University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (ASC)   Annenberg School for Communication

11-27-2013

The Value of Community Ethnography in Public Library Crisis Preparation

Jessa Lingel
University of Pennsylvania, jlingel@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers

Part of the Communication Commons

The Value of Community Ethnography in Public Library Crisis Preparation

Abstract

In this brief article, I address the usefulness of including community-driven interviews into preparations for disasters. Drawing on Shera's (1970) highly influential construction of library work as tied to communication, I analyze responses of three library organizations–the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library and the New Jersey Library Association–immediately following Hurricane Sandy. I then turn to a specific role of communication that libraries can offer surrounding communities, providing resources for local community members to conduct interviews among those who have experienced a disaster. By incorporating this kind of responsibility to communicate experiences of a crisis to a wider audience, libraries fulfill an important part of Shera's charge to reflect the local values and norms of surrounding communities.

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

The Value of Community Ethnography
In Public Library Crisis Preparation

Jessa Lingel

Jessa Lingel is a post-doctoral research fellow at Microsoft Research working with the Social Media Collective.

Abstract

In this brief article, I address the usefulness of including community-driven interviews into preparations for disasters. Drawing on Shera's (1970) highly influential construction of library work as tied to communication, I analyze responses of three library organizations–the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library and the New Jersey Library Association–immediately following Hurricane Sandy. I then turn to a specific role of communication that libraries can offer surrounding communities, providing resources for local community members to conduct interviews among those who have experienced a disaster. By incorporating this kind of responsibility to communicate experiences of a crisis to a wider audience, libraries fulfill an important part of Shera's charge to reflect the local values and norms of surrounding communities.

Keywords: crisis preparation; public libraries; ethnography

Introduction

In thinking about what it is that libraries *do* as institutions, I find myself in perpetual dialogue with Shera's (1970) definition of libraries as social institutions that reflect the local ethics and norms of their communities. A key tenet for Shera is a two-pronged connection between libraries and communication: first between libraries and individual users, and second, between librarians and a larger community. On the one hand, he argues, library work requires sophisticated and adept acts of communication, as in the literal efforts to communicate with patrons during reference encounters. As well, the library is a concrete rendering of and site for social epistemology, with the materials gathered in a library reflective of the values and norms of the surrounding populace. Shera's construction has been highly influential in library science degree programs, where collection development, readers' advisory, and reference assistance are all imbued with the responsibility of respecting local ethics. I am interested in a third kind of communication, whereby libraries become a means of communicating on behalf of a community to a larger set of actors. In particular, I am thinking about the roles that libraries can play in emergency and disaster scenarios.

There has been a surge of interest in library responses to crises, including Bishop and Veil's (2013) investigation of how libraries responded to tornadoes in Joplin, MO and reports on library responses after Hurricane Katrina (Hamilton, 2011; Jaeger, Langa, McClure, & Bertot, 2006; for more general publications on libraries and disaster preparation, see Green & Teper, 2006 and Kahn, 2012). At the 2013 annual conference of the American Library Association, the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA) organized a preconference workshop guiding libraries in preparing for disasters, and the Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York is (at the time of this writing) planning a symposium on disaster planning.

In this brief paper, I add to this growing body of scholarly and professional material, looking specifically at the responses of three library organizations affected by Hurricane Sandy which struck the East Coast of the United States in late October 2012. In the New York Metropolitan area alone, dozens of lives were lost, thousands of homes were damaged or destroyed, and millions of people were without access to basic utilities. Dozens of branches of the New York Public Library (NYPL), and the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) suffered structural damage, in some cases resulting in long-term closure; and dozens of librarian members of the New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) were affected by damage to libraries in their state. The varying responses that emerged from these different library organizations are useful in thinking about the kinds of communication at work in the aftermath of a crisis. Rather than ranking these library organizations as to which had the best or most useful response to disaster, I want to use the differences among their responses to think about 1) how libraries position themselves as having responsibilities toward their communities, and 2) the role of libraries in providing tools, sites, and archives of communication between local communities and larger audiences, including government entities, non-profit organizations, and a wider, media-informed public.

In the months after the storm, a number of initiatives emerged in addition to the texts I analyze below. I address early sources to identify the organizations' initial priorities, but these sources are by no means an all-encompassing record of institutional responses to Hurricane Sandy. I start with the NYPL, which operates in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. In an email to its patron list sent just days after Sandy made landfall in New York, the organization described its efforts at recovery:

> Since the storm hit, our Facilities team has worked around the clock to clear debris, battle power outages, and repair minor damages to get our branches up and running. By November 1, we had 55 branches open. By November 5, all but four are open, and it is our priority to get

those four branches safely opened as soon as possible. (Lingel, 2012, 23, November)

NYPL went on:

> In the last week, as our branches have reopened, they have been packed with patrons using our free Internet, charging their phones, reading books, enjoying free programming, or just talking to their neighbors. Library staff–many of whom were redeployed because their own branches were closed–provided increased programming for kids and teens who were out of school, and the system extended the due dates for 390,000 items. (Lingel, 2012, November 23)

Two key themes emerge from the NYPL's message to its patrons: getting as many branches up and running as quickly as possible, and providing sites for connectivity, both online (charging mobile devices and using Internet) and off (enabling interpersonal communication, allowing people to talk to each other about their experiences). The efforts of the library concentrated on short-term and onsite capabilities for communication, predominantly between library patrons and their social networks. We can compare this NYPL response to that of the Brooklyn Public Library. In the days after Sandy hit, the BPL began offering services that included sending bookmobiles and pop-up libraries to impacted neighborhoods and shelters, coordinating Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) information sessions and supply drives, and compiling a hurricane bibliography (Hurricane, 2012). The Brooklyn Public Library took a number of the functions offered by the NYPL and made them mobile, bringing reading materials to displaced residents.

It is perhaps a bit tenuous to include the NJLA in the same list as the NYPL and BPL, in that the NJLA is a professional association rather than a collection of branches with an overarching administrative entity. As such, the email excerpted below was directed to its members, who are mostly librarians, rather than to library patrons. But keeping in mind my overall objective to draw out the possibilities for how libraries construct their responsibilities to their communities post-crisis, it is useful to note that in contrast to the NYPL and BPL, the NJLA emphasized documentation of individual as well as institutional experiences of the storm. As Executive Director Pat Tumulty explained in an email: "NJLA has created three tools to help us capture the story of what is going on with our libraries today as they are helping their fellow residents cope with Sandy" (Lingel, 2012, November 23). Those resources included a form that librarians could fill out to document damage to libraries, a Flickr page for sharing photos of library volunteer work, and a form to document patrons' experiences with the storm.

The NJLA here emphasizes communication between libraries, between libraries and patrons, and between community members and a larger public, both immediate and in the future. There are short-term benefits to using these tools (e.g., making insurance claims) as well as long-term benefits (e.g., providing material for historical records); hence, such services should be incorporated into discussions of disaster preparation.

Across these institutional reactions, there is an emphasis on some of my favorite elements of what libraries do as social institutions–reflecting community ethics, providing DIY resources, and serving as staging grounds to meet local needs and interests. Different modes of communication come to the foreground in these varying approaches: providing tools for communicating information about the disasters to others, including cell phone and laptop charging as well as meeting points for face-to-face communication; compiling reading lists that can help communicate information about difficult topics like disasters to children and young adults; and publicizing resources for requesting assistance from government bodies and insurance companies. Given my earlier gloss of Shera's (1970) arguments that libraries should reflect the values and norms of their surrounding communities, it would be completely counterproductive to suggest blanket approaches to preparing for disasters. Instead, I want to draw out possibilities for how libraries can expand on ideas of documentation as a form of communication that can be vital in the context of disasters.

Libraries are in a unique position to reach people whose everyday lives have been affected by crises. This position involves a responsibility to provide physical resources and support, but it also opens up the possibility of acting as sites of communication between local members of the community and wider audiences. One specific venue in which libraries could further develop this role of communication after a disaster relates to libraries as sites of ethnographic[1] documentation. In the spring of 2013, the BPL launched an initiative geared towards gathering ethnographic accounts of experiencing Sandy. This project makes sense not only given the amount of damage done in Brooklyn, but also in light of the Library's collection on Brooklyn history. I see a great benefit for libraries, their patrons, policy makers, and researchers in incorporating this type of function as part of preparing for disasters. Taking these tasks of documentation seriously would involve taking measures to ensure that before, during, and after a crisis event, members of the community had access to tools for recording their experiences. Table 1 provides additional details, although I mean these descriptions less as a formal prescription and more as a jumping off point for thinking about what it

---

[1] Space considerations prohibit a sustained discussion of ethnography, since even defining ethnography as a research method is a complex and somewhat loaded conversation (See Fetterman, 2007). In this context, I use the term "ethnography" as a way of describing interviews intended to document community norms, values, and lives.

would mean to provide patrons with the training and the resources to conduct and preserve ethnographic accounts of their communities in crisis.

Table 1: Library Tools of Ethnographic Documentation of Crisis		
Timeframe	**Resource**	**Summary**
Before	Workshops, training	Partnering with local institutes of higher learning, libraries could organize workshops introducing the history and core concepts of ethnography. Workshops would include issues of ethics, specifically as related to privacy and to ensuring that interviews are conducted with resources for managing any emotional distress that surfaces from the discussions.
Short term	Site for interviews, access to tools	In the aftermath of a crisis, libraries can become focal points for their communities, providing resources for both online and offline connectivity. If feasible, libraries could take advantage of this social convergence to provide the space and tools to encourage the conduct of ethnographic interviews with community members in situ.
Long term	Repository, digital preservation	Libraries can also provide a site for storage and preservation of accounts, interviews, and ephemera related to a disaster. Beyond housing these materials in their own locations, libraries can also serve as points of connection for sharing materials with journalists, scholars, and archives.

Elsewhere (Lingel, 2012), I have argued that libraries should gauge their ability to reflect local norms and values not only through collection development (the conventional metric of mirroring community norms) but through other library functions such as lending policies, staffing decisions, and cataloging strategies. Disaster preparation underscores the stakes of ensuring the convergence of institutional and community ethics. In this way, preparation requires not just reflection about preserving materials and safeguarding infrastructure, but also a more teleological analysis of the purposes of libraries as social institutions.

References

Bishop, B. W. & Veil, S. R. (2013). Public libraries as post-crisis information hubs. *Public Library Quarterly, 32*(1), 33-45.

Fetterman, D. M. (2007). *Ethnography: Step-by-step* (3rd ed.). London, England: SAGE.

Green, S. L., & Teper, T. H. (2006). The importance of disaster planning for the small public library. *Public Library Quarterly 25*(3/4): 47-59.

Hamilton, R. (2011). The State Library of Louisiana and public libraries' response to hurricanes: Issues, strategies, and lessons. *Public Library Quarterly 30*(1): 40-53.

Hurricane update (2012). Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20121112144247/http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/hurricane

Jaeger, P. T., Langa, L. A., McClure, C. R., & Bertot, J. C. (2006). The 2004 and 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes: Evolving roles and lessons learned for public libraries in disaster preparedness and community services. *Public Library Quarterly, 25* (3/4), 199-214.

Kahn, M. B. (2012). *Disaster response and planning for libraries* (3rd ed.). Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

Lingel, J. (2012, August 6). Occupy Wall Street and the myth of technological death of the library. *First Monday*, *17*(8). doi:10.5210/fm.v17i8.3845

Lingel, J. (2012, November 23). Social institutions, community ethics, disaster recovery [Web log post]. *Social Media Collective.* Retrieved from http://socialmediacollective.org/2012/11/23/social-institutions-community-ethics-disaster-recovery/

Shera, J. H. (1970). *Sociological foundations of librarianship (Sarada Ranganathan Lectures: 3, 1967; Ranganathan Series in Library Science: 23)*. New York, NY: Asia Publishing House.