

## Choices in Chaos:

### **Designing Research to Investigate Librarians' Information Services Improvised During a Variety of Community-Wide Disasters and to Produce Evidence-Based Training Materials for Librarians**

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“All disasters are chaos – but you always have choices”

– Kim Moore (Director of Emergency Services, Norman Regional Hospital, Norman, Oklahoma) discussing emergency responses after Oklahoma City's May 3, 1999 outbreak of F4 and F5 tornadoes and the bombing of the Murrah Building April 19, 1995.

(Personal communication, June 1999)

#### *Introduction*

“Disaster Planning” in Library and Information Science parlance currently means planning for system and collection protection during a localized emergency, but not necessarily planning for provision of information services during or after a community-wide disaster. An emergency is defined as “a situation or an occurrence of a serious nature, developing suddenly and unexpectedly, and demanding immediate action ... generally of short duration, for example, for a week or less. It may involve electrical failure or minor flooding caused by broken pipes.” While a disaster is “an unexpected occurrence inflicting widespread destruction and distress and having long-term adverse effects.”<sup>1</sup> Back-up plans for normal services based on agreements with another library in the same community may work in a brief localized emergency, but not in a community-wide disaster lasting more than a few days (perhaps even months)

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Community-wide disasters are neither rare nor limited to certain geographical areas. Places that may not be susceptible to hurricanes or earthquakes may suffer from tornadoes, wildfires, very large power blackouts, explosions, toxic releases or other disasters. An average of 464 such disasters (unrelated to wars or acts of terrorism) happen every year and affect the populations served by all kinds of libraries, information services and resource centers.<sup>2</sup> (See Table 1, *Examples of Libraries Recently Providing Services in Community-Wide Natural or Accidental Disasters*.) Recently in the United States, planning for possible acts of terrorism appears to have taken precedence over planning for more probable natural and accidental disasters.

Textbook studies on implementing new library services tell us about the value of thoughtful data collection, planning, testing, and evaluation. However, what happens when a community's information needs suddenly change and there is no time to plan? How do librarians continue to serve a community when the users needs have changed dramatically and the usual access to information sources is severely reduced or non-existent? After the hurricanes of 2005 battered most of the Gulf of Mexico coast of the United States, information providers – even those with traditional “disaster plans” in place, were taken completely by surprise. How do librarians deal with a barrage of questions about food, health services, social security checks and other necessities of life? How do they deal with a group of displaced children suddenly needing to do homework without any books or with a group of researchers trying to meet proposal deadlines with no Internet access?

### *Literature Review*

There is a long history of “Disaster Planning” literature for libraries dealing with resource protection during a localized emergency. The available research on library disaster planning is almost entirely limited to protection and restoration of the staff, systems, collection, and physical plant during a local emergency. Some reports describe the addition of links on a library's web site, but this is more about added resources than about new services responsive to the changing needs of the community.<sup>3</sup> This is astonishing for a profession that emphasizes service first and the resources for providing

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the service second. It is especially astonishing in an era in which distance services and virtual reference services are growing exponentially.

While there are best practices, standards, guidelines, and research in the literature about library services as diverse as bibliotherapy and term paper counseling, there are no such best practices, standards, guidelines or even research about providing primary library and information services in times of community-wide disasters.<sup>4</sup> In schools of library and information science, “disaster planning” is usually covered in conjunction with general management, collection development or preservation – not in the context of information services. (It is not covered anywhere in the current edition of Bopp and Smith’s *Reference and Information Services: an Introduction*.<sup>5</sup>) Two current examples of disaster planning texts are Halsted, Jasper and Little’s *Disaster Planning: A How-to-do-it Manual for Librarians with Planning Templates on CD-ROM*<sup>6</sup> and Kahn’s *Disaster Response and Planning for Libraries*.<sup>7</sup> Both emphasize assignment of staff responsibilities to insure the security and recovery of a library and its staff after a major emergency. Searches of the major bibliographic databases covering Library and Information Science literature can easily retrieve dozens of accounts of how individual libraries dealt with collection protection in a particular localized emergency, such as a power or plumbing failure. If these accounts mention services at all, it is in the context of restoration of normal service and not a service response to community information needs created by a disaster.<sup>8</sup> Alire’s *Disaster Response and Planning for Libraries*, is the only current text with a substantial section on the restoration of normal service after a community wide disaster<sup>9</sup>. It includes several accounts of service restoration in the Colorado State University Library after a community-wide flood.

There is some limited coverage, especially from Europe, of individual instances of public library support services for government officials and public health workers, but none of the recommendations is based on broader research into meeting community wide information needs in more than one disaster.<sup>10</sup> Another related example is Harris, Wathen and Chan’s account of Ontario libraries’ reference services for consumers during the 2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Toronto.<sup>11</sup>

The Medical Library Association and the National Library of Medicine held a symposium, “The Role of Information Services in Emergency Preparedness and Response” (May 15, 2005 in San Antonio, Texas) which emphasized web sites and reference materials which might be of use to first responders and public health workers in response to acts of terrorism. There have not yet been any publications from that symposium, but some notes and presentations are available on the symposium site. There was little mention of unusual services and no reports of research.<sup>12</sup>

### *Preliminary studies*

Within days of Hurricane Katrina’s landfall, researchers from the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) at LSU began informal assessments of the responses of librarians to the disaster. They collected anecdotal information through personal observation, conversations, and monitoring list-servs. It quickly became apparent that librarians around the state were responding to the disaster in many different ways and that few, if any, were following any predetermined plan for what they did.<sup>13</sup> This prompted the researchers to formulate an overarching research question to guide their assessments: did Louisiana libraries have any systematic approach to providing new services to meet users’ extraordinary needs after Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2005? Following that question were two sub-questions. If so, what services did they provide and how did they determine what was needed. In the weeks after Hurricane Katrina, these research question were extended to include responses to Hurricane Rita.

In October 2005, a twenty-two question survey was announced on all of the Louisiana library list-servs including those of the Louisiana Library Association, LALINC (Louisiana Academic Library Information Network Consortium), local chapters of ALA, MLA, SAA and SLA and sent to school media center coordinators and public library administrators. The survey was developed and administered with SurveyMonkey® online survey software. After gathering descriptive information about the current state of the library, it asked respondents to identify new information services that their organizations were providing in response to the hurricanes. Short open-ended

interviews were conducted with selected respondents who indicated that they had created such new information services.

The findings of the survey were augmented with participant observations of specific new information services conducted by SLIS faculty and students.

Because of the distribution method (a link to the survey site in a generic email message), it is impossible to calculate the total number of librarians who received the link. Usable responses were received from 269 librarians who reported they worked in the types of institutions in Table 2.

Not surprisingly, the majority of responses came from librarians whose institutions had sustained little or no direct damage from the hurricanes. Of those responding to the question, 84.1 percent reported little or no damage to their collections and 78.2 percent reported little or no damage to their buildings. Others, however, were less fortunate, and several responses were from librarians who had evacuated from their communities and did not know the condition of their buildings, collections or both. Almost half (48.9 percent) of those responding reported that they had continued operations without interruption; at the time of the survey, 8.5 percent of those responding have moved operations to another location and 12.1 percent were closed until further notice.

Of those who did have general “disaster plans” in place before the hurricanes, only 25 (less than 10 percent) said that they used their plan. Many of them reported being unable to implement the plans because the damage to the buildings and surrounding areas was greater than anticipated by the plans. Others reported lack of authority, lack of funds or lack of personnel as obstacles to implementation of existing plans.

Seventy-five librarians reported having added new services in direct response to the hurricanes. The services included extended service hours, new outreach locations, new websites, new evacuee-specific services, and special services for displaced adults and children. Some extended loan periods or suspended fines, provided wireless Internet access, delivered reading material to evacuee shelters, provided program matching services to guide displaced students in their choice of new schools, provided office space to displaced librarians, issued temporary borrowing cards to displaced users, provided

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free photocopying and read stories to children in evacuee shelters. Others provided new computer lab instruction programs, provided refreshments, facilitated communication with Emergency Operations, arranged transportation for evacuees, collected donations, helped evacuees search online for missing family members and pets, and helped evacuees replace drivers' licenses, birth certificates and other important documents. Most that instituted new services indicated that they would continue these services for a while.

Librarians who implemented new services reported that their emergency needs assessment was based on personal observations, requests from users, and discussions with internal staff, governing boards, and information professionals outside of the institution. Only 39 respondents said that they had any sort of plan in place that addressed the potential need for new information services in response to a crisis. The librarians who were interviewed as part of the follow-up survey focused on the level of general chaos in the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes and on the need to take quick and decisive actions based on whatever situation they might have encountered at a given moment. Their response showed that their post-Katrina responsibilities went far beyond collection protection, technical services and financial management. They emphasized the point that during times of crisis it is essential for librarians to be flexible enough to respond to the needs of their users and that a useful tool for any librarian to have is a very open mind about what types of services may fall within the aegis of the library.<sup>14</sup>

Independent of any particular library, Ann Curtis of ProQuest and retired librarian and library consultant Beth Bingham took services to evacuees in a converted mobile home in Baton Rouge. ProQuest furnished the trailer and database access, IBM donated more than a dozen computers (plus three children's workstations), and the Argosy Casino donated power, water and Internet access. A local computer group, the Cajun Clickers provided technical support. (Other individuals and groups donated reference, recreational and children's books.) More than 525 evacuees used the service in the first three weeks.

The mobile "Shelter Library" first opened across the street from a very large evacuee shelter (the Baton Rouge River Center convention center) in early September. A researcher was a participant observer in this project and took extensive in-context notes. Students and faculty from the Louisiana State University School of Library and

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Information Science Information Services and other classes (with a few retired volunteer librarians) provided ready reference, information and referral, guidance and one-on-one instruction services needed by evacuees for several weeks. For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) required evacuees to register for assistance online and many were surprised when the last blank on the online form required the evacuee's email address. (The form could not be submitted without it.) Most of the evacuees at the center had no email addresses, let alone Internet experience, so their motivation to learn was intense. (Some had never used a mouse before. Others had had email addresses on systems that were no longer functioning.) Student librarians not only helped individuals set up new email accounts, choose passwords, etc, but they also supported them with practice email exchanges between different computers in the in mobile library.

Many needed names and addresses of former employers (in businesses destroyed by the flood) for filling out unemployment forms. Some needed birth certificates, drivers' licenses, and replacements for other lost documentation. Some were looking for jobs; others who had found housing needed to know where they could get low cost furniture quickly. Worried people tracked the rising floodwaters near and around their homes in online satellite pictures. They needed information about missing family and friends from online databases and many contacts for rebuilding their lives. (Librarians in public libraries across the country were helping evacuees with the same kinds of needs.) The LIS students, some faculty and some librarian volunteers provided individualized services eight hours a day for several weeks in that location.

When the evacuees moved into FEMA-provided trailers in November, the Shelter Library was moved to the FEMA trailer site ("Renaissance Village") in Baker, Louisiana, where the Shelter Library was parked next to the tent school and dining hall. At that time librarians from the East Baton Rouge Parish Library began providing information services there. A few months later, when they were able to provide a shuttle bus for transportation to the nearby Baker branch of the EBRPL, the Shelter Library was moved to Algiers, Louisiana, across the river from New Orleans where it was operated by the New Orleans Public Library.

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One might call the Shelter Library a digital rebirth of the “bookmobile” idea. It contained very few books, but librarians could carry out expert reference interview as well as and help patrons to use the Internet connected computers to retrieve much needed information.

In a different effort, students and recent graduates of the Louisiana State University School of Library and Information Science’s health sciences librarianship program provided information services to health care providers in several shelters and in the 800 bed field hospital that was operated in athletic facilities on the LSU campus for six weeks.

In New Orleans, Ochsner Clinic and Foundation Library provided services virtually for the first two weeks after Katrina. Librarians provided services with scattered clients by email. When the Ochsner health care workers and their families were housed in two New Orleans hotels with Internet access, the librarians prepared “MRE” (“Medical Reference Electronic”) packets for them to explain how the new services worked. They quickly developed a plan to provide information services for health care providers in the other still functioning New Orleans hospitals, suburban hospitals who were now overwhelmed with additional patients and displaced health sciences researchers and students from Tulane University and the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center. The Ochsner library quickly received a grant from the National Library of Medicine’s National Network of Medical Libraries to support new staff to provide these services.<sup>15</sup>

### *Objective and Method*

As teachers of library and information science students, the authors see the need for evidence-based educational modules to prepare students and practitioners to provide such services during community wide disasters. To develop such materials requires research into instances when librarians have quickly created new services suddenly needed by their client communities. Disasters vary and so do the services needed by communities. Are there any common patterns of librarians’ planning and implementation of such services in a wide variety of communities and disasters? Published accounts of

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such services describe services improvised during a single disaster (as described above) or during a small number of similar disasters and usually point to the heroic efforts of particular librarians in particular libraries. They tend to be anecdotal and idiosyncratic. The authors needed to design a project using valid research methods to gather consistently and to analyze rigorously narrative data from a wide variety of libraries that have provided improvised services during a wide variety of disasters.

Therefore, the first question is “How can we discover patterns of how librarians develop new information services needed when disaster strikes the community?” which includes “What data will answer the question?” and “How can such data be gathered?”

A tally of libraries in communities experiencing disasters that simply differentiates between those that provided responsive service and those that did not would not provide any evidence of how librarians developed such services. Questionnaires limited answers forced by researchers would not uncover useful and unexpected information leading to a grounded theory model of common themes across different kinds of libraries and disasters. Evidence to answer this question needs to come from analysis of narrative data.

The researchers discussed the pilot study above and its results with several senior researchers experienced with qualitative methods. Based on what they had learned during the pilot study and in subsequent discussions, the researchers designed a much larger study to gather evidence of common practice patterns in diverse disasters. Needing to be open to discovery of what happens in different situations, they devised a research method based on in-depth interviews, multiple case studies, and narrative data analysis to build grounded theory.

### *Resulting Study Design*

The researchers designed a study proposal, “Investigating Library and Information Services During Community-Based Disasters: Preparing Information Professionals to Plan for the Worst”, which they submitted to the Institute for Museum and Library Services National Leadership program. The proposal was awarded a two-year grant of \$166,285 to perform the study. The study will conclude with the

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development of best practices presented as case studies and evidence based training modules for LIS students and practicing librarians.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Approximately 20 participants will be chosen to provide a sample of information professionals who have faced different types of community-based disasters in different types of institutional settings. The types of disasters faced by information professionals will include (but will not be limited to) the 2005 Gulf coast hurricanes, the 1999 Oklahoma tornadoes, the 1994 Houston flood, and the 1989 San Francisco Bay area earthquake. Selection criteria for the interviews will include: type of disaster faced, size or type of institution, geographic location, and scheduling constraints. Use of selection criteria such as these is consistent with both theoretical and purposive sampling techniques.

Data will be collected using a semi-structured Interview Protocol and will be audiotaped and transcribed for referential adequacy. Participants will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form, and data collected in the interview phase of the study will be kept confidential where possible. However, with the permission of the interviewees, specific identifiable experiences may be reported in the case studies developed during the second phase of the project. Interviewees will be given the opportunity to review all case study materials before they are released (member checks). In addition to the data collected during the interviews, the researchers will examine any other data sources that are available, e.g., existing disaster plans, flyers or brochures for new services, archived web sites, etc. These sources will be used to provide additional richness to the personal narratives.

The interviews will be carried out using a multiple-case-studies design.<sup>16</sup> The multiple-case-studies design will allow the researchers to use subsequent interviews to confirm or disprove the patterns identified in earlier ones. In practice, this means that the Interview Protocol may be revised during the course of the study in response to new information. The interviews will be sequenced so that the first group of interviewees will have many characteristics (size or type of institution, type of disaster, etc.) in common (*literal replication*); these interviews will provide (as far as possible) a baseline of types

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of responses and obstacles encountered by practitioners. The remaining interviews will be selected to explore and confirm or disprove the patterns identified in the initial interviews (*theoretical replication*) and to expand the list of responses and obstacles encountered. This approach will allow the researchers to identify common elements of disasters response that can be codified and presented as best practices.

Data will be coded using QSR NVivo®. NVivo is a qualitative research tool that allows researchers to search text and organize concepts efficiently for further analysis. It also helps researchers collect data from different sources into a single, compatible format for coding.

#### Development

Based on the results of the Data Collection phase, the researchers will identify five to seven common elements that appear to exemplify a successful approach to planning for and delivering new information services in response to community-based disasters. Common elements that will be addressed will include (but will not be limited to):

- Type of information need identified (e.g., health, basic needs, specialized data, etc.)

- Type of user (e.g., existing, new, transient, long-term, adult, youth, etc.)

- Type of resources sought (e.g., public, proprietary, etc.)

- Type of new or modified service provided

- Type of obstacles overcome

Case study materials will then be developed to exemplify the best practices identified during the data collection and analysis phase. The material developed will be a combination of generic case studies (demonstrating one or more common elements found across several interviews) and individual explanatory case studies (in which a single situation is described in depth to provide a pedagogical approach for discussing a variety of responses to the issues). Each case study will include a general description of the particular community-based disaster, the responses taken by the information professional(s) involved, and a guide for discussing the issues involved in the situation.

#### *Current Project Activities*

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An advisory committee for the project has been formed (see Table 3). The committee is communicating through a blog. The researchers are developing a large pool of libraries as possible study sites through personal contacts, literature review and through a call for participation in dozens of librarians' listservs. They have established a SurveyMonkey® site for interested parties.

They have found that it is easy to find libraries in communities that have experienced disasters. People usually are very eager to tell their stories because disasters have profound emotional effects. Friends and colleagues frequently suggest names of librarians and libraries affected by disasters. The challenge is to identify the few who actually created new services. A subject for a future study someday may be why some librarians in the same community do so and some do not practice their profession until they can return to "normal" services.

For updates, see the project site at <http://slis.lsu.edu/IMLSgrant.html>

**Table 1**

*Examples of U.S. Libraries Providing Services during Community-Wide Natural or Accidental Disasters in the last 10 years*

*(Data gathered by the authors)*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Disaster</i>	<i>Library</i>	Library Type
1997	Flood	Colorado State Libraries	Academic
1998	Earthquake	Olympia Timberland Library, WA	Public
1998	Tornadoes	Hanson-McCook County Regional Library, South Dakota	Public

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1998	Flood	Jonsson Library of Government Documents, Stanford, CA	Special library
1999	Flood	Edgecombe County Courthouse Archives	Archives and Historical Collection
1999	Tornadoes	South Oklahoma City Community College	Academic
1999	Tornadoes	Moore Public Library, OK	Public
1999	Tornadoes	West Moore High School, OK	School
1999	Tornadoes	Norman Regional Hospital Library, OK	Special library
2000	Tornadoes	Fort Worth Central Public Library, TX	Public
2000	Earthquake	Engineering Library and Fisheries Oceanography Library, University of Washington, Seattle	Special library
2000	Blackout	Helen de Roy Medical Library, Providence Hospital and Medical Centers, MI	Special library

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2001	Flood	Archive of Houston Academy of Medicine – Texas Medical Center	Archives and Historical Collection
2001	Tornadoes	National Agricultural Library, MD	Special library
2003	Wild Fire	San Diego State University, CA	Academic
2003	Wild Fire	San Bernadino Public Library, CA	Public
2003	Wild Fire	Escondido Public Library, CA	Public
2003	Wild Fire	San Diego County Library, CA	Public
2003	Blackout	New York Public Library	Public
2004	Flood	University of Hawaii at Manoa	Academic
2005	Hurricane	Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center Library	Academic
2005	Hurricane	Archdiocese of New Orleans, LA	Archives and Historical Collection
2005	Hurricane	Pass Christian Public Library, Mississippi	Public
2005	Hurricane	Vermilion Parish	Public

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		Library, La	
2005	Hurricane	DeLisle Public Schools, Mississippi	School
2005	Hurricane	McKinley High School, LA	School
2005	Flood	Bonne Ecole Elementary, Slidell, LA	School
2005	Flood	Chalomette High School, St. Bernard Parish, LA	School
2005	Hurricane	Ochsner Clinic and Foundation Library, LA	Special library
2006	Flood	Smithridge Elementary, Reno, NV	School
2006	Toxic chemical (chlorine) spill	Byrd Elementary and Levelle-McCampbell Middle School, Aiken County, GA	School

**Table 2**

*Survey Respondents Reported Types of Libraries*

Academic libraries	94
Archives or Historical Repositories	29
Public Libraries	52
School Media Centers	37
Special Libraries or Other	54
No response to the “type” question	3

**Table 3**

*Advisory Committee*

Theresa Jay Dickson, Associate Director, Pioneer Library System, OK

Carol L. Ginsburg, Senior Consultant, BST America, New York, NY

Deborah Halsted, Associate Director, Houston Academy of Medicine/Texas Medical Center Library, TX

Sue Sherif, School Library/Youth Services Coordinator Alaska State Library, Anchorage, AK

Delia Neuman, Associate Professor, College of Information Studies, University of Maryland—College Park, MD

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