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Libraries, Democracy, and Citizenship: Twenty Years after 9/11

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Libraries, Democracy, and Citizenship: 20 Years after 9/11

John Buschman

ABSTRACT

As of this writing, the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and a capstone edited book that defines the narrative tradition of libraries and democracy have come and gone. They are related. There is cause for reassessment in light of those two decades and widespread worries about democracy, with parallels in libraries. The library and information science field must deepen its understanding of democracy, but do so in a way that does not abandon the historic commitments characterized in the capstone book. I propose a switch in perspective to libraries in the life of democracy, from democracy in the life of libraries. This article describes the defining narrative and then explores the idea of *civic republican* (active) citizenship, on which the defining narrative draws heavily, revealing a democracy-within-the-life-of-libraries perspective. “Actually existing democracy” is sketched in contrast, which fosters a libraries-within-the-life-of-democracy approach. Factors working against and for democracy in libraries in the past two decades are presented in the conclusion.

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We have passed the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. It was the same anniversary for a capstone edited book, *Libraries and Democracy: The Cornerstones of Liberty* (Kranich 2001a). Why is the book a capstone? First, it was described as “prophetic,” (Waters 2001, 61) in light of “recent tragic events in New York and Washington” (Cope 2001, 383), referencing 9/11. Second, it received strong support in important journals as a capstone at the time:

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- “The level of discourse is remarkably high, and it has been a while since such aggressive advocacy has been seen in library literature. . . . This small volume demands the attention of all librarians, trustees, and library educators. A genuine effort should be made to get copies into the hands of politicians and others who may have the power to affect the future of libraries but not much understanding of their importance to democracy” (Moon 2001, 183).
- “This work will not answer all of the questions [but] it will provoke thought. It belongs in every professional collection and every library science collection on our college and university campuses” (Waters 2001, 61).
- “*Libraries & Democracy* is successful in providing an overview of the important contributions that libraries and librarians have made to the history of democracy” (Rhodes 2002, 296).

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- “The present collection contains excellent pieces and is well worth acquiring by both public and academic libraries, even if it is not the final word on . . . a difficult and enlarging topic” (Cope 2001, 383).
- The American Library Association’s (ALA 2001) blurb described the content as the “Building Blocks of Democracy” (86).
- Even a sour review noted that “collectively, these essays examine varying aspects of the relationship of libraries and democracies . . . collected in a single source.” (Dugan 2001, 486).

Third, the volume and the anniversary were reflected on in the pages of this journal: the book captured the “defining narrative” tradition laying out “the relationship between libraries and democracy” (Kranich 2020, 122). Fourth, *Libraries and Democracy* was part of Nancy Kranich’s (2020) presidential year theme for ALA in 2000–2001. Fifth, as a relatively conceptual topic for the library and information science (LIS) field, the book is still cited—136 times in Google Scholar as of this writing. It is a capstone of the defining narrative, not a revision of that tradition. It marshals and encapsulates historical and social analysis of libraries in democratic societies from the mid-twentieth century to 2001 in one volume.

If this tradition was theoretically and intellectually adequate in 2001 (and that is an open question), much has changed since. Two decades saw long-running wars in the Middle East, the final withdrawal from Afghanistan, deepened social and political polarization, an eroded commitment to democracy itself, the 2020 election, and the January 6, 2021, insurrection—all cause for widespread reassessments of the state of democracy (Klein 2020; Lepore 2020; Edsall 2021; Lozada 2021; Rauchway 2021).¹ There are parallel concerns in LIS (Taylor et al. 2022). To respond to contemporary conditions and deepen our understanding of democracy and libraries, we must do so in a way that does not abandon LIS’s commitments captured by the capstone. In this article, I use Kranich’s book and anniversary reflection on it as a reference point because the book captured the building blocks of democracy and provided an overview of the important contributions that libraries and librarians have made to the history of democracy in a single source, meriting wide reading and distribution. The critical approach is to theorize the issue differently, not in library terms (the capstone) but in democratic theory terms—libraries in the life of democracy rather than democracy in the life of libraries. This shift is a variation on Douglas Zweizig’s 1973 point that “for too long our profession has ‘looked at the user in the life of the library rather than the library in the life of the

1. The argument I make in this article, that the United States is central to this issue, was recently and forcefully restated: “We are now in the midst of the most sustained global assault on liberal democratic values since the 1930s’ . . . [by] aspiring autocrats: the cults of personality, the us-vs.-them populism, the disdain for law, the manipulation of racial and xenophobic resentments. . . . One country, and one leader, [is] virtually alone on the other side of the fight. ‘A crucial question for the Biden era,’ [Gideon] Rachman writes, ‘is whether the new president will be able to restore the prestige of the American liberal democratic model—and so halt the global march of strongman politics.’ The question becomes even more crucial when that restoration must take effect within the United States as well as beyond it, when liberalism . . . is under assault not just by competing ideologies but by those long living under its protection” (Lozada 2022).

user” (quoted in Wiegand 1999, 24). That perspective has been productively deployed (Wiegand 2003, 2015; Buschman 2017).

The article proceeds as follows: The first task is to convey the defining LIS narrative capped by Kranich and the theoretically informed LIS literature since 2001. That LIS narrative relies on a particular political theory of citizenship, which bears some unpacking; that is the second task. Introducing theoretical perspectives counter to the theory of citizenship that LIS deploys, thus deepening our understanding of democracy and citizenship, is the third task. Those perspectives reveal strengths and weaknesses in LIS’s narrative tradition and a democracy-within-the-life-of-libraries approach. The fourth task highlights doubt about the narrative tradition, present all along in LIS, that reveals glimpses of “actually existing democracy” (Buschman 2021a). This deepened understanding of libraries in democratic societies and the factors working against democracy is responsive to events of the past two decades and is presented in the conclusion. The narrative tradition that Kranich captured has been fundamentally challenged by events of the past 20 years. Libraries will continue to support democratic practices in democratic societies but must do so with a better grasp of the role they actually play.

Task 1: The Narrative Tradition and the Post-2001 LIS Literature

The Narrative Tradition

A chapter in *Libraries and Democracy* by Kathleen de la Peña McCook (2001) deftly and briefly conveys the early scholarship on and the policies of the narrative tradition: “The histories by Shera and Ditzion, the reports of the Committee on Post-War Planning, and the set of volumes issued by the Public Library Inquiry provided the framework [for] the identification of libraries with the support and promotion of democracy” (31).² In other words, *Libraries and Democracy* represented a systematic consolidation of ideas deployed in the LIS literature for a half century or more—a long-established theory of democracy in the life of libraries (Kranich 2001a, 2020). It is condensed as a series of axioms in the preface and introduction to Kranich’s (2001a, v) volume:

- “An informed public constitutes the very foundation of a democracy.”
- Libraries “provide opportunities for citizens to develop the skills needed to gain access to information of all kinds and to put information to effective use.”
- Libraries “disseminate information so the public can participate in the processes of governance,” which includes “access to government information [to] monitor the work of its elected officials and benefit from the data collected and distributed.”
- “Democracies are about discourse . . . ultimately discourse among informed citizens assures civil society.”

2. McCook (2001) references Sidney Ditzion’s (1947) *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture* and Jesse H. Shera’s (1949) *Foundations of the Public Library*. See McCook’s endnotes 10, 13, and 14 for citations to the series of policy studies and recommendations in the Public Library Inquiry.

- “Democracies need libraries. . . . They are the cornerstone of democracy.”
- “Modern democracy cannot be considered without taking into account the role of technology” (vii).³

A portion of this summary was quoted in the retrospective article (Kranich 2020, 122), and the ALA (2010) memorialized a version of it in “12 Ways Libraries Are Good For the Country.” Variations on these axioms are repeatedly deployed throughout McCook’s 2001 volume by all of the chapter authors. While there is a temptation to “rhapsodize” about it, McCook notes that the tradition’s centrality and durability are real, a thread that runs through LIS values and practices (36). No narrative tradition is entirely dominant, but even the most theoretically informed LIS literature about democracy since has largely followed in these footsteps. Behind the axioms lies the democracy-in-the-life-of-the-library supposition: libraries are democracy’s foundation and cornerstone because people come to them to find information, to be informed about their political life and political leaders, and to effectively participate in civic life and communicate with one another.

The Post-2001 LIS Literature

Voluminous literature exists about democracy outside of LIS, but within LIS, the circle of ideas has remained relatively small—a narrative tradition that could be capped by Kranich’s (2001a) work. To identify this LIS literature, three guiding principles were used to form a rubric. First is the post-2001 time frame. The older literature is only selectively referenced to help situate the narrative tradition. Second is peer review of the publication in LIS. Publication in a different field would not be representative of LIS theory about democracy. Third is substantive engagement with and citing of political theory in LIS contexts. This principle has a particular meaning. Political theory unpacks social and political conditions (and their contradictions) to construct a coherent account of contemporary issues of public importance and to shape institutions.⁴ Many LIS publications discuss or invoke political concepts (e.g., civil society, rights, free press, intellectual freedom) but do not engage or cite political theory and so are not included; nor were those that simply apply political theory in new or differing contexts (new democracies and civil societies, management contexts, empirical tests of democracy, etc.).⁵ The idea is

3. As the reviews note, Kranich is the most prominent contemporary advocate of the tradition. The ideas are common. For example, a 1996 ERIC Digest summarized “How Libraries Foster Democracy in the United States”: “Public libraries provide access for all persons to a variety of information and ideas. Citizens, therefore, have enhanced opportunities for self-improvement and empowerment” (Pinhey 1996, 2). And later, “They have helped citizens to participate more fully and effectively in their democracy, to make informed choices about government, and, by connecting them with appropriate resources, to educate themselves for personal and occupational success and fulfillment” (2).

4. It is both distinct from and a hybrid of political philosophy, the history of political thought, and empirical political science—for example, political philosophy often seeks to clear the underbrush of political language for precision and clarity, and political science tries to empirically capture and describe extant conditions (Miller and Siedentop 1983; Buschman 2012, 13).

5. Kranich’s derivative works were not included because they drew upon the fuller account in her edited volume. My own publications in this area were also excluded.

not to tally the many rhetorical gestures toward democracy in the field but rather to identify those that attempt to grapple with it in a more sophisticated theoretical way.

The Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database was queried in late 2021 with the Boolean phrase *librar** AND *democr**. The results were limited to the subjects of “democracy” and “libraries” and publications in academic journals between the years 2001 and 2021. The resulting 21 articles and their cited works were scanned applying the rubric. As a check on LISTA, Google Scholar was queried on the same date with a simple “libraries and democracy” search (<https://tinyurl.com/GoogleScholarLibandDemoc>). The first 100 citations (10 pages) were reviewed with the same rubric. Judgments were made on inclusion, as they must be in political theory itself (Miller and Siedentop 1983; Hampton 1997, xiii–xvi). The articles that were selected met all the criteria of date, publication, and substantive engagement with political theory, resulting in eight articles.⁶

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Two notable *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* (ARIST) articles on democracy naturally have a technological lens, as did a third on electronic government. The first is on promoting equity, specifically in light of the fact that “democratic political systems . . . make claims to legitimacy partly on the basis of their citizens’ ability to seek and obtain reliable, credible information about issues that affect them, information that allows them to interact with other citizens and with their governing institutions. . . . Indeed, the relationship between access to information and democratic political participation is . . . ingrained” (Lievrouw and Farb 2003, 504–5).⁷ This approach was grounded in an earlier ARIST article (Doctor 1992) on the importance of information equity “especially with regard to power and democracy” (Lievrouw and Farb 2003, 531n2). The second ARIST article appeared a year later and argued that “democracy is the generative, liberating, and animating force for participation, citizenship, and political activity” (Robbin, Courtright,

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6. Each of the eight articles cited multiple political theorists such as J. S. Mill, Michael Walzer, Robert Dahl, Kenneth Arrow, Robert Putnam, John Rawls, Amartya Sen, Iris Marion Young, Benjamin Barber, James Bohman, Tom Christiano, Joel Cohen, William Galston, Kenneth Janda, Pippa Norris, Carole Pateman, Adam Przeworski, Alexis de Tocqueville, Sidney Verba, Cass Sunstein, John Dewey, Julie Cohen, Tom Scanlon, Peter Dahlgren, Chantal Mouffe, Archibald MacLeish, Sheri Bauman, Danielle Allen, Harry Boyte, Jürgen Habermas and Michael Schudson, among the most notable names. This is in distinction to the fall 2016 issue of *Library Trends* (65, no. 2) on “Libraries in the Political Process,” containing articles concerned with the library in contemporary society in several democracies, with almost no inclusion of the literature of political theory. The monographic literature on information literacy displays the same overall pattern. Michael Eisenberg, Carrie A. Lowe, and Kathleen L. Spitzer (2004) focus, for example, on the global teaching and dispersion of skills, and the index contains no reference to citizenship or democracy, although it is not difficult to read into the text to find the assumptions behind the axioms. The same can be said for Daniel Callison and Leslie Preddy’s (2006) edited volume, although the axioms are a little less latent in this volume. Annie Downey’s (2016) treatment of democracy does rehash the axioms but with no perspective from political theory. Finally, Natalie Greene Taylor and Paul T. Jaeger (2021) are concerned with democracy in a more nuanced way but with a focus on the damages of mis- and disinformation, much like their later chapter (Jaeger and Taylor 2022). McCook’s (2001) book on public librarianship also reviews democratic concerns, as does a chapter on citizenship in John T. F. Burgess and Emily J. M. Knox’s (2019) volume on information ethics; both do so through a combination of the approaches in the volumes of the Eisenberg et al., Taylor and Jaeger, Callison and Preddy, and the *Library Trends* issue. This is not to diminish this work, only to say that their substantive engagement with political theory tended to rely on the LIS literature and not political theory.

7. This approach is closely related to chapters on the right to know and the right of access in Kranich’s (2001a) volume (e.g., Heanue 2001; McCook 2001; Schuman 2001).

and Davis 2004, 411)—an idea that is “central to a discourse on democratic governance that promotes information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a means of creating” authentic participation, political culture and engagement and civil society among other benefits.⁸ The same earlier *ARIST* article is mentioned and the 2004 publication concludes that ICTs have not necessarily “reinvented or modified political life and politics” by making government more efficient or more immediate in peoples’ lives: “Little progress will be made in understanding the role of ICTs in political life without first understanding fundamental concepts of democratic governance” (Robbin et al. 2004, 463). A year later a *Government Information Quarterly* article on electronic government appeared. ICTs were used primarily “to gather information” at the time (Jaeger 2005, 708), and the piece concluded that technologies present “wonderful new opportunities to convey government information and services to citizens” but may also contribute to polarization and serve the “interests of those in power” rather than “participation in order to promote deliberation and dialogue” (712–13).

Building on this foundation, five articles reflected on directly related themes. The first (Budd 2007) envisions an oppositional LIS institution that operates “through de-emphasis on exchange value,” “shar[ing] through discourse,” as a “place and space where physical materials are stored,” where “access mechanisms that include the mainstream and alternative sources of information” (12) are to be queried, and where people “read, learn, and grow” as libraries form a core resource to promote and extend democracy. The second (Oltmann 2016) concerns whether the free speech and intellectual freedom tradition in librarianship is truly fostered in LIS and whether LIS, in turn, fosters democracy. It boils down to the “extent patrons are ‘searching for truth’ through their library use” (Oltmann 2016, 166)—that is, patrons’ purposes in their free information gathering and seeking. The third article places that same activity in the promotion of democratic citizens’ “agonistic pluralism”—the extent to which library spaces and services can produce “dialogues or debates . . . about different issues related to everyday life that involve peoples’ different identities [and] promote critical scrutinising of information sources that . . . involve how the information is produced and consumed” (Rivano Eckerdal 2017, 1029). The fourth is Kranich’s (2020) update, which reflects on the theme of her earlier edited book. The fifth directly invokes Sidney Ditzion’s (1947) title noted earlier: “Given that libraries have proudly defined themselves as arsenals of democracy since World War II, the response to this fundamental threat of online misinformation to democracy has been dispiritingly uncoordinated and half-hearted. As information and technology have infiltrated virtually every aspect of life, critical information literacy has become increasingly essential” (Jaeger and Taylor 2021, 22).

These articles are serious contributions to a political-theoretical understanding of libraries and democracy. The non-LIS literature long moved beyond this basis, but that is not the focus here. Arguably, there may be more like them. But it does not take an extensive discourse

8. This approach is closely related to the chapters on the civic librarianship theme in Kranich’s 2001 volume (e.g., Marcoux 2001).

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analysis to find that undergirding this LIS literature is the LIS narrative tradition and axioms such as libraries role in an informed public, democratic decision-making, participation in and monitoring of governance, skill development and access to information with technology, effective use of information, active citizenship, and furthering discourse and civil society. These accounts broadly follow the same themes of early policy studies—Ditzion's (1947) arsenal metaphor and Jesse H. Shera's organizing idea that the "modern public library in large measure represents the need of democracy for an enlightened electorate" (quoted in McCook 2001, 29)—captured in Kranich's (2001a) volume. The narrative tradition and its twenty-first-century LIS extensions largely overlap, remaining focused on the democracy in the life of the library.

Task 2: The Narrative Tradition as a Theory of Citizenship

The word "citizenship"—and variations like "citizen" or "citizens" or "cizenry" or "electorate"—appears in Kranich's (2001a) volume more than 200 times. Much the same can be said of the eight reviewed articles, and the term appears in supporting quotations in this article up to this point. The concept of the "citizen can be regarded first and most simply as the recipient of certain benefits that the state, and no other political organization, provides" (Walzer 1970, 205). The idea of *democratic* citizenship introduces a plethora of issues, among them the meaning of citizenship, as it is an accident of geographic boundaries and birth, the privileges that come with citizenship, statelessness or lack of citizenship, inclusion, loyalty and social reproduction (how citizens are produced), and whether collective identity is part of it and where it resides—in a *volk*, religion, locality, nation, or the globe (Benhabib 2002, 409, 425; Saward 2006; Urbinati and Warren 2008, 396; Marshall 2009). These issues are interesting, but there is one particular theory of citizenship that the LIS narrative tradition deploys. *Civic republicanism* is a modern name for a very old and durable idea that "active participation in the exercise of political power" as a citizen is intrinsically valuable and/or a necessary burden to secure liberties (Kymlicka 2002, 294–95). In ancient times "active participation" meant a form of military or governing service. Voting is now considered the core of active citizenship, but only one part. Today, diverse activities such as serving in voluntary organizations, local political activities, neighborhood watches, and litter patrols; helping those less well off; observing basic duties such as reporting a crime or serving on a jury characterize it as well (Robbin et al. 2004; Dalton 2006; Galston 2007). Civic republican or active citizenship accomplishes five beneficial things for democracy. First, it produces an enlarged and more "other-regarding" mindset, fostering pluralism. Second, it produces diverse and peaceful political options and responses (e.g. protesting, petitioning, volunteering, contacting and pressuring one's elected officials). Third, these options in turn promote the quality and inclusiveness of deliberation. Fourth, trust and community are also built. Fifth, a meaningful personal autonomy results (Schlozman 2002; Callan 2004; Dalton 2006; Saward 2006; Galston 2007). "The premise is that involvement makes better people" (Robbin et al. 2004, 418). There is a well-known connection between

civic knowledge and political engagement (Galston 2001, 2007; Schlozman 2002). Thus, in library terms, information, which is “usually seen as the pre-condition of debate, is better understood as its by-product. When we get into arguments that focus and fully engage our attention, we become avid seekers of relevant information” (Lasch 1995, 163). A politically virtuous circle is formed by civic republicanism that sweeps in the values of LIS’s axioms and narrative tradition—and, by extension, its democracy in the life of the library orientation.

Civic republicanism in turn pushes back against contemporary individualism, “passive” citizenship, and the absence of “political community” (Walzer 1970, 210). The related trends of “politics as amoral bargaining and exchange” among plural interest groups, freedom as merely freedom from interference, and the “worrying decline in the quality of . . . public life” are characteristic of a retreat from civic participation, community, and justice in civic republican thought (Phillips 2000, 282; Kymlicka 2002, 318). That version of politics “leaves out . . . what has always been considered the virtues and dignity of citizenship. . . . The economic view has not so much neglected participation as it has looked on it with suspicion. People need the degree and level of input which will insure that the system is responsive to them” (Taylor 2017). We know that both democratic participation and public and educational rhetoric about it has declined in the face of a consumerist, neoliberal shaping of democracy (Giroux 1987; Barber 1998). Civic republicanism seeks to counter that long-running trend of the “individual getting the better of the citizen” (Phillips 2000, 281) that produces passive citizens, rights entitlements, “the absence of any obligation to participate in public life” (Kymlicka 2002, 288), and an overreliance on leadership that produces “correspondingly weak citizens” (Barber 1998, 95). Again, in library terms, “In the absence of democratic exchange, most people have no incentive to master the knowledge that would make them capable citizens” (Lasch 1995, 12). In the civic republican account of citizenship, it is no stretch to see the foundation of the LIS narrative tradition of the value of an informed public, the skills to access information, and putting that information to effective use—particularly in the form participation in governance and monitoring government and in discourse among informed citizens in civil society. Where civil society (“voluntary organizations, non-governmental organizations, private educational and religious facilities”) is strong and performs public functions, people are interdependent and a collective and individual autonomy is realized; the state is minimized in daily life, and domination and control are made more difficult (Apter 1996, 372–73; see Honohan 2017, 88–89).

LIS’s narrative tradition—and, by extension, its political theory of civic republicanism—has been critiqued from within. Most notably, Michael Harris (1972, 1986) wrote revisionist histories and analyses of it: public libraries were not exercises in popular democracy or information but rather founded as elitist, controlling, inflexible, and politically conservative institutions, and LIS beliefs that emanated from the tradition were gauzy, feel-good bromides. Back-and-forth publications ensued, with “American library history rather simplistically categorized . . . into two camps: pro- or anti-Harris” (Wiegand 1999, 29). Much of the argument has been conducted through historical investigation (Wiegand 2020) rather than in theoretical terms, concluding that

there is a “disconnect . . . between the way libraries see themselves as arsenals of democratic culture and the limited ability of library discourse to convey clear connections to actual democratic political processes” (Jaeger et al. 2013b, 166).⁹ These processes are traced primarily in policies and access to information through libraries around the mid-twentieth century, representing again democracy in the life of the library. In response, Wayne Wiegand’s (2015, 263) history of public libraries took on the long-standing ALA theme that “increased funding for American public libraries will not necessarily result in a more informed citizenry. There, I did it—directly challenged the cornerstone of the narrative librarianship uses to justify support of these ubiquitous civic institutions.”¹⁰ Civic republican or active citizenship and the LIS narrative tradition are also open to charges of “sociological innocence,” but simply pointing that out is not a sufficient critique in theoretical terms (Galston 1993, 34, 41). These ideas retain significant power as normative standards and ideals in LIS and political theory (Callan 2004; Jaeger 2005; Oltmann 2016). Their absence at key historical points provides searing examples of democratic and LIS failures (Snyder 2017; Wiegand 2020).

Task 3: Other Theories of Citizenship and the LIS Narrative Tradition

Rather than replay those old LIS debates, which are beside the point of this article, it is more productive to explore perspectives in political theory that reveal gaps in the civic republican version of citizenship, enabling a deeper account of democracy. If, as argued, the LIS narrative tradition is heir to the theory of civic republicanism, then gaps between empirical realities and the standards and norms of civic republicanism implicate LIS’s narrative tradition too. What follows is a selection of interrelated issues with that particular focus.

Size

Geographic size and mass electorates have long been theoretical challenges to democracy. “The state has simply outgrown the human reach and understanding of its citizens” (Walzer 1970, 204; see Habermas 1989; Przeworski 2009). Eighty years ago, Joseph Schumpeter (2001) expressed fundamental doubt whether, in modern mass democracy, achieving any coherent notion of the common good was possible. Large scale means that creating political change requires considerable resources, time, and organization (Cunningham 2002; Robbin et al. 2004, 422; Warren 2017, 50). It also requires a wide diversity of expertise among political elites, given the sociotechnical complexity of modern societies; in turn, those elites participate in different specialized discourses, increasing the difficulties (Warren 1996; Urbinati and Warren 2008). This situation exists before we consider globalized corporate and finance power that challenges national-level democratic controls and practices (Held 2006, 292–93, 296 *passim*). As a result, democratic governance is

9. A similar point was made by Jaeger et al. (2013a, 369).

10. Wiegand (2015) invokes many concepts from democratic theory in his book but leaves them largely implicit (see Buschman 2018).

routinely beyond the ken of active citizenship, evacuating much of the substance of civic republicanism and the LIS tradition.

Disengagement

It is a sociological truism that the simplification of a complex reality that any large bureaucracy (governmental or corporate) must undertake in order to make a problem capable of being addressed with the tools it possesses means it will often be unresponsive to specific groups and individuals being served (Scott 2006). As a result, “the sense that agency is impossible is powerfully alienating, whenever citizens have pressing reasons for dissatisfactions with political outcomes” (Dunn 2010, 109), as they will. The normative standards of civic republicanism are “confronted by the reality of substantial empirical evidence. . . . Large numbers of people do not participate in the political process or civic life; civic engagement and trust have declined; and most people . . . are not well informed about political issues, and have low levels of interest in politics” (Robbin et al. 2004, 423), as there are better, more interesting, and fulfilling things to do (see Galston 2001, 2007; Schlozman 2002). Contemporary democracy thus produces strong feeling that active participation (including voting) is ineffective, that elected representatives are unresponsive to real needs and problems and perform in their own interests, that power is unequal and bureaucratically hidden, and that there is little balance between providing order and noninterference (Warren 2002, 679–80; Robbin et al. 2004; Przeworski 2009, 72). There is a consequent crisis in democratic legitimacy (Warren 1996; Urbinati and Warren 2008). In other words, significant tides within modern democracy are running against the assumed goods of civic republicanism and the LIS narrative tradition.

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Cognition and Class

Gaining effective political knowledge can be time consuming (the “costs” are high) and “people are . . . ‘cognitive misers.’ For everyday reasoning, people prefer to use cognitive heuristics” (Ryfe 2005, 51), especially in the face of complex issues like those in politics and policy. That tends to make issues manageable but lacks informational or policy specificity and often relies on groups, likeability, and advertising (Carmines and Huckfeldt 1996, 244–48; Held 2006, 234; Schudson 2006). In other words, the values of civic republicanism and the LIS narrative tradition run counter to how people actually seek information, think, decide, and behave as citizens. In addition, the goals of civic knowledge and participation closely track to White, middle class, and college-educated people who can “afford” them (Galston 2001, 222; Schlozman 2002, 442–46; Ryfe 2005, 52), following the pattern of technology and information access (Lievrouw and Farb 2003). These constrictions can produce self-selection and power differentials in deliberative contexts, with social class itself warping participation and outcomes (Benhabib 1994; Young 2001; Robbin et al. 2004, 429–30; Ryfe 2005; Urbinati and Warren 2008). Civic republican and LIS

ideas and avenues of participatory expansion may inherently, and ironically, limit democratic participation.

Conflict, Political Passions, and Exclusion

Three entangled strains of political thought are reflective of politics now. If, as argued, politics is about conflict and struggle and forging new political identities as democratic citizens (Mouffe 1992, 2005; Rivano Eckerdal 2017), the deliberative, informational, communal, and participatory goals of civic republicanism and the LIS narrative tradition do not comfortably fit. In turn, “deliberative citizenship is continuously challenged by passionate attachments embedded in networks of power under conditions that are turbulently unsettled” (Mara 2015, 326). A more passionate, intensely engaged politics can be dangerous (Taylor 2017) and raises “the question of how [we] might judge different exercises of political energy” (Mara 2015, 314), with the January 6, 2021, insurrection being the current example. Conversely, political quietude can be a sign of satisfaction—people see no compelling reason to become politically informed or active (Berelson 1970; Held 2006, 162, 166). Finally, new political identities, conflict, and engaged politics can produce unintended reactions and exclusions, such as political intolerance (Gibson 2008; Edsall 2021), pushback to remediating the legacy of systemic racism (Katznelson 2006; Iati 2021), or outright racial denials of citizenship rights and access to economic resources and self-sufficiency (Shklar 1990; Blake 2021; Bouie 2021). Those reactions are also a form of deep political engagement not contemplated in civic republicanism or the LIS narrative tradition.

Summary

To recap, Kranich’s (2001a) volume and reflection capture and characterize a 50- to 70-year scholarly and narrative tradition about democracy and libraries (democracy in the life of libraries). The post-2001 substantive LIS literature about the topic hews closely to the axioms of the narrative tradition captured by Kranich. That tradition draws heavily on the political theory of civic republicanism, which in turn faces severe challenges from the empirical realities of modern democratic societies. We are close to an aporia. Rather than deploy democratic citizenship as a static concept for libraries to address its needs (democracy in the life of the library), this account of democracy requires contemporary specificity and a location to make the turn to the library in the life of democracy. There are ways to address these issues.

Task 4: Actually Existing Democracy and the LIS Narrative Tradition

Although sharp differences exist between political theories and goals—between neoliberal individualist liberalism and civic republicanism, as one example (Honohan 2017)—we need not strive for formal cohesion of LIS theories and practices. Blending perspectives and observations is healthy and responsive to actual circumstances (Walzer 1992; Sunstein 1996). We should acknowledge the limits of what democratic politics can and should do, both in social and LIS

terms (Buschman 2021b). That too is healthy. Finally, evidence suggests that contemporary “citizens are voting less but engaging more” and that “practices of democratic representation increasingly go beyond electoral venues” (Urbinati and Warren 2008, 403) in actually existing democracy.¹¹ If contemporary democratic politics take place outside of traditionally political contexts, engagement and change in social realms—what is acceptable or not—often take place through talk. That talk tends to coalesce in groups and interest clusters, forming smaller and more diverse public spheres. “Equalizing voice”—effective access to discourse (talk) and influence—is a key democratic goal in those public spheres. For instance, laws or policies often exist (e.g., not discriminating, enforcing the laws equally, forbidding sexual harassment), but they are observed in a breach. That breach remains until discourse (talk) in and among those public spheres surfaces them as concerns and injustices—#MeToo and Black Lives Matter are current examples.

Protest, investigation, publicity, political pressure, enforcement of policy, reform of practices, lawsuits, and elections are used to elevate issues, enforce laws, and investigate malfeasance. Furthermore, because much of democratic politics has been displaced into social realms, and because globalized markets heavily influence both politics and social life, the power of consumption and nonconsumption can be political. Refusal to consume or to consume alternatively is a political act considered commensurate with protesting and lobbying elected officials. The blend of these processes and electoral pressures and in shaping laws and policies through the courts—the formal means of checking authority—is how actually existing democracy now happens. Finally, in bringing democratic politics down to human scale, actual institutions like businesses, schools, homeowner or tenant associations, and libraries are important sites where these ideas and valences are worked out, and bureaucrats are often key players in fostering democratic processes and ends.

Zadie Smith (2012) wrote an illustrative narrative. Her local urban library frontage hosts a weekly flea market. The space is not attractive, but “the key thing about Willesden’s French Market is that it accentuates and celebrates this concrete space in front of Willesden Green Library Centre, which is at all times a meeting place” with peculiar attractions and deserving of care. The library hosts a local bookstore, and, like the librarians, the bookseller “gives the people of Willesden what they didn’t know they wanted. Smart books, strange books, books about the country they came from, or the one that they’re in. Children’s books with children in them that look at least a bit like the children who are reading them.” The library is to be demolished, replaced by a much smaller one and luxury apartments, with the frontage serving as profitable retail space as a needed economic measure (no bookstore). The community members deeply oppose this. “The thing that is most boring about defending libraries is the imputation that an argument in defense of libraries is necessarily a social-liberal argument. . . . I thought a library was one of the few sites where the urge to conserve and the desire to improve—twin poles of our political

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11. The phrase is Nancy Fraser’s (1992). The account that follows is adapted from Buschman (2021a).

mind—were easily and naturally united.” The question is, in this new neoliberal environment, “what kind of a problem is a library? It’s clear that for many people it is . . . only a kind of obsolescence . . . with every book in the world online [and] the library as a function rather than a plurality of individual spaces. [But] each morning I struggle to find a seat in the packed university library in which I write this, despite the fact that every single student in here could be at home in front of their MacBook browsing Google Books.” A well-run library is “filled with people because what [it] offers cannot easily be found elsewhere: an indoor public space in which you do not have to buy anything in order to stay. . . . The market has no use for a library.” Libraries teach a different kind of sociability that is not fiscal, which matters to people across the political spectrum. “These places are important to us [and] they are still a significant part of our social reality” that local democracy should recognize and support.

Smith’s (2012) account describes a libraries-in-the-life-of-democracy approach and implicitly pushes back against the liberalism we live under now, in which “liberty depends not on our capacity as citizens to share in shaping the forces that govern” us and where “government should be neutral . . . in order to respect persons as free and independent selves” (Sandel 1996, 66). That approach individualizes the person among forces well beyond their influence as a citizen, making active citizenship an impossibility (Sandel 1996). It “extends from . . . politics to . . . linguistics: . . . the individual (and not society, language, or tradition) is the master of meaning, which makes common understanding between individuals both desperately urgent and highly problematic” (Peters 1989, 389). This version of liberalism “lacks the civic resources to sustain self-government . . . [or] inspire the sense of community and civic engagement that liberty requires” (Sandel 1996, 58). In other words, it lacks libraries in the life of democracy. LIS has an equally empty parallel in the tradition of neutrality that “has not served libraries well” (Jaeger et al. 2013a, 378; Rivano Eckerdal 2017). Actually existing democracy reintegrates the LIS narrative tradition into libraries in the life of democracy: if democracy is displaced to social venues and takes place in and around institutions, then libraries and what they are and do as places in communities have roles in building and sustaining democratic society.

Although the primary emphasis concerning democracy in LIS has been on its narrative tradition, versions of these ideas and perspectives have appeared in that literature, if only as caveats or doubts. Ditzion himself acknowledged the ideological alignment of libraries with nationalist and economic (capitalist) goals; the presence of sexism, racism, and religious intolerance; libraries’ social role in the community; and the strong possibility that LIS self-interest might lead to overstating its role and understating the presence of censorship (Stielow 2001, 5–6, 9, 12). In addition, Shera noted sharp limits on LIS ambitions—society, not libraries, determined ends (McCabe 2001, 60), and the development of public libraries rode the wake of the massive social and political push for schooling, not as an independent popular movement (McCook 2001, 30).

LIS has never quite resolved the tension between the formal status of equality (“identical privileges or rights”) and equity (the “more nuanced . . . quality of being equal or . . . fairness”

or dignity) in its discourse (Kretchmer 2001, 97; Lievrouw and Farb 2003, 502–3; Rivano Eckerdal 2017, 1012). Equity may be the goal, but it implies the less popular idea of redistribution (Doctor 1992, 52–53; Robbin et al. 2004, 418). Thus, even approved statements promoting equity “on who should receive priority for service” (McCook 2001, 31, 33) in libraries produced controversy and widespread professional disagreement. This outcome is in tension with consistent acknowledgments in LIS that “people need more than constitutional guarantees; they need societal commitments as well. If you have no job, no education, and no money—your voice will not carry very far” (Schuman 2001, 199; see McCook 2001).

There is a full measure of technological optimism in the LIS narrative tradition, but there are also doubts that technological “access to abundance does not translate into access to diversity” (Kranich 2001b, 111) and that technology alone does not foster direct democracy and will solve neither the scale problems that confront democracy nor the “cyberbalkanization” of discourse (Lievrouw and Farb 2003, 524; see Schement 2001, 16; Robbin et al. 2004, 446–47; Jaeger 2005, 705–10). Anticipating some current issues, “The dilemma is not only with the haves and have-nots, but the cans and can-nots as well as the wills and will-nots” (Marcoux 2001, 72). In fact, “we know little about ICTs and political life at the beginning of the 21st century. [A] causal relationship does not necessarily exist between technological affordances and user activity” (Robbin et al. 2004, 414–15, 463; see Jaeger 2005, 705–10), tending instead to reinforce existing political behaviors and power structures.

Some affinities exist among LIS’s deployment of ICTs, neoliberal versions of civil society, and forms of consumerist and managerialist politics (Robbin et al. 2004, 425, 433, 442; Budd 2007; Rivano Eckerdal 2017, 1023–24). ICTs have been used to generate dangerous, exclusionary, and disruptive information and political passions, the likes of which libraries have long wished to counter—dangerous public health misinformation that included xenophobic spin during the pandemic, medical authorities falsely attacked as political agents, fanning of rumors of political violence with scant evidence, and racist incidents that were faked (Jaeger and Taylor 2021, 20–22).

Conclusion

Libraries aren’t democracy’s cornerstone. Jürgen Habermas (1989) told us that long ago, modern democracy sprang from spontaneous social and civic discourse (public spheres) parsing concerns about how political and economic conditions were handled by government and affecting lives and business; conditions changed only because of rising democratic demands for transparency, publicity, and participation conducted through public spheres. In other words, modern democracy had social roots before those roots sprouted public institutions like schools, universities, and libraries, as we know them now. The challenges to civic republicanism and active citizenship within political theory complicates LIS’s narrative tradition and the axioms from which it is drawn; thus, it complicates libraries’ implicit positioning regarding democracy. The 20 years since 9/11 tell us this and much more—from blatant, obvious governmental lying that led the United States

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into disastrous policies from the Vietnam era (Shawcross 1979) to Middle East wars since then (Lozado 2021); from the mangled pandemic response to the attendant disinformation (Jaeger and Taylor 2021); from the risible lie that the 2020 election was stolen to the January 6, 2021, insurrection and continuing internal threats to democracy (Rauchway 2021). Along the way, an exclusionary, racist, and violent political movement formed, fed on technology and some of the same lies (Klein 2020; Edsall 2021), with massive evidence to the contrary having little purchase. As the LIS tradition claims, “an informed public constitutes the very foundation of a democracy,” and libraries “develop the skills needed to gain access to information of all kinds and to put information to effective use,” so the “public can participate in the processes of governance” as active citizens and “monitor the work of its elected officials,” and further discourse in civil society with a particular focus on technology. Accordingly, LIS institutions are, in democratic terms, massive failures—but then, so are schools, universities, and the news industry (Klein 2020; Iati 2021).

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We must acknowledge what political theory does and make sure that the combination of attributes and values we prize in our LIS traditions are not logically welded. There is no necessary relationship between individual liberty (“What am I free to do?”) and democracy (“Who governs me?”) (Berlin 2012). Nor is there a necessary relationship between democracy and capitalism (Taylor 2017) or between democracy and access to information (Dervin 1994; Lievrouw 1994), or acceptance that “libraries are so self-evident that we do not need to mention them” in a democracy (Belfrage 2001, 210). Having surveyed a selection of political theory and what it tells us, we cannot now decouple from it and retreat back into a LIS-centric view, as we have tended to do. If democracy is wobbling, an account of actually existing democracy and how libraries fit in can only be helpful. A recent reorienting of democratic theory (Warren 2017) outlines that entanglement: institutions (e.g., libraries) can be thought of as “combinations of practices” that themselves can foster “generic practices that can serve democratic functions . . . and produce democratic effects: recognizing [others], resisting, deliberating, representing, voting, joining (producing association), and exiting (producing competition-based accountability)” (45). This example draws a strong parallel to libraries in the life of actually existing democracy. Answering an earlier point, libraries in what they do and in how they exist in communities provide some of the social resources and practices needed to sustain democratic societies—that is, regardless of the intentions behind services and collections embodied in the narrative tradition, libraries *as libraries* support democratic societies. This formulation is neither catchy nor library-centric, but it is nonetheless important and actually happens.

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We should not abandon the values of the LIS narrative tradition by wholly toggling to this new account. The tension between the two is productive. That tradition is based on “many positive traits, including the democratic institutions . . . of the liberal tradition that [stress] the rule of law, the defense of human rights and the respect of individual liberty [along with] the principle of the sovereignty of the people” (Rivano Eckerdal 2017, 1012). That tradition would be foolish to abandon. Part of that liberal tradition stresses the good that educating the individual does: “A person [who] has been educated is better [off] than if she has not been” (Allen 2016, 14; see 17–18, 42,

46), both personally and economically—with a LIS-like focus on literacy and language and the enabling of active citizenship very much at the center of that account. We must hold competing ideas in our heads. Libraries are about a sociability that is good for democracy and trust (Wiegand 2003, 373–74), and massive collections serve as a resource for citizens to “check the tendency of society’s problem solvers to declare they have arrived at the ‘final answers’” (Wiegand 1988, 75). Readers find and redefine their identities in the books and stories on library shelves (Wiegand 2015), and library boards are now a focus of right-wing attempts to take them over to prevent any role in promoting identity, equity, justice, and historical awareness (Bader 2021). Libraries were called on to be neutral sites to save the 2020 election (Klinenberg 2020), and “libraries are one of the few institutions in civic life devoted to cleaning up the mess left by this country’s tawdry refusal to care for its own, to create a viable social safety net, to cushion the fall for those left behind by Darwinian capitalism” (Kennicott 2020). Smith’s (2012) narrative importantly suggests that libraries can play a part in illustrating the need in their locations to talk and to determine what “goods” (ends) we are striving for; where partnership and collective action are needed that go beyond the individual’s wants; where similarities and differences are recognized; where democratic values, community, and trust are fostered; and where local action is taken toward those ends (Mara 2001, 340–41). The LIS narrative and civic republican tradition have their roles, but it is time for LIS’s concept of democracy to account for empirical realities that run counter to it and to embrace the theoretical tensions.

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QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

- Q1.** AU: Passive voice has been changed to active voice/first person in some places.
- Q2.** AU: Per journal style, most italics for emphasis were removed. Please review and revise if necessary.
- Q3.** AU: The phrase “in a mashup of the reviews quoted,” was removed for clarity in a long sentence. OK as edited?
- Q4.** AU: Per journal style, footnote markers have been placed after terminal punctuation. The two notes in this sentence were combined. Please review and revise if necessary.
- Q5.** AU: The opening quotation mark before *librar** was removed. OK? There was no closing quotation mark.
- Q6.** AU: Per journal style, the notes on the two *ARIST* articles were edited to be complete sentences. Please review and revise if necessary.
- Q7.** AU: Dizion’s and Shera’s works were added to the reference list, as they are cited several times in text.
- Q8.** AU: Please clarify (or remove?) the sentence, “Arguably, there may be more like them.” Who or what does “them” refer to?
- Q9.** AU: The sentence starting “It is a sociological truism” is a little complex. Clarify? (Perhaps “It is a sociological truism that a large bureaucracy’s (governmental or corporate) simplification of a complex reality to address a problem using existing tools means that bureaucracy will often be unresponsive . . .”)
- Q10.** AU: “That remains” was changed to “That breach remains” for clarity. Correct as edited?
- Q11.** AU: Please identify the source of each quotation by placing the citation after the closing quotation mark.
- Q12.** AU: On which page in McCook does the quoted text appear?
- Q13.** AU: The phrase “there are also doubts” creates double-negatives suggesting that access to abundance **does** translate into access to diversity, etc. Change to “there are also concerns”?
- Q14.** AU: In the sentence starting, “As the LIS tradition claims,” the summary of axioms is long and complex, so the conclusion was made a separate sentence. OK as edited?
- Q15.** AU: The Berlin citation year is 2012, but the only reference for Berlin shows 2006. Please reconcile.
- Q16.** AU: Please add a text citation for Berlin 2006 or remove the reference.
- Q17.** AU: Please add a text citation for McCook 2011 or remove the reference.