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The Library in the Life of the Public: Implications of a Neoliberal Age

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ABSTRACT

Wayne Wiegand consistently put forward the research agenda of the library in the life of the user. A focus on libraries' publics is a useful variation: What, now, is the library in the life of its public(s)? In order to undertake this analysis, some practical definition of libraries' public(s) must be clarified, and how they might have changed in recent (neoliberal) times. With this background in place, an analysis of how publics now approach libraries is possible—and clarifies library responses within our current neoliberal environment.

The distinguished library and information science (LIS) scholar Wayne Wiegand (1999, 24) never tires of quoting his colleague Doug Zweizig's remark that LIS scholarship traditionally focused on "the user in the life of the library rather than the library in the life of the user." Wiegand has repeated this theme for some time in an attempt to influence the research agenda of the field: What role, if any, do libraries play in the lives of people? This article is a version of his attempt to refocus LIS research by addressing the concept of the public and reformulating the Wiegand/Zweizig theme: What, if anything, has changed in the nature of the public in its expectations of and interactions with libraries in a neoliberal age? In other words, rather than focus on individual users, this analysis looks at users in a particular aggregate—as a public or as publics. My previous work (2003, 2012) focused on the library as one of the remnants of the Habermasian public sphere being chipped away by internal processes that mimic neoliberalism: mindlessly imitating management practices and fads, accountability/social capital/return-on-investment analyses of the institution, outsourcing of core functions such as collections and management, and silly and faddish investments in technology (such as gaming) that erode core functions. I argue that we're changing what a library is and what it is for without much real thought or discussion. The LIS field has not helped (let alone led) in terms of thinking through neoliberal trends or providing a sensible alternative to them. This state of affairs then elicits a version of Wiegand's question: What is the library in the life of its public now? And what is the role of a library's public in these transformations? Has the public that interacts with the library changed, and if so, how? In order to attempt an

answer, some ground must be laid in the form of establishing what we are and are not talking about when we talk about the public, and specifically a library's public—"a curiously obscure question, considering that few things have been more important in the development of modernity" (Warner 2002, 49). A brief review of the concept and its variety and contexts will be useful to this project before proposing a practical definition informed primarily by political theory. With this definition in hand, we can then turn to the question of a changed public—how much and why it has changed and how this change has affected libraries and their responses, followed by a brief conclusion.

What the Public Is, and Is Not: Toward a Practical Definition

Like many widely used concepts, "public" has a wide variety of definitions and meanings—so many that the word threatens to become "a metaphor," which simply "is what it does" (Greene and Griffiths 2003, 85), rendering it analytically useless in approaching the policies and practices of an institution such as the library. However contingent the result, distinctions must be made in the use and meaning of the concept of a public in the interests of intelligibility. The first is the oldest: classical political thinking posited the *res publica*—literally a "public thing"—that which is "uniquely concerned with what is 'common' to the whole community," often equated with the political terms "commonwealth" or "commonweal" (Wolin 2004, 4, 598). There is an irreducible kernel of the social to publicness: it is something shared. A "public" is different from a "community," with the connotations of affective bonds and shared history carried by that term, and it is not a simple aggregation of individuals gathered randomly, like a crowd or a mob, or purposefully, like an audience; there are many publics, and when we speak of "the public," we subsume the variety of publics in the people in general (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999; Warner 2002; Roessler 2006; Buschman and Warner 2016). For a public to come into being, it must self-organize through "forms that mediate the intimate theater of stranger-relationality," most often through discourse where we "recognize ourselves as addressees, but [also] remember that [the message] was addressed to indefinite others. . . . Our participation in the discourse . . . in common with strangers" is part of what constitutes a public and simultaneously one's place within it (Warner 2002, 57–58).

A public then consists of more than a mere grouping of individual private persons. The neoliberal market view of the simple aggregation of "free decisions that individuals make regarding their different and distinct interests [makes the] private and public . . . interpenetrable" (Feinberg 2000, 847) and obviates the commonality and coming-together of publicness by reifying a specific idea of the private.[1] Though it has been fashionable in contemporary times to conflate the concepts, a market is not a public; market response is not a public's feed-

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1. John Coggon (2012, 34) points to smoking and fox hunting as examples of putatively private decisions that happen in public and affect much more than the individual persons who make those choices.

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back, and conflating the two renders the empirical reality of human cooperation and action in concert (up to and including action for the common good) conceptually incoherent. The broader discourse around the public/private distinction is larded with complications and implications that cannot be the focus here,[2] but the distinction between public and private institutions—and a baseline commonality between them in the case of libraries—is highly relevant to this discussion. Public institutions are those that receive tax money (that is, collected and spent for a broad social or community purpose and commonly democratically arrived at— e.g., public schools, universities, and libraries); private institutions are frequently organized around private conscience (religion); around segregation of the sexes or the races, or further by religion and thus not eligible for tax support by law; or simply by tradition and wealth, such as Ivy League universities and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Feinberg 2000; Ingraham 2015). But when tax support in the form of tax-exempt status for private institutions is considered, and also the fact that libraries within such institutions are frequently supported by an internal tax (e.g., as part of tuition or fees or by resource-centered budgeting), the distinction is less sharp. The important point is that almost all libraries face a public that has some kind of stake in their actions and upon which their financial support depends.

We have what a public is not and some fragmentary baselines of the concept to build upon. Michael Warner (2002, 62) argues that a public is formed when people pay attention as a group, resulting in a "reflexive circulation of discourse"; extending further, it is constituted by "open-ended flows of communication that enable . . . formulat[ion of] collective orientations" (Emirbayer and Sheller 1998, 738). John Dewey (1927, 15–16) adds to the concept: "A public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for." In other words, a public is further constituted by an investment in the consequences of decisions. There is a time element to the concept. Past decisions affect present realities, and present decisions will bring future consequences; thus, the institution attracts attention, and discussion of decisions creates a public and a "locus [of] tensional forces" (political space) during/through discussion and issue resolution (Wolin 2004, 8). It is in this sense that certain institutions (schools, libraries, universities)—whether public or private—are political: they are funded in some common manner or "marked off as a . . . market segment" because their purposes concern a group of people that can constitute a public that "is wider than those who happen to be consumers" of those services at a given time. The institution exists in the interests of broader goods such as the "social and political conditions a democratic society needs for

2. In brief, *public* has been equated with masculinity-reason-action and in contrast, *private* has been equated with femininity-household-nurturing; all of these are now entangled with the private-as-privacy, rights, the individual self and conscience, and the sociopolitical claims of women and minorities (Arendt 1998; Roessler 2006; Cohen 2012–13; Buschman 2016).

its own renewal" (Feinberg 2000, 850). Put another way, "healthy democratic institutions are privileged because they respect and are guided by the goods of deliberation" (Mara 2008, 87)—a core element in the creation of a public. In other words, there is a political inflection to libraries' relationship to their public(s).

Pulling these strands together, the practical definition of a public that addresses a library (and vice versa) put forward here is that the public (*a*) pays attention to the institution; (*b*) receives communication from the institution; (*c*) communicates with the institution; (*d*) communicates among its members about the institution; (*e*) communicates about present benefits and future consequences of institutional decisions; (*f*) communicates in the context of common support for shared resources and services over time. This definition has some affinity with descriptions of eighteenth-century publics and their "discoursing private persons who critically negate political norms of the state and its monopoly on interpretation [to form] public opinion [that] institutionalizes itself with the goal of . . . rational consensus" in the emergence of the public sphere and democracy (Hohendahl 1979, 92–93; Habermas 1989; Warner 2002; Mills 2008).[3] Any one or all of these particular elements may be fragmentary at a given time—for instance in the level of attention or the receptiveness to communication on either side—but this practical definition describes the basis of how a public commonly engages its library: the library in the life of its public. It also describes how a library engages its publics, and it is clearly related to larger contexts. Those larger contexts, as will be seen, clearly relate to the specific and local. In other words this definition is scalable: it describes not only a local library's relationships to its publics—and vice versa—but also the framework of, for instance, American Library Association's response to publics (legislative and broad public discourse) about the field and its attempts to influence them. It describes the framework an academic library administrator experiences when she receives and acts on feedback from students, faculty, librarians, or upper administrators (all publics or a library public). So the question is: Is that how publics engage libraries now? What is the library in the life of its given public(s) at this point in time, and has it changed?

Have Libraries' Publics Changed, and If So, from What?

The argument here is yes, the public that engages libraries has changed. The library in the life of the public is different than it formerly was. But as banal as that point might be, it must be

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3. The differences from other fields are informative. Public health tends to define the concept narrowly as that which is the "law's business" and "take[s] for granted a political system"—thus making a large assumption about a fundamental relationship core to public health as well as LIS (Coggon 2012, 25, 31). Public relations' approach to the concept is instrumental and economic: "communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (http://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/publicrelationsdefined/#.VdjB7PmYFuo). The working definition here is also quite different from that of the public realm and its postmodern, performative aspects (Sennett 1974; Warner 2002) as well as the idea of public space for action and creativity, "the stage upon which communal life unfolds" (Carr et al. in Leckie and Buschman 2007, 14; see also Arendt 1998).

immediately followed by a disavowal of some halcyon past.[4] There is, however, a difference between the pieces and the pie. No account or theory ever describes its social totality, but there is considerable evidence that a broad and liberal (as marked by generosity of experimentation) political public has existed.[5] Sean Wilentz (2005, 489) describes the public and political support for American institutions to help the young and the "fallen": "public schools, benevolent societies, rehabilitative prisons, reformatories, and, for the truly unfortunate, insane asylums." With growing wealth, a broad public and a political consensus formed to invest in education, with wide interest in the topic during the nineteenth century (Veysey 1973). It was, after all, African Americans' *exclusion* from this system and the substandard resources of their public schools that brought protest (Litwack 1973). The broad public that supported the founding of public schools "believed that the government should play an active role in assuring the success of the economic and social system" (Spring 1986, 107). There certainly was a normalizing ideology (Connelly 1990) in all of this, but equality, democracy, and citizenship were once prime educational concerns (Giroux 1987). Like the schools, publicly supported libraries grew with a growing capacity to afford them (Shera 1971), and as with the schools, that broad support was predicated upon the idea that a library "would strengthen the 'republic government' [because] a free nation rested on the wisdom of the people" (Lee 1971, 120). Again, there were strong currents of normalization in these developments—Americanizing immigrants and other forms of social control—but "whatever the particular reasons for their creation, public libraries . . . enabled readers to make whatever use they wanted of collections, which became increasingly broad-minded and more accessible" (Dain in Buschman 2006, 292). 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 (Wiegand 2015).

Put most simply, publics chose to build classrooms and libraries instead of other things with taxes and philanthropy (Veysey 1973). That "American[s] fixed [their] patriotism . . . on institutions, and particularly . . . political institutions . . . inspired by abstractions [such as] equality, democracy, liberty" (Commager 1947, xiii) is perhaps too broad a statement for us in the twenty-first century, but it contains enough of the kind of a "rough pragmatic resem-

4. Eighteenth-century Britain—valorized as emblematic of the Enlightenment, the bourgeois public sphere, and the development of individual democratic rights—produced political rhetoric that was intensely personal and vituperative (Sennett 1974, 100, 104). The American political atmosphere at the time of the Revolution, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—a time of supposedly high ideals and rhetoric—was equally intense in its apocalyptic furor (Wilentz 2005, 57). The Lincoln-Douglas debates addressed a public that laughed and shouted encouragement when Lincoln was race-baited, forcing him into "humorous" racist disavowals that drew their own approving laughter (Lincoln 1990, 105–36; Strozier 1990; Wilentz 2005, 737–44). Two world wars and the civil rights movement brought out examples of racist and discriminatory discourse and legislation that addressed a large and receptive public (Goldman 1952; Goodwin 1995; Cohen 2003).

5. Some version of that public may still exist (see Wiegand 2015). Nor is this to dismiss alternative and revisionist perspectives on public education and libraries or society: volumes by Joel Spring (1986) and Michael Katz (1973) on education and the work of Michael Harris (1986), Wiegand (1999), and myself (2003) on libraries are examples. William Connelly (1990) is an excellent brief source of a broader social analysis.

blance to [the] reality" of the publics that then existed that it was successfully translated into political terms (Hofstadter 1989, 114). There were, after all, publics to which these policies were meant to respond and to which discourses about them were addressed. Those publics had a chance to ratify or reject them. Policies and laws and tax support are one clear way to read back into the nature of the publics they represented, but the language—its characteristic goals and assumptions—addressed to those publics about these institutions is another, and it is telling. Equality, citizenship and justice were often at the core of this discourse: "a democratic society . . . should seek actively to nurture in the young the emotional and intellectual dispositions which will prompt them to put the welfare of the many above the privileges of the few" (Childs in Giroux 1987, 108). These were routine statements from establishment figures and publications, and this discourse persisted through President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty (Spring 1986, 303–09). During roughly this same period (and for many of the same reasons), publicly supported libraries grew in size and scope and operated on an evolving set of democratic principles in response to their publics[6]: as a people's university; the protector of the public's right to information; and an active educational force in the community for all classes of people, "a system . . . unrivaled in the world"—along with a similar and unparalleled growth in academic libraries (Lee 1971; Harris 1995, 249, 241–58).

How Have Libraries' Publics Changed?

There is a broad scholarly consensus that we have lived for some time in a neoliberal age (Buschman 2012, 54–59). The vast majority of accounts of neoliberalism are critical, but its arguments to "aggregate diverse individual preferences into social choices" (Moe 2000, 129); "to let people have what they want, or to respect their freedom to choose" (Taylor 2002, 189); and to remove the "power to coerce . . . by removing the organization of economic activity from the control of political authority" (Friedman in Couldry 2010, 53) were addressed to publics receptive to them. In other words, for our purposes here, this account reverses the typical formula that neoliberalism is done to the public and, in acknowledging the contemporary ascendency of these ideas, examines the effect of neoliberalized publics on libraries. Briefly, neoliberalism posits a bedrock series of assertions about human nature and thus the best social, political, and economic arrangements for that nature: people are rationally motivated by self-interest; the market is the best mechanism to channel those interests; the state's hierarchical and bureaucratic restraints thwart the market and/or privilege certain groups or activities; state action in the name of the public good is therefore ineffective or does harm; therefore, the state should be weak in the name of market freedom and choice and ideally itself subject to market discipline in its budgets; at the same time, the state must ex-

6. To be clear, Harris (1995) challenged this as a democratic dogma that was always undercut by an elitist leadership bent on social control of immigrants and the poor.

ercise its power to bring about these economic and social policies (Dunleavy 1992, 3–4; Halsey et al. 1997, 254–62, 356–62; Apple 2005; Clarke et al. 2007). When this age began is a matter of some debate. For instance, C. Wright Mills (2008, 108) argued that fundamental changes showed up in the post–World War II period in the move from a "community of publics" to "an abstracted collectivity of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media . . . controlled by authorities who organize channels for . . . action" and opinion. Ira Shor (1986) pointed to the backlash over the progressive social, political, and economic movements of the 1960s (he called it the "Conservative Restoration") as the marker of the changes to come. However, there is broad agreement that this shift found its footing and public argument in the Reagan/Thatcher era, when these politicians famously declared that government wasn't the solution, it was the problem, and that there was no alternative (Buschman 2012).

Like the era of the founding of public institutions, these ideas have been translated into political terms: declining budget support for public institutions, privatized alternatives (such as charter schools and vouchers) supported at the public expense, and making citizens responsible for advocating for their own interests when engaging public services (Buschman 2003, 2012). Aside from legislation and budgets, there are social data. Robert Putnam (1995a, 1995b) looked at 30 years of survey data 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 working and more women in the workforce); and the ascendency of technologized and private forms of leisure during the times when people are together. Although he called it a decline in social capital, these broad social patterns have clear relevance to the constitution of publics in the form of "values and attitudes . . . that influence or determine how [people] relate to each other . . . [such as] trust and reciprocity . . . crucial for social and political stability and cooperation" (Newton 1997, 575–76). There is every indication that these trends continue—especially in the fraying fabric of commonality and mutual respect and dependence that political problem-solving depends upon (MacGillis 2015). Put simply, the long-term and persistent decline in social capital produces different publics—including those that interact with libraries. Put at its most basic, many scholars argue that these two strands are connected: neoliberal practices, assumptions, and policies erode the bases of social cohesion (Buschman 2012).

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 "the spheres of economic and social life [are] increasingly intertwined"; "new . . . technologies allow for the constitution of a production and management system spread all over the world," and "a global economy is an economy where the strategic, dominant functions in all processes work as a unit in real time throughout the planet"; "there

is a close connection between globalization and informationalization of the economy," and these same processes are at work in the "media, and thus on the formation of images, representations and public opinion"; and "at the level of personal interaction . . . what characterizes the new society is the endless construction of the self . . . instead of representing themselves in everyday life"—bringing us full circle back to consumption, new media, and thoroughly decentered selves (Castells 1996, 17–33; see also Habermas 1989; Storpor 2000; Miller 2003). Globalized neoliberal market culture uproots identities and communities; the radically unevenly distributed wealth produces polarized publics, making democratic politics difficult (Cox 2002, 124–25). The selfie culture of endless construction and exposure of the self has met the technology of relationship-revenge websites, which repost shared intimate photographs and identify the subjects, and this Hobbesian character of social media has found a foothold and voice in the putatively legitimate political landscape and discourse (Applebaum 2015; Gajda 2015). Stability of grouping and identity is assumed in a public that would address an institution such as the library, creating the political space referred to earlier. The rhythms described above obviate that very groundwork "and accordingly [politics] is not governed by the needs of deliberation but by rapid turnover," destroying political space (Wolin 1991; McIvor 2011).

If this is the broad sociology that characterizes the results of wide acceptance and ascendency of neoliberal economic, technological, social, and political policy arguments, how does this play out in a given public's interactions with libraries? What is the library in the life of its publics as they are constituted now? 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 (Fiels 2011, 5–6). 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 (Clark et al. 2015, 19). At the same time, libraries are supposed to become "less about . . . checking out books and more about . . . engaging in the business of making . . . personal and civic identities. . . . Users may 'customize' the [library] platform . . . to their individual needs" and somehow address trends such as the maker movement, the Internet of things, drones, fast casual, and robots (Clark et al. 2015, 12–13, 17).

If "the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power" (Schattschneider in Lubienski 2001, 640), then neoliberalism defines the alternatives: to be public is now the alternative, that which is artificially insulated from the choices of consumers and bureaucratically centralized.[7] "The shifting rhetoric has seen library funding receive serious cuts worldwide as the confluence of digital technologies, capitalism, and democracy creates a perceived

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7. Sharing resources through a public bureaucracy—such as a library—is equated with socialism, and as neoliberals declared in their arguments, "You have to have a West Berlin for East Berlin to fall" (Whittle in Lubienski 2001, 656).

sense that 'traditional' libraries are hoary substitutes for the Internet" (Ingraham 2015, 153). In turn, libraries face a "discourse continually advocating a more commercial approach to service design and delivery" (McMenemy in Ingraham 2015, 155). Thus, a public resource is undemocratic if a library's public thinks of consumer choice as the equivalent of democratic choice. In the process, a certain sense of the meaning of "public" is captured and repurposed: those who pay taxes are not the "owners" but merely the "payers," and what is public about a public institution is simply the institution "the public chooses to have" (Lubienski 2001, 641–42). Likewise, equity and equality are defined simply by how resources are deployed so that the basis of choices freely made is 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 (Lubienski 2001). This result represents a privatization of purpose of the library. Think of the rhetoric of "customer" service, the library as the McDonald's of information, or the coffee-shop model to lure "customers." Those are all long-standing responses in LIS to a public that has shifted, that demands concierge-style services, Club Med– and retail-like environments to market their collections and services in return for its continued financial support (Buschman 2003, 2012). Indeed, services such as patron-driven acquisition aggressively seek to structure the experience of using a library to mimic shopping (Buschman 2014), and collectively this produces a change not just in spaces but in the meaning of spaces[8]: it begins to seem that institutions such as the library are there to meet individual preferences and accommodate individual choices in the life of their public—a subtle but real shift away from establishing and running an institution for the common good for the purposes of a democracy (Buschman 2012).

These trends privilege a right of choice, "but the reality is that not everyone has alternative options for access to the kinds of services and resources" available to them, and "the way to make libraries more appealing depends largely upon which people one hopes to make them more appealing to" (Ingraham 2015, 155). In other words, a public demanding these approaches from a library is itself now a particular slice of private interests. Edwin Baker (in Buschman 2014, 169) asks, "Why should the [market] expression that tends to be the most impulsive or the most self-centered be privileged over . . . other[s]?" Those in comfortable circumstances do not share the same reality of the "vulnerabilities created and deepened by poverty," seeing instead a failure "to find and use the bootstraps America ostensibly provides" among the losers in neoliberal sociopolitical culture; the poor in turn are "disabused of the notion that life in the United States will always include some minimal level of safety, security or access to life-sustaining resources" (Ross 2015). Library resources shaped around market and retail choice further reinforce these asymmetries. The language of library inclusion is thus

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8. In fact, a number of libraries have relocated to malls and actively mimic the retail environment (Blankinship 2005).

another alternative defined by a neoliberal public in the life of the library: making services and collections more putatively equal in their access for those who are variously excluded or whose need for services is not the first consideration, who are not a public in the life of the library (Ingraham 2015). Putative equality of choice and access in no way equates with equality of outcome.

Returning to the practical definition of a library's public as an analytical resource, one finds some serious gaps in the library in the life of its public. Immediately items (*e*) and (*f*) are called into question: 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 is relegated to the status of alternative. To the extent that a library's public is paying attention and receiving and returning communication about the library, that is, (*a*), (*b*), and (*c*) in our practical definition, it seems from these developments that the library is increasingly viewed as a private good in its publics' lives: there is little evidence that members of the public are (*d*) communicating among themselves about the institution over (*e*) future consequences or (*f*) common support. It is worth pushing this logic a bit further, if for no other reason than the fact that it already has been pushed to extremes in neoliberal proposals over school reforms, to give one relevant instance (Buschman 2012). So if budgets for library services are slashed in the "necessary" reduction of public expenses under neoliberalism, those publics who wish to use them (to have a library in their life) as a private good should, under neoliberal logic, simply volunteer and/or compete to lure the best volunteers for their restored library services (Pullman 2011). After all, "it can be assumed that rational people will and must seek good information [in order to] act effectively and properly" (Dervin 1994, 378); therefore, they would (and should) provide for their own library services if they truly value them. One can quickly see the practical gaps here: people can't simply replace the professional services offered by a librarian or organize the opening and maintenance (fiscal and physical) of a building and a collection (print and digital) with volunteers or new, cheaper recruits. Further, the expense—since it is not distributed and shared equitably as a public purpose—becomes burdensome even for the well-to-do. As a practical matter, a library is a large undertaking, and fiscal support logically goes away when the private purpose of the library is done with—and then returns with the need. How does the institution continue in those fiscal gaps? Is there even, properly speaking, a library as an institution to make decisions about present benefits and future consequences in such a case? Libraries face, in short, a changed public whose support for public institutions and public purposes—behind which lies an argument for a shared social good in the interests of democracy—has dwindled and who 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.

This is not simply a matter of setting up a definition that provides intellectual comfort to the LIS field and then complaining that libraries' publics are, so to speak, coloring outside the

lines. For instance, some point to national usage data to contest that we do know about LIS's publics, but usage goes up and down over periods—with guesses and hunches (no data) about the reasons (Fiels 2011; Clark et al. 2015). In other words, we know broad behaviors of the public but have no other meaningful information about it. Others point to successes, for instance, of the "third place" role of branch libraries that Putnam famously overlooked in his initial analysis (Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen 2003, 34–54). But it is worth noting that the subtitle to that book is *Restoring the American Community*: it is addressing solutions to broad, problematic (the authors argue) social changes, the decline in social capital/publicness among them. Much the same could be said for the important community and digital-divide LIS research initiatives at present that seek to assess and remediate problems and challenges in communities (http://digitalinclusion.umd.edu; http://plinternetsurvey.org)—which stem largely from economic policies informed by neoliberalism. Wiegand (2015) has done an admirable job of gathering the voices of individuals for whom libraries are a vital, life-enhancing institution and resource: that is the-library-in-the-life-of-the-user approach but not an analysis that reveals much about libraries' relationship with their publics. Wiegand (2015, 364–65) in fact notes that libraries don't keep—and LIS does not research—data that might tell us something about their publics. There is little to no data on libraries' social capital with their publics; instead ideas about them are constructed from "anecdotal and policy-driven" narratives (Frey and Codispoti 2010).

Conclusion

To understand changed circumstances for libraries, the analytical frame of what constitutes a public—and what it is not—allows us to begin to gauge the lived effects within the field and the field's relationship to society, mediated through its publics. These changes have consequences. Political theorist Danielle Allen passionately argues that we've come to believe in "an inherent tension between liberty and equality, that we can pursue egalitarian commitments only at the expense of governmental intrusions that reduce liberty. What's more, in the last half century, our public discourse has focused on burnishing the concept of liberty, not equality. . . . We have ideas ready-to-hand about the danger posed to personal freedom by excessive governmental regulation and the value that lies in autonomy and self-creation. . . . Because we have accepted th[at] view . . . we think we have to choose" (2014, 22). Allen's characterization captures the prevalent beliefs of the public that the library now faces—a view informed by neoliberalism. We must come to grips with the contemporary reality that there is a deep hostility to collectivities within neoliberalism (Bourdieu 1998), and that includes libraries. Democratic politics also represents a broader form of collective action to which neoliberalism is, at least theoretically, also hostile: democracy is in itself not necessarily valued for its own sake. Popular sovereignty has too often expanded the state and interfered with the market in the neoliberal view (Moe 2000). Libraries may be a part of the educational and discursive infrastructure of a functioning democracy, but democracy's/the

library's publics have become somewhat unmoored from that fact. Neoliberalism's ascendency was not in fact a mere matter of successful argumentation accepted by publics that now face institutions like libraries and bring them into their lives on different terms. Its rise was very much also a matter of corporate power, political deal-making, marketing and branding an idea—and dissembling about its implications and positioning the change as an inevitable wave of the future demanded by technology and economics that must be accommodated by our politics and policies (Buschman 2012). The global does affect the local and the social and has affected the library in the life of its publics—and vice versa—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 hand long-standing and widespread discontent with the results. That shows up not only in Putnam's data but in the Occupy movements, the slow-food movement, and the significant resistance to invasions of privacy by corporations and the National Security Agency and to how politics is conducted in our putative post–*Citizens United* democracy. Even management data suggest that people seek altruistic ends in paid work, and making everything a transaction (as the underlying ideology of neoliberalism would do) is corrosive to altruism and social solidarity (Schwartz 2015). Citing a Pew Research Center report, Wiegand (2015, 348) points out that libraries are still held in high regard. But Pew also produced data that showed at the same time that people worry that their local library will be closed, lessening their quality of life (http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/libraries-at-the-crossroads). Libraries are political institutions facing a public that putatively agrees with the arguments and rhetoric in support of the economic, social, technological, and political forces that have been unleashed, but that same public has not reckoned with the full flower of the results. In so many terms—economic, social, political—it is unsettled and decentered publics in whose lives libraries play a role, and this is perhaps the single most valuable lesson to carry forward. A learned profession that grapples with these issues meaningfully throws into a different light practices that mimic corporate management or retail shopping experiences and spaces that its public seems to demand—but does the public really demand them?

Libraries are collectivities in a democracy that needs them. Allen (2014, 169–70) argues that "our individual pursuit of happiness leads us to form collectivities through which we pursue the safety and happiness of the whole." That is, politics is the collective endeavor to set up social arrangements so that individuals may pursue their, well, pursuits, and there is no inherent contradiction between liberty (individual choice) and equality (the common good). That in fact is how we pursue them: in tandem. Politics is not immutable, but it is at least as old as society—an established social fact that people engage in collective endeavor to set up pleasing social arrangements. We in LIS deeply depend on a sense of shared experiences and resources, and 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 the library to be an institution that no longer serves it. As each of us represents a library in our role—its services, its financing, its maintenance, or the profession as a whole—no one expects the people we encounter to have parsed what "public" means, what a library's public is and how it is constituted, the implications of neoliberalism, or its tensions with democracy. But our interactions with our publics can be informed by these things.

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