

EVEN IN THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO

EXPLORING LIBRARIES'
SOCIAL ROLE IN CRISES
REAL AND IMAGINED

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THE MOST COMMON SOURCE OF MANAGEMENT MISTAKES IS NOT THE FAILURE TO FIND THE RIGHT ANSWERS. IT IS THE FAILURE TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. NOTHING IS MORE DANGEROUS IN BUSINESS THAN THE RIGHT ANSWER TO THE WRONG QUESTION.—PETER DRUCKER¹

What are public libraries meant to do for their communities? How does the changing nature of our community also change our mission? And when crisis strikes, disrupting the assumptions, routines, and procedures of “business as usual,” what is the impact on the social role of our institution?

At the beginning of September 2010, an earthquake hit the Canterbury region of New Zealand’s South Island. Although there were no deaths and few serious injuries, property damage from the quake was extensive. Roads cracked, chimneys fell, and shop fronts collapsed. Many historic buildings in the main city of Christchurch were damaged. Hot water tanks and sewer pipes ruptured, and the soft soil that some areas were built on acted like a liquid, flooding streets and destabilizing foundations.

The region began the slow process of recovery, but just over five months later, another earthquake struck Christchurch. The second disaster, on February 22, 2011, took 185 lives, injured hundreds, and damaged thousands of buildings. In June of that year, another large earthquake caused further damage, hampering the work of rebuilding the South Island’s principal city. Finally—for 2011 anyway—two large quakes struck two days before Christmas, further rattling nerves and causing damage.

These were the most severe natural disasters in New Zealand’s recent history. The repercussions of these quakes will be felt for many years, yet Kiwi librarians’ response to these catastrophic events was one of courage, generosity, and lasting innovation.

When crisis strikes, organizations can flounder: they may respond to the unexpected or unprecedented with fuzzy thinking, emotionally freighted reactions, or injudicious implementation of rehearsed or routine responses inappropriate to the situation. Peter Drucker’s words that open this article point to the dangers of failing to reflect as we act in moments of crisis.

Yet crises can also offer possibilities to learn, adapt, and renew the institution’s mission and value for the community it serves. Given the high risk and unpredictability of real-life crisis situations, what can other communities’ crises teach us about the changing social role of libraries—and can we use imaginary scenarios to provoke the kind of innovative thinking released in a crisis?

THE CHRISTCHURCH EXAMPLE: FLEXIBILITY, COLLABORATION, AND ACCELERATED RESPONSE

Christchurch City Libraries is one of New Zealand's largest library networks. At the time of the earthquakes, it had twenty branches across one of the country's largest urban areas.

The quake of 2010 affected the entire Canterbury region. In Christchurch itself, all library branches were closed so that the buildings and their stock could be checked. Libraries gradually reopened through September and into October. Already the disaster had an effect on the way Cantabrians used their local library. People now came to pick up emergency welfare forms and photocopy documents for insurance claims.

North of Christchurch, the town of Kaiapoi had been badly affected and its library forced to close. The city agreed to send its mobile library outside of its own jurisdiction to serve Kaiapoi on Saturday mornings while temporary facilities were set up.

This kind of flexibility and collaboration defined libraries' response to the Christchurch disasters. When the second earthquake struck, Christchurch City Council's premises were severely damaged. To assist in the recovery, the library handed over three branches to essential council services.

Staff, too, had to adapt to new roles and requirements. After the February quake, business as usual ceased to exist for Christchurch. Librarians found themselves turning their hands to whatever was required of them. That might mean clambering over boxloads of rescued books stored in a garage, setting up portable toilets, or even issuing passes for drivers entering the city's severely damaged Red Zone. A number of librarians were seconded into roles with the council and emergency welfare.

At the time of the earthquakes, not all libraries had wifi. After the September quake, once power was restored, the wifi was left on so that people could continue to use it. After February, as libraries gradually opened again, the network partnered with Telecom so that free Wi-Fi could be accessed by library users. This was eventually superseded, but it is a great example of post-quake collaboration.

Still, information skills remained at the heart of what libraries could offer their communities. From locating open petrol stations to mapping altered bus routes and explaining how to register vehicles trapped by quake damage, librarians drew ceaselessly on their expertise in information retrieval and customer service.

Christchurch Libraries also bolstered its online presence in the wake of the quakes. The organization joined Twitter eleven days after the first quake in 2010 and established its Facebook presence in March the following year, just after the most serious event. Social media became a way to inform the public about help available to those in need and to share updates on how to finding missing people.

Donna Robertson, now Christchurch Libraries' web editor, was working for the libraries' digital team at the time of the earthquakes.

"Social media was approached in a fairly conservative way by the Council," she explains, "but we were enabled to take up these tools more quickly because of the immediate need. There were some times that blogging and social media was available to us to disseminate information to the public when the usual online channels weren't, for example when our website went down."

Robertson was also among the librarians who took on roles in the city's emergency operations center. "This was immediately after the February quake, and because the library had already started practicing on Twitter, I was able to help set up social media dashboard Hootsuite, and help the team with good social media practice."

Meanwhile, at the national level, New Zealand's librarians were also responding—exploring the issue of documenting and developing a record of the events in Christchurch. Penny Carnaby, then the country's national librarian, was living in the quake-stricken city at the time, commuting to her job in the capital of Wellington.

"I was at home when the first quake struck," says Carnaby. "An emergency meeting of state sector CEOs was called and once the airport reopened, I flew back to Wellington, trying to think what the response of a national library should be, given we

were not the first line for a state of emergency.” She considered New Zealand’s deadliest natural disaster, an earthquake that had devastated the Hawke’s Bay region in 1931. As a librarian, she was aware that the record of the response to that earthquake was limited: “Having been in the Christchurch quake I understood why; the last thing you think of is documenting it.”

Nonetheless, Carnaby determined that the best response from the National Library of New Zealand (NLNZ) was to begin creating a documentary archive, especially as the 2010 earthquake seemed at first to be a one-off event.

She engaged a photographer and a number of oral historians to capture people’s experiences of the earthquake. The commission was based on the expectation that the earthquake was a one-off event of unprecedented scale. When the 2010 incident turned out to be one in a series of major events with many aftershocks, the project became a long-term record of the city’s experiences during a prolonged state of emergency and recovery.

Carnaby points out that New Zealand librarians’ digital expertise was key to documenting the quakes: “The National Digital Heritage Archive meant that as a country we had the capability in digital preservation to ensure that the memory and story of the Canterbury earthquakes would be remembered and be accessible in perpetuity. Without knowing it, we were ready to respond in a significant way.”

New Zealand’s Ministry of Culture and Heritage subsequently set up the CEISMIC consortium, a group of cultural organizations working to capture the story of the earthquakes from many perspectives. The photographs produced for NLNZ, distributed under a Creative Commons license, now form part of CEISMIC’s collaborative, open-access archive.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF LIBRARIES

The nature of the crisis faced by Christchurch forced librarians to reimagine their role as the community’s leading information provider. Beyond tra-

ditional collections and the usual services, they found ways to meet the community’s information needs in a dangerous and rapidly changing context.

The broad interpretation of information services taken up by the Christchurch Libraries leadership team was a novel response to a dramatic situation, but it reflects a higher sense of mission as articulated by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) over twenty years ago.

In 1994, the United Nations’ culture organization UNESCO joined forces with IFLA to set out Public Library Missions at a global level.² The document focuses on activities like stimulating imagination and creativity, supporting the oral tradition, and providing opportunities for personal creative development. While promotion of literacy, lifelong learning, and children’s reading habits are all featured, the document doesn’t mention books once.

While the book is still at the core of a library’s identity and many people identify the public library with the business of book lending, both the global mission document and the experience of Christchurch City Libraries remind us that librarianship transcends any one medium, and gives the lie to those who think that the age of e-reading has made public libraries obsolete.

The education system is increasingly about training students to pass tests. Many digital materials are designed to make a profit out of the end user. But the public library is the one place you can go, whoever you are, wherever you are from, to explore all of human knowledge and culture on your own terms. In a moment of crisis, that social role becomes increasingly evident and important: when physical and social structures are threatened, an institution providing equity of access to information is an important contributor to community resilience.

In Christchurch, some post-quake service objectives were created by the Library Leadership Team led by Carolyn Robertson. These included equity of access, especially for those most affected; changing patterns of activity and location; and supporting the city’s recovery through library services.

In support of these objectives, libraries performed a variety of roles. One of the most important was the

dissemination of accurate information, and social media was used to amplify messages from official channels, such as letting people know about community meetings, the need to limit water, or changes in library opening times. Physical libraries became places where people could pick up leaflets, for example, about how to apply for Red Cross grants. Bishopdale Library, a community library on the west side of the city, set up a kiosk that included information from Civil Defence, WINZ (Work and Income New Zealand), the police, and EQC (the Earthquake Commission). Free public computers were also essential, meaning that those without power could contact families, friends, and official services.

Partnerships also started to develop, such as working with the Ministry of Education to create homework centers that helped students whose schools had been affected. Recording information for posterity about the earthquakes was also important, and the library became part of the CEISMIC consortium with other heritage organizations.

Libraries also provided distraction and comfort. They became places for people to meet and talk or to attend a children's program such as a story time. Although libraries were reopening throughout 2011, the social media team took the opportunity to highlight digital resources to those who weren't near a library and to provide different options for the community. In these ways libraries assisted and cared for their communities. Indeed, those libraries that had been taken over by the council—themselves doing essential work—were much missed by their communities, with people constantly asking when they would be open again. Over the past few years as libraries have been closed for repairs and upgrades, there has consistently been a demand from the communities affected for temporary libraries to be opened in their place or regular mobile library visits, which the network has usually been able to facilitate.

A similar example can be seen in the widely recounted and acclaimed response of the library service in Ferguson, Missouri, during the civil unrest of 2014. Scott Bonner, new to the leadership of the institution, took steps to make the library a

safe and welcoming space for Ferguson's children when local schools closed. In an interview, Bonner said: "It has magnified my existing perception of what libraries are for and what they can do in a community. It's given me a chance to take the community library idea and try it in hyper-drive."³

The crisis situation forced swift decision making based on Bonner's assessment of community needs and essential library values, similar to the challenges faced by the New Zealand library. But Bonner also goes on to point out that lack of preparation made the Ferguson Library's job more challenging. He advises readers:

Do not wait for trouble to come before you make plans for trouble. When Michael Brown was shot, I hadn't made contact with most of the service providers and nonprofits in my area. I had to do it on the fly. It would be useful for any library director to learn about the available services, make an initial contact, try to do a little program with them so you start to work together. Then if a tornado hits or whatever, you know where to go.⁴

Similar lessons derive from the New Zealand example. A 2013 article in *New Zealand magazine North and South* retrospectively highlighted concerns about the National Library's choice of photographer, who had taken photographs for New Zealand's library association LIANZA but was not a trained photojournalist. As the state of emergency continued, the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority restricted access to the Red Zone for many other photographers.

Reflecting on the decision now, Carnaby comments: "Professional photographers were vocal about the fact that I hadn't gone through due process. I argued that I needed to respond quickly and the focus was on accurate documentary record rather than a professional artistic recording of events."

Carnaby's experience leads her to give some advice to colleagues working in libraries and archives. "If I am honest, it didn't occur to me that this would be an issue, so there was learning there

for me. In hindsight it may pay to think what you would do in a similar situation and look at a strategy for moving quickly to record significant events or moments in your history. Our reaction was completely pragmatic. It would be advisable to line people up ahead of time to avoid the issues we faced.”

Community Libraries Manager Erica Rankin explains that Christchurch City Libraries have continued to learn lessons from their experience. In hindsight, she says that if this situation were to occur again, libraries would push back harder on reclaiming their buildings for service to the public as soon as possible. “There’s a much greater focus now on buildings’ ability not just to protect life, but also to be up and running again within days and weeks rather than months and years. Roles and responsibilities in the event of an emergency are also now much clearer and we understand where we would most likely put our efforts: IT, logistics, and welfare, for example.”

Librarians from both Ferguson and Christchurch emphasize the challenge of decision making with limited precedent and preparation. The crises they endured, and subsequent hindsight, stretched their understanding of libraries’ social role and helped them to identify issues that could have been prepared for despite the unusual challenges they faced.

However, it is possible to simulate these challenging situations, which enrich our capacity to serve the community and clarify our social role, without incurring the huge cost of a real-life crisis.

SCENARIO PLANNING

Crises can damage our ability to learn and respond or provoke useful innovations. The threatening aspect of crises, and the sense that they are one-off or exceptional events, carries a great deal of emotional freight. The organization theorist Bill Starbuck says that under such conditions, “reactions to uncertainty . . . include wishful thinking, substituting prior beliefs for analysis, biasing probability distributions towards certainties, searching for more data, acting cautiously, and playing to audiences.”⁵

In some crises—an infamous case was the 1979 nuclear accident on Three Mile Island—this can

lead to the mistaken belief that what is unfolding is what has been planned for. Instead of reading the signals presented to them, those confronting the situation reach for rehearsed responses, and the lessons of the past, to interpret and judge the crisis.

Ramírez and Wilkinson’s *Strategic Reframing* tells us:

It is difficult to let go of anchors, and to recognize that what one is facing is entirely unprecedented; but this difficulty can be reduced by having imagined versions of these new events beforehand.⁶

One approach to developing these imaginary situations to prepare for the unprecedented is scenario planning. This approach, as articulated by Ramírez and Wilkinson and taught at Oxford University’s Said Business School, helps communities of learners to develop plausible alternative futures that can be used to reframe and reimagine the role of their institution in a social context.

Unlike strategic forecasting, scenario planning does not seek to predict what is going to happen. The human capacity to predict the future is always limited, and institutions increasingly find themselves operating in what the Said team label as TUNA conditions—that is to say, situations characterized by turbulence, uncertainty, novelty, and ambiguity.

In a scenario planning process, the institution brings together key stakeholders to research, develop, discuss, and iterate possible future scenarios. These scenarios, developed as stories or system maps, can indicate emergent trends, challenges, opportunities, or instabilities that the institution may wish to address strategically:

Scenario planning is helpful to public librarians because there is some evidence that being attentive to future events, trends, and conditions allows one to rehearse plans in such a way that if the alternative future to the one one is hoping for arises, one has a playbook of responses, making you better prepared and more able to cope.⁷

In a public library context, scenario planning may enable institutions to anticipate situations of natural disaster, as in Christchurch, or civil unrest, as in Ferguson, without actually experiencing those crises in reality. The approach can also be used to respond to long-term changes and impacts. For example, the global financial crisis was difficult to anticipate from its origins on Wall Street, and even more difficult for libraries engaging in long-term planning to anticipate the potential impact on both their budgets and the needs of their economically challenged communities. Increasing attention to, for example, the challenge of homelessness in the public library setting reflects the ripple effect of wider social and economic changes that are difficult to detect in traditional strategic approaches.

Similarly, the advent of the smartphone and tablet computer in the early 2000s was not easy for public libraries to anticipate: as a result, many library buildings constructed even in the late 1990s were not fitted with sufficient power points for users to charge devices, whose existence librarians and architects had not considered.

Because scenario planning focuses on plausibility rather than prediction, it can also look at future situations that may be subject to political dispute. For example, the US Navy is currently using scenario planning to consider the potential for climate change to affect their operations.⁸ These kinds of wider environmental changes, if they come to pass, may also have knock-on effects on public library service.

LESSONS LEARNED

Public libraries can do many things in a time of crisis. Sometimes simply being open, continuing regular services in a temporary facility, or creating a sense of routine or familiarity is enough. At other times, taking services to damaged areas, running special community events, and collaborating with other organizations might be needed.

Both real-life crises and well-run scenario planning activities can yield lasting benefits, especially when it comes to negotiating public libraries' wider social role.

During the quakes, pop-up libraries were established across Christchurch to meet the needs of the stricken city. Community Libraries Manager Erica Rankin says staff were pushed out of their comfort zones by the experience, but “we gained the freedom to innovate, be creative, try new initiatives and services, alter plans, pop up and pack down, stretch, grow and learn, respond to need and make decisions on a dime, all amid a constantly changing and challenging environment.”

As libraries reopened, a new service model, SMART Library, was introduced, along with RFID technology. The SMART approach trades service desks for a roving model that sees staff working on the library floor to help customers at their point of need.

SMART was already on the agenda prior to September 2010, but Rankin credits the smooth implementation of these changes to the shared experience of the earthquakes: “I don’t think we could have managed the transition to a new service model so successfully without having had so many Central Library staff working in community branches. The experience really grew and strengthened ties across the network. There’s a better appreciation of what goes on in community libraries, and also of the skills and collection knowledge that Central staff were able to share in community settings.”

The Christchurch earthquakes became an opportunity for Kiwi libraries to innovate even as they demonstrated their enduring value to those they serve. In the city center, a new central library, Tūranga, was recently opened after years of design and construction work.

A new central library was on the cards before the earthquakes, but the damage to the 1980s central library and the decision to use its site for a new convention center in a redesigned CDB brought new opportunities. Tūranga is right in the center of the city, bringing people back to Cathedral Square, the historic heart of the city. The community was consulted about what they wanted to see in a library; the local iwi (tribe) Ngāi Tahu was involved from early on in the planning, producing artwork for the building and gifting the name: Tūranga.

LEARN MORE

Marybeth Zeman, “The Little Library that Lent a Hand,” *Public Libraries Online*, February 12, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2KoFDKv>

“FYI Podcast—Disasters Bring Out the Best in Us,” *Public Libraries Online*, April 18, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2KqdJOK>

Since the earthquakes, collaboration has continued; for example, the library continues to work with Telecom (or Spark, as it is known these days) and hosts Imagination Station, a Lego-


based play and education center.

There is much more willingness to take risks, to be adaptable and agile, and to listen to community needs, which is why Tūranga and other new facilities in the network include so many meeting rooms and other bookable spaces. Staff have also been through a lot, adapting to great change in their roles, short notice closures, changing communities, and frustrated and distressed users, all the while dealing with their own damaged or destroyed homes.

With the terrorist attack of March 15, 2019, Tūranga has already been tested. All libraries in the network were in lockdown, with librarians once again caring for their communities at a difficult time. At the time of writing, a condolence book continues to be available at Tūranga.

Few library services will ever face the kind of natural disaster endured by the New Zealanders, but all libraries experience challenge and change. When these challenges are turbulent, overwhelming, and unprecedented, conventional responses can seem insufficient. Yet Christchurch’s librarians

responded to a situation beyond their control by expanding their remit, collaborating, and tackling problems head-on—the same approaches that are stimulated by scenario planning methods.

Christchurch Libraries did heroic work responding to a dramatic and unexpected crisis, and their experience offers teachings that all libraries could heed. No library service seeks to be tested in the ways cities like Christchurch and Ferguson have been, but in such moments, hidden aspects of libraries’ social role are made starkly manifest, offering lessons for us all. 

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7. Matthew Finch and Rafael Ramírez, “Scenario Planning In Public Libraries: A Discussion,” *Public Library Quarterly*, 37, no. 4 (2018): 394–407.
8. Finch and Ramírez, “Scenario Planning,” XXX.