



Operating the franchise: vendor consolidation, algorithmic mediation, and the remaking of academic librarians as platform administrators for digital capitalism

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper examines how artificial intelligence implementation and vendor consolidation in academic libraries creates a franchise model where librarians operate vendor-controlled systems rather than exercising professional autonomy over information organization and access.

Method. Critical qualitative analysis synthesising empirical studies of AI accuracy in cataloguing, market concentration data, documented cases of content filtering, a revelatory case study of verification infrastructure failure, and theoretical frameworks from platform capitalism, the sociology of professions, and critical information science.

Analysis. Vendor monopolies (84% ARL member institutions market share at peak concentration), AI cataloguing failures (26% F1 accuracy for subject headings), and content filtering (blocking searches for *Gaza War* and *Tulsa race massacre*) create franchise conditions where librarians bear operational accountability for systems they neither control nor can modify.

Results. AI implementation serves vendor interests in labour cost reduction rather than improving information access, while consolidation creates platform monopolies extracting value from professional labour while eliminating the expertise that creates it.

Conclusions. Resistance requires collective organising, alternative infrastructure development, and recognition that current AI implementations conflict with core professional values. The framework extends platform capitalism theory to professional service contexts.

Introduction

Academic libraries face a fundamental transformation as artificial intelligence (AI) and vendor consolidation reshape professional practice and institutional autonomy. This paper argues that these changes create what it terms a franchise model of librarianship, where library workers operate platforms controlled by vendors rather than exercising professional judgment over knowledge organisation and information access. Like franchise operators who serve the products their franchisors specify according to procedures mandated by headquarters, librarians increasingly administer systems they neither control nor can meaningfully modify, while remaining accountable to users for service quality.

This transformation matters because it fundamentally alters the nature of library work, the quality of information access, and the ability of libraries to fulfil their democratic mission. Discovery systems silently censor research topics (Tay, 2025), metadata generated by AI achieves only 26% accuracy for subject classification (Potter & Saccucci, 2024), and vendor monopolies control essential infrastructure with 84% market share at Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions (Breeding, 2020). Taken together, these developments present the profession with not merely technical challenges but existential questions about its future under digital capitalism.

While the empirical documentation draws primarily from US academic libraries, where Breeding's (2020) longitudinal studies provide uniquely detailed market data, the structural dynamics operate globally. The same multinational vendors control library infrastructure internationally, and AI implementations including content filtering affect libraries worldwide. International evidence from European AI cataloguing research (Golub et al., 2024), Australian open-source adoption (National Library of Australia, 2024), and Koha deployments across Latin America, India, and lower-income countries (Breeding, 2024) confirms the transnational scope of both franchise dynamics and emerging resistance strategies.

The franchise model as analytical framework

The franchise business model, as established in organisational economics, involves a distinctive structural relationship: a franchisor owns proprietary systems and intellectual property while a franchisee pays ongoing fees for the right to operate using those systems under the franchisor's terms (Lafontaine & Slade, 1997). Defining characteristics include operational standardisation imposed by the franchisor, the franchisor's control over product specifications, and a fundamental asymmetry in which the franchisee bears local operational risk and accountability to customers while the franchisor retains systemic control and extracts value (Stanworth & Curran, 1999). Crucially, franchise operators maintain the appearance of independent local ownership while functioning within a system of corporate control.

This paper applies the franchise model not as metaphor but as a structured analytical lens. The mapping is precise: vendors function as franchisors who own proprietary platform infrastructure (Alma, WorldShare, Primo) and control development roadmaps, feature implementation, and default configurations. Libraries function as franchisees who pay substantial subscription fees to operate these systems and serve users through interfaces determined by vendors. The Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) delivery model functions as operational standardisation, as libraries receive the same platform with limited capacity for local customisation. When vendor systems fail, libraries absorb the consequences experienced by users as a result of decisions made at corporate headquarters, just as franchise operators absorb customer complaints about products they did not design and cannot alter.

The franchise framework was chosen over alternative conceptualisations—outsourcing, platform dependence, colonisation—because it captures a quality distinctive to the library-vendor relationship that these alternatives miss. Unlike outsourcing, franchise operators still perform

the labour under corporate terms, maintaining the appearance of autonomous professional service. Unlike simple platform dependence, the franchise model identifies the specific mechanisms through which autonomy is eroded: fee extraction, standardised operations, externalised risk, and the elimination of professional expertise. Unlike colonisation metaphors, the franchise framework identifies how libraries participate in their own transformation through institutional choices shaped by structural pressures.

Research questions and thesis

This paper introduces the franchise model as an analytical framework for understanding the structural transformation of academic librarianship, extending existing theories of platform labour and surveillance capitalism to institutional settings where professional expertise has historically mediated public access to knowledge. The paper addresses three interconnected research questions: first, how do vendor consolidation and AI implementation structurally transform the professional practice of academic librarianship? Second, in what ways does this transformation create franchise conditions where libraries operate infrastructure controlled by vendors while bearing accountability for service quality they cannot ensure? Third, what forms of resistance emerge within and against this structural transformation, and what do they reveal about alternative futures for library technology governance?

The central thesis is that the convergence of vendor consolidation and AI implementation creates a franchise model of academic librarianship in which libraries retain institutional identity and accountability to users while ceding substantive control over information organisation, discovery, and access to corporate platform operators. This franchise model emerges from the intersection of corporate consolidation with institutional conditions such as declining funding, administrative enthusiasm for AI-driven efficiency, and professional metrics prioritising comprehensiveness that create the structural preconditions for platform dependence.

The verification crisis: a case study

The transformation this paper analyses manifests concretely in daily library practice. An undergraduate student at a University of Wisconsin system library approached the reference desk with concerns about an article discovered through Ex Libris Primo, connected to the Alma library services platform and drawing from the Central Discovery Index (CDI)—all Clarivate products serving the majority of research libraries. The student had employed the source evaluation practices central to everyday reference instruction: searching the library database, finding a peer-reviewed article, verifying its ISSN and DOI, confirming CrossRef registration, and noting the journal's indexing alongside established publications. While critical information literacy scholarship has long advocated moving beyond such verification by checklist evaluations toward structural analysis of how information systems shape knowledge access (Elmborg, 2006; Nicholson, 2016; Seale, 2016), these institutional markers remain the primary verification mechanisms that vendor platforms present to users.

What prompted the student's scepticism was attempting to verify the article's citations. Library staff discovered that of the article's thirty-two listed references, only five could be verified as existing publications; the remaining 84% were fabricated. The student's report, as summarized by the reference services coordinator in the library's support correspondence, raised urgent questions about the credibility of the institution's library resources and whether systems supplied by vendors could reliably deliver quality scholarly content (Ex Libris Support, Help Ticket #552419, October 8, 2025).

The journal, published by Al-Kindi Center for Research and Development, carried every institutional marker of academic credibility including DOI registration, ISSN assignment, CrossRef indexing, and discovery system inclusion. Yet closer inspection revealed telling inconsistencies: the corresponding author's contact was a Gmail address rather than institutional

email, the listed departmental affiliation contained errors, the editor-in-chief worked in an unrelated discipline, and the publisher's listed London address appeared to be a residential dwelling. Graff (2023) identified Al-Kindi among publishers whose journals appear in library databases despite fabricated content and manipulated citation metrics. This was not an isolated lapse but systematic infrastructure failure. The ISSN system provides identification without quality verification; CrossRef accepts registrations from any paying publisher; vendor discovery systems index content based on publisher agreements and fees, not scholarly evaluation.

The vendor response

When system librarians contacted Ex Libris, the vendor's response illuminated the franchise dynamic with remarkable clarity. Ex Libris explicitly disclaimed responsibility for quality control, stating that it does not systematically vet or exclude individual journals and instead defers to broader community and industry standards. The vendor indicated that decisions to block or remove content are handled reactively, on a case-by-case basis, typically following reports from the library community rather than through proactive monitoring (Ex Libris Support, Help Ticket #552419, October 8, 2025).

The vendor positioned itself as neutral infrastructure that merely transmitted content, explaining that proactive monitoring was constrained by the lack of authoritative, standardized lists of predatory publishers and the overall complexity of the scholarly publishing landscape. Rather than committing to remediation, Ex Libris recommended that libraries take responsibility for communicating to their users the known limitations and risks of the systems those libraries pay to provide (Ex Libris Support, Help Ticket #552419, October 8, 2025). This captures the franchise model's central dynamic: libraries pay substantial subscription fees for discovery infrastructure; when that infrastructure fails, the vendor disclaims responsibility and externalises remediation labour to subscriber institutions. After weeks of escalation through multiple support tiers, Ex Libris eventually removed the specific journal, a process that required sustained professional labour to remove a single predatory journal from a database containing millions of records. The vendor's suggestion that libraries could manage the problem themselves by deactivating the journal on their end if removal on the vendor side proved impossible (Ex Libris Support, Help Ticket #552419, October 8, 2025) further illustrates the dynamic that libraries manage quality within systems they pay for but do not control.

Implications for professional practice

This case illuminates why the franchise model matters beyond labour concerns. The student was practising exactly the kind of critical engagement that information literacy instruction aims to develop, questioning surface-level credibility markers and seeking verification, an impulse aligned with what critical information literacy scholars advocate (Mackey & Jacobson, 2014; Tewell, 2015). Yet even this sophisticated critical stance could not overcome the infrastructure failure. Every institutional marker the student could access had been compromised. The verification systems librarians previously provided through collection development, cataloguing review, and professional judgment have been replaced by automated processes that cannot perform these functions and vendors who explicitly disclaim responsibility. The problem is not that information literacy instruction is inadequate, whether grounded in standards or in critical approaches, but that the infrastructure it relies upon has been hollowed out by the franchise model.

Literature review

The franchise model draws on three interconnected bodies of scholarship: the political economy of information and platform capitalism, which explains the structural logic driving vendor consolidation; the sociology of professions and critical librarianship, which reveals how platform

dependence erodes professional autonomy; and critical information literacy, which documents the consequences of algorithmic mediation for knowledge access.

Platform capitalism and the political economy of information

The transformation of library technology markets reflects broader patterns of information commodification. Schiller (2007) traces how information has been progressively enclosed and commodified through digital infrastructure, creating conditions where access depends on commercial platform relationships rather than public institutions. Mosco (2009) demonstrates how digital convergence enables concentration of ownership across previously distinct sectors of information production, distribution, and access which is precisely the vertical integration now visible in library technology markets.

Srnicek (2016) provides the most directly applicable framework, defining platforms as digital infrastructures that position themselves as intermediaries, extracting data and value from user interactions. Library vendor systems, particularly cloud-hosted platforms like Ex Libris Alma and Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) WorldShare, operate as platforms in Srnicek's sense. They provide infrastructure, extract operational and behavioural data, and leverage switching costs to maintain market dominance. The franchise model extends Srnicek's analysis by identifying how platforms targeting professional service institutions extract value from professional expertise while simultaneously eliminating the professionals who create it.

Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism framework reveals how platform operators transform behavioural data into prediction products. In library contexts, Pooley (2022) documents this logic as *surveillance publishing*, where companies like Elsevier generate significant revenue through prediction-based products powered by researcher interaction data, with profit margins approaching 38%. Lamdan (2022) extends this to the Reed Elsevier (RELX)-Thomson Reuters duopoly, revealing how market dominance comparable to major technology firms has been achieved with far less public scrutiny.

Professional autonomy and the sociology of library work

The franchise model fundamentally concerns the erosion of professional autonomy. Abbott's (1988) foundational analysis demonstrates that professions maintain social authority by claiming exclusive jurisdiction over specific bodies of knowledge and practice. When external actors successfully claim jurisdiction over core professional tasks, the affected profession faces existential crisis. The franchise model describes precisely this jurisdictional displacement. Vendors claim authority over previously professional domains, including cataloguing, through AI metadata generation; collection development, through algorithmic indexing; and information access, through discovery controlled by the platform.

Evett's (2009) distinguishes between *occupational professionalism*, controlled from within the profession through collegial authority and ethical standards, and *organizational professionalism*, controlled from above through managerial authority. The franchise model represents a third dynamic called platform professionalism, where professional practice is controlled by the technological infrastructure of corporate vendors. Noordegraaf's (2007) concept of hybrid professionalism, where professionals negotiate between professional and organisational logics, gains new urgency in contexts dependent on platforms where the platform itself mediates between professional practice and corporate logic.

Critical librarianship scholarship applies these dynamics to library contexts. Barron and Preater (2018) document how cloud-hosted systems cause loss of institutional autonomy through proprietary algorithms protected by trade secret law. Jones and Salo (2018) demonstrate that vendor infrastructure embeds surveillance capacities conflicting with patron privacy commitments. Lamdan (2019) reveals that library vendor RELX's data products serve immigration

enforcement agencies; the same entities selling discovery tools to libraries profit from surveillance targeting the communities libraries serve.

Vendor consolidation and AI implementation

Breeding's (2020) longitudinal study of 3,016 US academic libraries documents dramatic market concentration over three decades, with detailed market share data and consolidation patterns presented in the analysis section below. The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC)'s (2021) opposition to the Clarivate-ProQuest merger argued the deal would bring the market close to monopoly conditions. Fournie (2020) demonstrates that consolidation has produced closed ecosystem platforms that limit interoperability and lock libraries into single vendor technology stacks, conditions structurally analogous to the franchise operator's inability to modify corporate systems. International evidence confirms these patterns operate transnationally (Winter, 2023; Aspesi et al., 2019).

Empirical research on AI cataloguing reveals significant limitations. Multiple independent studies, including the Library of Congress' computational description experiment (Potter & Saccucci, 2024), evaluations of GPT-4 for MARC record creation (Taniguchi, 2024), critical appraisals of AI cataloguing tools (Miller-Nesbitt, 2024), and automated classification research using Annif (Golub et al., 2024), confirm that AI systems fall far below production requirements. Engel et al.'s (2025) systematic review concludes the evidence base lacks compelling experimental evidence. The detailed accuracy figures are presented in the analysis; what matters here is the scholarly consensus that AI cataloguing tools remain inadequate even as vendors market and implement them. The Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) (2024a) survey confirms institutional scepticism, with major professional concerns about misinformation, bias, and copyright.

Critical information literacy and algorithmic mediation

The critical information literacy movement has developed substantial alternatives to source evaluation approaches that rely on checklists. Elmborg (2006) critiqued treating information as neutral commodity, arguing librarians should help students understand how texts shape their positions as critical thinkers. Tewell (2015) extends this into pedagogical practice, and Mackey and Jacobson (2014) propose *metaliteracy* encompassing participatory engagement across platforms. These approaches gain urgency when algorithmic systems rather than human librarians determine what users encounter. Seale (2016) documents how information literacy instruction reproduces neoliberal subjectivities emphasising individual responsibility while obscuring structural constraints, and Nicholson (2016) reveals how what counts as *good* information behaviour is constructed through power relations increasingly mediated by AI.

Reidsma (2019) provides the most direct analysis of algorithmic bias in library discovery, documenting how vendor platforms reproduce biases through ranking algorithms and interface design, which he terms *masked* bias operating beneath users' awareness. Subsequent research documents how AI-powered discovery tools extend this through content filtering blocking legitimate academic topics (Tay, 2025; Singley, 2025). Noble (2018) demonstrates how search algorithms embed and amplify racist and sexist assumptions through training data and ranking systems. Archambault's (2023) call for *algorithmic literacy* recognises that students must understand how discovery systems shape which sources they encounter. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2016) Framework for Information Literacy partially addresses these concerns but, as Archambault argues, lacks explicit engagement with algorithmic mediation. Cope and Kalantzis (2023) document how generative AI further complicates this by blurring information retrieval and information creation, producing synthetic responses that may incorporate fabricated citations, an epistemological crisis requiring fundamental reconceptualisation of how libraries teach information evaluation.

Together, these literatures establish the theoretical conditions the franchise model synthesises. Platform capitalism provides the extractive logic; professional autonomy erosion provides the mechanism; and compromised information literacy infrastructure provides the consequences for users.

Institutional conditions enabling the franchise model

The franchise model does not emerge solely from vendor strategy. It arises at the intersection of corporate consolidation and institutional conditions that create structural preconditions for platform dependence.

Declining library budgets represent the most fundamental precondition. The shift from print collections that libraries owned to electronic resources they licence transferred not only access models but institutional leverage. Libraries that owned collections retained permanent access and could negotiate from material independence, while libraries dependent on licensed content must continuously pay vendors, creating the ongoing fee relationship characteristic of franchise arrangements. Shu et al. (2018) document that commercial publishers' packages carry substantially higher prices than non-profit alternatives, yet libraries accept these terms because individual title selection requires professional labour that institutions have reduced.

The profession's historical emphasis on collection size as a quality metric created incentives aligning with vendor interests in comprehensiveness over verification. When discovery systems index billions of items, scale is marketed as a feature. The verification crisis documented in this paper's case study is, in part, a consequence of collection metrics that prioritise breadth over the professional judgment required to ensure quality.

University administrative culture provides the third enabling condition. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) document how academic capitalism reshapes universities around market logics privileging cost reduction and technological innovation. Libraries that resist AI adoption risk being perceived as obstacles to innovation rather than guardians of information quality. When AI-generated metadata achieves only 26% accuracy for subject classification, this represents a professional crisis; when institutional culture frames such tools as modernisation, raising quality concerns becomes an act of resistance rather than standard professional practice. Vendors auto-enable features into an institutional environment where professional pushback on quality grounds has been systematically devalued.

These conditions do not excuse vendor behaviour, but they explain why the franchise model succeeds. Vendors built business models that exploit institutional pressures, offering platform solutions that appear to address funding crises while transferring professional control to corporate infrastructure.

Methodology

Research design

This paper employs a critical qualitative research design positioned within the tradition of critical information studies and the political economy of communication. The analysis synthesises multiple evidence streams to examine how vendor consolidation and AI implementation transform academic librarianship, applying the franchise model as an analytical framework following the methodological tradition of critical analysis in library and information science (Lamdan, 2022; Noble, 2018; Reidsma, 2019).

Categories of AI examined

The paper examines five distinct categories of AI technology, recognising that *artificial intelligence* encompasses diverse technical approaches with different capabilities, limitations, and implications for professional practice.

First, supervised machine learning for subject classification encompasses tools, like Annif, developed by the National Library of Finland, which use statistical models trained on existing cataloguing records to predict subject headings and classification numbers. Second, large language models for cataloguing describes the application of generative AI such as GPT-4 to creating bibliographic records in MARC format, raising distinct concerns about hallucination and the generation of plausible but inaccurate metadata. Third, neural content filtering refers to multi-class classification models, specifically Microsoft Azure OpenAI's content safety system, which score user prompts for potentially harmful content. When integrated into library discovery tools, these filters determine which scholarly queries receive responses and which are blocked.

Fourth, algorithmic ranking and relevance describes the proprietary algorithms determining order and visibility of search results in discovery systems, shaping information access through relevance determinations that operate largely without transparency. Fifth, AI metadata generated by vendors describes tools such as Clarivate's auto-enabled AI metadata for Ebook Central, announced to subscribing libraries in October 2025, for which no public disclosure of the specific technical implementation is available (Clarivate, n.d.), preventing independent evaluation. These categories are analytically distinct but operationally interconnected within vendor platforms: a single discovery session may involve algorithmic ranking, AI-generated metadata, content filtering, and machine learning models operating simultaneously within a system librarians can observe but cannot audit.

Data sources

The analysis draws on six categories of evidence: empirical studies of AI accuracy in cataloguing (Brzustowicz, 2023; Golub et al., 2024; Engel et al., 2025; Miller-Nesbitt, 2024; Potter & Saccucci, 2024; Taniguchi, 2024); market concentration data from Breeding's longitudinal industry analyses (2020, 2024, 2025), supplemented by SPARC (2021) and scholarly analyses of publishing market consolidation (Aspesi et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2018; Winter, 2023); documentary evidence of content filtering from practitioner investigations (Tay, 2025; Singley, 2025) and Microsoft's (2025) technical documentation; theoretical frameworks from platform studies, surveillance capitalism, the political economy of communication, and the sociology of professions; professional literature including PCC reports (2024a, 2024b), workforce surveys (Kennedy et al., 2022), AFL-CIO fact sheets (2025), and professional news reporting; and direct practitioner evidence including vendor support ticket correspondence (Ex Libris Support, Help Ticket #552419, October 8, 2025), vendor product technical documentation (Clarivate, n.d.), and direct observation at the 2024 Ex Libris Users of North America (ELUNA) conference.

Case selection and temporal scope

The verification crisis case study was selected as what Yin (2018) terms a revelatory case; an instance crystallising multiple dimensions of a broader phenomenon, automated indexing without quality verification, vendor disclaimers of responsibility, externalised remediation labour, and compromised verification infrastructure. Primary evidence covers 2020 to 2025, a period of accelerated vendor consolidation and AI implementation, with historical context from Breeding's (2020) longitudinal analysis tracking patterns from 1990 to 2020.

Analytical procedure

Evidence was analysed through the franchise model framework, with each stream examined for how it illustrates structural features of the franchise relationship: fee extraction, operational standardisation, externalised risk, franchisor control of product specifications, and erosion of franchisee expertise. The analysis proceeds inductively from documented evidence to structural interpretation.

Limitations

The empirical evidence draws primarily on US academic library market data; comparable concentration data for other national contexts would strengthen external validity. The case study represents a single institution; systematic research across multiple institutions would establish prevalence. Access to proprietary vendor data, algorithm specifications, content filtering thresholds, AI training data, remains unavailable, limiting analysis to observable outputs.

Positionality

The author occupies a dual position as both a practising cataloguing librarian at a university library and a critical researcher examining the systems that structure daily professional work. This positionality provides access to practitioner knowledge and documentary evidence while positioning the analysis within a particular professional perspective. The author has sought to balance insider knowledge with systematic evidence from peer-reviewed scholarship, industry data, and professional documentation, presenting vendor positions through their own communications rather than characterising them solely through a critical lens.

Analysis: the franchise model in practice

The architecture of platform monopoly

Marshall Breeding's longitudinal analysis reveals a dramatic transformation of library technology markets. While forty-three vendors competed in 1990, ProQuest controlled 72% of the overall academic library services platform market and 84% at Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions by 2020, with Herfindahl-Hirschman Index scores of 6,934 far exceeding the Federal Trade Commission's 2,500 threshold for *highly concentrated* markets (Breeding, 2020; SPARC, 2021). This concentration resulted from strategic acquisitions: ProQuest's purchase of Ex Libris for \$500 million in 2015, Innovative Interfaces in 2020, and Clarivate's \$5.3 billion acquisition of ProQuest in December 2021 (Breeding, 2021b; Clarivate, 2021). The 2024 library systems report documents Clarivate's commanding position among Association of Research Libraries members: eighty-eight using Alma, seven using Sierra, four using Voyager, approximately 80% of ARL membership across multiple platforms owned by Clarivate, with nearly 5,000 library systems on Clarivate-provided platforms (Breeding, 2024).

SPARC's opposition to the Clarivate-ProQuest merger argued it would bring the market close to monopoly conditions. The merger was expected to generate over \$100 million in cost synergies through streamlining facilities, technology infrastructure, and personnel; synergies achieved by eliminating professional expertise while retaining subscription revenue (SPARC, 2021). The SaaS delivery model that consolidation enables transfers operational control from libraries to vendors. While vendor application programming interfaces allow limited forms of customisation, the model as a whole functions much like a franchise system, shifting operational decision making from local institutions to corporate headquarters. Switching costs (data extraction, migration, installation, training) lead libraries to retain systems for twelve or more years on average (Breeding, 2021a), creating the long-term captive relationship characteristic of franchise dependence.

Operational control without ownership

When Clarivate announced auto-enabled AI metadata generation for Ebook Central bibliographic records in October 2025, the communication exemplified franchise dynamics. Clarivate notified subscribing libraries that the feature would be activated automatically for all customers, with the option to disable it in advance of the release through system settings, an opt-out rather than opt-in model (Clarivate, n.d.). The passive construction, *functionality is auto-enabled*, obscures agency. Clarivate makes decisions; libraries react. The opt-out framing mirrors how franchise corporations introduce new products: headquarters decides; operators comply or request exemptions.

Vendors control development roadmaps, feature implementation, and default settings while libraries manage consequences experienced by users. Librarians cannot modify vendor algorithms but must explain to researchers why searches for *Gaza War* return zero results or why AI-generated subject headings misrepresent content. This is a dynamic Abbott (1988) would recognise as jurisdictional erosion, where the profession retains responsibility without retaining authority. The 2024 ELUNA conference highlighted this tension, with vendor presentations emphasising AI integration while sessions led by librarians concentrated on broken functionality and persistent bugs unresolved for years. Libraries prioritised reliable core functionality; vendors focused on AI development aimed at reducing labour rather than addressing fundamental issues.

Labour transformation and deskilling

Kennedy et al.'s (2022) survey of 126 technical services managers found that 73% observed burnout in direct reports, with 82% supervising employees whose roles expanded significantly from original duties. Nearly half supervised employees not originally hired for technical services work, while 29% supervised staff who had taken on non-technical roles due to workforce reductions. The 2025 Library Perceptions report (Breeding, 2025) reveals a compounding dynamic. Following SirsiDynix's acquisition by Harris, one respondent reported the vendor reduced its workforce by 20%, expressed zero confidence in maintenance of feature parity, and noted that after more than a decade of development, the BLUEcloud interface still lacked essential cataloguing features for production use.

OCLC's 2025 elimination of approximately eighty positions while developing AI cataloguing tools exemplifies the franchise contradiction. The organisation justified layoffs citing AI's influence, yet AI systems depend entirely on training data created by the workers being displaced. Northwestern University's 2025 layoff of 200 employees, including Violet Fox, a leading voice in critical cataloguing who pioneered reparative description and served as one of the editors of the Dewey Decimal Classification, illustrates how institutions eliminate specialised expertise even as they claim to value ethical practice. Merga and Mat Roni's (2025) international survey of 971 school library professionals across sixty-three countries found that more than two-thirds reported retired professionals were replaced by less qualified staff, indicating the deskilling dynamic operates internationally.

The broader workforce trajectory confirms systematic decline: library professionals in the United States numbered 289,400 in 2024, down from 395,000 in 2006—a 26.7% decline (Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO, 2025). The American Library Association Core Subject Analysis Committee's Devaluation of Cataloguing Working Group (2024) captures the franchise trap precisely by placing the burden of justification on the profession itself, even as vendors automatically deploy features intended to displace that expertise.

Zipf's (2025) study characterised academic libraries as technology-saturated work environments where excessive reliance on digital tools undermines employee wellbeing even when measurable productivity increases. Murgu's (2021) research on digital scholarship librarians found that when organisations fail to understand the complexity of technical work, they risk alienating staff and creating unsustainable workload expectations.

AI accuracy and quality degradation

The Library of Congress Labs' Exploring Computational Description experiment tested five open-source machine learning models on approximately 23,000 eBooks, measuring performance using the F1 score, a standard classification metric combining precision and recall on a 0-100% scale. Large language models achieved only 26% F1 accuracy for Library of Congress Subject Headings, while Annif reached 35% for text classification (Potter & Saccucci, 2024). The study established 95% F1 as the quality threshold for production use, which no AI system approached. Taniguchi's (2024) evaluation of GPT-4 for MARC record creation found significant errors in access points,

title statements, and publication details. Miller-Nesbitt (2024) concluded ChatGPT introduces errors requiring additional correction time. The highest documented accuracy, Golub et al.'s (2024) automated Dewey Decimal Classification using Annif at 66.82%, derived from Swedish library metadata, remains far below production requirements; their qualitative study with professional cataloguers confirmed that purely automatic classification does not work for operative systems.

No other profession would accept comparable failure rates, yet the franchise model explains why libraries do. The cost savings from eliminating cataloguers are immediate and quantifiable, e.g., OCLC reported \$225 million revenue for fiscal year ending June 2023 (Breeding, 2024) while eliminating 80 positions in 2025 (Rees, 2025). Quality degradation manifests slowly through degraded discovery, perpetuated biases, and compromised scholarship. These are externalities absorbed by researchers and remaining librarians, not vendors.

The paradox of customer satisfaction under monopoly

The 2025 Library Perceptions survey reveals an unexpected finding: customer satisfaction scores remain moderate to high despite widespread recognition of monopolistic practices. Alma maintains satisfaction scores of 7.02 among large academic libraries, yet respondents express worry about Clarivate's motivations and describe feeling trapped by vendor lock-in (Breeding, 2025). This paradox mirrors franchise research, where franchisee satisfaction reflects adaptation to constrained alternatives rather than genuine approval. Switching costs, data extraction, migration, and training, lead libraries to retain systems for twelve or more years on average (Breeding, 2021a). Innovative's satisfaction ratings declined sharply after its 2013 sale to private equity and did not recover until the company became part of ProQuest in 2019, demonstrating that vendor behaviour responds to financial incentives rather than independent assessments of product quality (Breeding, 2025).

Verification infrastructure collapse

As documented in the case study, the discovery of articles with 84% fabricated references represents systemic failure of verification infrastructure. CrossRef accepts DOI registration without verifying reference accuracy; ISSN provides identification without quality control; vendor discovery systems index content based on fees rather than scholarly merit. Vendors have no incentive to exclude questionable content that pays indexing fees and inflates comprehensiveness metrics that libraries themselves use to justify subscription expenditures. The result is an information literacy crisis understood not as pedagogical challenge but as infrastructure failure. Even sophisticated critical approaches face structural limits when the infrastructure has been hollowed out.

Platform capitalism and the scholarly commons

The WorldCat paradox exemplifies how platform capitalism transforms collective professional resources into corporately controlled property. Libraries have contributed cataloguing labour to WorldCat since 1971, yet OCLC asserts significant control with contractual restrictions preventing libraries from freely sharing records they created. When Anna's Archive redistributed WorldCat data in late 2023, OCLC responded by filing suit in January 2024, characterising the scraping as cyberattacks and hacking (Price, 2024)—defending proprietary control over infrastructure built through decades of collective library labour.

The Clarivate consolidation creates vertical integration across the entire research lifecycle: one entity now controls discovery systems (Primo, Summon), library services platforms (Alma, Sierra, Polaris), research analytics (Web of Science, InCites), citation management (EndNote, RefWorks), and research workflow tools (Breeding, 2024). Behavioural data generated through these workflows becomes a product sold back to institutions as analytics services—surveillance capitalism penetrating scholarly communications (Winter, 2023). Libraries pay subscription fees

that fund the platform infrastructure that generates the behavioural data sold back to the institutions whose libraries paid for the infrastructure.

Content filtering as franchise control

Content filtering in AI-enhanced discovery represents the franchise model's most direct control mechanism. Microsoft's Azure OpenAI content filtering, which powers Clarivate's Primo and Summon Research Assistants, employs neural classification models designed for consumer applications rather than scholarly research (Microsoft, 2025). When Ex Libris launched these tools in March 2025, testing by Singley (2025) and Tay (2025) revealed that searches for "Tulsa race massacre," "Gaza war," "genocide," "lynching," and "COVID-19" generated error messages or zero results from a discovery index containing over one billion scholarly records. The filtered terms reveal a pattern where research on historical trauma affecting marginalised communities becomes systematically harder to discover. Tay (2025) notes that while "Gaza War" returned no results, "War in Gaza" passed without warning, illustrating that neural models operate unpredictably rather than through transparent logic.

Ex Libris's response exemplifies the franchise chain: filtering 'is due to safeguard policies enforced by our AI service provider (Microsoft Azure) to support ethical and responsible AI use. It's not something the Primo or Summon applications control' (quoted in Singley, 2025, para. 6). Libraries pay Clarivate; Clarivate relies on Microsoft's content moderation designed for social media; Microsoft's filters block scholarly queries; librarians explain to students why searches fail. Each entity disclaims responsibility. As Singley (2025, para. 11) observes, students encountering error messages are likely to simply change topics without reporting the failure to their librarian or instructor. This is algorithmic censorship enabled by separating the entities controlling the system from those accountable to users. Comparative testing found that Scopus AI and Scite Assistant did not exhibit similar failures for the same terms, confirming these restrictions reflect specific vendor choices rather than technological inevitability (Tay, 2025).

Results and discussion

From professional autonomy to platform administration

The evidence demonstrates systematic transformation of librarianship from professional practice to platform administration. Librarians may no longer primarily create original cataloguing but review AI-generated metadata achieving 26% accuracy; no longer design discovery interfaces but configure vendor platforms that censor research topics; no longer exercise professional judgment but implement auto-enabled vendor decisions. This represents what Abbott (1988) identifies as jurisdictional displacement: the tasks defining professional librarianship are claimed by corporate platforms, leaving professionals with accountability but not authority. When librarians must circumvent their own discovery systems to help researchers find materials on controversial topics, the profession has been transformed from knowledge facilitation to damage control within a franchise it did not design.

Resistance through alternative infrastructure

Despite structural constraints, resistance practices emerge across multiple domains. The University of California system's 2019 termination of its Elsevier contract, generating nearly 10% of all US research output, walking away from a contract exceeding \$10 million annually, demonstrates that franchise conditions can be challenged through coordinated institutional leverage. While Elsevier terminated direct access to post-2018 content, UC retained perpetual access to approximately 95% of previously licensed materials (University of California Office of Scholarly Communication, 2019). After more than two years, the parties reached a transformative open access agreement in March 2021, the largest in North America (McKenzie, 2021; California Digital Library, 2021). Australia's National Library provides a contemporary international example, selecting the ReShare open-source platform in May 2024 to replace legacy infrastructure with a

community-governed solution (National Library of Australia, 2024; CAVAL & Index Data, 2024; Project ReShare, 2024). These cases demonstrate that alternatives to vendor dependence are viable when institutions prioritise community-led governance.

Community-developed systems demonstrate increasing viability. Koha, arguably the most widely deployed ILS globally, has become predominant in Latin America, India, and lower income countries, a significant finding demonstrating that Global South institutions have chosen community-governed alternatives over vendor franchise arrangements (Breeding, 2024). Future of Libraries is Open (FOLIO), with 142 selections through 2023 including twelve ARL institutions and the Library of Congress, has emerged as the primary open-source alternative to Alma (Breeding, 2024). Critical cataloguing practice asserts professional jurisdiction through what practitioners term *radical cataloguing*. López and Wright's (2018) project at University of Colorado Boulder implemented alternative subject headings across more than 5,000 records, an initiative that has spread to over thirty-five libraries (Ford, 2020), while Violet Fox's Cataloging Lab provides ongoing resources for addressing classification bias. The Library of Congress's 2021 decision to replace the subject heading *illegal aliens* with *noncitizens* and *undocumented immigrants* demonstrates that sustained professional advocacy can reshape the classification infrastructure itself (American Library Association, 2021), a resistance that becomes more urgent as AI systems threaten to automate inherited biases at scale.

Alternative information models operating outside vendor platforms demonstrate the continued viability of non-commercial knowledge organisation. Zine libraries and collections, including the Barnard Zine Library, Denver Zine Library, and Queer Zine Archive Project, operate without vendor mediation: no licensing agreements, no usage surveillance, no algorithmic discovery. These collections function through direct human curation and community exchange, preserving alternative models of information stewardship that prioritise community accountability over commercial efficiency.

Professional governance frameworks address AI implementation directly. The PCC Task Group on AI and Machine Learning for Cataloging and Metadata, charged in September 2024, emphasises that 'AI is intended to augment, not replace, the valuable work of cataloguing professionals' and 'it is not a viable strategy for reduction of personnel' (Program for Cooperative Cataloging, 2024b, p. 1). Union organising demonstrates measurable material benefits: librarians who were union members in 2024 earned 41% more per week than non-union counterparts, and union members more broadly report substantially higher rates of access to retirement plans, health insurance, and paid sick leave (Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO, 2025).

These resistance practices share a critical insight: technical improvements alone cannot address political economy. Improving AI accuracy does not restore professional autonomy when algorithmic systems operate through infrastructure controlled by vendors. The franchise model reveals that these are structural power relationships requiring collective political action, not technical problems requiring technical solutions.

Theoretical implications

The franchise model extends platform capitalism theory to professional service contexts. While Srnicek (2016) analyses lean platforms extracting value from user-generated content and Zuboff (2019) examines surveillance platforms commodifying behavioural data, library platforms extract value from professional expertise while eliminating the professionals who create it. This represents a distinct form of platform capitalism, one targeting academic libraries. The model also reveals dynamics the sociology of professions has not addressed. Evetts's (2009) distinction between occupational and organisational professionalism does not account for platform-mediated control, and Noordegraaf's (2007) hybrid professionalism assumes negotiation between professional and organisational logics rather than the imposition of corporate platform logic

through technological architecture. Libraries do not choose to accept 26% AI accuracy through organisational decision making; they encounter it as a feature of platforms they have been locked into through consolidation and switching costs.

The case challenges assumptions about AI augmenting human expertise. In library contexts, AI serves primarily to justify labour elimination rather than enhance capabilities—the 26% accuracy rate matters less to vendors than the ability to claim technological modernisation while cutting costs. This suggests AI implementation in professional contexts may systematically prioritise labour displacement over functional improvement when implemented through platform relationships structurally akin to franchises, a finding with implications for other professional domains. The information literacy implications connect the franchise model to critical pedagogy scholarship. Traditional information literacy pedagogy assumes the stable verification markers named above (DOIs, ISSNs, peer review, library endorsement) remain reliable, but the case study demonstrates they are systematically compromised. Even the more sophisticated critical approaches advocated by Elmborg (2006), Seale (2016), and Tewell (2015) face limits when the infrastructure has been hollowed out. The franchise model explains why. The systems that critical information literacy would teach students to analyse are proprietary, opaque; the vendors that control them have no obligation to make their operations transparent to the librarians who teach with them.

Practical implications

The franchise framework suggests strategic priorities: demanding vendor disclosure of AI training data and accuracy rates as contractual requirements; coordinating multi-institutional responses following the UC-Elsevier model; investing in open-source infrastructure as demonstrated by FOLIO and ReShare; establishing enforceable quality thresholds through professional governance bodies; developing algorithmic literacy instruction that teaches students how discovery systems reflect business models; and systematically auditing content filtering as a condition of continued subscription. These responses require recognising that technical problems reflect political economy; the franchise model's analytical value lies in directing attention from technical fixes to the power relationships determining how technology is implemented.

Limitations and future research

While the empirical documentation draws primarily from US academic libraries, the structural dynamics operate globally. Systematic comparative research would reveal whether franchise dynamics manifest similarly under different regulatory frameworks (GDPR in Europe, varying data sovereignty laws), in different library sectors (public libraries, Global South institutions), or at different levels of vendor consolidation. The franchise model provides a testable analytical framework for such comparisons. Future research should also examine long-term impacts of AI metadata on research outcomes, user behaviour adaptations to algorithmic mediation, effectiveness of algorithmic literacy instruction, and economic models for sustainable alternative infrastructure.

Conclusion

The franchise model reveals how AI implementation and vendor consolidation transform academic librarianship under digital capitalism. Like franchise operators, librarians administer systems they do not control, implement features they did not request, and remain accountable for quality they cannot ensure. The framework identifies specific structural mechanisms — fee extraction, operational standardisation, externalised risk, jurisdictional displacement — and connects them to the institutional conditions that sustain vendor dependence.

Yet the evidence also demonstrates that the franchise model does not describe an inevitable future. The University of California's challenge to Elsevier, Australia's adoption of open-source

resource sharing, FOLIO's emergence as a viable alternative, Koha's global deployment, PCC governance frameworks, and union organising all indicate that collective action can contest franchise conditions. The question facing the profession is not whether AI will change library work, it already has. The question is whether librarians will organise collectively to demand systems serving public good rather than private extraction, build alternatives to vendor monopolies, and refuse to operate franchises that betray professional values.

The undergraduate student who discovered fabricated references in content supplied by vendors asked: 'Can I trust the library's resources?' How the profession answers, through collective action, not individual accommodation, will determine whether academic libraries remain vital knowledge institutions or become technical interfaces for corporate platforms.

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