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Documenting disaster

Summary

The practicality, and morality, of focusing attention on library and information services at times of national disasters and difficulties is discussed.

Keywords: natural disasters, political upheaval, library and information services

The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 occupied the attention of the media, and elicited worldwide horror and sympathy, as few other events have ever done. Among the responses was that of the international library/information community, with support from individuals and associations, co-ordinated through international bodies, UNESCO and IFLA. Even as such aid was being announced, there seemed to a feeling of some unease, as though it were somehow unseemly to think about such issues in the middle of human catastrophe. As the statement from the CILIP, the UK's main professional body, put it:

'given the immensity of the disaster and the urgency of the need to supply food, water, sanitation, shelter and medical assistance as well as the need to deal promptly but sensitively with physical debris and human remains it is likely to be some time before attention turns to library services in the process of reconstruction and renewal' (CILIP 2005).

Somehow, it seems insensitive, bordering on offensive, to be concerned about such a seemingly quiet and tidy peripheral activity as information provision, in the midst of such extreme human misery.

In a slightly less dramatic context, we have heard much of the role of libraries and similar institutions as supporting free access to information and knowledge, often heralded as one of the fundamental human rights. It may be argued, however, that this is not always as self-evident as those of us in the information professions might like to think (Robinson and Bawden 2001). And, as Yilmaz (1999) reminds us:

'the phrase "right to information" for a person who is hungry, who does not have enough money to live, who is not educated, and who does not have freedom, does not have any meaning'.

We should not, however, be too quick to take a negative view of the value of information and knowledge in time of national disasters and upheavals. One of the enduring images from the aftermath of the tsunami will surely be the searching of those desperate for news of their friends and relatives. Lack of certain knowledge in such a situation can, and does, blight lives. On a less emotive level, we have seen a seeking for understanding of how the event could have happened: from whether it can be attributed to the actions of an angry God to why no warning system was in operation. Information, knowledge and understanding - in many different guises - are surely at the centre of the processes of recovering from such terrible events.

Focusing on more formal information systems, Marianna Tax Choldin's article in the 'JDoc at 60' series, which appears in this issue, reminds us of how the revitalisation of library services played a part in the recovery and development of many European countries following the 1939-45 war, and again following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Similarly, Paul Sturges' papers dealing with information-related aspects of national liberation struggles, published in this Journal, emphasise the importance of information in this form of political upheaval.

It seems clear that we should not under-state the significance of information and knowledge, including formal documentation systems, in dealing with traumatic world events. As the papers reprinted with Tax Choldin's article remind us, this has been a concern of *Journal of Documentation* for many years, and continues to be so.

David Bawden

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