

# Engaging Platforms and Open Scholarship

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At a Glance / En un coup d'œil

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## Summary / Résumé

This post explores the evolving concept of platforms and their implications for open scholarship, drawing on the “**Engaging Platforms in Open Scholarship**” scan recently published with the **Open Scholarship Press** (Amell et al. 2025). In addition to exploring the concept of platforms—broadly defined as tools, technologies, and infrastructures that facilitate interaction and exchange—this post offers an overview of the scan, which consists of an analytical introduction, as well as 114 individual annotations divided across five sections.

## What are platforms?

These days, the word *platform* seems to be used to describe a lot: websites, apps, social networks, software, archives—even games and operating systems. Because of this, it can be difficult to pin down the meaning of the term. But some (e.g., Gillespie 2010) argue that this slipperiness is partly the point, and speak to the many ways in which platforms have become deeply woven into everyday life.

Scholars from many fields have tried to make sense of what platforms are and what they do. Some describe them as:

- Tools or technologies that help people connect, share, or build things online

(Anable 2018; Burgess 2021; Gillespie 2010, 353)

- Foundations that other services (like governments or libraries) can be built on (Cordella and Paletti 2019; Weinberger 2012; Van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018)
- Systems made up of software, hardware, or both (Schweizer 2023)
- Strategic discursive spaces where ideas, interests, policies, and politics compete (Edwards and Gelms 2018; Gillespie 2017)
- Living archives where content is constantly added, edited, or reused (Apperley and Parikka 2018)
- Intermediaries that link different people, groups, or services together (Hassel and Sieker 2022; Nichols and Garcia 2022; Van Dijck 2013; van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018)

Note: The [introduction for the “Engaging Platforms in Open Scholarship” research scan](#) overviews these various meanings (see also Gillespie 2010 for a discussion).

Further, while these various usages seem different from each other, there are three common themes that bring them together. These three themes are:

1. Platforms are social, relational, material, technical, discursive constructions applied in a heuristic, logic, or strategic-like way
2. They function as *intermediaries* and networks, typically connecting different types of users for a variety of purposes (or *multi-sided markets*).
3. They typically involve some form of *user-generated content*.

In other words, platforms are complex. They’re social and technical, abstract and practical. And their meaning often depends on how they’re used—and by whom.

One of the many challenges that arises when attempting to define what a platform is or is not relates to the evolving nature of the internet and technology. In other words, what might have been considered a platform yesterday may no longer be one today. One example of this might be Netflix, considered to be less of a platform these days and more of a company that provides streaming services ([Talking about Platforms 2024](#)).

A frequently repeated guideline is that understanding what a platform *is* requires understanding what a platform *does*—although this approach may feel overly teleological for some, particularly if broader, critical questions are ignored. However,

shifting the focus to considering what platforms do (rather than what they are) reflects more recent trends in the literature that move away from object-focused discussions (where platforms are ‘things’) to process-focused discussions (where platforms are ‘processes,’ e.g., Poell et al. 2019).

In our “**Engaging Platforms in Open Scholarship**” research scan (Amell et al. 2025), we opted for a broader understanding of *platforms*; namely, one that includes *a set of tools, techniques, and technologies that connect different groups of users together; host or otherwise facilitate user-generated content; enable opportunities for social networking, communication, selling/buying and/or the exchange of information, files, media, or content; and/or allow for code to be written or run* (Anable 2018; Andrews 2020; Burgess 2021; Gillespie 2010, 353; Nichols and Garcia 2022).

For instance, both YouTube and Facebook could be considered a type of platform. While both are owned by private companies, the term ‘platform’ can extend beyond private and for-profit examples to others such as Mastodon (a not-for-profit social networking site) and to platform cooperatives (see, for example, **platform.coop**). The term can also be extended to include other examples, such as the Knowledge Commons (**hcommons.org**) and the Canadian HSS Commons (**HSSCommons.ca**), which serve as repositories, spaces to share content, and connect with other members of the community.

## Platforms and Open Scholarship?

It’s hard to talk about platforms—or knowledge—without also talking about capitalism and the market. As researchers like Lund and Zukerfeld (2020), Ma (2023), Scholz (2023), and Srnicek (2017) have pointed out, both are shaped by economic systems that influence how we share, access, and control information.

While platforms can enhance efficiency and accessibility, they also raise some concerns. Andrews warns that platforms can easily become gatekeepers, monopolizing data, workflows, and the values underpinning the open scholarship movement (e.g., by prioritizing profit over equity, openness, and collaboration). This is echoed in broader critiques of media consolidation and **the market consolidation of scholarly publishing**, where a small handful of companies control a large share of

content and infrastructure (see also: Butler et al. 2023; Garz and Ots 2025; Larivière et al. 2015; Ma 2023a; Winter and Sardino 2023).

As such, it often seems as though dominant understandings of platforms heavily rely on these marketplace or market-based connotations in some way. This may lead those in the open access and open social scholarship movement to question whether the term ‘platform’ is appropriate for their purposes.

At the same time, the open movement has long held a complicated relationship with platforms. Sites such as Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and ‘X’ / Twitter have all been used to develop scholarly communities as well as create and share knowledge (Andrews 2020). But, as Jonathan Gray (2020) and Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2015) point out, these platforms are businesses—they can organize and reorganize academic relationships based on what’s likely to make them more money, whether through advertising revenue, user fees, or interaction-based data. Recommendation and curation algorithms, influenced by marketing trends and the perceived shareability of a piece may very well determine what research gets shared and seen.

Yet open social scholarship encourages us to imagine otherwise—whether it is a cooperative academic publishing platform that charges commercial publishers a fee to access its network of authors, reviewers, and editors (Lupova-Henry and Tenorio-Fornés 2021) or a world where diamond open access journals that are free for readers and authors are sustainably funded, and radical scholarly publishers succeed alongside others prioritizing degrowth and smaller scales.

In light of this, supporting alternative platforms that reflect the values of open scholarship are critical. Community-driven initiatives, such as the **HSS Commons** in Canada, and the **Knowledge Commons** in the U.S. are two examples of efforts to create spaces that prioritize public access, shared governance, and non-commercial goals.

## Parting Thoughts

So, can platforms and open scholarship co-exist? While the “**Engaging Platforms in Open Scholarship**” scan does not offer a single definitive answer, it does offer some questions for reflection by those interested in considering this issue further. They

are:

1. Can another word—such as site, base, forum, digital space, service, tool, or network—be used instead of platform, as a term? What might be lost or gained with this substitution?
2. What affordances might an application of the term (platform) offer in your context? What constraints and/or consequences might accompany such usage?

Ultimately, however, the “**Engaging Platforms in Open Scholarship**” scan is intended to act more as a resource and primer that community members and researchers can use to engage in this broad and complex topic. The scan consists of **an analytical introduction**, as well as 114 individual annotations divided into five sections:

- **Understanding Platforms**
- **Researching Platforms and Digital Environments**
- **Social Implications of Platforms**
- **Models and Mechanisms of Platform Governance and Regulation**
- **Alternative Models and Approaches**

This and other themed bibliographies can be found for free online as a Wikibook, at **Open Scholarship Press Collections**.

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