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The Aftermath of the Flood at the Boston Public Library: Lessons Learned

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In this presentation I would like to describe what happened in the aftermath of the flood at the Boston Public Library, and tell a little bit about what library personnel learned from this event about disaster planning, preparedness, and recovery.

Background

The Boston Public Library is the regional, and because we became a depository in 1885, we have a large collection. Fortunately, only most of the recent, that is, post-1960, documents were housed in the basement where the flood occurred. A few older materials were in the basement and were salvaged.

The Boston Public Library drafted a disaster plan in 1991. I was one of four staff members assigned to write it, so I am familiar with its organization and contents.

The disaster plan which the committee drafted is comparable in scope and coverage to those of many other libraries. On paper, it is a good plan, which addresses many of the consequences of a disaster situation. However, now that we have actually been through a disaster, we can see that the plan fails to address some important considerations which cost us precious time in dealing with the flood's consequences. I will address some of these considerations later. The biggest problem with the library's disaster plan, though, was not its contents, but the fact that it was never formally adopted by library administrators. Most of its recommendations, including the appointment and training of a Disaster Action Team, were never implemented.

The Disaster Action Team was to be made up of administrators and staff members representing all divisions of the library. It would implement many of the "start up" components of the plan, such as ordering emergency supplies and assembling the supplies into portable kits, and gathering salvage priorities lists from each department. This team would meet from two to four times a year and would keep all department heads apprised of its activities and initiatives. This team would revise the disaster plan as needed and would distribute revisions to every department head. Team members would be trained in

disaster preparedness and recovery procedures in order to serve as resource people in the event of a disaster. Without having such a team in place, coping with the flood was made that much more difficult.

The flood occurred on August 16, 1998, shortly after midnight, which was very early on a Sunday morning. A 42-inch water main broke and three feet of water flowed rapidly into the building. It filled up the basement area where most of the recent SuDocs collection and many of the patents were housed. The force of the water buckled three rows of shelves where the water entered the building. Only two maintenance people were in the building. We feel very fortunate that almost no staff and none of the public were in the building at the time, because it is very possible that lives could have been lost.

Amount of Material Affected

We estimate we lost about 350,000 paper GPO documents; most of these were not sent to be freeze-dried because treatment was determined not to restore them to a usable condition. (Many of them were a pile of mush by the time staff were able to enter the building). In other cases recovering them would have significantly slowed down the clean up process. The fact that many of these documents were deemed to be fairly easily replaceable also influenced this decision. There were several hundred of the more valuable items which were sent out to be freeze dried and many will be restored to the collection. About a thousand documents are still waiting to be rebound or recased, or in some cases, photocopied.

About 3 million pieces of fiche were affected. This represents almost half of our collection of GPO, DOE, and commercial sets such as those published by CIS. The GPO diazo fiche fared much better than expected; some of it is in usable condition and will be reintegrated into the collection until replacements can be obtained. The commercially produced sets, such as the CIS documents, did not fare well. They congealed into a huge mass and can now only be used as doorstops.

Of the 205 drawers of maps sent out to be freeze-dried, most came back in very good condition and only had to be cleaned.

Issues Affecting Response to the Flood

- The library is not insured. The city of Boston is self-insured with a \$10 million deductible. We had no standard insurance policy providing for business interruption—meaning that requests for replacement of computers and other equipment sometimes had to go through the city of Boston's standard procedure for equipment orders. We had to work without staff equipment and some public computer workstations for much longer than we should have had to.
- Following Murphy's Law, the library's director was in Europe when the flood occurred and was unable to return promptly to Boston. The library's Chief Financial Officer had been on the job for only two weeks. No one person was assigned responsibility to coordinate recovery efforts; instead, a team was organized which operated somewhat democratically. However, this team approach led to confusion

and miscommunication and hindered the immediate cleanup efforts.

While the library has a book conservator, who knows a lot about preservation of print materials, we have no preservation officer to coordinate things. Preservation experts were called in immediately, but they were not always directing the cleanup efforts. Also following Murphy's Law, I was on a camping vacation and could not be reached for a week, and another person who helped write the disaster plan was also away and was not contacted.

Instructions given to workers sometimes were contradicted by another person a few hours later. In one case, hired cleanup workers were told to move dry material out with the wet; this order was later taken back. In the confusion, microfiche was also sent out to be freeze-dried with the print materials, but it should have been air-dried.

- Since the library is a city department, City Hall was also involved in making decisions about the cleanup and recovery process. With more groups involved in the decision making, each with its own priorities, it took longer to negotiate the terms of the contracts for moving and freeze-drying materials. The city was obviously more concerned about costs than were library officials. City officials also tended to see the library as a building, not as a service provider and a repository of materials.
- There also was a lack of communication to other institutions and companies about urgent library needs right after the flood. What the affected departments really needed immediately were in-kind contributions such as PCs and printers. With so many print materials gone, we really could have used a replacement for our LAN, and more workstations with Internet access. While other library departments were quick to loan or donate some of this equipment, the library did not actively seek donations from computer manufacturers and others in a position to help us. The library did not capitalize on public attention focused on the flood.

I'll mention a few of the good outcomes of the flood. Of course there are not too many, but it helps me and the rest of the staff keep a perspective on the experience.

- No lives were lost and no one was injured.
- Even though some time was lost in boxing the materials and sending them to be freeze-dried, about thirty percent returned from the freezer in generally good condition and could be returned to the shelves with minimal additional treatment. Freeze-drying and cleaning were the two most common treatment methods for the flood damaged material. The paper documents and maps all responded well to freeze-drying. Many of the card files and parts of the shelf list were air-dried, with good results.
- The Government Documents Department had a salvage priority system already in effect before the flood. No valuable or rare materials such as the Serial Set were put into the basement. Those materials were housed on other floors or in special collections. For those materials in the basement, the Documents staff were very knowledgeable about which collections needed to be saved first and acted quickly to

move those materials out.

- The staff at the BPL quickly mobilized to help those departments most affected by the flood. There was a large team of people who understood what had to be done to save collections such as our large collection of CD-ROMs. In one instance, staff formed an assembly line and quickly washed and dried our entire CD-ROM collection. Through their efforts we were able to save a lot of valuable electronic material.
- The depository community was very helpful and immediately responded with donations of material that we lost and with reference assistance and help in filling ILL requests that we could not handle. The emotional support we received was very heartening and kept us going. I have gotten to know people in the depository community a little better.
- The disaster has in some ways given the library the added incentive it needs to begin digitizing some of its collections. Digitization needed to be pursued as a means of preservation even before the flood occurred. We are currently in the planning stages of digitizing a collection of flood-damaged state and local documents. Many of these documents were damaged enough that returning them to the shelves is problematic. These documents will hopefully be more accessible in scanned format than they were in print. I am hopeful that once we get our feet wet in the scanning business, it will be an overall benefit to the Government Documents Department and to the library as an institution.
- The fact that I was on vacation and could not be reached immediately had its good and bad points. I felt some guilt about the fact that my colleagues had just seen much of the collection destroyed. They then spent a week doing exhausting work before I could be reached. In the long run, I wish I could have been there to help the people I work with. But I was glad I returned with the energy needed to pick up where they left off and direct the recovery effort.

What We Have Learned and What We Will Do Differently

We need to take every measure necessary to ensure that decisions can be made quickly and in the best interests of the library. Measures to ensure this outcome include:

- Rewriting our new plan to establish a chain of command and to assign responsibility for each aspect of the later recovery process to a specific staff member. Assigning a team to make decisions before a disaster happens is effective, but it will not work in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.
- Putting into place a system for expeditious cleanup and salvage of materials. We learned that our original disaster plan would not have provided for the most expeditious cleanup and recovery of damaged materials. We are currently looking into putting some of the disaster cleanup contractors on retainer, and to the extent possible, drawing up the basics of contracts before another catastrophe occurs.

- We have learned in the most difficult and painful way why library materials must not be stored in the basement! Even though many of the materials are not irreplaceable, putting them in a basement is not acceptable. Several years ago when the building was renovated, a proposal was made to move documents into the basement. This proposal was opposed by the person who was then the head of the documents department, for the very reason that they would be vulnerable to water damage. Unfortunately his advice was not taken and the library succumbed to the pressure to find extra space for its growing collections. The renovated basement gave us lots of space with room to grow and met most of the department's needs beautifully. However, no amount of renovation could change the fact that as a basement, especially a basement in the Back Bay of Boston, it is very vulnerable to floods.
- Every staff member has now been "sold" on the importance of adhering to a disaster plan. Having said this, we still need somehow to ensure that department heads and other key people are participating in an ongoing process to make the library less vulnerable to disasters. We also need a preservation officer; but we have not hired one yet.

The original disaster plan gave a lot of responsibility to a few people, top administrators and persons serving on the Disaster Action Team. The responsibility for planning and preparedness needs to be spread around. This means making sure that salvage priorities are updated when needed, that the entire staff receives regular training in disaster prevention and preparedness, and that the general consciousness about disaster preparedness is maintained, especially during the next few years when our institutional memory of the flood begins to fade. Every staff member needs to believe that his participation is crucial to preventing and/or coping with another disaster.

- As a public library we are a city entity. The flood has made library staff more aware of this fact. For years we operated to a large degree independently of the city, with our own Board of Trustees, but in the aftermath of the flood, we lost some of our autonomy, possibly permanently. We now realize we will have to work more closely with the city to make sure the elements of our revised disaster plan will really work in the event of another disaster. We see this as our biggest challenge, because it involves changing the attitudes of people outside our own institution, who do not stand to lose as much, but upon whom we must rely for support.

While most depositories are part of an academic library system and are not government agencies, it still makes sense to look at the whole picture and to know that other players will be involved in the recovery process at your library in the event a disaster happens. You need to know what their agendas and concerns might be in case they conflict with the mission and interests of your institution.

I would like to thank many people who helped us during the cleanup and the ongoing recovery, including the BPL staff, especially the staff of the Science Reference and Documents Departments, Betsey Anderson, who is the senior documents reference librarian at BPL, Harvard College Library, Gordon College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and many other depositories in Massachusetts, Laura Saur at Newark Public

Library, Montclair State College Library, and Masako Ohnuki at the Occidental College Library, who sent us 550 cartons of GPO material. Sheila McGarr took time out of her vacation after the flood happened, to come to Boston and cheer us up. We could not have done without their help and the help of many others.