

Review of Platform Power and Libraries

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ABSTRACT: Review of Smith, C. F. (Ed.). (2025). *Platform Power and Libraries*. Library Juice Press.

Keywords: platformization, acquisitions, deprofessionalization, labor



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Journal of Radical Librarianship, Vol. 11 (2025) pp.180-182. Published 4 Sep 2025.

Platform Power and Libraries, edited by Christine F. Smith, often reads like a catalog against the platformization librarians have experienced in recent years but, perhaps in a more general way, against the role technology has had in engendering an increasingly precarious workforce:

Libraries are becoming even more beholden to these platforms as patrons identify with the platforms rather than their library service (Rowan, 2025, 40).

...these subscription packages effectively circumvent a librarian's collection development expertise and knowledge of their institution's uniquely local needs in terms of collection gaps, faculty research and teaching needs, and student learning needs (Hooper, 2025, 74).

...academic and commercial SVOD platforms have effectively circumscribed the academic library repositioned themselves as both providers and keepers of filmic cultural memory (Hooper, 2025, 82).

The theme, in a word: replacement. Librarians, no longer professionals in the old sense of the word,¹ have been turned into veritable consumers within their own institutions—sans any real choice, as the platforms are increasingly owned by a small number of multinational conglomerates. This is essentially what the book's four chapters discuss, albeit in several different contexts: digital property regimes, streaming platforms, legal documentation, and, finally, data surveillance. Each of these chapters, however, share a common, underlying observation: the corporatization and financialization of the acquisitions process is nearing its zenith—and something must be done about it.

The book begins with a working definition of platforms: “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 (Smith, 2025, 4). Most of the emphasis throughout the rest of the book is not so much on how these platforms are positive or negative forces *in and of themselves*, but rather on how their current iteration is deeply entangled with the profit motive: “It warrants noting that, as technology, platforms are not the root of the issue. The deeper root is the hegemonic capitalistic orientation that...necessitates their integration, all the while extracting value from the individuals using them (Smith, 2025, 2). I say “most of the emphasis” because this question—whether platforms, even in isolation, are part of a larger problem within librarianship—is an interesting point of contention, one which *Platform Power and Libraries* leaves tantalizingly unresolved. I will attempt my own resolution here.

A good place to start is the following quotation, taken from the third chapter: “this shift of power away from libraries and to academic streaming platforms *was not intentional*. Indeed, conversations with sales representatives and industry leaders repeatedly reveal an enthusiasm and desire to provide the best content to as many people as possible” (my emphasis, Hooper, 75). One could argue the exact opposite; platformization was, in fact, intentional, devised by corporations with the sole aim of opening a relatively untapped area of the economy to privatization. This is not to suggest that the individuals working for these corporations are aware, per se, that the product they sell makes librarians more precarious, but merely that the product

¹ That is, if we ever were professionals. One can only look back with nostalgia on the hundreds of scholarly articles and books that saw the professionalization of librarianship as a given.

itself obscures this fact—to its own benefit. The average librarian, if not for having been fed the deliberate lie that technological progress is inherently good, would never have willingly agreed to their virtual removal from the acquisitions process. The role of ideology, in fact, seems relatively underdeveloped throughout *Platform Power and Libraries*—not necessarily a negative in and of itself, but it is certainly a topic that requires more thorough treatment.

But to push this point even further, it is evident that a third party has been left out of this discussion almost entirely: library management, which, to undercut library workers, has historically sought to align itself with corporate interests. There is little evidence that the rise of platforms would have taken the path that it has taken (and will continue to take) if the tools of the trade had remained in the control of workers. Management, in other words, sought to disenfranchise library workers.² Technological advancement, known colloquially as efficiency, was the material process which the consent of both the public and librarians was manufactured.

In summary, many of the authors in *Platform Powers and Libraries* are rightfully resistant to the idea that platform power should be left in the hands of corporations. This, in and of itself, is a positive and worthwhile contribution to the literature. They are less willing, however, to deemphasize the efficiency discourse that underpins the transition to platforms *in toto*. That is, except for Sly & Koivisto (2025), who pose the following question in the last chapter of the book:

By volunteering our work into this quantified system and allowing...metrics and assessment to make decisions without the imposition of needing to decide, in other words, to trust in the purity and objectivity of numbers, does this equate to ignoring the whole of the snake while it devours itself (119)?

This question inspires others: What would efficiency look like, if, in an ideal world, we were able to detach it from a capitalist ethos? Would platforms really be any less degrading (or less environmentally harmful)³ if we asserted full control over them? Might there be other paths our work could take—outside of platformization—that we ultimately find more fulfilling? I am reminded of a recent article in the *New Left Review*, which critiques efficiency discourse—in this instance, within the context of the overall economy:

While efficiency remains important...a genuinely multi-critical economy, capable of meeting the needs of all...would need to incorporate a broader array of care priorities...[including] respecting ecological limits...fostering meaningful rather than degrading [labor]...[and] community cohesion or autonomy (Benanav, 2025).

Replace “multi-critical economy” with “multi-critical librarianship” and we have a good starting point for a renewed understanding of librarianship—one that respects the environment,

² I have outlined a similar transition that has taken place within cataloging (Kirby, 2025). It is interesting to note that many of the same ideological parlor tricks that were used decades ago against catalogers (efficiency, progress) have been recycled, wholesale, in the current era of platformization.

³ While they pale in comparison to the emissions produced by vehicles, the emissions produced by data centers are substantial: 3.7% of total greenhouse emissions in 2018 (Lavi 2025). This, for the record, was more than air travel (2.4%).

strengthens the autonomy of communities, and asserts a worker's right to be free from the whims of "progress" and "technological advancement." Or, to put it a bit more directly, a revitalized vision of librarianship that maintains a worker's right to structure and define their own labor. Efficiency, under certain circumstances, is a worthwhile goal, but it should never function as the sole criterion by which we set our standards.

In the end, these criticisms are not meant to undermine *Platform Power and Libraries*, but rather to highlight some of its interesting contradictions and push them towards their logical conclusion. The book undoubtedly offers valuable advice for librarians seeking to resist platformization; its call for a "nonprofit digital content platform which could redistribute some of the power and control held by platforms back to libraries" is worthwhile and should be actively pursued (Rowan, 2025, 119). *Platform Power and Libraries*' most radical feature, however, is that it acts as a starting point from which we can begin to question the centrality of efficiency altogether.

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