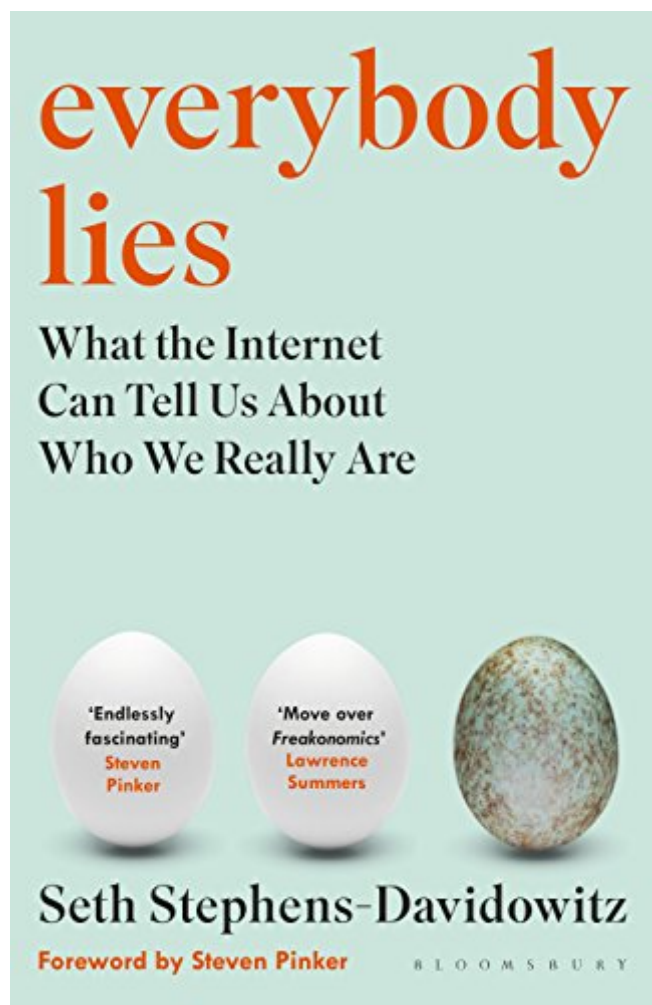


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Everybody Lies: The New York Times Bestseller



Synopsis

Insightful, surprising and with ground-breaking revelations about our society, *Everybody Lies* exposes the secrets embedded in our internet searches, with a foreword by bestselling author Steven Pinker. Everybody lies, to friends, lovers, doctors, pollsters and to themselves. In Internet searches, however, people confess their secrets about sexless marriages, mental health problems, even racist views. Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, an economist and former Google data scientist, shows that this could just be the most important dataset ever collected. This huge database of secrets unprecedented in human history offers astonishing, even revolutionary, insights into humankind. Anxiety, for instance, does not increase after a terrorist attack. Crime levels drop when a violent film is released. And racist searches are no higher in Republican areas than in Democrat ones. Stephens-Davidowitz reveals information we can use to change our culture, and the questions we're afraid to ask that might be essential to our health and both emotional and physical. Insightful, funny, and always surprising, *Everybody Lies* exposes the biases and secrets embedded deeply within us, at a time when things are harder to predict than ever.

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Customer Reviews

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

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 "little house on a prairie." Also, and I hate to be a pedant, for all the "applied statistics" 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 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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