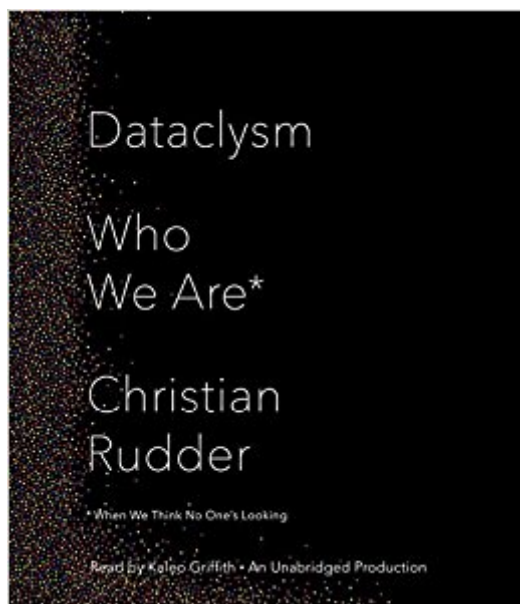


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# Dataclysm: Who We Are (When We Think No One's Looking)



## Synopsis

A New York Times Bestseller An audacious, irreverent investigation of human behavior—and a first look at a revolution in the making. Our personal data has been used to spy on us, hire and fire us, and sell us stuff we don't need. In *Dataclysm*, Christian Rudder uses it to show us who we truly are. For centuries, we've relied on polling or small-scale lab experiments to study human behavior. Today, a new approach is possible. As we live more of our lives online, researchers can finally observe us directly, in vast numbers, and without filters. Data scientists have become the new demographers. In this daring and original book, Rudder explains how Facebook "likes" can predict, with surprising accuracy, a person's sexual orientation and even intelligence; how attractive women receive exponentially more interview requests; and why you must have haters to be hot. He charts the rise and fall of America's most reviled word through Google Search and examines the new dynamics of collaborative rage on Twitter. He shows how people express themselves, both privately and publicly. What is the least Asian thing you can say? Do people bathe more in Vermont or New Jersey? What do black women think about Simon & Garfunkel? (Hint: they don't think about Simon & Garfunkel.) Rudder also traces human migration over time, showing how groups of people move from certain small towns to the same big cities across the globe. And he grapples with the challenge of maintaining privacy in a world where these explorations are possible. Visually arresting and full of wit and insight, *Dataclysm* is a new way of seeing ourselves—a brilliant alchemy, in which math is made human and numbers become the narrative of our time. From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

Q&A with Christian Rudder, cofounder of OkCupid and author of *Dataclysm* As more of our social interaction happens on social media, how much can researchers learn about us from our online interactions? Well, they can only learn what we tell them, but in the age of Facebook and Google, that's become pretty much everything. To the extent that friendship, anger, sex, love, and whatever else happen online, we can investigate them. Your search history tells us what kind of jokes you like. Your Facebook network reveals not just your friendships, but in some cases the state of your marriage. Your preferences on OkCupid tell us what you find sexy, and your reaction to the strangers the site offers up tells us how you judge people. The articles you "like" tell us not just about your politics, but even predict your intelligence. You fold in data points like these for millions and millions of people, and you start to get a whole new picture of humankind. In *Dataclysm* you're taking this flood of information and putting it to an entirely new use: understanding human nature. So what have you found? I tried really hard to avoid the numerical dog and pony show. There are of course lots of interesting one-off factoids, but I mostly found what I (and probably you) have always known: that people are gentle, mean, stupid, lusty, lonely, kind, foolish, shrewd, shallow, and endlessly complex. *Dataclysm*'s central idea isn't necessarily what we can see using big data; it's the fact of the vision itself. That we can get real data on even the most private moments in people's lives is an astounding thing. It's like the second advent of reality television, but this time without the television part. Just the reality. Are you worried about any of this? I have mixed feelings about the implications. I myself almost never tweet, post, or share anything about my personal life. At the same time, I've just spent three years writing about how interesting all this data is, and I cofounded OkCupid. My hope is that this ambivalence makes me a trustworthy guide through the thicket of technology and data. I admire the knowledge that social data can bring us; I also fear the consequences. You have a lot to say about race in the book, and you use data to shed light on the many ways it affects the way we interact with one another. What surprised you about your research in this area? Did you find anything unsurprising? The data on race was surprising only in its stubborn predictability—for all the glitzy technology, the results could've been from the 1950s. I grew up in Little Rock and graduated from Central High, the first school in the South to be integrated: Eisenhower, the National Guard, mobs of white people screaming at nine black children, that's Central. The school embraces its history and is now over half black. I'm no

brave crusader, but race (and racism) were part of my education. So when, in researching the book, I unpacked three separate databases and found that in every one white people gave black people short-shrift, I wasn't shocked, you know? Asians and Latinos apply the same penalty to African Americans that white folks do, which says something about how even (relatively) recent additions to the "American experience" have acquired its biases. What makes this moment in time and this set of data different from the massive data surveys of the past, such as Pew, Gallup, or the Kinsey Institute? The data in my book is almost all passively observed—there's no questionnaire, no contrived experiment to simulate "real life." This data is real life. Online you have friends, lovers, enemies, and intense moments of truth without a thought for who's watching, because ostensibly no one is—except of course the computers recording it all. This is how digital data circumvents that old research obstacle: people's inability to be honest when the truth makes them look bad. Digital data's ability to get at the private mind like this is unprecedented and very powerful.

--This text refers to an alternate Audio CD edition.

An NPR Best Book of 2014  
A Globe & Mail Best Book of 2014  
A Brain Pickings Best Science Book of 2014  
A Bloomberg Best Book of 2014  
One of Hudson Booksellers' 5 Best Business Books of 2014  
Goodreads Semifinalist for Best Nonfiction Book of the Year  
Finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize

"Most data-hyping books are vapor and slogans. This one has the real stuff: actual data and actual analysis taking place on the page. That's something to be praised, loudly and at length. Praiseworthy, too, is Rudder's writing, which is consistently zingy and mercifully free of Silicon Valley business gabble."  
—Jordan Ellenberg, Washington Post

"As a researcher, Mr. Rudder clearly possesses the statistical acumen to answer the questions he has posed so well. As a writer, he keeps the book moving while fully exploring each topic, revealing his graphs and charts with both explanatory and narrative skill. Though he forgoes statistical particulars like p-values and confidence intervals, he gives an approachable, persuasive account of his data sources and results. He offers explanations of what the data can and cannot tell us, why it is sufficient or insufficient to answer some question we may have and, if the latter is the case, what sufficient data would look like. He shows you, in short, how to think about data."  
—Wall Street Journal

"Rudder is the co-founder of the dating site OKCupid and the data scientist behind its now-legendary trend analyses, but he is also—as it becomes immediately clear from his elegant writing and wildly cross-disciplinary references—a lover of literature, philosophy, anthropology, and all the other humanities that make us human—and that, importantly in this

case, enhance and ennoble the hard data with dimensional insight into the richness of the human experience...an extraordinarily unusual and dimensional lens on what Carl Sagan memorably called "the aggregate of our joy and suffering."

• Maria Popova, Brain Pickings "Fascinating, funny, and occasionally howl-inducing...[Rudder] is a quant with soul, and we're lucky to have him."

• Elle "There's another side of Big Data you haven't seen - not the one that promised to use our digital world to our advantage to optimize, monetize, or systematize every last part our lives. It's the big data that rears its ugly head and tells us what we don't want to know. And that, as Christian Rudder demonstrates in his new book, *Dataclysm*, is perhaps an equally worthwhile pursuit. Before we heighten the human experience, we should understand it first."

• TIME "At a time when consumers are increasingly wary of online tracking, Rudder makes a powerful argument in *Dataclysm* that the ability to tell so much about us from the trails we leave is as potentially useful as it is pernicious, and as educational as it may be unsettling. By explaining some of the insights he has gleaned from OkCupid and other social networks, he demystifies data-mining and sheds light on what, for better or for worse, it is now capable of."

• Financial Times "Dataclysm is a well-written and funny look at what the numbers reveal about human behavior in the age of social media. It's both profound and a bit disturbing, because, sad to say, we're generally not the kind of people we like to think of or say we are."

• Salon "For all its data and its seemingly dating-specific focus, *Dataclysm* tells the story set forth by the book's subtitle, in an entertaining and accessible way. Informative, eye-opening, and (gasp) fun to read. Even if you're not a giant stat head."

• Grantland "[Rudder] doesn't wring or clap his hands over the big-data phenomenon (see N.S.A., Google ads, that sneaky Fitbit) so much as plunge them into big data and attempt to pull strange creatures from the murky depths."

• The New Yorker "A hopeful and exciting journey into the heart of data collection...[Rudder's] book delivers both insider access and a savvy critique of the very machinery he is employed by. Since he's been in the data mines and has risen above them, Rudder becomes a singular and trustworthy guide."

• The Globe and Mail "Compulsively readable - including for those with no particular affinity for numbers in and of themselves - and surprisingly personal. Starting with aggregates, Rudder posits, we can zoom in on the details of how we live, love, fight, work, play, and age; from numbers, we can derive narrative. There are few characters in the book, and few anecdotes - but the human story resounds throughout."

• Refinery29 "Rudder's lively, clear prose makes heady concepts understandable and transforms the book's many charts into revealing

truths. Rudder teaches us a bit about how wonderfully peculiar humans are, and how we go about hiding it. Flavorwire "Dataclysm" is all about what we can learn about human minds and hearts by analyzing the massive ongoing experiment that is the internet. Forbes "The book reads as if it's written (well) by a curious child whose parents beg him or her to stop asking 'what-if' questions. Rudder examines the data of the website he helped create with unwavering curiosity. Every turn presents new questions to be answered, and he happily heads down the rabbit hole to resolve them." U.S. News "A wonderful march through infographics created using data derived from the web a fun, visual book and a necessary one at that." The Independent (UK), 2014's Best Books on the Internet and Technology "This is the best book that I've read on data in years, perhaps ever. If you want to understand how data is affecting the present and what it portends for the future, buy it now." Huffington Post "Rudder draws from big data sets — Google searches, Twitter updates, illicitly obtained Facebook data passed shiftily between researchers like bags of weed — to draw out subtle patterns in politics, sexuality, identity and behaviour that are only revealed with distance and aggregation. Dataclysm will entertain those who want to know how machines see us. It also serves as a call to action, showing us how server farms running everything from home shopping to homeland security turn us into easily digested data products. Rudder's message is clear: in this particular sausage factory, we are the pigs. New Scientist "Dataclysm offers both the satisfaction of confirming stereotypes and the fun of defying them. Such candor is disarming, as is Mr. Rudder's puckish sense of humor." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette "Studying human behavior is a little like exploring a jungle: it's messy, hard, and easy to lose your way. But Christian Rudder is a consummate guide, revealing essential truths about who we are. Big Data has never been so fun." Dan Ariely, author of Predictably Irrational "Dataclysm is a book full of juicy secrets — secrets about who we love, what we crave, why we like, and how we change each other's minds and lives, often without even knowing it. Christian Rudder makes this mathematical narrative of our culture fun to read and even more fun to discuss: You will find yourself sharing these intriguing data-driven revelations with everyone you know." Jane McGonigal, author of Reality Is Broken "In the first few pages of Dataclysm, Christian Rudder uses massive amounts of actual behavioral data to prove what I always believed in my heart: Belle and Sebastian is the whitest band ever. It only gets better from there." Aziz Ansari "It's unheard of for a book about Big Data to read like a guilty pleasure, but Dataclysm does. It's a fascinating, almost voyeuristic look at who we really are and what

we really want." — Steven Strogatz, Schurman Professor of Applied Mathematics, Cornell University, author of *The Joy of x* "Smart, revealing, and sometimes sobering, *Dataclysm* affirms what we probably suspected in our darker moments: When it comes to romance, what we say we want isn't what will actually make us happy. Christian Rudder has tapped the tremendous wealth of data that the Internet offers to tease out thoughts on topics like beauty and race that most of us wouldn't cop to publicly. It's a riveting read, and Rudder is an affable and humane guide." — Adelle Waldman, author of *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* "Christian Rudder has written a funny and profound book about important issues. Race, love, sex — you name it. Are we the sum of the data we produce? Read this book immediately and see if you can answer the question." — Errol Morris "Big Data can be like a 3D movie without 3D glasses — you know there's a lot going on but you're mainly just disoriented. We should feel fortunate to have an interpreter as skilled (and funny) as Christian Rudder. *Dataclysm* is filled with insights that boil down Big Data into byte-sized revelations." — Michael Norton, Harvard Business School, coauthor of *Happy Money* "With a zest for both the profound and the wacky, Rudder demonstrates how the information we provide individually tells a vast deal about who we are collectively. A visually engaging read and a fascinating topic make this a great choice not just for followers of Nate Silver and fans of infographics, but for just about anyone who, by participating in online activity, has contributed to the data set." — Library Journal "Demographers, entrepreneurs, students of history and sociology, and ordinary citizens alike will find plenty of provocations and, yes, much data in Rudder's well-argued, revealing pages." — Kirkus Reviews From the Hardcover edition.

Big data has a bad name. It is used to spy on us and to convince us to buy things we do not need (and, we discover after parting with our money, that we often do not want). Nevertheless, big data - and the insight it gives into who we are - fascinates us. Christian Rudder is in a unique position to tell us a lot about ourselves. As a co-founder of OkCupid, he has access to the hearts and minds (and politics and food and drink) of millions of us. In *Dataclysm*, he slices, dices, and adds a bit of direction (and wit) to data that, he believes, reveals the inner soul of who we are. Here is a smattering of what you'll uncover in *Dataclysm*. Women (who men believe are 'over-the-hill' after age 21) think that only one in six men is 'above average' in attractiveness. Until age 30, women prefer slightly older guys. After 30, they prefer them slightly younger. At 40, well let's say that men lose their appeal after they turn 40. Conclusion? Women want men to age with them (at least until age 40). Men always want youth. People who are considered attractive by everyone are less appealing than those who are seen as unattractive by some. That is, having some flaw or

imperfection actually makes you more attractive and appealing to others. Twitter may actually improve a user's writing because it forces you to wring meaning from fewer letters. The messages on OkCupid that get the most responses are short (40-60 characters). To get to that brief message, most people edit, edit and edit some more. Then that same message is used over and over and over again. Rudder's conclusion? Boilerplate is 75% as effective as something original. Remember the six degrees of separation? Rudder reports that analysis of Facebook accounts shows that 99.6% of people on Facebook are, in fact, within six degrees of anyone on the planet. The more you share with mutual friends, the stronger the relationship. Couples who have a strong relationship tend to be the connecting point among very different groups of people - your partner is one of the few people you can introduce into the far corners of your life. People tend to overemphasize the big, splashy things: faith, politics, and certainly looks, but in determining compatibility with another, those beliefs do not matter nearly as much as everyone thinks. Sometimes they do not matter at all. Often it is caring about a topic that is more important than how you view the topic itself. Race has less effect on how well you will get along with someone else than religion, politics or education. However, racism is still pervasive in whom you might prefer to interact with. On Facebook, every percentile of attractiveness gives a man two new friends. It gives a woman three. Guess how that plays into employment interviews? White people tend to differentiate themselves by their hair and eyes. Asians by their country of origin. Latinos by their music. You get the idea - many strange but interesting relationships begin to pop out when you have mounds of data about many people who give up that data without the expectation that it is going to be used to figure out who we really are when no one is looking over our shoulder. Rudder provides a stimulating glimpse into what can be teased out of piles of data. I have to assume he knows how to analyze the data and how to interpret what the data says to him. What he sees is sometimes distressing (as in his conclusions about racism). However, it is always fascinating. As dating sites, Google, social media sites, (the NSA?) and others continue to vacuum up data on our personal lives, will the result be good? Or will it be used to hurt? Who will decide? Does it require laws? Or will people eventually turn away from companies that misuse the information we give them about ourselves? A good read. Look for more tidbits as social scientists dig deeper and deeper into big data. This and other reviews available at [WalterBristow.com](http://WalterBristow.com) Review based on a copy courtesy of the publisher.

This is a well-written book best suited to two groups of people: those interested in data but not much familiarity with analysis beyond the concept of averages and those interested in the ideas and issues that Rudder lightly touches on (gender, race, sexual orientation). Beyond that, though, this



book doesn't have a lot to offer besides brief distractions. He intends it to be "a popularization of data and data science," which apparently means publishing a lot of "hey, this might be interesting" graphs to generate an audience. It's a shame, because there is a lot of quality content here that with more effort and ambition could have been shaped into an inspiring example of what data can do to stimulate thought and action; instead we get mostly just entertainment (well done, but entertainment nonetheless). Not exactly what the world needs from people with Rudder's skills.

I just finished a class project on this book, and wrote this review for the project in my information studies class. In the book *Dataclysm*, by Christian Rudder the co-founder of OkCupid, Rudder takes a compelling look at data research in big Internet companies. A few months before Rudder released his book in October 2014, Rudder posted a blog explaining three tests their company has conducted on its sites users. Rudder got some flack for saying this in his blog "guess what, everybody: if you use the Internet, you're the subject of hundreds of experiments at any given time, on every site. That's how websites work. The media spun Rudder's comments in his blog in quit a few different ways, some good and some bad. Many people appreciate that Rudder and his partners at OkCupid released a tell-all in data usage from one of the largest free dating sites on the web. Rudder and his colleagues believe that people should have the right to know what companies like OkCupid are doing with their data. OkCupid is not selling the data they collect from the people who use his dating site to other companies. The Data is used to improve users experience on their dating site. The book offers an in-depth look into what social media sites and search engines do with your data from analyzing keystrokes to identifying a secret population of racists by their search terms and preferences in dating. The book shows how people act in front of social media and how they act when they don't think anyone is watching.

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