
Nailisa Tanner  
*University of Toronto*

Those working in academe need not look far to read about the crises of their institutions, with symptoms ranging from the decline of humanities education, to escalating student debt, to the development of a precariat class of underpaid contract faculty. How did we get here? Much writing that investigates these conditions points to the ascendancy of neoliberalism in state and academic governance. Lawrence Busch’s *Knowledge for Sale* argues along similar lines: its thesis is that not only have neoliberal attitudes and practices hijacked institutions of higher learning but also the practices they encourage are actually undermining their stated outcomes. As Busch sees it, the quality of scholarly research is declining, students are receiving worse educations, and those working in academe are less free than ever. Amid the recent proliferation of scholarship concerned with neoliberalism and universities, this work is not groundbreaking, particularly as this text is a translation of a work originally published in French in 2014 by Éditions Quae. Its real value, however, is not in making a new or innovative argument on the subject but in providing a succinct and accessible overview of the current crisis in higher education and research.

Professor emeritus of sociology at Michigan State University, with research interests in environmental and agricultural research, Busch opens *Knowledge for Sale* by emphasizing the significance of the neoliberal turn in higher education coinciding with a number of other global crises, namely climate change, volatile food prices, water shortages, rising energy costs, obesity, and financial crises. He argues that because these problems are so complex and require so much cooperation on the part of researchers, lawmakers, and citizens, healthy and functional institutions of research and higher education are more important now than ever before. With these high stakes in mind, Busch provides a brief pre-history and outline of neoliberal thought, revisiting historical disagreements concerning the role of the state in promoting freedom. He acknowledges that there are competing understandings of neoliberalism but does not dwell on these debates, instead providing a broad survey of the shared tenets of most neoliberal thought and writings. As a counterpoint, he then presents his own views on the principles that should guide higher education,
including, notably, that education is a public good and that an educated citizenry is an essential component of functional democracy.

The book’s core chapters focus on four areas of investigation: administration, education, research, and public engagement and extension. The chapter on research is particularly strong and describes a number of alarming trends, from the reshaping of scientific inquiry through competition for grants, to the monopolistic hold that a small fraction of academic publishers have on scholarly publication channels. Despite Busch’s overly simplified assertion that libraries make decisions about journal subscriptions based on indexes such as Web of Science, academic librarians whose work touches on scholarly communications will appreciate the inclusion of data on academic citation practices and journal prestige.

The chapter discussing public engagement and extension, on the other hand, feels out of place. In the book’s acknowledgments, Busch notes that this work originated at the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique, a public research institute in France that is dedicated to agricultural science, and that some of its research was funded by a grant from the Fondation Agropolis, a French agricultural research network. Given these connections, it is not surprising that Busch focuses on research and work in the field of agriculture. What is surprising, however, is that this chapter is the only one where this focus is so conspicuous. Whereas examples of agricultural research are well integrated into other chapters, this chapter is almost exclusively dedicated to the institution of agricultural extension services, education programs designed to integrate research into agricultural practice. These practices are not well explained for the benefit of those outside this discipline, and although Busch claims that agriculture is an exemplary discipline with strong and publicly visible relationships between research and application, readers from other disciplines may find little in this chapter that is relevant to their concerns. This is unfortunate, as the rest of the book supplies readers with illustrative examples of trends that are applicable across scholarly disciplines.

The trends identified in these chapters also relate to recent works that have turned a critical eye to algorithmic and data-driven decision making. In her 2016 book *Weapons of Math Destruction*, for example, Cathy O’Neil argues that the determinations made by decision-making algorithms often go unquestioned, even when the results they lead us to may be biased and are often incorrect. Moreover, when metrics are disclosed, they are susceptible to being gamed by participants. Busch’s examples of university rankings in the administration chapter and publication and citation counts in the research chapter, both examples of specific and often arbitrary metrics receiving excessive focus at the expense of other factors, recall O’Neil’s warnings and connect this work with current critiques of irresponsible techno-utopian solutions to social questions.
Given the disheartening phenomena that Busch describes, and the catastrophic backdrop he has painted these trends against, what can be done to address these issues? He outlines the three complementary strategies of resistance, emulation, and imagination. Resistance here means engaging in deeper, more sustained, frequent, and public critiques of neoliberal policies, particularly when there is evidence that these policies have failed to produce their intended results. Emulation means learning from neoliberal tactics and policies and forging alliances among like-minded groups. Imagination requires thinking and speaking about what an alternative future of the academy might look like. He then lists several specific proposals formulated according to these strategies, ranging from the rejection of standardized testing to the promotion of interdisciplinary and public scholarly activities.

Given contemporary neoliberals’ own reluctance to use the term, neoliberalism is an easily misunderstood concept: some may see it as a mere buzzword, or as a phenomenon limited to the privatization of public entities. Busch’s work can help give substance to more shallow understandings of the term while at the same time remaining brief and accessible. Its appearance is also timely given the increasing interest in the topic of neoliberalism in LIS research. While recent contributions to this discussion have generally applied studies of neoliberalism towards specific facets of academic library work such as student services, information literacy instruction, or the managerial rhetoric of change, this work will help to provide wider context for this area of LIS scholarship. Librarians concerned by the neoliberal turn in education will find this book useful as an introduction to the issues at stake, and academic librarians in particular can benefit from a broader picture within which they can situate their own work.

References