Platform Power and Libraries

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Capitalism

The foundations of platform power are steeped in capitalism.[1] Across many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences myriad texts analyse these foundations via explorations of "digital capitalism"[2] and "surveillance capitalism."[3] While much research is done on the impact of capitalism on the masses, studies of the institutional impact of digital capitalism, in educational technology (edtech),[4] libraries,[5] healthcare, ener-

1   Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*. (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017).

2   Christian Fuchs, "Critical Theory Foundations of Digital Capitalism: A Critical Political Economy Perspective," *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 22, no. 1 (2024): 148–96., https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v22i1.1454; Thomas Allmer, Sevda Can Arslan, and Christian Fuchs, "Critical Perspectives on Digital Capitalism: Theories and Praxis. Introduction to the Special Issue." *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 22, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v22i1.1501.; Jathan Sadowski "When Data Is Capital: Datafication, Accumulation, and Extraction," *Big Data & Society* 6, no. 1 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718820549.; Dan Schiller as per Yeo, *Behind*, 26.

3   Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

4   Janine Arantes, "Educational Data Brokers: Using the Walkthrough Method to Identify Data Brokering by Edtech Platforms," *Learning, Media and Technology* 49, no. 2 (2024): 320–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2022.2160986; Laura Czerniewicz and Jennifer Feldman, "'Technology Is Not Created by the Sky': Datafication and Educator Unease," *Learning, Media and Technology* 49, no. 3 (2024): 428–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2023.2206137.

5   Bignoli, et al. "Resisting."

gy, and more,[6] are also present. Despite the open future that once was anticipated by such technological innovations as the internet, continuous emphasis on profit margins over equity have led to a much different digital world than foreseen, one grounded in privatization, commodification, and extractivism.[7] Influx of technology, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have further entrenched corporate power[8]—a reality that was predicted to occur by some, as global crises have long been mechanisms to further solidify the power elite's force.[9]

However, these mechanisms on their own are not fully to blame; to quote Steve Matthewman, "technology is neither society's driver nor the source of all problems; the issue is technology's integration into society. Technological development is distorted under capitalism because it is impelled by the logics of profit and domination."[10] For the purposes of this book, we are drawing distinct attention to the technology of platforms, specifically in relation to libraries. It warrants noting that, as technology, platforms are not the root of the issue. The deeper root is the hegemonic capitalistic orientation that, in the eyes of many practitioners, necessitates their integration, all the while extracting value from the individuals using them. Platforms lock users into a specifically curated suite of digital tools, algorithmically optimising the user's goal, while covertly surveilling and commodifying this data to

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6   Yeo, *Behind*.

7   Tarnoff, Internet.; Yeo, *Behind*, 49.; Garry Robson, "Big Nihilism: Generation Z, Surveillance Capitalism, and the Emerging Digital Technocracy," *Information & Culture* 58, no. 2 (2023): 180–204.

8   Bignoli, et al., "Resisting."; Czerniewicz and Feldman, "Technology."

9   Brian Michael Murphy, *We the Dead: Preserving Data at the End of the World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

10 As cited by Sam Popowich, "'Ruthless Criticism of All That Exists': Marxism, Technology, and Library Work," In *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, edited by Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale, 39–66, (Library Juice Press, 2018). https://doi.org/10.7939/r3-26j6-5r32.

promote business interests of platform shareholders. While algorithms, like those embedded in platforms, do not necessarily change user behaviour, they do create extensive datafication and commodification of user behaviour thereby eroding user privacy.[11] Why then are they used so extensively? Because the landscape has changed to require their use to accomplish so many tasks; lack of platform use could effectively lock people out of whole professional and personal spheres. This is, in part, because "the Internet has become a new transnational marketplace and driving force for capitalist development and expansion" [12] where the existence of platforms "alters the geography of existing markets and generates a new terrain of competition and potential monopolization."[13]

Platforms

Before exploring further, we must first clarify: what is a platform? The definition of this term is contested among scholars. Those who opt for prescriptive definitions believe that "platform" should be used in a restrictive fashion for specific technological

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11   Pascal D. König, "Two Tales about the Power of Algorithms in Online Environments: On the Need for Transdisciplinary Dialogue in the Study of Algorithms and Digital Capitalism," *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 7 (2022): 1372–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111893.; Eric Hellman, "16 of the Top 20 Research Journals Let Ad Networks Spy on Their Readers," *Go To Hellman* (blog), March 12, 2015. https://go-to-hellman.blogspot.com/2015/03/16-of-top-20-research-journals-let-ad.html.; Dorothea Salo and Stephen Kharfen, "Ain't Nobody's Business If I Do (Read Serials)," *The Serials Librarian* 70, 1-4 (2016): 55–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2016.1141629.; Cody Hanson, "User Tracking on Academic Publisher Platforms." 2019 https://www.codyh.com/writing/tracking.html.

12   Yeo, *Behind*, 1.

13   Devika Narayan, "Monopolization and Competition under Platform Capitalism: Analyzing Transformations in the Computing Industry," *New Media & Society* 25, no. 2 (2023): 287–306, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221149939.

functionality.[14] Conversely, those opting for a more descriptive definition recognize that the initial use of the term has been co-opted from its origins and now, both in the public and in academe, has a broader meaning. In this descriptive approach, platforms come to mean technology serving to mediate between individuals or groups of individuals (e.g. students, library users, employees, news readers, etc.) and a private corporation, brokering user data for financial gain.[15] Schlosberg categorizes this mediation into some or all of the following roles: "provider...aggregator...portal...gateway...facilitator."[16] Gillespie argues that platforms serve a combination of computational, architectural, figurative, and political functions.[17]

This text will adopt the broader, descriptive use of the term platform, that of an intermediary. While potentially innocuous sounding, as mere venues of service rather than producers of content, the intentional choice of suppliers in using the term platform actually "speaks to the term's utility for companies eluding regulation by claiming neutrality instead of selectivity."[18] Indeed, platforms are neither innocuous nor neutral.[19] They are instead, as Nielsen and Ganter posit:

> deeply relational...based on their ability to attract end users and partners... [Their] power is...generative...exercised

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14 Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, "Platform Studies: Frequently Questioned Answers," UC Irvine: Digital Arts and Culture (2009), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01r0k-9br; Tarnoff, Internet; Rebecca Giblin and Cory Doctorow, *Chokepoint Capitalism: How Big Tech and Big Content Captured Creative Labor Markets and How We'll Win Them Back* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).

15 Arantes, "Educational."; Aarthi Vadde, "Platform or Publisher," *PMLA* 136, no. 3 (2021): 455–62, https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812921000341.

16 Schlosberg, *Media Ownership*.

17 Tarleton Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms,'" *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 347–64, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738.

18 Vadde, "Platform," 456.

19 Gillespie, "Politics."

through socio-technical systems built by companies that draw many different third parties in by empowering them to do things that each of them value and want, while in the process leading them to become ever-more dependent on the platform in question, increasingly intertwined in highly asymmetric relations.[20]

One might argue that the problem then must lie in the existence of platforms themselves. However, it is more so the structure, or "hourglass-shaped market,"[21] in which platforms exist and that which they support. That is, if one were to permit the metaphor, it is not the players alone that are the issue, but rather the entire game itself.

Libraries

Like platforms, libraries do not exist in a vacuum. As locales of information exchange, and by and large due to public funding regardless of their type,[22] libraries are extensions of the state.[23] They have, therefore, long been venues fraught with power differentials as relational institutions caught in the confluence of stated professional ideals and hegemonic practice.[24] For example, in her work analysing the Library of Congress (LC), Adler

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20 Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Sarah Anne Ganter, *The Power of Platforms: Shaping Media and Society, Oxford Studies in Digital Politics*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 1-2.

21 Giblin and Doctorow, *Chokepoint Capitalism*, 15.

22 Be they academic, school, public, legal, governmental, research, etc.

23 Bales and Engle, "Counterhegemonic."; Douglas Raber, "Librarians as Organic Intellectuals: A Gramscian Approach to Blind Spots and Tunnel Vision," *Library Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2003): 33-53.; Harris, "State."; Wayne A. Wiegand, "The Structure of Librarianship: Essay on an Information Profession," *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 24, no. 1 (1999): 17-37.

24 Bales and Engle, "Counterhegemonic."; Michael Quinn Dudley, "The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach." *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 1 (January 2016): 107–110, https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v1.25580.

"draws attention to prevailing assumptions and approaches to managing information resources...and how such practices contribute to the cultural reproduction of state ideology" rooted in neoliberal, free-market business models.[25]

Capitalism, Platforms, and Libraries

Looking back towards the history of internet search as we know it today, we can see origins in publicly funded academic libraries and research institutions.[26] Whatever the initial ethical orientation, it is now clearly visible that there is a "commodification of search and the role of government in creating conditions for capital."[27] As a link in the information chain, libraries can be seen as targets in this "commodification of information" which turns "information into a capitalist commodity."[28] This trend is not brand new, nor is it surprising. Thirty years ago, in 1994, "Lievrouw...cautioned...about the potential for corporate interests to undermine democracy, realizing the growing presence of such interests in libraries and information systems. Over twenty years later," Adler notes in 2015, "we see significantly increased participation by private enterprises in American libraries."[29] Nearly a decade after Adler, we can see platformitization (also written "platformisation;" defined by Helmond as "the rise of the platform as the dominant

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25   Melissa A. Adler, "Broker of Information, the 'Nation's Most Important Commodity': The Library of Congress in the Neoliberal Era," *Information & Culture* 50, no. 1 (2015): 27, https://doi.org/10.7560/IC50102.

26   Yeo, *Behind*, 21.

27   Yeo, *Behind*, 17.

28   Simon Barron and Andrew Preater, "Critical Systems Librarianship," in *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, ed. by Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale, (Sacramento, California: Library Juice Press, 2017), 101.

29   Adler, "Broker," 27.

infrastructural and economic model")[30] has been fully embed-ded into the global library landscape. While Lievrouw's cau-tioning may have been seen as coincidental foreshadowing by some, it is quite aligned with the actual industry rhetoric of the time. Writing one year after Lievrouw, Bill Gates penned in 1995 that "there are those...who think the Internet has shown that information will be free...Although a great deal...will con-tinue to be free, I believe the most attractive information...will continue to be produced with profit in mind."[31]

Terminologically, the words "library" and "platform" have coex-isted in the LIS field for at least a decade. Often, they are seen together when referring to "Library Services Platforms" (LSP), a term used first by Marshall Breeding in 2011 to differentiate uni-fied, consolidated digital library service systems from their pre-decessor, Integrated Library Systems (ILS).[32] However, referenc-es to library platforms can be found predating Breeding's 2011 piece (see Figure 1). Thus, while LSPs do play a pivotal role in the discourse regarding libraries and platforms, it is important to note that they are not the *only* platforms to be discussed. In-deed, there are platforms that provide the infrastructure and applications to support library services,[33] but as platformati-zation has exploded in a multitude of industries, other library platforms also play a part in LIS (be they ebook platforms, da-tabase platforms or otherwise). Furthermore, libraries are

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30 Anne Helmond, "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (July 2015), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080.

31 As cited by Michael Dawson and John Bellamy Foster, "Virtual Capitalism," in *Capitalism and the Information Age: The Political Economy of the Global Communication Revolution*, ed. by Robert Waterman McChesney, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and John Bellamy Foster, (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 61.

32 Marshall Breeding, "Library Services Platforms: A Maturing Genre of Products," *Library Technology Reports* 51, no. 4 (2015).

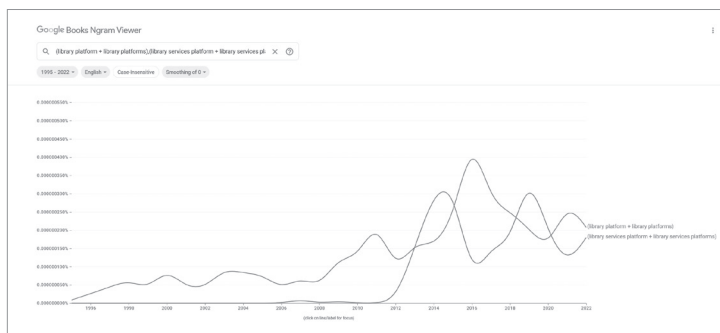33 Marshall Breeding, "The Power of the Platform," *Computers in Libraries* 36, no. 9 (2016), https://librarytechnology.org/document/22052.

Figure 1   Screenshot of the tool Google Ngram Viewer (https://books. google.com/ngrams) and its search results for "Library Platform(s)" and "Library Services Platform(s).

increasingly finding themselves impacted by the platformitization of other markets as they attempt to uphold their core mission.[34]

Building on research in critical library systems studies, this book intends to draw to light the impact of platform power and libraries. We must first, however, situate platform power and libraries in the larger realm of platform studies. We will do so by looking at platforms in libraries through what Nielsen and Ganter call "the five most important aspects of platform power," that is:

1. The power to set standards…
2. The power to make or break connections…
3. The power of automated action at scale…
4. The power of information asymmetry…[and]
5. The power to operate across domains.[35]

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34 For example: Andreas Lenander Aegidius and Mads Møller Tommerup Andersen, "Collecting Streaming Services," *Convergence* (May 2024), https://doi. org/10.1177/13548565241253906; Nielsen and Ganter, *Power*, 189.

35 Nielsen and Ganter, *Power*, 21.

"The power to set standards"

The relationality of platforms is a key element of their appeal. They can connect people and institutions to information, tools, products, and services to which they may not otherwise have access. This is often seen in libraries, as previously non-platformed tasks and tools (like cataloguing or reading a journal article) now take place in a platformed environment. However, there is distinct power in platforms as they alone can "set standards that others have to abide by if they want to be part of the…networks…and markets…platforms enable."[36] The most obvious of these standards is sole decision-making power over terms of use. That is, the power to decide how one is able to exist on a platform, what permitted use of data on a platform entails, and what gets someone kicked out or sued for breach of terms.[37] In libraries, these standards can manifest in such matters as deciding whether or not one is able to show a platformed film in class,[38] or whether platform content can be archived, or used in other contexts.[39]

Furthermore, as the platform industry has ballooned out of the United States (U.S.), it is important to recognize the weight of platform creators' worldviews and interests in their architecture of both technology and standards. That is, regardless of the location of the platform user or institution, standards

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36 Nielsen and Ganter, *Power*, 21.

37 Giblin and Doctorow, *Chokepoint Capitalism*.

38 Christine F. Smith, Rumi Graham, and Eva Revitt.,"Leaps in Media Access & Reuse," (presentation at Canadian Association for Information Science Conference, Online, 2024). https://cais2024.ca/talk/24.smith/24.Smith.pdf; Christine F. Smith, "Lack of Collections as Data: Making Meaning out of the Films We Cannot See," *The Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 47, no. 3 (2024). See also Chapter 3 by Hooper.

39 George Machovec, "Who Owns Bibliographic Metadata Created by Libraries?" *Journal of Library Administration* 63, no. 3 (April 3, 2023): 386–393, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2023.2177928. See also Chapter 4 by Hegarty.

are often built with a U.S. lens in mind, as it is "the current capitalist imperial power."[40] Thus platform businesses do not just set standards within the platforms (i.e. products) themselves; such businesses also hold weight in impacting laws and other standards from being made or modified. An example of such intense global platform power can be seen in the work of Bannerman, et al. who track the communications between technology company lobbyists and public servants in the Canadian federal government.[41] Their findings, when read against those of the case studies in this text, can begin to highlight the impact that platforms can have both within and outside of virtual product "walls," as the laws they influence cause repercussions in libraries, as they have had in edtech[42] and other milieux.[43]

Beyond legal and technical standards, platform power can impact libraries in other, more covert ways. For example, while libraries and their employees may support equitable labour practices, platforms can obfuscate exploitative labour in their systems.[44] Additionally, platforms may breach normally upheld library privacy practices,[45] or charge libraries exorbitant

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40 Yeo, *Behind*, 16.

41 Sara Bannerman, et al., "The Tech Lobby." (2024), https://thetechlobby.ca/.

42 Czerniewicz and Feldman, "Technology," 430.

43 Giblin and Doctorow, *Chokepoint Capitalism*, 144-145; Nielsen and Ganter, *Power*, 195.

44 Kristen C. Howard, "Digitization and Exploitation: Acknowledging and Addressing the Use of Exploitative Prison Labor by Libraries and Archives," *The Library Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2023): 241–255, https://doi.org/10.1086/725070; Alexis Logsdon, "Ethical Digital Libraries and Prison Labor?" (presentattion at the Digital Library Federation Forum, Tampa, FL, October 15 2019) https://experts.umn.edu/en/publications/ethical-digital-libraries -and-prison-labor.

45 Erin Berman and Bonnie Tijerina, *The Ultimate Privacy Field Guide: A Workbook of Best Practices*, Chicago: ALA editions, 2023.; Laura K. Clark Hunt, Jennifer E. Steele, Janet L. Koposko, Josh Cromwell, and Tamatha A. Lambert, "E-Resource Librarians Perceptions on Library Patron Privacy," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 49, no. 3 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2023.102704.

fees without transparency across the field.[46] Navigating such standards can be onerous or intentionally confounding for library employees.[47] Once clarified, platform standards may be found to be at odds with library best practices or librarian personal ethics and professional values, leading library workers to potential resignation and feelings of powerlessness.[48] Additionally, when LIS best practices do not support a platform's bottom line (like the ability, or lack thereof, to supply Machine Readable Cataloguing (MARC) records for resources acquired) such standards can create more work or prohibit work from being done. In sum, when platforms hold the power to set the standards, platforms have the final say.

"The power to make or break connections"

LIS literature has widely documented that the action of making connections between topics is grounded in the biases of those drawing the lines of connection. Whether classification, cataloguing, or other metadata, there is embedded therein the "power to control how and what we know, situating, stabilizing, and setting down the paths that can be travelled," write Allison-Cassin and Seeman, "it carries substantial weight, depth,

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46 Barbara Fister, "Liberating Knowledge: A Librarian's Manifesto for Change," *The National Education Association (NEA) Higher Education Journal, Special Focus: Radical Transformations,* (Fall 2010): 84-85.; Robert S. Fortner and Mark Fackler. *World Media Ethics: Cases and Commentary*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2018), 9.

47 Clark Hunt, et al., "E-Resource".

48 Marc Zinaman, "Social Media Archiving in Practice: A Troubled Landscape in Review," *The Serials Librarian* (2024): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2024.2367405; Czerniewicz and Feldman, "Technology," 430.; Nadja Schaetz, Emilija Gagrčin, Roland Toth, and Martin Emmer, "Algorithm Dependency in Platformized News Use," *New Media & Society*, (August 2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231193093; Nora A. Draper and Joseph Turow, "The Corporate Cultivation of Digital Resignation," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 8 (2019): 1824–1839, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819833331; Heather Howard, David Zwicky, and Danielle Walker, "Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is: A Values-Based Evaluation Tool for Collections Decisions," *Collection Management* 48, no. 3 (2023): 165–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/01462679.2022.2150733.

and power."[49] Therefore, before discussing platform power in the making or breaking of connections in libraries, it must then be clarified that this text is not arguing that library-generated or -imposed structures are not biased. Quite the opposite; "theorists and practitioners from Sandy Berman (1993) to Hope Olsen (2002) have made clear that subject and classification standards are rife with problems."[50]

The power dynamic to be discussed here then is that, when outsourced to a third party, a platform, which may or may not have the same vision as those in the library,[51] the biases behind the metadata can be more easily glossed over, unquestioned, or concealed. This is as a result of the fact that "metadata's utility to aid search, discovery, retrieval, and interoperability means it is often neglected as textual in and of itself; its utilitarian nature obscures its tacit power."[52] Whether in discovery layers, resource databases, library purchasing interfaces, or otherwise, the way that information is organized by businesses serving libraries—the indexing, the content that is promoted as similar to one's readings, the relevance decisions that push some content to the top above others—holds immense

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49 Stacy Allison-Cassin and Dean Seeman, "Metadata as Knowledge," *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 6, no. 3 (2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.244.

50 Allison-Cassin and Seeman, "Metadata," 2.

51 Barron and Preater, "Critical," 95.; Jeremy Knox, "(Re)Politicising Data-Driven Education: From Ethical Principles to Radical Participation," *Learning, Media and Technology* 48, no. 2 (2023): 204, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2022.2158466.

52 Allison-Cassin and Seeman, "Metadata," 3.

power.[53] It is often stated that libraries are not neutral, but when libraries rely on others to build connections on their behalf, the lack of neutrality deepens. When the decision to connect is left to platforms alone, it is they who have the power to "pick and choose" what connections to make or break.[54]

"The power of automated action at scale"

The magnitude of growing library platform amalgamation and reach provides key evidence of the impact of "the power of automated action at scale." In his 2020 edition of the annual Library Systems Report, Breeding writes that "the library technology industry has steadily consolidated over the last two decades, with the number of vendors narrowing at each round of acquisition."[55] Of the consolidations that year, Breeding notes that this "narrows the slate of competitors in an industry already offering few viable options for many libraries."[56]

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53 Richard Wisneski, "I Can't Get No Satis-Searching: Reassessing Discovery Layers in Academic Libraries Journal of Web Librarianship," *Journal of Web Librarianship* 18, no. 1 (2024): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/19322909.2024.2326687; Matthew Reidsma, *Masked by Trust: Bias in Library Discovery*, (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2019).; Lisa Romero, "Database Coverage for Communication Research: Implications for Collection Development," *The Serials Librarian* 83, no. 3/4 (2022): 233–260. https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2023.2212019; Vadde, "Platform," 458; Andrew D. Asher, Lynda M. Duke, and Suzanne Wilson, "Paths of Discovery: Comparing the Search Effectiveness of EBSCO Discovery Service, Summon, Google Scholar, and Conventional Library Resources," *College & Research Libraries* 74, no. 5 (September 1, 2013): 464–88, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl-374; Sarah P. C. Dahlen, Heather Haeger, Kathlene Hanson, and Melissa Montellano, "Almost in the Wild: Student Search Behaviors When Librarians Aren't Looking," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 1 (January 1, 2020). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.102096; Simon van Bellen, Juan Pablo Alperin, and Vincent Larivière, "The Oligopoly of Academic Publishers Persists in Exclusive Database," *arXiv*, June 25, 2024. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2406.17893.

54 Tarleton Gillespie, "Platforms Intervene," *Social Media + Society*, 1, no. 1 (2015), 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580479.

55 Marshall Breeding, "2020 Library Systems Report," *American Libraries Magazine* (May 1, 2020), https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/05/01/2020-library-systems-report/.

56 Breeding, "2020".

This narrowing of both depth and breadth of ownership means that a handful of private actors have the power to make decisions at scale that can impact libraries around the world. In today's libraries, private corporations maintain control over what resources are available and what are discontinued; they control which potential partners end up being close collaborators and which are locked out of collaborations all together. Should they choose to, they can effectively hold monopolies through mergers and acquisitions at the whims of their financial stakeholders. While platform providers may not have bad intentions in making these large-scale moves, it is the fact that they can make them to begin with that is cause for concern. As Giblin writes,

> Big Tech abuses monopoly power to deprive us of choice by limiting what we can buy, redirecting our searches to hide rivals' products, and locking us into ecosystems with technologies we can't alter without risking a lengthy prison sentence…[this] locking in users often begins with network effects—that phenomenon through which the value a user gets from a service increases with every additional user… when everyone's locked in, a better product or deal won't be enough to win them away.[57]

With the aforementioned global capitalistic orientation, we find ourselves in situations where these large-scale vendor automations cannot be undone with ease. As Smith and Appleton posit, "efficiency drives, including the move toward purchasing shelf-ready books from vendors, make customization at the local level increasingly difficult."[58]

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57   Giblin and Doctorow, *Chokepoint Capitalism*, 36, 142, 144.

58   Trista Smith and Leo Appleton, "Addressing Classification System Bias in Higher Education Libraries in England," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 23, no. 4 (2023): 823.

"The power of information asymmetry"

With the power to make decisions about content, one holds the power to target certain content to certain users while withholding from others. In doing so, the power to control content decisions can quickly escalate to information asymmetry between different users. In platforms, powerholders are able to "operate as opaque black boxes where outsiders only see input and output on the basis of limited and biased data [while]... only the platforms are privy to how the processes work and have access to much more detailed data."[59] In this way, it is the platforms alone who become the ultimate gatekeepers, deciding what information to share, with whom, and when. Such polarity is contrary to basic democratic values as "education is a public good...an educated citizenry is an essential component of functional democracy,"[60] and "...in order for people to exercise their full rights as citizens, they must have access to...the broadest possible range of information...a communications system needs to be both diverse and open."[61]

When algorithms, content, and processes become obscured by platforms, it becomes easier for power holders to unquestioningly ground decisions for inclusion or exclusion in their own beliefs and values. In limiting decision makers and critiques to a smaller set of more uniform voices, platforms risk decreasing diversity and creating unease amongst their user

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59 Nielsen and Ganter, *Power*, 21.

60 Natalie Greene Taylor, Karen Kettnich, Ursula Gorham, and Paul T. Jaeger, eds. *Libraries and the Global Retreat of Democracy: Confronting Polarization, Misinformation, and Suppression, Advances in Librarianship* 50 Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2022; Nailisa Tanner, "Knowledge for Sale: The Neoliberal Takeover of Higher Education, by Lawrence Busch," *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 4 (2019): 1–3. https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v4.29644.

61 Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, "For a Political Economy of Mass Communications," *Socialist Register* 10 (March 1973): 21, https://socialistregister-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/index.php/srv/article/view/5355.

Figure 2   Screenshot of the introductory remarks of a redacted vendor's
Spring 2024 Town Hall for customers.

communities.[62] Furthermore, as will be discussed later in this book, when the power of information distribution is asymmetrically assigned, platforms—especially those in libraries where access to information is primordial—risk the spread of mis- and disinformation.[63]

Additionally, as seen too often in libraries, information access is asymmetrically assigned for financial reasons. That is, while openness is essential "for people to exercise their full rights as citizens" and platforms tout the importance of said openness (even going as far as to cite renowned critics of capitalism in their business pitches, as illustrated in Figure 2), platforms can also prohibit access to this essential information

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62 Czerniewicz and Feldman, "Technology," 438; Ana Stojanov and Ben Kei Daniel, "A Decade of Research into the Application of Big Data and Analytics in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Education and Information Technologies* 29, no. 5 (2024): 5821, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-12033-8.; Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and José van Dijck, "Platformisation," *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (2019): 3 https://policyreview.info/concepts/platformisation.

63 See Chapter 2 by Rowan.

unless sometimes exorbitant fees are paid.[64] This powerful asymmetry of information takes place at the expense of libraries, researchers, and citizens alike as access to cultural artifacts is withheld under the guise of "financial," "proprietary," or other reasons.

"The power to operate across domains"

Nielsen and Ganter provide the example of "data collected through a photo-sharing app…used to target advertising on a social network" to illustrate operating across domains.[65] But platform power need not be restricted to virtual domains. The magnitude of platform power can also be felt across industry domains (e.g. public libraries vs. academia) and sociopolitical domains, as platform power can be seen as a digital manifestation of globalisation's impact on libraries.[66]

This book provides texts from authors based in Canada, the United States, and Australia, each of whom are writing with their own inherent biases, and from their own positionality, global or otherwise. However, their arguments and findings can be found in similar scenarios around the world.[67] Connecting to "the power to set standards," it should not go unnoticed that globalisation of platforms increases their ability to function across multifold domains, allowing for operation around

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64 Murdock and Golding, "Political Economy," 21.

65 Nielsen and Ganter, *Power*, 21.

66 Ruth Rikowski, Globalisation, *Information and Libraries: The Implications of the World Trade Organisation's GATS and TRIPS Agreements*, Oxford: Chandos, 2005; Robert Waterman McChesney, "The Political Economy of Global Communication," in *Capitalism and the Information Age: The Political Economy of the Global Communication Revolution*, ed. Robert Waterman McChesney, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and John Bellamy Foster, 1–26. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1998.

67 See, for example, how Hegarty's chapter connects US platform power to Australian libraries.

the world, often at the expense of those already in marginalized situations.[68]

In the digital realm, there is an evidenced "rise of powerful intermediaries…creating online environments …of users who are surveilled to commercialize their attention and data."[69] Usage data, its extraction from libraries and those they serve, and later its monetization, is one of the LIS manifestations of "the power to operate across domains," as through data brokering, platforms can objectify information users' decisions for their own capital gains.[70]

Case Studies

The following chapters delve deeper into the pervasiveness of platform power in libraries by offering case studies exemplifying the aforementioned powers beginning with Rowan's discussion of the digital property regimes navigated in library ebook acquisition, management, and preservation. Grounding her research in the historical context of North American property regimes, Rowan's work looks at libraries, intellectual property, and cultural artifacts.

Beyond books, libraries have become environments where one can discover a myriad of information resources. The two chapters that follow highlight the increasing challenges that

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68 Toussaint Nothias, "Access Granted: Facebook's Free Basics in Africa," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 3 (2020): 329–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719890530; Czerniewicz and Feldman, "Technology," 430; Nora Schmidt, "The Privilege to Select: Global Research System, European Academic Library Collections, and Decolonisation." (Phd. thesisLund: Lund University, Faculties of Humanities and Theology, 2020), https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4011296; Nielsen and Ganter, *Power*, 201.

69 König, "Two Tales," 1378.

70 Signe Sophus Lai, Victoria Andelsman, and Sofie Flensburg,"Datafied School Life: The Hidden Commodification of Digital Learning," *Learning, Media and Technology* 49, no. 3 (July 2, 2024): 371–387, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2023.2219063; Nielsen and Ganter, *Power*, 203. See also Chapter 5 by Sly and Koivisto.

come with these new formats and bring to light the questions of how platform power impacts libraries in an information landscape where libraries are no longer just collecting printed works. First, in Chapter 3, Hooper highlights new challenges faced with acquiring moving images in a platform-laden world. She speaks to the "customer captivity" of streaming media platforms, as a select few hold dominant power in the library film distribution landscape, and goes on to elaborate on how library film media is one of the venues where disenfranchisement of the global south further facilitates barriers to culture and education.

In Chapter 4, Hegarty outlines the challenges faced by libraries whose mandates now encompass electronic legal deposit of social media posts. His work provides a forward-looking illustration of how business interests impact modern archiving. Through the concrete striking examples in his work, one can see the increased impact of platforms on collective heritage and cultural memory institutions.

Finally, this tome will close with Sly and Koivisto's chapter on the increasingly present coalescence of power in the scholarly realm. In this chapter, the authors speak more broadly about libraries, their place in academia, and how a perpetual cycle that privileges certain people and groups has taken hold via platformitization. This chapter will connect the information asymmetry of Nielsen and Ganter to Foucault's work in power distribution and extrapolate it to the information economy of today.

Through the case studies presented in this work, and the theoretical framing of this chapter, it is hoped that both those practicing and studying library and information can see the power that platforms now hold in libraries. In doing so, practitioners and scholars alike can make more informed decisions regarding the platform power and libraries.

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