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## Facts in the machine: Systems of record and the performance of sociotechnical truth

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### Abstract

Information systems serve as the “source of truth” for much of social reality, from credit scores to eligibility for boarding an airplane to the current time. In contexts of practical consensus, *the system makes it so*. I label this phenomenon *system-dependent truth*. This paper advances a theory of performative truthmaking, wherein the agencies of *giving as* and *taking as* produce facts and truth as relations. I introduce the term *systems of record* to denote information systems that contain facts rather than propositions. I develop a suitable performative approach to the phenomenon of system-dependent truth by synthesizing John Searle’s social ontology, an account of truth, facts, and social reality, with Karen Barad’s agential realism, an onto-epistemology of human and nonhuman agency. Using several specific examples drawn from travel and migration contexts, including the US government’s No Fly List, I show that system-dependent truth arises when an agent *takes* information from a system *as fact* during the performance of sociotechnical truth. I argue that the agencies of truthmaking and factmaking are a distinct form of power, that the coordination of these agencies constitutes institutional rationalities of potentially global scale, and that systems of record are therefore critical sites for justice-oriented information studies.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The number of things that are treated as true because an information system says they are exploding. Consider what actions must be taken to determine the truth of these statements:

- «Parking ticket 84720582 has not been paid.»<sup>1</sup>
- «Insufficient balance.»
- «Your appointment is scheduled for 4:00pm.»
- «The current time is 3:34pm.»
- «Your Known Traveler ID is valid.»

<sup>1</sup>In what follows I will use « » to indicate a proposition and › < to indicate a fact.

Determining the truth of each of these statements requires consulting a specific information system. That is, the truth of these statements depends on *facts* that only exist within information systems. This is a source of commonplace oddities and annoyances where, for instance, a parking ticket I already paid is nonetheless sent to collections. In such situations, information systems acquire a kind of intransigence, belying lived experience and even mooting other information systems—a municipal government’s records will trump my credit card statement, for instance. A common response to such situations is to seek recourse in the form of a human who can correct the error in light of some provided evidence. This habitual resort to recourse is not always available in a given