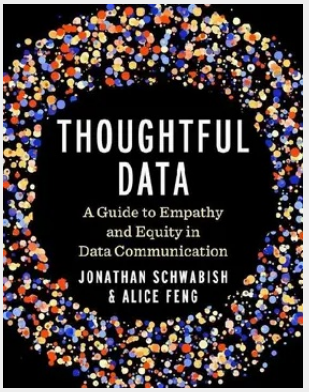
Schwabish / Feng

Thoughtful Data

A Guide to Empathy and Equity in Data Communication



Data shape how we understand the world—and how the world treats people. Yet data are never neutral. From redlining maps that entrenched racial segregation to charts that quietly reinforce stereotypes, the ways data are collected, analyzed, and visualized can produce real and lasting harm. Thoughtful Data is a guide to practicing data work ethically, empathetically, and inclusively. Drawing on interviews with nearly 150 experts across research, journalism, design, data science, and policy, Jonathan Schwabish and Alice Feng argue that foregrounding equity is not at odds with rigor but is essential to it. They invite readers to reconsider the everyday decisions embedded in data projects—from language choices and category definitions to visual defaults and framing—and to reflect on how those decisions affect the people represented in the data and those who consume it. Thoughtful Data provides a framework for critical thinking and intentional practice across the full data lifecycle: collection, analysis, and communication. It situates data visualization within broader debates about equity, trust, power, and accountability while remaining practical and accessible to nonspecialists. This book equips readers with the tools to recognize bias, question defaults, engage communities, and communicate in ways that respect human dignity—helping ensure that data are used not just accurately but responsibly.

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