff writer exemplifies this discursive strategy:

Assessing higher education – colleges and universities of all different shapes and sizes, with unique student populations and divergent educational goals – is *far from a perfect science*. *US News's* system is *a work in progress, evolving over time*. When the rankings debuted in 1983 they were purely reputational, based on an opinion survey of 662 college presidents. . . . In 1988, editors *introduced a mathematical formula* that rates colleges on the basis of student selectivity, strength of faculty, financial resources, retention and graduation rate, and academic reputation; this methodology itself has been *refined and improved* over the years. In 1997, for example, a *graduation rate performance* factor that weighs predicted and actual values *was added*. (*USN*, 2004 edition: 74, emphasis added)

The quotation shows that the *USN* does not simply state its rankings as a work-in-progress, but also provides evidence for this argument. The *USN* refers to the concrete actions it has taken that mimic practices of methodological refinement in scientific institutions, such as increasing sample size, increasing the number of indicators for a certain measure and increasing its reliance on standardized and quantitative measures. But how can changes in the evaluation criteria help 'improve' or 'refine' the *USN's* methodology if there is no shared definition of academic excellence among students, professionals or researchers? Conceptualizing the *USN* rankings as a spectacular process of abstracting images from scientific/empirical data, what these actions actually do is to make the scientific portion of the ranking method more rigorous, while leaving the unscientific portion (i.e. the vital part of rankings) untouched.

The use of the technology-in-progress metaphor is powerful, for it relates the *USN* rankings to objects that readers encounter in everyday life. Numerous technological products we see today are described as technologies-in-progress, including weapons, cars, computers, rockets and spacecrafts. But the deployment of this metaphor also serves to undermine the degree of advancement and can obfuscate the failure of any technology. A speedy car that misses a brake can be represented as an excellent car-in-progress, a machine gun that backfires can be represented as a good weapon-in-progress and a medicine that kills both the patient and the targeted bacteria can be represented as a cure-in-progress. By representing the *USN* rankings as 'far from a perfect science' and 'a work in progress', the *USN* conveys the impression that it is constantly improving elements of the evaluation process without demonstrating any improvement in the outcome of performance.



## Appeal to non-scientific utilities

While proclaiming that the rankings reflect objective measurement of the academic quality of colleges, the *USN* simultaneously appeals to non-scientific utilities. In addition to offering supposedly objective rankings, the *USN* suggests that the rankings simply provide more information and data for people seeking to choose a college:

What is the best way for students and their parents to use the rankings? Students can use the rankings to create an initial list of schools to consider, to narrow down that list, and to compare overall academic quality. *Students can also use the data underlying the rankings to identify schools with specific characteristics that they value.* (*USN*, 2005 edition; emphasis added)

The *USN* staff stress the *USN* as part of a broader movement providing information and data to consumers about higher education. Although certain data in the rankings may not be useful, consumers may find other data that are. Hence, the *USN* advertises itself as a valuable instrument providing data to college consumers who can never have too much data concerning their purchases. Rejection rates, for example, may not indicate student quality, as the *USN* claims, but they may provide useful information for a prospective college applicant looking for a 'safety school'. Similarly, data about average freshmen SAT scores may help the public estimate their chances of acceptance to a certain school. 'The data underlying the rankings' provide a non-scientific public utility for identifying 'schools with specific characteristics'. If a parent or student does not agree with the rankings generated by the *USN* because he/she happens to think that graduation rate means everything about academic quality, then he/she could generate his/her own rankings of colleges by only looking at the *USN* data on retention rates.

Overall, the *USN* describes how its rankings function as both a scientific index and an extensive reference similar to a telephone book. This argument implicitly suggests how the publication could be a useful college-choosing instrument, independent of the rankings and despite the abstraction of colleges as images. But it is worth noting that the *USN* rankings have only recently evolved into a reference guide. One dramatic trend concerning the *USN* is its expansion of the display of statistics over the years. The initial publications included only a few colleges and were based on a single criterion of academic reputation. By 1990, the *USN* rankings of national universities displayed five columns of percentile rankings of the top 25 universities. The 2004 edition, in contrast, displays 18 columns of

statistics on the top 50 universities, in addition to 12 columns of statistics on schools that rank from 51–248. Additional lists of statistics are included for liberal arts colleges, regional institutions and specialized schools. This increased display of data and statistics helps the *USN* to maximize its social legitimacy, allowing it to function as both a scientific evaluator and a neutral informer.

### POLITICIZING THE RANKINGS GAME IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The recent skyrocketing expansion of numbers and types of institutions ranked by the *USN* increases the grasp and reach of the spectacle. No longer are only the 'top 25' and their neighboring institutions infected by the influence of the *USN* rankings. Few, if any, four-year higher education institutions in the US currently escape the *USN* rankings spectacle.<sup>14</sup> All institutions must be constantly vigilant about their place in the hierarchy or they may face dire consequences (see Kirp, 2004).

According to the current evaluation criteria, some groups of institutions are more vulnerable than others in the rankings and not necessarily because they lack 'academic quality'. The *USN* rankings are likely to punish institutions that enroll a high percentage of low-income students and ethnic minorities, even if the students have equal levels of academic achievement. Lower income students are more likely to suffer due to economic factors (St John et al., 2001), such as the need for work while in college, and Hispanic and African American students are known to have lower retention rates due partly to cultural factors (Astin, 2001; Swail et al., 2003; Vars and Bowen, 1998). Institutions seeking to maintain a certain identity, such as black colleges, women's colleges, religious schools or colleges with alternative curricula, may also be punished. By not aiming to attract vast numbers of the mainstream population, they therefore score lower in the 'selectivity' criterion. Similarly, institutions spending money on minority outreach programs or collaborative projects with disadvantaged communities are implicitly penalized because they do not spend those dollars on straight advertisement. Advertisement could potentially increase their number of applicants and therefore boost their rankings in the selectivity category. In addition, teaching-based institutions that lack research expenses rank lower in the 'faculty resources' criterion. Due to the local nature of teaching evaluation, such institutions may not be known by the presidents of other institutions and are therefore also ranked lower in the 'peer assessment' criterion.

Public universities are also punished through the alumni giving rate criterion. In the 2004 edition, there is a shocking pattern of discrepancy

between top public and top private universities when it comes to alumni giving rate (although the same pattern is not discernible in the ranking of master's universities). The alumni giving rates of the top 10 universities – all private – range from 37–61 percent and their alumni giving ranks between one and 12. The top 10 public universities, on the other hand, show a distinctly different pattern: the alumni giving rates range from 8–32 percent and their alumni giving ranks between 18 and 191.<sup>15</sup> These discrepancies are unequivocally attributed by the *USN* to differences in alumni satisfaction.<sup>16</sup>

Running across all these examples and scenarios is one unspoken rule: colleges that do not spend money to sustain the spectacle are likely to be punished. The famous 'Thomas theorem' states that people define situations as real and the definitions are real in their consequences, a statement widely accepted by scholars who subscribe to the social constructionist theoretical approach (Mehan, 2000; Merton, 1995). Taking into account the vital role of power in social construction and social relations, Mehan (1990: 160) reformulated the Thomas theorem: 'All people define situations as real; but when powerful people define situations as real, then they are real *for everybody involved* in their consequences.' This reformulated theorem is helpful for understanding the *USN* spectacle. The society of the spectacle rests upon the exchange of images that mediate real social relations. The *USN* rankings are a successful spectacle not simply because somebody defines situations as real and assigns those situations with specific meanings; the extensive effects and success of the rankings spectacle arise from the social position of the *USN* within the wider spectacular economy of marketing higher education. The *USN* is an economically and socially powerful institution, whose definitions of the real have tremendous consequences for almost everybody involved in American higher education today.

Once the spectacular economy of the *USN* rankings becomes understood as real, it intersects with a larger web of economic and social relations. It reconfigures what Bourdieu called a 'field' of capital in which people compete in a gamelike activity by strategically exchanging various economic, social and cultural capitals based on their 'feel of the game' (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998). For example, a parent may enroll their daughter at a higher ranking institution rather than an alternative liberal arts college due to strategic considerations of 'investment' in the field of the *USN* spectacular economy. And, by systematically producing various 'irrationalities of rationality', such as the stratifying and counterproductive effects we have reviewed, the *USN* proffers a trend of McDonaldization of higher education (Ritzer, 1996, 2002). This trend pressures colleges and universities

to increase efficiency, calculability, predictability and control *according to the standards constructed by the USN rankings*.

How the *USN* rankings work in these areas deserves further study. Our main goal in this article, however, is not to explain why individuals use the *USN* rankings or how institutional practices are transformed by them; rather, our article begins by noticing that students, parents and educators *do use* them as consumers and asks how an institution becomes an image that people use and how these images come to be understood as real enough to use. Once these images are abstracted, evaluated and legitimized, they enter a spectacular economy, apart from their accuracy or inaccuracy as representations. They become *real* rankings for everybody involved in their consequences.

As the rankings become real in their consequences, the spectacular images of colleges and universities become a peculiar form of 'capital'.<sup>17</sup> Commenting on the peculiar nature of this capital in a spectacular economy, Debord (1967: para. 49) writes: 'The spectacle is the money *one only looks at*, because in the spectacle the totality of use is already exchanged for the totality of abstract representation.' The capital that universities possess through a *USN* rank is a capital that they 'only look at'. They cannot save it in a bank or spend it in the variety of ways that 'normal' capital can be used. Much of the transaction and exchange activities are already done when the *USN* rankings are sold to its consumers. This rule of the game, from Debord's perspective, is very different from the rules of a traditional economy. Individuals and institutions do not directly engage in the process of production that would increase their capital in a spectacular economy. For example, a college can attempt to create its image through spending money on advertisements (and withdrawing money from service learning programs), but these activities do not necessarily add to their capital if the *USN*, for arbitrary reasons, decides to fundamentally revise its evaluation criteria the following year.

Thus, while higher education is a powerful institution in its own right, universities have little power in defining the spectacle. Rather, the *USN*, a commercial publication outside the realm of higher education, defines universities as numerical images, which are then placed in a constructed hierarchy, and the situations defined by the *USN* as real become real *for everybody involved*.<sup>18</sup> At the beginning of this article, we outlined a series of institutional changes that frequently result from and respond to a change in the *USN* rankings. Considering these changes, the situation defined by the *USN* is not only perceived as real for the colleges and universities involved, but is indeed also real in its effects.

However, higher education actors are not passive in the spectacular economy of education. Many higher education administrators and leaders voluntarily use the *USN* rankings in recruitment brochures and institutional websites, to introduce departments and universities, or even in personnel and funding decisions – perhaps because they feel the market pressure to do so, perhaps because they seek to capitalize from this spectacular economy whenever they can and perhaps because of a lack of scientific and cultural skepticism (Espeland and Stevens, 2002; Kirp, 2004; Miyoshi, 1997). But this sort of advertising is only useful due to the value of the rank (i.e. lower ranking institutions gain very little from posting their ranking), and the capital value of rankings cannot be developed or increased through the work of the institution. However, alongside the process of relying on the *USN* rankings to increase a college's positive publicity, a reverse process is also happening. As the *USN* spectacle is embraced and, thus, legitimized by a social institution that historically represents reason and knowledge, the university is not only using the media; the university *becomes* the media. The institutions, in this sense, understand and present themselves as the image abstracted by the *USN*. It is difficult to judge which of the two phenomena is worse: the knowledge institution's legitimating of a spectacle or the necessary reliance on a spectacle to legitimize a knowledge institution within a commodified society.

Of course, efforts of resistance have been raised by prominent figures in higher education. For instance, there have been attempts to boycott the *USN* rankings surveys and there have been open statements calling for the *USN* to completely shift its role from evaluator to informer and abolish the rankings section. The Law School Admission Council (LSAC, 2004), for instance, annually publishes a letter to law school applicants on its website criticizing the validity and usefulness of the *USN* ranking of law schools. The 2004 letter is signed by the deans of over 150 law schools, including traditionally recognized elite law schools such as the University of Michigan, Harvard, UC Berkeley and Yale. Less visible examples include efforts by higher education leaders and administrators to develop and seek out alternative ranking systems that are more circumscribed in audience, meanings and implications.<sup>19</sup> Institutions may also utilize other forms of spectacle such as nationally advertised sporting events or celebrity commencement speakers to counter or resist the *USN* rankings. The fundamental task, however, is not to deal with the *USN* rankings as an isolated spectacle. The same actors resisting the *USN* spectacles should critically re-examine the universities' own practices and uses of abstraction in the domains of student admissions, public relations, personnel hiring and promotion and funding distribution.

Spectacular economy exists, and often in more vibrant forms, beyond the institutional arena of higher education. Spectacular economies powerfully configure social relations as well as our relationships with things. Statistics of economic wellbeing widely cited by politicians misconstrue conceptions regarding the degree of poverty and mask the emotions experienced in its sufferings. The pricing of commodities and labor based on speculations has led to illusory economic prosperity and unnecessary economic crisis. An uncritical reliance on media to 'know' the world has gradually led many to adopt manipulated conceptions of society and universalized standards of truth, goodness and beauty. As we live in the age of the spectacle, many social realities are not grasped directly. Rather, by offering dazzling displays, scientific representations and images of fantasy, spectacles are mediating, shaping and conquering material relations in higher education and beyond.

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### Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1983, 1993) has extensively theorized the new economy of representations and signs in ways some would argue are more developed than Debord. But we choose to use Debord's theoretical approach because it strives to retain the material base of social relations. Debord observes that social relations are no longer simply mediated by labor, use values and material conditions as argued by Marx; rather, social relations are increasingly also mediated by images. Debord's conceptual connection between material relations and the images they produce, which is less prevalent in Baudrillard's writings, offers a useful tool for analyzing the relationship between *USN* rankings and practices in the realm of higher education.
2. According to Debord:

When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency *to make one see* the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present day society. (1967: para. 18, emphasis in original)
3. Debord (1967: paras 63–5) distinguishes between the concentrated and diffuse forms of the spectacle, a distinction David Roberts (2003) complicates with a

fourfold typology. We label the spectacle of the *USN* rankings a form of diffuse spectacle. The rank numbers of colleges are not aesthetically and sensationally spectacular in themselves, at least not in comparison to the high technology of contemporary multimedia festivals. But the ranking system, and the capitalistic economy surrounding it, has developed spectacular images of higher education that generate much institutional and public attention, discussion, transaction and transformation.

4. The *USN* reports are always prepared for the following year. Thus, *America's Best Colleges: 1990 Edition* was published in 1989, the 1991 edition was published in 1990, and so on. For simplicity's sake, we refer to the year of the 'edition' being quoted rather than its year of publication. Furthermore, because the authors explaining and justifying the *USN*'s ranking methodology speak on behalf of the *USN*, the corporate author (i.e. *USN*) will be used for citation throughout the article in place of individual staff editors and writers.
5. Although the *USN* roughly follows the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2005), there are still hundreds of institutions within each category. These categories divide institutions along the lines of doctorate-granting institutions, master's colleges and universities, baccalaureate colleges, specialized colleges, and so forth.
6. For instance, the *USN* editors wrote:

How can rankings help you identify colleges and universities that are right for you? Our critics would say they can't. It's absurd to think that a college's special and intangible qualities can be reduced to mere numbers, many administrators argue – even though they measure their applicants by test scores and class standing. But we believe it *is* possible to objectively compare schools on one key attribute: academic excellence. (*USN*, 2000 edition: 26)

7. Citing Astin's classic 1991 study, Gater claims:

For the most part, the percentage of faculty with terminal degrees is not connected to a faculty member's ability to be an effective teacher, according to research by Alexander Astin of UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). Average faculty salaries are largely an indicator of how much emphasis an institution places on research, and top researchers typically earn the highest salaries at research universities. Because the national supply of first-rate university researchers is limited, research universities compete with one another and pay a premium to hire the best research faculty. (2002: 8)

8. The *CAPE* staff summarize student evaluations in the form of short humorous narratives. For the course in question, the *CAPE* staff report:

More amicable than Mr Rogers. Students raved that everyday was a beautiful day with Professor [B]. And man, this guy was so great, so helpful, so enthusiastic, so smart, and so funny, wouldn't you want to be his neighbor? Students applauded the material as captivating yet challenging

and some even delighted to find it easier than cake. However, others lamented they found it as sleep inducing as naptime and time consuming to boot. (2003: 313)

9. The *USN* claims that it has increased the role of 'output measures' over the years. But the weight of retention rate increased from 5 percent in the 1991 edition to 20 percent in the 2004 edition.
10. This hypothesis is consistent with Gater's understanding:

*US News* uses these as indicators of how satisfied students are with a school and also to assess whether a school is providing the courses and services that students need to succeed. The magazine claims that potential students can check freshman retention rates to learn how hard schools work to keep new students from dropping out. (2002: 6)
11. The mean score for graduate rate performance of institutions ranked from 1–50 is +1.66 whereas the mean score for institution ranked from 51–100 is twice as high (+3.32). Because eight colleges occupy the 99th rank, we use their mean score of graduate rate performance to replace the hypothetical institution that is ranked 100.
12. We are not arguing that the rejection rate is an 'objective' indicator of the quality of the student body. The economic values of supply and demand are no more 'scientific' than other types of values.
13. The subjectivity of *USN* rankings is not only embedded in the overall weighting across categories, but also in the construction of each category. Although students have a variety of backgrounds, knowledge, experiences, intellectual interests and political awareness, many of these qualities cannot be quantified and the *USN* therefore bases the category 'student selectivity' primarily on test scores and grades (90%).
14. Recent global rankings of higher education indicate a globalization of this form of spectacular economy. Two examples of global rankings that appear to operate similarly to the *USN* rankings are *The World University Rankings* by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (2004) and *The Academic Ranking of World Universities 2004* by Shanghai Jiao Tong University (2004).
15. It is very interesting to see that the pattern among public universities is bipolar. Four of the top 10 public universities (University of Virginia, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, College of William and Mary and Georgia Institute of Technology) have alumni giving rates ranging between 25–32 percent, with rankings between 18 and 41. The other six of the top 10 public universities, however, all have alumni rankings beyond 100: University of California, Berkeley ranks 105, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor ranks 111, University of Wisconsin, Madison ranks 119, University of California, Los Angeles ranks 129, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign ranks 143, University of California, San Diego ranks 191.
16. There are many possible reasons for these discrepancies aside from alumni satisfaction. Students in private universities, for example, could have allegiances to unique institutional histories whereas students in public universities may have a different sense of relation with public education. Alumni from public universities



may feel that they are already donating to their institutions by paying taxes, while alumni of private universities donate to specific institutions benefiting the universities.

17. The rule of spectacular economy is theorized by Debord (1967: para. 34), who writes: 'The spectacle is a *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.' An alternative formulation of this rule is: how much 'capital' does a college have in a spectacular economy become the image of that institution?
18. The competition among colleges and universities (or, in other words, their separation from each other) is another cause that limits their power of defining the spectacle. Debord (1967: paras 25–33) argues that just as the traditional capitalist economy relies on separation and alienation among workers and competitors, a spectacular economy relies on the production of separation through an abstraction of images.
19. In addition to the rankings developed by the National Research Council (NRC), see also *The Top American Research Universities* developed by The Center at the University of Florida (Lombardi et al., 2000, 2002) as an example. While these publications provide much less ambitious claims, whether they are used in a sensible way is a separate issue beyond the scope of this article.

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