

What Company Does Data Keep?

The 2025–2026 Book Club in Review

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This academic year, the virtual book club of the Digital Due Process Clinic read five books on corporate history. In doing so, we explored a number of questions on the relationship between corporations, markets, technology, and the world. This was our reading list:

READING LIST

Collins, Martin. *A Telephone for the World: Iridium, Motorola, and the Making of a Global Age*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

Eriksson, Maria, Rasmus Fleischer, Anna Johansson, Pelle Snickars, and Patrick Vonderau. *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.

Hao, Karen. *Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman's OpenAI*. New York: Penguin Press, 2025.

Harwood, John. *The Interface: IBM and the Transformation of Corporate Design, 1945–1976*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Lepore, Jill. *If Then: How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future*. New York: Liveright, 2020.

Over the course of the year, four analytic and methodological themes emerged from our discussions.

THEME ONE

Rendering the Corporation Strange

For a brief period in New Deal (1933–38) America, it seemed that public enterprises would direct the economy. A section of US private industry, along with Herbert Hoover, used their influence to oppose public enterprises and regulation, and to promote a state that merely provided “information and guidance to facilitate voluntary reforms”.¹ By the time the state dominated university research funding during the early Cold War, including at Hoover’s Stanford, the state itself had been recast not as a producer but an enabler of industrial capital. Modern American corporations did not spring fully formed out of the ether – they were consciously made, with supporters repeatedly snuffing out alternatives.

It is thus helpful to see private corporations as profoundly strange entities, and these business histories help us render them strange. One strange aspect is that corporations promote a “culture” internally and externally. Martin Collins (2018) describes in *A Telephone for the World* how Motorola strategically deployed a rhetoric of employee autonomy and company culture to achieve its goals of global expansion in the 1990s. The conscious design of a company culture helps shape the people inside companies and how they relate to their work. Corporations have “strange” hierarchies and organizational patterns that affect the products and services they make and the knowledge they create.

In *The Interface* (2011), John Harwood describes how important aesthetic design was for IBM, and how closely its aesthetic design was made to be tied to its internal bureaucracy and its management. IBM's drive for internal management as a corporation was also a drive for the spatial reorganization of corporate America through industrial design and ergonomics. Harwood adds to work by Max Weber as well as others like Lisa Gitelman and Joanne Yates, who describe the enmeshing of materials – paper, computer screens, keyboards, desks, filing cabinets – with corporate structures.

Studying strange corporations also involves studying idiosyncratic personalities, such as Karen Hao does in *Empire of AI* (2025), where she outlines the messianic fervor of the current corporate leaders of AI, and the almost-religiosity they seek to imbue in their organizations. Likewise, Jill Lepore in *If Then* follows the peculiar beliefs of famous Cold War personalities such as Ithiel de Sola Pool and Eugene Burdick as they (along with Ed Greenfield) used a corporate form – the Simulmatics Corporation – to promote and entrench their ideas of prediction and manipulation of human behavior, even as the corporation itself failed after a short run. Lepore follows these men and their wives as they construct their versions of the suburban American family, including its seedy underbelly.

THEME TWO

Corporations and the World

Corporations play a role in making the state and facilitating the interaction between the state and the rest of the world. Harwood points towards IBM's erstwhile slogan, "World Peace Through World Trade", in a demonstration of how critical US corporations have been in molding and spreading US foreign policy tenets. US multinational corporations are constituents of the US state; they accord to the state its world-spanning characteristics. The books we read describe how some corporations have conceived of the world and aimed to shape it, as well as how the world has presented obstacles in their paths. In the late 1960s, the Simulmatics Corporation carried out opinion surveys in Vietnam, deputing visibly American, military-supported staff to ask its besieged people what they saw in their futures. Simulmatics hoped that this data would further US interests in Vietnam by helping predict the consequences of different military choices. This exercise, which Lepore describes as "bumbling", was part of the scientization of social inquiry during the Cold War – Simulmatics' leaders saw Vietnam as the largest social sciences laboratory they had available. Such corporate research dovetailed with not only the general fervor for "counterinsurgency" in the US national security establishment (Simulmatics had previously supported counter-revolutionary efforts in Venezuela), but also with Robert McNamara's choice to elevate the quantitative in US aggression by measuring victory by counting the dead – combatants and civilians alike.

Hao argues that OpenAI's designs for the future follow a similar imperialist path. Building on her earlier work on data colonialism, Hao sketches how a small set of AI companies build and plan for AI by extracting from the frontier to enrich the metropole, and how their religiosity about the future

unfolds as a civilizing mission. Likewise, Collins describes how Motorola's Iridium project was based on an idea of satellites as a means to control the world, how capitalism came to rely primarily on global domination through the 1980s onwards, and how outer space was brought into the orbit of capital. The civilizing mission in this case is the drive to universalize "liberal democracy", or the aspect of liberal democracy that involves the opening up of global markets for US corporations. It also involves cementing the particular monetary and trade architecture that actively sustains multinational corporations.

THEME THREE

Corporations and Technology

Not only do corporations do technology – but also technology that emerges from corporations bears a corporate imprimatur. If Collins points towards how private corporations and their role were portrayed as inevitable at the height of neoliberalism's powers, Hao highlights an ongoing mission to portray certain technological paths as being inevitable. OpenAI, for instance, is invested in promoting large-scale and extractive AI models as the only worthwhile type of AI, because they can be made and controlled by a small set of private actors. This tendency arises from both its economic incentives and corporate leaders' moral beliefs and models of the future.

The corporate form, in other words, directs technological development along certain paths and forecloses other paths. Collins too describes how the Iridium project led to a belief that network optimization rather than individual satellite optimization was the right axis along which to develop satellite technology; a certain degree of failure was accepted as a feature of the system because it suited the corporation's global ambitions to do so.

Similarly, Maria Eriksson et al. have shown in *Spotify Teardown* how algorithmically targeted advertising is modelled on stock exchange processes. Music, in this business model, is incidental to the automated datafication of daily life through anonymous advertising markets. What is more, such advertising is more expensive for publishers and marketers than relatively older forms of advertising; the purported efficiency of platforms then is merely efficient for the platform itself.

Corporations affect the trajectory of technological development when they control a large proportion of the market: as Harwood argues, IBM was a standard-setting organization that determined how information organized and redistributed across other companies.

Studying Corporations

Kean Birch has pointed out that STS scholars face a methodological issue: there are higher barriers to studying private science than public science, and so developments in private science can be understudied.² The authors on our list have tackled this problem in different ways. Most remarkably, Maria Eriksson and others have shown the value of Harold Garfinkel's breaching experiments in STS research in the digital realm. They have used a range of methods, including computational experiments, tests, and setting up a fake record label and bots, to examine Spotify's algorithms. For their trouble, Spotify intervened with the Swedish Research Council to jeopardize the researchers' funding.³ The long arm of the corporate economy unsurprisingly finds its way into research resources as well. The authors' methods raise important questions about how to interpret research ethics and norms in cases where researchers are trying to "study up" by investigating companies that refuse to share data.

Interviews – with CEOs, ex-employees, and whistleblowers – also emerge as another method to study corporations, especially in *Empire of AI*. Harwood's disciplinary tack in architectural history also introduces the reading of the archive itself as an "interface", as he calls it: he examines archival material like brochures and manuals for their role in being "the hinge between the world of things and the world of numbers", the very interface that makes logistical systems possible.

Learn more about the book club or simply get in touch:

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At the Digital Due Process Clinic, we have been paying attention to how people are translated to numbers, and how data and automation can come to order people's lives. Studying company histories taught us how the corporate form – a historical entity, that is, one born of historical rather than transcendent forces – exacerbates such translation and ordering and directs it along specific paths

Endnotes

¹ Lowen, Rebecca S. *Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 22.

² Birch, Kean. "Do Artifacts Have Political Economy?" *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, published online August 4, 2025.

³ "'Spotify Teardown' Book Sparking Controversy before Release." *Music Ally*, October 9, 2017.



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