Ideology and Audit Culture: Standardized Service Quality Surveys in Academic Libraries

Jeff Lilburn

abstract: This article examines the relationship between the standardized service quality survey LibQUAL+ and the rise of audit culture. Recent scholarship examining assessment and accountability systems and the ideological principles driving their implementation in higher education raises concerns about the impact these systems have on teaching, learning, research, faculty autonomy, and the meaning and value of university education. Situating the growing popularity of LibQUAL+ within the sociopolitical context of pressures universities face to adopt private-sector management practices, the author argues that many criticisms made about systems of accountability imposed on higher education are equally applicable to LibQUAL+.

Introduction

This article examines academic library assessment practices in the context of recent scholarship investigating the rise of audit culture, a term used to describe a “managerialist conception of accountability” focused on quantitative performance measures. More specifically, this article situates the growing popularity of the standardized service quality survey LibQUAL+ within the broader setting of the pressures universities face to accept neoliberal principles and to operate more like private-sector businesses. Neoliberal principles, described in greater detail later, include an emphasis on free market competition and privatization of public services, and recast citizens as consumers. Recent scholarship examining systems of accountability and the ideological principles driving their implementation in higher education raises a number of questions about the impact of accountability systems on teaching, learning,
research, faculty autonomy, and the meaning and value of university education. This article considers how these questions are relevant to library assessment practices and, in particular, to the use of one-size-fits-all assessment measures such as LibQUAL+.

According to literature on library assessment and to promotional material produced by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), large numbers of academic libraries now turn to the standardized survey LibQUAL+ as a means of measuring their users’ opinions of service quality. A survey tool developed by ARL and based on the private-sector quality assessment tool SERVQUAL, LibQUAL+ is a “suite of services” designed to “solicit, track, understand, and act upon users’ opinions of service quality.” The survey consists of 22 core survey questions measuring perception of service quality across three dimensions: (1) affect of service, (2) information control, and (3) library as place. A small number of additional questions address “information literacy outcomes, library use, and general satisfaction,” and written comments may be entered in a text box. Individual libraries also have the option of adding five “local” questions to the survey.

The growing use of LibQUAL+ has generated a good deal of scholarly research. Studies representative of the larger body of work on LibQUAL+ examine response rates, the extent to which the tool is used, perceived usefulness of the survey, aspects of library services not satisfactorily analyzed by LibQUAL+, and whether LibQUAL+ can help identify so-called best practices. A number of studies have also investigated the survey’s reliability and validity. Other work has adopted a more critical perspective on the survey or attempted to address perceived shortcomings. Jessica Rovito raises questions about the application of a “customer concept” model to libraries, while Brian Detlor and Kathryn Ball, in a study aimed in part at examining the merits of qualitative analysis of LibQUAL+ survey data, conclude that such analysis adds value to the survey by helping to identify recommendations that could not be clearly identified using quantitative data alone. However, to date, the broader social and political contexts in which LibQUAL+ has been advanced, and the relationship between LibQUAL+ and systems of assessment and accountability used throughout academe, remain underexplored in the literature.

Critical analyses of other areas of activity within the academic library have taken into consideration the influence of dominant political and economic ideology. The last three years alone have seen essays placing the development and practice of information literacy within the context of neoliberalism, work offering strategies for resisting the current neoliberal climate of higher education, and studies exploring the ways that language (“neoliberal keywords”) can serve to reinforce market ideology in higher education and academic libraries. Early responses to the new Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education have highlighted the “neoliberal underpinnings” of the document and critically examine the manner in which the Framework handles power relations. A collection of essays devoted to critical information literacy includes works addressing social and institutional power and dominant social and professional narratives. John Buschman has made important contributions to this area, including the influential *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy*, while Stephen Bale’s *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach* investigates the position of the “modern capitalist academic library” and the role played by academic librarians in late capitalist society. This article is informed by these and related works.
and aims to contribute to ongoing critical discussion about the impact of neoliberalism on libraries and the work of librarians.

Neoliberalism is a term used to describe ideologies, policies, and practices that have become increasingly dominant since the 1970s. In broad strokes, neoliberalism can be understood as a multifaceted project aimed at reconfiguring the relationships between society, the economy, the state, and the individual. David Harvey, whose book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* informs several of the studies discussed in this paper, describes neoliberalism as a “theory of political economic practices” which asserts that the role of the state is to create and maintain an “institutional framework” designed to enable “entrepreneurial freedoms” and to advance “private property rights, free markets and free trade.” Sometimes referred to as a “more intensified” style of capitalism, neoliberalism is typically characterized by deregulation of industry, privatization, and removal of the state from provision of social services. The process of neoliberalism, Harvey explains, entails “creative destruction,” a dismantling of existing institutional frameworks and a rolling back of progressive social policy and of the welfare state developed since the 1940s. One manifestation of these processes is the ongoing attempt to reshape public institutions, including institutions of higher education. Under neoliberalism, the idea of the university as a public good devoted to critical social analysis, civic education, and meaningful scholarship is replaced with a utilitarian and market-driven approach to higher education characterized by flexible and efficient program delivery designed to produce an employable workforce and commercially relevant research.

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The primary focus of this article is library use of LibQUAL+ and the survey’s relationship to neoliberalism and the rise of audit culture. Because LibQUAL+ is so widely used by academic libraries across North America and around the world, it has a status and profile unmatched by other library assessment tools. What is more, as a tool comprised of a standard list of questions designed to “foster a culture of excellence” by quantifying users’ opinions of their own experiences for the purpose of cross-institutional comparisons, LibQUAL+ invites critical examination of its relationship to other metrics developed and implemented in response to mounting calls for accountability. It also invites critical consideration of the influence the tool may have on library assessment practice and discourse and on the normalization of the use of standardized service
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quality instruments. This article will argue that many of the criticisms made about systems of accountability imposed on universities more generally—including concerns about the commodification of higher education, a focus on comparability over local context and need, and diminishment of professional autonomy for academic staff—apply equally to LibQUAL+. The article also discusses how systems of accountability can increase managerial control and considers how the survey’s disregard for local context is especially troublesome with regard to librarian teaching. I begin with a discussion of literature examining the political and economic drivers underlying the rise of audit culture in higher education. This is followed by a discussion of the relationship between audit culture and the growing popularity of the LibQUAL+ survey. I conclude with consideration of possible next steps to continue a critical examination of library audit culture and to promote development of library assessment practices that are more in tune with academic values and priorities.

The Rise of Audit Culture

Growing numbers of public-sector institutions have adopted systems of assessment and accountability designed to measure, rate, and compare performance and outcomes. Within higher education, the implementation and use of new accountability measures is often framed as an exercise aimed at ensuring “quality” and “excellence,” but work situating accountability practices and discourse within a broader social and political context contests such claims. This section will discuss how this body of critical work contends that accountability can instead function as “facilitator” of the drive toward commercialization, corporatization, and greater managerial control.22

Concerns about the corporatization and commercialization of higher education are not new. Universities have a long history of collaborating with industry. Over the last couple of decades, numerous scholars have attempted to document the nature of these relationships and to consider their implications for higher education and for the role universities play in democratic societies.23 Issues of concern include threats to academic freedom, diminishment of collegial governance and faculty autonomy, the erosion of tenured and tenure-stream faculty complement and an accompanying reliance on contingent faculty labor, and a focus on job-skills training and labor market needs.24 This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 17.1.

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and trends we see today can be traced to the early twentieth century or earlier, there is an emerging consensus that the range and intensity of the relationship between higher education and industry and market forces are unprecedented. In particular, recent scholarship on the state of universities has examined the relationship between shifts in higher education and the ideological principles driving neoliberalism. The ties to neoliberalism seem especially clear when one looks at systems of assessment and accountability and what has come be known as audit culture, or “audit society,” the names given to the systems of “bureaucratic oversight” and “accountancy mindset of performance management” focused on “quantification and measures of output.”

The literature examining audit culture and the rise of standardized assessment tools pays particular attention to the underlying reasons for their use. Theresa Shanahan writes that changes in higher education do not happen in a vacuum but are shaped by economic restructuring associated with globalization and public policy shifts reflecting neoliberalism. Developments in policy and practice surrounding accountability are no exception. As “economic principles of productivity, efficiency and competitiveness have become imperatives” in almost every part of society, the accountability frameworks developed for higher education have, Shanahan submits, been “infused with market discourse, market principles and market mechanisms.”

Scholars from a range of academic disciplines have reached similar conclusions. A growing chorus of critical voices suggests that pressures to adopt systems of assessment and accountability are not designed to help higher education meet its own disciplinary or pedagogical goals but are instead used to “hold higher education accountable to neoliberal goals.”

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introduced systems of accountability designed to “assess efficiency and effectiveness free of academic norms, university culture, and the complex context of teaching, learning, and intellectual inquiry.” From the perspective of managerialism, the value of the university and its academic staff is measured not by their contributions to the common good, but by the degree to which they help advance economic growth or produce other private benefits.

Indeed, an important factor to consider when examining links between accountability and neoliberalism is the rise of new public management, or new managerialism, an approach to organizational governance closely associated with neoliberalism. Characterized by a “combination of free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices,” new public management has been implemented in a range of public-sector environments, where it plays a key role in promoting competition, market values and principles, and the use of performance measures and rankings. Scholarship examining the effects of new public management in the public sector emphasizes that it is not an innocuous or neutral process. Rather, as Kathleen Lynch explains, its objective is to normalize organizational governance based on systemic reliance on market principles. Further, new public management may lead to a radical alteration of organizational control: it “promotes and legitimizes the takeover of power by managers in public organizations that were formerly run by professionals in accordance with their standards.”

Examined within the context of new public management practices and goals, new systems of assessment and accountability take on meaning and importance beyond their stated purposes. They are not simply tools or practices to help ensure and enhance quality; they are “disciplinary technologies . . . aimed at instilling new norms of conduct into the workforce” and at “strengthening managerial control over the workforce.” In other words, as Cris Shore argues, the introduction of audit culture into university settings cannot be understood as merely a response to calls for transparency, excellence, and accountability; it is also closely tied to the politics surrounding managerial regulation and control. In England, for example, where principles of new public management have been in play in higher education for several decades, accountability “has become the watchword for a new system of corporate management.” In short, a number of recent studies examining audit culture and accountability practices conclude that “the call for greater accountability goes hand in hand with more power for management.”

The rise of audit culture in higher education has also led to concerns about the impact that systems of accountability have on the role of the university in society. For some critics, the rise of audit culture reflects the “market-based economic reconceptualization of the purpose and focus of higher education.” Martínez Alemán, for instance, links increasing use of standardized tools and metrics designed to measure learning outcomes with the instrumentalization of higher education and the idea of education as commodity. For Shore, one key problem with audit culture is that it conflates accountability and accountancy, with the result that “being answerable to the public” is reframed through measures that privilege “productivity, economic efficiency, and delivering value for money.” Efficiency, in particular, has special prominence in both new public management and accountability discourse, leading to concerns that prioritization of efficiency will marginalize other organizational values. Other scholars have focused on problems associated with the use of standardized tools that rely on quantitative data and that
foster competition within and among institutions. For David Hursh and Andrew Wall, for example, the move toward “simplistic metrics to define the outputs of higher education” exemplifies the way neoliberalism uses “assessment as a lever to reduce” teaching and learning to quantifiable data that can be compared in an “educational market.”

The use of standardized tools has also led to concern about how the norms and criteria used to determine quality are established. In his much-cited critique of the discourse of excellence, Bill Readings discusses how a fundamental assumption underlying the push for performance measures is that there is a “single standard” or single “measure of excellence” by which universities can be assessed and compared. Readings argues that this assumption deflects attention away from questions about the meaning and judgment of quality. Similarly, because standardized measures require compliance with predetermined “norms and procedures”—which may differ from academic or disciplinary standards and customs—they can do “as much to construct definitions of quality and performance as to monitor them.” One consequence is that academic staff lose the professional autonomy to determine their own norms. Standardized measures also obscure, as Shanahan explains, how the process of establishing norms and defining quality is not a neutral process, but a political one: there are “power relations around who decides what ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’” may mean. Finally, a reliance on standardized assessment tools fails to acknowledge that teaching and learning are complex processes not readily measured by simple, reductive tools. Quality assurance measures that focus on quantifiable data tied to desired learning outcomes assume that the only learning that matters is that which is measurable and quantifiable. Such measures discriminate against learning that does not lend itself to easy quantification, posing problems that can be especially acute in the arts, humanities, and certain social sciences. In short, a substantial body of critical work contends that standardized systems of assessment and accountability can devalue teaching and learning, marginalize faculty members, and contribute to the growing instrumentalization and commodification of higher education.

Audit Culture and Library Assessment

To date, scholarly work on the use of standardized service quality surveys in libraries remains largely disengaged from scholarship critically examining the rise of audit culture. This is especially evident in library literature addressing external pressures to implement new accountability systems. An important document that features prominently in many studies of assessment and accountability in higher education is the Spellings Report, the
final report issued in 2006 by the United States Department of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings convened the commission to recommend a national strategy for reforming postsecondary education. Similar to reports issued in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand and by such international organizations as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, the Spellings Report recommended a federally administered program of assessment and accountability measures designed to improve efficiency and to make higher education more responsive to market forces.53 Among the recommendations of the Spellings Report was creation of a “consumer-friendly information database on higher education” designed to permit students, parents, and others to “weigh and rank comparative institutional performance.” The report also included proposals aimed at enhancing workforce development to meet labor market needs.54 Although the report had limited success effecting adjustments at the national level, it did lead to important changes at regional and institutional levels and helped popularize the idea of standardized evaluation for higher education.55 Again and again, studies examining the rise of audit culture in higher education point to the Spellings Report as an example of the influence of political and economic power on assessment practice. Hursh and Wall, for instance, describe the report as a key document that “exemplifies the direction in which neoliberal ideology is pushing higher education.”56 Steven Ward describes the Spellings Commission as the “most significant” effort to impose neoliberal principles on higher education in the United States.57 Richard Shavelson, one of the developers of the Collegiate Learning Assessment tool, a standardized test to measure critical thinking and written communication skills, notes how critics of the report have pointed out that proposals made in the Spellings Report do not “directly address the improvement of teaching and learning” but instead focus on “the external or summative function of accountability.”58 Ellen Schrecker refers to the “corporate makeup and pro-business ideology” of the Spellings Commission, while Benjamin Ginsberg observes that the testing industry was “well represented in drafting a federal report recommending more testing, raising questions and more than a few eyebrows.”59 The American Association of University Professors was also highly critical of the Spellings Report, noting that it largely ignores the contributions of academic staff, is narrowly focused on economic concerns, and overlooks the diversity of higher education institutions by viewing them as a single system.60

With few exceptions, the literature on library assessment practices has overlooked the significance of the Spellings Report. John Budd offered an early critical review of the report in which he addresses implications for academic libraries and emphasizes the need to carefully evaluate the commission’s conclusions and recommendations.61 More recent studies, however, cite the Spellings Report without reference to its critical reception or to work that situates it within the context of political and economic ideology driving higher education policy. For example, in a review of scholarship on academic and research library assessment published over a seven-year period, Jon Hufford explains that he chose to begin his review with 2005 because the Commission on the Future of Higher Education was created then.62 He rightly acknowledges the importance of the Spellings Report, observing that it led regional accreditation organizations to revise their standards, which in turn contributed to the “trend toward assessment.” He also notes
that the report has influenced the way libraries are assessed.63 Missing from Hufford’s
discussion, however, is acknowledgment of concerns raised in response to the Spellings Report. Hufford offers a useful summary of recent literature on library assessment, but his discussion does not engage with the broader social and political context in which the assessment and accountability movement is being pushed forward. Other recent studies examining LibQUAL+ and library assessment practices refer to the Spellings Report in a similar fashion. Jody Fagan cites only the Spellings Report when noting that the “surge of interest in assessment has been encouraged by the larger trend in higher education for more measurement and accountability.”64 Elizabeth Mezick summarizes key recommendations of the report and says that it highlights the “significance of assessment in all of higher education,” but she does not mention the critical response to the report.65 Instead, in each of these examples, the discussion tacitly accepts the influence of political power and political documents such as the Spellings Report and leaves unacknowledged and unaddressed a growing body of literature contending that external pressures to implement systems of assessment and accountability can pose a threat to faculty autonomy, to academic freedom, and to the idea of teaching and learning as complex processes that do not necessarily have predetermined or measurable outcomes. In other words, the widespread use of standardized service quality surveys such as LibQUAL+ has occurred in the absence of critical consideration of sociopolitical factors contributing to their growing popularity. The following section offers a closer look at LibQUAL+ and discusses how use of the survey can contribute to library assessment practice and discourse that help to advance a library audit culture consistent with the objectives of neoliberalism and new public management.

**LibQUAL+ and the Customer-Service Model of Quality**

Fundamental characteristics of the LibQUAL+ survey suggest that critical consideration of its widespread use is not only merited but also necessary. As described earlier, the LibQUAL+ survey consists of a standard set of questions intended for use at any academic library. It is a one-size-fits-all measurement tool that aims to capture and translate the complex and varying activities of an academic unit into quantifiable and comparable data. LibQUAL+ essentially imposes a standard measure of quality across all academic libraries, thereby neglecting local context, local differences, and local priorities. The single standard approach to assessing quality also disempowers libraries and librarians from determining the criteria most appropriate and useful for their particular setting and needs. These characteristics alone invite consideration of the role the survey plays in relation to issues raised in scholarship on audit culture discussed earlier. The part that LibQUAL+ may play in the development of a library audit culture is accentuated even further through examination of the language used to describe and promote the survey and analysis of the underlying assumptions revealed by this language.
To begin, LibQUAL+ explicitly conceives of academic library patrons not as students, scholars, learners, or researchers but, as Rovito rightly observes, as customers. The language used is important because language confers meaning. As Kathleen Lynch writes, “Language does not simply name the world, it defines it.” When students cease being called “students” and are instead described as “customers,” their relationship to faculty and instructors changes “from one of education to one of market service.” LibQUAL+ describes its service quality measurements as “snapshots or discrete summaries of customers’ evaluation of their experiences.” The language used on the LibQUAL+ website reinforces this view of the library user as customer. For example, LibQUAL+ defines service quality—the very thing LibQUAL+ is designed to measure—as “customers’ subjective evaluation of ‘customer service.’” Not only does LibQUAL+ define students and other library users as customers, but also it equates the service quality of the academic library, including the functions and activities of its academic staff, with customer service. This view of service quality reduces librarians to customer-service agents. It values the professional and academic work of librarians—including teaching, collection development and maintenance, provision of reference and research support, and development and implementation of library services and programs—not for its contributions to education, research, or scholarship, but for its contributions to perceptions of customer service.

The language in the LibQUAL+ documentation also suggests that it is a tool designed for library administrators and not a means to help librarians plan and implement services or inform their teaching or professional practice. The words “library” and “library administrator” occur frequently in LibQUAL+ documentation, but the word “librarian” rarely appears and is completely absent from the LibQUAL+ General Information, General FAQs, and Survey FAQs pages. The word “librarian” is also conspicuously absent from the survey questions, where references to “the library” and “employees” obscure the academic nature and pedagogical purpose of professional librarianship. Unlike formative evaluations of faculty teaching, LibQUAL+ is not designed to inform librarian praxis. Nor is it designed to help librarians gauge student learning. Rather, the survey is constructed to offer libraries a means of measuring and tracking the subjective opinions of customer service held by their “customers.” It is intended to help library managers “identify best practices, analyze deficits, and effectively allocate resources.” It is also designed to help libraries “better manage” users’ expectations. This last phrase is especially troubling because it could suggest a survey more concerned with public relations and marketing than with patron needs or student learning.

The emphasis placed by LibQUAL+ on comparability of data underscores both the market principles that inform the survey and the role it can play in perpetuating a culture of compliance. LibQUAL+ provides libraries with “comparable assessment information from peer institutions” and permits libraries to “examine the practices of libraries evaluated highly by their users.” However, because the survey is intended to offer libraries a way to compare their assessment information with that of peer institutions, it largely ignores specific details about the libraries it measures. As noted earlier, individual libraries have the option of adding 5 “local” questions to the 22 core survey items, but these must be selected from a list of approved questions that may not accurately reflect genuine local concerns. Also, as discussed earlier, the idea that service quality at
one institution can be compared with service quality at other institutions assumes that there is a single definition of quality or excellence that can be meaningfully compared. It also implies that significant conclusions can be drawn by determining how institutions perform in relation to one another. Similar to university rankings, this approach to assessment of service quality pits institution against institution and creates a competitive framework that rewards compliant adherence to a narrow range of predetermined performance measures. Such a system does indeed allow for easy comparisons and rankings of quantifiable data, but it does so by ignoring local context, questions, and needs and by excluding from consideration activities that cannot be easily measured or compared. It also ignores programs and services that may help to distinguish one institution from another.

To propose that LibQUAL+ is designed for library administrators and not for librarians or that it gives more importance to comparing assessment information than it does to local issues or questions is not to suggest that the survey is without merit or value. However, as a tool made up of standardized questions designed to quantify users’ opinions of customer service for the purpose of cross-institutional comparisons and managerial decision-making, LibQUAL+ does invite critical examination of its relationship to audit culture and to the underlying power relations driving audit culture. Many of the criticisms made about the systems of accountability imposed on higher education more generally seem equally applicable to LibQUAL+. A survey that explicitly treats students and other library users as customers invites questions about its role in the commodification and corporatization of higher education. Use of a survey that largely ignores the local context in which library services are provided and imposes a one-size-fits-all measurement tool that reduces to simple, quantifiable data the complex interactions librarians have with students seeking help, guidance, and instruction invites concern about the library’s commitment to learning as a complex process that can vary from one student to another. A survey that positions itself primarily as a tool that can help library managers allocate resources and virtually ignores the role of the librarians who design, coordinate, and deliver library services and teaching invites concern about diminishing the academic freedom and professional autonomy of librarians, including their ability to determine professional norms and measures of quality. Together, these criticisms of LibQUAL+ suggest that an approach to service quality modeled on a private-sector tool designed to measure perceptions of customer service has more in common with neoliberal ideology than it does with the academic values and priorities of the institutions it ostensibly aims to assess.

Growing use of the LibQUAL+ survey begs the question: to whom are libraries and librarians being held accountable? A system of assessment and accountability that treats students as customers invites an answer to this question that is different from an accountability measure that regards students as students, as scholars, or as citizens. As
discussed earlier, the treatment of students and other library patrons as customers suggests that the LibQUAL+ survey deserves careful consideration in conversations about the commodification of higher education. Library assessment based on a customer-service model seems ill-suited to measuring the contributions of an academic unit devoted to teaching, learning, and the advancement of scholarly knowledge. The “narrowing and homogenizing effects of standardized measures of accountability”\textsuperscript{75} seem especially inappropriate in libraries, which celebrate and champion diversity. LibQUAL+ also draws attention to the ways in which assessment tools can construct definitions of quality as much as monitor quality. For example, the survey asks library patrons to assess libraries in relation to the efficiency with which they carry out their work, regardless of whether efficiency is determined to be a meaningful organizational value or measure of quality.\textsuperscript{76} Similarly, LibQUAL’s definition of service quality—“customers’ subjective evaluation of ‘customer service’”\textsuperscript{77}—says nothing about a library’s contributions to the advancement of the scholarly mission of the university it serves. Through the creation and dissemination of knowledge, universities can help develop local communities, foster informed and critical citizenship, and promote social welfare and social justice. An instrument designed to assess customer service does not consider a library’s contributions to these objectives of the university. LibQUAL+ also ignores the particular goals and priorities articulated in library mission statements. With its emphasis on quantification, standardization, competition, and benchmarks, LibQUAL+ seems disengaged from the goals and values that inform and drive the work of the academic library. The underlying assumption that all students, faculty, researchers, scholars, and community members who use the library can be reduced to mere customers gives the strong impression of a survey invested in a different set of values and priorities.

The LibQUAL+ survey’s disregard of local context in favor of quantifiable and easily comparable data is especially problematic with regard to the teaching role of librarians. Because so much of the service work of librarians includes a teaching component, LibQUAL’s context-blind approach to service quality divorces librarian teaching from the specific site in which the teaching takes place. This approach to measuring service quality overlooks the significance of local context for teaching and learning. For example, Heidi Jacobs, stressing that information literacy “operates within a sociopolitical context,” argues that the teaching of information literacy is always contextual.\textsuperscript{78} Similarly, James Elmborg asserts that “education is a profoundly political activity” and contends that educators must decide how to engage students in their encounters with dominant ideologies and societal practices.\textsuperscript{79} While the LibQUAL+ survey does include a few questions intended to address information literacy outcomes, these questions do not explicitly deal with librarian teaching activity and they do not consider curriculum or the particular and changing contexts in which teaching and learning take place. What
room is there for critical pedagogy in LibQUAL+? What room is there for creativity, for unanticipated learning outcomes, or for transformative learning? LibQUAL+ does not consider any of these.

Recognizing the importance of context in relation to teaching and learning offers a useful counterpoint to the view that context can simply be dismissed or ignored. Emily Drabinski’s recent work on librarian teaching practice is instructive here. Using the Greek concept of kairos, or qualitative time, a concept that “measures both time and its context,” Drabinski proposes a “pedagogy of kairos”—a shift away from globally defined standards and “externally defined outcomes” toward outcomes derived from the “material conditions of teaching.” She discusses how the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education were themselves the product of particular socioeconomic conditions—that is, they were developed in the context of emerging discourse surrounding information economies and a higher education sector increasingly tied to employment. The kairos of information literacy, Drabinski argues, is “inextricable from . . . the corporatizing kairos of higher education.” Understanding the kairos of the Standards provides a means of challenging the “need for shared organizing principles” and of recognizing that standards of all kinds are created “contextually” in response to particular political, social, and economic conditions. In short, Drabinski proposes that kairos permits instructors to focus on their own classrooms and students instead of on a set of standardized outcomes.

Drabinski’s ideas are instructive to the present discussion about assessment and accountability in two key ways. First, her proposal for a pedagogy of kairos emphasizes the importance of local context for teaching and learning. If context is important for teaching, then the manner in which we think and talk about teaching must also take into account the context in which teaching occurs. If different situations require different approaches to teaching—and keeping in mind that much of librarians’ service work has a teaching component—a standardized measure of service quality may be inadequate.

Second, as described earlier, Drabinski explains how the development of the Standards and a globally shared concept of information literacy were the products of a particular socioeconomic context. She further argues that the demand that the Standards be revised—even though the revision has come to be understood as a “natural and necessary project”—is also a product of a particular socioeconomic context that can be destabilized through kairos. The continuing demand for a globally shared concept of information literacy is “a demand we might usefully resist.” Applied to audit culture and to the mounting pressures to implement systems of accountability (such as those made by the Spellings Report), Drabinski’s argument can help focus attention on the context in which these pressures emerge. In other words, critical consideration of the kairos of audit culture, already (as discussed in earlier sections) the object of much scholarly attention in other corners of the academy, can lead to increased understanding of the social, political, and economic
interests underlying library audit culture. Drabinski reminds us that these interests can be resisted. Her work also helps to highlight an important aspect of the LibQUAL+ survey: its neglect of local context conveys the idea that context is unimportant and, by doing so, discourages critical consideration of the sociopolitical conditions in which the survey itself is deployed. Yet, by situating the survey in the context of audit culture, we can more fully understand the implications of its widespread use.

Future Directions for Library Assessment and Research

Robert McChesney has written that “most assessments of the Internet fail to ground it in political economy; they fail to understand the importance of capitalism in shaping and, for lack of a better term, domesticating the Internet.” A similar statement could be made about much of the scholarly work on library assessment and the rise in popularity of LibQUAL+. LibQUAL+ has achieved and sustained impressive levels of popularity over an extended period. It also delivers information that many librarians find useful. This paper does not dispute these achievements. However, the survey has been widely adopted in the absence of critical consideration of the links among audit culture, neoliberalism, and new public management. This paper has outlined how library assessment practices, and, in particular, the standardized service quality survey LibQUAL+ require the same critical consideration given to standardized assessment and accountability practices elsewhere in the academy. This paper also emphasizes that practices surrounding library assessment cannot be considered apart from the sociopolitical contexts in which universities operate. Neoliberalism promotes, advances, and elevates certain values and ideas over others. It also influences and informs decisions concerning the criteria and methods used to describe and assess malleable concepts such as relevance, quality, and excellence. LibQUAL+ views library assessment through the lens of customer service. It emphasizes efficiency and customer satisfaction and encourages libraries to compare and rank their scores in relation to those of other libraries. This model of library assessment has proved very popular, but it is not the only model. There are alternatives.

Academic libraries are regularly described—by themselves and by others—as spaces that support learning and independent inquiry, promote equitable access to information, and encourage scholarly and civic engagement that contributes to the greater good of society. If these assertions ring true, then additional research is needed to consider why library successes and failures are routinely measured, counted, and compared using reductive and standardized tools that seem disinterested in these goals and values. As discussed in earlier sections, a range of work on audit culture alerts us to the political and economic interests underlying calls for accountability and assessment. An increasing number of these studies also conclude that the broad scope of activity within higher education does not lend itself to assessment based simply on “counting, measuring and quantifying” and that the “language and practice of quantification” is “inappropriate and unhelpful.” In one such study, Hursh and Wall assert that assessment “methodology should respond to question and context” and should respect the values that underpin higher education, including shared governance, academic freedom, and service to the public good. In the case of library assessment, additional research is needed to examine whether other forms of evaluation might better match the educational setting in which
academic library services are delivered. Other methods of assessment might provide information that is more helpful and more meaningful to the work of librarians and to the advancement of the library as an academic unit devoted not to customers, but to students, scholars, researchers, and citizens. In particular, additional research is needed to examine how issues raised in relation to audit culture and discussed in this paper may inform further critical analysis of the LibQUAL+ instrument as well as comparisons of LibQUAL+ to other standardized service quality surveys and assessment methods. Such research is needed to help ensure that library assessment methodology reflects the academic mission underlying the activities being assessed. More study is also required to develop better understanding of how the trends and discourse surrounding library assessment practice reflect the politics of shifting power relations across higher education institutions.

Jeff Lilburn is a public services librarian at Mount Allison University Libraries and Archives in Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada; he may be reached by e-mail at: jlilburn@mta.ca.

Notes
1. Cris Shore, “Audit Culture and Illiberal Governance: Universities and the Politics of Accountability,” Anthropological Theory 8, 3 (2008): 290. Shore further describes how audit culture refers to “contexts in which the techniques and values of accountancy have become a central organizing principle in the governance and management of human conduct—and the new kinds of relationships, habits and practices that this is creating” (279).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


20. See, for example, Laura Servage, “The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and the Neo-Liberalization of Higher Education: Constructing the ‘Entrepreneurial Learner,’” Canadian Journal of Higher Education 39, 2 (2009): 25–44. According to Servage, accountability is “founded on the belief that institutional efficiency is—and should be—the primary objective of any enterprise” and is a key concept for new managerialism and an “essential discourse within neoliberal governance” (32, 35).


26. Ibid., 8.


30. Ibid., 95–96.


32. Lorenz, “If You’re So Smart, Why Are You under Surveillance?” 600.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Lorenz, “If You’re So Smart, Why Are You under Surveillance?” 610. Lee Parker discusses how “the rise in centralized top management power” associated with new managerialism has been accompanied by a “decline in collegial modes of governance, with decision-making power and influence being progressively removed from disciplines, departments and schools” (“University Corporatisation,” 442).


38. Shore, “Audit Culture and Illiberal Governance,” 283, 292. Shore uses stronger language elsewhere, stating that managerialist systems of audit and accountability are “coercive and authoritarian,” reduce “professional relations to crude, quantifiable and inspectable templates,” and are being used to construct “new forms of hegemonic governance” (“Audit Culture and Illiberal Governance,” 290–91, 279).


40. Lorenz, “If You’re So Smart, Why Are You under Surveillance?” 618.

41. Parker, “University Corporatisation,” 446. See also Craig, Amernic, and Tourish, “Perverse Audit Culture and Accountability of the Modern Public University,” 7; Shore, “Audit Culture and Illiberal Governance,” 281.


46. Readings, *University in Ruins*, 27.

47. Ibid., 32.


49. Craig, Amernic, and Tourish also discuss how a culture of audit distorts the environment under review and argue that audit does not “axiomatically lead to meaningful socially responsible accountability” (“Perverse Audit Culture and Accountability of the Modern Public University,” 11). What it delivers is “auditability,” with academic quality defined by “auditable indicators” (11). See also Shore, “Audit Culture and Illiberal Governance,” 280–81, 287.

53. Ward, Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge and Education, 146–50; Schrecker, The Lost Soul of Higher Education, 184–85. Ward describes how the emergence and promotion of the “knowledge society” led to calls for the transformation of the university into a setting for entrepreneurial innovation, knowledge transfer, and vocationalism (Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge and Education, 145). Universities were seen as “much too independent and self-directed” and needed to be retooled and streamlined—they needed to undergo a “creative destruction” and be “remade by the forces of the market in order to become more rationally organized, economically responsive, [and] accountable” (145, 131). He describes the Spellings Report and similar efforts such as the Dearing Report in the United Kingdom—a review by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Sir Ron Dearing published in 1997—and the Dawkins restructuring in Australia—a reconstruction of Australian higher education in 1987 and 1988 under Education Minister John Dawkins—as “university reform efforts” aimed at reorganizing universities to serve neoliberal goals (131).
57. Ward, Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge and Education, 149.
63. Ibid., 5.
68. Ibid.
69. ARL, “General FAQs.”
70. Ibid.
72. ARL, “General FAQs.”
73. Ibid.
74. Lee Parker writes that examples of university corporatization “are particularly evident in the philosophy of customer service and orientation mimetically imported from the private sector and symbolically reflected in private-sector language that reinterprets the student as customer” (“University Corporatisation,” 445).
76. One of the survey items addressing information literacy outcomes asks respondents to indicate the degree to which they agree that the library improves the efficiency of their academic endeavors. See Green and Kyrillidou, LibQUAL+ Procedures Manual, 24.
77. ARL, “General FAQs.”
81. Ibid., 482.
82. Ibid., 483.
83. Ibid., 483–84.
84. Ibid., 481.
85. Ibid.