A Note on Frohmann

by John Buschman

First, I want to thank Professor Frohmann for his extended analysis of the book. He clearly took it seriously enough to engage it at length, and despite his disagreements, he feels it is a topic and treatment worthy of wide engagement by librarians and those studying at the graduate level in library and information science. In no way do I want this to be a debate, so I will keep my comments brief, pointing the reader back to the book.

A key idea – that libraries enact and embody, in concrete and specific ways, Habermas’s formulation of the public sphere – was bypassed. To pick a key phrase from the Zaret book Professor Frohmann referred us to, “ideas seldom exist apart from practice.” Libraries as they have historically evolved in democracies are an idea in practice – the public sphere. Our institutions and policies and values are remarkably congruent with its development and that of democracy. This, it seems to me, is a good thing in which to be historically and theoretically rooted, and it is worth fighting the fight for its meaning and against its dismantling in our institutions. The critiques he lauds in the book are rooted in what is being dismantled. Otherwise, why bother? (More on this in a bit.) Yes, the word democracy has been debased (what hasn’t in our culture lately?). But that does not mean it never existed, or can’t ever exist, or can’t be recreated, or created anew. The book attempts to define a democratic theory for public institutions (it did not begin with one provided by Habermas) and it culminates in adapting the work of the philosopher Amy Gutmann and others on democratic education. Giving meaning to democracy when we’ve lost track of it is the point. The book is an extended analysis of the context of, the struggle for, and the forces allied against the democratic public sphere within our field. This remains contested terrain, and naming it as such is a critical first step.

Professor Frohmann is undoubtedly more versed in the basic postmodernist texts and discourse than I am. However, I am somewhat puzzled as to his puzzlement on the source of the criticisms I put forth, since they were certainly not invented whole cloth. (Habermas and Foucault squared off long ago.) Rather, than go at the text with a black marker (!), I would suggest readers look at some of the work I use, cite, and adapt: Frank Webster, Richard Brosio, John Durham Peters, Stuart Hall, Kevin Robins, Carl Boggs, Michael Apple, Robins & Webster’s Times of the Technoculture, etc. They clearly link trends – like economic globalization, the fragmenting nature of new media, political isolation, the apolitical nature of media identity formation, the neo-liberal “new” economy and politics, technocracy and technological domination – with a critique of postmodernism and its theories. Professor Frohmann’s own work summarizes some of this very well (and he indeed takes a middle path). Though he disagrees, these arguments are well established and have been connected to public institutions (especially schools) for
some time. The central point in my criticism of the “posts” is that we need an intellectually sustainable reason for librarianship in an era when public institutions – and the very nature of and need for their existence – are continuously under question and even attack. Postmodernist theory cannot provide that reason for librarianship in my estimation. We’ll be deconstructing the “text” of libraries while libraries really are being deconstructed, jobs lost, local history tossed in the dumpster, and real communities going unserved. The book is about figuring out where “North” is on our professional compass – for us and for our societies. That’s why we should bother.

As to the observation that it is a “very American” book, I too share Professor Frohmann’s anger at the preemptive “gift” of democracy to Iraq. I too grind my teeth at the purposeful conflation of the word with an unfair market system and global domination. We’re both pulling oars in the same direction here. At the same time, we cut ourselves off from possibility if we dismiss the meaning of struggles of the past because of the unsavory character of the present. The historical struggle for access to education and over curriculum was important, and we reap benefits from that struggle to this day. The struggle King led did make a real difference for African Americans, and we reap benefits from that to this day. These are not mere rhetorical invocations of heroes, but rather represent real extensions of democracy by and for real people in the red thread of history. They are still there to be realized and recaptured. Democracy rolled back or withheld does not make that a permanent condition: at the very moment I’m writing this, thousands of gay people are getting married in a handful of communities and forcing the issue of equity and equality forward however haphazardly – in George Bush’s America. Our critiques cannot lead us to a pessimistic dead end, and that too is what the book is about. Professor Frohmann is surely right when he notes that the questions the book raises are incompletely answered, but I would suggest they are not merely American ones. He is surely right as well that the field of inquiry can be broadened beyond that I’ve utilized. Lastly, it is an unqualified good when those of us in the field and those of us in library and information science programs at last connect, engage at a theoretical level, and overcome a traditional and destructive division in the field. I suspect the pages of Progressive Librarian are one of the few venues for that right now.