

November 8, 2016, the Public, and Libraries¹

by John Buschman

Our recent election provides ample reason to stop and analyze what is going on. The same political system that elected Abraham Lincoln with 39.8% of the vote produced majorities in enough states to ratify an onslaught of lies and bigotry.² Economically, people voted against “expansion of health-insurance subsidies for low- and middle-income Americans; investments in education and retraining; middle-class tax cuts; and a higher minimum wage [which] would do far more to help the economically precarious ... than ... top-heavy tax cuts and trade wars.”³ This, I contend, is a problem. To pivot to libraries, Wayne Wiegand never tires of quoting a colleague that our scholarship usually focuses on “the user in the life of the library rather than the library in the life of the user,”⁴ and he asks instead what role do libraries play in the lives of people, if any? I reformulate his theme: what, if anything, has changed in the nature of the public in its expectations of and interactions with libraries? I look at users in a particular aggregate – as a public or as publics: what is the library in the life of its public now? And, what is the role of a library’s public now? Has it changed, and if so, how? I technically define what a public is,⁵ but skipping to the results: the practical definition of a public that encounters a library is a) paying attention to the institution; b) receiving communication from the library; c) communicating to it; d) communicating among themselves about it; e) communicating about present benefits and future consequences of library decisions; and f) communicating in the context of common support for shared resources and services over time. Any one of these may be lessened at a given time – for instance in the level of attention given to library communication – but it also describes how a library engages its publics. So the question is: is that how publics engage libraries now? What is the library in the life of its given public now, and has it changed?

I disavow a golden past, but there is considerable evidence that a broad and liberal (as in marked by generosity of experimentation) political public has

John Buschman is Dean of University Libraries at Seton Hall University (john.buschman@shu.edu). Buschman is author of *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Libraries in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (2003). His most recent book is *Libraries, Classrooms and the Interests of Democracy: Marking the Limits of Neoliberalism* (2012). He holds an M.L.S. from Ball State, an M.A. in American Studies from St. Joseph’s University and a Doctor of Liberal Studies from Georgetown University.

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existed: a political consensus formed to invest in educational institutions in the 19th century and it was, after all, African Americans' exclusion from schools and libraries – and segregated, substandard resources – that brought protest. Democracy and citizenship were once prime library and educational concerns. There were undercurrents of racism, sexism, and a distasteful normalization in these developments – Americanizing immigrants and other forms of social control – but the role of the library in the life of the public then was one of support and expansion of possibilities, opportunities, education, or just plain inexpensive leisure. Put simply, publics chose to build classrooms and libraries instead of other things with taxes and philanthropy. This is too broad a statement, but it contains enough of the kind of a “rough pragmatic resemblance to [the] reality”⁶ of the publics that then existed and it was successfully translated in political terms. So *how* have libraries' publics changed? There is a broad scholarly consensus that we have lived for some time in a neoliberal age. Accounts of neoliberalism are largely critical, but its arguments “to let people have what they want, or to respect their freedom to choose” and to remove the “power to coerce ... by removing the organization of economic activity from the control of political authority”⁷ were addressed to publics receptive to them. This means that neoliberalism⁸ isn't purely done to the public, and the resulting effect on libraries' relationship to its public is our focus. Neoliberal ideas have been translated in political terms: declining budget support, privatized alternatives supported at the public expense (like charter schools and vouchers), and responsibilizing citizens to advocate for their interests when engaging public services.

Putnam⁹ has looked at thirty years of surveys and found a consistent pattern of declining membership and participation in groups and voluntary associations, a decline in time spent with friends and acquaintances, a decline in political participation and interest in politics and a corresponding decline in trust in political institutions, an increase in mobility – and therefore an increase in uprootedness, a declining parental presence in the home (more hours spent in paid work), and the ascendancy of technologized and private forms of leisure during the times when people are together. These broad social patterns have clear relevance to the constitution of publics in the form of how people relate to each other via “trust and reciprocity [which are] crucial for social and political stability and cooperation.”¹⁰

These trends continue – especially in the fraying fabric of commonality and mutual respect and dependence that political problem-solving depends upon – as demonstrated by November 8 and more than two decades of political experience. Put simply, the long-term and persistent decline in social capital produces different publics – including those that interact with libraries. These two strands are connected: neoliberal practices, assumptions and policies erode the bases of social cohesion. Technology and neoliberal economic policies deeply affect the circumstances of and the constitution of publics: production efficiencies underwrite a highly unequal growth in wealth and consumerism, and a globalized neoliberal market culture uproots identities and communities producing polarized publics, making

democratic politics difficult. Stability of grouping and identity is assumed in a public that encounters a library, and right on cue, Inglehart has very recently plumbed his long-running data on postmaterialism and found that “increasingly, high-income societies have winner-takes-all economies that tend [to produce an] overwhelming majority [with] precarious jobs [and as a result,] populist movements” on the left (fueled by inequality) and the right (fueled by “emotionally-charged cultural issues cutting across economic lines”), polarizing social and political environments.¹¹

This is the broad sociology that characterizes the results of wide acceptance and ascendancy of neoliberal economic, technological, social, and political policy arguments over a few decades. How then does this play out in a given public’s interactions with libraries? Some of the trends are well known. Funding – for materials and personnel – is, at best static, and at worst decreasing across all LIS sectors, with state-level public funds the most endangered. In a time of “constrained public dollars and political shifts ... that call for smaller government,” libraries directly compete with other units for the same dollars – police, schools, and roads in municipalities, maintenance and teachers and public safety in educational settings. At the same time libraries are supposed to become “less about ... checking out books and more about ... engaging in the business of making ... personal ... identities. ... Users may ‘customize’ the [library] platform ... to their individual needs” and address trends such as the maker movement, the Internet of things, drones, fast casual and robots. If “the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power,”¹² neoliberalism defines as alternative the public: that which is artificially insulated from the choices of consumers and bureaucratically centralized. Thus a public resource is undemocratic if a library’s public thinks of consumer choice as the equivalent of democratic choice. Likewise equity and equality are simply defined by how resources are deployed so that the basis of choices freely made are putatively neutral, ignoring the deficits of poverty or multiple jobs or health burdens or lack of insurance. The result is a library in the life of its public that, the thinking goes, should be paid for collectively but organized around private benefit. This represents a privatization of purpose of the library. Think of the rhetoric of “customer” service, or the coffee shop model to lure “customers.” Collectively this produces a change not just in spaces, but the meaning of spaces: institutions like the library are there to meet individual preferences and accommodate individual choices in the life of its public – a shift away from establishing and running an institution for the common good. These trends privilege a right of choice, but a public demanding these approaches from a library is itself now a particular slice of private interests. Library inclusion is thus another alternative defined by a neoliberal public in the life of the library: those in need are not a public in the life of the library.

Returning to the practical definition of a library’s public as an analytical resource, we find some serious gaps. While present (individual) benefits are front and center, future consequences are sacrificed on the altar of the private, and common support for shared resources and services over time

are relegated to the status of alternative. The library is increasingly viewed as a private good in its publics' lives: there is little evidence that they are communicating among themselves about the institution over future consequences or common support. It is worth pushing this logic a bit further. As a practical matter, a library is a large undertaking and fiscal support logically goes away when the private purpose is done with – and then returns with the need. How does the institution continue in those gaps? Libraries face, in short, a changed public whose support for institutions and public purposes – behind which lies an argument for a shared social good – has dwindled, and has accepted, at least to some degree and for the time being, the argument for individual choice over a collective set of goods – libraries among them.

In conclusion, this is not simply a matter of setting up a definition that provides intellectual comfort to the LIS field and then complaining that the public is coloring outside the lines. We must come to grips with the contemporary reality that there is a deep hostility to collectivities within neoliberalism, and that includes libraries. Libraries may be a part of the educational and discursive infrastructure of a functioning democracy, but democracy's and the library's publics have become somewhat unmoored from that fact. Democratic politics is not necessarily valued for its own sake since popular sovereignty has too often expanded the state and interfered with the market in the neoliberal view, the ascendancy of which was not in fact a mere matter of successful argumentation accepted by the public. Its rise was very much also a matter of corporate power, political deal-making, marketing and branding an idea, dissembling about its implications, and positioning the change as an inevitable wave of the future demanded by technology and economics which must be accommodated. The global does affect the local and the social, and has affected the library in the life of its publics at all levels. In the end, the picture is mixed. We have on the one hand a neoliberal argument that has become to an extent ingrained in our public life and discourse, and on the other longstanding and widespread discontent with the results. That shows up not only in the data, but in the Occupy movements, Slow Food, and the significant resistance to invasions of privacy by corporations and the NSA. Libraries are still held in high regard, but data also show that people worry that their local library will be closed, lessening their quality of life. Libraries face a public that has not reckoned with the economic, social, technological and political forces that have been unleashed, but the arguments and rhetoric in support of which they putatively agree. That is a big part of what November 8th tells us in my view. It is unsettled and de-centered public in whose lives the library plays a role, and this is perhaps the single most valuable lesson to carry forward. We do not want to wake up one day mindlessly catering to neoliberal choice ideologies and find ourselves with a public that has moved to the logical conclusion of these ideas – that it no longer has a place for libraries or has rediscovered its collective identity and finds an institution that no longer serves it.

Endnotes

1. This paper is adapted from two of my recent articles: Buschman, John. 2017a. "The Library in the Life of the Public: Implications of a Neoliberal Age." *Library Quarterly* 87 (1): 55-70; and Buschman, John. 2017b. "November 8, 2016: Core Values, Bad Faith, and Democracy." *Library Quarterly* 87 (3): 277-286.
2. See the sources and the account in Buschman 2017b, p. 279-281.
3. Rampell, Catherine. 2016. "Why the White Working Class Votes Against Itself." *Washington Post*, December 22. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-the-white-working-class-votes-against-itself/2016/12/22/3aa65c04-c88b-11e6-8bee-54e800ef2a63_story.html?utm_term=.e723ba17a6cd.
4. In Buschman 2017a, p. 55.
5. See Buschman 2017a, p. 56-58.
6. Hofstadter in Buschman 2017a, p. 59-60.
7. Taylor and Friedman respectively in Buschman 2017a, p. 60; see also Buschman 2017b, p. 282-284.
8. One tally of neoliberalism's deficits notes that "the market is insensitive to the distribution of income and wealth among ... classes and geographical locations," that "left to its own devices, the market does little to alleviate the burdens of the dislocations it induces [in the form of] the struggles of communities and regions [and their] declining economic sectors," that "the market does little to ameliorate the tensions that women experience between workplace and family or to reduce persistent inequalities [or] discrimination," that "the market does not achieve a self-regulating balance between consumption and investment [and] imperfect information [distorts market choice], externalities [are] not factored into ... prices, [and there is] inadequate provision of public goods that undergird sustainable economic growth," that the market will exhaust "global 'carrying capacity' [in] a rapacious and exploitative attitude toward nature" leading to ecological disaster, and that the market is indifferent to "the quality of human relationships it entails" along with the substantive quality of individual lives and work it engenders. See p. 37 of Galston, William A. 1993. "Political Theory in the 1980s: Perplexity Amidst Diversity." In *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*, edited by Ada W. Finifter, 27-53. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
9. In Buschman 2017a, p. 61.
10. Newton in Buschman 2017a, p. 61.
11. See p. 452 in Inglehart, Ronald and Pippa Norris. 2017. "Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: *The Silent Revolution* in Reverse." *Perspectives on Politics* 15 (2): 443-454.
12. Clark, et al. and Schattschneider respectively in Buschman 2017a, p. 62