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Revealing Networks: A Case Study in Disaster Response and Recuperation

For the last five years, I have been working in the area of disaster preparedness and risk assessment of library and archival collections. My work has put me in contact with librarians, archivists, conservators, and preservation administrators with all kinds of experiences as well as questions. One of the questions that I always hear is:

“Where do we begin?”

The easy answer to that question is that it does not matter where you begin in developing a disaster preparedness plan as long as you do it BEFORE the disaster happens. The more thoughtful response is one that addresses the complexity of social, spatial, and temporal dimensions of disasters. A thoughtful response also has to address the probability and the magnitude of risk. Above all, what is needed is motivation to prompt a proactive analysis of local resources, awareness of the social networks necessary to access them, and a brutally honest assessment of institutional capacity to negotiate and contract for services. Probability may be a good motivator. All of us can count on having at least one disaster during our careers.

What we do not know is what magnitude the disaster will take. Whether you have to confront a disaster of international, national, regional, local or institutional proportions, you will have to deal with a tangled network of first to last responders. You cannot--and should not--have to respond to disaster alone. So a key question then is,

“Who will be involved? And what assets, skills, and experience will each of them bring?”

Before I took an interest in the problems of preservation and conservation, I was involved in construction. During twenty years in the construction of high-rise buildings in Seattle, I experienced several disasters, some of them spectacular, one of them fatal for one man. I tried to draw parallels from experiences in construction in order to think about the problems of library and archival collections. However, there were few parallels to be drawn.

In construction, the response network to accident and disaster is codified, standardized, planned, drilled, and interwoven with everyday activities. In construction, every surface changes on a daily basis. It is assumed that an accident is always and everywhere about to happen. Risk control has to be seamless and considered for every action. That level of heightened awareness, however, is difficult to maintain in institutions--like libraries and archives--where routine is the norm and accountability is not distributed.

For libraries and archives in the United States and Canada, most if not all the necessary prevention and response resources are on call. Here, we can find resources in the yellow pages, or collected in almost any disaster-related directory. I remark on this because most of my work has focused on the Caribbean where the situation is very different. However, whether here or elsewhere, the available resources are not pre-qualified and the links between institutions and response agents are not formalized. The relationships are time consuming to nurture, and questionable in the context of public institutions.

So, how best to proactively develop a capable response network wherever you are? I had to look for new models. I turned back to our own professional publications, but with a different perspective. I started to look for stories and for the relationships that the stories revealed. The professional literature includes case studies, reports, and detailed recollections of disasters written by seasoned practitioners. Recent publications—such as that compiled by Camila Alire about the flooding of the Colorado State University library-- have been much more forthcoming and effective in communicating the psychological and social aspects of disaster prevention and recovery. In addition, by carefully sifting through archives and the internet, I have been able to compile news items, newsletters, bulletins, diaries, photographs, and police and fire reports for various events.

To squeeze insight from all these sources, I rely on methods of text and narrative analysis. When I cannot find sufficient detail to reconstruct the networks mobilized in response to a specific event, I collect oral histories and eyewitness testimonies. Specifically, I borrowed the modified life history and critical-incident analysis from ethnography and human factors engineering. These mixed-methods are now accepted and used in all the social sciences. I also create basic chronologies and diagrams. I used all these methods and techniques to reconstruct the aftermath of the fires that destroyed the Film Archives in Mexico in 1982, and the Los Angeles Public Library in 1986. The fire in Mexico killed five people, destroyed the entire film collection, and resulted in the collapse of the building. Needless to say, the documentation about that disaster is problematic.

Today, I will focus on the fire at the Los Angeles Public Library. On April 29, 1986, --19 years ago today--an arson fire at the Los Angeles Central Public Library consumed 375,000 books and severely damaged another 700,000 items. That fire resulted in the greatest loss in volumes to any public library in the United States ever, or since. About 50% of the collection of over 2 million items was impacted.

The disaster began in the bottom tier of shelving in the northeast corner of the library; from there the fire spread throughout the top floor. The smoke from the fire set off an alarm alerting library staff to call the fire department and to evacuate the building. At 10:52 a.m. when the alarm went off

most of the 200 employees of the library were at work and the building had already opened its doors to the public.

Within minutes the firefighters arrived on the site. They noted heavy smoke spewing from the northeast corner, and traced the fire to its source on the third floor. The concrete roof created a tight lid over the burning structure. Windows and skylights had to be smashed in an effort to ventilate the building, where temperatures rose to 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. Steel shelving glowed red-hot. As the large fire hoses were dragged up the stairs, salvage operations were started, including draping the bookshelves on the lower levels with protective sheets of plastic. Thousands of gallons of water, used to fight the fire, cascaded to the floors below. Whatever books were spared by the fire ended up soaked by the torrent of water from above.

By 11:56 a.m. according to the Fire Department logs, the electrical system in the building was turned off. By that time, telephone calls had been made to several of the library branches throughout the city to alert them to the unfolding disaster. From the branches more calls were made to others inside and outside the library system. From these communications surged several plans of actions. An event like the 1986 fire at the Los Angeles Public Library is revealing because so many people who were involved have reported their experience in detail.

In researching the Los Angeles fire, I was lucky to discover that a colleague of ours at the University of Texas—Olivia Primanis—had been involved in the recovery of the library after the fire. Primanis was in private practice in Los Angeles at that time. In addition, she documented her involvement with the library and photographed her work during the salvage of 120,000 of the library's books.

During our first interview, Primanis illustrated her discussion with notes, articles, television clips, and vendor materials that she has preserved for years since the fire. Her materials allowed me to triangulate the data I had collected from the fire department archives, investigative reports, newsletters, press releases, as well as from contemporaneous published sources.

Some of the most surprising insights came from clips from television news reports. These clips documented the first 100 hours after the fire broke out and included the sequence of events that mobilized firefighters, arson investigators, security forces, all sorts of media, emergency responders of all types including the Red Cross, hundreds of volunteers, and politicians... after all City Hall is just ten blocks from the library.

In less than twenty-four hours a citywide telethon had been organized with the help of one of the local television stations. By the second day, adequate cold storage facilities nearby had been identified and the pack-out of the 700,000 wet books was well underway with the guidance of Eric

Lundquist—a disaster specialist—who was acting as consultant at that point. Within three days of the fire, a force of over 1,700 volunteers was mobilized.

At least five non-profit groups were involved during the first two weeks of the salvage efforts. Volunteers were kept busy for over two weeks as more than 1.5 million items were trucked out of the damaged building. In addition, three major foundations—the Getty, *Times Mirror* and the Ahmanson Foundations—together contributed \$3.5 million. An ARCO executive, who with various other horrified employees watched the fire from their headquarters across the street, was moved to start a fundraising campaign—Save the Books. In very little time, public officials, the corporate and non-profit sectors had become involved. Three key library administrators including public information officer Robert Reagan managed the public face of the library. Meanwhile technical problems of huge proportions had to be solved.

Specialists familiar with the nature of library collections know that if anything remains after a fire, these materials will be damaged as much by water as by fire and smoke. They also know that the materials have to be salvaged within forty-eight hours, before mold spores bloom. Once the mold spores—which are everywhere—are provided the right conditions to bloom, they are difficult and expensive to eradicate. The individuals who are most aware of this risk and best prepared to combat it are book and paper conservators. They are among the first to be called.

A phone call from a colleague at the Los Angeles County Art Museum alerted Olivia Primanis to the fire at the library. The library was only a few blocks from Primanis' studio. The call interrupted an otherwise pleasant spring morning. Incredulous, Primanis remembers saying to her colleague, a conservator at the County Museum, “it can't be; the library is all concrete.” She recalls the rest of the conversation.

“She said, ‘The library is on fire! Go over and see if you can help.’

I walked up there and it was...burning; it burned all day.”

How and when conservators at the County Museum heard about the fire is not yet clear; word spread quickly through various sources. Radio and television broadcasts provided local and regional coverage expanding the communications network. The broadcasts continued throughout the day informing the public about the event, and soliciting help.

The reason why one particular conservator, Victoria Blythe-Hill, at the County Museum thought to call Primanis is uncertain, but Primanis' vivid portrayal of the conservator's network reveals the characteristics of the social network that made the call possible.

"I was in Los Angeles working as a private conservator; I had moved there in 1984. There was a very small, informal but tightly connected group... where at least every one met each other. Every one was friendly. ...There was no formal group... We would just meet...I remember when I first got there, I looked up all the conservators and asked them to lunch.

"I volunteered at the Huntington Library in Pasadena one day a week to get connected. I did not want to work alone in my studio. My husband was a commercial photographer and we had a studio downtown, and so I tried to meet all the people. It took a while."

In response to the fire, others with more expertise came to volunteer and help out... like Lynn Jones from Berkeley. Sally Buchanan also worked in the background during the early stages of the recovery negotiations. Her authority on major disasters had been established at Stanford University, where she managed the salvage operations of their undergraduate library. The library had been flooded in a construction-related accident in 1978. As a way to teach and learn from the situation, Buchanan had published several accounts of that accident. In 1980, she had organized a conference on disaster prevention, which was significant because of the panelists that she was able to convene.

Primanis had this to say about the initial response by the librarians:

"It was quite sad. I was standing around with library staff... they were all very regretful because their disaster plan was up there on the third floor where we could see the flames flicking about. It turns out that their disaster plan was just in its beginning stages, and it had only one or two pages to it. So the first day I was there it was more to provide the librarians moral support."

According to excerpts from the Librarian's Guild publication of June 1986:

"By Sunday...this is five days later all but a very few library staff had gone home. But Monday came and new areas were declared to be safe.... But there were no volunteers, no helpers now, only the Central staff to do it all. Every day a new area was made safe to enter, with more charred volumes, more swollen books, more damage.... Various rumors surfaced, along with the absence of administration, along with the absence of ideas and plans and information and communication and concern

for the workers. But there was no absence of ash or odor or nightmares, no absence of depression or anger or fear...."

Fortunately, no one had been killed or seriously injured. The library building had a long record of fire code violations. The building had been known to be a firetrap. There had been doubt about how to solve the problem. Fire doors and between-floor separations had been planned, but had not been installed at the time of the fire. Requests for funding for renovations had been postponed by the city for years. Primanis noted with irony the results of this collective failure,

"They were in the middle of remodeling and getting a fire suppression system when the fire broke out."

The interview with Primanis expanded my understanding of who becomes involved in disasters. I was startled to discover how quickly a variety of consultants and vendors got involved. Primanis explained it like this:

"Contractors are drawn to library disasters like flies to shit. The library administrators had a ton of companies asking to do the salvage work. Many companies wanted to get the work drying the books...it was a big contract--several million dollars--... It took so long to write up a suitable contract because there were so many people involved. The Request for Proposal was 90 pages long..., but the library administrators got good results because they took their time writing the contract...about two years. It was expensive --the library administrators had to pay for all those books in cold storage.

I like to add here that thanks to that effort and the work of many other proactive administrators, we now have a more substantial catalog of contract language

After several days of investigation by forensic teams, the conclusion was reached that an arsonist had set the fire. The fire had been started with an open flame and paper that was lying about. Many believed that because there had been remodeling going on the building, the arsonist was not noticed walking into an area normally closed to the public.

Then on September 3, 1986, a second fire swept through the Library. During that fire a large portion of the music collection was destroyed. Very little salvage work was attempted. By then, staff was so beleaguered and their morale so low, it had become impossible to respond adequately. In a

somber note, Elizabeth Gay, the director of the Central Library, remarked, "It's been devastating to everyone who works here. We were just beginning to recover from the first fire, and everyone has been through so much."

And how about the Arsonist?

The main actor of the play has been remarkably absent from most accounts of this drama. Only a few words were written about the alleged arsonist Harry Peak and little is to be found about him in the general media. According to a news item in the *New York Times* of March 1, 1987, we learn that Peak had been arrested for the arson. His arrest was based on hundreds of telephone tips received by the fire department in connection with the second fire, only a few months after the first.

The second fire had been set in a manner similar to that used to start the first. Both were started with an open flame, without resort to an accelerant. A tipster familiar with the organization noted that the arsonist might have been an employee. This deduction has not been followed up. A brief item in the *New York Times* noted the comments of the District Attorney: "The arsonist has been released from police custody because of lack of evidence."

The LA Central Library fire has inspired a substantial body of library disaster literature including a novel. The literature includes a variety of texts that makes possible the study of almost every aspect of library disaster preparedness, response, and service continuity. There are some chapters of this event that are missing—like the police texts of the arson investigation. The complex sequence of decision-making and the source of them have been clouded by time and kindness.

There are other aspects of the project we have no time to discuss today. For instance, I have not mentioned the restoration of the historic murals in the rotunda or the involvement of architects, engineers and various teams in the design of the new tower that was completed in 1993—seven years after the fire. There are more stories to be told but we will save them for another time. At least from the telling of one part of the story, I hope you have been able to glimpse how many people are needed to respond to a disaster.

Selected List of Disaster Preparedness Resources

(A much longer list of references is available upon request. Please write me at gonzalez@ischool.utexas.edu)

Alire, Camila, ed. Library Disaster Planning and Recovery Handbook. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2000.

Fortson, Judith. Disaster Planning and Recovery: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians and Archivists. How-To-Do-It Manuals for Libraries 21. New York: Neal-Schuman, 1992.

Kahn, Miriam B. Disaster Response and Planning for Libraries. 2nd ed. Chicago: American Library Association, 2003.

Protecting Your Library's Digital Resources: The Essential Guide to Planning and Preservation. Chicago: American Library Association, 2004.

Layne, Stevan P. The Cultural Property Protection Manual. 1999. Rev. ed. Denver, CO: Layne Consultants International, 2002.

Matthews, Graham, and John Feather, eds. Disaster Management for Libraries and Archives. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003.

The Complete Library Safety and Security Manual: A Comprehensive Resource Manual for Academic and Public Library Professionals and Law Enforcement Officers. Goshen, KY: Campus Crime Prevention Programs, 1998.

Wellheiser, Johanna, and Jude Scott. An Ounce of Prevention: Integrated Disaster Planning for Archives, Libraries, and Record Centres. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002.