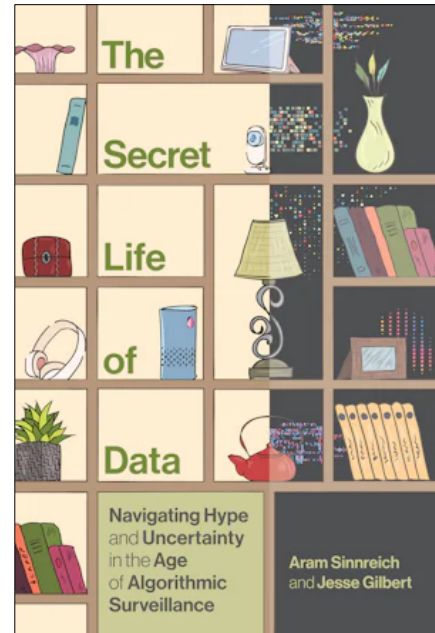


Aram Sinnreich and Jesse Gilbert, **The Secret Life of Data: Navigating Hype and Uncertainty in the Age of Algorithmic Surveillance**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024, 312 pp., \$29.99 (hardcover).

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In 1995, mathematician Clive Humby helped invent the Tesco Clubcard, the world's first mass customized loyalty program. With the Clubcard helping the UK supermarket chain accrue £2.3 billion in 2023 alone, we can thank Humby for the ubiquity of barcodes affixed to keychains and displayed on mobile phones (DecisionMarketing, 2024).

However, we can also credit Humby for another invention of comparable importance. "Data is the new oil," he proclaimed in 2006, coining both a pithy slogan and novel perspective (Talagala, 2022, p. 2). Money was to be made in the new economy not through commerce but epistemology. While critics have haggled over the metaphor's efficacy, there's certainly truth attached to it: As of late 2024, Google wields a market cap of \$2.16tn, Amazon at \$2.129tn, and Meta nips at Saudi Aramco's \$1.775tn with their own \$1.45tn (CompaniesMarketcap.com, 2024).



Aram Sinnreich and Jesse Gilbert's ***The Secret Life of Data: Navigating Hype and Uncertainty in the Age of Algorithmic Surveillance*** enters this well-financed fray with an impressively clear, direct, and public-facing intervention. In this book, we are given an interpretation of data premised on inexhaustibility: "There is no limit to the amount and variety of data—and, ultimately, knowledge—that may be produced from an object, event, or interaction, given enough time, distance, and computational power" (p. xii). Unlike oil's toxic finitude, data is recyclable, an accidental capitalist environmentalism that defies purported material scarcity and upends traditional understandings of privacy, social justice, and political consequence.

From the onset, *The Secret Life of Data* makes known that it does not intend to change policy or "advance the bleeding edge of any particular field" (although the authors manage to slip two conceptual additions in, *algo-vision* and *triangulation*) but to survey a shifting digital landscape (pp. xiv–xv). Instead, the book documents the "new complexities and challenges" (p. xiii) that data's secrecy introduces into our worlds.

Its first chapter opens with metadata, that data about data that the National Security Agency (NSA) famously intercepts "not wittingly" (Marcus, 2013). Nominally distinct from personally identifiable information, metadata inaugurates the authors' first brush with the secret life of data. With metadata, seemingly unimportant information can be made significant: Inept lobbyists leave their author names in

the .docx of a bill; streaming platforms make programming decisions “based purely on viewing habits” (p. 20).

Chapter 2 considers the pools of unstructured data through which emails, keystrokes, and text messages are given meaning. Cases include the colossal heterogeneity of data that both facilitates predictive policing and OpenAI’s flagship ChatGPT. Pithily put, “all data are big data” (p. 50) when able to be woven together, as data’s secrecy removes authorship, propriety, and context.

Chapter 3 establishes this framework of big data, where its larger-than-life scale reforms but also mires the liberal individual. Here, a machine-generated song unsettles frameworks of intellectual property while algorithmic bias disempowers through disparate health decisions and economic consequences.

Chapter 4 rehearses many scholastic arguments around smart devices. “You don’t necessarily see the kinds of power” (p. 90) embedded in our algorithmic objects, Laura DeNardis is quoted. Secrecy is not just about data’s fungibility, but infrastructural purpose. Through its invisibility, we are shown how the tech industry invades our private spaces, from Roombas mapping our homes’ floor plans to ultrasound tracking that inaudibly screams into our phone’s microphone.

Chapter 5, “The Secret Data of Life,” rewrites the book’s title and turns its focus to the body. Abstracted into bits, biometric sensors have also reconceptualized the human form into data. Facial recognition appears in the Moscow subway, as does the Taliban’s unfortunate seizure of U.S. military databases of Afghan civilian biometrics in 2021.

Chapter 6 on self-tracking begins with a notable claim: “We’ve learned to see our worlds through the eyes of the algorithms that surround us, and we’ve altered our habits, our behaviors, our identities, and sometimes even our bodies” (p. 139). Strident and evident, our acculturation to algorithmic outputs is undeniable. Research has shown that Instagram use increases body dysmorphia; TikTok’s beauty filters induce plastic surgery. What emerges is a digital phenomenology, an “algo-vision” that subsumes “our own needs and desires” to the “dictates of an algorithm” (p. 147).

Chapter 7 examines data within the stack of nested computer systems. Like chapter 2’s weaving of disparate data, digital infrastructures integrate multiple perspectives, sidestepping “[Donna] Haraway’s ‘God-trick’” to socialize a datafied feminist epistemology: a “map of the world that integrates multiple vantage points” (p. 166). Here, “triangulation” emerges as a technical diagram for ethical crowdsourcing that, unfortunately, also facilitates the persistent “smart glasses” fixation of fashion-challenged Silicon Valley.

Chapter 8 concludes with the well-publicized threats that data poses to democracy. From neurotargeting to Cambridge Analytica, the marketplace of ideas has become even further vulnerable to the consequences of data’s secrecy: “our point is that every source of information about individuals’ identities, behaviors, and locations, regardless of its stated purpose or original function, may eventually become a tool of state surveillance” (p. 198).

For those in the field, the book serves as a who's who of case studies and quotations. Its examples are reminders of data's quiet prominence in digital life, while the interviews will have you nodding along to the last names we normally see between parentheses. Where the book succeeds is in this integrative presentation. Like unstructured data, it connects a diverse set of issues under the effective rubric of secrecy. And while gestures are made at resistance, the book's tenor is honest: The problems we face are multifaceted and difficult to overcome.

Similarly, the very concept of secrecy expresses something I find compelling about the book's framework: Secrecy avails itself with a powerful infinitude, a rejection of data's oiliness since data cannot be exhausted. The allure of this book's argument is precisely the unrelenting potentiality to data—the "tip of the iceberg" of what may come (p. xii). Secrecy, like the Deep Web, underscores a fundamental truth of the Internet. Most things are not on the Clear Web. Most data are not visible. And nearly all data are unintelligible.

What is intelligible is the fact that trillions of dollars are generated through data's commodification. Regarding politics, the authors write that "it's tempting to lay the blame for what ails our democracy at the feet of tech itself because that lets us off the hook for doing something about it" (p. 196). But, of course, tech does nothing by itself. It is "our decisions, institutions, and politics" that make tech act in the world (p. 196).

Accordingly, I think back to Tesco, to the origins of mass data processing, and to the immense wealth deposited in Silicon Valley. It is capitalism, that annoying-to-point-out mode of production structuring all facets of life, that gives data its contemporary *raison d'être*. Most "secret" data flows from the founts of profiteering tech firms. It might circulate freely due to its apparent immateriality, but the hoarding of data comes with an expected return on investment. Remember that even as the NSA tapped the globe's undersea Internet cables, it still installed backdoors into Google's and Microsoft's servers.

This economic impulse, however, does not figure centrally in *The Secret Life of Data*. Aiming for that delicate balance between general readership and specific scholarship, I understand, but do not necessarily agree, with a "plain language" and "straightforward storytelling" style that might justify giving "capitalism" a scant three non-footnoted mentions (p. xv). Significantly, though, these mentions are all adjectivized—one surveillance, two industrial.

Whereas the concept of surveillance capitalism has already encountered its share of critiques, I am fond of, if not surprised by, the authors' seeming throwback to an old-fashioned, industrial capitalism. If we are to locate our digital technologies within the same capitalist logics that fueled Manchester's smokestacks, there is a profound nefariousness to data's secrecy. Snubbing the more fashionable "postindustrial" that often hides capitalism's requisite exploitation within the factories and mines of the Global South, I see the authors winking at us: "Because these threats come at the intersection of technology, politics, and industrial capitalism, we must work on all three fronts simultaneously" (p. 208).

Like many winks, it could be a wink. Or a blink. But in my eye, I would have liked more than a flutter, perhaps a deeper conversation on how capitalist reward structures, human immiseration, and

oppression facilitate data's secrecy. Google makes its trillions through firms that recoup their ad budgets by inflating prices for toothpaste or bedsheets. Amazon makes its trillions by economizing the activities of once-social services like the post office. And Meta makes its trillions through the extraction of surplus value by laborers who monitor content and clean data. In short, data's value comes from somewhere—it is not secrets all the way down.

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