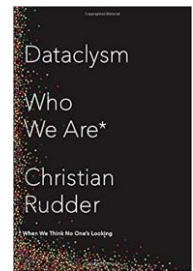


Book Review

By Tazein Fatma

Dataclysm – Who We Are* by Christian Rudder (*When we think no one's looking)

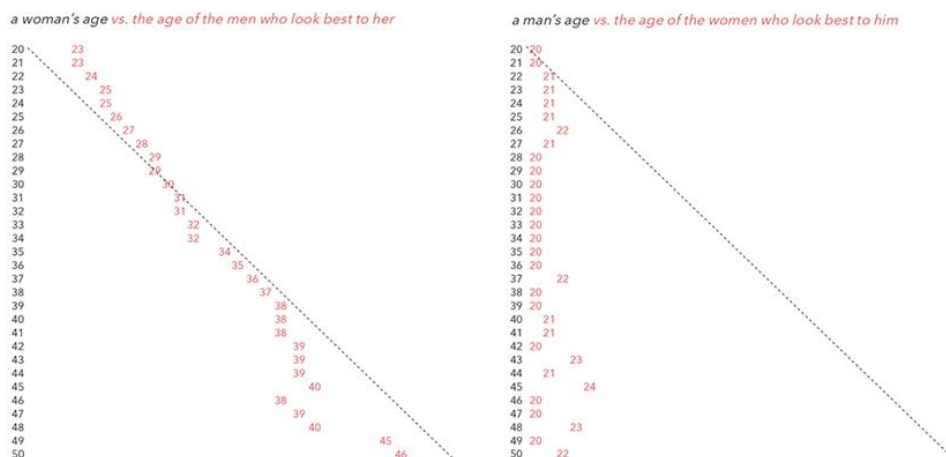


Christian Rudder is the co-founder of the well-known online dating website OkCupid. His book “Dataclysm: Who We Are (When We Think No One’s Looking)” builds upon his popular blog OkTrends which has been running on the website. The blog caters to the website users or anyone curious about online dating. This book on the other hand gives us a peek into human psychology and how data defines us.

Rudder uses OkCupid’s data and ties it with information from Twitter, Google Trends, Facebook and geo-location to develop insights which extend beyond the dating domain and become applicable to the human population in general. This book is a study of human behavior which is derived from the data that users submit to the sites when they think “no one’s looking”. It sometimes enforces our beliefs, surprises us, humbles us and even embarrasses us when we realize that most of us have bias towards gender, race & sexual orientation and that it is deeply ingrained in us. We manage to keep our biases under wraps, but they get exposed when we know no one’s looking.

This book has been packaged into three interesting parts: a) What Brings us together, b) What pulls us apart & c) What makes us who we are. Rudder has used a unique style, where he lays out information about latest trends in social media, a technology or a path-breaking research and then dives with it into OkCupid data and finally emerges out to translate those theories to human behavior. Once you identify this pattern then you look forward to the next topic and wonder what thread would be picked next to weave the story. The book is also replete with beautiful graphs, charts & tables where **red** is used cleverly to highlight the most interesting features in the data. Those who work with data and always look for simple yet powerful ways to present it will appreciate the graphs.

One of the first few graphs in the book blurts out disparity between female & male preferences about each other. Specifically, what ages women prefer their partners to be & vice-versa. The graph shows that as women grow old, the age preference for their partners also keep going up but as men age from 20 to 50 years they all unequivocally want 21-year-old girls. This graph needs to be seen to get a peek of what’s more to come in the book.



Source: pages 34-35

The book starts by answering questions like what your friends say about the stability of your marriage, how Asians (and whites and blacks and Latinos) are least likely to describe themselves, where and why gay people stay in the closet and many such intriguing questions. We get to know that “my blue eyes” is one of the top five phrases that white women/men choose to describe themselves with and Asians use “tall for an Asian” extensively. We learn that a message 40-60 characters long gets the most responses on the dating site and that using the same message for multiple people is 75% as effective as writing an original.

It gets sobering when Rudder lays out preferences of men & women across different races. One expects there will be a bias but that it is so stark is what shocks us. It is observed that Asians, blacks, Latinos mostly prefer their partner to be of same race, whites are easily the second choice, but blacks are least wanted among all races. We then see how the word “nigger” is searched in Google over time, specifically between December 2007 & February 2009. This was the period of Obama’s run for office and the word “nigger” got searched the most on the eve of election day. In Rudder’s words **“You hear a lot about our national conversation on race; when you look at the data, you see it’s really more of a series of national convulsions.”**

Rudder discovers that “good looking” women get more messages on dating sites as well as more job interviews from employers. While men’s looks have no relation to the interview calls they get, the line for men is a dull straight line while the graph for women curves steadily upwards with their attractiveness. Another interesting insight is based on searches for adult content on Google that suggests that almost 5% of people in every state in US are gay and that this number stays consistent from state to state and is not affected by political/religious beliefs. Of course, self-reporting of sexual orientation is lower than 5%. This enforces the book’s theme that what we do when no one’s looking is what really defines us. We give Google more information about us through our searches than we can imagine.

This book is full of such insights and gives us a peek into human behavior through various lenses that Rudder chooses to see the data through. The chapter “Know your place” starts with how in Junior High School, Rudder and his classmates situated themselves near or far from a dumpster based on their “coolness” factor. It then moves on to how on a map people define their own boundaries like Craigslist had carved the country into small zones and Rudder calls it a “Holy Roman Empire of old furniture”. The official boundaries blur into new territories based on preferences, beliefs and habits as trivial as “taking a shower”. Maps superimposed with data tell a different story.

There are some stories that are not quite unique and have been told many times in data related sessions, like the story of the dad whose teen daughter received pregnancy related messages from Target. But apart from few such instances the rest of the book is successful in presenting insights that make the book an interesting read. This book could have been a boring read about numbers, but Rudder’s use of massive data complimented with his humorous and at times self-deprecating style, maintains the pace of the book and keeps it enjoyable. If you like Malcom Gladwell’s “Tipping Point”, “Outliers” and similar books then you need to add this book to your reading list. Rudder himself mentions that “Outliers was focused on fringes, exceptions or one-offs while Dataclysm focusses on dense clusters and centers of mass. This book is about the whole and not one fractional part of us.”

Sources:

Book Image source: <https://www.amazon.com/Dataclysm-When-Think-Ones-Looking/dp/0385347375/>

Graphs source : Pages 34-35 of the book.