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# We Are Data: Algorithms And The Making Of Our Digital Selves



## Synopsis

What identity means in an algorithmic age: how it works, how our lives are controlled by it, and how we can resist it. Algorithms are everywhere, organizing the near limitless data that exists in our world. Derived from our every search, like, click, and purchase, algorithms determine the news we get, the ads we see, the information accessible to us and even who our friends are. These complex configurations not only form knowledge and social relationships in the digital and physical world, but also determine who we are and who we can be, both on and offline. Algorithms create and recreate us, using our data to assign and reassign our gender, race, sexuality, and citizenship status. They can recognize us as celebrities or mark us as terrorists. In this era of ubiquitous surveillance, contemporary data collection entails more than gathering information about us. Entities like Google, Facebook, and the NSA also decide what that information means, constructing our worlds and the identities we inhabit in the process. We have little control over who we algorithmically are. Our identities are made useful not for us—but for someone else. Through a series of entertaining and engaging examples, John Cheney-Lippold draws on the social constructions of identity to advance a new understanding of our algorithmic identities. *We Are Data* will educate and inspire readers who want to wrest back some freedom in our increasingly surveilled and algorithmically-constructed world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“We Are Data” spells out the implications of being made of data in the digital age: our

new algorithmic identity. John Cheney-Lippold shows how algorithmic logics that undergird the architecture, regulation, monetization, and uses of the Internet have changed the nature of human experience and identity. Through witty and accessible examples, he eloquently lays out the social and political consequences of transcoding lived identity into measurable types in our new world. Clearly written, carefully researched, timely and intelligent, *We Are Data* is a compelling and much-needed book.

Alexandra Juhasz, Chair, Film Department, Brooklyn College  
 "This book sparkles with brilliant insights. It offers us tools and a vocabulary through which we can think about the layers of identities that our data-conjured ghosts inhabit. I don't think I fully grasped the complexity of what these clouds of commercial data did with us and to us until I read *We Are Data*."

Siva Vaidhyanathan, author of *The Googlization of Everything* and *Why We Should Worry*  
 "A heady and rewarding explanation of our lives in the data age. [Cheney-Lippold's] discussion of privacy...will fascinate many. Essential reading for anyone who cares about the internet's extraordinary impact on each of us and on our society."

Starred Kirkus Reviews  
 "John Cheney-Lippold's deft examination of measurable types—the categories by which we are known and assessed, based on our data—sheds light on contemporary society's encounter with information systems to scrutiny, and with those eager to identify us for their own ends. *We Are Data* goes beyond naming possible harms. It helps us think differently about what it means to be seen by marketers, algorithms, or the NSA as members of shifting categories—identifications that structure us and our encounter with the world, but that we have little power to shape."

Tarleton Gillespie, author of *Wired Shut: Copyright and the Shape of Digital Culture*

John Cheney-Lippold is Assistant Professor of American Culture and Digital Studies at the University of Michigan.

We all know that web services sell data from our use of the internet. But how do they make that data useful to anyone? That is the purpose of *We Are Data*. It laboriously elucidates the often arcane machinations of the Googles and Facebooks of the world. At bottom, there is an algorithm, a mathematical construct, ever tweaked to reflect new realities, so you can't pin it down from one day to the next. Algorithms spit out decisions based on your individual clicks, searches, e-mail, contact lists and chats. They decide who you are in order to appeal to data purchasers. According to your activity and location, it might classify you as a man even though you

are a woman, old though you are young, black though you are white, and so on. You could be gay one day and straight the next. Doesn't matter. Your activity and location is just a commodity for sale in bulk. Web services structure the raw data into algorithmically constructed data objects, according what is useful to clients. It could be terrorist for the NSA for example. (There are two kinds of beings in the world those without quotation marks, and those with, the latter being cyber constructs).

Facebook could be completely different from Google. It's purely a convenience for the sake of the buyer, be it TSA or Starbucks. Everything is monetized (but you receive none of it). The dictum is that if it is not in principle measurable, or if it is not being measured, it doesn't exist. Individuals cease to matter. They become dividuals, the cyber distillation of the data they generate. We Are Data is a missing link in the chain of how the world operates. it is also quite dense and dry. There are precious few examples of how real people are affected. It is however, festooned with empty when not totally meaningless references to Michel Foucault. Just name dropping, while adding zero insight. I would say he is mentioned about 40 times. In places, We Are Data reads like it was written by an algorithm. But just when you want to give up, Cheney-Lippold sends a missile across the bow: Almost everything that is algorithmic is a lie. I wish he would have led with that instead of his 40 page intro. It would have been a much more dynamic book. So the bad news is privacy is non-existent. Irretrievable. Gone forever. The good news is nobody wants to know who you really are anyway. Just keep clicking. David Wineberg

The author looks at the present and future of identity on line. Every net search we make, stored and classified, tells some databank something about us, whether characteristics are correctly assumed or not. Referencing Frank Pasquale's term Black Box Society, a book I can recommend, the author describes the complex algorithms and various purposes that store and classify data about people, as individuals or groups. Cheney-Lippold mentions that these judgements are used to show us specifically targeted ads. Ads, some of them infected with spyware and malevolent bugs, which he doesn't mention, are the reason to use ad blockers, not mentioned. I seldom see an ad on my own computers. Privacy law in Europe is a separate issue as search engines have to remove outdated results if a customer complains. And he explains that Google, say, may assign us to categories like male / female, but does not care if we are, if we search and buy like that category. Layers of identity build up for race, age, country of residence etc. Unlike traditional role boxes however, Google's are more dynamic, shifting with trends and new data input. Critical scholars, philosophers (one

discussing Civilisation III), digital media commentators and industry experts are all quoted. Concrete examples are also shown, such as a white and a black store assistants who found that HP software could only face-track the white one. I am sure the surveillance techs are working hard on this as we write. We're told that in 2012 the Department of Labour's statistics showed the top ten Silicon Valley companies employed 6% Hispanic and 4% black workers. At executive and higher level this was 3% and 1%. (I'm wondering how many women they employed.) And crime data shows some people, whose associates experience the criminal justice system, are more at risk of dealing with crime themselves. We don't really need to be told this to understand it, but some police are already using generated patterns to knock on doors of 'at risk' citizens. A chapter on using data is rather scary about using what looks like terrorist-involved web or phone activity to get someone labelled as worth a drone strike. Who they are doesn't matter, it's what they are thought to be doing. And sometimes that is a false assumption. We see a little of data mining for text associations. And an amusing anecdote is that Google thinks a neuroscientist researcher who is a young woman, is actually an older man, because she spends all her time reading science articles written by older men. So I imagine they won't be advertising high heels to her. Did you know that 'Angry Birds' was in some way profiling your sexual practices? And leaking its conclusions through bad security? The second chapter is about control; from computer games to enabling some people to access buildings and not others. Health programmes exist at the government and personal level, including self-tracking with IoT devices. I don't see the term Internet of Things used. Subjectivity is the next topic, comparing the NSA to Google. Leakers are discussed, Assange and Snowden. We're warned about receiving mails from someone using Tor. The gender question returns. And Facebook knows or assumes a lot about you, whether you use it or not, from what others post about you. An airline or hotel knows not only if you are a returning customer, but what kind of computer you are using, and may adjust its price accordingly. Privacy begins with the chilling case of a man whose agonised phone call to ask for an ambulance was met by an operator running through a list of possible symptoms he didn't have; the man later died. Personal privacy, we're told is something we don't really have any more. We have patient and social security records, or use a store loyalty card. Some gay people are identified as such by big data; others may be erroneously identified that way. The author suggests using a program that throws random search terms into the data stream constantly, obfuscating the real searches. (Methinks some of those fakes could get you into trouble, and can you prove they weren't typed by you?) And the Tor browser is described but some drawbacks specified. This author is Assistant Professor of American Culture at the University of Michigan. I found the book densely written in places, suited to a university text rather than a general

readership, which is why I am giving four stars, though it may be an excellent scholarly work. American-centric, discussing the abstract and experience of big data. No mention of Python, a language used to classify and interpret words from text, nor of the physical complexities and expansion of the IoT and server or storage banks. Terms like material temporality, epistemological gaps, antiessentialism, an infinitely material posthuman assemblage. Graphs, digitally accented photos and still frames are included to demonstrate points. Notes P269 - 303. I counted 110 names that I could be sure were female, including George Eliot. Women were quoted more on personal identity and men more on counter terrorism. I downloaded an ARC from Net Galley. This is an unbiased review.

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