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Marco Schirone

BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND PRODUCTS

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The less-than-satisfactory interoperability of platforms that convey content and the subsequent creation of "data silos" are well-known topics in the scientific and professional domain of scholarly communication and librarianship. This book provides readers with a means to contextualize these phenomena within the larger context of "chokepoint capitalism." A chokepoint originates whenever users and creators of cultural content are locked into a few platforms where users interact—at a price—with the content sold by the platform's owners rather than the content creators. To maximize profits, the proprietors of these platforms tend to exploit— at the same time—the creators of content and the platform's customers. This twofold "alienation" (to use a more philosophical terminology) of cultural goods' creators *and* users is achieved in several ways, for example, through circumventing antitrust regulations and putting in place mechanisms of technology lock-in.

Smaller companies, challenged by bigger ones, seek profits by extracting more labor from workers. This process is by no means only valid for the creative industries. However, the authors of *Chokepoint Capitalism* argue that the extraction of value from labor in this sector is facilitated by the fact that creating cultural objects is intrinsically rewarding. In other words, it is more probable that one would work for free when employed in the cultural sector (e.g., writing a book chapter) than in other sectors (e.g., working on the assembly line of a factory). As the authors write, "People's passions are weaponized to facilitate their exploitation" (p. 24). In this regard, it could be argued that the creative industries and the "market of symbolic goods" (Bourdieu, 1985') have a special place in the neoliberal version of capitalism as discussed at length by McGuigan (2009).

In *Chokepoint Capitalism*, Rebecca Giblin (Professor at Melbourne Law School and the Director of the Intellectual Property Research Institute of Australia) and Cory Doctorow

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(Canadian-British blogger, journalist, and science fiction author) depict a scenario in which the influence of the Chicago school of economics—from which the neoliberalist version of capitalism emerged—has been galvanizing the accumulation of economic power into a few mammoth-size corporations. Thus, these legal entities control how cultural goods are produced and delivered. In the book, collective names used for these corporations are Big Content, that is, companies concerned with the production of cultural goods, and Big Tech, which capitalizes on delivering these goods.

The book's audience is broad, as this publication can be read as a scholarly work in the field of intellectual property law and as a critical tool for activism. More specifically, the book is articulated into three quite distinct, although at the end converging, narratives: (1) the historical development of Big Content and Big Tech; (2) the adverse effects of chokepoints on workers, as in the case of wage theft (i.e., the extraction of more value from the labor of the "creative class"); and (3) the issue of how to counter chokepoint capitalism. The first two narratives are dealt with in Part I of the book, whereas Part II takes up the third.

The book offers theoretical insights to librarians and allied professionals, making it relevant as a resource in information studies and related fields. Part II (corresponding to Chapters 12–19) is where the book becomes an inspiration to action for all affected by chokepoint capitalism, librarians included. Chapter 12 underlines how Big Tech and Big Content have the economic muscles necessary to scare off competitors and lobby for favorable regulations. The authors propose several approaches for limiting the power of large companies: greater transparency in economic transitions (Chapter 13), fair retribution for creators (through unionizing and collective class actions, see Chapter 14), greater interoperability between platforms, and copyright implementations that side with the creators and consumers of content rather than the platforms that deliver it (Chapter 13).

Moreover, libraries are presented as counterforces against chokepoint capitalism when the authors point out that library professionals' commitment to protecting the privacy of their patrons is diametrically opposed to Big Tech's disregard for the privacy of the users. On a more practical plane, *Chokepoint Capitalism* is a timely source of reflection for librarians and scholarly communication specialists engaged in the topic of copyright—I think of the library world's increasing interest in copyright education (see Hinchliffe et al., 2022'). More broadly, in my view, the book indirectly shows the democratic role of libraries as representative of the "public sphere" as opposed to the marketization of culture discussed from a Habermasian perspective in *Cool Capitalism* (McGuigan, 2009). *Chokepoint Capitalism* also emphasizes that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, remote access to books through libraries—not seen in a favorable light by Amazon—has been of paramount importance.

Furthermore, scholarly publishing is a system that overlaps on occasion with the type of publication systems studied by the authors, for instance, in the case of sources that are both academic texts and best-sellers. The book contributes to the research on this intersection between scholarly communication and the broader dynamics of publishing. In fact, although scholarly communication is not the book's first and foremost focus, its arguments and examples are relevant to this field (especially if one is interested in contexts in which U.S. legislation applies). Let us consider the academic equivalent of Big Content, namely large academic publishing corporations whose profit margins have led to boycotts and the rise of initiatives such as open access and Creative Commons licenses. In this regard, I wished the book had some discussion of open access publishing and, maybe, even some mentions of the phenomenon of university presses.

Strengths of *Chokepoint Capitalism* are its references to the COVID-19 pandemic and the most recent developments in Big Tech, thus making the book a timely update in the literature on the effect of neoliberalism in the cultural sector. Another strength is the depth of the legal analyses, which are always well-documented and expertly discussed. At the same time, this depth turns the book into a reading that might be challenging for some. In any case, an effective division of content into chapters and parts helps a reader navigate the book, which is well-written and captivating in all its sections, both the technical ones and the ones more directly aimed at provoking societal action. In this respect, the book has a transformative agenda that is similar to another work written in the wake of the pandemic, *Democratize Work* (Ferreras et al., 2022), especially concerning the topic of the commodification of the news sector (see chapter 3 in *Chokepoint Capitalism*) and the proposal of a job guarantee for workers in the creative industries (see chapter 19 in *Chokepoint Capitalism*).

Although the book has an ambitious scope, the authors emphasize that it has a U.S. focus and that all legislation they discuss should be analyzed from that perspective. Future works could extend the analysis of chokepoint capitalism to the perspective of other knowledge economies, especially those that have advanced their place in the scholarly publishing market (e.g., China).

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