First, a few huge truth-in-reviewing notes: Norris' book, on first blush, would seem to significantly overlap my own Libraries, Classrooms, and the Interests of Democracy: Marking the Limits of Neoliberalism, to be published by Scarecrow Press/Rowman & Littlefield this year. Second note: both volumes are revisions and updates of dissertations (note bene on keyword searching: Norris' dissertation did not come up when I looked to find other similar work at the beginning of my project). Third, and this is the good news: both of us have taken very different approaches to the topic, and the differences are very instructive. Much like jazz, we are playing many of the same notes, but holding them differently and longer with different ends in mind. Now to Norris' book.

The table of contents gives as good an idea as anything of what the books covers, and how: Introduction: Consumerism in Our Own Schoolyards; 1) The Origins and Nature of Consumerism; 2) Consuming Schooling: Whose Schools Are They?; 3) Hannah Arendt: Consuming the Polis; 4) Jean Baudrillard: Consuming Signs; 5) Resisting Consuming: Ruin or Renewal; Conclusion: "What Is to Come." Instead of mechanically walking through the book, I'd like to discuss some salient points and strengths of Norris' work, and some areas where we diverge a little. The first thing to say is that Norris' overview of the origins and nature of consumption is probably as good a brief overview of the topic as I've read. He approached the issue and the sweep of the literature differently than my own related chapter, and I found it very productive to read and a real help to reflect on the phenomenon, as well as a guide to some of the literature I was not as familiar with. And he makes an important series of clarifications very useful for any of us who would wish to think about and discuss consumption and consumerism (quoting British scholar Frank Trentmann to begin): "By nature all human beings are consumers, but the political meaning and identity attached to consumption varies in history." In this book the word consumerism refers more broadly to the larger ideological framework, while consumption refers to more specific individual acts" (p. 16). In other words, his work models the way to think and talk about the ideology of consumerism without the need to denigrate or attack specific acts of consumption. How many of our conversations about this topic have devolved into defensiveness about the purchase of a new coat or music recording, etc. when the real issue lies in the ideology that surrounds it? This alone is a significant contribution for readers of this journal.
Aside from the theoretical and practical interests in understanding, analyzing, and perhaps countering consumption, readers of this journal should be interested in an analysis that deals with the larger context that envelops much of the field of librarianship. As I have written elsewhere, education and librarianship are largely (and productively) symbiotic in both practical terms and in the theoretical-analytical framing of democratic theory. There are often parallel examples or an important point for both institutions best illustrated by one field. Their separation tends to isolate each to their detriment, and both will benefit from a mutual theorization and engagement with broader themes. Such entanglements are productive and, conversely, maintaining divisions and distinctions are counterproductive and we share a fate more common than those on the top rungs in both fields might want to admit. Classrooms are never far from my mind when I write of libraries, and libraries are never far from my mind when I write of classrooms. Both are important parts of an ensemble of educative institutions in democratic societies. We separate them theoretically or separate them as classes of institutions at our peril. One of those common interests is democracy and it’s functioning and non-functioning.

Toward that end, Norris turns to and grounds much of his analysis and critique of consumerism in schools (and he provides a fine overview of that phenomenon as well) vis-à-vis democracy in the work of Hannah Arendt. Arendt is both a seductive and a difficult thinker: one can become immersed in her sometimes entrancing words and concepts and lose or blur some of the key distinctions she wishes to make. Norris provides as clear a brief overview of Arendt as I’ve read. This too is worth the read alone, and would be an excellent introduction to Arendt’s political ideas for the beginner. Her relevance to the topic at hand can be summed up as her analysis that “Consumption becomes a self-perpetuating dynamic: just as the rise of consumption erodes the public realm, consumerism is strengthened when we are denied meaningful political life” (p. 103). Unpacking what that means in terms of democracy, schools, and democratic action considerably deepens the political meaning of that culminating statement (something I too obviously have an interest and stake in advocating), and Norris pulls it off. I have quibbles with his treatment of Baudrillard, but I understand why he included his analysis: “commercial discourse [is] a language of signals,” and Baudrillard takes us into the process whereby such signals “animate” an object for sale and it is thus “endowed with simulated meaning” and the consequent “re-enchantment of the world through animating objects and turning them into signs” (pp. 116-117). Norris does acknowledge the controversies and extremes to which Baudrillard pushed his language, and how silly and/or hopeless some of it became, but his conceptual tie to Arendt saves it. He will not abandon Arendt’s positing of our ability to act and think politically and to disrupt hegemonic forces (her concept of natality), but he uses Baudrillard to warn us that “it is not a question of being for or against ‘agency’ but a need to address a deeper problem of how little space is left for enacting such a concept” (p. 141). Combining those two, “it follows that the most effective way to engage consumerism is through critically investigating the language of consumerism” (p. 157).
My quibble is that Baudrillard could have been more selectively read: the result of wending through the more extreme ends of his analyses tends to reinforce the hegemony of consumerism. In the end though, Norris makes a fine contribution to the work of extracting the political and democratic meaning of our ideology of consumerism.