

*Constraining Public Libraries: The World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services*, by Samuel E. Trosow and Kirsti Nilsen. Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2006.

*Reviewed by Ruth Rikowski*

I was delighted to discover that another book has now been written about the implications of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for libraries. Trosow and Nilsen's book is indeed, very welcome. It considers the GATS in some detail, which is very useful, including chapters on the Scope of the GATS (Chapter 2) and the GATS disciplines (Chapter 3). The authors summarise and simplify a number of issues (e.g. the scope of and rules regarding the coverage of GATS) in diagrammatic form – which aids in understanding this complex and dense topic.

GATS is about the liberalisation of trade in services, and as such it threatens state-funded libraries, including public libraries. Trosow and Nilsen make this very clear. There are also four appendices A-D (pp.175-220), which provide useful background material: on pertinent sections of the GATS Agreement (Appendix A), on the WTO Dispute Settlement Process (Appendix B), the IFLA position on the WTO, as at 2001 (in Appendix C), and on the Canadian Library Association's position on the potential threat to library and information services posed by the GATS (Appendix D). To the uninitiated, this might be helpful, although such information can be found elsewhere.

Trosow and Nilsen also emphasise how difficult it is to understand the intricacies of the international trade agenda in general:

By design, the international trade regime is confusing, and equally by design it is fully accessible only to the most specialized trade lawyers and lobbyists...The GATS agenda is ongoing and not always transparent. (p.150).

Chapter 4 considers whether public libraries operate on a commercial basis, and within this, a range of collection, information and reference services are examined. Trosow and Nilsen conclude the chapter saying:

The wide variety of public library services available illustrates the extent to which libraries are either operating in a commercial manner or competing with private-sector suppliers. On either account, libraries cannot rely on the GATS exemption for services provided under the auspices of government authority. (p. 80)

Considerable reference is given to my own book, *Globalisation, Information and Libraries*, in Chapter 5, particularly in relation to my typology regarding commercialisation, privatisation and capitalisation. The authors write:

...Ruth Rikowski provides a timely and very useful framework that explains the mechanisms of three main paths to privatization. (p. 100)

In this way, they build on my previous work, although not so much in other ways. Trosow and Nilsen refer to commercialisation in regard to commercial digital libraries, for example, saying that:

HighBeam Research and Questia...are examples of commercial digital libraries that market services directly to individuals and bypass any connection to physical libraries. (p.71)

They make an interesting point when they say that although public libraries are not providing Internet access on a commercial basis, perhaps they can be seen to be competing with private sector Internet providers. This is something that we need to be aware of and to deliberate further on.

Chapter 6 considers how to avoid the negative impact of trade in services and a number of very useful recommendations are made. These include discouraging privatisation, limiting commercialisation and avoiding user fees, engaging in advocacy for public libraries and avoiding complacency (p. 144).

However, this book does not have the clear political and theoretical message that I purvey. It does basically establish that the GATS is something that the library and information profession needs to be really concerned about, if we care about our public libraries. Yet I do find their conclusion disturbing: Trosow and Nilsen indicate that the implications of the WTO agreements for libraries were “unanticipated,” and just showed an “unintentional and unfortunate lack of foresight” (p.168). I do not accept this at all. Instead, the GATS is primarily about placing public services (including library and information services) within a trade agenda. Its trajectory and development carries with it the potential to transform public services into internationally tradable commodities under the auspices of capital and profit-making enterprises. All this is an aspect of the “logic” of capital, a logic currently dressed up in academic and left media circles as neoliberalism, which is an ideology that has practical effects when embraced by governments: viz. to break down barriers to marketisation, commodification and capital accumulation – throughout the known social universe. It is disingenuous, in my opinion, to argue that those negotiators who traded away a whole gamut of public services into the arms of capital via the GATS in 1994 – even before the WTO became a legal entity on 1st January 1995 – were apparently clueless, and hence blameless, regarding what they did.

In the final section there is a “GATS Glossary” (pp.221-225) that opens up the relevant acronyms used in GATSpeak accurately and succinctly. The bibliography is quite extensive and useful, especially for postgraduate students and researchers new to this growing field of enquiry. There is an

index and also quite extensive notes at the end of each chapter. All this, plus the appendices, constitutes approximately one third of the book.

In conclusion, I certainly recommend this book. The more that we can uncover and unravel of the complexities of the global capitalist trade agenda for libraries and information, the better. The book provides a very valuable contribution to this task. However, I do urge against falling for any form of smoke screen, no matter where it comes from. But hopefully, together we can start to “blow the lid” on this global capitalist agenda and, indeed, uncover the hidden (and not so hidden) global capitalist trade agenda for libraries and information.