

Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Thomas Ramge, **Access Rules: Freeing Data from Big Tech for a Better Future**, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022, 220 pp., \$24.95 (hardcover).

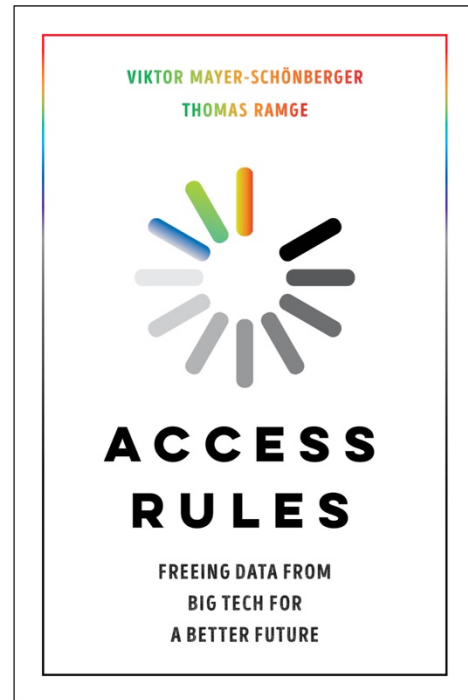
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Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Thomas Ramge's **Access Rules: Freeing Data from Big Tech for a Better Future** arrives at a critical juncture in debates over digital platform governance. Written during the COVID-19 pandemic, when questions of data access became matters of life and death, the book uses the conjuncture to indict the current concentration of informational power. Their opening example illustrates their concern. When Google and Apple invoked privacy principles to resist sharing location and contact-tracing data with U.S. public health authorities, they exercised what Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge characterize as "a de facto veto over the democratic flow of information" (p. 4).

The book's thesis is straightforward: "When information rules, we need new rules of access" (p. 7). Positioning itself explicitly as a counterpoint to Carl Shapiro and Hal Varian's (1999) *Information Rules*, Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge call for mandated data access to counter power asymmetries and eliminate what they term "undue information-based digital domination" (p. 5). They argue that broad-based data access is essential for advancing scientific, social, and economic progress. Indeed, their framing deliberately invokes democratic first principles; the book opens by invoking Benjamin Franklin and repeatedly emphasizes that "access to information is the foundation of democratic decision-making" (p. 3).

At the heart of their analysis lies a diagnosis of contemporary digital capitalism as characterized by extreme information concentration. Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge contend that well-reinforced property rights have created a regime where control over information flows favors dominant platforms. This concentration, they argue, is simultaneously a problem of social inequality and stunted economic development. Most bluntly, they assert that "data oligopolists are in fact slowing down innovation" (p. 12), a direct challenge to the narrative that Big Tech is the apex of entrepreneurial dynamism.

Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge deploy Schumpeterian frameworks to explain how informational advantages convert into market power, but they argue that creative destruction has been neutralized in the digital age. Through documentation of acquisition strategies (Google's 260+ acquisitions, Facebook's nearly 130, Apple's 125, and Amazon's 110 as of mid-2021 [p. 58]), for example, Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge demonstrate how Big Tech has systematically purchased potential competitors, often at prices well above market rates. The result is what they characterize as a "frenzied standstill," where genuine innovation has



given way to careful market management and strategic product rollouts designed to extract maximum value. The watchword of Silicon Valley, they claim, is no longer “disrupt” but “cash out” (p. 57), a phrase that captures the transformation of platforms from innovation engines to rent-extraction apparatuses.

The book offers particularly sharp criticism of some U.S. progressive regulatory approaches. Antitrust efforts are dismissed as “one-sided and reactive,” insufficient to address “the current gross imbalances in informational power” (p. 10). Privacy laws, particularly those built around individual consent, receive even harsher treatment. Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge argue that such frameworks misunderstand the problem by individualizing and responsabilizing structural issues, placing impossible burdens on citizens and users to navigate choices that are not truly voluntary given the compulsion and dependency surrounding digital tools. Moreover, they contend that Big Tech has mastered regulatory compliance, learning to extract more value from less data while data protection bureaucracies prove “no match” for their sophisticated evasion strategies. To a degree, they have a point, but they do not concede how power has been exercised and money spent to neutralize U.S. antitrust efforts. Regulatory efforts in the United States are hardly fair battles of ideas. Money matters.

Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge also have little regard for European digital policy. They describe it as characterized by “moral superiority” that masks fears of economic decline, a form of “policy making through symbolism” (p. 74), focused on digital sovereignty rather than substantive reform. The General Data Protection Regulation, in particular, is characterized as “an act of legal disempowerment” (p. 101) that nowhere addresses information imbalances or concentration of informational power, instead promoting underuse of data through excessive caution.

Against these failures, the book’s alternative vision centers on proactive mandated data access like compelling dominant platforms to share data with citizens, scientists, startups, and other potential users in advance rather than after harm has occurred. Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge ground this prescription in the economics of information goods, emphasizing data’s nonrivalrous nature (multiple uses do not diminish the resource) and the way it becomes valuable through use rather than hoarding. “It’s not data that’s scarce—it’s its use” (p. 97), they argue. Democratization of access has its own utility as more purposes generate more economic value, while withholding imposes social and economic costs.

In addition to providing a common baseline for leading work on field of international communication studies, the book makes several contributions to scholarly debates. The analysis of how Big Tech strategically shares non-core data while jealously guarding competitive advantages helps to clarify the political economy of corporate data practices. They observe that platforms share data, knowledge, and technology in areas that are not decisive for digital dominance, engaging in reputation-laundering corporate social responsibility work while creating, guarding, and leveraging their core data. This insight helps explain the disconnect between platforms’ public rhetoric about openness and their actual practices of enclosure.

The critique of consent-based privacy frameworks makes an important intervention in policy debates. By showing how individualized consent mechanisms fail to address structural power imbalances, Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge redirect attention toward collective questions of access and control rather

than individual choice. This reframing has implications for how scholars and policy makers conceptualize digital rights and governance.

Despite these contributions, the book has several limitations that constrain its analytical and political impact. Most important, while Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge place considerable faith in political will to implement access mandates, they do not adequately address regulatory capture, one driver and effect of the power concentration they indict. They acknowledge that Big Tech engages in extensive lobbying and benefits from revolving-door dynamics between industry and government, yet provide little analysis of how proposed reforms would overcome these structural obstacles. The authors insist that the details of access mandates matter enormously then offer insufficient guidance on institutional designs that could resist industry co-optation.

As a point of entry into the politics of information, the book's analytical frame may be simultaneously too narrow and too ambitious. The focus on data access through reclassification as a public good, while useful, can, if not expanded, risk treating symptoms rather than underlying causes of power concentration. There are also limits to the Schumpeterian framework. They note that in late-stage digital capitalism, "ideas and money are no longer enough for creative destruction" (p. 53) and that affordable computing power and open-source tools "hardly help" (p. 123) when data itself becomes the scarce resource. But this hints at dynamics beyond information politics: questions of capital accumulation, labor power, and economic structure that remain unaddressed. Granted, there are reasonable limits for any project, and this may fall on the other side of reasonableness, but at what point does concentrated power become so entrenched that calling for access becomes an insufficient political strategy?

The book's vision of data-sharing mandates may also be overtaken by technological development. The rise of large language models and AI systems now require us to ask whether, once models are trained, historical data retains the same strategic value? If the real barrier to entry for AI competitiveness becomes computational power for training rather than data access per se, the book's central prescription requires rethinking. Is data as a public good still a political target in the era of foundation models and transfer learning?

I do applaud Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge for wishing to engage with issues of "data colonialism," and how this feature of global inequality may be made more acute by the "divide and rule" tactics of digital neomercantilism of the Cold War 2.0. Even so, this is done without much reference to scholars in the Global South writing about these emerging issues. Their idea that "large emerging economies might be better able to reset the power relationship thanks to a clear stance and a stronger starting position compared with the West" (p. 13) is hopeful, but also could be construed as "regulatory janitorial work" that comes after wealth creation. And then as much as there is data colonialism, there is also a neocolonial comprador class who gains from the continuation of data colonial practices. Postcolonial data solidarity may require advocacy for the fundamental reorganization of global digital infrastructure and value flows.

Overall, *Access Rules* succeeds in reframing debates around digital regulation away from reactive regulatory enforcement and toward proactive access mandates. Such mandates can be implemented, especially through appeals to fair competition, open standards and the like. As they themselves

acknowledge, "a world of open data is no land of milk and honey; the data dividends won't just fall from heaven like manna" (p. 149). That work will be worth doing, but the book leaves unanswered a crucial question: What comes after access?

Reference

Shapiro, C., & Varian, H. R. (1999). *Information rules: A strategic guide to the network economy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.