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COVID-19 doesn't change anything: Neoliberalism, generation-ism, academic library buildings, and lazy rivers

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Does COVID-19 challenge the persistence of neoliberalism? The pandemic and popular resistance to globalization seem to coincide, and there considerable discussion of neoliberalism within LIS now. First, this paper defines the centrality of the market as neoliberalism. With that in place, the remaining parts of the paper will explore and document phenomena in and related to academic libraries that instantiate how neoliberalism stubbornly persists. Second, the continuing reliance on generational cohorts to characterize incoming students – generation-ism – is a manifestation of categories of consumption and marketing. The influence of generation-ism on academic libraries is significant in the form of design pressures on space and to market the college experience. Third, where neoliberalism does tend to drive higher education investments in facilities, it results in the “lazy river” trend. This will be examined in direct contrast to the finance/space pressures on academic libraries. The paper concludes with a short discussion of these factors and what this analysis can tell us about academic libraries going forward into a post-COVID-19 era.

Introduction

The statement in the title of this paper is not quite correct. COVID-19 has given rise to some changes in academic librarianship beyond immediate adaptations. Despite some breathless this-changes-everything rhetoric (e.g. Martzoukou, 2021) and library and information science (LIS) “experts” that state the obvious and reify existing social-academic hierarchies (see Buschman, 2020a for one such analysis), the field seems to have largely taken a calm, measured approach with research and judgements that weigh adaptations, achievements and the evidence concerning changes to academic libraries, the good and less-good aspects of those during COVID-19, and what might persist in a variety of areas from library spaces to research behaviors to work patterns to open access (e.g. Carlson, 2021; Cox, 2020; Obler & Pitts, 2021; Shi et al., 2021). It is a glimpse of a promising change in the professional culture from academic library leaders “particularly lemming-like” habit of chasing after flashy trends (Buschman, 2007, 28). Two popular and related business metaphors illuminate that change. The first metaphor is dinosaurs. They are said to characterize industries, companies, universities and libraries that are “hapless … lumbering [and] too stupid to survive” (Schrage, 1992). What don’t the dinosaurs survive? It is the second business metaphor: an asteroid. That is, an unexpected difficulty requiring quick adaptation or extinction (Dans, 2020). Having been around for a while, these two metaphors enjoyed a revival between 2017 and 2019 when it was fashionable to anticipate (and thus plan to be nimble for) the next higher ed asteroid.¹

¹ Then the COVID-19 “asteroid” actually came (Dans, 2020). The best one higher education consulting firm² could offer was for “campus leaders to come together to begin identifying and capturing all the learnings of the past several months” (Watt, 2020). There is an entire industry of such firms, generating more than $2 billion per year in revenue (https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/market-research-reports/education-consultants-industry/). It’s continued existence means they’re profitable, else they’d be out of business. That also means

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¹ The metaphors have always been strained. Which is the asteroid for higher education: an active shooter on campus, a hurricane, an earthquake (see Watt, 2020), large-scale wildfires, the much-discussed demographic cliff or something completely unknown? These are all real examples. And how, exactly were dinosaurs supposed to adapt quickly in evolutionary terms to the bad luck of an actual random asteroid strike that radically cooled the planet? (Dans, 2020; Schrage, 1992).

² A brief list as of this writing from a Google search for “higher education consulting firms” produced the following list from just the first page: McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, Bain & Company, EY (Ernst & Young), KPMG, LEK Consulting, Deloitte, PA Consulting Group, Huron, Nous Group, GIL Management Consultants, Tyton Partners, Credo, Higher Ed Associates, The Segal Group, The Change Leader, and Kennedy & Company. To these add widely known firms in the industry like AGB, EAB, Hanover and Ologie.

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they make reports and recommendations, and universities act on them to varying degrees because they paid for them. Their advice and analyses tend to reinforce a zeitgeist and follow a language pattern about the sector and helping public and private institutions’ leadership create and implement strategies to successfully navigate crises, transformation, planning, and change management for long-term success. They offer similar menus of services on strategic planning, enrollment management, branding, governance and faculty relationships, etc., followed by similar offerings of in-house reports, webinars and white papers whose language also largely repeats: e.g. “As America emerges from the global pandemic...” Academic libraries’ analytic responses would seem to be deeper than the expensive consultants universities hire.

What is the zeitgeist that hasn’t changed for academic libraries with COVID-19? That is the topic of the remainder of this paper. The short answer to our question is the persistence of neoliberalism which fosters the strong tie between the performance of the economy and education. ...The practices that logically followed [meant] scarce resources were to be directed to economic end ... [via] commodification, vocationalization, accountability, and fiscalization of educational practices and institutions [and] librarianship after a lag [followed]. ... [R]adically deregulated markets freed of state intervention were unleashed as the best means of socioeconomic development. The ... manifestations of global neoliberalism are the vast influence of corporations ... globalized consumption ... promoted through marketing and advertising on similar scales; and ... financial infrastructures that promote quicksilver ... flows across the world (Buschman, 2020c, 157–58).

After four decades, neoliberalism’s inequalities and undermining of social and democratic institutions have bred widespread mistrust, polarization, and growing unease: “We are now in the midst of the most sustained global assault on liberal democratic values since the 1930s” (Rachman in Lozada, 2022). Rising popular resistance resulted in considerable discussion of neoliberalism within the LIS literature, resulting in more familiarity with the term.4 Following Mirowski (2019), this paper focuses on the centrality of the market so as not to get lost in the many side discussions of the cultural, political or financial permutations of neoliberalism like globalized consumption. With that in place, the remaining parts of the paper will explore and document phenomena in and related to academic libraries that instantiate how neoliberalism stubbornly persists, often relying on reportage, cited because LIS literature often doesn’t write about this data. While reporting isn’t the same as social science research, if we must never use the data on-hand, insisting on research-established social phenomena (which LIS doesn’t produce), that is like saying we can’t talk about dangers to democracy until we establish whether or not 1/6/21 was technically an insurrection or not. The phenomena out there have implications whether we’re comfortable with them in our literature or not. As such, the continuing production of and reliance on generational cohorts to characterize incoming students – generation-ism as it is called here – is a manifestation of neoliberalism’s centrality-of-the-market persistence. Generation-ism in higher education manifests in two ways: bundling students by categories of consumption and then marketing those bundles to universities in a neoliberal feedback loop.

The influence of generation-ism on academic libraries is significant: libraries are cost centers (not revenue centers) at any college or university. As such, they come under the neoliberal gaze resulting in significant design pressures on the space and to conform to the framework of generation-ism. Those influences will be unpacked. When neoliberalism does tend to drive higher education investments in facilities, the contrast is revealing. The much-written-about “laziness” trend does not figure strongly (or at all) in the LIS literature. It will be examined in direct contrast to the finance/space pressures on academic libraries just reviewed. Finally, the paper will conclude with a short discussion of these factors and what this analysis can tell us about academic libraries going forward in a post-COVID-19 era.

Neoliberalism: a short and essential definition

Health and economic disparities revealed by COVID-19 in combination with contemporary political destabilization are thought to hold promise to end the hegemony of neoliberalism (e.g. Drever, 2021; Gerstle, 2021; Tharoor, 2021; Tooze, 2021). But neoliberalism came through an earlier global financial crisis in 2008 – itself a result of neoliberal policies – virtually intact (Mirowski, 2013a). Therefore, it is worth thinking about this dominant economic and social pattern we continue to live under beyond the earlier characterization. Mirowski powerfully argues that the essential core of neoliberalism is the centrality of the market. The market in neoliberalism literally knows best and defines what is worth knowing; neoliberal claims are that sweeping.

It is “an information processor more powerful than any human brain” (Mirowski, 2009, 29), “the only overall order that comprehends nearly all of mankind” (italics added, Hayek in Cunningham, 2002, 103). The market, for neoliberalism, therefore serves not only as a theory and framework for political and economic policy, but also as an epistemology and a social, moral and ethical code that extends to private arenas like markets for spouses and childcare (Mirowski, 2013b, 2019; Cunningham, 2002, 101-122; Buschman, 2012a). The New York Times columnist David Brooks (2019) characterized the ideas and ethos while singing its praises:

[G]overnment officials … [are] not capable of planning the society they hoped to create. … The world is just too complicated. I came to realize that capitalism is really good at … creating a learning process to help people figure stuff out. If you want to run a rental car company, capitalism has a whole bevy of market and price signals and feedback loops that tell you what kind of cars people want to rent, where to put your locations, how many cars to order. It has a competitive profit-driven process to motivate you to learn and innovate, every single day. [...] interfere[nce] with price and other market signals … suppress[es] or eliminate[s] profit motives that drive people to learn and improve. It doesn’t matter how big your computers are [they] can never gather all relevant data, can never construct the right feedback loops. The state cannot … see the local, irregular, context-driven factors that can have exponential effects [nor] predict people’s desires…. Capitalism creates a relentless learning system.... Neoliberalisms themselves invoke many and contradictory justifications, precedents and policies to advance the philosophy, epistemology, and ethos of neoliberalism – often simply to tailor the message to the audience, but it is the market that is the unwavering core idea defining it. (Mirowski, 2019).

3 See Buschman (forthcoming) for the patterns quickly revealed by a simple discourse analysis. Higher education consulting firms display these same characteristics.

4 As of this writing, there were about five dozen citations in Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts for the subject “neoliberalism” in academic journals since 2005. A search of Google and Google Scholar significantly supplements this number with books, book chapters, other journals and open source publications. Since many publications already described prior neoliberal developments in the library field there is no need to recapitulate them here (see for example Buschman, 2020a, 2012a, 2012b; Greene & McMenemy, 2012; Waugh, 2014).

5 This is known as the “audience commodity” effect: the primary purpose is not to sell a product to an audience, but rather to gather the audience as the commodity to be sold to marketers (Snythe, 2012).
Demography as market destiny: student generation-ism and libraries

If the market is the core of neoliberalism, how does that play out in higher education? We have already glimpsed the power of gathering student cohorts via their consumption (market) preferences to in turn turn market them to universities. Fifteen years ago, a brief list of monikers – each purporting to be key to understanding a unique generation of users – was compiled in the LIS literature: “Bloomers (of course), Millenials, Gamers, GenX, GenY, NextGen, Echo Boomers, C Generation, ‘Net Gen, the Generation Born With The Chip, the TIVO Generation, Baby Bust Generation, N-Gen, Screenagers, Nexters, Gadget Generation, and MySpace Generation” (Buschman, 2007, 28). Ten years ago, this “bona fide” trend data was used in a series of “life” ethnographic studies to propose a way to shape library spaces, reifying in bricks and mortar “defining” generational characteristics (Buschman, 2012b). The Beloit Mindset list is a handy example of this practice. The core to it (and the monikers) remains consumer and media categories that “define” age cohorts (Buschman, 2007). The marketing industry itself touts such efforts as “taking marketers inside the minds of future generations” (https://www.ama.org/marketing-news/the-mindset-list-is-taking-marketeers-inside-the-minds-of-future-generations/). Consider a few items from the Mindset list for the Class of 2022: “The Prius has always been on the road in the U.S.”; “The detachable computer mouse is almost extinct”; “Starbucks has always served venti Caffè Lattes in Beijing’s Forbidden City”; “They never tasted Pepsi Twist in the U.S.” (http://themindsetlist.com/2018/08/beloit-college-mindset-list-class-2022/). Two things jump out. The first is how trivial6 generation-ism is in defining the lives of students who are finishing their degrees amid the challenges and fallout of a third year of COVID-19. Retroactively describing an earlier group that experienced social and political upheaval produces the same result (Buschman, 2012b): Hitler has never been alive and West Germany has always been an ally for the class of 1968. Typewriters have always been portable, Wheat Thins, Polaroid cameras, Cheerios and Clearasil have always existed. Radio has always been in decline and television has always had sitcoms, etc. To the generation experiencing the draft and Vietnam, the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements, political assassinations and the police riot of the Democratic National Convention at the time, that characterization would’ve sounded utterly vapid. Current ones do as well.

And yet, generation-ism continues. To give one instance in some depth, Ologie – a higher education consulting firm – produced a booklet (https://ologie.com/gen-z/) that, as of this writing, continues to represent the company’s analysis of incoming students. It brands “Gen Z” as “sick of manufactured advertising” and wanting “natural, organic, and authentic brands like Zappos and Chipotle.” The report identifies Gen Z through consumer categories: “gaming, television, movies, role-playing games” and food, with specific genres of movies identified. There is the obligatory contrast with earlier cohorts: The Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials. It finishes with demographics and trends for higher education: women will outpace men in enrollment growth, digital will shape campus physical environments, and “crowd-sourced lesson plans, information fluency, and digital citizenship” will ascend.7 Note the reference to buildings, learning and information fluency (and democracy). This “research” – largely a sampling of consumption habits and patterns – shapes academic libraries, directly effecting the thinking about and the shaping of library spaces and services. Campus buildings – including libraries – have been and are influenced in design, purpose and content by the reports higher education consulting firms package and sell to higher education. Academic libraries are among the buildings designed to preserve or convey a desired Hogwarts/Harry Potter look-and-feel, often costing much more per square foot as a result (Hawthorne, 2017; Morrison, 2013).8 At the same time, there is a conscious effort to de-emphasize the “traditional” library (primarily books) by deploying and featuring technology and emphasizing social or group spaces. (Rothbauer, 2019; White, 2019; Wong, 2019; Editorial Board, 2022; Friedman, 2022). The sum of these two cross-cutting trends is that academic libraries are simultaneously cost centers (not revenue generators), valuable campus real estate (Buschman, 2017) and marketed as part of the college “experience” (hence the Hogwarts look-and-feel), and as such, they play a part in furthering the long turn toward making a college education a commodity rather than a social good to be shared (Buschman, 2003; Finn, 2018; Sessions, 2020). Finally, these circumstances serve to make “students themselves forge the connection between higher education and the labour market”; because public funding of higher education has dwindled, “under the pressure of debt students are transformed into rational agents who must evaluate the potential return on their education” in good neoliberal/market fashion (Fecteau, 2021). Academic libraries must be both a (so defined) market-attractive space and contribute to the instrumental trends students are told they need to accommodate to make their education pay off.

The circle is completed: students are packaged to colleges in generation-ism, colleges market to generation-ism by shifting values, practices and structures into an “experience.” This is a familiar phenomenon, analyzed in the mid-twentieth century. Our society and economy have long been organized around the production of wants by “modern advertising and salesmanship”: “the path for an expansion of output must be paved by a suitable expansion in the advertising budget” (Galbraith, 2000, 219). In the process students feel real financial pressure to realize a return on that “experience.” What, in concert with other investigations, the circle of generation-ism tells us is that there are interested parties in this arrangement: elites and consultants – like Ologie or EAB – who have good reasons to maintain the status quo and reinforce what the media pick up and report on as trends (and that boards, parents and administrators read) that go all the way through shaping library building projects (Buschman 2020a, 2020b, forthcoming). Two examples encapsulate this. A 2019 New York Times article found in its reportage on academic libraries that actual “college students just want normal libraries” – that is books, book delivery, and quiet spaces – that fly directly in the face of consultant-fed “tides of change” concerning what “this generation” of students wants, stoking old fears about obsolescence, etc. (Wong, 2019). That very same year in an article in The Atlantic, a Boston-area campus administrator stated that “the books of college libraries are turning into wallpaper” after Yale students protested the removal and storage of books in a popular library location, noting that library book usage has been dropping and students on his campus favor group spaces and e-resources (Cohen, 2019). Academic libraries and how they are shaped and used are being debated in the popular press with all the elements of generation-ism: “documented

6 It is worth remembering that neoliberalism has been dominant for four or five decades now (Niwinski, 2009).
7 The Mindset list has since moved on from Beloit College; it still exists and has been heavily criticized for some time (http://www.beloitmindlessness.com/).
8 And many times, factually untrue: see the footnote above for many examples.
9 The ironies here are plentiful: Zappos owner Tony Hsieh went on a hedonistic binge and died in a mysterious housefire in 2020 (https://www.forbes.com/sites/angelalauyeung/2021/01/26/cause-of-fire-that-killed-tony-hsieh-still-unclear-investigators-cite-carelessness-but-will-not-rule-out-intentional-act/?sh=36a81a854a70) and Chipotle was serving tainted food as this report was being deployed (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/business/chipotle-tainted-food-settlement.html).
10 Such “analyses” continue and are widespread as of mid-2022. See https://tinyurl.com/GenZCharact; https://eab.com/insights/blogs/enrollment/effectively-reach-gen-z/; https://tinyurl.com/TeachGenZ.
11 Again, not covered in the LIS literature: see Buschman (forthcoming) for one analysis.
trends," elites speaking for students through consumption analyses with elite locations leading the way – all the while regular students at regular academic libraries in regular institutions appearing in reportage are seemingly unheard. That is how neoliberal ideas steamroll common sense and actual experience and these data points need to appear in our literature.

Going forward: the neoliberal apologie of “lazy rivers”

“Lazy rivers” – water park-like recreation facilities at universities – have been introduced into this ginned up atmosphere, and now seem both logical and inevitable in light of generation-ism. As of this writing 27 lazy rivers at universities were easily identified from the web. These projects are linked to the “needs” of athletics programs and marketing to prospective athletes (Hobson, 2017) and/or the retailing of the university itself or luxury residence hall complexes (Yanni, 2015). Much like Kleenex and Xerox, the name lazy river itself has become a sense and actual experience and these data points need to appear in our site in popular media, university web pages and e-publications.

Conclusion

Much of what has been explored here has been available as data points for some time. That is the point. The public realm has been progressively unviewed for most of our lives. We have become used to the naming and characterizing of age groupings of young people merely by the consumer goods sold to them. We have had so many reports of overwhelming trends requiring libraries and librarians to adapt or face obsolescence (see Buschman, 2003) that there are generations of library professionals who know nothing else. And we have seen the investment choices made by our host/governing institutions. Internal to those choices is a logic that valorizes what students (and parents) expect when they choose (now consume) a college based on what they are told are the defining characteristics of their age cohort. The only thing knitting these phenomena together is the market, and the relentless push of neoliberalism for the logic and meaning of the market in everything. Like medieval thought, the logic of neoliberalism is all-encompassing. It produces dysfunctional, nonsensical results like Monty Python and The Holy Grail’s witch scene where a knight concludes in flawless logic that if the accused witch weighs the same as a duck, she is made of wood which also floats in water, and therefore she is a witch. To the person providing this “analysis” came the admiring response “Who are you who are so wise in the ways of science?” Neoliberalism is equally closed: its failure in the form of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis could only mean insufficient fidelity to the necessary depth of market penetration regarding the issue of financial deregulation (Buschman, 2022). The answer to neoliberalism’s problems is more neoliberalism.

To be clear not everything that pinches academic libraries is neoliberalism. We should be efficient with our resources. They should be used robustly. Our spaces should be clean, well-lit, have the affordances students use (academically) and be attractive. None of that implies a change in the purpose of an academic library: to foster the educational mission of its university. The educational mission – vs. market-driven nimbleness to “survive” in an increasingly impoverished public realm – is what we should remain about. Naming these factors and their power is necessary to recognizing them when they inevitably appear. Can we wholesale change the nature and context of the academy? No. Do we have room to maneuver and maintain public purposes within the envelop of our institutions? Yes. How can we do that? By circling back to the potential of the sensible responses to COVID-19 noted at the beginning of this paper: not every trumpeted trend is good and needs to be followed. Judgement, obviously, is required. Asking oneself whether the current flavor-of-the-month trend (e.g. https://www.thridernews.com/vider-librarians-find-new-way-to-improve-the-student-learning-experience/) is core to our mission is a good means of dividing the substantive from the ephemeral. Libraries, as noted recently, have a “public spirit” that most other kinds of institutions don’t, a “clarity around intention and transparency of outlook” that, for instance, museums lack (Raicovich, 2019). Neoliberalism’s influence on higher education won’t be...
go away because of this pandemic. But the hopeful glimmer that we're not swallowing this-changes-everything rhetoric about the adaptations to COVID-19 is unexpected. It might be a start.

Author statement
I am the sole author of this article.

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