In a world dominated by technology, data and information have become valuable resources. In her book, *Data Cartels: The Companies that Control and Monopolize Our Information*, Sarah Lamdan draws attention to two data analytics giants less scrutinized by the public eye—RELX and Thompson Reuters—that dominate the access to information in the United States through rather unethical and untransparent practices. On the one hand, these companies capitalize on the gap between the rapid growth of the internet and the comparatively sluggish pace of legal regulation by placing crucial information behind paywalls. On the other hand, the products sold by these companies to various organizations contain personal data that, taken out of context, can hurt, disadvantage, and result in unjust discrimination against individuals.

Sarah Lamdan is a law professor and law librarian and has broad experience working with law schools and firms. The analysis she makes is robust because it is supported by her legal expertise, and it illuminates how human rights are being disregarded by data companies. I found her book valuable in shedding light on the lack of effective regulation in diverse fields, illustrating how this absence of oversight enables companies to prioritize profit when it comes to gathering data and disseminating information.

RELX and Thompson Reuters are data companies that separately own “an amalgamation of hundreds of smaller publishers and data services” (p. 3). Naturally, their dominance in the market does not necessarily make them malevolent; “it’s how the company wields that power that matters” (p. 7). Throughout her book, Lamdan extensively discusses how these companies maintain their dominance in the market in an unregulated context (for example, by eliminating competitors). She not only highlights the problems arising from the current situation but also offers insights into the legal deficiencies identified throughout her research and possible solutions.

An insight preeminent throughout Lamdan’s analysis is that the data products sold by RELX
and Thompson Reuters “can be used to sort people, and their assets, into risk categories and to make predictions about future events” (p. 15). Lamdan explains that these data can contain errors and biases, or be easily misunderstood; however, even so, government organizations like US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, insurance companies, hiring managers, and landlords rely on them for making decisions. Companies are more likely to collect data on disadvantaged individuals (and less on the wealthy), who are more likely to give away their data when using various services. Furthermore, enduring discriminatory practices like “redlining, workplace discrimination, and racist financial treatment” contribute to the accumulation of extensive data profiles for certain groups, disproportionately affecting them (p. 33). These societal issues, when combined with data brokerage practices, frequently lead to the excessive surveillance and scrutiny of Black individuals, undocumented immigrants, and those who fight against injustice.

Whether we are discussing academic research, legal resources, financial data, or news, access to these forms of information can be transformative and, in numerous instances, even life-preserving. As Lamdan makes it clear, monetizing access to information creates all kinds of issues, especially for those who cannot afford to pay excessive fees for subscriptions or downloads.

When talking about academic research, Lamdan discusses Elsevier’s Scopus (owned by RELX) and Clarivate (a corporate spin-off of Thompson Reuters), companies specialized in academic metrics. According to Lamdan, “both products collect and sell author and user data, not access to academic research” (p. 52). Even if they claim to help academics, in reality, these platforms create analytics that evaluate and predict which project or researcher will make a particular institution or grant funder more profitable or prestigious. Inevitably, the practice of assessing researchers and their work through digital metrics is affected by “biases, white supremacy, and systemic racism” (p. 63). Thus, researchers are evaluated through a standardized system that discriminates and discredits their work. This approach also makes researchers focus heavily on accumulating papers in prestigious journals, and citations, as a way of getting hired: “When metrics decide researchers’ futures, the number of publications on their resumes, and names of those publications, is more important than the substance of their work” (p. 65). In academic research, the lack of access to scientific articles is a persistent problem, and Lamdan calls attention to the resulting deficits and issues, including the spread of fake news and misinformation (as long as good-quality information is put under lock and key). Furthermore, Lamdan contests the current academic publishing process, in which authors get to do all the work only to be stripped of their copyrights and have their work published in academic databases that require a subscription or a fee for every download.

Access to legal information should be guaranteed; however, the existence of RELX’s Lexis and Thompson Reuters’s Westlaw legal information systems has led to the naturalization of a paywalled legal infrastructure in the United States. This private form of delivering law disarms people and inhibits the development of more accessible, public ways of accessing legal information. Not only ordinary people are restricted from accessing essential legal information, but even lawmakers, lawyers, and any other court staff. Lexis and Westlaw are so important in the current legal information system that they get to “shape the law” and how it is applied (p. 75). Because these systems are highly efficient in delivering law and court decisions, they have become trusted and dependable. However, the privatization of access to legal information and lack of regulation has permitted the development of manipulative and untransparent practices—such as determining which case law is made available, making some legal materials more visible than others, defining which resources lawyers get to use, et cetera. Lam-
dan found that the legal products delivered by these companies offer predictions affected by biases, which shape the resulting legal work. Even their correctional products, which should help inmates, violate prisoners’ privacy and are used as a means of digital behavior surveillance, providing online activity information to prison guards and administrators.

When it comes to financial information, Lamdan found that paywalled access ensures that monetary hot tips circulate in elite groups only: “Financial opportunities in the United States are plucked up by just a fraction of Americans, who tend to be older, affluent, and white” (p. 108). This, once again, deepens and perpetuates inequality, minimizing opportunities for those who need them the most.

Similar to academic research and legal or financial information, news has fallen prey to being converted from a public resource into a profit-driven operation. In the chapter concerning media information, Lamdan discusses the consequences of the privatization of media by tech and data companies, which include lack of access to essential news, polarization, misinformation, and dramatization of facts.

In Data Cartels, Sarah Lamdan offers an essential analysis of the issues that the privatization of access to information creates. Through her research, she brings into focus how individuals are wronged on a daily basis. To rectify the situation, she urges readers to be aware of the dangers data analytics companies pose. Among the solutions she offers are ensuring open access to high-quality information, treating data companies as public utilities, and regulation. Lamdan does not hold back in discussing the costs involved in maintaining and curating public digital platforms. Addressing the question of ensuring access to information involves grappling with various challenges. Still, making sure that data companies are “sustainable and just,” facilitating access to high-quality information and respecting individuals’ privacy can significantly improve our society and tackle some of the most pressing issues we face today (p. 142).