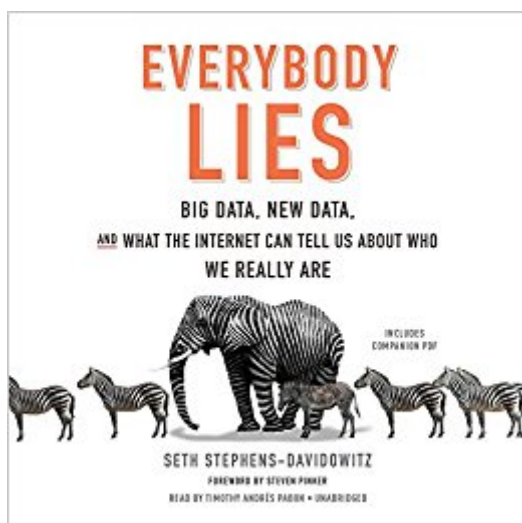


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# Everybody Lies; Big Data, New Data, And What The Internet Reveals About Who We Really Are



## Synopsis

Blending the informed analysis of *The Signal and the Noise* with the instructive iconoclasm of *Think Like a Freak*, a fascinating, illuminating, and witty look at what the vast amounts of information now instantly available to us reveals about ourselves and our world -- provided we ask the right questions. By the end of an average day in the early twenty-first century, human beings searching the Internet will amass eight trillion gigabytes of data. This staggering amount of information -- unprecedented in history -- can tell us a great deal about who we are -- the fears, desires, and behaviors that drive us, and the conscious and unconscious decisions we make. From the profound to the mundane, we can gain astonishing knowledge about the human psyche that less than twenty years ago, seemed unfathomable. *Everybody Lies* offers fascinating, surprising, and sometimes laugh-out-loud insights into everything from economics to ethics to sports to race to sex, gender and more, all drawn from the world of big data. What percentage of white voters didn't vote for Barack Obama because he's black? Does where you go to school effect how successful you are in life? Do parents secretly favor boy children over girls? Do violent films affect the crime rate? Can you beat the stock market? How regularly do we lie about our sex lives and who's more self-conscious about sex, men or women? Investigating these questions and a host of others, Seth Stephens-Davidowitz offers revelations that can help us understand ourselves and our lives better. Drawing on studies and experiments on how we really live and think, he demonstrates in fascinating and often funny ways the extent to which all the world is indeed a lab. With conclusions ranging from strange-but-true to thought-provoking to disturbing, he explores the power of this digital truth serum and its deeper potential -- revealing biases deeply embedded within us, information we can use to change our culture, and the questions we were afraid to ask that might be essential to our health -- both emotional and physical. All of us are touched by big data everyday, and its influence is multiplying. *Everybody Lies* challenges us to think differently about how we see it and the world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

• "This book is about a whole new way of studying the mind . . . an unprecedented peek into people's psyches . . . Time and again my preconceptions about my country and my species were turned upside-down by Stephens-Davidowitz's discoveries . . . endlessly fascinating." • (Steven Pinker, author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature*) • "Move over *Freakonomics*. Move over *Moneyball*. This brilliant book is the best demonstration yet of how big data plus cleverness can illuminate and then move the world. Read it and you'll see life in a new way." • (Lawrence Summers, President Emeritus and Charles W. Eliot University Professor of Harvard University) • "Everybody Lies relies on big data to rip the veneer of what we like to think of as our civilized selves. A book that is fascinating, shocking, sometimes horrifying, but above all, revealing." • (Tim Wu, author of *The Attention Merchants*) • "Brimming with intriguing anecdotes and counterintuitive facts, Stephens-Davidowitz does his level best to help usher in a new age of human understanding, one digital data point at a time." • (Fortune, Best New Business Books) • "Freakonomics on steroids" "this book shows how big data can give us surprising new answers to important and interesting questions. Seth Stephens-Davidowitz brings data analysis alive in a crisp, witty manner, providing a terrific introduction to how big data is shaping social science." • (Raj Chetty, Professor of Economics at Stanford University) • "Everybody Lies is a spirited and enthralling examination of the data of our lives. Drawing on a wide variety of revelatory sources, Seth Stephens-Davidowitz will make you cringe, chuckle, and wince at the people you thought we were." • (Christian Rudder, author of *Dataclysm*) • "A tour de force" "a well-written and entertaining journey through big data that, along the way, happens to put forward an important new perspective on human behavior itself. If you want to understand what's going on in the world, or even with your friends, this is one book you should read cover to cover." • (Peter Orszag, Managing Director, Lazard and former Director of the Office of Management and Budget) • "Stephens-Davidowitz, a former data scientist at Google, has spent the last four years poring over Internet search data . . . What he found is that Internet search data might be the Holy Grail when it comes to understanding the true nature of humanity." • (New York Post) • "Everybody

Lies is an astoundingly clever and mischievous exploration of what big data tells us about everyday life.Â Seth Stephens-Davidowitz is as good a data storyteller as I have ever met.Â • (Steven Levitt, co-author, Freakonomics )Â œA whirlwind tour of the modern human psyche using search data as its guide. . . . The empirical findings in Everybody Lies are so intriguing that the book would be a page-turner even if it were structured as a mere laundry list.Â • (The Economist)Â œPivotal . . . A book for those who are intensely curious about human nature, informational analysis, and amusing anecdotes to the tune of Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubnerâ™s Freakonomics

In this groundbreaking work, Harvard-trained economist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz argues that much of what we thought about people has been dead wrong. The reason? People lie, to friends, lovers, doctors, surveysâ”and themselves. However, we no longer need to rely on what people tell us. New data from the internet finally reveals the truth. By analyzing this digital gold mine, we can now learn what people really think, what they really want, and what they really do.Â Everybody Lies combines the informed analysis of Nate Silverâ™s The Signal and the Noise, the storytelling of Malcolm Gladwellâ™s Outliers, and the wit and fun of Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubnerâ™s Freakonomics in a book that will change the way you view the world.Â There is almost no limit to what can be learned about human nature from Big Dataâ”provided, that is, you ask the right questions. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

The basic thesis of "Everybody Lies" is that online data on human behavior, including Google searches and data from Facebook, shopping and pornographic sites, can reveal much about what we really think than data from surveys in which people might be too embarrassed to tell the truth. In our unguarded moments, when we are alone and searching Google in the privacy of our homes, we are much more likely to divulge our innermost desires. The premise is that truly understanding human behavior by way of psychology or neuroscience is too complicated right now, so it's much better to simply bypass that kind of understanding and look at what the numbers are telling us in terms of what people's online behavior. In doing this the author looks at a remarkable variety of online sources and studies by leading researchers, and one must congratulate him for the diversity and depth of material he has plumbed. What has allowed us to access this pool of unguarded opinions and truckloads of data concerning human behavior is the Internet and the tools of "big" data. As the author puts it, this data is not just "big" but also "new", which means that the kind of data we can access is also quite different from what we are used to; in his words, we live in a world where every sneeze, cough, internet purchase, political opinion, and evening run can be considered

"data". This makes it possible to test hypotheses that we could not have tested before. For instance, the author gives the example of testing Freud's Oedipus Complex through accessing pornographic data which indicates a measurable interest in incest. Generally speaking there is quite an emphasis on exploring human sexuality in the book, partly because sexuality is one of those aspects of our life that we wish to hide the most and are also pruriently interested in, and partly because investigating this data through Google searches and pornographic sites reveals some rather bizarre sexual preference that are also sometimes specific to one country or another. This is a somewhat fun use of data mining. Data exploration can both reveal the obvious as well as throw up unexpected observations. A more serious use of data tools concerns political opinions. Based on Google searches in particular states, the author shows how racism (as indicated by racist Google searches) was a primary indicator of which states voted for Obama in the 2008 election and Trump in the 2016 election. That's possibly an obvious conclusion, at least in retrospect. A more counterintuitive conclusion is that the racism divide does not seem to map neatly on the urban-rural divide or the North-South divide, but rather on the East-West divide; people seem to be searching much more for explicitly racist things in the East compared to the West. There is also an interesting survey of gay people in more and less tolerant states which concludes that you are as likely to find gay people in both parts of the country. Another interesting section of the book talked about how calls for peace by politicians after terrorist attacks actually lead to more rather than less xenophobic Google searches; this is accompanied by a section that hints at how the trends can be potentially reversed if different words are used in political speeches. There is also an interesting discussion of how the belief that newspaper political leanings drive customer political preferences gets it exactly backward; the data shows that customer political preferences shape what newspapers print, so effectively they are doing nothing different from any other customer-focused, profit making organization. The primary tool for doing all this data analysis is correlation or regression analysis, where you look at online searches and try to find correlations between certain terms and factors like geographic location, gender, ethnicity. One hopes that one has separated the most important correlated variable and has eliminated other potentially important ones. There are tons of other amusing and informative studies - sometimes the author's own but more often other people's - that reveal human desires and behavior across a wide swathe of fields, including politics, dating, sports, education, shopping and sexuality. There's plenty of potentially useful material in these studies. For instance, some of the data that indicates gaps in educational or social attainment in different parts of the country are immediately actionable in principle. Google searches have also been used to keep track of flu and other disease epidemics. Sometimes finding correlations is financially lucrative; there is a story

about how a horse expert found that success in horse races seems to correlate with one factor more than any other: the size of the left ventricle. Another study isolated the impact of the early growing season on the quality of wines. There is no doubt that financial firms, supermarkets, newspapers, hospitals and online purveyors of everything from pornography to peanuts are going to keep a close eye on this data to maximize their reach and profits. Generally speaking I enjoyed "Everybody Lies"; for the scope of the material, the easy-going style and some of the counterintuitive observations it reveals. My main reservation about the book is that I think the author overstates his case and sometimes sounds a little too breathless about the great changes these tools are going to bring. More than once he uses the term "revolutionary" in describing these data tools, but I am much more suspicious of their ultimate utility. Firstly, data does not equal knowledge; rather, it is the raw material for knowledge. As the author himself acknowledges, understanding correlation is not the same as understanding causation, and it's in very few cases that a true causal relationship between people's Google searches and their true nature can be established. Part of the reason I think this way is because I don't believe that a person's Google search is as reflective of their innermost desires as the book seems to think, so what a person truly believes may go way beyond their online behavior. Consider the studies revealing people's sexual preferences for instance; how many of them point to trivial idiosyncrasies and how many are indicative of some deeper truth about human brains? The tools alone cannot draw this distinction. At the end of the day you could thus end up with a lot of data (including a lot of noise), but teasing apart the useful data points from the red herrings is a completely different matter. In this sense, looking at Google searches and other information can be a reductionist and simplistic approach. Secondly, it's usually quite hard to control for all possible variables that may reflect a Google search; for instance in concluding that racism contributes the most to a particular political behavior, it's very hard to tease out all other factors that also may do so, especially when you are talking about a heterogeneous collection of human beings. How can you know that you have corrected for every possible factor? Thirdly and finally, the "science" part of "data science" still lacks rigor in my opinion. For instance, a lot of the conclusions the book talks about are based on single studies which don't seem to be repeated. In some cases the sample sizes are large, but in other cases they are small. Plus, people's opinions can change over time, so it's important to pick the right time window in which to do the study. All this points to great responsibility on the part of data scientists to make sure that their results are rigorous and not too simplistic, before they are taken up by both politicians and the general public as blunt instruments to change social policies. This responsibility increases especially as these approaches become more widespread and cheaper to use, especially in the

hands of non-specialists. When you are in possession of a hammer, everything starts looking like a nail. Considering all these caveats, I thus find tools like those described in this volume to be the starting points for understanding human behavior, rather than direct determinants of human behavior. The tools themselves can tell you what they can be used for, not necessarily what problems would benefit the most from their application. The many interesting studies in this book certainly answer the "what" quite well, but most of them are still quite far from answering the "how" and especially the "why". They point out the path to the door, but don't necessarily tell us which door to open. And they can be especially impoverished in illuminating what lies beyond; for that only a true understanding of the human mind will pave the way.

By the author's admission, this is the Google-generation version of his favorite book, Freakonomics. As we've repeatedly found in elections all over the planet, the survey is an imperfect tool, chiefly because people lie. Hence the name of the book. But they don't lie when they are doing a Google search. So that's the digital truth serum. You can use this cornucopia of data both 1. to establish facts but also 2. to discover correlations. If you use it cleverly you can even detect causation. The author walks you through a large number of fun examples. If you want to find out what part of their body men and women most frequently research on Google, you've come to the right place. If you want to find out how searches for the word correlate with states Hillary lost despite being ahead in the polls, again you have come to the right place. If you want something better than a stab in the dark regarding the age we pick our football team, you get the idea. You do get the impression, however, that the author is IMMENSELY happy with himself. This is a very smug book. All self-deprecatory commentary here (and there's a lot of it and it's often funny) feels fake. True to his field, psychology, at least half the time author Seth Stephens-Davidowitz is talking about sex. So, for example, when he goes looking for the percent of men who are gay, it's all based on research he's done trolling on, erm, sorry, analyzing, porn websites. I'm really not kidding when I'm telling you the man's got one thing on his mind. Bottom of page 124, in a footnote, you can see what he really wanted to call the book. It's not a little house on a prairie. Also, and I hate to be a pedant, for all the applied statistics and rigor you find in the book, he fails to mention that if your work is based on porn websites, then you are assuming that the property you are researching is exhibited in the same proportion amongst those who frequent porn websites as it is in the general population. Can that be true if the property you are researching is sexual in nature? Regardless, I spent all my time laughing when I was reading this. I

was done with it within 48 hours. I could read more. Although I'm annoyed that the author has pretty much pre-announced the sequel, I think I'll buy it.

This book does a great job of giving the qualitative value of data science without getting hung up in the quantitative details. Don't get me wrong, it's no pop-econ beginner's book, but the focus on giving powerful examples of surprisingly simple data science provides the kind of motivation that will drive people to enter this field (for the right reasons). Ever since I read 'big-data', I've been excited about the potential for data science to be used across the social sciences in order to better understand humanity at all levels. It was exciting to find that this is exactly the approach and purpose laid out in this book.

Should be required reading for anyone talking or thinking about Big Data and how it's used. This will be the first of many to make more sense of it than has been to date. It's fine to say don't start into big data efforts just for the sake of mountains of data, but have an objective, but most people haven't a clue how to begin to figure out what those objectives might be. This will help, but the future holds more ideas I'm sure. Still is nods toward the power and value of big data analyses that might give us a better world in the long run.

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