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Information as Capital: The Commodification of Archives and Library Labor

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Abstract

This paper explores the commodification of archival information through the exploitation of library labor related to the ongoing management, preservation, description, and digitization of unique and rare materials. Through this discussion, the author highlights the cultural, social, and economic factors that play a central role in creating an ideal environment for the sale and distribution of public information by commercial vendors. The result of this commodification is a reclassification of library labor from what Marx defines as “unproductive” to “productive” labor, which the author demonstrates through a case study at her own institution. Finally, the author provides recommendations for maintaining core values and open access to information as a public good, while still participating in the market structures in which libraries and cultural heritage institutions are entrenched.

Keywords

capitalism, labor, archives, public good, vendor relations, Karl Marx

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Jasmine Burns is the Visual Resources Metadata Librarian at Cornell University Library. This paper was written as the final project for the course "Science, Technology, and Capitalism" during Spring 2018.

Introduction

Libraries, and the information aggregated within their many physical and virtual spaces, are widely considered a public good. These institutions and the individuals who identify as library workers generally hold values and produce policies that support access to information as a pure resource, something of actual or potential use, rather than as a commodity. However, market structures in contemporary society problematize access to these resources by attributing monetary value to information and generating artificial exclusion mechanisms in order to gain access. As central access points for such resources, the labor of information workers is greatly impacted by these tensions.

Academic library workers in particular maintain a vast array of unique resources in archival and special collections. The commodification of archival “information” (i.e. the content within the material) is only made possible by the ongoing management, preservation, description, and digitization of these materials by library employees. This paper will explore the cultural, social, and economic factors that play a central role in creating an ideal environment for the exploitation of public information by commercial vendors, and the subsequent reclassification of library labor from what Marx defines as “unproductive” to “productive labor”.

I begin this paper by defining archival material as “information” and discussing the ways in which this material obtains intellectual and economic value. Through the process of separating intellectual content from its physical container through digitization, I discuss the fluidity of commodities in academic library collections and the ways in which the commodification of archival information becomes possible. While the intention behind the large investment in preserving, describing, and digitizing special collections material is to support the research and information needs of a campus community, this library labor dually becomes the basis for the commodification of archival information. The low cost of digitization, along with the implications related to the separation of content from container (ease of transfer, storage, and distribution), entices commercial vendors to negotiate contracts and licensing agreements with academic libraries to digitize existing archival collections with the intention of packaging and selling the information for a profit.

Within the framework of information as a non-rival good and the potential barriers to its unlimited use (i.e. proprietary access points and intellectual property claims), I will address the way in which these vendor contracts specifically transform the labor of library workers from “unproductive” to “productive” labor. This transformation is initiated by the negotiation of the restricted delivery of the assets, as well as the vendors’ utilization of existing metadata and library preservation and organization investments. Such a venture generates surplus value for the commercial entity, therefore decontextualizing the work of the library staff who made such an endeavor financially profitable, and challenges the library’s ultimate goal of the provision of information as a public good.

Archives as Information

Archives and special collections within academic libraries often contain a combination of institutional records, published and unpublished materials, and unique and rare materials with content that aligns with large research fields on campus, as well as the collecting policies and directions of the library or university. These materials find their way into such collections because of their unique or extremely rare status, which requires special housing and preservation.

The research value of an archive¹ can be determined by the relationship of each discreet object to the collection as a whole. This value is highly dependent upon the integrity of the provenance of the collections, which provides a certain degree of authenticity to the information contained within the archive.

The rare and unique status of such materials ties the content (i.e. the information) to its physical vessel: if the vessel is destroyed, the information is lost. The singularity of the object therefore links a great deal of value, both intellectual and market, to the original physical item. This link is reflected in the market prices for rare items and those items which have been deemed historically significant.² While market value (appraisal) is determined for insurance purposes, using that monetary attribution as a resale value after the object has entered the archive is highly frowned upon among cultural heritage institutions. Even insurance value is somewhat arbitrary, as unique archival items are singular and therefore not replaceable, no matter what their value.

Igor Kopytoff would consider these objects to be singularized commodities because they are removed from their usual commodity sphere.³ They are “nonfungible, nonliquid assets”⁴, which leaves them open to various kinds of singularization including individual and collective redefinitions.⁵ He states that “anything that can be bought for money is at that point a commodity, whatever the fate that is reserved for it after the transaction has been made (it may, thereafter, be decommo-ditized). Hence, in the West, as a matter of cultural shorthand, we usually take saleability to be the unmistakable indicator of commodity status, while non-saleability imparts to a thing a special aura of apartness from the mundane and the common.”⁶ This is the point at which the material transforms from a commodity that was purchased by the institution, into a resource that is valued for its intellectual content with a “special aura.” This notion is further complicated by the fact that not everything in an archive is purchased, as much of the material is donated or acquired from campus departments.

Regardless of how it gets to the archive, once in custody, heavy financial investments are made by the institution for the ongoing maintenance, accessibility, and discovery of the materials, which are entirely separate from the costs of acquisition. These additional financial resources are invested without the expectation of adding monetary value to the objects, and these costs are rarely recovered from exploiting the objects themselves (i.e. charging for their use).

Information contained within the archive as a whole is a public non-rival good. Non-rival consumption means that the good can be shared and used by many people without depletion, and public goods do not have an “exclusion mechanism.”⁷ However, the use of the physical item, as opposed to the information contained within it, is depleted with continuous use because of

¹ I am referring throughout this paper to actual academic institutional archives, not “the archive” as it is written about by Derrida and others.

² It is not always clear who makes the determination of what is and is not historically significant in the determination of market value. Watching the Antiques Roadshow on PBS is enlightening in this sense and provides a framework for observing the somewhat arbitrary nature of appraisal.

³ Kopytoff, Igor. “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” 74.

⁴ Brower, Lisa. “Pushing Paper: Dealers and Institutional Collectors,” 53.

⁵ Kopytoff, 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁷ Trosow, Samuel E. “The Commodification of Information and the Public Good: New Challenges for a Progressive Librarianship,” 19.

chemical and environmental degradation.⁸ One effective way to separate the information from its physical container is through digitization. The inherent value of digital surrogates of special collections material is somewhat contested within the library world. There has been a general consensus that digitization does not equal preservation, however this statement is also wrongfully used to justify not digitizing collections at all.

The people that invoke this argument claim that the material object contains equally important information as the intellectual content: the processes of manufacture and traces of past use are as much a part of the object as the text, and are the elements that provide the object with authenticity. These physical attributes are not transferred into the digital surrogate, and are therefore lost in the process of digitization. Benjamin's notion of "aura" is often invoked, in which objects lose their aura in the process of reproductions because they become separated from the traditions from which they derive. These arguments are valid to an extent, but are also limiting when discussing potential new uses and users of special collections.

Building from these concerns, I have argued in previous publications that digitization generates an entirely new object that should be treated as a derivative of the original instead of a true copy. Rather than eliminating the material evidence of the object's existence (what Kopytoff would refer to as the object's "biography", and what the archive values as provenance), the digitization of these materials and the subsequent dissemination of their surrogates enhances those material qualities that are not inherently represented in the digital object.⁹ Instead of reproducing the item, a surrogate both preserves the intellectual content and produces persistent information regarding the condition of the object at the exact moment of digitization. Through descriptive and technical metadata generated by library workers, the surrogate itself can hence be considered a piece of metadata.

Regardless of which side of this argument you gravitate towards, what digitization and the creation of digital facsimiles does successfully is create readily accessible surrogates and new information vessels that can be transferred, transported, and disseminated with relative ease. As long as the infrastructure is in place and the metadata travels with the digital object, this frictionless transfer creates a new realm of possibilities for a range of users and uses: researchers without a travel budget to visit the archive, non-academics without access to physical archives, serendipitous online discovery, and of course, commodification.

Archives as Commodity

Marx defines a commodity as something produced by human labor for a market, which gives it both a use value and an exchange value. If information is a resource, then information as

⁸ This form of rivalry is distinctly different than that of a usual commodity. Trosow and Perry discuss there being a limited number of physical containers that hold information (i.e. printed books, DVDs, etc.) available for purchase. However, libraries inherently reject this system by allowing many users to consume the information contained within the vessel by sharing the resource, therefore ignoring the market system that tells us that such commodities are finite. Instead, the depletion of the resource is due to general wear and tear.

⁹ See Burns, "Aura of Materiality: Digital Surrogacy and the Preservation of Photographic Archives" and "Digital Facsimiles and the Modern Viewer: Medieval Manuscripts and Archival Practice in the Age of New Media."

a commodity under capitalism is a resource produced for the market by wage labor.¹⁰ Library workers produce information, but they are also paid a wage to organize, manage, preserve, and make information accessible as a public good. The product of library labor is not inherently a commodity until it is directly exchanged or used to generate capital by an outside entity. I would not, for instance, consider the scholarly reinterpretation of archival information to be a form of commodification. A body of literature exists that discusses library workers as knowledge workers, however the definition of knowledge workers is that they participate in the market economy by generating capital for themselves or capitalists. This definition is limited and does not leave room for wage laborers who do not generate commodities (i.e. library workers).

So, when does the commodification of archives and the information contained within them happen? This is a complex cultural question that can be addressed by utilizing the work of Kopytoff from his essay “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodification as Process.” The following excerpt offers a framework within which to think about the fluidity of commodification and how it applies to information:

“From a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing. Out of the total range of things available in a society, only some of them are considered appropriate for making as commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another. And finally, the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by another. Such shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.”¹¹

Notwithstanding the fact that archival materials may have been originally produced as a commodity in their former lives prior to belonging to an archive (i.e. books, postcards, etc.), and had likely been exchanged several times in different contexts before reaching the special collections, once in the custody of an archive, they are removed from their “usual commodity sphere” and are transformed into a resource. However, the information contained within the archive may be distilled, removed from its vessel, and re-commodified.

There are several factors that facilitate this contemporary re-commodification of archival information, that upon convergence provide a fertile landscape for the conversion of a pure resource into a commodity with both use value and trade/exchange value: 1) the transformation to a wage labor economy, 2) the contemporary political environment, 3) the ability for frictionless transfer of information, and 4) intellectual property law.

Dan Schiller, in his book *How to Think About Information*, states: “to the postindustrialists’ assertion that the value of information derives from its inherent attributes as a resource, we counter that its value stems uniquely from its transformation into a commodity – a resource socially revalued and refined through progressive historical application of wage labor and the market to its production and exchange. The wage has been imposed continually on new fields of social labor, including information.”¹² Rather than valuing archival information based

¹⁰ Schiller, 21.

¹¹ Kopytoff, 64.

¹² Schiller, 15-16.

on its actual or potential uses as an intellectual resource and a public good, in a market and wage economy this is based on the exchange value, thus attributing to it a financial worth. Additionally, the social labor used to produce the information, or in this case to expose it, is increasingly subject to the wage economy.

William Birdsall, in his article “A Political Economy of Librarianship?”,¹³ speaks to the role of the contemporary political environment in the commodification of information. He believes that because of the rise of the “ideology of Information Technology” politicians have adopted information public policy that includes copyright and patent policy developments. These policies essentially create a virtual space for a deregulated market in which entrepreneurs compete to provide information and information services. Because this takes place in a market structure, he believes libraries are not a loud enough voice in the conversation, and that they should assert themselves to be more central to the knowledge economy.

Bronwyn Perry, in her text on the commodification of bio-information, and Steven Marks, in his book *The Information Nexus*, discuss the ways in which technology has impacted the transmission and sharing of information. The central argument of *The Information Nexus* is that the rise of technologies which facilitate the frictionless transfer of information are responsible for the foundation of modern capitalism. Perry refines this argument significantly in her discussion of new and novel technologies that enabled “nature to be translated into new, more artifactual forms (specimens, botanical illustrations, taxidermy, and so on) that might effectively ‘stand in for’ or ‘represent’ the organism in question.”¹⁴ This process was a means of mobilizing materials that were impossible or undesirable to transport across the globe for further study through the creation of “proxies.” These proxies, created using what Bruno Latour calls “inscription devices”, are applicable to a wide range of materials beyond the study of nature, as they are able to “serve as substitutes for the materials in question in their absence.”¹⁵ The example that Perry uses to describe this dematerialization is the digitization of a set of encyclopedias. Her ultimate conclusion is that changing the way in which the information is presented, embodied, and transmitted has profound effects on the “dynamics of trade and exchange.”¹⁶

Finally, Peter Hirtle, in his Presidential address to the Society of American Archivists in 2003, discusses the intellectual property issues related to the commodification of archival materials and information. There is a distinction, he notes, between physical ownership of an object and the copyright of the content within it. The archive can 1) own neither the object, nor its copyright, 2) own the object *and* its intellectual property, 3) own the object, but a third party retains copyright, and 4) own the object, and the work is in the public domain, meaning it belongs either to the public or to no one.¹⁷ While the remainder of the article makes a case against attempting to control this information, legally under intellectual property law, materials that fall within the second and fourth categories are fair game for the generation of revenue.

With the combination of an economy of knowledge workers functioning under wage labor and the gig economy, the open free market of the internet, the transformation of all material

¹³ Birdsall, William. “A Political Economy of Librarianship?”

¹⁴ Perry, Bronwyn. *Trading the Genome: Investigating the Commodification of Bio-Information*, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59

¹⁷ Hirtle, Peter. “Archives or Assets?,” 238.

into the essential information that it holds, and the intellectual property loopholes that allow for mass dissemination under proprietary platforms, the commodification of archival information and cultural heritage material is inevitable. However, this commodification precedes the invention of the specific contemporary informational technologies to which Perry is referring. Museums have been capitalizing on their physical collections for decades by charging exorbitant fees for photographic reproductions and licensing of those images for publication. Unfortunately, this has also become somewhat commonplace in archives. The institutions often claim to be “recouping the costs” of producing the reproductions, but this excuse hardly holds water when you think about how much money is poured into preservation (climate controlled vaults), conservation (highly specialized treatment and housing), and description (cataloging and metadata staff).

Vendors and the Expropriation of Public Information

When imaged, archival materials become autonomous objects, disassociated from their original source. Library vendors often exploit this disassociation to assert control over digital assets. Such a disassociation triggers Hirtle’s fourth category of ownership: the source material is in the public domain, meaning the information/content is still a public good, but a private entity can own and control the singular digitized surrogate. While the vendor does not own the content or the copyright, they control the vessel within which the content travels. This is not unique to digital reproductions, as museums and archives often assert control over their physical objects by making them temporarily or permanently unavailable for use even though they do not own the copyright to the content. This kind of exploitation to guarantee revenue is also not exclusive to vendors, as Hirtle quotes Kathleen Butler as saying that “object owners, by controlling physical access to the objects, have the opportunity and power to govern how reproductions of those objects are made, used, and licensed.”¹⁸ Perry presents a similar statement, framing proprietary access to information:

“This mysterious sleight of hand – the ability to access information without owning it and give it away and still have it – favors particular types of commodity exchange such as rental and licensing. Repositories or storehouses of informational materials (“libraries” of books, videos, software, electronic music, or catalogued or archived data) may be accessed by those who wish to use the information without owning it, while those who control the repositories are able to secure an economic return each time the information is accessed and used.”¹⁹

By utilizing the free market, vendors as capitalists can transform a public good into private information without breaking any intellectual property laws.

Schiller discusses this expropriation of nonproprietary information at length. He notes that institutions such as libraries and museums whose mission is information provision have been “widely formalized, built up at collective expense, and put in motion by skilled labor.”²⁰ Such information programs can easily be reorganized along proprietary lines in order to expand

¹⁸ Ibid., 240.

¹⁹ Perry, 56.

²⁰ Schiller, 42-43.

corporate capital. Schiller calls out Reed-Elsevier specifically, a library vendor who acquired scientific journals from small professional societies and impeded open access to scientific information by charging restrictive subscription fees.²¹ This commodification of research and scholarly communication is pervasive across all academic disciplines, and is made possible by the neoliberalization of higher education.²² This kind of expropriation is part of a series of initiatives that “represent a consistent attempt to discredit, to attack as illegitimate, the very principle of nonproprietary information provision.”²³

The same thing happens when large vendors negotiate contracts with libraries to digitize their unique holdings of primary source materials, and then place an embargo on the reproductions in order to sell them back to libraries for an extreme profit. Vendors are not interested in obtaining or collecting material archives, they are not interested in being stewards of knowledge or cultural heritage, and they are certainly not interested in preservation (digital or physical). Their ultimate goal is to aggregate, repackage, and control the information contained with the archive (which moves freely and is non-rival) in order to generate capital. Schiller frames this as an “active expropriation” that puts effort into cementing private-property rights to information, which he claims is “essential to realizing profit from the new commodities.”²⁴

By placing surrogates within proprietary delivery systems, rather than claiming intellectual property rights on the scanned assets, vendors can disseminate the information quickly, easily, and at low cost to themselves. The archival information packaged in the subscription is still accessible through the physical archive, however visiting the physical object in a fixed space is no longer necessary to use the content, particularly when there is a convenient copy that can be accessed globally.

This begs the question as to why libraries would agree to enter into these contracts, and why they would purchase such subscriptions willingly. In an effort to serve the needs of a variety of users, libraries purchase subscriptions to primary sources and many similar databases that offer access to academic research for hundreds of thousands of dollars every year. It is an unchallenged system that is perpetuated by predatory publishers who refuse to provide open access to scholarly research and supplementary assets.²⁵ When libraries are approached by vendors, they see it as an opportunity to get their collections digitized and distributed. Every library has a finite budget, and prioritization does not allow for the institution to make most materials available as digital collections themselves.

Transformation from Unproductive to Productive Labor

Productive labor under capitalism generates surplus capital, while unproductive labor is supported out of that surplus value.²⁶ In Marx’s “Theories of Surplus Value”, he states that “from the capitalist standpoint only that labour is productive which creates surplus-value” and goes on

²¹ Ibid., 44.

²² There is a body of literature that addresses neoliberalism in relation to libraries and academic research, but unfortunately it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the theme at length.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 46

²⁵ For more on this topic, see Lawson, et. al. “Commodification of the Information Profession: A Critique of Higher Education Under Neoliberalism.”

²⁶ Gough, Ian. “Marx’s Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour,” 47.

to say that “this also establishes absolutely what unproductive labour is. It is labour which is not exchanged with capital, but directly with revenue, that is wages or profits.”²⁷ Under Marx’s assertion that labor being purchased as a service is unproductive, library labor would be considered as such. Library work can generally be thought of as a public service and part of the public sphere: workers are paid from institutional profits (either taxpayer dollars, donations, student tuition, endowments, or a combination) to support the provision of information. There is certainly a conversation to be had about the neoliberal nature of the modern university,²⁸ as well as the inherent differences between academic and public library labor.²⁹ However, I am classifying the labor of library workers as unproductive because the mission of academic libraries as non-profit institutions is not the generation of surplus capital.³⁰ Even though library laborers work for a salary, in theory the product of their labor is to further the research mission of the university, rather than to make money for the university.

Digital library workers produce a range of outputs depending on library initiatives, but in my experience there has been a push to keep collections as open as possible by working closely with donors and copyright holders, and by publishing digital collections openly online. Laborers involved in the process of creating digital collections of archival material range all the way from the curators and conservators of the special collections material, to the catalogers and metadata staff who describe the materials, as well as the imaging staff, students, project managers, digital preservation stewards, and public service librarians.³¹ The products of this labor (i.e. digital collections, digital images, catalog records, etc.) are not directly generating surplus capital for the institution, especially not for the library, unless contracted by a vendor to digitize materials.

In early 2017, Cornell University Library entered into a contract with Gale, a “leading publisher and aggregator of educational content, tools, services and other resources to academic libraries, public libraries, school libraries, and businesses,”³² to digitize a variety of newspapers from the Rare and Manuscript Collections for one of their large database subscriptions. Gale approached Cornell Library with a list of items they were interested in scanning, which they obtained through the library’s online catalog, and worked with the curators and conservators to determine if the materials were in a stable condition for digitization. The representative from Gale originally asked if they could take the materials to their own facility to scan, to which the Head of Digitization and Conservation, Tre Berney, refused. They then asked if they could send a digitization team to set up shop in the library for six months to scan the materials themselves, and again the department head refused. Mr. Berney gave Gale a quote for in-house digitization costs and negotiated a per-page price for scanning. Through this process, the Cornell Library

²⁷ Quoted in Gough, 50-51.

²⁸ See Radder, “The Commodification of Academic Research” and Cope, “Neoliberalism and Library and Information Science: Using Karl Polanyi’s Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Concepts of Information.”

²⁹ When the salaries of the library workers are paid for by taxes their labor is solidified as unproductive according to Gough because they are state workers.

³⁰ There is also a conversation to be had about how to classify contract and contingent labor in digital library and archives settings, but that is for another paper.

³¹ These roles could be combined into several positions held by just a few people, or could be spread out to employ one or several people for each role. The point is that there are many tasks associated with the creation of digital libraries.

³² Gale website, <https://www.gale.com/>. Accessed May 14, 2018.

department head was able to solidify a contract, and all surplus profit was returned to the cost-recovery unit, which funds salaries for imaging and conservation staff/students and additional digitization projects. The final contract stipulated that Gale would retain the rights to the digital images for five years, after which point Cornell Library could release them openly. Within that five-year period, Cornell can only use 20% of the digitized content.³³

Schiller notes that “labor is productive...if it creates a surplus for a capitalist over and above the wealth that it consumes in order to be capable of producing at all. No matter how repellent the function of a given kind of labor, it is productive if it ‘is taken over by capital’ so as to contribute to accumulation by means of the wage relationship and market exchange.”³⁴ So, by leveraging in-house labor for preservation, conservation, arrangement, description, and sometimes imaging in order to sell information at a profit, these types of contracts with vendors transform all library labor from unproductive to productive labor. Marx states that “qualities are required which are utterly unconnected with the specific content of the labour, with its particular utility or the use-value in which it is objectified. Hence labour with the same content can be either productive or unproductive.”³⁵ Therefore, even though the content of the library work has not changed to accommodate this particular contract (i.e. the workflows for generating digital content, cataloging practices/standards, etc.), the labor has been reclassified. This comes to fruition in the delivery of the final product of the labor, when the digital surrogate is placed behind a paywall and revenue is absorbed by the vendor.

Rather than making a moral judgment about the ways in which library vendors are using public information (it’s great that these resources are out there for use at all!), I am instead trying to call attention to the exploitation of library labor by market forces. This dynamic is not universal to all libraries. For instance, the Director of Technical Services in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress once told me that if people are using their public domain images to make money, the institution would see that as a positive thing because their work, which is government funded, is helping to stimulate the economy and is therefore productive. In a climate where libraries, particularly those who depend upon government funding, have to prove their worth by showing a return on investment, we must be acutely aware of how our work impacts the communities that we serve in a neoliberal economy.

Recommendations

My ideal call to action is for all libraries to join together and unsubscribe from all vendor subscription services and to rebuild scholarly publishing and digital library development to provide truly open access collections (a la the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition’s “big deal cancellations” <https://sparcopen.org/what-we-do/popular-resources/>). However, since this is a stretch, I also have some smaller, more manageable and impactful recommendations that library staff, managers, and librarians/archivists can make in their daily work to remain true to our core values of providing information as a public good.

³³ The library is also responsible for paying for the digital preservation of this massive collection so that when the embargo is over they can deliver the assets openly from the Cornell Library platform.

³⁴ Schiller, 10.

³⁵ Quoted in Schiller, 10.

Firstly, we should be advocating for the materials being digitized by outside companies to eventually be opened. We need to make plans for future access, and if there is revenue from the contract it should be earmarked for digital preservation and eventual access to those materials. For instance, Cornell's Library Technical Services has implemented a new policy based on the digital objects from the Gale contract that will add a code to the catalog record of digitized collections to identify which collections have been digitized but are not being served in a delivery system. This will ensure that whomever is in charge of this material in five years at the end of the embargo can identify which collections have digital surrogates that can be released.

Secondly, library workers are really great at advocating for collections, but we should also be mindful of advocating for our workers. Using revenue from these contracts to pay for salaries, benefits, or equipment to enhance the quality of the work environment is ample motivation to enter into the contracts at all. Similarly, since we are increasingly forced into negotiations with these vendors and to essentially function as a business, we should become better prepared to enter into these conversations. Unfortunately, we cannot fight capitalism by pretending that we don't have to participate. We need to leverage these existing systems in order to advocate for open collections and to continue to provide information as a public good.

Finally, it is our duty to do our research up-front to be sure that the materials being digitized through such contracts are not already available somewhere else online (e.g. Hathi Trust, Google Books, etc.). This ensures that truly unique materials are selected, which will be of the highest benefit to end users and the public good rather than duplicating work and effort that just provides more opportunity for the capitalists to transform information into a proprietary commodity.

Conclusions

Archives provide a complex framework for thinking about information and commoditization. The physical containers that carry information through time are bought, sold, traded, and given various values. Once an object is part of an archival collection, all the information contained within it (physical traces as well as textual content) is compounded to create an information resource. This resource is removed from the commodity sphere and its meanings and values are redefined in the context of a research collection.

When transferred into digital form, the resource begins yet another new life. The information is detached from the vessel, and again leaves the confines of the limited and restricted space of the archive to be reinterpreted and [re]presented in an online platform. If that platform happens to be a proprietary delivery system, then the information has effectively been re-commoditized in this new life.

There is a great deal of labor and investment behind the preservation, arrangement, and description of these physical objects, as well as the metadata creation, digital imaging, and project management that goes into producing digital collections. The product of this labor serves as a public good and disrupts the market system because the "marginal cost for information goods approaches zero."³⁶ The distinction between productive and unproductive library labor lies in the final delivery of the products of that labor. This applies not only to the digital assets, but

³⁶ Trosow, 20.

also to the processes behind maintaining the physical objects so that they are readily accessible and are able to be digitized quickly and cheaply.

In studying the production and use of information resources, it becomes evident that “they have experienced the same series of changes in social organization as other resources claimed by capitalism and transformed into commodities: *all are produced increasingly by wage labor within and for a market.*”³⁷ In order to resist this transformation, library workers must find creative ways to subvert the market system to provide more information to a wider audience without selling their collections or forgetting their core values.

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³⁷ Schiller, 8.