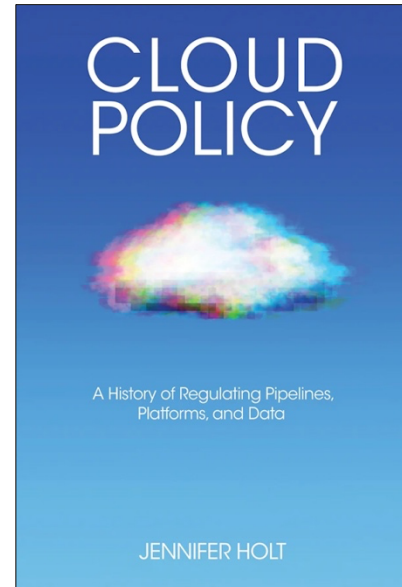


Jennifer Holt, **Cloud Policy: A History of Regulating Pipelines, Platforms, and Data**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024, 326 pp., \$68.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Mengmeng Guo  
Renmin University of China  
Harvard University  
and  
Guosong Shao<sup>1</sup>  
Nantong Institute of Technology

Jennifer Holt's **Cloud Policy: A History of Regulating Pipelines, Platforms, and Data** is a timely and compelling exploration of how policy, law, and public values have shaped—often inadequately—the infrastructure of the digital age. Published by MIT Press in 2024, the book offers a sweeping historical and conceptual narrative tracing the regulatory frameworks governing the evolution of cloud infrastructure in the United States. Holt contends that the governance of contemporary digital systems—particularly broadband “pipelines,” digital “platforms,” and massive troves of user “data”—rests on outdated assumptions imported from analog infrastructure eras. These inherited frameworks, she argues, are fundamentally ill-suited to addressing the unique characteristics, risks, and social stakes of cloud technologies. The result is a regulatory landscape marked by fragmentation, inertia, and corporate capture—one that privileges commercial efficiency over civic responsibility, and market growth over democratic accountability.



Rather than treating the cloud as a nebulous metaphor, Holt grounds her analysis in material realities and institutional histories. Her tripartite structure—pipelines, platforms, and data—serves not merely as a thematic guide but as an interpretive method for understanding how regulation and power interact in the digital economy. Each of these domains is explored through a rigorous historical lens, bringing together legal analysis, policy history, and media theory to explain how digital systems evolved as they did—and how they might be governed differently.

In the first section, Holt begins with broadband infrastructure—what she terms the “pipelines” of the cloud. She examines how regulatory traditions rooted in common carriage shaped early expectations around communications networks such as railroads and telephone lines. Historically, these systems were seen as essential public utilities and were subject to regulation designed to ensure fair access, prevent monopolistic behavior, and protect the public interest. However, Holt traces how neoliberal economic ideologies, particularly since the 1980s, have eroded these protections. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, often hailed as a landmark modernization effort, becomes in Holt’s account a turning point away

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author

from public-oriented regulation and toward deregulation in the name of market competition. Judicial decisions such as *Verizon v. FCC* in 2014 further weakened the Federal Communications Commission's authority to enforce net neutrality and promote universal broadband access.

Holt's treatment of net neutrality is especially astute. She argues that the fight over net neutrality represents more than a technical debate—it symbolizes the broader retreat of the state from regulating digital infrastructure in the public interest. Broadband providers, shielded from common carrier obligations, have increasingly dictated the terms of access, speed, and availability, often exacerbating existing socioeconomic inequalities. The regulatory vacuum has allowed major telecom firms to consolidate power and influence the very policies designed to oversee them. Holt's historical perspective reminds us that infrastructure is never neutral; it reflects the values of the political regimes that build and maintain it. And when public oversight weakens, those values shift toward private profit.

Transitioning from infrastructure to interface, Holt's second section tackles the rise of platforms—search engines, social networks, online marketplaces, and app stores. These platforms have become the primary intermediaries of digital life, mediating everything from political communication to cultural expression. Holt draws comparisons to earlier broadcast and mass media systems, where government regulators imposed licensing requirements and enforced (however imperfectly) standards of public interest. Yet today's platforms operate with far less accountability. As Holt explains, legislation such as Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act has granted platforms sweeping immunity from liability for user-generated content, effectively shielding them from traditional regulatory scrutiny.

Holt situates Section 230 within a broader legal and ideological context. Passed in 1996, the provision was initially intended to foster innovation and protect nascent Internet companies. However, in the decades since, it has become a cornerstone of platform exceptionalism, allowing companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter to exercise enormous editorial control without bearing the legal responsibilities of publishers. The consequences are manifold: platforms shape public discourse through opaque algorithmic systems, amplify divisive and harmful content, and extract behavioral data for monetization—all while denying that they bear responsibility for their effects on society. Holt critiques this arrangement as not only legally incoherent but democratically dangerous. By refusing to acknowledge their roles as *de facto* gatekeepers of the digital public sphere, platforms evade civic obligations and undermine institutional trust.

Holt's discussion of platform governance is enriched by a series of vivid case studies. She revisits the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal, not merely as an aberration but as illustrative of systemic weaknesses in the surveillance capitalist model. The scandal revealed how platform design, data brokerage, and lax oversight combined to manipulate electoral processes—raising fundamental questions about the role of digital infrastructure in democratic life. Holt also examines antitrust actions against tech giants, arguing that U.S. competition law—focused on price and consumer harm—is ill-equipped to grapple with the concentration of attention, data, and influence that platforms now command. She calls for a reinvigoration of antitrust theory and enforcement, grounded not just in economic efficiency but in concerns for information pluralism, civic agency, and structural fairness.

In the final section, Holt turns to data, the third and most abstract component of the cloud. Here, she explores how personal data has become the core commodity of the digital economy, governed by few constraints and little public oversight. The United States' approach to data regulation, as Holt explains, is largely sectoral and reactive. Unlike the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which establishes comprehensive rights for individuals and responsibilities for data controllers, U.S. privacy laws tend to be industry-specific (e.g., Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPAA] for health, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act [FERPA] for education) and oriented toward self-regulation. Holt critiques this patchwork model as inadequate for addressing the scale and complexity of contemporary data practices.

She traces the historical construction of data as property, a transformation that has allowed corporations to treat behavioral information as both asset and capital. Drawing on thinkers like Shoshana Zuboff (p. 12) and Julie Cohen (p. 15), Holt situates this process within the broader political economy of surveillance capitalism, in which user data is extracted, analyzed, and monetized with minimal consent or transparency. This commodification of personal experience has profound implications—not just for individual privacy but for autonomy, identity, and social agency. Holt also notes how state surveillance, justified by national security rationales after 9/11, has reinforced the erosion of privacy norms, turning private-sector infrastructures into tools for mass monitoring.

Yet *Cloud Policy* is not merely a work of critique. Throughout the book, Holt gestures toward alternative frameworks and emergent practices that could reorient cloud governance toward democratic ends. She highlights efforts to establish public cloud infrastructures, data trusts, and platform cooperatives—experiments that treat digital systems as civic utilities rather than commercial services. She also underscores the importance of restoring public interest language in legal and regulatory discourse, arguing that policy must reclaim its normative role in shaping the values embedded in infrastructure.

Holt's approach is distinguished by its interdisciplinarity and historical rigor. Trained in media studies but deeply conversant with legal theory and public policy, she weaves together scholarship, case law, archival documents, and policy analysis into a cohesive and engaging narrative. Her writing is clear without oversimplifying, critical without veering into polemic. She balances structural analysis with human consequences, reminding readers that the stakes of cloud governance are ultimately about power—who holds it, who is subject to it, and who gets to define the rules.

One of the book's key strengths lies in its insistence that cloud infrastructure is not inevitable or immaterial. The "cloud," for Holt, is not some neutral technological artifact floating above society—it is a dense, layered system of cables, protocols, corporate interests, regulatory decisions, and user behaviors. Its shape is contingent on policy choices, historical accidents, and ideological commitments. Recognizing this contingency, she argues, is the first step toward building better systems—ones that reflect democratic values rather than merely entrenching commercial dominance.

If there is a shortcoming, it may be the book's U.S.-centric perspective. Holt acknowledges this limitation and gestures toward comparative models, particularly in Europe, but more sustained analysis of global variations in cloud policy—especially in authoritarian or hybrid regimes—would have deepened the

account. Additionally, while the book references emerging technical models such as decentralization and open-source governance, it could further engage with how these innovations may disrupt or complement regulatory paradigms. Still, these are minor limitations in what is otherwise a richly researched, compellingly argued, and politically urgent book.

In sum, *Cloud Policy* is a landmark contribution to the study of digital governance, infrastructure policy, and democratic theory in the 21st century. Jennifer Holt has written a book that is historically grounded, intellectually ambitious, and normatively committed to the public good. For scholars, policymakers, technologists, and citizens concerned with the future of the Internet, this book provides both a diagnostic toolkit and a conceptual map for imagining a different digital order—one where cloud systems are not merely efficient but equitable, not merely profitable but accountable.