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OBJECTS OF VALUE: ADDRESSING  
EMERGENCY AND DISASTER MITIGATION,  
PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE AND RESEARCH  
IN LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

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ACURIL XLI: THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES IN  
DISASTER PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE AND RESEARCH

PLENARY ADDRESS

“Objects of Value: Addressing Emergency and Disaster Mitigation, Preparedness,  
Response and Research in Libraries and Archives”

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Recent events have helped to refocus our attention on the importance of addressing disaster related issues in libraries and archives. Some of the events that have served this purpose are the severe flooding along the Mississippi River and the unusually destructive tornadoes in the Southwest region of the U.S., the earthquake, subsequent tsunami and nuclear plant safety issues in Japan, and, of course, the Haiti earthquake of January, 2010. All of these events serve as a springboard for this conference and its daily themes.

The daily themes for this conference are as follows:

- “Response of libraries and archives to disasters: focus on management and triage, books, media and other documentation” – addressing disaster issues **in** libraries
- “Response of libraries and archives to disasters: preserving memories, community, and restoring hope” – addressing disaster roles of libraries in communities
- “The role of libraries and archives in disaster research”

This paper will address these three areas, working to draw connections among the three themes. It will also strive to challenge conference attendees to utilize the various opportunities offered to enhance their skills and expand their knowledge, better enabling them to address disaster related issues in libraries and archives.

In order to understand the various disaster related issues impacting libraries and archives, some context must be established by way of historical background. In 2005, prior to Hurricane Katrina, Historic Preservation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) partnered to conduct an extensive survey of museums and libraries throughout the United States to determine the overall “health” of collections. Survey results were published in December,

2005, under the title “A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America’s Collections.” At that time, the report indicated that “2.6 billion items of historic, cultural, and scientific significance were not protected by an emergency plan” (p. 6) and that 70% of archives and libraries had no emergency plan or staff trained to implement the plan (p. 7).

Watershed events have helped to significantly raise our awareness of the need to address disaster related issues in libraries. Prior to the completion of the Heritage Health Index, the U.S. had been dealing with the ramifications of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City, at the U.S. Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and at the plane crash site in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Although these events renewed concern about the impacts of disasters on libraries and archives, far more attention was focused on museum collections that had been impacted. At best, this served as only a minor nudge at best to address disaster related issues in libraries. When Hurricane Katrina hit in the fall of 2005, it served as a strong wakeup call to address these issues in a more concrete and substantive way. The major earthquake that struck Haiti last January only furthered that awareness and made the call stronger.

Thinking of one’s own library or archive one must ask the following questions: Does our library or archive have a disaster plan? Was that plan updated within the past year? More libraries are taking disaster planning to heart, however many still do not even have the basics in place in the form of an updated disaster plan. We do not passively permit the destruction of library resources due to day-to-day maintenance problems or related basic issues – why would we permit the destruction of these resources due to a disaster?

The perception of libraries and the potential roles that they can play following disasters is also improving among government emergency management organizations. For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the U.S. recently established a policy that designates libraries as “essential community services,” categorizing them with other “first response” entities such as fire departments, police, hospitals, and schools and qualifying them to apply for federal funding to support a temporary relocation to enable continuity of operations. This is a major step forward for U.S. libraries, but it also carries greater responsibility to plan adequately for potential disasters. Part of that challenge is the fact that the federal funding allows for coverage of expenses incurred to rent a temporary space while it does not provide for financial support to replace critical systems such as Internet access or critical equipment such as computers. Libraries now must make an effort to think in even greater detail about the steps involved in getting back up and running and the equipment necessary to do so as well. Perhaps a vital part of our plans should be to consider how we would go about mobilizing equipment on temporary loan from outside our impacted region and who might provide such resources.

Another element often overlooked when developing a thorough disaster plan is the people – library staff members and patrons. Again in one’s own library situation it is imperative to consider when the last time an unannounced fire drill was held while patrons were present. This should be done on a regular basis to increase familiarity with safe procedures and responses among both the staff and the patrons. Another important question to consider: would your patrons know where to go in your archive or library for safety during a quick onset disaster situation? Not only do we have a responsibility to mitigate the impact of disasters on our collections, but we have an even greater responsibility to ensure as much safety as possible for our staff and our patrons during disasters.

When one is considering the human element, one should also consider this: studies have shown that people are better able to focus on one task if they are not distracted by the worries of a related or unrelated problem. For example, people responsible for critical disaster related functions tied to their jobs are better able to focus on the tasks at hand if they are relatively certain that the disaster related situation as it impacts their homes and families is under control. Therefore it is tremendously important that library staff members have personal and family disaster plans in place to help alleviate any personal concerns or worries that might arise following a disaster impacting both home and work place.

As stated previously, the perceptions of libraries and their roles following disasters is improving, however several challenges still remain. Among traditional emergency managers, for example, the focus remains on safety and specifically the safety of people impacted in disasters first. This is as it should be without a doubt. Additionally, emergency management organizations tend to operate in a monetary based system, reducing all disaster impact and loss to a dollars-and-cents value. Because much of the value in libraries goes well beyond the physical collections to the services provided, staff knowledge and wisdom, etc., it becomes exceedingly difficult to place a financial figure on that loss, thus making it difficult at best for emergency management professionals to grasp the true value of what can be lost when disasters hit libraries.

Much can be done, however, to improve both the perceptions emergency managers have of libraries in the larger disaster framework as well as the relationship between emergency management professionals and libraries. First, we must be clear about our argument for considering libraries and archives as essential service providers. During non-disaster times, libraries often serve as community hubs and gathering places thus community members become accustomed to turning to libraries for a variety of non-disaster purposes. Among the more basic

and commonplace services provided and utilized these days is Internet access. If patrons are accustomed to using their local libraries for this service prior to a disaster, it seems only reasonable to presume they would look to their library for the same service after a disaster. Libraries can also serve other vital functions post-disaster in addition to information and communication access in the short-term recovery phase. For example, libraries can serve as tourism promoters and employment information clearinghouses during the long-term recovery. The key in determining any number of potential roles for libraries pre- and post-disaster is to think creatively.

Before a disaster strikes, the obvious role of libraries and archives is to serve as a source of information and educational tools to better equip community members to prepare for what may lie ahead. When we consider the role of libraries and archives in disaster research then, we must consider not one but two distinct groups of potential “disaster researchers.” The first is what might come to mind immediately when considering the term – those traditional academics and scientists who are engaged in developing best practices and attempting to mitigate the impact of disasters on a theoretical level. The second and perhaps less obvious group are informal “researchers” – community members in search of the information that will best enable them to minimize the impact of disasters on their families. To fulfill our duties thoroughly and completely, we must develop skills and resources that will serve both populations.

In developing the skills and resources necessary to address the multifaceted issues of disasters and libraries we will benefit greatest from a shared effort. It is ironic that often times the libraries with the most limited resources serve the communities with the most limited resources. By drawing on and fostering professional connections and relationships established between libraries, among libraries, and between libraries and local and regional emergency

management professionals, we can create an environment that taps into the best shared resources and also enables the best possible scenario in terms of disaster preparedness, response, and research.

ACURIL has enjoyed a long history of networking on issues and concerns of common interest among members – why should disaster related issues be any different? As this conference moves forward, participants are asked to consider accepting the following challenge: establish or enhance a connection with one other library or organization in attendance. By doing so, each participant will most assuredly enhance their ability to address disaster related matters more effectively.

The following is a quote taken from the ACURIL XLI conference description:

Disasters, in whatever form they take, rob us of our sense of well-being, our security, our community, our loved ones, and our homes. Disasters forever change ‘life as we know it’ and seriously impact our ability to function. We may rebuild buildings and replace lost books but the impact on staff, their families and loved ones, and their communities linger.

This presenter challenges all participants to utilize this conference to build individual toolkits of skills, resources, and contacts that will help mitigate the impact of disasters on themselves, their libraries, and their communities.



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