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Library Life in the Shadow of the Pentagon: Reflections on What We Experienced and What We Learned

Patricia A. Wand
American University

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Library Life in the Shadow of the Pentagon; Reflections on What We Experienced and What We Learned

by *Patricia A. Wand*
University Librarian,
American University
ALA Councilor for the
Association of College and
Research Libraries (ACRL)

Our lives have changed irrevocably since September 11, 2001. The airlines, post office, federal and local governments, medical professionals, newspapers and magazines, all are sources of information preparing us for another elusive, unpredictable terrorist incident. For the first time in its 227-year history, the United States, like so many other countries, is vulnerable to terrorism aimed to change its infrastructure.

Here in Washington, D.C., formerly open streets and vital thoroughfares are now cordoned off and motorists search for alternative routes. We see impediments to building entrances where they never existed before: the U.S. Capitol, Library of Congress, virtually every federal government building. It's hard to remember when one is confronted by cement barricades, armed officers and high tech security systems that these buildings are, after all, public facilities and that we as citizens have a right to enter them.

In this climate of fear, our library lives have changed as well. "Service" has been the library mantra for decades and the policies that form the underpinnings to some of our most treasured values are now being questioned. Privacy, confidentiality of user records, collection policies, exhibit content, and building use by diverse groups are examples of library values that may be compromised in the rush to prevent another terrorist attack in the U.S.

Experiences in one campus library in the nation's capital

American University Library, located in the District of Columbia and within six miles of the Pentagon, was drawn into the crisis immediately on September 11, 2001.

All emergency personnel in the region were focused on the Pentagon. Federal employees were sent home and virtually


all offices in the city were closed. After passenger airline flights were cancelled, the sounds of fighter jets overhead were reminders that we were in an all-out alert. Middle Eastern students were fearful to be seen on the streets. It was a strange and eerie environment.

Torn between closing to ensure the safety of our employees as they fled the city and keeping the library doors open to offer a normal environment for our 3,500 students in campus residence halls, we made the decision to stay open with greatly reduced staffing. As I walked around the library that day I felt an indescribable hush and saw fewer readers than I had ever before seen in the building.

Immediately after the second plane hit the World Trade Center towers, we moved a large-screen television into the library lobby and kept it on newscasts for the rest of the day. The television created a gathering place for patrons and staff alike where we supported one another and followed the latest developments of that unforgettable day. Many University employees had family and friends whose lives touched either the Pentagon or World Trade Center and we all shared the anxiety of not knowing. Although there were several narrow escapes, including a friend of mine who walked down from the 73rd floor of the first tower hit, no one in the library lost a family member or close friend.

Another trauma, too close for comfort

Two days later, while we were still coping with the shock of 9/11, American University was victim to a copycat prank. A bomb threat was received about 9:30 a.m. on September 13, warning that the entire campus would blow at 12 noon. Whereas bomb threats to specific buildings were not unusual, especially during exam periods, no bomb threat to the whole campus had ever been received. As campus administrators were conferring behind closed doors about the appropriate response to the threat, a second call was received in a



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residence hall, repeating the same warning. The news of a second bomb threat, identical to the first and received by a different campus office, led to the decision to evacuate the campus by 10:30 a.m.

Classes were interrupted, student residents were forced out of bed, children were carried from the daycare center, buildings were evacuated, and campus businesses forced customers out the doors and locked them. Everyone on campus was told to assemble in a nearby parking lot. Immediately University administrators were confronted with how to deal with the basics: restrooms, water, and food for thousands of people.

Students still in pajamas wondered how to get shoes, parents searched for children from the daycare center, staff worried about keys and valuables they had left in offices. Everyone worried about how to contact loved ones who may be picking up media announcements already being broadcast about the emergency on American University campus. No one knew for sure how long we would be evacuated nor the source of the bomb threats. We only knew that if we made it past 12 noon, the campus might be safe for our return.

Fortunately it was a beautiful day so we were not coping with rain, snow or freezing temperatures. In the end, food and water were provided by neighborhood stores and restaurants; nearby churches opened their facilities for restrooms; and

cell phones helped to keep people in contact. Many people, after consulting with supervisors and establishing mechanisms for communicating, temporarily left the area for lunch and rest. By 1:45 p.m., after the bomb squads and dogs had searched the grounds and every building, campus was reopened and we began re-establishing our routines.

Preparing for disasters before 9/11

In the early 1990s American University Library personnel compiled a comprehensive disaster preparedness manual and a companion piece in the form of a laminated “crib sheet” that is assigned to each service desk and office. The planning efforts have paid off on numerous occasions: floods, fire alarms and serious medical emergencies. On September 13, 2001 when the entire campus had to be evacuated, library personnel carried their training to a new level.

When we all fled to the parking lot, library personnel knew that a “library spot” had to be designated and everyone needed to know where to assemble. The early ones out the door gathered a critical mass from the library in a shady area near the back of the lot. They then helped to spread the word as they spotted other staff from the library in the crowd. They intercepted me as the last person out of the library and led me to where the 80 or so others were assembled by this time. Many people had grabbed those “crib sheets” along with their lists of staff emergency telephone numbers and cell phones. All of these became particularly valuable as we coped with the crisis.

A few days later we learned of another way that the library disaster preparedness planning had paid off. The young woman who received the second bomb threat, not knowing about the first bomb threat that morning, was a student working at the reception desk in a residence hall. She was



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also a part-time student assistant in the library who had been briefed the previous day by her library supervisor about what to do in emergency situations. Those procedures, fresh in her mind, kicked into gear. She recorded the critical data from the caller and immediately reported the information to campus security. Her

training and attention to detail lead to the safe evacuation of campus and eventually to tracking the source of the two calls. A disgruntled student was identified and prosecuted.

Following so closely on the heels of 9/11 when awareness of pending terrorist disasters and adrenaline were so heightened, the events of September 13 drove home on a very personal level what it feels like to be in a war zone. We were forced out of our familiar workplaces and displaced into new environments where sources of food, water, clothing and shelter were unknowns. I can now identify more easily with people around the globe who live through tragedies of war or natural disasters. The fear of not knowing what will happen next was a new sensation and one that caused great anxiety among us. Reflecting on this life-altering experience, I have come to regard the environment in the U.S. previous to September 11, 2001 as Camelot.

Preparing for disasters after 9/11

In the days that followed the bomb threats, the University responded most appropriately. Administrators immediately collected copies of emergency preparedness plans from campus offices where they existed. They gathered employees representing each unit to participate in designing a University master plan for responding to emergencies and to undergo training so they could provide emergency support.

That master plan was released in April 2002 and the library is now adapting its own plan so that the two are aligned. In addition, we are designing new training so that library personnel will be prepared to respond to new types of threats.

What are the “new” threats to libraries? The plans that libraries compiled in the 1990s and earlier prepared us to cope with floods, fire, bomb threats and theft. Now we must consider bio-terrorism to water, air and postal systems; violent attacks to buildings; criminal use of library computer equipment; and assaults on patrons or staff. Truly we face a new and more complex set of challenges.

In addition to cataclysmic physical disasters, we must be prepared for threats to our values. How do we respond when law enforcement agents enter our libraries and demand to see the circulation records of our borrowers? What do we tell government agents who want to confiscate computer hard drives to track the Web-searching habits of patrons? What do we say when they ask librarians to monitor the use of public meeting spaces by “suspect” groups. How do we answer patrons who question the content of exhibits featuring Middle Eastern traditions or the Koran?

Are we prepared as individuals? Do we have procedures clearly articulated? As managers are we giving our staff the words to use for coping with these unexpected but highly likely scenarios? It has become essential for staff in all areas of the library to be prepared to respond to unusual emergencies and demands.

Fortunately librarians have resources from which to draw as we face these challenges. There is no need for each library to start from scratch. We can share our talents and, for example, stretch the missions of our consortia. Several libraries together can establish a task force to draft emergency preparedness plans that can then be adapted by each library to its unique community.

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Libraries' Responses


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lbrary) received donations of materials from the local Islamic and Jewish communities for the Library's collection during 2001 and 2002. Working with these community groups, OIT sponsored a speakers' series in the Fall of 2002, according to Marita Kunkel, Director of the Library.

In April 2002, the **Newport Public Library** sponsored a program by Afghan-American photographer Ibrahim Wahab, reported Reference Coordinator Sheryl Etheridge. Entitled *Where is Afghanistan?*, the program documented Wahab's recent two-month visit to his homeland. Sheryl observed, "Many people spoke up and asked what they personally could do to help. They came to the program to learn about Afghanistan, and left with a fresh, new perspective."

The Rev. Peter Marshall wrote, "Life is measured not by its duration but by its donation." The quality of our professional life is indeed measured by the donation

that we make to our clients of our unique professional skills. We must not think that our response in any library was unimportant or insignificant: all of us who thought about the nature of our work and the needs of our clients, and who used the resources we had to meet those needs—all of us were responding to the sudden and special crisis in our communities. And I use the term "community" deliberately to mean those people whom we serve, regardless of the type of library we work in. Academic and special libraries have communities of users, just as public and school libraries have communities.

The examples described in these pages are only a partial demonstration of the response of Oregon libraries. They are, however, exemplary in their scope and initiative. When we look back on the effects of September 11, we can be proud of the responses that Oregon librarians made to this historic crisis. 


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The American Library Association's Washington Office has brought together valuable "best practices" in its Web site on privacy, and frequently sponsors programs at conferences addressing these issues. The ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom has prepared numerous statements and guidelines over the years that can be incorporated into our plans. As libraries we are accustomed to sharing resources and this is an opportune time to do so.

Threats to the values of library service in a democracy have always been present. But in this climate, when everyone has experienced the fear of terrorism, there is more sympathy for the threats to become reality in our libraries. Sympathy for restricting privacy, confidentiality and

intellectual freedom lies not just within our communities but also among our administrators; perhaps even among ourselves.

The USA PATRIOT Act, an acronym that stands for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism, passed in 2001 and is in place. This is a time to be mindful of our values, our policies and the law. This is a time to establish the parameters of how far we each are willing to go to protect the intellectual freedom of library users on the one hand, and to protect our communities on the other. 

The ALA Washington Office URL is: www.ala.org/washoff/patriot.html

