Conforming or transforming? How organizations respond to multiple rankings

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Conforming or Transforming?

How Organizations Respond to Multiple Rankings[1]

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Abstract

The dominant theme within extant research on performance and ranking conceptualises the organisational response to a ranking as one where it responds by conforming to the measure. This process of straightforward 'reactivity' (Espeland and Sauder 2007), however, is not always possible, especially in the complex and rapidly-changing settings described in this paper. In certain contexts organisations are surrounded by multiple measures, raising the question as to which they should align. Drawing on an ethnographic study across a number of sites, we show how some organisations instead of conforming to a single measure are 'transforming' to respond to the challenge of multiple rankings, by constructing and elaborating new forms of expertise, knowledge and connection with rankers. Unlike prior research that presents organisations as constrained by systems of measuring (which we name 'reactive conformance'), we examine how they are becoming more proactive towards this challenge (described as 'reflexive transformation'). Specifically, building on themes from accounting and the sociology of worth, we present evidence that organisations exercise greater choice than expected about which rankings they respond to, shape their ranked positions, as well as wield influence over assessment criteria and the wider evaluative ecosystem.

INTRODUCTION

Few aspects of the economy and society remain untouched by potent performance measures of one form or another. The auditing of performance is all the time more based on rankings (Strathern 1997, Shore and

Wright 2015). Rankings are exerting an increasingly profound influence on organisations and institutions, whereby they contribute towards shaping not only strategies but also structures and practices (Shore and Wright 2015). The growing diffusion and popularity of rankings – and other kinds of metrics, such as ratings, certifications and league tables – is reflected in continuous attempts by academics to theorise their influence on targeted organisations. Espeland and Sauder (2007) sharpened our understanding of how audit and rankings influence by distinguishing between their intended consequences (e.g. to offer new information about 'performance' and 'quality') and their unintended ones (e.g. how they often alter the thing they hope to measure). The real import of a ranking for these authors is not just the flood of demands for transparency and accountability, depicted variously as the 'audit society' (Power 1997), 'performance measurement society' (Humphrey and Owen 2000), and 'evaluation society' (Dahler-Larsen 2012), but how they can encourage ranked organisations to adjust *towards* the instruments. It is through a process described as 'reactivity' (Espeland and Sauder 2007) that rank positions are said to be maintained or improved. Reactivity captures the way organisations remodel themselves to conform more closely to 'evaluative templates' (Wedlin 2006, 2007). For example, Espeland and Sauder (2007) have shown how university law schools adapted strategies and activities to align with the principles embodied in the *US News* law school ranking.

How rankings encourage reflexive behaviours has also become a key focus for accounting scholars and others (Jeacle and Carter 2011, Scott and Orlikowski 2012, Pollock and D'Adderio 2012, Mehrpouya and Samiolo 2016). Scott and Orlikowski (2012: 38), for instance, note how hotels have become "acutely attuned" to the review site *TripAdvisor* and will use this to "evaluate and revise their own organisational practices". However, the evidence presented in this article suggests that, in focusing predominately on how organisations align with a ranking, scholars have only captured one facet of reactivity thus far. We argue that more recent evidence is beginning to question just how far the notion of responding by conforming helps explain the current challenges raised by ranking systems.

The increasingly important test facing organisations today is that rankings are both broadening and deepening their coverage. They seem, on the one hand, to be multiplying. Shore and Wright (2015: 426) talk of a "new industry of measuring and ranking". Dahler-Larsen (2012: 227) suggests that actors in this industry

"never sleep" since they "constantly come up with new models, approaches, and ways to evaluate". Fueled also by the possibilities offered by new social media technologies (Bialecki, O'Leary and Smith 2017), it is now common for an organisation to be ranked many times over (Sauder and Espeland 2006, Brandtner 2017). Rankings, on the other hand, seem to be becoming more relevant. No matter whether online or offline, they are thought to have immediate and decisive influence (Adkins and Lury 2011, Jeacle and Carter 2011, Scott and Orlikowski 2012). Few organisations can afford to ignore a ranking. Being positioned below a rival or failing to appear on a measure could directly affect standing (Schultz, Mouritsen and Gabrielsen 2001), market position (Fombrum 1996), consumer decision-making (Blank 2006), and service providers' practices (Scott and Orlikowski 2012).

This multiplication of rankings raises an important question: how might an organisation respond when there are many measures evaluating its performance? To which should they react? One reading of the reactivity thesis is that to engage with one (or a few related) ranking(s) the organisation would allow specific evaluative criteria(s) to guide its behaviour. This, however, leaves the question open as to what might happen when organisations are confronted with a multiplicity of different ranking templates. Simply conforming would be implausible. An entity reacting equally and indiscriminately to increased and diverse pressures would risk being pulled in different directions (Stark 2009). This suggests that something else might be happening, i.e., that a plurality of performance systems might produce different effects on organisations than the relatively straightforward conformance theorised in extant literature (Greenwood et al., 2011). Precisely how does an organisation respond to multiple – and potentially inconsistent - ranking systems?

In this paper, we address this question through an ethnographic study based on the in-depth analysis of several ranked organisations countering and interacting with numerous rankers. By exploiting this privileged form of access where we could look across the processes of change occurring within various ranked organisations, we acquire a window onto, first, how organisations are responding through building new forms of expertise known as 'analyst relations' or 'influencer relations' and, second, the various practices and knowledge developed by this emergent category of specialist. We present evidence that organisations are

now able to exercise greater choice about which rankings they respond to, how they are often able to shape their ranked positions, wield influence over assessment criteria and, in some cases, positively influence the wider evaluative ecosystem in their favour. In doing so, we provide a counter to those who present rankings as an ‘unmanageable constraint’ (Elsbach and Kramer 1996, Sauder 2008, Sauder and Espeland 2009) and the organisational response as ‘defensive' and ‘compliant’ (Strathern 1997, Espeland and Sauder 2007, Dahler-Larsen 2012). Through linking developments in accounting scholarship with similar advances in organisational studies (Greenwood et al., 2011) and valuation studies (Stark 2009) we show that ranked organisations are becoming more ‘proactive' (Mennicken 2010) and, in some respects, able to counter the dominance of these ranking systems.

RANKINGS ENCOURAGE A RESPONSE

Rankings are not new. There have long been credit ratings of institutions and states (Boot, Milbourn and Schmeits 2006), consumer-oriented rankings of performing and visual arts (Becker 1984, Shrum 1996) and high-value goods such as wine (Odorici and Corrado 2004). Over the past two decades, however, there has been an ‘explosion’ in the number and type of ranking and indicator (Dahler-Larsen 2012). There are rankings to measure the quality of films and music (Karpik 2010, Bialecki, O’Leary and Smith 2017), restaurants (Blank 2006), the top consumer products to buy (Aldridge 1994), the best cities to live and work in (Kornberger and Carter 2010), the standing of a company in relation to competitors (Schultz, Mouritsen and Gabrielsen 2001), and the past or projected performance of organisations such as schools (Wedlin 2006), universities (Free, Salterio and Shearer 2009), auditor firms (Mennicken 2010), and investment banks (Podolny 1993).

An initial wave of studies, because of the new kinds of information demanded and provided, emphasised the radical potential of rankings to reshape organisations (Power 1997, Humphrey and Owen 2000, Dahler-Larsen 2012). Hazelkorn (2011) describes how rankings force ‘profound transformations' across institutions and organisations. Kwon and Easton (2010) portray rankings as an exogenous factor driving organisational and economic action. Control over key information was said to allow the rankers the ability to exert authority over a space (Burrows 2012), to make domains governable through creating an 'iron cage' (Erkkilä

and Piironen 2009) of fixed and standard measures. Rankers could, as Kwon and Easton (2010: 124) describe, become "...powerful to the point where they were able to monopolise the information required for the efficient functioning of markets and thereby influence the behaviour of other market actors". Other contributions, however, have taken issue with this simplified narrative, arguing that rankings have brought not a radical shift, but a more gradual evolution in organisational processes.

Rankings create reflexive behaviours

In a further stream of studies, what scholars have found of interest is the apparent capacity of rankings to invoke in organisations the tendency to change *themselves*. Rather than this description of rankings as an autonomous, monopolistic mechanism imposing change, it was suggested that they become powerful and influential by their ability to encourage processes of 'reflexivity'. Strathern (1997) was amongst the first to develop the idea that when a feature of an organisation was singled out for audit that it ceases to function as before since actors change their behaviour towards it (see also Hoskin 1996). "Targets that seem measurable", she wrote, "become enticing tools for improvement" (Strathern 1997: 308). This idea found much support, not just within accounting circles, but across management disciplines. Organisational scholars showed how the pressure aroused by a poor rating was such that entities were often 'compelled' to improve performance for fear of stakeholder sanction (Chatterji and Toffel 2010). Similarly, it was argued that rankings could be 'fetishized' by those subject to them (Willmott 2011). 'Fear of falling' (Sauder and Espeland 2007) on a ranking was seen to constitute a peculiar type of pressure – one which organisations often found difficult to 'buffer' (Sauder and Espeland 2009).

The current focus of debate is, therefore, that audit and rankings cannot be separated from understandings of how organisation r*espond*. Scholars have also argued for better analytical templates to capture reflexive behaviours. Dahler-Larsen (2012: 218), for example, called for investigations of rankings and "the broader social processes triggered by the evaluation itself". In perhaps the most advanced study of this kind, Espeland and Sauder (2007) describe the 'mechanisms of reactivity' that can ensue after a ranking is introduced. They define reactivity as "the idea that people change their behaviour in reaction to being evaluated, observed, or measured" (ibid: 1). Their study shows how rankings "evoke self-fulfilling prophecies

that gradually transform law schools into entities that conform *more closely* to the criteria used to construct rankings" (ibid: 33, *our emphasis*). They see reactivity as having three aspects: it affects how organisational resources are allocated, leads to the shifting of work practices, and encourages the proliferation of 'gaming strategies'. Espeland and Sauder define gaming as about "managing appearances and involves efforts to improve ranking factors without improving the characteristics the factors are designed to measure" (ibid: 29).

Espeland and Sauder (ibid) see reactivity as part of the broader notion of 'reflexivity', and call for those interested in audit and valuation processes to be more systematic about its study. Versions of what we might describe as the 'reactive conformance' thesis have been deployed to good effect across different empirical and disciplinary areas. Writing about university business schools, for instance, Wedlin argues that they "have accepted the ranking as an arena and have been shown *to adapt*, at least partially, to the template, and to the criteria specified in the rankings" (2006: 150, *our emphasis*). Gioia and Corley similarly suggest that "[…] schools that *best conform* and perform to the rankings criteria achieve high rankings and reap tremendous rewards" (2002: 110, *our emphasis*). Writing more generally about business entities, Martins argues that rankings "push organisations to change *in accordance* with the criteria used by the rankings…thus constraining organisational strategy to focus on an externally defined ideal of organisational performance" (2005: 715, *our emphasis*).

Though valuable, we argue that these contributions fall short in capturing the different facets revealed by exploring the notion of reactivity. Current work tends to foreground one facet only: the arrival of a salient indicator that presents a template of what reality ought to be. If there is a discrepancy between the organisation and the measure, what typically follows is a shifting of the organisation towards the ranking. This view, however, portrays the organisational reaction to a ranking as something like a 'reflex' (Lynch 2000). We can depict this, following Lynch (2000), as 'mechanical' reactivity. The question, however, arises as to whether this simple kind of reactivity might be able to account for and explain more complicated cases of the reflexive influence of rankings over organisations. How far, for example, does the notion apply in circumstances of multiple rankings?

Reactive conformance is only one possible outcome

We build our argument on the increasing evidence that actors and organisations do not always seek to conform to performance systems. In her discussion of early university business school rankings, for instance, Wedlin (2006) shows how some high prestige institutions could (at the outset at least) afford to ignore the introduction of new measure arising from outside the sector, e.g. from newspapers like the *Financial Times*. Martins (2005: 715) similarly considers "why some organisations capitulate to the institutional pressures exerted by rankings, whereas others resist them". Building on this argument, we propose that in giving attention to the initial introduction of a ranking, rather than its continuation or stabilisation, scholars have largely overlooked the possible range of alternative responses. These include the possibility that - as the organisation becomes more familiar with the ranking(s) - its response(s) may evolve, triggering a further course of decision-making or even resistance (Martins 2005). It is also not a great leap to suggest that, while an organisation may react through a narrow process of conformance to one or a few measures when presented with a range of rankers, this may lead to the creation of more complex forms of reflexivity/reactivity.

Recent work from the sociology of worth (Stark 2009) has argued that we need to understand the heterogeneity of the evaluative 'ecosystem' that has emerged in some areas, including the 'productive friction' this creates. This school of thought foregrounds how there is seldom just one single principle of evaluation; rather, as the number of performance measures increases, multiple modes of evaluation will compete against one another (see also Chenhall, Hall and Smith 2013). Similarly, while not talking specifically about rankings, organisational scholars investigating corporate performance measurement systems have suggested that competing systems may push an organisation, not towards alignment but 'nonconformity' (Greenwood et al. 2011). Greenwood et al. (2011) argue that in the case of a plurality of social ordering systems reflexivity is enhanced because organisations can 'see' and are forced to 'reflect' upon the different (and often contradictory) responses asked of them. Multiple measuring systems are potentially liberating for organisations, they argue, as it provides for greater discretion and room for manoeuvre (Stark 2009). It follows from this that organisations must begin to appreciate just how rankings may diverge and which of these differences may be important to them.

How new experts help organisations respond to multiple rankings

While there has been growing interest amongst accounting scholars and others in the expansion of rankings (Jeacle and Carter 2011, Scott and Orlikowski 2012, Pollock and D'Adderio 2012, Brandtner 2017), there has not been the same level of focus in how those ranked might respond to or manage the multiplicity challenge. In a few cases, scholars have started to note how the introduction of new experts may help organisations build their knowledge about the specifics of rankings to excel on them. These studies, however, diverge in their analysis of what these actors mean for the organisational response. Sauder and Fine (2008: 716), for example, show that to meet the informational demands of "thirty or forty rankings a year", US business schools have turned to public relations (PR) professionals. Described as 'reputational entrepreneurs', these experts help schools improve their placings by 'selecting', 'synthesising' and 'simplifying' the information presented to rankers. Wedlin (2006) also notes the 'dramatic' increase in business schools soliciting external PR advice. However, she theorises their presence as further evidence that schools are 'adapting' to rankings, because, as she sees it, the role of PR experts is to gather and diffuse information about the criteria behind a ranking to encourage the kinds of compliance described above.

These latter studies, therefore, point to the need for further analysis and theorisation of the potential ways in which new emergent categories of actors might mediate reactions. We can reasonably expect that some version of the selection, synthesis and simplifying process identified by Sauder and Fine (2008) to be significant in the presence of multiple rankings. As a corollary, we are also interested whether these experts might offer organisations a more extensive range of responses than merely facilitating simple conformance.

Our research question is thus to understand how organisations reconfigure themselves to respond to multiple ranking. This includes analysing how they are building new kinds of expertise, the nature of interactions these experts form with rankers, and the opportunities these specialists present to ranked organisations.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

To address our research question, we focus on the ‘enterprise solution' area. Enterprise systems are large-scale applications such as enterprise resource planning (ERP) and customer relations management (CRM) solutions. This sector provides vantage points to study the organisational response to many rankings because it has witnessed a significant increase in the number of rankers over the past few years. The proliferation of rankings in the enterprise solutions domain reflects the fact that these kinds of systems are notoriously difficult to evaluate and procure. Enterprise system acquisition suffers from ‘information impactedness' (Williamson 1975). This describes the situation whereby the buyer typically does not know the ‘value' of the software solution before purchasing and installing it, causing information asymmetries which may encourage opportunistic behaviour by the vendor. This feature has led to a rapid growth in the kinds and numbers of bodies attempting to help buyers through providing indicators of vendor products and performance.

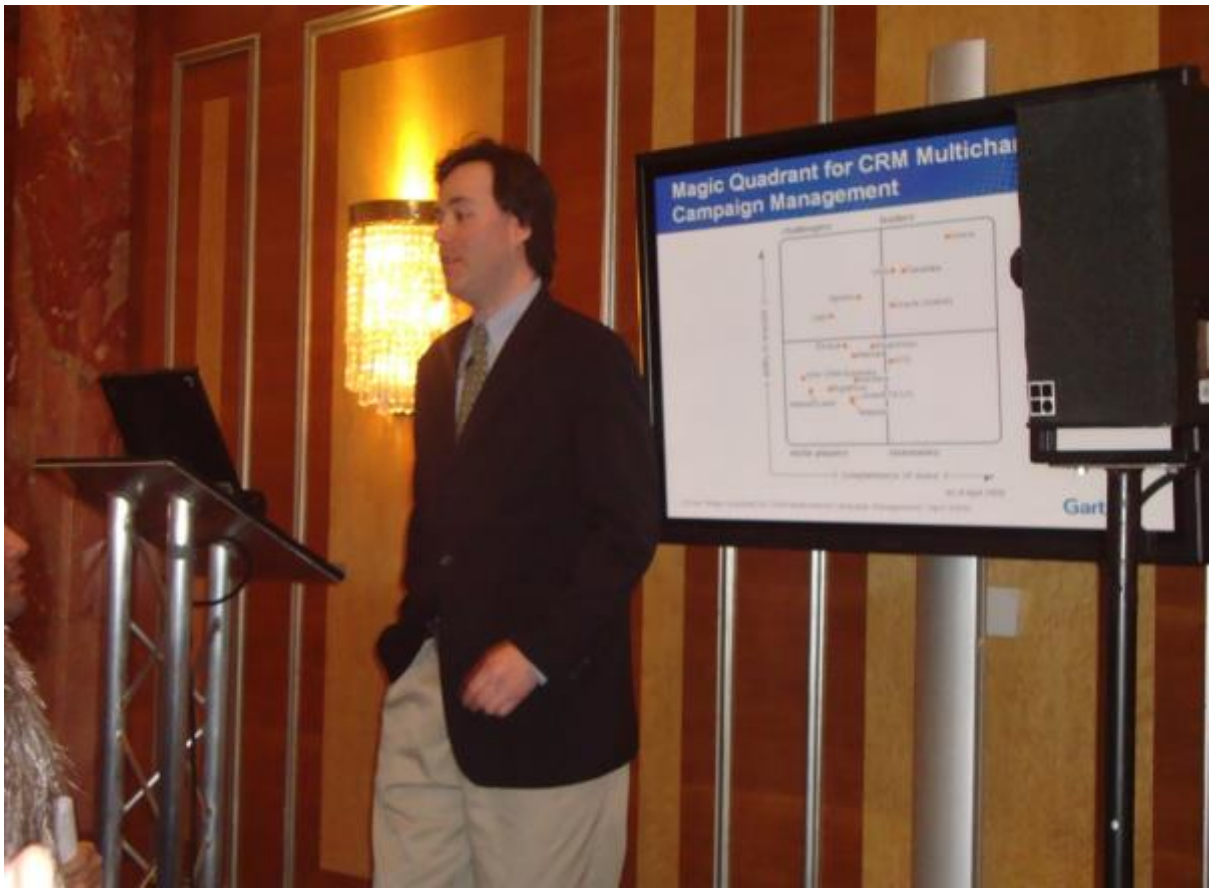
The main groups producing rankings in this area are known as ‘industry analysts'. Bernard and Gallupe (2013) have highlighted the diversity within what they call the ‘IT industry analyst sector'. This currently comprises: a handful of very large organisations (notably ‘the Big Three' of Gartner, Forrester and IDC); a modest number of smaller firms (such as Aberdeen, GigaOM, Ovum, Yankee Group, including various industry specialist organisations); and "hundreds of boutique firms" (very small organisations and individuals) (Dennington and Leforestier 2013: 6). These firms make their money through selling research to adopter organisations purchasing IT system. Many have a ‘hybrid’ business model, selling information and services also to technology vendors. A distinction is often made between analyst firms that generate revenues from IT adopters (‘buy-side’) or IT vendors (‘sell-side’) (Tan 2014).

The number of rankings in this sector has continued to grow because of social media technologies which have lowered the barriers to entry (Pollock and Williams 2016). One industry database suggests a shift from around 100 industry analyst firms just a decade or two ago to something closer to 700 today.[2] Our fieldwork investigations suggest there could be many as ‘50' different landmark evaluations that IT vendors must consider. ‘Landmark evaluations’ is a term used by our vendor informants to signify those rankings that

matter to them (e.g. have the potential to influence their customers). These typically, though not necessarily, include the rankings produced by the major buy-side analyst organisations like the 'Gartner Magic Quadrant', the 'Forrester Wave', and the 'IDC MarketScape' etc. (see Figure 1).

Two further aspects of these rankings merit note. First, each analyst organisation will produce many 'versions' of their ranking targeted at different technologies, geographies, market segments etc. Gartner will produce approximately 230 different Magic Quadrants each year; Forrester nearly 150 of its Wave; and IDC a 100 of its MarketScape. This markedly increases the number of rankings that large multi-product and multi-geography vendors will have to confront (with some the largest IT vendors encountering up to 100 different rankings at any one time). Second, there is fierce competition between vendors just to 'enter' these rankings. The bulk of rankings in this area – in contrast to the lists found in other fields - are 'visual'. Visual devices foster particular dynamics (Busco and Quattrone 2015). For instance, our previous research has shown how industry analyst firms will limit the number of vendors that can be included in any one ranking (Pollock and D'Adderio 2012). They seek to ensure that they are not 'overcrowded' or confusing for clients to read (thus the Magic Quadrant is limited to 25 vendors, the Market Scape to 15, and the Wave to 12). This is a zero-sum situation therefore where just making it onto one of these rankings, never mind where the organisation is placed, can become a significant task (ibid).

Figure 1. A Gartner analyst presents a new Magic Quadrant ranking



Source: author archive

Data Collection

Mapping the organisational response to industry analysts

The highly diverse and fragmented landscape of the industry analyst sector provides vantage points to study how IT organisations respond to being exposed to multiple rankings. We note how ranked organisations have not stood still considering this new problem. One particular development is that they have created new forms of expertise to help them take a more systematic response to the challenge – the so-called 'analyst relations' specialist approach (hereafter 'AR'). The role of AR (or 'influencer relations' as they are also known) appears primarily to be about making sense of, interfacing with, and at times 'confronting' or 'countering' industry analysts and other influential rankers.

To study industry analysts and the recent emergence of AR specialists we needed to develop a data collection method which acknowledged the field's highly complex and distributed nature. Our data collection methodology was therefore principally inductive but informed by a broad interest in recent trends in the

shaping of rankings. Our preliminary analysis suggested the need to move away from the view that rankings could be analysed separately from the organisational nexus in which they were shaped and used. Following this early insight, we have thus opted to study the development and use of these rankings in their combined production and usage setting. We found useful in this respect Sauder and Fine's (2008) conceptualisation of ranking bodies, not as part of a separate evaluative realm but embedded in an 'interactional arena'. The idea of an interactional arena foregrounds how rankers find it necessary to operate in proximity to practice which provides the possibility not just of greater contact but also of sustained interaction. Although not explicitly developed in their paper, this suggested that to understand the reflexive interactions between organisations and rankings, it was necessary to follow not just the production of these measures but the circuits through which they are distributed and consumed. Rather than take any one stakeholder as our unit of analysis, therefore, we focused on the continuous interactions between actors in what we later came to think of as the 'ranking chain'.

Investigating the 'ranking chain'

We draw further inspiration for the term ranking chain from informants who had come to conceive of rankers according to their import in adding value to their organisations through supply chain notions like 'tiering' ('tier 1 rankers', 'tier 2 rankers', etc.). The field-inspired label of 'ranking chain' helped focus our analysis on the various 'service levels' (as informants called them) that were put into place to respond to the different category of ranker. It also pointed at the importance and configuration of 'the logistics' connected to these interactions.

Studying interactions within and across the ranking chain (as opposed, for example, the impact of a ranking on an organisation, the conventional research design) promised more valuable insights into the complexities of the ranking system, though capturing these connections posed methodological challenges. We encountered (at least) two difficulties. One immediate obstacle, also remarked on by Sauder & Fine (2008), was the impenetrability of these circuits. Unsurprisingly perhaps, participants in the ranking chain are reserved and reluctant to discuss the details of their work and dealings with rankers. This perhaps explains why there are so few studies of these kinds of exchanges since most remain concealed from public view. A

further difficulty was that these interactions often take place in temporary, liminal spaces at the interstices between organisations. Exchanges are typically widely dispersed, often mediated (through telephone, email or webinars) or taking place in transient settings (industry conferences or workshops). One had the feeling when conducting the ethnography of never being in the right place at the right time (Law 1994). This presented problems for traditional ethnographic research designs, which are typically enacted in particular moments and located in specific organisational settings (Marcus 1995).

Strategic ethnography

To help overcome this potential limitation we acknowledged Marcus' (1995) point of the need to be 'strategic' during ethnography to capture phenomena that overflow the single site. Our solution to dealing with this problem was to focus our attention on one set of actors and their interactions in what seemed to us to be both a key and available link in the ranking chain. This was the Institute for Industry Analyst Relations (IIAR), a member organisation formed over a decade ago by AR experts based in the UK, to bring together IT vendors responding to rankers. Currently representing approximately 60 of the largest IT vendors in the world, its aims are linked to a concerted effort to build and strengthen the fledgling AR community, to help these people act in unison, to create and share knowledge and expertise, etc. Towards these aims, the IIAR runs monthly meetings and webinars that bring together a wide selection of actors including the rankers themselves for discussions and informal meetings. We initially attended – and later, as our project's stakeholder participation strategy evolved, helped in the running of - these events. A key feature of these gatherings is that, because the IIAR does not have its own offices and leans on the support of its member organisations and others, these meetings are held in different locations each time – including those of the rankers. Strategic choices in research design should be coupled, as Marcus (ibid) argues, with opportunism in exploiting avenues of access. In this respect, we could make use of visits to these different actors in the ranking chain as part of our data collection.

Data gathering

The data collection for the study comprised ethnography and in-depth semi-structured interviews in the context of AR. We conducted approximately 300 hours of physical observation of meetings and participated

in a further 50 related conference calls or webinars. We have also carried out over 60 interviews with actors working both in ranker and ranked organisations.

The focus of our ethnography was the IIAR. Initially, the first author's participation in IIAR activities was as a researcher only there to take notes. He also gave talks on his research (on industry analysts), and together with other IIAR members, co-authored several IIAR 'white papers' and blog posts. This included co-designing and publishing an IIAR 'ranking of the rankers' (see below). As the various participants in the ranking chain got to know and trust him, he became more involved in the running and governance of the IIAR (eventually being invited to stand for election to the board, which give him unfettered access to the more private IIAR meetings). Overall, participant-observation helped us gain first-hand experience in the challenges involved in responding to rankings. Many of the activities and interactions described below, while routine for the organisations involved are unknown to social scientists interested in performance information of this kind. This meant that the ethnography helped illuminate the complex chain of players, the intricacy of the influence creation and reception process, as well as the convoluted relations at play.

Our study is further informed and contextualised by interviews and discussions held with respondents distributed across different locations. We have conducted over 20 semi-structured interviews and carried out many more hours of informal conversations with AR experts (located either within vendors or working in PR firms or independent agencies). Discussions lasted between 1-2 hours (and some were re-interviewed several times). Also, we could consult archived recordings of meetings stored in the IIAR repository that stretched back several years. The repository also included presentations, IIAR policy documents, and notes on best practice in conducting AR. Finally, our fieldwork also engaged with the rankers themselves. We have formally interviewed more than 40 current or ex-analysts about how they construct Magic Quadrants, Forrester Waves, MarketScapes etc. While many of these analysts work for the leading industry analyst firms Gartner, Forrester and IDC, we also sought out those employed in smaller, competitor firms or the new 'upstart' analyst firms. See Table 1 for a list of data sources referred to in the text.

Table 1. Data sources referred to in text

Initials	Works for	Method	How evidence collected
AA	AR Agency (ex-industry analyst)	Multiple interviews/observations from 2013-16	Some recorded/mostly notes
BB	Industry Analyst firm	Telephone interview 25th August 2015	Recorded
CC	AR Agency (ex-industry analyst)	Webinar 5th Oct 2009	Recorded
DD	PR firm	Interview 20th Oct 2009	Recorded
EE	AR Agency (ex-industry analyst)	Interviews/multiple observations from 2013-16	Some recorded/mostly notes
FF	IT Vendor	Interview 1st Oct 2015	Notes
GG	AR Agency	Interview 18th Sept 2014	Recorded
HH	IT Vendor	Multiple interviews/ observations from 2013-16	Some recorded/mostly notes
II	Industry Analyst firm	Interview 20th Oct 2009	Recorded
JJ	Industry Analyst firm	Interview 19th Mar 2010	Recorded

Data Analysis

This rich body of data was inductively analysed according to the principles of grounded theorising (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Eisenhardt 1989) and successively compared with insights from the literature. The data analysis process, which was carried out by the first author and verified by the second, began during our ethnography where he wrote notes on each interview and observation period and coded the accumulating interviews and observation material based on *in vivo* phrases and terms as mentioned by informants (Van Maanen 1989). This included scouring field notes and transcripts and the material contained in the IIAR online repository (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The goal was to get close to the daily practices of AR experts by examining what they did to foster interactions with rankers. Recurring themes in the data included categories such as 'inquiries', 'constant touches', 'briefings', 'logistics', 'expertise', 'occupation', 'valorisation' 'influence', etc. Particular attention was given to indigenous categories like 'tiering strategy', 'SAS days', 'service levels', 'the onion', 'ranking the rankers', 'moving the dot activities' etc.

In the second phase of coding, these *in vivo* entries were further compared to develop a sense of the variation within them and to foreground emerging concepts and their interrelationships. At this stage, we also evolved the emergent categories by comparing our data with existing theoretical frameworks. This allowed us to collapse some of the *in vivo* categories into a set of second-order notions. This included

identifying a range of techniques whereby those ranked began: to foster specialised skills and expertise with regard to rankings; to work to create increasing interactions and involvement with rankers; to comprehend and map the varying levels of influence of particular rankers/rankings; and, to create new distinctions between rankers.

As the links and interrelations between second-order categories became more evident, we were able to synthesise these into larger groupings which cast our insights at a more abstract level (Ryan and Bernard 2003). This more logically ordered set of categories thus obtained focused on how organisations react to multiple rankings through the complementary techniques of *navigating* and *(re)negotiating* (see Table 2 for final coding structure). This finally led to identifying as our overarching theme the strategies organisations develop to respond to rankings by *conforming* and/or *transforming*. After selecting this final theme, we continued to discuss it with informants to validate our reading of the situation, which included sending them drafts of the paper and making changes based on feedback.

Table 2: Final coding structure

First order	Second order	Overarching theme
"we did inquiries", "I need to do briefings", 'SAS days', "doing references", "get the best coverage", a "mountain of stuff", "we're pre-filter", "don't give me lots of marketing", "a good opinion", "right messages", to "positively influence thinking"	Fostering specialisation within the organisation	How organisations react to multiple rankings through complementary practices of navigation and (re) negotiation
"We're friends", "constant touches", "building the relationship", "deep dives", "speak with that analyst over a meal and try to convey to them our thought leadership", "how am I going to work with these analysts"	Creating greater involvement between ranker and ranked	
"tiering strategy", "service levels", "it's like layers of an onion, who's in the middle, who's the next layer and the next layer", "focus our time", "different levels of importance", "who's most influential for you", "the person in the middle of the onion", "under-allocating efforts on influential analysts", "most analysts relations effort is wasted", "a lack of understanding"	Comprehending and mapping influence	
"So IDC I put very much 'The challenger'", "a lot of the analyst relations function having a tiering system", "the front row was reserved for Gartner", "to develop a common picture of which analysts were reporting [on] them and how they were seen by analysts", "we started to be more systematic about collecting it"	Creating new distinctions	

FINDINGS

Our results capture and theorise the techniques created by organisations to enact sophisticated responses to multiple rankings. We find that organisations do not simply react to industry rankings in isolation. They instead develop internally by creating capacities and forms of calculative expertise (Tan 2014) which help to address the complexities associated with the coexistence of multiple rankings. The new kind of expertise consists in the development of a novel professional category, that of the AR specialist. These kinds of specialist emerging within the industry nexus have acquired the knowledge and techniques needed to understand the structure, dynamics and methods of the industry analyst sector and to help technology vendors make choices about how to select between and respond to rankings.

DEVELOPING NEW TECHNIQUES

Our findings highlight how the work of AR involves developing a range of techniques that support the processes of selection and reaction to rankings. We start by describing some of the main techniques they deploy to do this work.

Fostering a more proactive approach

A major way in which AR specialists shape the organisational response is by managing the material conditions surrounding rankings – what our experts refer to as 'the logistics'. Part of the logistics is to foster a more pro-active approach. One informant explains how, vendor staff "will come to us and say: 'We're in this particular Magic Quadrant', and we want to make sure that we get the best coverage in the one that's coming up as possible'" (interview, AA). Preparing for an assessment typically starts several months ahead of a ranking submission deadline. It will involve not one person but a whole team of individuals from across the organisation, who will together produce a report that will extend over 50 pages. However, there is much more to the logistics than simply filling out forms. As well as gathering information, the AR specialist may have to help prepare it for presentation or sometimes even present it to the analyst firm:

> Analyst relations professionals rarely brief the analysts themselves. I've always done it, but I'm probably more technical than most, so it depends on the seniority. So [describing a recent example] we had loads of AR people who were ex-product managers, so they know their stuff really well. What AR people would do is they would teach the subject to an analyst. I tend to brief the analysts on high-level stuff, you know, 'who's the company?' and those kinds of things (interview, LL).

As one informant told us, this is not just a matter of presenting the data to the industry analyst; it is also a question of understanding the analysts' perspectives and giving the information to them in a way they will understand. Vendors face difficulties in presenting the qualities of their new offerings to industry analysts and other opinion shapers. These problems may be particularly acute where a product differs significantly from established market understandings or categories, in terms perhaps of its technical features or of the business challenges that it addresses. The AR specialists we spoke to observed that those involved in product

development tend to highlight technical features and have more difficulty conveying the business case for a new product:

> They talked about everything they did in very much a technical way. But if you look through all of their Gartner research, for example, that came out about them, they said: 'No, you need to be talking about things in a very much business problem point of view'. It is not rocket science. But they were still coming from a technical point of view (interview, DD).

This is where the AR specialist comes in. As one says: "…we act like the analysts, like a pre-filter. We say [to the product development people] give us the information. We will tell you what information to give us. Do not give us any of that stuff. Don't waste time on any of that because it's a complete waste of time" (interview, AA). Here AR specialists draw on their understanding and often a direct experience of the culture and practices of industry analyst firms to achieve what Garfinkel (1967) called 'recipient design'. This is where an actor constructs their message in a way that will increase the likelihood that it is understood and acted upon. One informant, who was a Gartner analyst before turning to AR, describes the typical analyst workload and how this, therefore, affects how he crafts his message. This means that if the AR specialist is not clear with the information they provide to the analyst:

> …the analyst may never even notice it. They'll never hear the fact that we're hugely differentiated because we do this. At the time I mentioned it, they were reading their email or somebody has just called them from across the office, I've no idea, I'm on the phone with them, I think they're looking at my slide and listening to me; they're not (interview, AA).

AR specialists achieve this form of understanding not through episodic contact with analysts but sustained interaction. The work of AR appears primarily concerned with maintaining and exploiting informal channels within the ranking bodies to create the space and occasion for collaboration.

Developing greater interactions with rankers

Personal familiarity and networking appear a dominant resource in this community (Simakova 2012). Unlike most other kinds of assessment – where there is typically a formal separation between ranker and ranked (Free, Salterio and Shearer 2009) – analysts and AR seem to forge particularly close relations. Many of these

people will be interacting with and talk to each other on a regular almost weekly basis either through ‘vendor briefings’ (a formal ‘pitch’ made to analysts about new products/services) or more informally over lunch or at an event or conference. Moreover, many of the technology vendors will be ‘clients’ of the industry analysts. This not only provides them with access to their research but also to formally contracted meetings with the analysts themselves, such as ‘inquiries’ (which are one-to-one calls made to an analyst).[3] Finally, some of these people will even socialise together in the evening, and it is not unheard of for them to refer to each other as ‘friends'.

We discover that AR specialists have borrowed (from the allied field of marketing) a lexicon to describe the various types of interactions that could go on between them and analysts and others. In a professional development webinar, the founder of an AR agency describes how his engagement with analysts proceeds through ‘touches' (in line with the established marketing principle that it takes 7 or 8 ‘touches' before someone will internalise and act upon your call to action):

> I need to do ‘briefings’; I need to do ‘deep dives’; I need to perhaps do a ‘SAS day’; I’m going to work on social media; I’m going to actually have ‘social time’ with my executive; speak with that analyst over a meal and try to convey to them our thought leadership. So those are ‘the touches’ (webinar, CC).[4]

These meetings play several roles that help the AR specialist plan their response. They provide information about ‘who’ is involved. Preparation for a ranking should start by identifying those analysts responsible for collecting and compiling the assessment information:

> …remember some of these Magic Quadrants may have a lead analyst, and then have additional researching-type analysts that are working to get the information. You need to know who is actually in charge, and who is actually doing the data gathering, and what are the characteristics of these analysts? Are they approachable? Are they people whom we have a strong relationship with? And exactly how am I going to work with these analysts? (webinar, CC).

The interactions allow the compilation not merely lists of analysts but more detailed ‘profiles’. These sketches – some noted in a jotter, others added to specially developed software packages – might be

collected over a period of months and even years. We had access to some of these, and they would describe in detail the analyst's career, their knowledge of the vendor, as well as, importantly, their inclination or attitude towards the ranked organisation:

> [Bob] is IDC's new lead analyst for [vendor]. He joined IDC about 6 months ago and this is his first analyst position. As lead analyst, he is in a position to influence all research at IDC that prominently features [vendor]. [Bob's] overall position on [vendor] is positive...He recently was briefed by [vendor employee] on our M&A strategy and was quoted publicly reinforcing our messages (vendor document).

Given the myriad of different rankers commenting on and assessing vendor products, however, the key problem in this role was to find the rankers who would count or make a difference in a product or service area. This required a substantial effort to estimate the influence of a ranking either in absolute terms or relative to others.

Tiering

A third way in which AR specialists shape responses to rankings is by helping assess the rankers' influence. Working out which are the important rankers is one requirement. Getting to the right people within the ranker seems to be another. There are significant differences in terms of influence between the various analyst firms. It is not necessarily the case that all 'landmark' rankings are automatically important. Some are more important to an organisation than others. Likewise, identifying the most influential analyst expertise was complicated by the fact that there were also significant differences *within* these firms regarding the influence wielded by individuals. This is a domain characterised by 'star analysts' (people reputed for their technical knowledge who would often also possess charismatic personal attributes) (Wang 2010). Thus, a key aspect of the work of AR experts appears concerned with the creation of lists that sort and prioritise rankers and individuals according to their perceived importance and influence – which underpin their so-called 'tiering strategies'.

We were interested in the different 'calculative practices' (Miller 2001) that have emerged in recent years amongst these groups. During fieldwork, we found two distinctive (and in some respects competing) ways of

assessing influence. The first is a ‘social interaction’ model where the AR expert fosters interactions with analysts to build up a rich picture of their reach and sway (as described in the section above). The second, more ‘quantitatively’ focused, was heavily reliant on the use of new social media technologies and online influence measurement tools. These generated an automatic score based on a variety of criteria related to the popularity of a ranking (e.g. the number of times a ranking is mentioned or shared across various social media platforms [Gerlitz and Lury 2014]). One AR specialist told us, "I understand the whole tiering better than anyone else, especially when it comes to social media because I have developed tools that can do that, that no one else has got" (interview, DD). There appeared to be an almost ‘disciplinary’ divergence between those that looked to exploit the affordances of ‘big data’ to measure a ranking’s influence and others, critical of this turn towards quantitative information, who argued for the benefits of more qualitative practices.

Once in place, these tiering strategies would structure the organisation's responses to a ranking. The role of tiering was to open opportunities for the organisation beyond responding in a mechanistic manner, either by reacting immediately to the first ranking that came along or by treating all rankers in the same way. One AR specialist told us, “when analyst relations are done badly, it is done in a very *reactive* manner" (interview, DD). Another writes, “[i]t's easy to get very reactive, very quickly as unchecked content races rampant across the Internet" (IIAR internal document). Additional informants told us how, "if you are working consistently in analyst relations and you're treating each analyst the same then either you have unlimited resources and a very low level of sophistication, or you're wasting effort" (interview, EE).

Most AR teams we talked to seemed to work with a ‘three-tiered' system of differentiation, paying more attention to ‘tier one' and less to those they considered ‘tier two' or ‘tier three'. In practice, this would mean that when they had to get news or information out, the tiering strategy would dictate whom they speak to and how much effort they put into it: "We have to focus our time. If we have got someone important to get a message to, are we going to test it with everyone? No. We pick up the three best people because we have only got three hours, to speak to. So, our job is always to make sure which of the people are important" (interview, DD). Likewise, when an analyst contacts a vendor to ask them to talk to executives or for the latest product strategy - because either they are compiling a ranking, or perhaps one of their own clients has

asked them for information about a specific vendor offering – there will be differing 'service levels' at play based on their perceived importance (interview, EE)

One informant likened the identification of these layers of influence to 'peeling an onion': "Of course you want to identify who's most influential for you. It's like layers of an onion, who's in the middle, who's the next layer and the next layer, you concentrate most importantly on the people in the centre and then less and less on the people around" (interview, AA). However, in this dynamic space, the added complication is that it is not always the analyst at the centre of the onion that turns out to be the one wielding influence. Influence can move around as our informant goes on to describe:

> …lets say you're a specialist [analyst] in mobile application development…You're the most important analyst to me, but you're pretty busy, and there's an event coming up…You're not going to speak at it but [another analyst] is….I'm a delegate at that conference, I want to talk to someone about mobile application development, you're not there, he's there…He's not the person in the middle of the onion, but at that point in time, he's critically important to the vendor because if that user now asks him who should I buy and he doesn't mention that vendor, there's an opportunity gone for them (interview, AA).

Keeping up with just which ranker might be able to wield influence over your organisation's market segment is a difficult task. Some we talked to, especially those who were new to the AR role, or where this was just one element of what they did, confessed how they found maintaining and updating the tiering strategy overwhelming (interview, FF). Many have turned to external specialists who are providing new kinds of performance information – so-called 'rankings of the rankers'.

Ranking the Rankers

A fourth technique used by AR specialists is to turn some of the tools the rankers apply to them and their organisations back onto the rankers themselves. Several new players have emerged - independent AR 'agencies' and 'consultancies' – to produce and sell 'rankings of the rankers'. Initially, the products and services sold by these agencies involved merely collating information about rankings, but this was

subsequently extended through the production of guides and practitioner handbooks, and the running of seminars and workshops. Today, some sell advanced forms of the tiering strategy discussed above.

We interviewed the founder of one of the first of these agencies, who was responsible for producing the 'analyst quotations database' which went on to become one of the most popular resources for information about analysts, and a source of inspiration for other AR specialists attempting to create similar rankings. He talks us through how the database was started:

> I was sitting in the American Airlines lounge at O'Hare airport one day, waiting for a flight, and I picked up a copy of…*PC World*…And as I leafed through it, I saw that there were several places where analysts were quoted. So, I opened up *Excel* just as a personal record so I could remember which analyst said what about which firms. I started making a spreadsheet that had some of these analysts' quotations, name of the analyst, name of the company, name of the publication, date of the publication and a little bit about what the analyst said, nothing fancy - just a spreadsheet (interview, GG).

Later, he shared the spreadsheet with his agency colleagues who agreed it looked interesting. They created reports that differentiated and rated industry analysts from the original spreadsheet and started using that data in discussions with clients. Because customers were enthusiastic about it, they began to be more systematic about collecting the data. Once they had enough information, as explained by our informant, "we tried to interest some clients into subscribing to a report, and some of them did, so that was when we started the report" (interview, GG).

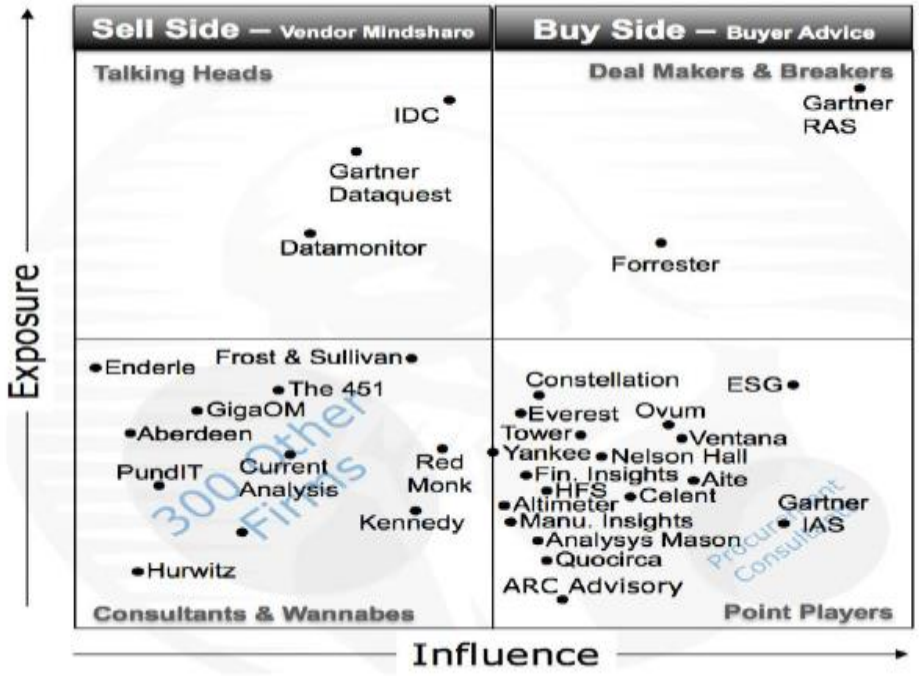
In constructing these rankings, it was intriguing to see how these groups drew explicitly on tools and presentation formats that industry analysts had developed to rate vendors and their products. An AR specialist told us of where he had got the idea for his ranking: "I bastardised Gartner's and Forrester's own methodology against them. So [showing the first author an example] this is the *Gartner Magic Quadrant of Analyst Houses*, and this is the *Forrester Wave of Analysts*. And this would show which of the analysts had the greatest influence" (interview, DD). These new rankings were at the outset a 'bit of fun', and circulated internally within the AR community. Later, some began to be posted on websites to increase traffic. Today,

in some cases, they have come to take on a growing importance (and in some cases, are developed as a central part of the value proposition provided by the agencies).

How rankings of the rankers create new distinctions

A final practice used by AR specialists to assist the response to rankings consists in helping create practical distinctions between rankers. AR experts seek to differentiate industry analysts primarily regarding the influence they wield over technology adopters. We investigated the 'KCG Mystical Box Chart' which is one of the most widely diffused rankings of rankers (see Figure 2). KCG seek to differentiate and rank industry analysts primarily regarding their 'influence over' enterprise technology buyers and 'exposure in' the IT product market (Hopkins and England 2012). They position analyst firms on a two-by-two matrix that closely resembles Gartner's Magic Quadrant. They name this (with delicious irony) the *KCG Mystical Box Chart*. Like the Magic Quadrant before it, this tool sorts industry analysis into four quadrants and then positions them along two dimensions: influence and exposure. A salient feature is the classification and ranking by AR experts of industry analyst organisations regarding their (direct) adopter and (indirect) media influence. Rankers are positioned as either *Deal Makers or Breakers* (because of their influence over procurement choices); *Point Players* (where they have high levels of specific competence); *Talking Heads* (who enjoy high levels of exposure in the media); and *Wannabees and Consultants* (who have limited direct influence on the market).

Figure 2. KCG (Knowledge Capital Group) Mystical Box Chart



Source: The Knowledge Capital Group (reprinted with permission)

These often seemingly humorous interventions are far from trivial. We saw numerous examples of how these distinctions could pattern the interactions between the ranked organisations and the rankers – often acting as a filter. The rankers themselves told us how they recognised they were being countered by the ranked organisations. For some, it seemed just a further evolution in their dealings with IT vendors: "You see a lot of the analyst relations function having a tiering system - i.e. saying that we are predominately dealing with Gartner and the Magic Quadrant world, little bit of Forrester if you have time…then the rest of the world" (interview, BB). These distinctions, in this analyst's view, were creating an evident and crude hierarchy that privileged one set of rankers over others regardless of expertise or relevance. Whereas in the past they were mostly implicit, today they have taken on a quite public and (according to some) intrusive aspect of relationships. One analyst recalled the striking example of how at a recent briefing these distinctions were used to determine the layout of the room:

> There are times I get exasperated with people who almost tier blindly…one provider who shall remain nameless, at a briefing…typically, it is quite a relaxed, informal meeting and you know the drill for the briefings… All the front row had name tags for the briefing, which is unusual anyway, but not only nametags, but all the front row was reserved for Gartner, even analysts who don't cover the vendor (interview, BB).

Others, however, complained that the rankings of the rankers meant that suppliers were now choosing to deal only with a handful of the industry analyst firms (even to the extent of prioritising those who did not research the particular vendor/technology). For those rankers perceived as less influential, this was making life a lot harder. Analysts require good, unfettered access to the vendor to produce the reports they sell to their clients, but these strategies were beginning to change that.[5]

How these experts change the way organisations respond to rankings

In previous sections, we have highlighted the new techniques enacted by AR specialists to articulate the organisation's response to rankings. We now proceed to address how these techniques enabled organisations to choose between a range of possible responses that includes *navigating* and *(re)negotiating*.

Navigating between rankings

Most organisations in this area no longer approach all the rankers that cover their products in the same way: they navigate *towards* some and *away from* others. Individual rankings have become obligatory points of passage that need to be considered. An informant describes how the Magic Quadrant is one such landmark ranking:

> For companies who are on the periphery of [Magic Quadrants], they make a huge difference to whether they get on to [customer procurement] shortlists and whether they have a chance to win a piece of business. So, if you're not on, it's far less likely that you'll get shortlisted. If you are on [and] the further up to the right you are [on the ranking] the more likely you'll get shortlisted and the more likely you're going to win the business. So, everyone wants to get in, and everyone wants to move up to the right (interview, AA).

In cases where rankings were crucial for getting onto adopter shortlists, for instance, then one possible response was conformance. Vendors told us that because certain rankings had leverage amongst their client base it was here they would focus all their attention. This included, if necessary, adjusting aspects of what they did to align more closely with the ranking criteria (personal communication, FF). Ranked organisations, however, were also able to identify which rankers were less important to them, or were reputed to be difficult to work with, and thus might need to be *navigated away from*. For instance, a vendor might attempt to avoid a ranker hostile to its organisation or committed to a different view of how the technology field should develop. An informant describes how:

> …there is a bit of a duopoly in this space: Gartner and Forrester. A lot of the vendors…like that duopoly as long as Gartner and Forrester like what they are doing. But…if the vendor [feels] they just don't understand me, or fundamentally they just can't get on those guys' radar, because they are not seen as interesting or whatever, or, maybe, for genuine reasons, Gartner and Forrester…don't really agree with what they are doing, it is various easy for those vendors to feel excluded (interview, II).

It is easy for a vendor to disagree with or be invisible to a ranker. The rankers view the world through their classification schemes. An informant explains how, "[b]ecause Gartner and all the technology houses see the world according to their own 'taxonomy', what do we do when we don't fit into that taxonomy?" (interview, DD). Some organisations may attempt to find rankers more sympathetic to their view (see below). Others may decide it is too damaging to be excluded from a landmark evaluation and may look to reposition themselves within the taxonomy or, as we show now, even attempt to change that taxonomy.

Negotiating the shape of rankings

Attempting to negotiate the form of a ranking was another potential response. Negotiating a measure could occur at different levels. One is to *negotiate the ranker's perception of an organisation.* It was common, for instance, when excluded from a ranking, to attempt to negotiate entry. As described by one informant: "In [the case of not being included] we have to work with education to try and get things to change. And it is hard" (interview, DD). To evidence this latter point, he gives an example of the kinds of interactions he had

with the ranker when the organisation he worked for was omitted: "…we tried to understand what the analyst thought about our company, and we realised that there were several areas where there was a gap. So we made sure we filled those gaps…" (interview, DD). Regarding how these gaps were filled, he describes how:

> We did inquiries to understand whether what we believed the message should have [been, was] got across…and if it wasn't, we tried to fill that gap. So when the Magic Quadrant finally came out, we positioned! We knew the analyst had sufficient information, we knew where we had weak points and we addressed those, so it wasn't a shock. In fact, we were positioned in the top right-hand corner. It was fantastic (interview, DD).

A further form of influence could be to *negotiate the ranker's conception of the technology*. The same informant described the notable example where they could encourage Gartner to create a wholly new Magic Quadrant ranking for what they believed to be a developing innovation area. Gartner currently represented the technology with a Market Scope.[6]From his previous discussions with analysts, our informant understood Gartner's internal processes for creating such a ranking. This includes establishing that there is a market with enough players for Gartner's work of assessment to be pertinent to its clients. He also liaised with other vendors to ensure that they would be able to meet other requisite criteria - in particular, Gartner's requirements regarding numbers of vendors and revenue volumes:

> We knew that for it to become a Magic Quadrant in its own right it had to have a certain amount of revenue within it, it had to have a certain number of vendors competing within it, lots of different scenarios. So we made sure that we actually had all these facts to hand, and say: 'Look, this is not a Market Scope, it is a [Magic] Quadrant. It is this part of the technology cycle'. And it worked! They actually developed a new way of looking at things (interview, DD).

To be involved in the creation of a new version of a Magic Quadrant was highly advantageous for a vendor (as it gave them the potential to dominate the ranking). Another - albeit more ambitious - possibility was to *negotiate the analysts' understanding of the wider market segment*. We attended webinars, for instance, where it was suggested that the way to position well in a ranking was through creating an entirely new

market category. A seasoned AR expert tells his audience: “You can own a market if you *redefine the category*, so you're the leader" (webinar, CC). While the speaker emphasises the considerable work required to negotiate this kind of change, he also flags the substantial rewards:

> Although it’s difficult, sometimes you might want to put yourself into a unique category. We call this ‘category creation’. Category creation is particularly difficult to do, but particularly positive in terms of its overall response. It gives you the opportunity to create a new space where the buyer understands the product and the technology, there’s no confusion about exactly what the space is, you’re unique in this category, everybody else is an also-ran, and you’re going to be the leader (webinar, CC).

We came across several attempts at category creating during our fieldwork. For instance, one AR specialist (DD) told us he had played a role in the early definition of the ‘Web Services’ category. However, it does not seem to be the case that AR players can easily or directly exert influence or control over analysts. It was more they could negotiate the dynamics of influence. As one informant modestly observes, when he did manage to introduce a new category, “I must admit that I had help from some hefty vendors behind me who were trying to push it, so it wasn’t all thanks to me, but there was part of the process of trying to say: ‘No, this is what we need to do to make sure that Gartner recognise this as an area’” (interview, DD).

(Re)negotiating the ecosystem

A final technique observed involved attempts at *renegotiating the wider ranking ecosystem*. During fieldwork we saw how ranked organisations were becoming increasingly interested in the internal workings of rankers themselves. This went beyond simply collecting information about their assessment criteria to developing understandings of their business models and the competitive structure of the industry analyst sector: ‘Understand the analyst marketplace’ was a typical heading on PowerPoint presentations in AR meetings (fieldwork document). ‘What is the analyst firm’s business model?’ was another frequent question (webinar, SG). ‘You need to know how these firms generate revenue’ (webinar, SG), was an additional piece of advice. We even attended meetings where AR specialists - because they had developed a comprehensive knowledge

of the analyst business model - would end up advising rankers on how to compete more efficiently against the dominant ranking firms like Gartner.

Some went further still. As noted earlier, there has been a marked increase in the number of analyst firms in the last few years (Bernard and Gallupe 2013). A significant stimulus for this growth has been the IT vendors themselves who sought to encourage and sustain the presence of more rankers. In one informant's words, "… a mature AR function also *grows* analyst firms" (personal communication, HH). What is described here is how some of the largest vendors sought to foster the growth of more 'start-up' rankers. They would do this indirectly by commissioning research from them. An industry analyst, reflecting on the growth of these smaller sell-side players and their reliance on specific vendors, notes how:

> If *IBM* analysts stop funding analyst firms, which ones go bust? IBM has a very, very large analyst relations team; it is over 80 people worldwide, and they put millions of dollars into it every year. A lot of the smaller [analyst] firms live off the side of IBM, or IBM and a couple of other firms (interview, JJ).

A vendor might look to grow the number of rankers because this would give it more room for manoeuvre. For instance, a supplier excluded from a market by a ranker committed to a different view of how a technology field should develop, could find a more dynamic ecosystem advantageous. As an informant describes:

> It is very easy for…vendors to feel excluded [by established analysts like Gartner and Forrester]. That is why they like the idea of lots of these small players...it allows them to have a channel into that whole market even when the big [ranking firms] aren't…amplifying the right kind of messages…So lots of choice in the analysts' ecosystem is a good thing for some of the vendors (interview, II).

These specialists favoured a diverse – to use their term - 'ecosystem' where there were large numbers of rankers and difference between the rankings. There appeared to be a growing consensus that the vendor community would be better served by growing the ecosystem. Fed up with being ignored or treated poorly by the large analyst firms some found common interest in having a broad range of rankers. An ecosystem of

big and small players with different taxonomies allowed vendors to pilot towards those that were more aligned to their concerns and away from those that might be more critical.

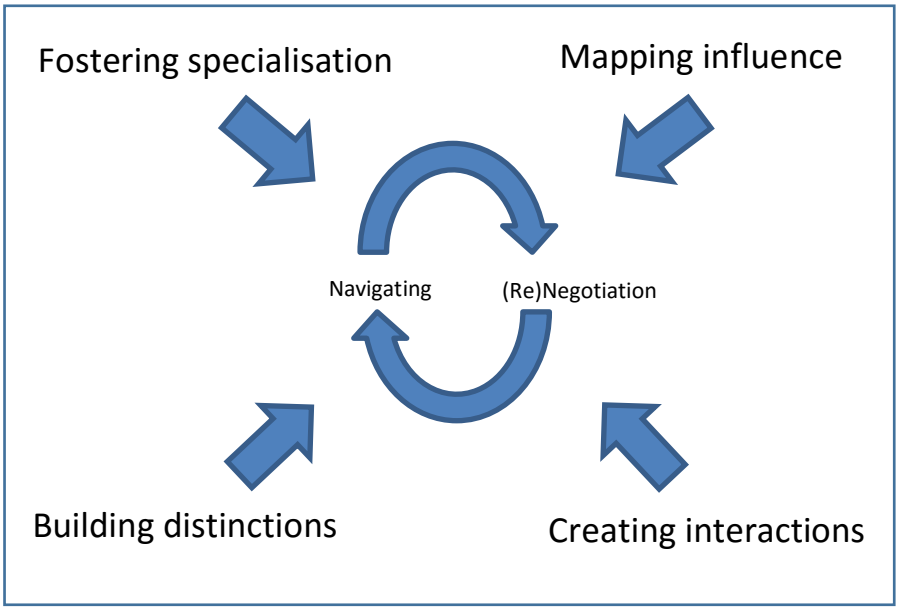
To summarise, what our story shows is that ranked organisations are now able to exercise a degree of 'choice' when responding to multiple rankings. Our investigations also suggest that the capacity and success of ranked organisation's AR teams were unevenly distributed. The latter examples, such as creating a new version of a ranking or helping to foster more analyst firms, required higher levels of experience, deeper knowledge of the workings of industry analysts, and significant internal budgets for research and marketing. Whereas attempts to relocate a vendor within a ranking were common, convincing a ranker of the emergence of a new market category was not. Likewise, sustaining and creating new ranking organisations was a tactic discussed only by one or two (of the very largest) IT vendors. Exercising such a choice depends on the level of resources they can deploy to such ends and whether such an investment would appear justifiable and doable.

DISCUSSION

The auditing of performance (Strathern 1997) is increasingly based on rankings (Shore and Wright 2015). The proliferation of these measures across the economy and society raises an interesting question for scholars of accounting, namely how organisations respond to such rankings. It is commonly assumed by those inside and outside accounting that actors react to the pressure of rankings through reorienting *towards* them (Kornberger and Carter 2010, Scott and Orlikowski 2012, Shore and Wright 2015). This conceptualisation worked well enough when one or a few similar rankings dominated a field, but falls short when there are multiple systems for measuring, ranking and auditing performance that differ regarding both influence and position in the field. We highlight this issue by considering how the continued proliferation of rankings forces us to revisit underlying assumptions about the process of 'reactivity' (Espeland and Sauder 2007) and 'reflexivity' (Strathern 1997). Whilst the idea of reactivity helps us understand how reflexivity is a fundamental characteristic of performance information, i.e. that rankings both create expectations about performance and then encourage actors to realise those assumptions, it is less clear what kind of a response is provoked in the presence of more plural performance measurement systems (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Through analysing ethnographic material, and bringing together themes from accounting with those of organisational studies (Greenwood et al., 2011) and the sociology of worth (Stark 2009), we have examined how different organisations respond to the problem of multiple rankings. A key insight from our study is that organisations no longer simply conform to dominant measures but are instead 'transformed' by them. To help show how these transformative dynamics differ from but also build on the early work on reactivity, we propose an analytical template that we call 'reflexive transformation'. We have identified the specific techniques which organisations enact to coordinate their response to multiple rankings that includes *fostering specialisation, building connections, mapping influence* and *creating distinctions.* It is important to articulate how these techniques relate to previous work.

Figure 3. Reflexive transformation



Reflexive transformation

Our interest in *fostering specialisation* builds on a growing interest in the construction of new forms of 'calculative expertise' (see Tan 2014) surrounding or responding to performance information. That ranked organisations will draw on external expertise to help them to excel on rankings has been noted but not yet sufficiently developed within the literature (Wedlin 2006, Sauder and Fine 2009). We thus advance this further through showing how there has been a process of specialisation within ranked organisations as they nurture a new occupational category - the 'analyst relations' or 'influencer relations' role. These actors have

constituted themselves as experts in helping ranked organisations decide which rankers they should work more closely with, how they should project their offerings, and what might be the most successful strategy for engaging with and influencing them.

Scholars typically present a necessary arms-length relation between ranker and ranked (Free, Salterio and Shearer 2009). We have painted a picture instead of these experts *building connections* and constituting a network of relations. Rankers find it necessary to operate in close relationship with practitioners which provides the possibility not just of greater contact but deepened interaction/relations. Analyst relations play a mediating role that links up different actors within and beyond the boundaries of the organisation. These kinds of interstitial transformations open a channel for information and influence to be exchanged and traded. We build on Sauder and Fine (2008) who call for studies that consider not merely how people react to rankings but also how they are 'involved' with them, and we discuss the notion of a 'ranking chain' which questions the notion that rankings are always produced autonomously and result from dyadic relationships.

We sought to understand the role of ranked organisations and agencies in *mapping influence.* These are the practices to find which rankings 'count' or 'make a difference' in a product or service area. What we have shown is how organisations cannot respond to all measures in the same way. To get "very reactive, very quickly", as one informant describes, is seen a mistake or act of naivety by these specialists. Analyst relations experts will thus attempt to work out which are the essential rankings to which they must respond, as well as how to do this (Chenhall, Hall and Smith 2013).

Just as rankers influence the shape of technology fields by articulating evaluation principles (Sauder 2008), ranked organisations are now involved in the classification and reworking of the evaluative ecosystem, through *creating distinctions*. These specialists have constructed new discriminations to differentiate rankers according to their perceived importance and influence. This means they give form to properties and relative positions hitherto not defined (e.g. rankers are categorised as 'dealmakers', 'point players', 'talking heads' or 'wannabees'). These distinctions are not insignificant. They create the opportunity for ranked organisations to treat the rankers differently, which means that these new forms of 'ranking of the rankers' genuinely become constraining.

Through describing the interrelation of these four techniques we extend earlier work. This includes Sauder and Fine's (2008) description of how intermediaries select, synthesise and simplify the information they present to rankers. We are also able to go further in that our template allows us to show how ranked organisations do more than just present themselves in a better light but also garner room for manoeuvre in what some have described as the most constraining of contexts (Elsbach and Kramer 1996, Sauder 2008, Sauder and Espeland 2009). We now turn to illustrate this idea and give some suggestions as to the new kinds of relations emerging between ranker and ranked.

Organisational Responses to Multiple Rankings

Scholars typically present rankings as a materialised institution patterning action which organisations have little choice but to bend to (Sauder and Espeland 2009, Shore and Wright 2015). However, Martins (2005: 702) also noted how "organisations vary in their adaptation to rankings". Likewise, in talking about similar kinds of performance object, Power (2015: 51) flags the non-deterministic aspects of performance information and how 'noncompliance' and 'resistance' are always possible. How might we take account of these contrasting positions?

We have shown how the creation of these new chains of influence makes the proliferation of rankings and broader 'ecosystem' of measures increasingly understandable, and perhaps because of this more malleable. We suggest the above techniques constitute a distinct form of response where organisations can build their relationship with (multiple) rankings in different directions. The separation we have made above between *navigation* and *(re)negotiation* exhibits similarities to how one might traverse a difficult terrain. There were rankings, because they were found to be obligatory points of passage, which had to be *navigated towards*. Here reactive conformance was a possibility as certain rankers were seen (and importantly, calculated) to be so influential that there would be little choice for the organisation but to adapt itself to its evaluative criteria, leading perhaps to the 'isomorphic' pressures described by Gioia and Corley (2002) and others. There were also rankers that while potentially negative or unreceptive towards the ranked organisation could simply be side-stepped or *navigated around.* These internal experts could calculate the relevance and import of a ranking and judge it not necessarily important enough to warrant a response. This observation throws light

on Martins (2005) and Power's (2015) question as to how and why organisations might sometimes resist or ignore rankings.

Ranked organisations could also exercise a certain amount of discretion about which rankings to accept as fixed and which to attempt *to negotiate*. At the most basic level, this could mean for the organisation to negotiate itself onto a ranking where it had previously been excluded or to relocate to a more favourable rank position. More advanced forms of negotiation could involve shaping the evaluative criteria of a ranking or even the creation of a new ranking version for an emerging/diverging technological area. Certain of these specialists conceived their influence not simply regarding the immediate goals of establishing new versions of a ranking but also in the longer-term aims to rework or *renegotiate the evaluative ecosystem*. Ranked organisations find advantage in supporting the growth of new ranking firms. Sustaining or building diversity seemingly gives them greater room for manoeuvre. An organisation excluded from a ranking because it did not fit the rankers' established taxonomy, would be able to identify other, smaller or more specialised ranking firms open and receptive to their perspectives.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Given that the auditing of performance is now discussed by scholars well beyond accounting, our interest is in exploring what the various social science traditions can learn from each other (Chapman, Cooper and Miller 2009). The main contribution of the paper is to propose a framework that provides analytical resources for the study of contexts characterised by a plurality of measures.

From conforming to transforming

Our first contribution is to respond to Strathern (1997) and Espeland and Sauder's (2007) call for the study of the reflexive interactions between measures and organisations. We also take account of Dahler-Larsen's (2012) argument that analytical frameworks need to able to account for both the ranking and the broader organisational transformations triggered. The dominant thesis (characterised here as 'reactive conformance') does capture transformation, but this is depicted as a 'knee-jerk' reflex with unintended behavioural effects (such as 'gaming') (Espeland and Sauder 2007). This narrowly constitutive view where

ranked organisations become "acutely attuned" and responsive to the extent of 'revising' organisational practices (Scott and Orlikowski 2012: 38) no longer seems to suffice in the case of more plural systems.

Reflexive transformation attempts, by contrast, to capture how multiple rankings are a generative force not exclusively in the sense of moving an organisational environment towards a ranking but also through creating or forcing greater interplay and entanglements between organisations, rankings and the wider ecosystem. In discussing various aspects of reflexive transformation, we have moved beyond the idea that ranked organisations are passive/conforming and shown instead how multiple rankings increase the impulse for (i) *self-transformation*, e.g. the development of new kinds of calculative expertise. These specialists have a role in creating various processes of mutual shaping between ranker(s) and ranked. Through the development of a ranking chain they can (ii) transform *the rankings* themselves, e.g. ranked position, evaluation criteria, creating new rankings etc. Finally, through providing resources and incentives for the emergence of new ranking players, ranked organisations contribute to (iii) reworking *the composition of the evaluative ecosystem*.

Moreover, this tripartite conception of organisations, rankings and ecosystem moves us beyond a focus on dyads and the black-boxing of the (often rich) interactions between ranker and ranked.[7] Reflexive transformation might also more usefully be conceived as concerned with providing not for a ranking's disciplining effects but a spectrum of possible outcomes. We have shown how ranked organisations have learnt to navigate an ecosystem characterised by multiple asymmetrical relations between the various classes of player. It is these kinds of more dynamic depictions we would argue that might allow scholars insight into some of the 'generative frictions' (Stark 2009, Chenhall, Hall and Smith 2013) present in situations of multiple rankings. We want to now turn to how the notion of reflexive transformation might help scholars develop research along these lines.

The implications of multiple rankings for ranking scholarship

Another contribution of our approach is to open alternative vistas on the consequences of rankings and other kinds of performance information. Shore and Wright (2015: 422) argue that the spread of auditing to new domains, through the expansion of rankings, has brought about a wholesale transformation as

organisations and actors are “incentivised to compete and perform according to the new norms of accounting”. As organisational activities became “increasingly focused on the measures by which their performance is judged” (ibid: 422), scholars have suggested that rankings are an ‘unmanageable constraint’ (Elsbach and Kramer 1996, Sauder 2008, Sauder and Espeland 2009); that they produce acute pressures which those ranked find difficult “to buffer” (Sauder and Espeland 2009: 78); they constrain organisations “to focus on an externally defined ideal of organisational performance” (Martins 2005: 715); and where those ranked are mostly ‘passive’ or ‘compliant’ (Gioia and Corley 2002, Wedlin 2006). However, these characterisations no longer seem to fully capture all situations – especially the highly dynamic area described in this article. Indeed, it is worth noting that Espeland and Sauder (2007: 23) themselves pointed to the possibility that mechanisms of reactivity "produce varied changes over time" and that the "initial responses [to a ranking] will be different from those coming later" (see also Espeland and Sauder 2016). However, these suggestions have so far remained undeveloped in the literature. In this respect, in setting out reflexive transformation we are not arguing for the superiority of this approach, but to demonstrate its complementarity with existing work. Namely, how reactive conformance and reflexive transformation are subsets of the more encompassing reactivity process (e.g. the former might be understood as a ‘first-order’ reaction while the latter a ‘second-order’ response).

The proliferation of rankings has created the impulse for more local forms of control. The drive for specialisation and proactivity within ranked organisations, we argue, arose in response to a world in which simple knee-jerk reactivity had become inadequate. Supported and propelled by new forms of calculative expertise, organisations have found ways to buffer and mitigate some of the adverse effects of this form of audit. Our analysis points to the various interactions and mutual influence that may “deaccelerate the reactivity”, as one informant described to us (personal communication, EE). What we are witnessing is a different kind of effect than rankings acting as an external iron law (Humphrey and Owen 2000, Hazelkorn 2011, Espeland and Sauder 2016).

Protecting organisations from adverse implications, however, is only one side of reflexive transformation. The other is how it presents organisations with the potential for ‘proactivity' (Wedlin 2006). The ‘flood' of

rankings is less ‘totalising' than we are often urged to believe (Shore and Wright 2015). Those ranked no longer appear to fear measures as they once did. Mennicken's (2010: 54) discussion of how auditing firms sought not to ‘escape’ but to “actively embrace" and "shape" new rankings is useful here. Rankings helped auditing firms gain "public visibility", she argues, and signalled their "quality and leadership" in the field (ibid: 54). Likewise, in our case, we saw how organisations would not only welcome rankings but even champion and encourage their further introduction. Additional rankings were welcomed as they provided occasions for organisations to distinguish themselves from competitors; for those excluded from the initial ranking they offered a second opportunity to gain entrance; and for those already placed, they provided further opportunities for an improved position.

This brings us to the debate about whether multiple rankings are positive or negative. Work within the sociology of worth and organisation studies suggests the former because an increase in performance information creates a ‘productive friction’ (Stark 2009, Chenhall, Hall and Smith 2013). Greenwood et al. (2011: 341) argue that the contradictory requirements of different performance systems provide discretion to an organisation. We would agree. A plethora of voices is useful to redress the acute asymmetry between ranker and ranked in an oligopolistic ranking system (Sauder and Espeland 2006). However, not all friction turns out to be productive. Multiple evaluative principles can also create complexity and confusion so that, as Stark (ibid: 27) himself notes, “nothing is accomplished”. Reflexive transformation throws light on how organisations turn multiple rankings to their advantage. It is not merely the number and diversity of rankings that are fruitful. Nor is it just being confronted with contradictory requirements. Instead, it is how organisations make sense of and map out the differences between rankings (Chenhall, Hall and Smith 2013). When rankers themselves are ranked, this provides enticing opportunities for organisations to navigate towards specific measures and around or away from others.

We suggest that the problem of plurality has significant implications for accounting scholars, for the dynamics where organisations are presented with many as opposed to a few rankings will be significantly different (Stark 2009). Thus far, scholars interested in audit have developed analytical templates honed on the study of a *single* set of evaluative principles (Miller and Power 2013). We mention one example which

has been widely taken up. This is that when features of an organisation are singled out for measurement that they become 'targets' to be aimed for (Hoskin 1996, Strathern 1997). Strathern (1997) popularised this axiom in her study of the UK university research assessment exercise, and it has since become a prominent theme across the social sciences (Power 2015). It is questionable, however, as to whether concepts honed on the study of one or a few performance measurement systems apply as well in the case of multiple performance objects. As suggested above, multiplicity complicates the reflexive interactions between organisations and measures. To paraphrase Stark (2009), the organisation that finds itself subject to many targets is the organisation that is also subject to none. It follows, therefore, that when organisations are exposed to multiple measures they are incentivised to find ways to sort and prioritise the targets that are to be aimed for. When the importance of rankers can be measured and made explicit then their outputs no longer function as before, i.e., in creating simple targets.

Future research directions

Shore and Wright (2015: 422) argue that the tools and processes of audit, embodied within rankings, are spreading to new domains. This is undoubtedly true, but there is also an argument that just as they can spread out from a source, they can also loop back (Strathern 1997). If they do, however, we find they will not be the same, but translated. The repurposing of established audit practices could take many forms. We note the paradox that ranked organisations now expose rankers to some of the same kinds of audit process to which they were subjected. In his original work, Power (1994) noted the irony that audit had mostly been insulated from itself. Likewise, till now, rankers appeared to be exempt the influence of their own measures. Our empirical material provides early evidence for the growth in a new 'industry' of expertise who are turning the methods of the rankers back onto these same actors (and perhaps, in the process, countering their dominance). There is also evidence that the new forms of expertise identified in this paper are spreading. Our study has implications for how we conceive of rankings beyond the information and communication technology area. Influencer relations specialists shape a wide range of economic and business indices. There are more than casual links, for instance, between the specialists studied here and the 'rating agency relations' professionals who help governments manage interactions with the powerful rating agencies (Duff and Einig 2015); the same can be said of the 'investor relations' professionals who

intermediate between financial analysts and investors (Davis et al. 2012). Also, as Wedlin (2006) and Sauder and Fine (2008) noted, this kind of expertise has been developing a presence within higher education and business schools for some time. It is likely therefore that the forms of response identified here may become a feature of audit and performance information more generally. This suggests the possibility for a 'turn' in accounting research, one that investigates a further 'devolving' of the audit process as noted by Shore and Wright (2015), where less established actors rank the judgement and influence of more entrenched experts. The aim would be to (re)think what these alternative accountings - and here studies of new audit formats like *TripAdvisor* (Jeacle and Carter 2011, Scott and Orlikowski 2012) and *IMDb* (Bialecki, O'Leary and Smith 2017) appear instructive - will have on the power and influence of established producers of performance information.

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[2] This is the ARchitect database maintained by ARInsights (http://www.arinsights.com).

[3] The fact that rankers will often be evaluating their customers raises many of the same issues concerning 'independence' that one finds with auditors who are assessing their clients (see Sikka 2009 on auditor independence).

[4] A 'SAS day' – Strategic Advisory Service day – is where Gartner clients can ask Gartner analysts for detailed advice on their go to market and product development strategies, amongst other things.

[5] Indeed, some (of the more significant) analyst firms were attempting to ameliorate these kinds of tiering effects by employing experts who had direct responsibility for communicating and working with vendor analyst relations staff to ensure that they could still access the technology vendor executives as before.

[6] A Market Scope was one of Gartner's lesser-known rankings designed to offer clients advice about emerging product areas where there were few players and a successful or dominant technology model had not yet been established, and where it was therefore not yet possible to draw a Magic Quadrant.

[7] We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for encouraging us to make this point.