

2005

Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy, by John E. Buschman
(Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003)

W. Bede Mitchell

Georgia Southern University, wbmitch@georgiasouthern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/lib-facpubs>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mitchell, W. Bede. 2005. "Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy, by John E. Buschman (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003)." . *Library Faculty Research and Publications*, Paper 22. doi: 10.5860/crl.66.2.185
<http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/lib-facpubs/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Zach S. Henderson Library at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Faculty Research and Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact dskinner@georgiasouthern.edu.

human information needs). This section also includes a model for investigating a community-based digital library designed to meet the specialized information requirements of a marginalized community and an examination of the tough issues of "control and governance, economics and sustainability, and audience," all concerns of traditional libraries, but issues for the digital realm that are still in the awkward, gangly stage to be expected of the teen-aged, technology or otherwise.

The authors of the essays in the last section attempt to explain the role of digital libraries in knowledge creation and to describe specific user communities. Anchored in social theory, one author argues that the "sociological conceptualization of user communities and institutions is logically prior to the design and evaluation of technical systems." Another investigates how digital libraries designed to serve large groups of users must scale up concepts traditionally seen as individual or psychological, specifically focusing on "transparency," the idea that you do not have to know the intricacies of how a thing works to use it. (A refrigerator is transparent to me; I can't explain its physics, but I can use it to make ice cubes.) This essay explains that as digital libraries seek to meet the needs of larger communities, contentions arise over transparency, but when that larger community accepts the transparency, it becomes "coercive." In other essays, the authors examine issues of trust and credibility in digital libraries by studying data sharing between two closely related fields, and they employ social realist theory as a frame for the evaluation of the digital library resulting from the Flora of North America project, an immense collaborative data-collecting program.

Although the above description might sound like a totally abstract, academic exercise, most of the essays involve or

grow out of real digital libraries with real content designed to serve real people. Investigation into these systems provides the jumping-off place for more conceptual thinking. Of special note are essays by David M. Levy ("Documents and Libraries: A Sociotechnical Perspective"), Gary Marchionini, Catherine Plaisant, and Anita Komlodi ("The People in Digital Libraries: Multifaceted Approaches to Assessing Needs and Impact"), and Clifford Lynch ("Colliding with the Real World: Heresies and Unexplored Questions about Audience, Economics, and Control of Digital Libraries"). The editors' introductory essay is also quite useful. On first read, it appears to be the standard here-is-what-is-between-the-covers production, but because the individual chapters explore digital libraries from a variety of angles, the editors' extremely succinct, but equally useful, mapping of digital library research and their identification of recurring themes and overriding motifs bring a helpful coherence to the book.

Digital libraries are sociotechnical systems, interconnected ecologies of machines, people, and content. This work provides a rewarding, multifaceted investigation into those systems. —Kevin Cherry, East Carolina University.

Buschman, John E. *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy*. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003. 218p. alk. paper, \$60 (ISBN 031332199X). LC 2003-53882.

In this stimulating new book, John Buschman argues that for the past few decades librarians have responded at best incompletely and at worst ineptly to a long series of perceived crises. He attributes much of the problem to our not fully understanding how a new public philosophy has changed the framework within which libraries func-

tion. By employing a market-oriented approach to directing public policy, the new philosophy has so altered public debate that librarians are increasingly defending library budgets on the basis of how libraries return "high dividends" to the community, instead of how providing access to information benefits a free and democratic society. Buschman asserts that even when the latter argument has been made, it usually lacks an adequately worked-out theoretical justification. To achieve a sound philosophical defense of librarianship, Buschman relies on the concept of the public sphere and its support by educational institutions, such as libraries. The public sphere exists where opinions are developed and shared outside the government. Public institutions (libraries, museums, schools, universities) support the public sphere because the moral, political, and civic discourses essential to a democracy take place within them. Buschman's analysis of the public sphere leads him to conclude "The social, democratic—in short, public—role and purpose of libraries is one of providing alternatives (possibility and balance) in a society dominated by the ethic of the private and the consumer."

Buschman draws heavily on the work of several writers for the notion of the public sphere, particularly Jurgen Habermas, and Buschman's description of the library role in supporting the public sphere is drawn primarily from the work of Amy Gutmann. He has absorbed their concepts well and applied them convincingly in building his philosophical defense of librarianship. Buschman is adept at explaining complex ideas clearly, and what could have been a tedious slog through some heavy philosophizing turns out to be painless and illuminating.

Many readers will appreciate having such a well-developed and reasoned defense of the importance of libraries in

a democratic society. Some may object that although Buschman's arguments are convincing to members of the profession, we will be ignored if we do not defend libraries using the economic criterion of the New Public Philosophy. In response, Buschman might point to the several chapters he devotes to describing how using the market-oriented philosophy has led many libraries to treat users as customers, has moved ALA toward a business model of operation, and has influenced our profession's response to technology trends. In each case, Buschman concludes that the New Public Philosophy has pointed librarianship in self-defeating directions.

This is a substantial contribution that deserves and rewards careful study.—W. Bede Mitchell, *Georgia Southern University*.

Assessing Student Learning Outcomes for Information Literacy Instruction in Academic Institutions. Ed. Elizabeth Fuseler Avery. Chicago: ACRL. 2003. 299p. alk. paper, \$29 (ISBN 0838982611). LC 2003-21498.

The information provided by assessment is essential for improving our information literacy programs and garnering support for these efforts. In 2000, ACRL adopted its Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. To enable implementation of these standards, ACRL was awarded a National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences to train librarians in assessment principles and techniques. Twenty-four academic librarians from a cross section of colleges and universities lent their expertise to this effort; this book is the result of this collaborative grant activity over a two-year period.

The authors of the introductory set of five short chapters explain the basic concepts of planning for assessment, selecting and developing tools for assessment,