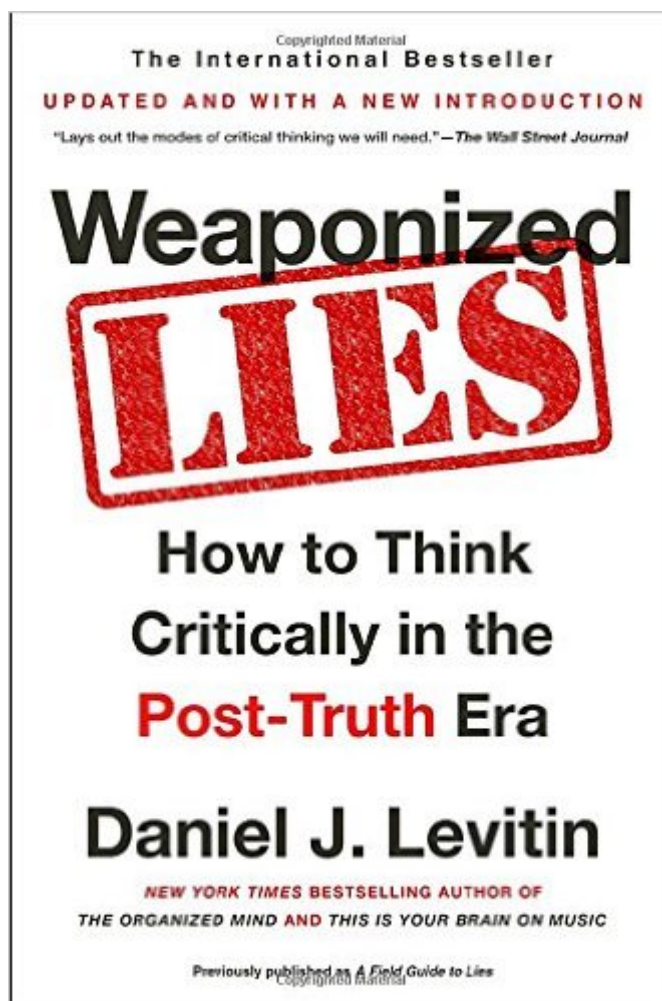


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# Weaponized Lies: How To Think Critically In The Post-Truth Era



## Synopsis

Previously Published as *A Field Guide to Lies* We're surrounded by fringe theories, fake news, and pseudo-facts. These lies are getting repeated. New York Times bestselling author Daniel Levitin shows how to disarm these socially devastating inventions and get the American mind back on track. Here are the fundamental lessons in critical thinking that we need to know and share now. Investigating numerical misinformation, Daniel Levitin shows how mishandled statistics and graphs can give a grossly distorted perspective and lead us to terrible decisions. Wordy arguments on the other hand can easily be persuasive as they drift away from the facts in an appealing yet misguided way. The steps we can take to better evaluate news, advertisements, and reports are clearly detailed. Ultimately, Levitin turns to what underlies our ability to determine if something is true or false: the scientific method. He grapples with the limits of what we can and cannot know. Case studies are offered to demonstrate the applications of logical thinking to quite varied settings, spanning courtroom testimony, medical decision making, magic, modern physics, and conspiracy theories. This urgently needed book enables us to avoid the extremes of passive gullibility and cynical rejection. As Levitin attests: Truth matters. A post-truth era is an era of willful irrationality, reversing all the great advances humankind has made. Euphemisms like "fringe theories," "extreme views," "alt truth," and even "fake news" can literally be dangerous. Let's call lies what they are and catch those making them in the act.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2016 Mavis Gallant Prize for Nonfiction One of Hudson Booksellers' Best Business

Interest Books of 2016

“Daniel Levitin’s field guide is a critical-thinking primer for our shrill, data-drenched age. It’s an essential tool for really understanding the texts, posts, tweets, magazines, newspapers, podcasts, op-eds, interviews, and speeches that bombard us every day. From the way averages befuddle to the logical fallacies that sneak by us, every page is enlightening.”

—Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit* and *Smarter, Faster, Better*

“The world is awash with data, but not always with accurate information. *A Field Guide to Lies* does a terrific job of illustrating the difference between the two with precision and delightful good humor.”

—Charles Wheelan, senior lecturer and Policy Fellow, Rockefeller Center, Dartmouth College, author of *Naked Economics*

“*A Field Guide to Lies* by the neuroscientist Daniel Levitin lays out the many ways in which each of us can be fooled and misled by numbers and logic, as well as the modes of critical thinking we will need to overcome this.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Mr Levitin is the perfect guide. If everyone could adopt the level of healthy statistical scepticism that Mr Levitin would like, political debate would be in much better shape.”

—*The Economist*

“Valuable tools for anyone willing to evaluate claims and get to the truth of the matter.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“An essential guide for finding what’s real amid the daily proliferation of texts, tweets and skewed stats, with smart tips for sharpening critical thinking skills.”

—*The San Jose Mercury News*

“This useful, entertaining, and highly readable guide is ready to arm everyday citizens with the tools to combat the spread of spurious, and often ridiculous, information.”

—*Library Journal*

“[A] book you may want to have close by at all times.”

—*Success Magazine*

“[*A Field Guide to Lies*] serves as a kind of Strunk and White for sloppy thinkers.”

—*New York Journal of Books*

“Entertaining and filled with helpful hints, *A Field Guide to Lies* is a valuable tool for navigating the daily data onslaught.”

—*San Jose Mercury News*

“Smart and humorous....The tools anyone needs to tell good information from bad are in this definitive guide to critical thinking.”

—*Shelf Awareness*

“Exceptional...practical and essential advice.”

—*Big Think*

“An entertaining, user-friendly primer on evaluating data wisely.”

—*The Washington Independent Review of Books*

“Everybody who cross-examines witnesses should read this book.”

—Justice Patricia Rowbotham, Alberta Court of Appeal, Calgary

“This is a wonderful book. It covers so many of the insights of science, logic, and statistics that the public needs to know, yet are sadly neglected in the education that most of us receive.”

—Edward K. Cheng, Tarkington Chair of Teaching Excellence and professor of law at Vanderbilt Law School

“Hits on the most important issues around statistical literacy, and uses good examples to illustrate its points. I could not put this book down. Reading it has been a pleasure, believe me. I am so impressed with Levitin’s writing style, which is clear and simple, unlike

much of the murky stuff that is written by statisticians and many others.âââ "Morris Olitsky, former vice president, Market Research and Analysis, Prudential Financial; statistician, USDAâ "Insightful and entertainingâ "an excellent work.ââ "Gregg Gascon, Biomedical Informatics, the Ohio State Universityâ "Just as Strunk and White taught us how to communicate better, *A Field Guide to Lies* is an indispensable guide to thinking better. As Big Data becomes a dominant theme in our culture, we are all obliged to sharpen our critical thinking so as to thwart the forces of obfuscation. Levitin has done a great service here.ââ "Jasper Rine, professor of Genetics, Genomics, and Development, UC Berkeleyâ "Not since Huff's classic *How to Lie with Statistics* has a book so clearly described how numbers can be used to deceive and misdirect. Levitin shows how to critically evaluate claims that charlatans, the media, and politicians would have us believe.ââ "Stan Lazic, team leader in quantitative biology at AstraZenecaâ "A must read! Professor Levitin convinces the reader why critical thinking has become even more crucial in the Information Age. As we are consistently bombarded with information, let's question its veracity and acquire the tools to analyze it.ââ "Isabelle Bajeux-Besnainou, dean and professor of finance, Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill Universityâ "No book could be more timely. An important book for everyone to read. Essential to where western democracies are going.ââ "Janice Stein, Founding Director, Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Torontoâ "Well researched, and provides a valuable guide to assist the public with a methodology for evaluating the truth behind this cacophony of information that constantly inundates.ââ "Patrick Martin, magicianâ "[A] valuable primer on critical thinking that convincingly illustrates the prevalence of misinformation in everyday life.ââ "Publishers Weeklyâ "Mr Levitin is the perfect guide...If everyone could adopt the level of healthy statistical scepticism that Mr Levitin would like, political debate would be in much better shape.ââ "The Economistâ "Levitin belongs to a best-selling group of expertsâ "Daniel Kahneman, Gerd Gigerenzer, David Spiegelhalter, and a few moreâ "who want to put us right on the pitfalls of dubious statistics and the various forms of bias that skew our decisions...There can hardly be a more important message at this moment in history, and until everyone gets it, all are welcome to keep pumping it out and Levitin is perhaps *primus inter pares*...His message is bracing...[and] all we have to guard against a new Dark Age.ââ "The Arts Desk

Daniel J. Levitin, Ph.D., is Founding Dean of Arts & Humanities at the Minerva Schools at KGI, a Distinguished Faculty Fellow at the Haas School of Business, UC Berkeley, and the James McGill Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Music at McGill University, Montreal, where he also holds appointments in the Program in Behavioural Neuroscience, The School of Computer Science, and

the Faculty of Education. An award-winning scientist and teacher, he now adds best-selling author to his list of accomplishments as *This Is Your Brain on Music*, *The World in Six Songs* and *The Organized Mind* were #1 best-sellers. His work has been translated into 21 languages. Before becoming a neuroscientist, he worked as a session musician, sound engineer, and record producer working with artists such as Stevie Wonder and Blue Oyster Cult. He has published extensively in scientific journals as well as music magazines such as *Grammy* and *Billboard*. Recent musical performances include playing guitar and saxophone with Sting, Bobby McFerrin, Rosanne Cash, David Byrne, Cris Williamson, Victor Wooten, and Rodney Crowell.

I have read numerous books on this subject. Many of them have too many errors, focus on trivial considerations or arcane mathematical technicalities, and few cover the important subject of applying critical thinking not only to numbers but words (logic, reasoning protocol, etc.). Given that, this is one of the very best books on the topic I have read yet. I really liked the author splitting his subject in three main categories: 1) evaluating numbers; 2) evaluating words; 3) how the scientific method works. Each section covers its respective subject in a thorough and entertaining way. Within the evaluating numbers section the author covers all the ways in which visual quantitative data (graphs) can fool you. You really have to watch very carefully the scale of the X- and Y-axes to understand if someone is trying to trick you. The author does a good job of explaining the difference between correlation and causation (and how not to confuse the two). He also warns you not to confuse what is tested as statistically significant and yet can be immaterial (small differences pop up as statistically significant that have little bearing on the outcome when you have very large samples). The author also warns against extrapolating trends especially when you go outside the boundaries of the variable values you observed within the learning sample of your data set. The author covers well the various biases and errors that can affect sampling (participation bias, reporting bias, etc.). The chapter on probabilities is excellent with a well-defined differentiation between classic probabilities, frequentist probabilities, and Bayesian probabilities. Within the evaluating words section, the author warns about understanding the actual domain narrowness of experts. He does a good job of explaining the difference between incidence and prevalence rate. He provides a very good coverage on behavioral risk perception that is so detached from probabilistic thinking. Within the scientific method section, the author defines the different types of reasoning (deduction, induction, abduction). He also covers logic and logic notation. He also covers in greater detail Bayesian statistics. The latter is a subject that permeates every section of the book. And, he does a good job of explaining Bayes thanks to his four-quadrant framework that is really helpful in

calculating the related Bayesian statistics. The author makes just one small error where he confuses R Square with R (correlation). R Square explains how much the variance in one variable can be explained by the other variable. Meanwhile, R simply tells you the strength and the direction of the relationship between those two variables. Also, remember R is often negative (so the explanation bit here not only is wrong but is divergent) meanwhile R Square can't be negative by definition. This is a minor typo. I know the author knows that stuff. One math typo in a 250-page book is far better than most books on the subject.

For anyone about to start University this is a must have primer. Levitin writes in such an easy going way that you can see him smiling as he provides examples to explain hard ideas in a simple, clear manner. If you find stats and research methods confusing or daunting this is for you. At the same time, as consumer of information everyone of us should be acquainted with the ideas and insights Levitin provides. We would be less likely to fall for the poor analysis and down-right nonsense that characterizes so much of the information we consume today. Who knows... if we up our game, maybe journalists/pundits/bloggers will be forced to up theirs!

An outstanding overview of critical thinking. A (relatively) short read but it does get the brain cells cranked up. You can't just breeze through it; you have to think and that's what makes it great.

Thoughts on Levitin's *Weaponized Lies* & *A Field Guide to Lies* - Good reads on how statistics can deceive  
With great interest, I read Daniel Levitin's recent books "*Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era*" and "*A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking in the Information Age*." Both of these books give a good primer to deal with statistics, going over such things in detail such as Bayesian analysis in terms of a 2x2 table. Levitin also talks a bit about how people sort the truth by simply making false graphs with unlabeled axes or how there are more subtle aspects such as subtly changing the denominator (eg when talking about individuals versus families). Altogether I found these extremely useful reads. One thing that was a little troublesome to me was that they were fairly similar books. I think it does make sense for the author to repurpose his text into more current times where we talk about fake news and so forth but I still found the overlap between the two books disconcerting.

Levitin's premise is simple: the world today offers an abundance of information. What used to take hours or days to dig up using traditional research now takes moments. We need to reinvest a bit of

that time saved into thinking critically about the information we consume. This book offers guidelines to sifting through irrelevant data, pseudo-science and self-proclaimed experts. I'd love to see this book as part of a high school curriculum, to arm the next generation with the skills they need. The primer on Bayesian thinking is worth studying and keeping.

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