

BOOK REVIEW

MINDMASTERS: THE DATA-DRIVEN SCIENCE OF PREDICTING AND CHANGING HUMAN BEHAVIOR.

Author: Matz, S. (2025).
Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

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Most, if not all, individuals with access to the Internet have probably accepted that we live in the digital age and have heard of the term “Big Data.” However, to most people, Big Data remains a vague and rather abstract concept. Very few would fully understand how it affects their lives.

In her Mindmasters book, Professor Sandra Matz, a computational social scientist at the Columbia Business School and one of DataIQ’s 100 most influential people in data-driven marketing in 2015 and 2016, helps us better understand the impact of Big Data on our lives. She uses compelling academic research results and refreshing real-life anecdotes to examine how the vast data that individuals generate unknowingly on a daily basis can be utilized for and against them for better or for worse. She points out one alarming statistic: an average person generates more than 6GB of data hourly. Such a figure is beyond our wildest dreams. These digital footprints come from our habitual interaction with digital technologies such as Facebook likes, Google information searching, credit card transactions, and the GPS location tracking of various mobile apps.

The collected digital footprint data can then be psychoanalyzed through models and algorithms to predict our consumer behavior (and mental health) without our noticing it. Such an insight into a person’s psychology is powerful. It allows firms (and governments) to influence individuals’ behavior using advertising messages especially designed for them as they fit a particular psychological profile. Such a practice can be either beneficial or detrimental. It can (1) entice consumers to buy certain products, (2) provide intervention to help people live healthier and happier lives, or (3) influence swing voters to lean on a particular political party.

Because the insights from digital footprints can be misused, Professor Matz raises a credible concern about the need for individuals to regain control of their digital privacy. She offers solutions such as by changing the privacy default to a stricter one, by shifting responsibilities to firms, and by creating data co-ops.

Through her carefully chosen statistics and stories, Professor Matz successfully crafts a fascinating insight into how Big Data can affect netizens’ lives and prepare them to be more cautious about the digital footprints they leave in public spaces. The book is very easy and fun to read. It will appeal to a broad audience, from the average consumer to industry professionals

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and policymakers. To the average consumer, the book offers a clear, non-technical education on how algorithms “decode” their inner traits, such as personality, political views, and mental health, from their digital footprints. Hence, they can develop a clear and actionable understanding of the digital game, enabling them to make more informed decisions about their privacy and online engagement. To industry professionals such as marketers, product designers, and business leaders, the book provides an insider’s view on the science behind psychological targeting – the engine of modern marketing and product development. It details the power of such a tool in influencing consumer behavior. It is a guide to responsible innovation, i.e., leveraging psychological insights to genuinely help consumers (rather than exploiting consumer vulnerabilities for profit). For policymakers, the book offers a strong argument for the need for better data governance as well as a practical roadmap for regulating the digital world, focusing on collective empowerment and accountability.