Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy
by John E. Buschman
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reviewed by Bernd Frohmann

John Buschman needs no introduction to readers of this journal. He is one of its editors and his work since the early 1990s has enacted progressive librarianship in exemplary fashion. Dismantling the Public Sphere is a great read, full of passionate argument, naming villains and heroes, unafraid to use adjectives like “nonsensical” and “moronic.” As befits the work of an academic librarian at the rank of Professor, it has an abundance of excellent references in its many footnotes. The Selected Bibliography, focused on critical and historical perspectives, guides readers to highly useful reading for further study.

My approach to this review is to identify what I find most useful and less useful from the perspective of a researcher and teacher of masters and doctoral students in library and information science (LIS). I don’t mean to imply that the book isn’t important for librarians. On the contrary, it speaks perhaps most directly to librarians because it is about the soul of librarianship.

Dismantling the Public Sphere is a shorter book than it first appears. There are 125 pages of text, sixty pages of footnotes, and twenty-six pages of selected bibliography. It is divided into nine chapters in two parts, a first part of three chapters on the book’s conceptual framework and a second part of six chapters consisting of case studies in librarianship followed by a conclusion.

Buschman introduces his main argument in the first part: “librarianship is a classic case of the dismantling of the public sphere in an era of radically market-oriented public philosophy toward public cultural institutions.” The threat comes from “the new public philosophy” (the term originates in Sheldon Wolin’s paper in Democracy in 1981), the now familiar neo-liberal ideology of advanced capitalist societies, which if implemented, Buschman argues, will install an information capitalism spelling the ruin of libraries and librarianship. He insists that librarianship “needs a meaningful, consistent, and sustainable intellectual basis for its defense” (p. 8) and finds it in Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, which provides a “democratic theory of public institutions” (p. 9). The case studies of the second part — library funding, library management, customer-driven librarianship, the American Library Association’s drift to a corporate model, technocracy and libraries — illustrate how the public sphere mission of libraries and librarianship is
threatened by the new public philosophy’s technophilia and economic instrumentality. Two things should be noted at the outset: first, that Buschman’s focus is on academic, public, and school librarianship, not the special librarianship of the corporate sector, and second, this is a very American book.

From my perspective the most useful part of *Dismantling the Public Sphere* — by “useful” I mean helpful for thinking, especially about research and pedagogy in LIS — is the second, especially chapters 4 through 6. On almost every issue in these chapters Buschman presents such a succinct and compelling case that I plan to use his book to stimulate students to think about the current state and future prospects of librarianship. It ought to be used widely in masters programs in LIS because its study of the discipline’s professional and academic literature models a refreshingly critical kind of thinking that strengthens the profession. In this review I will reverse the order of the two parts and first discuss chapters 4-6.

Chapter 4 is a critique of school, public, and academic library funding policies and the rhetoric of the new public philosophy in which they are expressed — what Buschman calls “funding ideologies.” Libraries are evaluated in terms of private, not public, goods; the familiar and fatuous rhetoric of the “information age” and “learning society” justifies information technologies as solutions to “challenges” libraries must meet to “survive” in the new digital social order (the book opens with wonderful examples of the many “crises” in librarianship littering its literature, which Buschman attributes to the grip exercised by “epiphenomena of the moment” on the authors’ attentions). Yet the most pressing need — adequate public funding — is largely absent from the policy documents he examines, which show a sharp “disjunction between the rhetoric of the importance of libraries in the information age” and actual funding patterns (p. 65) that reveal wide disparities tracking social patterns of affluence and poverty. Libraries are valued by the degree to which they participate in the new information capitalism as consumers of the information technologies and services marketed by the private sector.

The “ideological forefront” of attempts to position libraries firmly within the “new public policy framework,” Buschman argues, has been the academic library leadership. Although academic library budgets continue to fall as proportions of overall university budgets, they show a “skyrocketing” increase in spending on electronic resources as compared to books. Their funding patterns are similar to those of school and public libraries: wide disparities between the small and dwindling proportions of budgets spent for staff, materials, and hours of operation as compared to information technologies.

Libraries are forced to scramble for grants to make ends meet, yet granting agencies skew resources toward information technology applications, thus miring libraries even deeper within information capitalism. Buschman’s claim that the “policy framework of the ‘new’ economy agenda and the new public philosophy is very clear in the funding patterns followed by the
private foundations” finds support in Bill Gates’s well-publicized “highest goal” — “to put an end to paper and books” (p. 70).

The chapter concludes by arguing that the new public philosophy of funding defines the benefits of libraries in purely economic terms. As economic assets, they are valuable to communities because they can “lure wealthier homeowners or students or businesses.” But the price is high: “the library as a source of democratic inquiry and critique becomes something of a sideshow (or an embarrassment)” (p. 73). Because they are not valued or funded as spaces for “research, reflection, and reading,” Buschman sees the integration of libraries into the “new” information economy as a threat to their primary purpose: “They do not function as a democratic space apart for inquiry and reflection, and they do not further rational discourse — or the potential for discourse — when they become an extension of the media entertainment empire in order to ‘survive’” (p. 74).

In this chapter, as in others, readers encounter Buschman’s clear preference for print over non-print materials. It is as if print materials are somehow less implicated in information capitalism than electronic materials and inherently more conducive to reflection, analysis, judgment, and rational thought, and are therefore the materials of choice in the communicative practices of the public sphere. Arguments for his preference remain implicit here — in chapter 8 one argument becomes explicit when he claims that multimedia are inherently apolitical due to their visual bias (an argument surely unacceptable to many politically progressive filmmakers, painters, video, and other visual artists). But is there a difference in principle in spending on electronic rather than print materials, especially when the same publishing conglomerates supply both? The argument would be more useful if it were made more explicit. Buschman’s main point of the chapter, however, is clear: “libraries have not prospered in the shift to the information society, and librarians ‘stretch’ fewer fiscal resources over more formats, with a tremendous economic and social emphasis on one particular ‘flavor’ of resource” (p. 69).

The threats to librarianship stemming from library administrators and library management ideologies are analyzed in chapter 5. Buschman does not pull his punches — his prose is refreshingly bracing: “The literature of library management does not have a new public philosophy subtext. Rather, it is the text of that literature: there is no critical distance between economic/business management themes and those in librarianship…[the literature] is directly derivative of business management fashions…there is a wholesale adoption of dominant fads”(p. 85). “If war is too important to be left to the generals, the fate of libraries is too important to be left just to library administrators” (p. 87). He targets the “intellectual sloppiness” of three leading concepts of library management literature: “information,” “postindustrialism,” and “knowledge management.” The first is used in so many different ways as to be useless for analyzing and planning library services (Buschman cites Frank Webster’s count of 400 different conceptions in the scholarly litera-
ture; Alvin Schrader came to the same conclusion over twenty years ago). Nor does one find in this morass of definitions and metaphors any “serious questioning or investigation of the validity, permanence, integrity, or value of the information so avidly (and transformationally) funded and piped into libraries” (p. 90).

With respect to the second of Buschman’s triad of library management confusions, he argues that the public enrichment implied by Daniel Bell’s concept of postindustrial society has been hijacked by the new public philosophy commitments of library administrators, whose aping of management fashions turn the concept on its head as a justification of for-profit models of library services. Buschman applies Steve Fuller’s analysis of knowledge management in his critique of the simple-mindedness of library managers’ information-capitalistic appropriation of the concept to erode librarianship’s values of public information, preservation, and open access. He also shows the real effects of the intellectually fraudulent discourses of library management in justifications of the “wholesale outsourcing of librarian’s jobs and competencies” (p. 99; Buschman’s example is the trail-blazing Wal-Mart approach to libraries adopted by Bart Kane in his role as the state librarian of Hawaii), and in “transformative” library architecture, as exemplified by the Cerritos [California] Public Library and the Seattle Public Library, where “space is lavished on technology and grand interior design spaces and buckets of money further spent on exterior architectural ‘statements’” (p. 98) rather than on collections. He concludes that “fashionable management rhetoric about libraries constitutes a form of managing away the public sphere in librarianship — and possibly managing away the institution itself” (p. 101).

Themes of accountability and quality measurement, the “bookstore-with-a-Starbucks” model for libraries, and the role of public relations and marketing are taken up in chapter 6. These themes are closely related because “each re-casts the library user as ‘customer’ and is a different aspect of customer-driven librarianship ” (p. 109). His main point about accountability and quality measurement uses Henry Mintzberg’s analysis of public institutions to argue that “accountability is not a guiding principle for effective management but rather an inappropriate management model for public institutions” (p. 111). Although it may guide library administrators in slick performances for funders committed to the political ideology of the new public philosophy, this model generates flawed exercises with no real benefits. Buschman also relies on William Starbuck, another writer of organizational management literature, who argues that “decisions in organizations are not based upon objective phenomena but rather upon ideologies that come into play when a ‘crisis’ is seen, envisioned, made up and simply declared, sought, or genuinely thrust upon an institution from external factors” (p. 112). Buschman’s application of Starbuck’s argument is straightforward: the new public philosophy offers library administrators just such a “crisis.” “What is measured in response to our variously declared ‘crises’,” Buschman writes, “is ‘quality’
from a particular ideological...point of view...what is identified and defined as ‘quality’ is that which will pay off, and therefore, the lack of quality is defined as those aspects of librarianship that do not provide a return — or do not pay off soon enough” (p. 112). This argument should be taught to every student in masters courses in library and information science.

Buschman argues that the “bookstore-with-a-Starbucks” model of libraries is merely a faddish and gimmicky attempt to increase “customer” foot traffic in order to provide the quantitative data so eagerly sought by funders in thrall of managerial “accountability.” This model bypasses completely the value and nature of libraries: “To equate the turnover and stock of a good bookstore and its inventory control system and salespeople with a library demonstrates a breathtakingly shallow understanding of what a library is and does.” (p. 114). The marketing and public relations fad in librarianship also positions library users as customers: “the incentive is to continue to assess and evaluate with facile and surface methodologies and instruments to identify and document ‘quality’ and ‘successes’ that support arguments for funding and the rhetoric of repositioning of libraries within the new public philosophy information society” (p. 118).

Chapter 7 turns to the American Library Association (ALA), examining both its inaction (what it should have done, but did not) and its action (what it should not have done, but did). Buschman argues that in spite of its honorable legacy, the ALA is “drifting toward a new public philosophy-like corporate model” (p. 132). The organization’s inaction includes failures to take principled stands and exercise appropriate vigilance on outsourcing library services, the massive and increasing concentration of corporate ownership of the publishing, distribution, and media industries, and the Patriot Act’s attack on the confidentiality of library user records. The ALA’s actions include (1) what Buschman calls the ALA’s “one voice” policy, which consists in stifling internal debate, especially around attempts to press the organization into action on progressive policies and issues; (2) limiting the scope and meaning of intellectual freedom, both in the profession and more generally; (3) its emphasis on public relations and corporate partnerships. These cases evidence a steady erosion of democratic governance of the ALA and its enthusiasm for protecting democratic values — tendencies Buschman sees as the ALA’s drift toward an embrace of the new public philosophy.

I now return to the first part of the book, which I find somewhat less useful because some ideas need further development and some arguments need stronger support. Buschman’s appeal to democracy belongs to the first category and his hostility to postmodernism to the second.

The word “democracy” and its variants appear seven times in the last six sentences of the first chapter’s penultimate section, “The Structure of the Book.” We read that chapter 9 will adapt “a democratic theory of public institutions” to “rescue democratic possibility” and argue for “librarianship
in a democracy.” Librarianship is part of “the project of democracy.” It is positioned in “the critical and democratic public sphere,” and “democratic principles and possibility” are at its core. Librarianship is “part of the democratic public sphere” (p. 9). The concept of democracy has its work cut out for it. Is it up to the job?

Some tensions already appear in chapter 1 before we encounter these rhetorical bombs of democracy bursting in air. Buschman acknowledges that librarianship is “routinely” defended “as essential to democracy” (p. 7). But he is critical of the “happy consensus of information-equals-democracy narrative,” noting that the “connections between libraries and democracies are more a matter of rhetoric and faith than substance.” It is not that he rejects a democratic defense of librarianship, but believes that its “current form” is “grossly inadequate.” A more substantial defense is required. But the worm is in the apple; by recognizing that the democratic argument is “discredited” by “shallow” glosses, such as those retailed by the ALA (and he’s surely right about that, noting that the ALA lumps together the democratic value of libraries and virtues such as making “families friendlier” — whatever that could possibly mean), Buschman recognizes that the argument can be undermined by “rhetoric” and “faith” as opposed to the sober pursuit of a “meaningful, consistent, and sustainable intellectual basis.” The strength of the concept of democracy seems to depend not so much on its assumed referentiality as on the rhetorical company it keeps, which raises the issue of whether “democracy” — dare I say, the signifier “democracy”? — has been sufficiently debased in our time to negate its value as the robust resource Buschman needs to defend libraries and librarianship against the encroachments of information capitalism.

Chapter 2 complicates the role of “faith” in articulations of democracy for here, far from undermining the concept, faith supports it. It just depends, so it seems, on the kind of faith. Buschman’s own rhetoric is imbued with faith, and it is a very familiar variety: faith in American democracy. Following Wolin, he accepts the idea that at one time, not so long ago, Americans enjoyed a “language of public discourse” in which the notions of “power,” “justice,” “right and wrong,” “equality,” “freedom,” and “authority” were discussed in moral, religious, or legal but not economic terms, with the result that this public discourse did not conflict with a healthy skepticism about the “motives of businessmen” (p. 15, quoting Wolin). But all this changed, and the shift was marked as “Reaganism” or “Thatcherism” (in Canada, it was associated with Brian Mulroney). Economics was the core of the new public philosophy; all public questions became framed in economic terms. A key idea here is that the new public philosophy is “neutral,” that it is, or purports to be, a scientific language — Buschman calls it “a falsely neutral rhetoric” (p. 19). In chapter 2, a rationality — albeit economic rationality — undermines the democratic argument whereas religious and moral discourse supports it, but in chapter 1, rationality defends the democratic argument against “faith.”
Further complications arise when Buschman accepts, as he must, that even in America democratic ideals are far from having been achieved. Although he recognizes slavery and the oppression of a wide variety of minorities throughout American history, he sees these as “significant shortcomings of the American experience” (p. 16) — a confession of faith that the “American experience” itself, in its essence, once did and still contains truly liberatory and democratic value and force. In a faith-based gesture, Buschman calls the roll of familiar American heroes: Tom Paine, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The real and true democracy embedded in their ideals “expanded — however slowly, haphazardly, and with struggle — democratic participation and possibility over time” (p. 17).

We see a current variant of this faith in American democracy when we open our newspapers or watch our televisions to encounter George W. Bush’s comments about the bumps along the road to democracy in Iraq — a lesson in the hospitality extended by the rhetoric of “democracy” to purging the institutions of civil society and replacing them with American business. The moral of this comparison suggests that the language of “democracy” is hardly neutral and “scientific,” neither in Buschman’s book nor in the extremism of the current White House’s fervent moralism, so frightening to the rest of the world. Can a defense of librarianship appeal to an “American experience” as accommodating of Buschman’s faith in a democratic public sphere as of Bush’s faith, currently preached from the Oval Office, in American democracy as the one true religion for the whole planet?

The question of the value of the language of American democracy for defending librarianship also arises in Buschman’s appeal to the critical educationalists Henry Giroux and Michael Apple. The moralism of the new public philosophy, as opposed to its “neutral” economic rationality, is acknowledged in Buschman’s discussion of Apple, who recognizes the contradictions of the political alliance in America of corporate secularism and modernization with a cultural conservatism that abhors both tendencies. Yet the rhetoric of democracy easily unites the two; the market is commonly presented as a zone of democratic freedom where rational self-interest benefits all, and where corporations are simply “individuals,” no different, really, from the Mom and Pop whose hard work and good business sense enables their candy store to turn the small but steady profit that allows them to raise their children rightly and attend church on Sunday. Tax cuts for the wealthy, a major plank of the present Bush administration, are sold as a tonic for the health of an egalitarian and “democratic” public sphere in which everyone benefits. The religiosity of America’s new mullahs, now comfortably installed within the inner circle of the executive branch of government, is a far cry from “neutral” and “scientific” public discourse, and, more to the point, their faith too is in “democracy.”

Lest there be any mistake, I wish to be clear that I don’t think for a moment that Buschman falls for tall tales of democratic markets and the egalitarian-

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ism of corporate individualism. But I do wish to raise the question of the role of faith in a concept that refuses to stop skidding drunkenly across the discursive terrain. Even after recognizing the sordid history of American education (p. 25), Buschman writes, somewhat pleadingly, as if to abandon that history altogether would be to abandon all hope: “And yet, and yet...there were democratic ideals built into the system and they are there to be recaptured” (p. 25). His evidence of the continued existence of those ideals — the attempts of the new public philosophers to repress the history of conflicts between democratic educators and the entrenched, non-democratic forces they encountered — is a weak reed to support hopes for a critical and egalitarian public sphere.

I believe that the tensions between Buschman’s acknowledgements of the unsavory history of American democracy and his faith in its recuperation as a defense of librarianship arise from a conviction that there must be universal principles, and that American democracy — the real, true American democracy — is one of them. It is a conviction that only universal principles can support a liberatory politics grounded in the truly democratic ideals surviving beneath or alongside America’s chequered past and able to be recovered with the help of Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. This conviction emerges more fully in his antipathy to postmodernism, or at least to what he takes postmodernism to be. After all, if there are no universal principles, American democracy can’t be grounded in them; if what democracy is is revealed only in what is immanent, or on the surface — its history and the historically fraught conflicts waged under its banner — if that’s all it is, then appealing to some transcendental ground from which its essence and goodness flow has little more intellectual respectability than claiming God is on our side (a posture that the current White House is not in the least embarrassed to strike).

Buschman’s rubbishing of postmodernism is at work in chapters 3 and 8. The burden of chapter 3 is to explain and defend the idea of the public sphere, a civic space free from the distortions of the state and the market, a space of rational communication supported by open communicative structures such as a free press. The values of law and morality become universal through the rational communication constituting the public sphere. The concentration of ownership and control of mass media in the hands of a few corporate behemoths does present some problems, to be sure, but Buschman cheerily celebrates Habermas’s refusal to be pessimistic and expresses his own staunch faith in the political force of communication, which is now heard in the voices of grassroots social movements “through protest and highlighting problems and contradictions” (p. 44). There follows a section on criticisms of the public sphere, all quickly swept aside, except for postmodernism.

Of all the flawed ideologies, fatuous assertions, and muddled thinking that Buschman tackles, postmodernism arouses most of his ire. He leaves the most sweeping dismissals to critics like Alan Sokal — which is somewhat
like delegating criticism of progressive politics to Rush Limbaugh — whose famous hoax perpetrated on Social Text is read as a definitive rebuttal of postmodernism tout court, in spite of the many more hoaxes and frauds perpetrated in the scholarly scientific literature without a murmur of alarm about the failure of editors to distinguish sense from nonsense. In Buschman’s text a caricatured “postmodernism” is laughed out of court as being utterly unable to engage any serious political questions due to its alleged dissolution of transcendentally objective concepts such as “truth” and “reality.” It’s a bold gesture, ignoring completely the deeply ethical preoccupations of Derrida and Foucault, to name just the two most prominent ridiculed thinkers. We also read that “librarians are all Habermasians: the mere act of organizing and the purpose of informing are inherent rejections of postmodernist notions” — a sweeping appropriation of the intellectual commitments of an entire profession, one that might be seen as somewhat alarming to adherents of open communication, rational discussion, and the search for truth. Since the existence of transcendental, universal ideals is a certainty for Buschman, there are no arguments here, but he writes with brio, and will certainly entertain those already converted. But the dismissiveness of his comments on postmodernism render them quite useless for thinking about librarianship — they usurp rational critique rather than encourage it.

Strong binary oppositions are at work in chapter 3. On the one side, a space for democratic inquiry, rational discourse and critique, and on the other, librarianship’s alliance with mindless, popular mass entertainment. The two never meet, in spite of Buschman’s acknowledgement in his quotations from Habermas of the relationship between the development of the public sphere and the market economy. Although many of the analyses offered in cultural studies of the politically “transgressive” nature of the consumption of popular culture are at least overstated if not fanciful, the connection between commerce and the development of a public sphere has recently received serious scholarly attention in David Zaret’s Origins of Democratic Culture. He reveals the postmodernist style “signification run riot” of the textual practices of Restoration England, which not only did not impede new forms of political organization leading to a public sphere, but aided their development. Commerce fueled the new print technologies that brought about the textual practices at the core of a public sphere: “Communicative change propelled by commerce and textual reproduction led to novel political practices that constituted a public sphere in which participants issued reasons to defend opinions on setting a legislative agenda” (p. 278). Buschman’s opposition between spaces of commerce and democratic rationality leave no room for analyses hospitable to their intersection; to be intermeshed with commerce seems to amount in his view to a thorough elimination of the possibility of progressive politics other than one based on appeals to universal — yet thoroughly American — “truths” about the essence of democracy, justice, and equality. Zaret models serious scholarly consideration of postmodernism even while rejecting much of it, as does Frederic Jameson, who Buschman enlists in his cause.
Chapter 8 has many valuable things to say about the dangers of librarianship’s “technocratic” fixation on new information technologies. The concept of technocracy is useful; Buschman explains it in terms of “a perception of the world as a set of problems to be rationally solved through expertise; the interconnection of science, technology, and modernization; a rationalized human social order with technical expertise (and its tools and purposes) at its center; and centralized managerial control” (p. 159). These features would appear to position technocratic thought poles apart from postmodernism; indeed, quoting Andrew Feenberg, Buschman endorses his claim that postmodernism “attacks all forms of totalizing discourse … in the belief that totalization is the logic of technocracy” (p. 153). Yet immediately following, Buschman says that postmodernism’s relationship to technology “is shot through with the longstanding faith in the ability of technical rationality to solve economic and social problems.” Later in the chapter he writes: “Postmodernist visions of librarianship show [the] basic hallmarks of technocracy” (p. 159). But if post-modernism’s attack on all totalizations stems from a belief that totalization is the logic of technocracy, then how can postmodernism embody a faith in technocratic rationality? Indeed, how can the alleged postmodernist “intoxication with words, combined with a superb indifference to meaning” (a quote from Sokal, p. 151), and its rejection of any “basis for knowledge … in the airless domination of narrative” (p. 46) be reconciled with its commitments to economic rationality and modernization?

The confusions here run deep, surfacing again in Buschman’s claim that for postmodernism, the “only acceptable alternative is a return to the individual and self-constructed ‘narrative’” (p. 152). This is completely wrongheaded. One of the leading ideas of poststructuralist thought — the philosophical basis of postmodernism — is the rejection of a basic concept of the Western philosophical tradition: that of the unified, self-present, thinking subject. Not even a cursory reading of, say, Foucault and Derrida could lead one to believe that they celebrate a “technologically mediated ‘individualism’” (p. 152), much less the “hyperreality” promoted by those with much to gain from diverting our attention from injustices occurring beyond the play of images on computer screens. (Buschman enlists two of my articles in his anti-postmodernist cause, but my discussion of the discursive construction of new information technologies does not mention postmodernism, and my discussion of postmodern information science argues that postmodernism’s analysis of the relationship between information technologies and fragmented human subjectivity must be taken seriously because it provides resources to help us understand our place in the world being constructed around us by networked military and corporate practices of domination.)

The idea that postmodernism is a celebration of technological rationality — bizarre as it may be — drives Buschman’s argument aimed at discrediting the more egregiously technophilic enthusiasms found in the literature of librarianship. His argument goes something like this: postmodernism is bogus, the literature celebrating multimedia libraries and “the networked in-
formation environment” are postmodern, therefore that literature is bogus. One can easily agree with his conclusion yet reject both of his premises. In fact, the second premise is false. The literature he cites is not postmodern just by virtue of celebrating multimedia and new information technologies — it’s not that easy to be a postmodernist. Buschman’s text is sprinkled with this false assumption: “postmodernist visions of libraries,” “postmodernlike library problems,” “this postmodernist context,” “the postmodern multimedia library,” and so on. The difficulty here is not that the passages he cites are sensible and sober rather than absurd, but that his enthusiasm to tar them all with his postmodernist brush deflects useful and productive critique.

I suggest that readers apply their black markers to highlight Buschman’s dismissals of postmodernism; they’d clearly see that his arguments don’t need them. There are good reasons to believe that uncritical enthusiasms for electronic resources “furthers the bias that cuts society off from the vast majority of the information and value contained on the shelves in libraries” (p. 155); the argument that “a visual bias strips our resources of any political meaning” (p. 155) is worth serious consideration; and perhaps it’s true that the “struggle for representative justice in catalog subject headings” are rendered meaningless in a multimedia library consisting only of visual images (p. 155). But we don’t need to rubbish postmodernism to arrive at such conclusions.

Far from leading us to conclude that the authority of texts has evaporated, the work of the few poststructuralist thinkers Buschman actually cites, such as Foucault and Derrida, embody and encourage serious and painstaking scholarship on the question of how that authority is created and maintained. His highly controversial claim that “information, words, and images [have] relationships or rational structures built in” is offered as glibly as his dismissal of postmodernism. The very real problems he recognizes about the web’s failure to identify the resources laboriously established as “legitimate” by librarians may be due far more to the imperatives of commercialization (which he also notes) than to the evils of postmodernism. In a gesture that is itself ahistorical, Buschman even attributes librarianship’s ahistoricity to postmodernism, yet the phenomenon is easily encountered in library journals published since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His argument that a reorganization of librarianship around the “new” information economy and technology “clearly represents the technocratic reorganization of a public, social institution around rationalized, instrumental, and economic purposes” has great merit, and it is important that it be debated. But it should be read with your black marker ready at hand. His chapter’s concluding argument, that technological determinism masks human agency and breeds “political impotence in the face of anonymous systems” is also difficult to fault, but to read postmodernism in technologically deterministic discourses in librarianship is bizarre. Will the technological determinist among postmodernists please stand up?
In the final chapter Buschman recognizes more explicitly than elsewhere the need for argument in at least two important debates. The first is whether libraries and librarianship contribute to the maintenance of a democratic public sphere. The debate is important, because the answer is not obvious. More historical and critical work is needed to determine whether libraries and librarianship are fundamentally oppositional to attacks on democratic institutions. Second, and implicit in the first, is the value of the Habermasian idea of the democratic public sphere in current political and philosophical thought. Buschman defends the Habermasian democratic theory against conservative, liberal, and postmodern alternatives because he insists upon the need to make explicit the theoretical assumptions of public policies. The outcome of this second debate is no more obvious than that of the first. More work needs to be done to determine whether a public sphere of rational argument, reasoned debate, serious discussion of theoretical principles underlying public policies, and open communication between knowledgeable and articulate citizens is fundamentally opposed to or easily reconciled with a polity that justifies barbaric acts of aggression and violence, not only outside but within its borders, by the “spread of democracy” to oppressed peoples. Perhaps social justice requires more than a Habermasian communicative sphere, and perhaps the justification of civic institutions involves more than service to a particular form of political organization, especially one with much to answer for, both historically and in our own day. It might also be worth reflecting whether the cause of social and political justice are well served by poststructuralist thought, which in arguing that our social practices are the only source of whatever stability our favorite concepts enjoy might give us more of the hope we need for political action than continuing to cling to and champion them by appeal to eternal, universal, and transcendental entities. Both of the debates Buschman opens are valuable because they lead us and our students to reflect on purposes of libraries and librarianship beyond issues of efficiency, professionalism, institutional organization, technological functionality, and economic instrumentality. Buschman’s work deserves a wide audience in the profession but especially in schools of library and information science.