RECORD ABSTRACT ARTICLE

Data Cartels: the Companies that Control and Monopolize our Information, Sarah Lamdan

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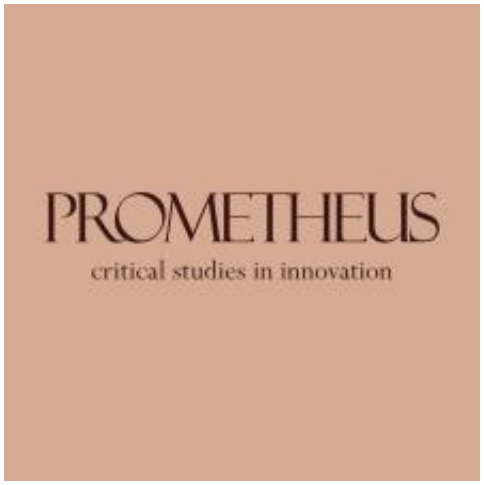
Publication date Pub: 6 March 2024
Journal: Prometheus
Publisher: Pluto Journals



Main article text

Data Cartels: the Companies that Control and Monopolize our Information, Sarah Lamdan (2022) 222pp., $US26 paperback, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, ISBN 9781503633711

In *Data Cartels*, Sarah Lamdan addresses the power of a few corporations over information in several domains. Her analysis is directly relevant to the experience of *Prometheus* with its previous publisher, Taylor & Francis (T&F). Stuart Macdonald, general editor of *Prometheus*, organized a forum on shaken baby syndrome (SBS). A lead article by Waney Squier was arranged and then a range of respondents, of which I was one, offered their thoughts on, and analyses of, Squier's article and SBS issues more generally. This tried-and-true approach to intellectual engagement is especially illuminating when diverse perspectives are involved. SBS is a controversial topic, but then so are many issues addressed by *Prometheus* contributors. For some reason, T&F raised a never-ending series of ever-changing objections to the SBS forum. Stuart found it outrageous that a publisher would interfere with the freedom to express views on a controversial topic when there was no specific concern about legal risks.

The impasse was only resolved by *Prometheus* moving to a different publisher, Pluto. The SBS forum was published, first on the platform Researchers.One (Macdonald *et al.*, 2019) and then on the new Pluto site. There was no legal calamity. T&F acted as a censor, with arbitrary power (Macdonald, 2020). T&F publishes over 2,500 academic journals. It is a massive operation, shaping the paths of a great many scholars. Yet rather than operating with the highest of scholarly principles, its greatest loyalty is to corporate goals. How can we understand what is driving T&F and other companies like it? Lamdan provides relevant insights. She examines the role of data companies, specifically RELX and Thomson Reuters, that play an outsized role in several

domains but whose activities are little known. For their relevance to the *Prometheus* experience, we can immediately turn to Chapter 3, 'Academic research'.

Profiting from others' research outputs

Lamdan focuses on just one of the major academic publishers, Elsevier, owned by RELX, but her analysis applies to others, including T&F. Here in a nutshell is Lamdan's analysis:

Elsevier is reducing publicly funded science into fodder for RELX's data analytics software. Instead of focusing on selling critical scientific information at an affordable price, the company is concentrating on developing software that sifts through the company's 'vast corpus' of academic data to draw 'insights' from – and monetize – the entire research process. (p.51)

We may think of Elsevier, T&F *et al.* as publishers because that is how most academics interact with them. Lamdan shows that they are more than this and are better thought of as data companies. In the academic side of their operations, they manage scholarly materials, but do not add any intellectual content. By gaining control, through copyright, of vast quantities of academic content, the companies seek to extract maximum profits. As Lamdan puts it:

But when you're a for-profit analytics company that sees academic content as a stockpile of raw materials instead of as individual human insights, you'll try to squeeze as much profit as possible from your digital collections. (p.53)

The result is high prices to obtain published material. For those without access to databases, the prices of individual articles are exorbitant. Academics can turn to university libraries for access, little realizing the high prices paid to companies. Lamdan reveals a little-known fact: the price a library pays for access to a database is not fixed, but is subject to negotiation. Some universities pay more than others, and the differences do not correspond to enrolments. But often university librarians don't know what others pay because Elsevier requires the signing of confidentiality agreements, and even when librarians do know what others pay, they may be afraid to say anything about it, fearing retaliation from Elsevier.

I was familiar with exploitation by academic publishers. They rely on the free labour of authors, reviewers and editors, and then sell the results of this labour back to the same intellectual workers and their employers for a never-ending income stream. That's bad enough. I learn from Lamdan that there's more to the exploitation story. Elsevier *et al.* are in the business of data analytics, using the vast quantities of information under their control to produce more information, and sell it.

There's another angle to database collections, which is most obvious in the case of books. Many publishers make it difficult to access copies of the pdf of the whole book. The reason is obvious enough: readers might share it with others. Horrors! Someone might be able to read an expensive book without paying, or without their institution paying. So, the publishers allow downloads of only a limited number of pages at a time. Some of them put online versions in formats that don't correspond to the pages in the print copy, making life difficult for scrupulous authors who give page numbers for quotations and citations. Unfortunately, most academics are complicit in this exploitative system. They would rather publish in a high-prestige journal owned by Elsevier or Sage or whoever than in a free open-access journal like *Prometheus.* As Lamdan explains:

Ridiculous or not, so long as academia depends on journal prestige to make hiring and tenure decisions, academics will continue to publish in Springer, Elsevier, Wiley, Sage, and Taylor & Francis's most prestigious journals despite the companies' exploitative contract requirements. (p.62)

Rather than using its windfall profits to benefit the scholarly community, Elsevier *et al.* use them for developing data analytics products. Have you ever used one of the ranking tools such as Scopus? Counting citations is big business. Many editors adopt dubious practices, for example encouraging contributors to cite other articles in their journals, thereby improving their journal's impact score. The higher the score, the more academics feel they must aim to publish there, reinforcing the grip of Elsevier *et al.* over academic work. On several occasions, I've witnessed an editor attempt to increase the prestige of a professional-society journal by requesting a big-name publisher like Elsevier take it over, making the journal inaccessible to writers and readers outside the academic system. As the open-access movement gained support, big publishers responded by offering open access – at a price, such as €3,000 per article. Who pays? Usually the author's institution, meaning that once again independent scholars are excluded. The publishers offer this expensive open access so that scholars will continue to treat their journals as the place to be.

Lamdan tells how publisher dominance influences decisions over what research areas to investigate by putting the most prestigious journals at the top of their ranking algorithms, so scholars feel they need to publish there to obtain jobs and grants. Lamdan suggests that 'The algorithms will likely also favor the types of tech and pharmaceutical research likely to make money instead of research that isn't so lucrative' (p.64). Lamdan tells the story of Sci-Hub, a website hosting thousands of papers that are free to access. Elsevier sued the researcher who set up the site. However, Lamdan doesn't discuss a different method of resistance: authors putting their publications on academia.edu, researchgate.net or an institutional repository, making their works available outside journal paywalls. It might be argued that this workaround doesn't seriously hurt the publishers but just lets authors feel like they're doing the right thing while still seeking a place in high-status journals. Other authors take a more principled stand, publishing only in no-fee open-access journals, but this is a minority position.

Legal and other information

The story of Elsevier *et al.* is just one of several case studies presented by Lamdan. The others are legal information, financial information, news and data brokering. The same two companies, RELX and Thomson Reuters, feature in each one. You might imagine that laws and court decisions should be in the public domain. They are outputs from the government, and citizens are supposed to obey the law. But in the US, the two companies have a stranglehold over the practical use of legal information. Two databases are widely used: Lexis, produced by RELX, and Westlaw, a product of Thomson Reuters. They provide legal information with commentaries and are easier to use than governments' own publications, which are slow to be published and difficult to navigate. As expected, there are problems arising from the dominance of Lexis and Westlaw by lawyers, stemming from the companies prioritizing profit over service. The legal information market is dominated by the duopoly, and competitors don't stand a chance, being harassed by legal actions. Even when competitors have won in court, legal costs have wrecked their businesses. The same sorts of stories apply to financial information and news. The dominant companies act in their own interests, which often clashes with the public interest. The general dynamics are much the same, but the specifics depend on the nature of the information market, whether academic research or news or whatever.

There's one other area to mention: data brokering. RELX and Thomson Reuters collect vast quantities of personal data about criminal records, credit ratings, health conditions, marital status, automobile ownership and much else. They have the capacity to cross-reference this material, creating profiles of individuals. And what do they do with this information? They sell it. The idea is to make money. To give just one example of the problems this creates, consider police use of this personal data. Members of the police can go on fishing expeditions through reams of personal data and use it in any way they like. In the US, the fourth amendment to the Constitution protects against warrantless searches, but the government gets around this restriction by using

information from companies, which themselves are not bound by this constitutional restriction. Privatization of personal data collection thus enables an end run around privacy provisions.

The solution?

In her final chapter, Lamdan argues for expanding the informational commons, controlling corporate oligopolies:

The internet doesn't have to be an informational labyrinth of dead-end paywalls blocking critical public information, and privacy-stealing platforms where companies prey on our personal data. With the right blend of governance, oversight, and support, we can open up science, law, and financial data and information to all. (p.142)

This is a pretty picture. Lamdan presents it as desirable, as what should be done, but without a practical strategy for bringing it about. This is not a serious criticism, for Lamdan has done a great service in raising awareness of the problems, and perhaps there are no easy solutions.

The enormity of the challenge was brought home to me following the schemozzle of *Prometheus* and Taylor & Francis. Stuart Macdonald told me he had heard from editors of other journals about their difficulties with their big-publisher owners, either T&F or some other. I had the idea of contacting the editors of other T&F journals, telling them about the *Prometheus* experience as a way of warning about potential problems. Setting about this task, I selected only those journals where I thought socially controversial articles might be published, and even so getting through the alphabetical list of T&F journals proved to be too much. After sending nearly a hundred emails, I quit the operation. A few editors responded with interest, but that was all. It is hard to imagine many editors rising up against corporate power.

In Australia, universities usually do not pay journal fees for open access, and few academics would want to pay them out of their own pockets. Coming to the rescue, the Council of Australian University Librarians has reached agreements with several big publishers, including T&F, to cover open-access fees centrally, up to a national limit per year. I've taken advantage of this myself, with some of my papers covered by the agreement. From an author's perspective, this sounds good, but at a system level it serves to cement the role of the big publishers, which benefit from a continued income flow from their informational monopolies, while reducing the incentive of authors to seek no-fee open-access outlets. The Australian academic journal experience is an illustration of how the big publishers are accommodating the pressures from the open-access movement, which for a time seemed to be a promising road to expanding the informational commons systematically. The challenge is big, given how the companies have infiltrated their control into so many information domains. *Data Cartels* is a vital guide to the problem.

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Author and article information

Journal

Journal ID (doi): 10.13169/prometheus
Title: Prometheus
Abbreviated Title: PROM
Publisher: Pluto Journals
ISSN (Print): 0810-9028
ISSN (Electronic): 1470-1030
Publication date Pub: 6 March 2024
Volume: 40
Issue: 1
Pages: 56-59

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Article

DOI: 10.13169/prometheus.40.1.0056
SO-VID: 8ace2d80-d623-453f-bf34-d78e51e9a7d4

History

Page count

Pages: 4

Product

Data Cartels: the Companies that Control and Monopolize our Information, Sarah Lamdan (2022) 222pp., $US26 paperback, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, ISBN 9781503633711

Categories

Subject: Book review

ScienceOpen disciplines: Computer science,Arts,Social & Behavioral Sciences,Law,History,Economics

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