

Brianna J Davis. "The Library Has Been There": Public Library Response in Times of Community Social Crisis. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2018. 47 Pages. Advisor: Sandra Hughes-Hassell

This paper describes a series of case studies of public libraries during times of community social crisis. The responses of libraries were compared to historical examples of library responses to times of war and natural disasters, in order to determine how similar these responses were to other types of disaster response.

Three cases were examined: the Ferguson Municipal Public Library in 2014, the Baltimore Enoch Pratt Free Library in 2015, and the Charlottesville Jefferson Madison Regional Library in 2017. Reports of the library's actions and of the community's response were collected from contemporaneous and retrospective news reports, interviews, and social media postings. These libraries seemed to exhibit several of the same patterns of behavior exhibited by libraries during times of war or after natural disasters. The closer the library response mimicked that of a library during war or natural disaster, the more positive the community response seemed to be.

Headings:

Libraries & community

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“THE LIBRARY HAS BEEN THERE”: PUBLIC LIBRARY RESPONSE IN TIMES  
OF COMMUNITY SOCIAL CRISIS

by  
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## **Introduction**

On August 9, 2014, officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

For weeks following the shooting, there were protests and demonstrations throughout the city. Although the unrest eventually died down, it rose again three months later, when a grand jury decided not to indict Wilson for the shooting death of Brown. During this second wave of protests, the city closed its public schools and most public services.

The Ferguson Municipal Public Library stayed open.

With only a single full-time employee and a few part-time staff, the small library became a vital community center during the days and weeks of protest. While the public schools were shut down, library volunteers provided educational classes and supervision for the community's children, as well as many other vital services. The library's actions and response to the unrest in Ferguson gained widespread praise in the aftermath. Only a few months on the job at the time of the protests, library Director Scott Bonner decided to keep the library open and to partner with community members to provide information and emotional stability to the community. He described the library's actions as "what libraries do after tornadoes in Joplin, during hurricanes in New England, and at many other times" (Berry, 2015, para. 4).

How libraries respond to tornadoes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters is well documented. Most libraries have procedures and plans established in preparation for such events. However, few libraries have procedures or policies in place for when the community that the library serves is in periods of turmoil and crisis. There is little research at all as to how libraries do or should respond to such events, despite the fact that community crisis occurs, and seems likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Without policies or plans, libraries can only respond as best as their employees judge in the moment. While the Ferguson Municipal Public Library earned widespread praise and community acclaim for its actions in the wake of the protests, a library that fails to respond as well faces the possibility of alienating its own community and losing the trust of its patrons.

In the aftermath of the protests, the Ferguson library has since been held up as an example of how libraries should respond in the wake of social unrest; the library director in turn pointed to library responses to natural disaster as the template for the library's actions.

By examining the policies and procedures that libraries use in the wake of disaster, it is possible to deduce an idea of how libraries might follow that example to respond to times of social crisis. During extreme circumstances, libraries often act outside their typical capacity as repositories of information and materials – they act as community members, partner with other organizations, and provide services ranging from emotional support to a safe space to stay.

This paper will compare the actions of public libraries in times of crisis like wartime and severe weather to the actions of libraries in times of civil unrest. Using examples such as the Ferguson Municipal Public Library (FMPL) during the 2014 protests, the Enoch Pratt Free Library (EPFL) in Baltimore during the 2015 unrest there, and the Charlottesville Jefferson Madison Regional Library (JMRL) during the 2017 demonstrations, this paper will examine the ways in which libraries respond to times of social crisis, and how they can model this response on disaster planning in order to react better in future circumstances. Research questions explored here are:

*RQ1. How do public libraries respond in times of community and social crisis?*

*RQ2. How do these responses compare to the responses of public libraries to other disaster events?*

*RQ3. How do communities receive library responses to social crisis?*

## Literature Review

Research into library response in times of social upheaval is still sparse, while examples and research into the ways that libraries react to times of war or instances of natural disaster are much more readily available. Even this research, however, focuses largely on the preservation and recovery of collections and materials. Less common is research into the way that libraries act as community institutions and members in a crisis period.

Shaluf (2007) groups disasters into various types, including natural disasters, man-made disasters, hybrids, and subsequent disasters. However, libraries can be and have been affected by disasters of all kinds. This research broadly discusses two separate types of crisis – crisis of warfare or attack, and natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and flooding. Certainly these are not the only types of disasters libraries face and must cope with, but both demonstrate a crisis that libraries have learned to survive over centuries of experience.

### **Libraries in Times of War**

Libraries have been affected by war for as long as libraries have existed. Subject to both incidental damage and deliberate attack, libraries have been damaged and traumatized by war throughout the ages. Libraries have been burned, as during the war of 1812. In World War II, Nazi raids deliberately targeted British libraries.

Again, the majority of the literature and the research in this area focuses on the effects of war on collections and preservation, as well as how libraries have acted to

preserve and protect their collections when they have been placed in danger. However, Spencer has written several excellent analyses of how libraries responded to periods of war as more than just institutions that store and protect information.

According to Spencer (2008), although most libraries in the continental United States were never directly affected by the fighting of the war, the libraries were nevertheless active participants in preparing the nation for the possibility of air raids akin to the ones experienced by the United Kingdom at the time.

Public libraries organized collections of survival materials for community members – materials such as books and pamphlets from Britain that advised how to prepare and act during an air raid, which the United States was believed to be in imminent danger of. The President of the American Library Association called for every library to become a “War Information Center,” able to offer materials and information about all aspects of the war.

Across the nation, libraries acted to prepare for attack. The Cleveland Public Library distributed bulletins about first aid and air raid procedures; the New Orleans Public Library similarly mass distributed a pamphlet entitled *Safety in Air Raids*.

When the United States began to form “defense councils” – groups of citizens who could coordinate local and state planning in the event of an attack – librarians often became active members. Libraries were volunteered as meeting places for these councils, and as places of shelter for the community. A 1942 ALA circulation called upon librarians to offer space in their buildings for air defense training, meetings, and shelter from bomb attacks. Libraries tinted windows to prevent their lights from attracting the

attention of bombers; they placed sand, shovels, and buckets of sand in or near the library for use if the library was bombed.

Libraries' involvements in the war efforts were varied and widespread. In his 2015 book *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*, Wayne Wiegand lists a few examples:

In Detroit the Office of Civilian Defense designated the library's "War Information Center the official place for information on the Red Cross, American women's Voluntary Service, the United Service Organizations (USO), and the Visiting Nurses Association. The Winchester (Massachusetts) Public Library invited a butcher to the library to show housewives how by skillful carving they could make their meat go further. The East Orange (New Jersey) Public Library exhibited pictures of 125 local men drafted into the war. At the Detroit Public Library seamstresses showed patrons how to hang drapes to darken houses at night. (p. 161)

While most of the literature focuses on the measures libraries took to protect the collection, or the other ways in which they assisted the war effort, there is a record of activities such as these: libraries taking on extra duties, supplying information that they would not normally provide, and hosting art and memorials that typically they would not include. Examples such as these, as well as other examples such as librarian involvement in defense councils, and the volunteering and preparation of libraries as shelters, demonstrate that libraries took an active role in defending their communities from the possibility of attack and aiding them in enduring the harder times of war.

Spencer (2014) continues in another paper that libraries took on a similar role in the 1950s, as the Cold War began to escalate. Again, librarians converted their buildings into fallout shelters and distributed survival information to the public. Instead of literature on how to endure a bombing, information now focused on nuclear strikes and how to prepare. Some libraries generated their own booklets and pamphlets, in addition to



distributing the publications of the government and other institutions; the Brooklyn Public Library offered guided tours of exhibits about modern warfare, in order to educate the public about nuclear warfare. Libraries ran film screenings of titles such as *You Can Beat the A-Bomb* and *Pattern for Survival*. At film screenings, librarians would distribute civil defense booklets, moderate discussion forums, and provide information about the library's other defense services.

Some libraries opened their doors and allowed civil defense groups to use their facilities for planning and training. The Red Cross was authorized to teach first aid classes in some library facilities; one of the New York Public Library's branches served as the city's civil defense headquarters. Had nuclear war indeed broken out, the library may have served as the seat of operations for the city's emergency government in the aftermath.

Librarians, community members, and government officials alike acknowledged the value of the library as a source and distributor of information. Spencer (2014) quotes:

...They could not claim to be the primary dissemination channel. Schools, civic groups, businesses, newspapers, television, radio, and mass mailings reached as many if not more Americans, but the library had a special role as a reliable, recognized, and permanent "reservoir of information for the use of the entire public," as Malmberg suggested to Congress. (p. 362)

When the government instituted the National Shelter Program in 1960, libraries were identified as particularly excellent shelters due to their "common ownership, thick walls, and reading rooms that could serve as emergency hospitals" (Spencer, 2014, p. 364). Libraries stocked themselves with supplies, ranging from food and beds to generators and medicine – the Boston Public Library even identified staff members who could play music to cheer patrons of the library in the event of a nuclear strike. The

Louisville Free Public Library offered its closed circuit broadcast network, which communicated between the various library branches, for use to the local civil defense coordinator. In the event of a nuclear strike, most TV and radio stations were expected to stop broadcasting, but the library's network would continue to function – offering the ability to broadcast potentially lifesaving information to other branches.

### **Libraries in Natural Disasters**

Once again, the bulk of the research in this area focuses on disaster planning intended to preserve library materials and save collections in the event of a natural disaster, and less on the library's role as a community member and its partnerships and relationships in the aftermath of crisis. However, some excellent research has been done, especially around events such as Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans, and other crisis events.

Featherstone, Lyon, and Ruffin (2008) conducted interviews with twenty-three North American librarians who responded to acts of terrorism, earthquakes, epidemics, fires, floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes. Rather than focusing solely on how librarians protected their collections, Featherstone et al. aimed to understand the activities and roles that librarians played in the aftermath of these crises. They ultimately divided these roles into eight broad categories: “institutional supporters, collection managers, information disseminators, internal planners, community supporters, government partners, educators and trainers, and information community builders” (Featherstone et al., 2008, p. 345). Institutional supporters were mostly observed in academic libraries as librarians provided support in aid to the university they were a part of; collection managers were librarians

who protected and continued to provide access to the collection; information disseminators were observed across all types of libraries, and were focused on spreading accurate and current information to patrons and the public. Internal planners made plans for their own library and worked to keep track of library staff. Community supporters encompassed a variety of tasks, including serving as a community gathering point, volunteering help, offering emotional support, and many other activities. Government partners assisted government services and community members with accessing one another for help; educators and trainers helped to train emergency responders for disasters, and information community builders focused on sharing and taking in resources to rebuild and replenish damaged or lost connections.

Welsh and Higgins (2009) conducted a similar study, analyzing the narratives of library and information science students who had experienced the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. When these narratives mentioned public libraries, eighty percent of the students recalled how the libraries were filled with refugees, evacuees, and relief workers. Further sixty percent remember the library providing computer access and assistance with filling out FEMA and Red Cross aid forms. Fifty percent recalled the librarians as listening and providing comfort to patrons in the library. Braquet in 2010 conducted a survey and interviewed survivors of the flooding in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and found that almost half of the survey respondents used libraries in the aftermath of the disaster. Patrons cited Internet access, information, mental escape, and refuge as reasons for visiting the library after the hurricane.

Assistance with accessing emergency aid from entities such as FEMA and the Red Cross emerges as one of the most common services that libraries provide in the aftermath of almost any natural disaster. Typically, aid forms for such entities are filled out online, requiring not only access to a computer and the internet, but also a degree of information and computer literacy to find, access, and complete. Libraries are frequently the best suited to provide this service to community members in need.

In addition to more typical library services like computer access and aid, the library has often been seen to serve as a community contact center in the aftermath of crisis. Bishop and Veil (2013) discuss the various ways libraries serve as physical places of community after tornado events. Libraries act as contact centers, where separated family members or acquaintances can reconnect and find one another; in addition to offering computers for aid, they offer Wi-Fi and electricity that can be used to charge cell phones and contact friends and loved ones. They also function as food distribution centers for government aid and NGOs, as well as providing a place where organizations such as FEMA, the Red Cross, and the National Guard can access the community and meet with residents who need relief.

### **Libraries as Community Members**

Bridging the gap between wartime and natural disasters, we see some events that take on the characteristics of both. One of the most notable of these events, and certainly one with the greatest impact on American history, is the attack of September 11, 2001. While more technically classifiable as an act of war - at least more so than it could be described as a natural disaster - the September 11 attacks played out in practice more like

a natural disaster. Rather than the prolonged period of preparation and planning that characterized library responses to World War II and the Cold War, libraries were forced to react to the September 11th attacks like a natural disaster: coping in the aftermath.

Wiegand (2015) quotes one such example from the day of the attacks:

Patrons were exceptionally hushed and subdued, and the only ongoing noise was the low hum of CNN on a television...wheeled into a reading area for the day,” reference librarian Stuart Hinds recalled. An elderly man asked about the location of the Twin Towers. “I retrieved a travel guide for New York City to pinpoint on a map exactly where they had stood.” Without talking they both studied the map, “Each of us silenced by the horrific events of the day, knowing that the towers depicted on the diagram - and the people inside - were no more. He then looked me in the eye, shook my hand, thanked me, and left the library. (p. 254)

Certainly it is not unique for users to use a library to watch television, or to examine a travel guide of New York. However, this very specific sort of emotional support is something that librarians are not typically called upon to provide. Outside of the delineated job duties of a librarian, in times of crisis they take on a role as sources of comfort, emotional support, and reassurance. Rather than acting solely as sources of information and access, they become community members, familiar and comforting to the library patrons that they serve.

In the aftermath of disasters, libraries take on not only this duty of emotional support, but also a number of additional roles outside of their typical services, in addition to their usual tasks of information gathering and preservation. Examining and comparing library actions in times of war and in times of natural disaster, a few consistent patterns begin to emerge across most responses.

Libraries begin to provide resources, both informational and practical, to their communities. This phenomenon persists throughout time, despite assumptions that the

Internet or other sources of information might dissuade patrons from turning to the library in times of need. Spencer (2008) notes this occurring even in World War II:

During the first few weeks after America's entry into the war, library usage dropped off as many Americans monitored the war through newspapers and radio. However, Americans soon visited libraries in greater numbers as they realized their need for instructions on civil defense measures. (p. 132)

More than fifty years later, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana state librarians observed a similar effect: although thirty-five percent of public libraries were closed, the overall number of library visitors was only down one percent, indicating that citizens still came to the library in the wake of the hurricane (Hamilton 2011).

In addition to these information resources, libraries often take part in the distribution of practical, physical resources. This pattern can be seen in the stockpiling of material goods for shelter in wartime libraries, or in the partnering of libraries with government and NGO relief organizations to distribute food and supplies in the aftermath of natural disasters. These resources can often be more ephemeral than clearly tangible, such as the availability of electricity to charge devices, or even the simple availability of the library as a climate-controlled, public space for those without a place to go.

Third and perhaps most important, libraries act as community centers in times of crisis. They offer a gathering place for community members to meet, discuss, and get some emotional relief from the crisis at hand. This can be through direct action, such as the librarians who took an active role in "defense councils" during wartime, or the librarians who were observed comforting and talking with emotional patrons in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It can also be through more passive means: the offering of a space, allowing a discussion forum to be hosted within the library, or encouraging library employees to sing a song to lift the spirits of refugees staying within the library.

Throughout time, these same patterns persist. Libraries act as information hubs for the community to gather information about their current crisis; they provide physical and practical resources beyond their usual scope; and they act as pillars of community support, offering emotional consolation and commiseration to both individual patrons and entire communities seeking familiarity and steadiness. The question then arises: are these same patterns reflected in the ways that libraries respond to social crisis? Do public librarians, when the community is in upheaval, take on these same extraordinary roles, outside of their duties to preserve collections and provide information services? Furthermore, if librarians do follow these patterns and perform these services, how does the community respond to that effort – appreciatively, or with hostility?

The rest of this paper will examine real-world examples of library response to these kinds of community upheaval. Examples will include the Ferguson Municipal Public Library, the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, and the Jefferson Madison Regional Library in Charlottesville. The library's actions will be analyzed and compared to the typical responses to military and natural disasters, and the community response to those actions assessed. The paper will attempt to determine if following the example of these other types of disasters results in more positive responses from the community, or if it creates negative responses from library patrons.

## Methods

This paper will adopt a qualitative approach, gathering data from published accounts and previously collected data in order to collect narratives surrounding libraries in times of community crisis. These narratives, accounts, and descriptions will be critically analyzed and compared to models and accounts of library responses to military and natural disasters, in order to compare and contrast the ways in which libraries respond to these different types of crisis.

The following sections will collect narratives, news reports, and interviews regarding three separate cases of public library responses to times of community social crisis. Three particular incidents will be studied: the 2014 unrest in Ferguson, Missouri following the death of Michael Brown, the 2015 protests in Baltimore, Maryland after the death of Freddie Gray, and the 2017 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. All three of these incidents marked points of heightened social and racial tensions in the community that necessitated a response from the local public library. This paper will lay out a timeline of events surrounding each incident, as well as the actions that these three libraries took during and in the aftermath of these crises, based on contemporaneous news reports, interviews, and testimony. The paper will then go on to examine the community response to each library's actions, in the form of donations, awards, news coverage, and public support of the libraries.

Based on these comparisons, this paper will determine if public libraries can emulate elements of responses to war and natural disaster in order to successfully respond to community crisis. It will also analyze the community response to the library's actions,



based on public reporting and statements, as well as funds and awards given to the libraries, in order to assess how positively the community receives these actions.

## Cases Studied

### Ferguson

The Ferguson protests over the shooting of Michael Brown sparked the national debate over police violence towards Black men. The protests went on for some time, calming for periods before arising again; for the purposes of this paper, the “Ferguson protests” will specifically refer to the incidents that took place over the course of late November 2014, following the decision of a federal grand jury not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for shooting Michael Brown.

The governor of Missouri had already declared a state of emergency on November 17, a full week prior to the grand jury’s decision. Even before the jury’s decision was handed down on November 24, school districts across Missouri had already announced that they would be closed. The library’s director - and, at the time, its sole full-time employee, Scott Bonner - said that he “spent all night agonizing about whether or not to open today” (“In This Together,” 2014, para. 2). Eventually, Bonner used social media to spread the word: the library would open as usual on Tuesday, November 25, at 9 AM.

The most noteworthy and most widely publicized of the library’s actions during the November unrest was its unofficial school activities. With schools and public services around Ferguson shut down, the library called on teachers and volunteers to come host classes for children who, in the absence of school, had nowhere else to be. The library had already undertaken this endeavor once; when schools closed during the initial unrest in August. During that initial shutdown, participation in the library’s unofficial school

expanded from roughly forty students on the first day, to over two hundred students by the end of the week (Berry, 2015). Even after the schools reopened, approximately two weeks into the scheduled school year, the program continued with assistance from the organization Teach for America.

Attendance was lower during the November unrest, when schools were again closed, but Bonner claimed that the library still hosted “scores” of students and their guardians (Peet, 2014). During the November school closure, the FMPL coordinated with Operation Food Search, a St. Louis based nonprofit, in order to provide lunch for children who would typically eat school lunches. In addition to classes, the library also hosted magic shows, arts and crafts, and other activities that could keep children entertained during the day and relieve some of the pressure on their parents and guardians.

In this, already some parallels to the wartime preparations of libraries can be seen in the Ferguson Municipal Public Library’s actions. With the school system already having been shut down once, and with a small amount of advance notice prior to the grand jury decision and subsequent shutdown, the library was able to prepare to host displaced students. They had experienced the situation before and had volunteers and networks already in place to begin their program again.

Beyond their “ad hoc school on the fly,” as Bonner referred to it, the FMPL began a host of other programs, initiatives, and events while the unrest rocked Ferguson. Beyond hosting an impromptu school, the library opened its spaces to a variety of businesses and government offices. The library invited the Small Business Administration to the library in order to help set up emergency loans once the governor had declared the area in a state of economic emergency (Berry, 2015). They held

listening sessions for small businesses to connect with nonprofit organizations that could help them with recovery costs, and a help session with the Missouri Department of Insurance as the department helped businesses that had suffered damage or losses in the protests file insurance claims for recovery. Starting on November 26, they hosted the Secretary of State's office as it helped "affected businesses recover/restore vital docs for insurance" (Ferguson Library, 2014).

After the initial protests in August, the FMPL was one of over a dozen galleries to host the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" art exhibit, a show organized by the Alliance of Black Art Galleries in response to Michael Brown's shooting. The FMPL hosted the exhibit from October to December 2014. The library also created and distributed what Bonner called "healing kits" for local children and their guardians. The healing kits included books about dealing with traumatic events, source material on civil rights history, information about where to access free or inexpensive mental healthcare, and a stuffed animal. The backpack and books had to be returned to the library; the stuffed animal was for children to keep (Berry, 2015).

Following the FMPL's actions over the course of November 2014, there was an enormous outpouring of public support for the library. Certainly some of this support was due to the library's adept usage of social media. The library's own use of social media, combined with the high level of national attention on the Ferguson unrest and the endorsement of several influential and high profile individuals, resulted in a wave of support and donations (Deutsch, 2014).

In the first two days following the schools shutting down, the FMPL received over 175,000 dollars in donations (Henderson, 2014). As of Wednesday, November 27th,

over 7,000 separate people had donated, many of which were in small amounts such as five or ten dollars (Hu, 2014). By June of 2015, the total donations to the library amounted to over 450,000 dollars - exceeding the library's annual budget of 400,000 dollars. The library also received new grants from the state of Missouri, as well as multiple private foundations (Berry, 2015).

Alongside new monetary donations, Hewlett-Packard collaborated with Marc Andreessen and his wife Laura Arrillaga-Andreessen to donate almost 170,000 dollars of computers and equipment to the FMPL and Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library (Guynn, 2015). The library was also named the 2015 Gale/LJ Library of the Year, in recognition of its actions and services during the crisis. As a result of their new funding, the library was since able to hire a second full-time staff member, as well as two more paraprofessional librarians (Berry, 2015). Lifelong Ferguson resident Cathy Bindbeutel told *Library Journal*:

These unfortunate events really did change my idea of what a library ought to be. The fact that the library stayed open and welcomed the students and teachers when school didn't start brought an amazing response. The library has just done so much. (Berry, 2015, para. 38)

Beyond the donations and accolades the FMPL received in the aftermath of the unrest, it solidified itself in the community and created a new relationship with the people the library serves. In May 2015, Bonner told *American Libraries Magazine*: "The library is busier every day than anyone [can] remember it being. Prime time after school, the library is standing-room only. I think on a larger scale, people know that we're here and appreciate what we're doing more" (Cottrell, 2015b, para. 11). For a library that had only a single full-time employee at the time, the FMPL had made its mark on the community.

## **Baltimore**

On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray was taken into police custody. While in police custody, he sustained injuries to his neck and spine that left him in a coma; a week later, he passed away. During Gray's coma and subsequent weeks, protests began to occur throughout the city and the police station, finally escalating into violent riots on Monday, April 27, following Gray's funeral. By the time the protests subsided in the first days of May, the Baltimore City Council reported that almost 150 vehicle fires and 60 structure fires had been lit; the Small Business Administration estimated that almost 9 million dollars in damage had been done to 285 businesses (Wenger, 2015).

Among the damaged businesses was a CVS Pharmacy, burned and looted on Monday, April 27. Directly across the street from that CVS was the Pennsylvania Avenue branch of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library, which stayed open throughout the protests and rioting. At only one point did the library close: when branch manager Melanie Townsend-Diggs looked out the front windows of the library and saw a mob approaching down the street, she locked the library doors and kept the patrons inside. Even as Townsend-Diggs notified patrons of the situation, "the attitude of the customers was, 'We're safe in here. We don't want to go,'" Townsend-Diggs told *Library Journal* (Peet, 2015, para. 4). Eventually Townsend-Diggs escorted patrons out of a side door, and all branches of the Enoch Pratt Free Library closed by 5:30 PM on Monday evening.

The next morning, with the city under a state of emergency, a curfew, and the local schools closed, the library opened at its usual time. To the surprise of library employees, not a single window was broken at any of the twenty-two branches of the library - not even the Pennsylvania Avenue branch, which stood across the street from the

looted CVS Pharmacy. A large mural of a young girl reading above the branch's windows continued to gaze over Pennsylvania Avenue undamaged.

With the city's schools closed for the day, the library chose to open to give students a place to go. In addition to the schools, local preschools and daycares had closed as well. The library held its regularly scheduled preschool story hour to a significantly larger crowd than normal, and several teachers stopped by the branch to offer their assistance.

During the more peaceful protests of Tuesday, the library served as a sort of gathering place for the community. Activists and reporters came in and out of the library to use its bathroom, its charging stations, and its Wi-Fi. A local Whole Foods supplied water and wraps to keep patrons hydrated and fed (Palmer, 2015).

"The library has been open the entire time. The library has been the community's anchor. It's the heart of the community at good times and bad times," Enoch Free Pratt Library CEO Carla Hayden told *American Libraries Magazine* (Cottrell, 2015a, para. 4). She also spoke about future plans for art and music programming at the library, "to capture what's going on and be a place where kids can talk about their feelings, capturing their experiences." (Cottrell, 2015a, para. 18)

By the Wednesday morning arrived, the community was already beginning to recover. Director of Communications Roswell Encina told MTV News that he came in to work in the morning to find an elderly gentleman sweeping the intersection in front of the library clean (Rosenfield, 2015). Encina described the community response on the day after the riots to *Library Journal*:

Yesterday a young woman...came up here to the Pennsylvania Avenue branch with an armful of pastries and flowers and said, 'I'm so grateful that you're open.

I got this for all of you. These two big guys were standing outside the library, and when we asked them ‘what are you guys doing?’ [They said,] ‘We want to protect your branch.’ (Peet, 2015, para. 14)

In the first week following the protests in Baltimore, the library received over 6,000 dollars in donations from people across the United States and Canada for its Pennsylvania Avenue branch alone. The PNC Foundation later offered the library a 25,000-dollar grant to acknowledge and commend their behavior during the protests (Leong, 2015). The Enoch Pratt Free Public Library also shared in the donation of almost 170,000 dollars worth of computer equipment that was donated to them and the Ferguson Municipal Public Library (Berry, 2015).

The library also received what MTV News described as an “outpouring of support” on Twitter and other social media platforms from members of the community, praising the library’s decision to stay open and thanking them for their presence (Rosenfield, 2015). Enoch Free Pratt Library CEO Carla Hayden described the community response (Cottrell, 2015a):

The community has been so grateful—“Thank you for being open. Thank you for having a safe haven.” Things are quiet. Things are normal. The gratitude of the public has sustained the staff. It’s not easy being on the front lines. It’s not easy being in the middle of the tense challenging situation, but having so many people coming in saying “thank you for what you’ve been doing.” It’s almost like they knew they can count on us. I’ve never been prouder to be a librarian. (para. 14)

## **Charlottesville**

On August 11, 2017, a coalition of far-right organizations convened on Charlottesville, Virginia, for a “Unite the Right” rally. Over the next days, white nationalist rally attendees and counter protesters clashed on and around the University of



Virginia campus, ultimately leaving three people dead and thirty-four injured (Peet, 2017).

Charlottesville's Jefferson Madison Regional Library is situated downtown, right in the middle of where the rally took place. Even before the rally officially began, the library found two signs with white supremacist messages left on their front door on August 10 (Inklebarger, 2017). Given advance notice and warning of the rally before it happened, the JMRL planned ahead of time to close, for the sake of the staff and patrons' safety.

The evening before the rally, the library closed and took extra precautions to ensure its safety. Garbage cans were brought inside the library so they could not be used as weapons; library vehicles, including bookmobiles, were moved away from the downtown location and placed elsewhere. The library curtailed its book delivery services downtown in the days before the rally, and even turned off the library Wi-Fi to discourage people from congregating around the library in order to use the Internet. Local police helped to remove the bricks from the garden in front of the library so that they could not be used to harm anyone or damage any properties (Peet, 2017).

On Saturday, August 11, library Director John Halliday remained in the building all day, in order to monitor the activity of the rally and protect the library space. The library had already given law enforcement permission to use its loading dock to gather and park police vehicles; police officers were also permitted to use the library restrooms and electricity. As the day progressed, the rally was eventually declared an unlawful gathering. When the streets and parks around the library began to empty out, Halliday offered the library to law enforcement for respite. Halliday emailed his employees: "With

Market Street and Emancipation Park nearly empty, I invited a few state troopers to come in and cool off, then a few more, now the library is full of exhausted, overheated police and soldiers. They are really knocked out” (Peet, 2017, para. 10).

The library eventually reopened at its usual time on Monday, August 13th. The library placed its typical sign, which read, “Libraries are for everyone,” in front of the building. A “Cville Strength” mural composed of rainbow popsicle sticks was also set up, where patrons could write comments about what makes their community strong and contribute them to the mural (Peet, 2017).

As time went on, the library hosted other support events. Library staff teamed up with local mental health professionals in order to provide free and confidential counseling sessions for community members, along with hosting “stress-relieving coloring” and therapy dogs for approximately two weeks after the rally took place (“Downtown Charlottesville Library Offers Free Counseling,” 2017). In December, the library hosted a debate by the group Gov360 where people with opposing views could be brought together to talk and debate (“Organization Aims to Bring Opposing Sides Together in Charlottesville,” 2017). Furthermore, when the University of Virginia libraries began gathering stories about the events of August 11 and 12, the library served as a collection point for patrons to contribute their experiences to UVA’s archive (Early, 2017).

In the aftermath of the rally, the JMRL has received “numerous calls and emails of support” from community members. Other libraries across the country organized gatherings in support of the Charlottesville community and library, including several moments of silence for Heather Heyer, a woman killed during the rally. (Peet, 2017)

However, the library did not report a significant increase in donations or funding, nor has it received any notable grants or awards in the time since the rally. However, less time has passed since the events of Charlottesville, relative to the protests in Baltimore and Ferguson, so more donations or awards may be forthcoming in the future. Farrell said that even before the protest JMRL was working with Wilson and others to further develop the library's response plan to include emergency and disaster scenarios.

(Inklebarger, 2017)

## Discussion

### Information Hubs

The beginning of this paper highlighted some of the extraordinary roles that libraries tend to take on in times of crisis. Among those roles is that of an information hub: a place where information and knowledge outside the typical domains of librarianship can be distributed to the community and patrons of the library. In times of war, libraries acted as distributors of military information: pamphlets on how to prepare for an air raid, training in how to make a piece of meat go further, films on how to duck and cover from an atomic bomb. Libraries during the Cold War hosted discussion panels and created guided exhibits about the history of modern warfare.

During the cases of modern social crisis highlighted here, similar patterns of information distribution can be seen. The Ferguson Municipal Public Library, for instance, engaged in many of the same behaviors that wartime libraries did. In the “healing kits” distributed by the library, the staff distributed information on the history of civil rights and racism in the community. The library opened its space and hosted the Secretary of State’s office so that they could continue and aid in their work of helping damaged businesses recover. Listening sessions and discussions with organizations ranging from the local Small Business Administration, Missouri Department of Insurance, and nonprofit organizations were held so that businesses could get in contact with organizations that could offer them loans or support to repair damages suffered. The library opened up for forums and discussions where people could express their feelings over the protests, the shooting of Michael Brown, and the history of racism in the region.

Charlottesville's Jefferson Madison Regional Library engaged in a similar tactic, hosting an open debate designed to bring people of opposing viewpoints into conversation with each other, reminiscent of the discussion panels hosted by libraries during the Cold War. Baltimore, of the three cases here examined, is the only library that did not prominently take on additional duties as a distributor of information.

### **Resource Distributors**

Another of the atypical duties that libraries adopt during times of stress is the role of resource distribution. These resources can vary from the plainly material to the more ephemeral. In the aftermath of natural disasters, libraries have historically been used as bases or centers of distribution where organizations like FEMA and the Red Cross can distribute food and other essential supplies to communities. Although largely never called into use, the some libraries stocked provisions, food, and medical supplies during World War II and the Cold War, in case the library was called upon to shelter and provide for patrons. In more modern times, libraries often become the providers of less tangible, but equally vital resources; internet connectivity and electricity provide patrons the ability to connect with loved ones, call for aid, and begin to recover from disasters.

Again, the FMPL serves as the most prominent example of this sort of behavior. Conceptualizing childcare and the labor of teachers and volunteers as a resource, the FMPL's "ad hoc school on the fly" provided an enormously valuable resource to the library's patrons. Parents who were financially unable to take time off work to supervise their children could safely leave their children at the library; students and children who would otherwise have lost valuable school time were able to still receive some lessons

and learning opportunities. The “school on the fly” was among the most widely recognized and praised aspects of the library’s response to the protests, showing just how valuable this resource was to the community. The EPFL in Baltimore engaged in a similar effort when the schools closed during their unrest; they held an expanded preschool story time for the children whose preschools and daycares were closed, and remained open for students who were displaced from closed schools.

As a more practical, tangible example, the FMPL partnered with Operation Food Search, a St. Louis nonprofit, in order to provide food to the students in the library who would normally eat school lunch. In a similar vein, the “healing kits” assembled by the staff provided practical resources on how to access free or low-cost mental health services for those affected by the protests. Beyond that, the healing kits provided a stuffed animal to young patrons in the library at a time when they needed comfort. Baltimore’s EPFL, similarly, worked with a nearby Whole Foods grocery store to provide food and water for the activists and reporters in the area. Many of those same patrons came to the library to use the Internet and charge their devices as they reported on, documented, or even organized the protests around the library. Charlottesville, at least in the immediate period of the rally, did not offer any resources of this nature; in fact, the JMRL turned off its Wi-Fi on the evening before the rally was scheduled to take place, in order to discourage people from congregating around the library.

### **Safe Spaces**

The third and most difficult to define of the extraordinary roles the library assumes is that of the emotional safe space. An intersection of both the library’s role as a

physical space and as a community member, the library acts as a place where community members can convene for emotional support and safety in the midst of a crisis. This service is difficult to document, as it is individualized, ephemeral, and hard to clearly define. Public libraries identified specific librarians to play music and sing to soothe patrons in the event of a bombing during WWII; patrons reported that they came to the library for “refuge” and “mental escape” in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; a librarian helped a patron to find the exact location of the World Trade Center on a New York map on September 11, 2001.

Ya-Ling Lu (2008) addressed this concept in her article, “Coping Assistance vs. Reader’s Advisory.” “Finally, it would be helpful for librarians to reexamine their duties and responsibilities in another context, that of providing information or reading as a healing tool and not just as an educational or recreational device” (p. 21). Even the more routine activities of the library, or the theoretically neutral fact of the library’s physical space takes on an emotional context in periods of crisis. The physical space of the library, and the simple act of opening the library, normally entirely routine and expected, can become a space of emotional support.

In the face of the protests and rioting within their communities, both the Ferguson Municipal Public Library and the Enoch Pratt Free Library chose to stay open during the unrest, albeit with some adjustments to hours or temporary closures when safety became a concern. Of the three cases examined here, only the Jefferson Madison Regional Library closed for the duration of the rally in Charlottesville.

In any crisis, the safety of the library staff should be of the highest importance; all the goals of librarianship and community building are contingent upon the staff of the

library feeling safe and able to do their work. Every librarian spoke extensively of safety when deciding whether or not they chose to stay open. Scott Bonner sat up late, watching social media and the news, trying to decide whether or not to open the library in the morning. When the FMPL did decide to open during the protests, the library's Facebook post stated that “the Ferguson Municipal Public Library will stay open as long as it is safe for patrons and staff.” (Ferguson Municipal Public Library, 2014). Melanie Townsend-Diggs of Baltimore had to lock the library’s doors against a passing mob, and the library only opened the next day after a long conference call between the managers of the library decided it would be safe enough. EPFL’s Roswell Encina described the call to Library Journal: “Do we open on Tuesday? And everybody’s decision was a resounding yes, from the staff as well. We all understood that with the schools out, the kids needed a place to go. The public needed somewhere to go” (Peet, 2015, para. 9). As CEO Carla Hayden told American Libraries Magazine, “If we close, we’re sending a signal that we’re afraid or that we aren’t going to be available when times are tough. We should be open especially when times are tough” (Cottrell, 2015a, para. 9). When the JMRL decided to close on the day of the rally, they cited safety as their main concern. Announcing their decision on July 24, well ahead of the day of the rally, the library’s statement read: “The Board regrets having to close the library, but in the interest of safety for library staff and visitors it seemed closing the building was the prudent thing to do” (Peet, 2017, para. 6).

No library was misguided in their concern for safety. The rally and counter protests in Charlottesville did result in three deaths and thirty-four injuries (Peet, 2017); Baltimore suffered over 9 million dollars in damages to various businesses in the course



of only a few days of protests (Wenger, 2015). The Ferguson protests caused around 5 million dollars in damages (Deere & Kohler, 2014), with as many as twenty-five buildings or businesses burned (“The Damage in Ferguson,” 2014). Each library had valid reason to fear for the safety of their staff and patrons, and each staff chose what they thought safest and best for their situation.

It is, however, important to note the results. The FMPL never suffered damages during the protests; Bonner reported that one night several individuals attempted to kick in the library door after it closed, but ran off when Bonner came to the door to confront them (Peet, 2014). No branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library was damaged in the Baltimore unrest, even while a pharmacy directly across the street was burned and looted (Peet, 2015). The Charlottesville library prepared thoroughly to protect the library and its property from damage, and while two signs with white supremacist messages were left on the library door the day before the rally, the library suffered no damage during the rally itself. While the library’s decision to close was understandable, the closing of the Charlottesville library nevertheless denied the library a chance to serve its community.

Interestingly, the JMRL did choose to offer the library as a physical sanctuary to a certain group: the law enforcement officials policing the rally. Certainly in the mid-August heat of Virginia the use of an air-conditioned space to cool off was appreciated by police officers. Director Halliday also offered the police use of the library’s loading dock to park police vehicles, and access to the library’s restroom and electricity. A further study might examine whether or not the police force’s opinion of the library was affected by the fact that these services were offered only to them, and whether or not the police’s feelings were aligned with the rest of the community to whom the library was closed.

## Summary

Comparing the actions taken by these three libraries during times of social and community crisis, it is evident that many of the actions taken by the libraries reflect or mimic the responses of libraries to natural disaster and war. Each library demonstrably took on at least two of the three identified roles that public libraries often adopt in the wake of disaster: information hubs, resource centers, and emotional safe spaces. The FMPL in Ferguson is the only library that clearly took on all three roles, demonstrating a commitment and service to its community that was unmatched by either of the other two cases.

Similarly, all three libraries received broadly positive public support of their actions during these periods. News coverage of the libraries was almost universally sympathetic and supportive, describing the libraries as offering “unity” (Peet, 2017) or “a haven” (Palmer, 2015). However, of the three, the FMPL received the most accolades and attention by far. Donations to the library exceeded 450,000 dollars; it received new grants and funding, and was named Library Journal’s Library of the Year for 2015 (Berry, 2015). Baltimore’s EPFL, similarly, received an influx of donations that totaled over 6,000 dollars, alongside a 25,000 dollar grant and almost 175,000 dollars worth of computer equipment that they shared with the FMPL (Leong, 2015). In contrast, although press coverage has been positive and the library reports calls of support and praise, the JMRL in Charlottesville did not report any wave of donations, nor has it received any new grants or awards in the time since the rally in 2017.

While further studies of greater scientific rigor would be necessary to establish clearer causation, a pattern does seem to be emergent in the library's response, and the subsequent community reception of that response. It was the Ferguson library that most clearly and visibly responded to the unrest as if it were a natural disaster, and it was subsequently the Ferguson library that received the most support and following praise. The Baltimore library, which openly patterned its response on Ferguson's, also demonstrated nearly as many of the patterns of disaster response as Ferguson did; later, it would also receive donations and grants, although significantly less than Ferguson did. Finally, the Charlottesville library, which, like Baltimore, demonstrated two of the three traits of libraries in disaster response, received little to no donations or awards for their actions, although public response and coverage of the library remained positive.

### **Complicating Factors**

Each of these three events was unique, creating some complications in directly comparing the libraries' choices to one another. Most notably, the Ferguson protests were on a significantly larger scale than either the Baltimore protests or the Charlottesville rally. Ferguson's unrest took place over the course of weeks and caused a greater shutdown of public services in the area, creating a much greater need for the support offered by the library. Furthermore, the protests in Ferguson were arguably the first of their kind; the death of Michael Brown and the subsequent unrest in the city sparked the Black Lives Matter movement that has defined many subsequent protests and events.

As a result of both scale and novelty, the Ferguson protests received far more national attention than either of the other two events. This increased scope was

augmented by the FMPL's use of social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook. The FMPL's social media account went viral during the protests; prominent figures including Neil Gaiman and Rachel Maddow promoted the library as a place to donate to support the city of Ferguson through the unrest. It should not be surprising, then, that the FMPL received much more in the way of donations and money, as they had far more exposure and national attention than either of the other two libraries.

Furthermore, the nature of the unrest was very different across the scenarios. Although all broadly mark instances of race-related social conflict, the protests in Baltimore and Ferguson were very different from the alt-right rally that took place in Charlottesville. In Baltimore and Ferguson, citizens of a city were protesting a perceived injustice done to their community. In Charlottesville, the majority of the rally attendees came into the city from other areas of the country, and rather than people of a minority group protesting injustice, represented members of a political group advocating for a white nationalist ideology. It should be noted at this point that Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charlottesville are very demographically different cities. The populations of both Ferguson and Baltimore are majority Black by a considerable margin: 67.4% and 63.7%, respectively. Charlottesville, in comparison, is over 69% white, with Black people making up only 19.4% of the city's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

However, despite the fact that the unrest in Charlottesville was not caused by members of the community, it could be argued that the library might have served an even greater role in such a situation. When the city was placed in a state of emergency, the library could have stepped into a vital role to provide a sanctuary and safe haven for the community members threatened or frightened by the alt-right rally attendees.

Nevertheless, the situation was clearly distinct from that of Baltimore or Ferguson, and it should not be surprising that the Charlottesville library reacted differently than either of the others.

## Conclusions

Examining the three cases within this paper, some trends do seem to emerge. Public libraries, to a greater or lesser extent, do seem to exhibit the same patterns of disaster response during social crises as they do during wars and natural disasters. Libraries tend to adopt roles as community information centers, distributors of resources, and emotional safe spaces to support their communities in times of crisis. Furthermore, it would seem that the more libraries exhibit these behaviors, the more positively communities respond to the libraries' actions.

Several factors may influence how well libraries respond, and how well their responses are received. Firstly, severity undoubtedly plays a role. The Ferguson protests went on far longer and received far more national attention than either Baltimore's protests or Charlottesville's rally, and Ferguson accordingly received much greater praise and more donations. It could be argued that the greater the stress upon the community, the more instrumental the library can be in mitigating it. Certainly if Ferguson's schools had not been closed for several weeks, then the library would have had no need to open its "ad hoc school on the fly," and would probably as a result have received far less attention.

However, consider that the Charlottesville rally, while brief, ended in several fatalities and received widespread national coverage; even so, the response to the library's actions was much less enthusiastic than the response to Ferguson. It may be more accurate to conclude that the more severe the crisis, the greater the opportunity

available to the library to support its community and create a positive bond with their patrons.

From the three cases investigated here, it may also be possible to conclude that immediacy is a factor in how well the library's response is viewed. One key difference between the cases of Baltimore and Ferguson and the case of the Charlottesville library is the timeframe in which the library responded. Baltimore's EPFL and Ferguson's FMPL were open and providing services to their communities immediately, while the crisis was ongoing; Charlottesville's JMRL closed while the crisis happened, and reopened and began providing services once the situation had passed. Although the roles that the JMRL took on and the services it provided were admirable, they did not receive the positive community response of Baltimore and Ferguson. It could be argued that the immediacy of the responses, and the library's availability not just after but also during a crisis, is a key factor in determining how well the community receives the library's actions.

Immediacy being a factor in how well a library's actions are received should only encourage librarians to engage in disaster planning for social crisis as they do for natural disasters. If it can be argued that being able to respond quickly and decisively to a crisis is an important factor in responding well, then librarians should actively prepare so that they can respond immediately in the event of a crisis within their community. As was discussed in the literature review, it has been observed that patrons flock to the library in the aftermath of a natural disaster; librarians should be prepared for them to do the same in the midst of a social crisis.

Furthermore, an emphasis on a swift response should encourage librarians to focus more on responding quickly and openly rather than perfectly. In creating a bond

with the community, the simple fact of the library's open doors and available spaces might be enough to create a positive impression with library patrons. Rather than worrying about responding perfectly, creating ideal programs, and making sure the library operates flawlessly, it arguably may be more important to simply have the library open to the community. As FMPL's Scott Bonner said, "I'd rather do too much and have things go sideways than do too little" (Berry, 2015, para. 15).

If there is one conclusion that can be taken away from these three cases, it is the vital support that an engaged and active library can provide to its community in times of crisis. As far back as World War II, the library has served as a source of support and comfort to its patrons. Wiegand quotes a librarian at the New York Public Library in 1945, telling the story of a young Jewish woman who came to the library to learn more about her own culture after hearing that her family had been killed: "The impregnable position of the Library - being intolerant only of intolerance...gives the institution at this time a graciousness that is needed by many depressed people in the neighborhood" (Wiegand, 2014, p. 161). As Wiegand himself points out, the reality of the library is far from this lofty ideal; libraries are frequently intolerant, and often lacking in graciousness. But even so, the library is impregnable in the mind of the community; to the people who patronize it, the library is a place where patrons are safe. Rebecca Hamilton of the State Library of Louisiana made a similar observation in her 2011 paper concerning the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: "I believe that people came to libraries because it is embedded in our psyche that libraries are safe and that people there will assist you. Even people that had never been library users came to public libraries" (p.43).



Compare these two impressions of libraries to that of Carrie Pace, the Ferguson art teacher who first approached Bonner about hosting classes for students while schools were closed: “I expected a library to step up and do this sort of thing. That was the first place I turned to because I kind of expected it would step up. I thought libraries could play the role that it did” (Berry, 2015, para. 23). In the midst of a crisis in her city, unable to provide for her students in the way she was accustomed to, Pace turned to the library on the assumption that they could and would help.

Again, the reality of libraries is frequently very different from the expectations and beliefs that patrons have about them. In many cases a library would be unable to provide the help Pace was seeking. A small library with a freshly cut budget and a single full-time staff member could very easily have turned down Pace’s idea, kept to its normal operations, or even closed entirely in the face of the protests wracking the city. Fortunately for the community and the library, Scott Bonner took the opportunity and made the most of it. “When there's a need, we try to find a way to meet it. I have a very broad definition of librarianship,” Bonner told NPR (Hu, 2014, para. 5).

However much we would like to be and however much we might imagine ourselves to be, libraries are not impregnable bastions of tolerance. Frequently, even routinely, libraries fail our patrons and our communities; we lack the graciousness that, in our patrons’ minds, defines the library as an institution deserving of respect and reverence.

It is imperative that libraries prepare ourselves not just for the everyday duties of librarianship, but for extreme situations and times of crisis, when we may be required to go beyond our typical responsibilities in order to serve our communities. From the Civil

War to the Civil Rights movement to the Black Lives Matter movement, these types of social crises and upheavals have happened historically and are not likely to stop happening any time soon. As librarians, if we seek to do our jobs well, then we ought to be prepared for them to happen.

As Enoch Pratt Free Library Director of Communications Roswell Encina told MTV News: “It’s at times like this that the community needs us. That’s what the library has always been there for, from crises like this to a recession to the aftermath of severe weather. The library has been there” (Rosenfield, 2015, para. 3). If libraries want to stay relevant, if we want to deepen our bonds with the communities we serve and remain an important part of public life, we must be ready to respond when crisis strikes, no matter the nature of the crisis. Be it a hurricane, a foreign power, or a riot in the streets, the library has been there. We must continue to be.

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