

JLSC

ISSN 2162-3309 | JLSC is published by the Iowa State University Digital Press | <http://jpsc-pub.org>

Volume 11, 1 (2023)

Brief Reviews of Books and Products

Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information

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Blessinger, K. (2023). Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information [Brief Reviews of Books and Products]. *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*, 11(1), eP16306. <https://doi.org/10.31274/jpsc.16306>



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BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND PRODUCTS

Book review: Lamdan, S. (2022). *Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information*. Stanford University Press. 224 pp. ISBN 9781503633711, 26.00 USD (paperback), ISBN 9781503633728 (e-book).

Each chapter in *Data Cartels: The Companies that Control and Monopolize our Information* focuses on how data analytics companies operate in varied information silos to gather, synthesize, and profit from our personal data. The audience for this well-researched book are those interested in data collection/usage and privacy. The author, Sarah Lamdan, is currently a professor at the City University of New York School of Law. Prior to this, she was a law librarian for over a decade. She drew on her experience in these two professional positions, as well as her perspective as a law student, to write this work. Since Lamdan is a US citizen, the United States is the main geographical location that centers in this book.

This book has three main arguments, the first pertaining to personal data privacy. Users of commercial electronic resources such as Google or Amazon may be aware that they are trading some privacy for convenience. However, while working as a law librarian, Lamdan discovered that the producers of the two databases largely considered the “gold standard” (p. ix) in legal research, RELX’s LexisNexis and Thomson Reuters’ Westlaw, were heavily invested in personal data analytics. This is defined as information tied to individuals that includes a variety of details including current address, arrest records, land ownership, social media interactions, religious and political affiliations, and so on.

Lexis and Westlaw are indoctrinated into future attorneys’ lives because law schools are required to train students to use legal databases. Lamdan states that there are currently no other comparable products that can compete with these two major players. When students and researchers use these systems to access scholarship and laws, they are tracked in ways that would have been impossible in the print market. Scholars are often forced to allow cookie trackers to access materials in databases. These tracking data are used to ensure adherence to contracts. Additionally, “When we do research online, every click, mouse move, and search we enter can be recorded and traced” (p. 57). This allows these companies to compile these data and to profit by selling them as separate academic metrics analysis products.

The second argument that Lamdan voices is that institutional data brokering disproportionately affects those with the least agency. This includes racialized groups who have been



historically over-policed in the United States and those who need governmental assistance requiring personal data. These individuals are reported into these systems at a higher rate than individuals who do not face these inequities. Additionally, the products that dominate legal research organize their information on biased historic classification systems that align with 19th-century worldviews. The classification that runs through Westlaw was “developed by John B. West’s 1800’s-era legal classification system... that institutionalizes the white, male, heteronormative, upper-class, able bodied, and politically conservative perspective” (p. 76). This information is then layered beneath artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and algorithms, which are also prejudiced by the human developers who train the programs. RELX and Thomson Reuters specialize in institutional data brokering, i.e., the practice of selling data about individuals to government agencies and institutions that provide essential services such as health care and insurance. These include personal dossiers created to determine individual risk levels for loans and the potential for criminal behaviors. Both RELX and Thomson Reuters have identifiers in their risk analytics products that function similarly to social security numbers. The US government is one of the largest clients of the personal dossiers that these companies create.

Lamdan’s third argument is that regulations and laws in the United States lag far behind the pace of technology. She contends that US governmental engagement is necessary to control the power that these companies have. Governments need to pass regulations and laws to protect the private information of their citizens. Legislation could include requiring data analytics companies to provide citizens with access to their dossiers with the ability to correct false information. Although other countries have passed laws such as these, the United States has not. Lamdan considers the companies RELX and Thomson Reuters to be “cartels” because they are “taking over the market for different categories of information and exploiting their stronghold on multiple information sectors to amass more power and profit” (p. 2). These companies also employ aggressive business tactics, including the takeover of smaller competitors and the exploitation of customers. Both companies spend millions on lobbying and supporting technology-friendly candidates in US elections. Monopolies are viewed negatively, and the US government has historically stepped in to break them up. They are undesirable because they limit competitive pricing, innovation, and options for end users.

RELX and Thomson Reuters have been able to obscure their involvement with personal/governmental data analytics in part by having information silos in a variety of sectors. Although academic librarians are familiar with these vendors’ scholarly databases, the data analytics and brokering component of their work will likely be surprising and off-putting to many. Lamdan meets her goals of explaining the business and issues of data analytics in a clear and readable manner, including an index of key terms. This book could be used not only to spread awareness but also to serve as a catalyst to engage information professionals,

their organizations, citizens, and governments toward more regulation. She argues that all new communications technology, even the printing press and radio, at first seemed too wrapped in mystery to control. However, since these tools were created by humans, they can also be regulated by humans.

Lamdan's extensive background with US law and legal resources make her an ideal figure to discuss the problems that can occur when just a few major players monopolize a market and when the US government is slow to react. The comparison of these companies to monopolies and cartels could also be applied to scholarly publishers who charge exorbitant costs for journals. Existing laws are not a good fit for these new problems. The first step toward addressing this is a broader awareness that personal data collection is ongoing. Lamdan's book does an excellent job in alerting us to the issues posed by new data technology.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kelly Blessinger is the Head of Access Services at the Louisiana State University Libraries. She has been an academic librarian for over 20 years.