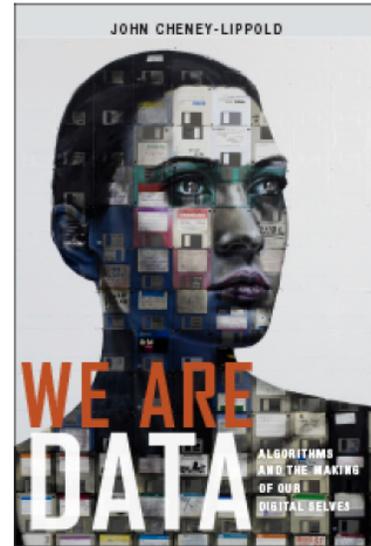


John Cheney-Lippold, **We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017, 317 pp., \$27.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Oscar Gandy
Annenberg School for Communication
University of Pennsylvania, USA

My copy of John Cheney-Lippold's new book, **We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves**, is in embarrassingly terrible shape. Not all of this is my fault. If I were basing my review on one of the many electronic formats through which this book might be read, there would still be yellow underlining on nearly every page, but none of them would be dog-eared as three-fourths of this book's pages now are. Because part of my identity, as Cheney-Lippold provides it, is that of a political economist, while part of his is that of an assistant professor of American culture at the University of Michigan, nearly every page also has my marginal notes, offering an alternative view or a question.



Lest you assume that this review will simply recast past debates between scholars bearing similar identifications reflecting oppositional positions across a still algorithmically discernable divide, let me say that nothing could be further from the truth. *We Are Data* is a gem!

The insights, as well as the triggers for the reader to engage, begin with the introduction. It is here that Cheney-Lippold begins to provide the foundations for his primary construction of what we might call “the problem of algorithmic identification.” At a primary level, the *problem*, if we are so determined to label it that way, would be that a great many of the categories to which we are assigned are likely to differ from those that we use for ourselves, or that are used by our friends, colleagues, or associates within the variety of contextual frames through which we interact.

Many of the “authorities” that Cheney-Lippold cites offer critiques that go beyond noting differences between the categories and labels that are assigned to us, and emphasize the differences in the kinds of power that enable those classifiers to do the work for which they were designed. As he presents it, “Algorithmic agents make us and make the knowledges that compose us, but they do so on their own terms” (p. 11). It is in this chapter that we get the first hint of the variety of technologies of identification being developed. These systems, including those that claim to be able to provide affective assessments of mood (p. 13), operate through the capture and analysis of data for the generation of actionable intelligence by human, nonhuman, and “post-human” (p. 30) agents in the service of corporate, bureaucratic, and institutional interests. We are also reminded of the extent to which we are complicit in this process, in part by our acceptance of those illegible and unintelligible terms of service that we have been conditioned to click our assent, because their use has become a social necessity. The

introduction ends with thumbnail sketches of the next four thematic chapters and the conclusion, in which we are provided with an introduction to the notion of the "soft biopolitics" Cheney-Lippold offers as a label for our engagement with the new relationships of power that "ubiquitous surveillance" (p. 36) will enable.

Chapter 1 is about categorization as the central feature of the process of making data useful. Part of Cheney-Lippold's strategy for introducing the problem with data is to begin his chapters with what we might call a worst-case scenario. This chapter begins with Predator drones that utilize a data-based assessment of a particular group of people as terrorists that can be targeted on the basis of an algorithmic determination of their status. It is here that Cheney-Lippold makes use of a distinction between a terrorist and a 'terrorist,' as indicated by the presence or absence of the single quotation marks, indicating a "datafied" identity (pp. 39–40). These "measurable types" are defined as the "classifications, empirically observed and transcoded as data, that become discrete analytical models for use in profiling and/or knowledge abstraction" (p. 47).

Cheney-Lippold provides numerous examples and definitions of the myriad strategies and techniques that are used in these classification or categorization tasks. In addition to the technical descriptions, he also provides insights into the variety of theoretical perspectives that differentiate between the methods and their application, such as the distinctions being made between Foucauldian forms of governmentality that emphasize discipline and those that emphasize security (pp. 62–63). An extended discussion of the utilization of this process within commercial market segmentation is particularly rich with regard to the unique definitions of personhood associated with a multitude of intersectional pathways.

The next chapter is about control, and the manners through which the "algorithm is going to get you" (p. 93). The consequences of algorithmic determination in this chapter are not as catastrophic as those that we might experience upon being identified as a 'terrorist.' Cheney-Lippold begins instead with one of many examples of fitness-oriented devices, including wearable, networked sensors, that capture data about the user's levels of effort and the responses of their key biological systems.

Rather than marking someone as a target for elimination, the focus here is on behavioral regulation, primarily designed to improve the user's health and well-being. Cheney-Lippold's characterization of this form of control is, as most of them are, especially well phrased: "We tortuously facilitate mobile but constant contact with a regulatory regime that effectively recalibrates the nuances of our own making at the moment of each and every encounter" (p. 107).

The third substantive chapter takes us into deeper waters with its engagement with subjectivity. It begins with the similarities between the subject relations we experience as users of Google's platform and those that have attracted attention worldwide to the surveillance efforts of the U.S.'s National Security Agency. This chapter provides an important insight into the meaning of big data analysis for the different experiences of citizenship and 'citizenship' that some of us might experience. It is here that Cheney-Lippold leads us through the structural attributes that Gilles Deleuze associates with the distinctions between an "individual" and the "dividual" that are based in part of the latter's status and character reflecting only that which can be counted (pp. 172–173).

It is this aspect of subjectivity that makes discussions of the consequences of classification a bit more difficult to describe as problems. We can appreciate this aspect of subjectivity as the basis on which the book's title is built, because it is here that the 'we' version of us is produced that then shapes our lives. We are told that for some of us, unfortunately, the only problematic aspect of this process is that we might see algorithmic segmentation as a bit "creepy" (pp. 193–194). This minimization of consequences weakens the possibility that our displeasure about the use of our communications and other transaction-generated information (TGI) to influence the quality of our lives would move us to demand the establishment of legal boundaries and punishment for such uses of these data.

It is in the next chapter, about privacy, that we turn—to a large degree, outside the realm of law and public policy—to consider some of the forms of resistance that have been mobilized by those among us who have the technological knowledge, skill, and willingness to risk the responses of power to our audacity. It is here that Cheney-Lippold demonstrates his special talent for choosing an example and exploiting it fully to make a powerful statement about data-based harms and the responses to them that are worth exploring. As in the case of those identified as 'terrorists,' we are introduced to the case of a disabled man who is, essentially, sentenced to death because of an algorithmic identification of him as someone 'undeserving' of emergency transportation to the hospital (pp. 203–205).

After a brief review of the historical development and redefinition of privacy as a legally defined right, and an assessment of its declining importance as a shield against such harmful classifications, Cheney-Lippold goes on to describe the strategic technology of obfuscation. Obfuscation is exemplified by the work of "cypherpunks," and other technologically sophisticated defenders of our rights to self-determination, to develop and implement ways of introducing "noise" into the masses of TGI and other data being used to define and shape our identities. Among those defensive contributions is the TrackMeNot browser plug-in that Helen Nissenbaum and her colleagues developed that supplied numerous "random search queries" for the actual subject of interest we submit (pp. 230–232).

Cheney-Lippold's primary purpose for offering us this book is to begin the development of the kinds of resistance that come with our understanding the nature of the technologies of surveillance, classification, and discrimination. Because these systems of control are continually, and quite rapidly, developing into new forms and points of engagement with our ability to shape our own futures, the need to pursue greater understanding means that a great many more of us will have to invest in that project. This finely crafted book should help us to take a giant collective leap forward along that path.