

# The Algorithmic Lives We *Don't* Lead

Marc Koscijew, Ph.D.

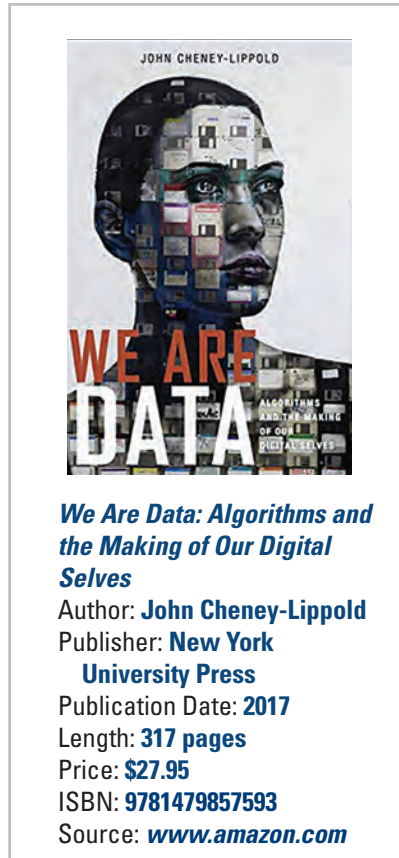
**Y**ou aren't who you think you are online. You are instead your data and the algorithmic categories to which it has been assigned. This unnerving reality is the central theme of John Cheney-Lippold's *We Are Data*, a sobering and urgent account of the ways in which our lives are being increasingly determined and regulated by algorithms.

Cheney-Lippold critically explores the complex dynamics of algorithmic surveillance by illuminating its diverse forms and functions and their wide-ranging implications. His purpose is twofold: first, to understand how algorithmic categories construct our lives into quantitative, measurable type forms; and, second, to recognize how these measurable types control and discipline our lives in a digitally networked world.

## Algorithms Classify 'Who We Are'

"We are data" does not mean that we, individually, are data. It means that our data is interpreted and assigned meaning by algorithms that, in turn, affect our lives. This central theme is framed by Cheney-Lippold's novel conceptual contribution of the "measurable type," which he describes in this way:

"...a data template, a nexus of different datafied elements that...assign users an identity, an algorithmic identification that compares streams of data to existing datafied models. Categorical membership is assigned based on algorithmic fit: if one's data is spoken 'as if' it was produced [by a certain category]. And fit is subsequently based only on what data is available to be measured, so membership – and identity at large – is based exclusively on data."



### *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*

Author: **John Cheney-Lippold**

Publisher: **New York University Press**

Publication Date: **2017**

Length: **317 pages**

Price: **\$27.95**

ISBN: **9781479857593**

Source: [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

Our data is interpreted and then assigned to categories that define countless aspects of our lives, including gender, race, citizenship, education level, employment status, and other kinds of personal and behavioral features. It does not matter if you really are how your data is categorized, but it does matter how your data is categorized because those definitions can delimit your agency, or capacity, to act.

## 'Who We Are' Constantly Changes

While categorizing people is not new, Cheney-Lippold notes that "what is new about the categories that constitute us online is that they are unknown, often proprietary, and ultimately...modulatory: Google's own interpretation of gender [for

example], faithful to nothing but patterns of data, can be dynamically redefined according to the latest gendered data." These categories are in flux as new data is included and interpreted. In turn, our online identities are continuously changing, in real-time, with the latest data.

In other words, you are not who you think or say you are. You are what other actors – from corporations to governments – classify you as, according to their categories, at any given moment, depending upon your latest click, swipe, like, comment, purchase, visit, or other interaction.

Our online identities thus are measurable types "that determine the discursive parameters of who we can (and cannot) be." The author continues: "The result is an array of measurable-type categories that our data either fits within or doesn't. That subsequent fit then governs how systems of classification algorithmically authenticate us online."

Moreover, "with hundreds of other companies similarly assigning each of us different... [categories] there is no single, static sense of us but rather an untold number of competing, modulating interpretations of data that make up who we are." They ultimately affect our lives in ways that are often without our knowledge, without contextualizing of our data, and without any consideration of who we really are beyond our data.

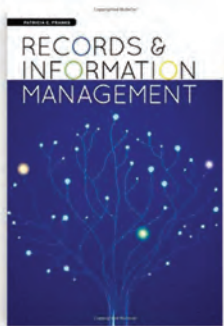
## The Book's Four-Part Framework

The book's four main chapters explore the many nuanced ways in which algorithms shape our lives and possibilities by translating and transcoding us into modulating measurable types. The book presents this detailed discussion through an illuminating framework comprising



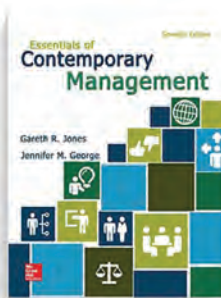
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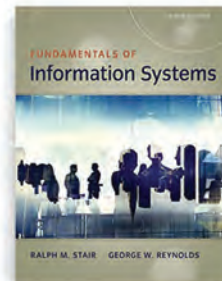
Essentials of Contemporary Management, 7th Ed.

Gareth R. Jones  
Jennifer M. George



Records and Information Management: Fundamentals of Professional Practice, 3rd Ed.

William Saffady, Ph. D.



Fundamentals of Information Systems, 9th Ed.

Ralph Stair  
George Reynolds



Records Management for Dummies

Blake Richardson, CRM

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“Categorization,” “Control,” “Subjectivity,” and “Privacy.” Each chapter is thoroughly researched and provides complex but clear analyses of how algorithmic interpretations of data by different organizations are impacting our lived experiences.

#### *Data Patterns Create Categories*

The first chapter on categorization introduces the concept of the measurable type. It discusses how data is made useful by and through algorithmic identification. The author describes how “computers create categories through patterns in data, which then construct algorithmically transcoded ideas [measurable types] about the world.”

He explains that “measurable types are placeholders for meaning... They are empirical assessments of prejudice and/or patterns that work, according to a particular confidence percentage, at a particular moment and by a particular set of rules.” He further argues that this process is not personalization but instead profilization in which our data – not our real selves – is placed within its corre-

sponding measurable type category, which again can dramatically shift from moment to moment with the latest data.

#### *Algorithmic Control Frames Our World*

The second chapter on control examines the disciplinary practice of “control without control,” in which control is either difficult to perceive and/or is distanced and rarely felt. Cheney-Lippold argues that “it’s a control that frames your world. It conditions the possibilities available for you to live your life as a user – as well as a member of a category.”

Algorithmic regulation of our data defines and controls us in intimate and specific ways, but does so from a distance. Organizations make decisions about and for us for their purposes based on our data without us fully realizing or understanding that they are doing it.

#### *Our Online Selves Morph*

The third chapter on subjectivity outlines how your online self is not one complete entity but is instead

a collection of different measurable types with multiple meanings at any given time, or what Cheney-Lippold terms “dividuals.” He explains that “online, where our individualities are recorded into units of data, our dividualities are the only things to be counted.” In other words, our individuality is divided from within and we are understood and used as a decontextualized and constantly rearranging aggregation of data points in different modulating measurable types. Online you are not an individual but are instead a morphing combination of dividuals.

#### *Mislead to Protect Privacy*

The fourth chapter considers privacy implications for our subdivided, or dividualized, selves. Cheney-Lippold argues that we should have a right not to be identified. He further argues that we further need a new kind of privacy that protects not only us as individuals but us as dividuals. He states that “privacy should protect both the self and the assemblage connecting that self to others – the user and the [dividual] components

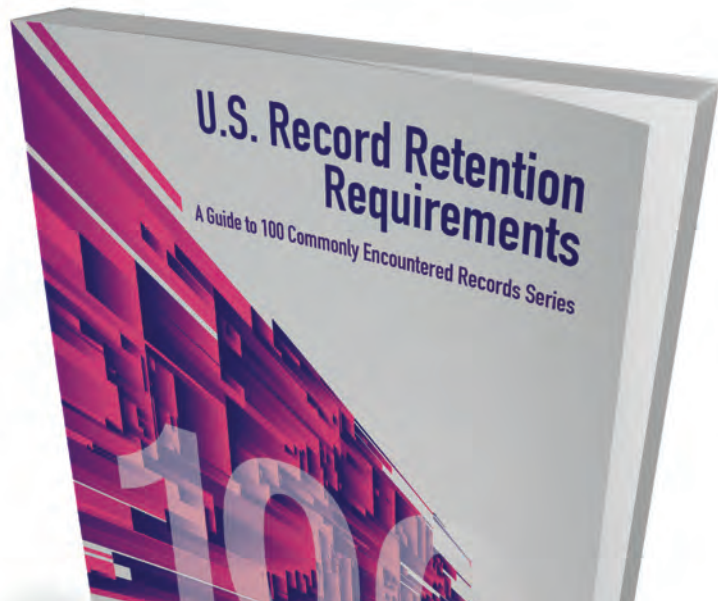


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that further constitute that user, or his datafied answers.”

He shrewdly contemplates resistance to algorithmic control of our lives through an endorsement of Helen Nissenbaum’s technique of obfuscation involving “the ‘deliberate addition of ambiguous, confusing, or misleading information to interfere with surveillance and data collection.’” Obfuscation, in other words, means feeding an algorithmic system

incorrect or extraneous data to compromise its subsequent control over you and others.

### Essential Reading for Info Pros

*We Are Data* is an important contribution to greater understanding of algorithmic identification, regulation, and surveillance. Cheney-Lippold expertly shows how “as everything we do becomes datafied, everything we do becomes controllable.” It clearly

describes a complex and often murky situation supported by thorough research. Indeed, the research alone is highly informative and instructive. The book further presents both conceptual analyses of and practical discussions on the implications of how our data is made useful for others. It is essential reading for anyone interested in information and its philosophy, creation, management, surveillance, and other uses.



**About the Author:** Marc Kosciejew, Ph.D., from Western University in London, Ontario, Canada, is lecturer and previous head of the Department of Library, Information, and Archive Sciences at the University of Malta. Malta’s Minister for Education and Employment also appointed him chair of the Malta Libraries Council, which provides strategic advice on libraries, learning, and literacy to senior cultural and political figures. His research has been published in numerous peer-reviewed scholarly and professional publications; his May/June 2014 *Information Management* article, “Proposing a Charter of Personal Data Rights, won ARMA International’s Britt Literary Award.” Kosciejew, who received his doctoral in library and information science from Western University, can be contacted at [mkosciej@gmail.com](mailto:mkosciej@gmail.com).