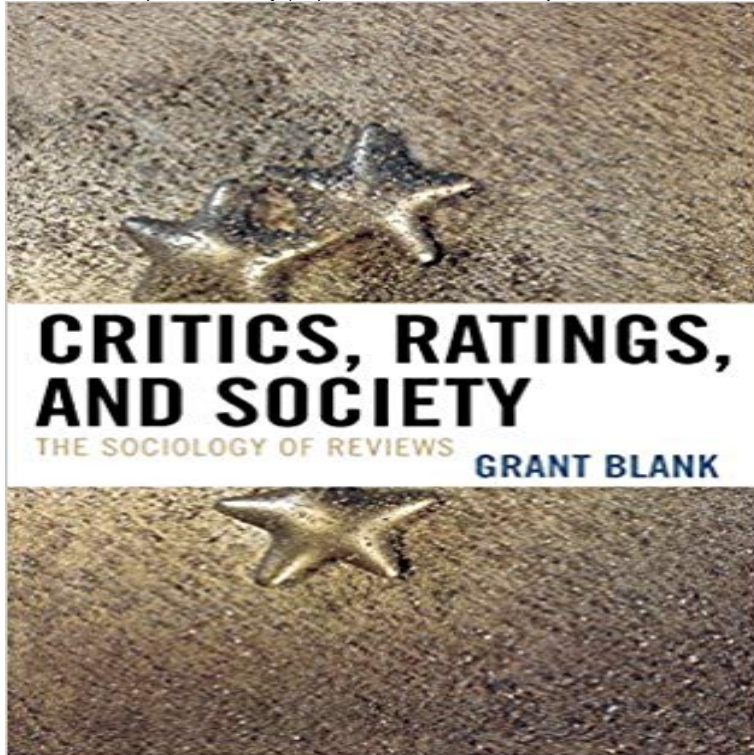


Critics, Ratings, and Society: The Sociology of Reviews



How do we make choices in an information-saturated world? Prior studies often assume that the problem is coping with the volume of information. They rarely ask how people judge the validity of new information. But we are all forced to depend on secondary sources that no one has the time or resources to verify. In *Critics, Ratings, and Society* Grant Blank confronts these issues through an investigation of independent evaluations and reviews. Reviews are widespread; they rank products ranging from books and films to automobiles and computers. They are important not just because they influence success and failure of products, they also make or break reputations and careers, and often play a critical role in stratification, power, and status. Reviews are shaped by the interaction of media editors, product makers, and consumers into credible cultural objects. These are processed into two types of rating systems: connoisseurial reviews that depend on the unique skills and experience of a single reviewer, a connoisseur; and procedural reviews that are based on the results of tests, well-defined procedures that allow reviewers to rank groups of similar products. Both rating systems construct hierarchies of products. Blank develops a new theory explaining the circumstances where economic concerns like price are overshadowed by review-constructed hierarchies. When this happens, culture constructs markets. He argues that review-constructed hierarchies are widespread as a consequence of inherent structural characteristics of contemporary capitalism and, as a result, reviews will become more important in the future.

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