Introduction: The Politics of the List

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Abstract

This articles introduces the special issue on 'The Politics of the List.' We observe that lists proliferate as a technique of governance across multiple domains, including health, security, and commerce. We argue that it is important to take seriously the form and technique of the list itself and engage the knowledge practices, governance effects and ways of ordering the world that the list format enables. In other words, the special issue seeks to 'remain in the register of the list,' to unpack its technological arrangements and juridical power. This introduction sets out the key themes of this special issue, through discussing, in turn, the list as a technology of knowledge, the list as a technique of law and governance, the list's complex relation to space and the relation between the list and the digital. We draw on these four elements to characterise what we call the politics of the list in an era of complexity.

Lists proliferate across diverse domains such as finance, the environment, security, humanitarianism and health to do discrete but hard work. In addition to headline-grabbing 'kill-lists', contemporary politics works with lists of internationally wanted persons (Interpol lists), lists of stolen paintings, lists of persons banned from flying, lists of protected species (Bravermann, in press) and lists of world heritage sites (Lixinski, 2011), to give just a few examples. This is in addition to a plethora of lists in popular culture, for example lists of best mother–daughter movies, best video-games and best i-tunes songs. Lists assemble disparate items into ordered classes of things, making problems amenable to targeted, cross-boundary intervention in novel ways. This special issue critically interrogates the seemingly archaic technology of the list and brings its politics into focus.

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We suggest that the proliferation of lists should be treated as more than curiosity. Instead, we argue that it is important to take seriously the form and technique of the list itself and engage the knowledge practices, governance effects and ways of ordering the world that the list format enables.

Lists are usually approached through analysing actors *behind* the list, or explicating criteria *governing* the list. The articles collected in this special issue seek to effect a change in perspective: how are research questions and critical attitudes enabled by *starting with* a focus on the form and technology of the list? In the words of Fleur Johns (this issue), the special issue seeks to 'remain in the register of the list,' to unpack its elements, technological arrangements and its particular juridical power. In the political ecology of the present, listing does more than classify and create new semantic fields (Goody, 1977). It also functions as a particular epistemic practice and regulatory technique. In this special issue, we seek to move beyond pre-established conceptual schemes to focus on *how* listing works across different empirical sites. The fact that lists now most often take the form of digital repositories – ranging from searchable online.xsl files to classified but continually expanding police databases of potential radicals – affects their reach, form and combinability (Weber, this issue). However, the substantial powers of lists are enhanced, not eroded, when lists take on a digital form and forge complex alliances with new technologies such as algorithms. This heightens the significance of focusing on the listing as a form and technology.

This introduction sets out the key themes of this special issue, through discussing, in turn, the list as a technology of knowledge, the list as a technique of law and governance, the list's complex relation to space and the relation between the list and the digital. We draw on these four elements to characterise what we call *the politics of the list* in an era of complexity.

The politics of the list as a technology of knowledge

A list is defined as 'a catalogue or roll consisting of a row or series of names, figures, words, or the like' (Oxford English Dictionary, also Johns, this issue). An index or inventory, and also a census or a google results page, are examples of lists. Etymologically, the meaning of list as a catalogue or series dates back to circa 1600 Middle English and European languages. It originates from the earlier *liste* (in Old English and French), meaning 'border, edging, strip' or 'band, row, group', which usually referred to the section of cloth or paper that bounded particular statements of measurement (Oxford English Dictionary; also Goody, 1977: 80). In contemporary Dutch, German as well as in Scandinavian languages, 'lijst'/'Liste'/'list' retains the dual meaning of list *and* frame or border (for example, around a picture or window). As this etymology suggests, the list performs a 'cut', it enacts a border around categories of seemingly similar items, and performs important work of arbitration. The list has the capacity to *create* a meaningful grouping and to *constitute* a record. As Stäheli puts it in this issue, '[this] cut is itself a material practice…[that]…produces an isolated, motile entity'. Stäheli draws attention to the critical work of what he calls 'making listable', as the process that orders the continuous flow of the world into discrete listable items. 'It is here', Stäheli (this issue: 13–28) writes, 'that a constitutive political act is performed: the formatting of certain areas of the world as list-worthy'.

Umberto Eco's work on the list recognises and explores its dual nature of recording and bordering; of being simultaneously pragmatic and poetic. As Eco's 2009 Louvre exhibition on *The Infinity of Lists* shows, there are lists everywhere in the history of art and literature. For Eco, listing is a way in which humans have historically tried to make infinity comprehensible. In the exhibition catalogue, Eco therefore introduces a broad variety (infinity) of lists (see also Leander, this issue). Eco distinguishes different types of list: he

makes a distinction between pragmatic and poetic lists, as well as between coherent and chaotic lists. Pragmatic lists, for Eco (2009: 113), 'have a purely referential function;... they record things that are already existent and known [and they] are finite'. Coherent lists, in addition, 'put... together entities that already have some form of kinship among them'. What distinguishes poetic lists, on the other hand, is their profound infinity and sheer incalculability. They 'seek to enumerate something that eludes our capacity for control and denomination' (Eco, 2009: 117). In addition, for Eco (2009: 254), chaotic lists 'are an assembly of things deliberately devoid of any apparent reciprocal relationship'. The importance of Eco's work on lists is that it draws attention to the aesthetic and affective work of listing. The practice of listing simultaneously values and admires the infinity and innumerability of the universe, and tries to capture and tame it.

However, Eco's separation of different kinds of lists to some extent brackets off the *politics* of lists. Contra the poetic lists to be found in histories of the arts and culture, his typology implies that the more prosaic lists of law and regulation are practical, pragmatic and coherent. Prosaic lists, including the border watchlists, commercial whitelists and banking blacklists that are the focus of this special issue, are easily assumed to refer to known quantities in the world, to be finite and internally coherent. They are assumed to compile entities that already have affinities and obvious familiarities. However, as for example Kate Bedford's contribution to this special issue demonstrates, regulatory lists like gambling jurisdictions whitelists are profoundly affective and seductive. They entail affective appeals to (un)trustworthiness, that are implicitly racialised (Bedford, this issue).

This special issue is particularly attentive to the assumed prosaic nature of lists in law and regulation. We are interested in lists that *disguise themselves* as practical and coherent and in drawing attention to the knowledge politics of mundane lists that purport merely to compile and collect. These lists, upon closer examination, are revealed to be much more *creative* and *chaotic* than we might think. For example, in this special issue, De Goede and Sullivan discuss how the global targeted sanctions lists of the United Nations do not just compile entities associated with Al Qaeda, but in fact create and constitute Al Qaeda as a globally coherent phenomenon by placing into a particular relationality locally situated entities and groups (de Goede and Sullivan, this issue). The constitutive power of prosaic listing also renders it much more political, if we assume the politics of lists to lie (partly) in producing contingent referentialities that come to appear as obvious, and in drawing together disparate items that come to appear as commensurate. Similarly, as Leander argues later, the ostensibly prosaic and uncontentious regulatory whitelists in commercial security disguise legal and regulatory work that rests heavily on affect and potential, whilst crowding out criticism.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the list has become an important stylistic device for those who study the technology of knowledge themselves. It has become a recurring trope in the literatures that analyse the politics of knowledge. For example, Annemarie Mol (2002: 20) draws attention to the many elements that play a role in the constitution of medical knowledge: 'The physicality of bodies, vessels, blood. That of shopping, trolleys and staircases. And that of anesthetic drugs, green clothing, knives and tables'. Ian Bogost has coined the term 'Latour Litanies' to draw attention to the importance of the list as rhetorical figure in this body of literature and the work of Latour in particular. Latour uses lists abundantly to draw connections among unlikely entities and to signal infinity.[1] Mol and Law (2002: 7) explicitly reflect on their own prolific use of lists and write: 'Lists are not overviews...[T]hey assemble elements that do not necessarily fit together in some larger scheme...[The list] reflects a desire to make space, define outlines, sketch contours'. Mol and Law (2002: 16) celebrate the figure of the list for its open-endedness and attentiveness to 'surprise'. In the context of (security) governance, however, the seemingly benign beauty of

the list and its ability to work through 'sketching contours', evoking the ineffable and the yet to be imagined, become more problematic (Mol and Law, 2002: 7) as the next section discusses.

The politics of the list as a technique of law and governance

Thinking about listing as a legal format seems counterintuitive because law is usually conceived as an abstract system of norms made knowable through legislative acts and judicial decisions. However, as the rich literature on governmentality demonstrates, techniques like indicators, benchmarking and best practice guidelines pattern the world of law and governance in powerful ways (Davis et al., 2012; Leander, 2012). Such techniques of knowledge and calculation are inextricably intertwined with colonial practice and the historical creation of what Latour calls 'centres of calculation' that collect, compile and compare specimens from around the world (Bowker and Star, 1999; Elden, 2007; Hannah, 2001; Latour, 1987; Porter, 1995). What makes the list distinct is its non-narrative form: listing is a primary form of writing that *enables* (ac)counting and calculation (Goody, 1977: 81). Lists procedure categories by making a 'cut' in the continuous flow of the world. For example, the birth of statistics requires the compilation of lists – including municipal lists of deaths, births and fires, as Ian Hacking (1990) has shown. For Urs Stäheli (this issue), what distinguishes the list as a technique of ordering and knowledge is its capacity to create meaning and generate objectivity in a way that is non-narrative.

This special issue pushes these insights further by tracing the legal politics of the list across disparate domains. Unpacking the difference that lists make, demonstrates the 'agency of technocratic legal form' in the creation of new jurisdictional configurations and transnational legal relations (Riles, 2005–2006: 980). We argue that listing is a *performative* technology that helps constitute the objects and categories it targets or compiles. As Anna Leander (this issue: 47–65) points out in this issue, lists have agency: 'they can make things happen and can therefore be held co-responsible for political developments' (Leander, this issue: 47–65). As Leyshon and Thrift (1999) have put it, 'lists come alive'. Lists can reduce complexity by enrolling disparate elements together into the same class, thus rendering them commensurable, quantifiable and governable in novel ways (see, for example, Stäheli, 2012, this issue). They can also act as 'boundary objects' linking different contexts and holding them together in the face of tension across multiple scales 'without being marred by their contradictions and incompatibilities' (Leander, this issue: 47–65; Star, 2010). Listing is, in other words, a form of legal politics. While the list appears as a simple instrument to execute prior legal decisions, the contributions to this special issue show that it does much more: it creates juridical spaces and connects legal actors in new ways. Whether immunising global financial circuits from risk of money laundering and terrorist financing (Amicelle and Jacobsen, this issue), regulating the provision of online gambling or commercial security services (Bedford and Leander, this issue) or enabling global pre-emptive security practices (Weber), the list has become not just a conduit but an active participant in contemporary governance (Johns, this issue).

This leads to a further reason why consideration of the creative and chaotic sides of listing as a legal technology is important. As many of the contributions to this special issue show, the neglect of the performative power of lists helps explain why the politics of listing is not only difficult to understand but, more importantly, hard to contest. Listing techniques 'absorb uncertainty' from fragmented regulatory environments (Espeland and Stevens, 2008: 422). As Leander (this issue: 47–65) shows, the deployment of whitelists in commercial security makes it possible to ignore the creative side of lists and hence '*not* sort out what the exact relationship between... multiple regulatory standards is'. Instead, in commercial security, it becomes 'enough to refer to the

whitelist' for determining legal obligations. Listing, in other words, is displacing regulatory alternatives and undermining the possibilities for political challenge. De Goede and Sullivan similarly show how global security lists work by taking speculative allegations and reformatting them into a more solid and 'objective' format. An important translation is thus effected, with the medium of the list doing important work obscuring 'the contingencies and uncertainties' of the listing process itself (de Goede and Sullivan, this issue: 66–87). In both instances, the difficulties of contestation are tied to the obfuscation of the creative nature of supposedly neutral listings.

To engage with the politics of regulatory lists, usually conceived of as pragmatic tools, the contributors to this special issue resort to close observation. Whilst there is an abundance of literature normatively assessing the impacts of security lists on fundamental rights, for example, there is virtually nothing empirically tracing the 'diffusion of evaluative labour' and processes of 'cumulative judgment' that make listing possible (Bernstein, 2013: 485). The contributors address this challenge by showing how regulatory lists – whether whitelists, blacklists or self-exclusion lists (Bedford, this issue) – work by forging novel connections between jurisdictions. But many of the lists discussed here do much more than connect. Politically exposed persons lists (Amicelle and Jacobsen), UN sanctions lists (de Goede and Sullivan), whitelists in commercial security (Leander) and the Disposition Matrix (Weber) do not list places so much as individuals, organisations and practices. That is, they *create* relational spaces that enable novel modes of regulation to unfold.

We argue that focussing on the surface and on the 'shallow' politics of form is essential for understanding how lists become part of governance (Johns, this issue). And that staying within this flattened register, and mapping the mundane associations that lists draw, can be analytically rewarding because it is through 'the alliances and resistances that a list forms on its surface' that much of its legal and political assemblage work is performed (Johns, this issue: 125–148).

Space and complexity

Thinking through the politics of the list, we suggest, further contributes to discussions about spatial transformations that have recently been debated in this journal. Directing attention to listing practices, for example, helps specify and capture the discussion about how the emergence of a law/war/space nexus came about (Jones and Smith, 2015). The list as a knowledge technology is particularly significant in a world thought to be marked by radical uncertainty and complexity, where imagination has a core role (e.g. Anderson, 2010; de Goede, 2008). The 'lowly, mechanical, dull' appearance of lists (Bowker and Star, 1999: 137), is markedly different in aesthetic and nomenclature than the sophisticated colour-coded techniques of scenario planning and disaster modelling (Aradau and van Munster, 2011). But in the face of dispersed and networked contemporary security challenges (e.g. Coward, 2009), the list offers an appearance of manageability. As Urs Stäheli (2012: 234) writes provocatively, 'If you don't know how to represent something and if you don't know what is essential to an entity...then just create a list of what seems noteworthy!' Eco underscores the same point, arguing that lists do not only aid in grappling with complexity and uncertainty but also help in preserving imagination. He places the 'topos of ineffability' at the heart of his discussion of lists:

> Faced with something that is immensely large, or unknown, of which we still do not know enough or of which we shall never know, the author proposes a list as specimen, or indication, leaving the reader to imagine the rest (Eco, 2009: 49).

Various articles in this special issue show how the spatiality of listing resonates with this topos. 'Just as individuals and things are ineffable, the same holds also for places, and yet again the writer relies on the *etcetera* of lists' as Eco (2009: 81) insists. Lists, in other words, are a way of dealing with the overwhelming spatial complexity of contemporary life. They make it possible to produce seemingly objective accounts detached from the messy contextual narratives. Lists make it possible not only to link but perhaps more importantly to de-link the spaces they generate from others spaces and hence to deal with one of the core challenges of contemporary politics (Galloway, Thacker and Wark, 2013). This allows the list to conjure up an imaginary of possibility, potential and emergence. The list can be relied upon to integrate ever larger amounts of increasingly complex and contradictory material, to engage in ever new combinations, and to do so flexibly and rapidly, especially in the age of algorithmic data-management (Weber, this issue). Hence, the list provides a key for understanding how the war/law/space nexus (Jones and Smith, 2015) meanders, shapeshifts and transforms.

The spatiality of the list is an emergent space anchored in both imagination and the material self-organising activities of lists themselves. This space could not be further removed from that of the classical agora that remains the core reference point for imagining political space in the western tradition (Baumann, 2004). In the political space of lists, the boundedness, the rules and rituals, the face-to-face interactions and the time for deliberation that made up the agora are matched by infinite openness, imagination, individualisation, fragmentation and acceleration. Unlike the agora, the space of lists is therefore also a space that takes on a seemingly inscrutable, materially anchored logic, difficult to contest, escape and control as those placed on kill-lists or politically exposed persons lists experience very directly (Weber and Amicelle and Jacobsen, this issue). Eco captures this peculiar character of the space generated by lists well when he suggests that:

> A "list city" is shaped like an *open maze*. . . for those who enter one it represents the experience of the impossibility of getting out and hence of endless wandering. . . the maze is a non-linear list, and again the homology with the structure of the a rhizome tells us something about this Achilles' shield as infinite as the catalogue of ships (Eco, 2009:140; emphasis in original).

The list and the politics of the digital

The insights this special issue provides about the politics of listing as a technology of knowledge and regulation also speak to the politics of the digital. Listing involves relating the analogue and the digital through conversions, mediations and readings (Stäheli, this issue). We would even concur with Umberto Eco's depiction of the World Wide Web as the list par excellence or as he puts it as 'the mother of all lists':

> infinite by definition because it is in constant evolution, the World Wide Web, which is both web and labyrinth, not an ordered tree, and which of all infinities promises us the most mystical, almost totally virtual one, and really does offer us a catalogue of information that makes us feel wealthy and omnipotent, the only snag being that we do not know which of its elements refers to data from the real world and which does not; there is no longer any distinction between truth and error (Eco, 2009: 360).

From this perspective, this issue's exploration of lists is also an investigation into the politics of the digital. For example, Amicelle and Jacobsen discuss how blacklists of sanctioned individuals and entities changed format from cumbersome paper lists, to European-wide

consolidated and electronically available e-lists. They show how this move to the digital affected the lists' appropriation by banks, and how the commingling with other files and filters profoundly shapes banking practice. They concur with Stäheli who argues that algorithmic indexing produces 'highly unstable lists'. In that sense, even if digital lists are comparable in logic and technique to practices like book indexes, they also differ profoundly for their malleability and short time horizons.

To begin with, the instability and short time horizon of digital lists fashions political voice. As Eco underlines, the mother of all lists is a 'web and labyrinth, not an ordered tree'. In other words, the political voice of 'the mother of all lists' emerges in her connections and through the way she is imbricated in a wide range of heterogeneous and changing relationships. The list *plus* algorithm makes global governance (Johns, this issue). The implication is that the (once revolutionary) gesture of cutting off the king's head is still necessary for theorising digital politics, but it may no longer be sufficient. Rather, it takes a self-conscious effort to acknowledge and *list*en to the distributed and fragmented political voices in the digital. They are not only decentred from the king but also undergoing constant change in unforeseen ways. As the contributions underscore, hearing this political voice therefore requires a radical openness that can only be achieved at the cost of abandoning the safety and comfort of preconceived, generalising, frameworks and singular models. Understanding the politics of the digital, in other words, calls for a move away from, not back to, established political categories and conceptualisations of politics (Latour, 1993).

Along similar lines, the politics of lists has important insights to offer about how authority is affirmed in an increasingly digitised context. Lists move authority affirmation away from processes anchored in conventional meaning creating processes including dialogues, debates or discourses. Instead, lists work through complex, unstable and often directly contradictory and paradoxical registers. Lists are objective, neutral and detached *and* they appeal to affect, imagination, fantasy and potential. Bedford's whitelists, for example, are merging the registers of juridical rationality with racialised affect. The place of lists in politics is intimately tied to these contradictions and the multiple registers it allows for. The politics of the World Wide Web, the 'mother of all lists', asserts itself in similar fashion. As Eco (2009: 24) underscores, 'of all infinities [she] promises us the most mystical, almost totally virtual one, and really does offer us a catalogue of information that makes us feel wealthy and omnipotent'. Our explorations highlight that such contradictions and paradoxes are not occasional mistakes to be corrected or avoided. They are at the core of the politics of the digital. Attempts to understand the digital through a singular register anchored for example in a new epistemology, a digital infrastructure, in the working of algorithms or perhaps a register beyond theory are therefore bound to hinder more than help efforts to understand its politics (Amoore, 2013; Kitchin, 2014). Instead, our analyses of lists indicate the importance of accepting and dissecting the 'vertigo-inducing unknowability' and 'entropy' at the core of digital politics (Johns, this issue; also Dodge and Kitchin, 2001).

Finally our explorations of the politics of lists provide pointers both to why it is so difficult to engage digital politics and to why it might nonetheless be possible to do so. The difficulties are perhaps all too obvious. Engaging a dispersed, fragmented, constantly moving and metamorphosing target that keeps shifting and combining repertoires and registers is very difficult. As Eco (2009: 360) puts it, 'The only snag' with the mother of all lists is that 'we do not know which of its elements refer to data from the real world and which does not.' That makes her particularly difficult to engage politically. However, this is precisely what the contributors to this special issue do. To engage lists politically, this special issue scales down the focus and concentrates on details of processes that make up the politics of listing practices across a multiplicity of domains including gambling regulation (Bedford),

banking compliance (Amicelle and Jacobsen) and drone warfare (Weber). In so doing, the papers collected here also advocate a specific form of political engagement anchored in description. This is a modest form of politics. It promises neither paralysing blockings/interruptions (as proposed e.g. by Schmidt and Cohen, 2010 or Miller, 2015), nor heroic revolutions/encompassing solutions (as proposed e.g. by Lagasnerie, 2015). What this form engagement does promise and can deliver is a more effective, realistic and therefore also significant engagement with the politics of the digital that has the potential of reshaping the way this politics is understood, located and delimited.

Outlining the volume

Urs Stäheli opens this collection with a detailed conceptual reflection on the political work of the list as a knowledge form. Probing *beyond* the 'moral and legal aspects of a possible wrongful inclusion', Stäheli asks how the continuous flow of the world is rendered listable in the first place. He discusses the practices of coding and indexing as dull, invisible work that nevertheless entail a profound seduction, and exert considerable power in generating objectivity.

The contributions by Kate Bedford and Anna Leander both explore the affective dimensions of lists. Bedford's paper hones in on the racialised dimensions of blacklisting and whitelisting and shows how these terms are embedded in colonial history. Analysing the whitelisting of gambling jurisdictions, Bedford shows how jurisdictional reputation and trustworthiness were explicitly racialised in legal debates, to such an extent that the possible inclusion of Antigua and Barbuda broke down the regime. In this way, the racialised lineage of listing recreates unequal power politics in the present. Anna Leander argues that the practical, pragmatic and poetic character of lists helps make whitelists in commercial security formidably effective in reshaping regulatory politics. Her article traces how the soft law (codes of conduct, benchmarks, best practices and standards) that these whitelists enact do regulatory work and produce regulatory topologies. In Leander's account, lists are 'reshaping the place of evidence, expertise and criticism'.

Marieke de Goede and Gavin Sullivan's contribution draws attention to the ways in which security lists are lively, legally generative and have the capacity to 'materialise the categories they purport to describe' (De Goede and Sullivan, this issue: 66–87). Their critical analysis of security blacklists, watchlists and no-fly lists highlights the ways lists produce modes of dis/connectivities, not just across spaces and jurisdictions, but also across public/private domains. Here, critique involves 'revaluing the technicalities of the list for the profoundly political practices that they are' and subjecting the knowledge claims of listing expertise to critical scrutiny (De Goede and Sullivan, this issue: 66–87). Anthony Amicelle and Elida Jacobsen's contribution focuses more deeply on the ways in which lists are used and produced in private sector contexts within banks. In their analysis, lists of suspicious clients, Know Your Customer (KYC) guidelines and other 'filtering devices' are appropriated and used by banks in ambiguous and unpredictable ways. By tracing how lists acquire 'multiple, simultaneous identities in the course of [their] banking appropriation', Amicelle and Jacobsen (this issue: 88–105) help shed 'new light on what securing financial circulation means in practice'.

The special issue concludes with two articles analysing the politics of lists in the present and their interrelation with the digital. Jutta Weber analyses the reliance on kill-lists in drone warfare and unpacks the post-Newtonian technorationality of producing targets through lists and the 'disposition matrix'. She underscores the shift to a logic of recombination and (cor-)relation that displaces causality and narratives in processes of drone targeting and

shows how practices of 'tinkering' advance a possibilistic, pre-emptive culture of technosecurity. For Fleur Johns (this issue: 125–148), the 'list-plus-algorithm' is a powerful device that produces global governance as a 'delivery mechanism' and draws 'people, places and things into lawful relation' through its particular logic of 'expansive shallowness'. It is a novel juridical form that displaces public reason and produces political entropy. Yet critique will not come through transparency (an aspirational project she presents as a 'hopeless hope'), but rather through carefully engaging with the politics of lists in ways that 'enable renewed reflection upon our own responsibilities and capacities for association'. Taken together, the papers collected here take up the challenge of a renewed reflection enabled by remaining in the register of the list in order to shed light on the politics of listing technologies.

Note

1. See for example, http://bogost.com/writing/blog/latour_litanizer/ Thanks to Paul Harrison for drawing our attention to this.

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