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The Iowa City Flood of 2008: A Librarian and IT Professional's Perspective

Do you like to chase fire trucks? Do you enjoy watching a raft of adventurers go over the waterfall, careening from rock to rock? Well, this is a story of the Iowa City flood of 2008, a flood projected to happen once every five hundred years, from the perspective of a librarian and IT professional.

The approach of the flood

The winter of 2008 was hard, and we got mounds of snow. The spring was wet that year in Iowa City. It rained almost every day. Minnesota's snow melt-off hadn't been released from the reservoir due to the heavy rains. Everyone watched the river rise, day by day. The parks were underwater; the river was creeping up toward buildings, including the University of Iowa.

In early June, with about a day and a half notice, library staff at the university's main library, art library, and music library were told to evacuate. One of the first acts of evacuation was the relocation of all of the library servers to the engineering building up the hill—high and dry—literally rolling them across the street and up the sidewalk. Although all servers were relocated to engineering, engineering didn't have enough power in their server room to handle the extra capacity to run all of our machines. The five Primo servers that run our Discovery searching service had to stay disconnected.

With the servers safe and sound, we moved our attention to staff workstations. The personal workstations of the administrative staff and the finance department were moved to the business library. The libraries' laptops were collected and moved into the branch libraries, which would be receiving displaced staff. Many staff would be expected to work from public clusters in the various library branches, locked down to specific functions.

As library staff were collecting their critical possessions, the town was madly sandbagging. More than a million sandbags were piled around university buildings, private businesses, and residences. In retrospect, some of the sandbags may have made a difference, but since the flood was so much greater than anticipated, the water largely went over and around, leaving a lot of soggy sandbags.

On June 13, the day before the main library was to be closed, the decision was made to move books up from the basement. There were well over 500,000 volumes in the



Boxes of manuscripts being stacked on the fifth floor
Photo by Carol Jonck



Moving boxes out of the basement
Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa News Service

basement, and a group of approximately five hundred volunteers moved 62,000 volumes and 37,000 manuscript boxes from the lower shelves. Volunteers passed books hand to hand into the third, fourth, and fifth floors of the building. A number of the volunteers came from sandbagging teams. Individuals who had never been in a

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Library staff and volunteers sandbagging
Photo by Carol Jonck

library, didn't know what a circulation desk was, or what a Library of Congress call number was were working hard side by side with physicians, ministers, scientists, students, and retirees. The end result was not orderly, but the collection was saved from the encroaching river. The libraries at the University of Iowa are indebted to these volunteers who helped protect the collection from the expected water.

■ The river peaks

Approximately twenty university buildings were closed because of the flood, including the main library, the art building, and the music building. The university's power plant was closed. The entire arts campus was deeply under water. Most of the main roads connecting the east side of Iowa City to the west side were closed, and most of the highways into Iowa City were closed. Interstate 80 was closed in multiple places, and no traffic was allowed from the east side of the state to the west side. Many bridges in and around Iowa City were closed; some had actually crumbled and floated down stream.

So the president of the university, Sally Mason, closed the university for the first time in its history. Most staff would not be able to get to work anyway. Many individuals were struggling with residences and businesses that were under water. The university was to be closed for the week of June 15, with the university's hospitals continuing to operate under strained conditions; continued



The beginning of a book chain to the fourth floor
Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa News Service



Moving books out of the basement
Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa News Service

delivery of patient services was a priority.

Most library staff stayed home and followed the news stories, shocked at the daily news of destruction and loss. Select library IT staff began working in the background to set up new work environments for library staff returning to foreign workstations or relocated work environments.

At the flood's peak, the main library took several inches of water in the basement. There was slight rusting in the compact shelving, but the collection was completely saved. A portion of the basement was lower, and the computer equipment controlling the libraries' public computer cluster was completely ruined. This computer cluster housing more than two hundred workstations

was completely out of commission. The basements and first floors of the art and music buildings were completely ruined, but the libraries for these disciplines were on higher floors. The collections were spared, but there was absolutely no access to the building.

The libraries take baby steps to resume service

After a week of being completely shut down, the university opened to a first day of summer school, but things were not the same. For the nineteen university buildings that had been flooded, hordes of contractors, subcontractors, and laborers began the arduous task of reclamation. University staff could work at home when that was possible, and most of the library's dislocated reference staff did that, developing courses for the fall, progressing on selection work, and so on. Staff could take vacation, but few chose this option. Approximately 160 staff from the main library and the art and music libraries were reassigned to four branch libraries that were not affected by the flood. All of Central Technical Services (CTS) and Interlibrary Loan staff were assigned to the Hardin Health Science Library. Central shipping and facilities was also at Harden Library, thus the convoluted distribution of mail started from here. Most of the public machines were taken by CTS staff, but their routine work proceeded very slowly. CTS did not have access to OCLC until the end of their flood relocation, which seriously impacted their workflow.

An early problem that had to be solved was providing telephones and printing to relocated staff. Virtually none of the relocated staff had dedicated telephones, even the administration. In any given location the small number of regular branch staff graciously shared their phones with their visitors. Sharing equipment tended to be true for printers as well. For a few critical phone numbers in the main library, the phone number was transferred to a designated phone in the branch. Thus often, when regular staff or student workers answered a phone, they had no idea what number the originating caller was trying to call. Staff were encouraged to transfer their office phone number to their cell phone.

At the business library, the library administrative staff and the finance staff had their personal workstations,



Library staff sandbagging
Photo by Donald Baxter

which had been moved on the last day before the evacuation. Much of this administrative work could proceed, and during the first week at the business library our finance department successfully completed our end-of-year rollover process on all our materials funds. Staff from the music library, art library, preservation, and special collections were assigned to the business library. The engineering library adopted the main library circulation and reserve departments.

The media services staff was relocated to the physics library. The media staff had cleverly pulled most of the staff development videos and made them available to staff from the physics library, thus allowing the many displaced library staff to make progress on staff development requirements.



Passing the books up the stairs
Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa News Service

IT staff were housed throughout the newly distributed libraries complex. One IT staff member was at the engineering library, one was at the health science library, and two were at the business library. Several IT staff were relocated to the campus computer center.

■ The libraries proceed apace despite hurdles

As the water receded and workers cleaned and proceeded with air handling and mold abatement, a very limited number of library staff were allowed back into the main library, typically with escorts, for very limited periods of time. During this time IT staff was able to go into the main library and retrieve barcode scanners to allow CTS staff to progress with book processing. Staff went back for unprocessed materials needing original cataloging since staff had the time to process materials but didn't have the materials. IT staff retrieved some of our Zebra printers so that labels could be applied to unbound serials. As IT staff were allowed limited access to the main library, they went around to the various staff workstations and powered them up so that relocated staff could utilize the remote desktop function.

■ Moving back

The art and music libraries were evacuated June 10. The main library was evacuated June 13. The main library

was closed for about four weeks. The art and music libraries may be closed for a year.

When library staff returned to the main library, there were books and manuscript boxes piled on the floor and on top of all the study tables. Some of the main corridors, approximately twenty-one feet wide, were so filled with library materials that you almost had to walk sideways and suck in your tummy to walk down the hall. Bathrooms were blocked and access to elevators was limited. Every library study table on the third through fifth floors were piled three feet high or more with books. For many weeks, library staff and volunteers carefully sorted through the materials and reshelved them as required. Many materials needed conservation treatment, not because of the flood, but because of age and handling.

Many adjustments needed to be made to resume full service. Due dates for all circulation categories had to be retrospectively altered to allow for the libraries being closed and for the extraordinary situations in which our library users found themselves during the flood. Library materials were returned wet and moldy, and some items were lost. During the flood, in some cases, buildings actually floated down river. The libraries' preservation department did extensive community education regarding treatment of materials damaged in the flood.

The university was very interested in documenting the affect of the flood, and thus the libraries cooperated in trying to gather statistics on the number of hours of library staff and volunteers used during the flood. Record keeping was complex, since one person could be a staff person working on flood efforts but also a volunteer working evenings and weekends.

■ Our neighbors

The effect of the Iowa City flood of 2008 has been extensive, but was nothing compared to the flood in Cedar Rapids, our neighbor to the north. The Cedar Rapids Public Library lost their entire collection of 300,000 volumes, except for the children's collection and 26,000 volumes that were checked out to library users that week.