

Data Cartels, by Sarah Lamdan

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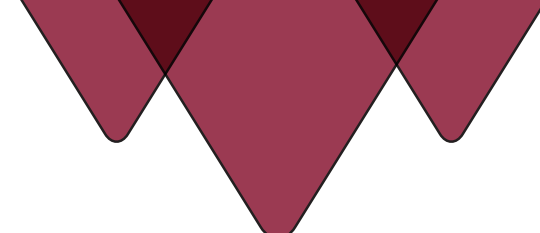
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Book Review: *Data Cartels*

Lamdan, Sarah. *Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize our Information*. Stanford University Press, 2022, 224pp, \$26.00.

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Keywords: *capitalism · markets · open access · service providers*

You already know the story this book tells. Seemingly every year the pool of different vendors offering services that your library licenses decreases ever so slightly. For instance, a society announces their journals will now be hosted on a publisher platform, publisher platforms consolidate in the same way media companies merge, and announcements that multinational Library service providers have 'pivoted' to offer data analytics services are now business as usual.

This book chronicles one dimension of this new reality and describes the lead-up and consequence of the creation of Reed-Elsevier-LexisNexis (RELX). Over the course of 6 chapters and conclusion, Lamdan describes the forces at odds with one another and what is at stake for purveyors and consumers of modern information goods and services. RELX is the multinational hydra that maintains a chokehold on five important information markets: data brokering, academic research, legal information, financial information, and news. The term cartel carries with it some illicit connotations that conjure up images of criminal organizations trafficking across international borders. The way in which Lamdan substantiates this is by alluding to harms created to the marketplace when consolidation funnels distribution to a single vendor. Price fixing and non-disclosure agreements allow RELX to set their own price effectively capturing the market. Here Lamdan uses the convenient examples of Canadian maple syrup production and OPEC as fully legal entities that nevertheless have a full run on what they charge customers for their products. Or put in other words, by having such monopolistic control over these different markets, RELX can effectively set the going price of information necessary for modern life. In effect, operating in plain sight as a cartel. Of the different captured markets described in the book the one perhaps most controlled is that of legal information. In this case



the duopoly that provides the lion's share of legal data (Westlaw from Thompson Reuters and Lexis from RELX) are sometimes the only places where certain decisions can be found—including those of the Supreme Court, that presumably should be available to all. This clearly creates a barrier where only well-funded law offices have access to the basic tools that are needed to meaningfully participate in court proceeding.

Throughout the text, Lamdan describes compelling case studies of where our values as Library workers are in direct conflict with what our service providers are doing. For instance, chapter 2 describes the case of RELX providing information to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is a startling example of this. By drawing on a seemingly bottomless well of sources RELX combines disparate bits of information and provides customs officials near precise location details of where to scoop up the undocumented. The work of #NoTechForICE in drawing attention to this collaboration and resisting it should not be overlooked (“#NoTechForICE” n.d.). Another illustrative example is the concentration of local news sources discussed in chapter 6. Once government protections of news sources started to lose their potency during a marked transition from protected public goods in the late 1990's a switch to news as source of profit was inevitable and swiftly realized. To illustrate the impact of loss of local coverage the tragedy at Minot, Texas is recounted. In 2002, a dangerous chemical spill threatened to harm the city of Minot; meanwhile, the local radio station was unable to change programming to feature alerts and other crucial information as they were taken over by Clear Channel and no programming decisions were able to be made locally. According to reports over a thousand people were injured in the ensuing chaos.

This progression towards monopoly is not a feature of modern capitalism. Early work from Marx published in 1847 takes as inevitable capital's move to monopoly (Marx, 1963) Marx's early work (1847) takes capital's move towards monopoly as an inevitability (Marx, 1963). What perhaps makes this more prescient for us as professional librarians is that this is not the only corner of Library service providers that are congealing into a single entity. The merger chart of library service provider amalgamations that features in Marshall Breeding's Library Technology Guides gets more frighteningly narrow with every year. Once a colourful cacophony of multiple different vendors it is quickly careening to a future where a few (or singular) entities will own and offer all services (Breeding, n.d.).

Lamdan concludes with an appeal to three strategies that might just stem the tide: Open Access, treating data companies as public utilities, and regulation. All very reasonable and easy to imagine in practice but practically challenging to implement in today's neoliberal political landscape. Open access of course is the explicit

conferring of a permissible copyright licence to material, something well familiar to librarianship. Public utility classification as a strategy would stabilise prices and ensure consistent access to vital information. Finally, with regulation, the result is a market that works inside of parameters explicitly set by the government for the best interest of all peoples. Here is perhaps the one criticism that can be levied against this book: The suggested remedies are all found in the final chapter that clocks in at merely 24 pages in length. More examples of success stories of resistance to date and more sophisticated treatment of how to implement these remedies would propel this book into even a higher echelon. Perhaps these things can only truly be realized by those of us that have read this book and are moved to action.

In this spirit of strategies to resist, we can look to some examples of successes that Canadian academic librarianship has accomplished, somewhat recently, in this struggle against monopoly. Consider the theses we had converted to microfiche and sent along to ProQuest in order for us simply to buy back access through the ProQuest Dissertations and Abstracts database. Now every graduate degree granting institution in this country has a free, publicly accessible repository that gives away this content to everyone all over the world. The ScholarsPortal Journal and EBook platforms many of us rely on for our work are also stellar examples of breaking the chokehold: their content is locally loaded and (in most cases) purchased in perpetuity, housed on infrastructure run and developed by the profession.

This book needs to be adopted as part of the canon of the profession. It brings clear evidence to bear and articulates the conundrums we face daily in an almost matter of fact way. If you have spent any time working in a library, academic or otherwise, you will have certainly seen the slow and steady drift toward monopolisation of all the content that we lease. What is refreshing is that this is written in such a way that those outside of librarianship will be compelled by the stories that it tells. Next time a friend says “it must be nice to read all day ” lend them your dog-eared copy of this book so that they understand first-hand where the war is being fought.

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