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Book Review: Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information

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Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information, edited by Sarah Lamdan, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022, 224 pp., \$26, ISBN 978-1-5036-3371-1

Introduction

The word ‘cartel’ often conjures a definition focusing on price fixing and production manipulation to increase profits and reduce competition. When used in the context of the critical information that governs our lives and personal and private behavior, the term ‘cartel’ takes on a more sinister aspect with shades of ethical impropriety.

Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information is a full expository on information cartels controlling the prices of the different types of data: personal data, academic research, legal information, financial data, and news.

The author - a law professor and a former law librarian - specializes in data privacy and information access, among other areas. Her book takes us inside these cartels’ free-for-all realm, showing how they collect, commodify, and monetize our informational and data assets. These cartels are responsible for reinforcing social inequality and threatening democratic knowledge exchange.

Scope

Lamdan has dedicated her book to “library workers everywhere.” This dedication is an appropriate description of the book’s intended audience. Academic librarians will gravitate toward her chapter on academic research, law librarians on legal information, and business librarians toward her chapter on financial data. Public librarians serving a diverse community will find salient points from all chapters, especially the news chapter, with patrons often encountering news paywalls.

Lamdan illustrates her arguments with comprehensive examples, including many consortium-led negotiations involving libraries and vendors and any accompanying lawsuits. Discussions include all perspectives and aspects of the prevailing injustice. For instance, she brings up the dimensions of cost and pricing, the length of contracts and agreements, bundling practices, and the nondisclosure and confidentiality clauses embedded in such arrangements. Should you need any supporting evidence for building your arguments on a data cartel in our midst, Lamdan’s book is the perfect recipe book (with no photographs). It is succinct at about 200 pages.

Organization and Content

This book starts with two chapters introducing and explaining the scope of a data cartel and data brokering. Four types of information are elaborated on in the following chapters: academic research, legal information, financial information, and news.

Lamdan does an admirable but thankless job summarizing each information industry's key players. She has named RELX's Elsevier, Clarivate Plc, and their products in her academic research chapter; the duopoly of RELX's LexisNexis and Thomson Reuters Corp' Westlaw in her legal information chapter; major players Bloomberg L.P. and Refinitiv (now part of London Stock Exchange Group plc) in her financial data chapter.

Lamdan provides a rich historical context on how we (in the U.S.) found ourselves in this financial data oligopoly nightmare scenario. Her financial information chapter is not simply listing vendors and introducing "who's who." This same approach is used in other chapters, for example, providing an excellent summary of how U.S. news broadcasters are funded and the privatization of news products.

In addition, specific themes emerge across her chapters, such as the unsavory practice of selling consumer data. Data brokers use trackers found in many news websites to sell our consumer behavior and habits, manifesting in this sinister data surveillance environment.

She concludes positively by offering solutions in her final chapter, expanding on concepts many librarians are familiar with: (1) open access for academic research, (2) treating data companies as public utilities or public infrastructure, and (3) regulating the industry.

The author urges the creation of a digital infrastructure that upholds our democratic ideals and specific legislative and market-based solutions that recognize information as a public good. She argues that information should be a public good. She spells out particular scenarios in which we can work to achieve this vision. As a law librarian herself, Lamdan is familiar with the excellent and exceptional work that libraries are doing to combat such cartels. Linda Hall Library in Kansas City, Missouri, is described as almost like a mirage in an informational desert. It continues to maintain an accessible print collection despite an increasingly digitized environment of born-digital scientific research articles.

An extensive bibliography (under the Notes chapter) accompanies many concepts and examples she mentions throughout the book. Lamdan captures archived records of important online articles with Perma.cc. She does not shy away from citing law cases. In addition, sources include governmental bodies such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulating what constitutes a monopoly or duopoly. She also quotes sources familiar to business librarians, such as an IBISWorld report on the market size of online legal services in the U.S.

Evaluation

A handful of firms dominate most of our critical informational resources. Business librarians are familiar with mergers between commercial database vendors. Such a phenomenon reflects the existence of information oligopolies that overwhelm our library budgets. For example, the creation of S&P Global Inc. resulted from McGraw Hill Financial, Inc. acquiring SNL Financial LC. Their merger with IHS Markit Ltd. concluded recently. Similarly, the London

Stock Exchange Group (LSEG) acquired significant entities in Frank Russell Company, Mergent Inc., and Refinitiv.

As librarians, we advocate that information is king. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to claim that such data cartels restrict the free flow of knowledge with their control over data. Lamdan notes that their actions are authorized, even if it increases digital racism, target underprivileged communities, and disseminates private data to predatory organizations. The author is deliberate in her language, using phrases such as “walled-garden financial information” that we can relate to, similar to the walled garden of Facebook, a journal publisher, or many major U.S. news publishers. Again, librarians - especially those in higher education - are most familiar with the predatory type, having encountered predatory journals.

I salute Lamdan for tackling a powerful, intimidating ecosystem undergoing rapid change and disruption. Several pages focus on the use of artificial intelligence by RELX to generate analytics and insights. Indeed, the explosive nature of OpenAI and its many forms, such as Dall-E 2 for images and ChatGPT for content creation, happened immediately after the book’s publication.

Lamdan’s work is groundbreaking yet intimately familiar to us in the librarian profession. We are acutely aware of such anti-competitive, cartel-like behavior from the vendors. Yet, we struggle with how best to communicate when operating in such an environment - like a family secret that others outside our profession might have difficulty understanding. Her bold approach breaks down the barrier and serves as a metaphorical lighthouse to our work. It gives us a reason to recommend her book to library advocates so that they can realize how these companies are operating in the informational capitalism age. This book should be required reading for all librarians who advocate that information is power.

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