

'Data Ethics: The New Competitive Advantage' an urgent yet hopeful plunge into getting information use right

🕒 Nov 29, 2016

📌 Save This ()



Courtney Gabrielson

Nonmember Contributor

(/about/person/0011a00000DIK6nAAF)

I've been doing a lot of reading about [big data](https://iapp.org/news/a/book-review-technology-vs-humanity/) (<https://iapp.org/news/a/book-review-technology-vs-humanity/>) lately (<https://iapp.org/news/a/book-review-networks-of-control/>). While I realize (with relish) that there's always something new to learn about even the most well-trod subjects, I approached "[Data Ethics: The New Competitive Advantage](https://mediamocracy.org/2016/08/20/data-ethics/) (<https://mediamocracy.org/2016/08/20/data-ethics/>)" questioning what else it could possibly say about the subject. "Big data," the concept itself, seems rather unfussy in its complication; ultimately, it's about how to best wield a double-edged sword, right?

"Data Ethics," however, pulled me in immediately, proving resolutely that there was much, much more that I had to learn about big data. Authors Pernille Tranberg and Gry Hasselbalch begin their work addressing me, or rather, "you," the reader, social media user, big data provider, part of the problem and part of the solution. When reading Tranberg and Hasselbalch's work, we are in the driver's seat, and it's important we don't look away.

And there's a lot we readers have to examine.

"Data Ethics" covers everything from "teens want privacy" to the politics of big data, to the history of the banner ad and beyond. The authors pepper each section with insights from heavyweights in the field, (full disclosure: these heavyweights include IAPP CEO J. Trevor Hughes) and additional anecdotal case studies add authority to arguments like "data ethics facilitates trust."

The work succeeds in its even-keeledness. While big data often seems to spark discussions of surveillance, manipulation and abuse, Tranberg and Hasselbalch acknowledge that the concept is not always necessarily synonymous with the Dark Side. Their measured study cites organizations who use widespread data collection with integrity — LEGO, for example — oftentimes adjusting their information collection practices to more greatly benefit their consumers. While the authors do not shirk from the great responsibility associated with the great power of big data and how often companies, even ones with a humanitarian bent, get it wrong, they're hardly advocating hopping into underground bunkers just yet. For all their urgency, there's a sense of hope often lacking in big data discussions. Frankly, it was refreshing to read that the information-overload apocalypse wasn't nigh.

of ethics to tame it.

“No matter how well-intentioned, all promises of customer privacy may come up against some obstacles,” they write. “But the real issue is whether or not the business addresses these issues with due diligence.” This work requires teamwork, they add; developing such a code isn’t a one-wo/man job.

But if their research shows anything, it’s that getting it right is possible, and that this current confusion regarding how to handle big data ethically may just be a symptom of another Industrial Revolution. While the responsibility is scary, it’s also exciting, and we’re here to shoulder it. Thanks to "Data Ethics: The New Competitive Advantage," it feels less of a burden.

© 2022 International Association of Privacy Professionals.
All rights reserved.

Pease International Tradeport, 75 Rochester Ave.
Portsmouth, NH 03801 USA • +1 603.427.9200