In disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, wildfires, pandemics, or terrorist attacks, which can affect a whole community and not just a single institution, librarians may be called upon to provide new and modified information services to users whose information needs have suddenly changed at the same time that access to information resources has dramatically diminished. Traditional disaster planning for libraries has often focused on the preservation of staff, collections, and the physical plant itself rather than on the provision of information services.

Librarians everywhere strive to provide timely and relevant services in an appropriate format to meet the information needs of their users. Textbook studies tell us about the value of thoughtful data collection and advance planning before launching new library services. But what happens when there is no time to plan? What do you do when suddenly there are thousands of homeless and desperate adults and children just down the street from the library? Bar the doors? Invit them in? How do you deal with the barrage of questions about missing family and friends, how to fill out Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) forms, and where to find basic services? How do you deal with groups of displaced students suddenly needing to do homework without any books? And how can you continue to serve existing user groups whose information needs have suddenly changed at the same time that access to information resources has dramatically diminished? These are questions of concern both to librarians and to society at large.

Disaster planning has been the focus of many articles in the past and continues to be an important concern for library administrators. However, the types of situations envisioned in many traditional disaster plans have often been of a localized nature, such as loss of power or flooding in the library itself, and the procedures have focused largely on the preservation of staff, collections, and the physical plant itself rather than on the
provision of services. Disasters affecting a whole community present very different types of challenges because they may dramatically change the information needs of library users. In these widespread disasters, librarians may be called upon to provide new and modified information services, both to existing users and to new users such as emergency response personnel or members of an evacuated population. This article describes some steps that librarians can take to prepare themselves to respond to the changed information needs of their users during and after a community-based disaster.

What is a Disaster?

While there are many possible definitions of the term “disaster,” the FEMA training material offers a working definition that clearly differentiates disasters from more common emergency situations:

A disaster is a non-routine event that exceeds the capacity of the affected area to respond to it in such a way as to save lives; to preserve property; and to maintain the social, ecological, economic, and political stability of the affected region.2

When we think of this kind of occurrence, we generally think of catastrophic events like earthquakes, hurricanes, or the results of terrorist attacks. Compare this to the definition of an “emergency,” which is described by FEMA as:

A situation or an occurrence of a serious nature, developing suddenly and unexpectedly, and demanding immediate action. This is generally of short duration, for example, an interruption of normal agency operations for a week or less. It may involve electrical failure or minor flooding caused by broken pipes.3 [ED/AU: reference added here; subsequent references renumbered]

A further distinguishing feature of disasters compared with emergency situations is that they are widespread events, affecting more than a single institution or a single user group. In disasters, immediate help may be unavailable because potential responders may be affected in the same way as the rest of the population, and it could take a considerable length of time for outside help to arrive. In the worst case, this can result in a breakdown of the social structure. Fritz, one of the early researchers on the social effects of disasters, writes that disasters are a state in which the social fabric is disrupted and becomes dysfunctional to a greater or lesser extent.4

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) also focus on the social implications of disasters by defining them as:

a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, and economic or environmental losses that exceed the community’s or society’s ability to cope using its own resources.5

According to the IFRC, there were 623 events worldwide in 2008 that involved Red Cross/Red Crescent responses.6 Fifty percent of these disasters were caused by floods, tropical storms, hurricanes, cyclones, and typhoons; another 14 percent were caused by earthquakes; 9 percent were caused by epidemics (including Avian flu); and the remaining disasters were caused by a combination of natural and manmade events including wildfires, industrial accidents, and political conflicts. According to figures released by the Center for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters and the United Nations, the death toll from disasters in 2008 was three times the annual average for 2000–2007, making it one of the most devastating years on record;7 most of the deaths occurred in Asia as a result of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the Sichuan earthquake in China.

While the events in Asia may seem far away from our everyday life, nobody is likely to forget the televised coverage of New Orleans residents trapped by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001. Disasters have the potential to affect all our lives, even if one does not live in an area prone to hurricanes or earthquakes. Preparing to meet and respond to disasters is a responsibility that is shared among many organizations in a community. Public librarians are in a unique position to support the planning and response effort because they have “the resources and expertise to address the need for prompt, reliable, and relevant information in any crisis situation.” To play this role in the community, librarians must consider what they need to do in order to be prepared to provide critical information services in response to the changed information needs of their users during or after a disaster.

Differences between Traditional Disaster Planning and Planning for Responsive Information Services

Response to the changed information needs of the community during a disaster has not typically been addressed by formal library disaster plans, which
Preparing to meet and respond to disasters is a responsibility that is shared among many organizations in a community. Public librarians are in a unique position to support the planning and response effort.

Often focus on what steps to take during a specific, localized emergency. The basic assumption in most library disaster plans is that only a single institution or perhaps a few-block area in a city will be affected. Furthermore, many disaster plans assume that redundant systems will be available elsewhere in the community to supply temporary backup. In such situations, the primary concern of the librarian is quite appropriately on the safety of the staff and the preservation of collections and building rather than on the provision of services. The goal in these situations is to return to normal operations as quickly as possible.

But when a community-based disaster occurs (as compared to a localized emergency), “it is very possible that 90 percent of the best library emergency and disaster plans will be irrelevant.”19 Even for organizations that have disaster plans in place, the enormity of the human catastrophe that follows in the wake of a major disaster takes many providers of information services by surprise. Accounts written by librarians who have lived through disasters such as the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Southeast Asia, and the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes agree that during and immediately after a community-based disaster no one knows how soon, if ever, it will be possible to return to normal operations.10 In some cases, such as the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, this is because the damage done by the disaster is so extensive that the response operations will take weeks or months to complete. In other cases, such as wildfires, it is because the disaster situation itself may be of unknown duration.11 In situations such as these, librarians need to think not only about protecting the staff, collections, and building but also about providing ongoing information services to users, many of whom may have dramatically different information needs as a result of the disaster. As Marylaine Block eloquently put it, “If institutions that claim to be the best source of information don’t come through, they not only miss an opportunity to bond with their communities but also risk their credibility.”12

Luckily, librarians are not without resources for disaster preparedness and response activities. In addition to general resources on planning for disasters, there are also several library-specific resources, including the newly launched Florida State University website on Hurricane Preparedness & Response for Florida Public Libraries, which offers a comprehensive bibliography of material on the subject that would be useful to librarians anywhere. The appendix (on page XX) by no means lists all of the possible resources available on the Web, but rather provides some of the more general ones that will lead the reader to other, more specialized resources.

User Needs Analysis

During and after a disaster, both the information needs of the users and the users themselves may be different from those the library served before the disaster. Disaster situations often involve evacuations, so librarians outside of the disaster zone may suddenly find themselves trying to meet the information needs of displaced members of a community looking for news about family and friends, trying to deal with personal business, and generally using the library as a resource and a place to go for support. Librarians within the disaster zone, if their institutions can remain open for business, may find that their users are emergency responders (e.g., FEMA personnel, firefighters, relief workers, and so on) looking for information about the local area or for access to online databases.13 Librarians in other institutions that have had to suspend in-house service due to damage may operate remotely or virtually so that they can continue to provide critical information to their existing users.14

While it may be impossible to develop a detailed plan for meeting users’ specific information needs in advance of some unknown disaster, it is important to consider how you would go about determining the information needs of a new group of users or the new information needs of your current users. What techniques could you employ that are not intrusive to people already under a great deal of stress and also do not take much time to implement? The latter
is important because responding to a disaster situation often requires responding quickly and creatively to a constantly changing set of information needs. Traditional user needs assessment techniques such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews are not practical in a disaster environment. Library staff is likely to be overburdened responding to immediate demands, and the users themselves are often unable to articulate precisely what information they need most.

Librarians we surveyed as part of an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) project to investigate library and information services during community-based disasters indicated that personal observation, requests from users, and discussions with other librarians (both within the organization and outside the disaster zone) were their primary sources of information about users and their needs for services. Only rarely did the library staff discuss the need for new or adapted services with a library board or advisory committee—basically the librarian who was on the spot took responsibility for initiating new or adapted services as she or he felt they were needed. A few librarians responded that they had received requests for assistance from city, county, or state officials who recognized that the library was in a position to help provide critical information services.

Information Services Design, Evaluation, and Adaptation
Occasionally the need for new or adapted services was identified from outside the library, as in the case of one librarian who reported that:

the Department of Human Services (DHS) requested our assistance in providing new services. An official of [the city] told us that we had a “rare commodity, a standing building.” DHS set up food card distribution to six thousand people who came through our doors over a four day period. The County asked us to allow the National Guard to take refuge in our headquarters building as there were no other government buildings that could be saved. In return they helped us save our building from mildew and further water damage.

This is a clear example of the library stepping up to the plate to provide services in whatever form was needed in the community. Another librarian responded, “The State Librarian took the lead in getting librarians statewide to regard this disaster as an opportunity to show what librarians could do, especially in terms of providing information to policymakers and agency staff who needed it.”

Typically the types of services that can most effectively be offered during and after a disaster are those that build most directly on existing skills and capacities (see figure 1). While the desire to provide completely new information services (e.g., using Geographic Information System technology to track distribution systems) may be strong, the time required to develop such a service—unless the resources already exist—may mean that the service will be offered too late to do any practical good. Thinking in advance about the types of information services you might want to offer in the event of a disaster will give you the opportunity to take stock of your skill set and other resources. Remember that relying too heavily on technology may mean that you will not be able to offer a particular service if there is a power outage or if Internet and telephone services are unavailable. Think about where you will be able to get information yourself and how you will best be able to provide it to others.

Evaluating the information services you are providing is an important part of the design process. However, in disaster situations, one rarely has time to ask users how well the new or adapted service is meeting their needs; you will have to collect your data other ways. One librarian described meeting with her staff next to the circulation desk: “Every morning we met and said ‘What works? And what didn’t work?’ and it changed every day.” [QY: For agreement, change previous to ‘What works? And what doesn’t work?’] Finding out what works and doesn’t work is a process of trial and error—sometimes the most obvious services are not the ones people need or want. For example, another librarian reported that traditional activities like book discussions and storytimes for children weren’t very effective, but that in one instance, presenting short poems for discussion in evacuee shelters elicited a surprising amount of therapeutic discussion. Based on the results gathered from the survey and follow-up interviews, constant improvisation was more successful than trying to replicate pre-disaster services.

Role of Librarians in Responding to Community-Based Disasters
The current IMLS project and other research shows that librarians can and have played a wide range of roles during and after disasters. As was demonstrated during the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, librarians have the ability to be responsive to their communities needs in unexpected ways. While the most
obvious role might be that of an information provider, the IMLS project results suggest that it is not, in fact, the most common role played by librarians. Often the humanitarian needs of the community are so great that librarians become a type of super volunteer, helping out in various types of relief activities (e.g., coordinating charitable donations or providing food and housing) rather than using their unique professional skills to provide critical information services to users. Other librarians are so overwhelmed by the situation that they shut down everything and wait for the community to recover before going back to work. As one librarian explained, “Library staff were going through the same things the residents were going through. We had no homes, no telephones, no computers.” In such situations, when the social fabric is disrupted and becomes dysfunctional, it is natural for people to think first about their own families, homes, and general safety, and only later to think about what they might be able to give to the community.

Another important role played by librarians in the immediate disaster zone is that of providing a safe environment for people affected by the disaster. The library as haven is a familiar concept, and never more than in times of upheaval. In addition to providing a safe place to be, librarians often provide a sympathetic ear for people in trouble. One librarian said, “You know, we really do need to listen to these people because [we] may be the only [people] really listening to them today.” For librarians outside of the disaster zone, the role may be that of providing a link to information about what is going on in users’ hometowns or that of providing concerned citizens with updates on the disaster. In a Library Journal article, Barbara Will wrote, “As we have learned recently, people will want relevant information when a major crisis occurs anywhere in the United States, not only when it directly affects their own community.”

Conclusion
While developing a detailed plan for meeting users’ specific information needs in advance of some unknown disaster may be challenging, laying the groundwork for quickly determining the information needs of a new group of users or the new information needs of your current users will help prepare

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**Figure 1.** Sample Services Developed During and After Disasters

**Supplements to Existing Library Services**
- Extended hours
- Extended borrowing privileges (issued temporary cards to evacuees)
- Extended Internet access and training
- Extended copying services
- Suspended fines and late fees

**Specialized Disaster-Related Information Services**
- Provided services for displaced adults and children
- Provided special storytime for children at local shelter
- Assisted with FEMA and other forms
- Developed specialized link on website to disaster information sites
- Collected and posted bulletins from local emergency response personnel

**Outreach Services**
- Sent books/periodicals to evacuee shelters
- Provided textbooks at reference desk for displaced students
- Created new website for remote users to access resources
- Assisted families and friends to locate missing persons

**Other**
- Provided water, snacks, and other personal items
- Helped with salvage/conservation of personal artifacts (photos, documents, and so on)
- Provided office space to displaced librarians serving other users remotely
you to respond creatively to the changed information needs of users during and after a community-based disaster. In the words of a librarian interviewed for the IMLS study about her role in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina,

I would like to say to our profession . . . librarians are strong . . . we are caring . . . and we are capable. Librarians can organize chaos and madness. We can set-up computer labs/links with little to no problem. We find answers and make contacts. . . . When people are faced with such a tragedy, they only want direction, compassion, and honesty. Our librarians gave much more. And they did so with an immense sense of moral duty.

References and Notes
3. [QY: Please provide reference info; if same as reference 2, please indicate with Ibid.]
15. IMLS grant LG-06-06-0032-06, “Investigating Library and Information Services During Community-Based Disasters: Preparing Information Professionals to Plan for the Worst.” Findings from research conducted as part of that project are the basis for much of the content of this article. [QY: Have these findings been published elsewhere? If so, please indicate]
19. Will, 76.

Appendix. Useful Websites for Disaster Preparedness and Response
All URLs accessed Feb. 18, 2010

General Resources
American Library Association, Disaster Preparedness and Recovery, www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/
advocacy/federallegislation/govinfo/
disasterpreparation/index.cfm
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.
cdc.gov
Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S.
gov
Library of Congress Preservation Directorate,
Disaster Mitigation Planning Assistance, http://
matrix.msu.edu/~disaster
National Network of Libraries of Medicine, NN/LM
Emergency Preparedness & Response Toolkit,
http://nnlm.gov/ep

Selected State or Regional Resources
Baltimore Academic Library Consortium (BALC),
Disaster Mitigation Planning Assistance, http://
matrix.msu.edu/~disaster/search.php
Connecticut State Library, WebJunction
ct.webjunction.org/do/Navigation;jsessionid=0
6165940CD725B1AF514A3C556A843D1?category=
y=11540
Florida State University, Information Use
Management & Policy Institute, Hurricane
Preparedness & Response for Florida Public
Library of Virginia, Workbook for Disaster Planning,
www.lva.lib.va.us/whatwedo/records/manuals/
dp-files.htm [QY: This URL no longer works; please update]
Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners,
Disaster Resources, http://mblc.state.ma.us/
grants/disaster/resources/index.php
Northeast Document Conservation Center, dPlan:
The Online Disaster-Planning Tool for Cultural
and Civic Institutions, www.dplan.org
San Francisco Department of Emergency
Management, Are You Prepared?, www.72hours.
org
State of Rhode Island, Office of Library &
Information Services, Disaster and Preservation
Planning for Libraries, www.olis.ri.gov/services/
preservation/index.php