
Rethinking Open Access: A Case Study of ACURIL's Disaster Fund Social Mediathon**Ardis Hanson (Dr.)**

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*This paper is dedicated to Dra. Luisa Vigo-Cepeda who departed this earth on
November 26, 2020.¹*

Abstract

This article examines questions crucial to the effective development, conduct, and presentation of the Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries' Disaster Fund Social Mediathon, as part of its emergency commitment to disaster relief. How does innovation come out of disaster? What are the issues in creating a programme that is relevant, informational, and compelling? How can technology be leveraged successfully to mount a Facebook mediathon? How can hosting bring evenness to the rhythm and emotionality of the program? What are the challenges faced when promoting a social mediathon? What is needed to create partnerships between ACURIL and the larger library community? Finally, what are the 'lessons learnt' for future, hopefully, happier events? The paper summarises what was accomplished and why, its importance for ACURIL membership, and the larger library community.

Keywords: Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL), Caribbean Region, disasters, Disaster Funding, Library Associations, library fundraising, mediathon events, open access, social media, social mediathon, virtual programme planning.

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Redefining Open Access in Times of Disaster

Traditionally, open access (OA) is considered as free and unrestricted online access to scholarly research in various formats such as text, data, image, audio, or video. However, in an increasingly global, networked environment, OA is much more than just free access to journals and books. It has grown into a movement comprising open education, open government, open access publishing, and open online platforms. This has significant implications for the importance of information before, during, and after the occurrence of disasters. Disaster information is key to understanding the activities and responses that must occur during the continuum of disaster preparation, mitigation, recovery, and resilience.

The frame of OA is used to describe a unique event in the history of the Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL); that of its Disaster Fund Social Mediathon which embraced and utilized open access social media platforms. One of the benefits of open access is the reduced cost involved in creating and making products accessible. Without a commitment to OA, the event's infrastructure would not have been possible, as the cost of television network time is typically prohibitive. The narratives of the Caribbean libraries and librarians affected by the disasters of 2017 would never have been told nor would the Social Mediathon have been possible without this OA event. Building upon lessons learnt from previous disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haïti, ACURIL was able to maximize the use of OA technology to respond quickly to the impact of the 2017 hurricanes.

This paper examines elements that were crucial to the effective development, conduct, and presentation of the ACURIL Disaster Fund Social Mediathon, also referred to as the social mediathon, as part of ACURIL's commitment to disaster relief. The paper projects how innovation emerged out of disaster, recounting discussions among the Executive Council members and the decisions made thereafter that resulted in a social mediathon. Second, the issues encountered in creating a programme that would be relevant, informational, and compelling are outlined. The online technology used to deliver the mediathon via the Facebook social media platform is provided in the background section. The issues regarding hosting the event that ensured synchronicity of the program and managing emotional components are discussed. The challenges in marketing the mediathon as an ACURIL event and as part of a larger community

response to disasters are addressed. The ‘lessons learnt’ are provided for the future, hopefully happier events.

Background

ACURIL is the premier library association in the Caribbean region that has provided training and networking opportunities for information professionals since 1969. It originated as part of a movement for Caribbean cooperation at the university level by the Association of Caribbean Universities (UNICA). One of ACURIL’s stated objectives is the development and use of libraries, archives, and information services in support of the range of intellectual and educational endeavors throughout the Caribbean (Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries [ACURIL], 2017a). One of its notable professional development events is the annual conference which is usually held in a country represented by one of the membership’s language groups – English, Spanish, French or Dutch speaking territories. Over the years, ACURIL has prided itself in highlighting conference themes and sub-themes that allow information professionals to keep abreast of developments in the profession while encouraging articulating a Caribbean perspective. These events enable delegates to exchange information, experiences, and best practices; gain opportunities to learn and develop skills and competencies to use new tools and technologies; and foster collaboration and engagement with library vendors and other stakeholders.

At present, ACURIL has representation from three categories of membership open to libraries, archives, organizations, and individuals living within the area of the Caribbean archipelago, the mainland countries (including the Guianas), and the states of the United States of America which border on the Caribbean Sea or Gulf of Mexico (ACURIL 2017a). These membership categories include Institutional, Association (national, regional or special associations) and Personal members. In addition, membership is also accepted from students, associate (any institution outside the membership region) and retirees. Membership within the region comes from over twenty Spanish, English, French and Dutch-speaking countries. ACURIL has expanded its membership outside the region by attracting international participants from the United States, Canada, The Netherlands, and other developed countries. The organization is

governed by an Executive Council comprising representation from the Institutional, Associate and Personal membership categories.

ACURIL Disaster Relief Fund

ACURIL focuses on the development and use of libraries, archives and information services and the identification, collection, and preservation of information resources supporting the whole range of intellectual and educational endeavors throughout the Caribbean area (ACURIL 2017a). One of the ways that ACURIL supports this objective is by assisting member libraries in times of disaster through its Disaster Relief Fund. The fund's objectives are to help libraries save their collections, restore services at the earliest possible time, and relocate the collection temporarily, if required. The fund provides financial support to institutional member libraries that are affected by natural or technological disasters such as hurricanes, floods, wildlife fires, earthquakes, and man-made disasters (ACURIL n.d.-a). Procedures guide council members concerning approval of funding requests. Institutional members must submit a proposal to ACURIL for evaluation and approval in order to access the funds. This fund is supported by well-wishers of ACURIL, including its conference exhibitors who participate in the annual conferences. Photo 1 shows ACURIL executive representatives receiving a donation of US\$10,000 from EBSCO, one of its loyal exhibitors, in November 2017, towards the Disaster Relief Fund.

Photo 1

EBSCO Donates US\$10,000 Towards ACURIL's Disaster Fund



Note. ACURIL (2017b, November 28)

From left to right: Executive Council members - Carmen Santos-Corrada and Dra. Luisa Vigo-Cepeda (late Executive Secretary) receiving cheque from Mr. Rafael Lagares, EBSCO's Representative for Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, República Dominicana, Venezuela and the Netherlands

Framing Disasters

The risk of disasters can be framed as a “social calculus” and linked to disaster constructs such as *vulnerability* and *response* (Smith, 2005, June 11). Social calculus attempts to determine the effects and consequences of disasters measured in human terms. Although disasters are common events, each is unique. Natural disasters include weather phenomena, such as hurricanes, tropical storms, floods, extremes of heat or cold, earthquakes, landslides, and cataclysmic events, such as tsunamis and volcanic eruptions. Manmade disasters now include acts of terrorism, genocide, and war. There are ‘slow-onset’ disasters, such as drought, famine, pandemics, or environmental hazards, which occur over a longer time. In whatever form they occur, disasters can deprive individuals of their sense of well-being, security, communities, loved ones, and homes.

Disasters forever change ‘life as we know it’ and seriously affect our ability to function. Buildings may be rebuilt, and lost books replaced, but the effects on communities, staff, families, and loved ones linger. Notwithstanding the nature and consequences of disasters, information accessibility and availability are paramount to prepare, mitigate, cope, and recover.

Professional associations often assume the role of synthesizers of information incorporating research findings, experiential insights, and consensus among peers (Yin & Andranovich, 1987; Yin & Gwaltney, 1981). Caribbean librarians are familiar with the complexities of language and language-sharing among diverse populations; each population has its language, taxonomy, and ontology of the world. A common language is also formed within distinct communities of practice, such as a professional organization as ACURIL. A common language ensures availability, access, integration, and sharing of information. The language of disaster is no different. Since the 2010 earthquake in Haïti and following the devastating effects of the 2017 hurricane season, the Caribbean is increasingly vulnerable to the forces of nature which are not controllable by persons or nations.

While it is important to be informed of best practices in disaster management through country experience and documented research that are available via online and physical repositories, much credit is due to social media platforms and networking which in great part, raise real-time public awareness, transcending language barriers, through the sharing of photos and videos and posted by citizen journalists. Without this element of sharing live content, the extremities of the hurricane effects cross-Caribbean could not have been fully appreciated. In response, ACURIL via its social mediathon (ACURIL, 2017c), demonstrated proactive engagement within library communities in the Caribbean region. Uncertainty and complexity are inevitable components of disaster and may sometimes lead to indecisive responses. ACURIL, once presented with the challenge, responded by adopting a novel approach with the social mediathon. The purpose of the social mediathon was to use an innovative popular online social media platform (Facebook) to raise funds and thereby boost the ACURIL Disaster Fund so that financial support could be offered to member institutions that were adversely affected by hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

Innovation as a Response to Disaster - Background

The diminished communication capacity that occurs before, during, and after disasters creates a high demand for information. It is a natural response for people to seek information on the safety of colleagues and friends, what resources they need, and what can be done to help; it is equally important to let other persons know the state of affairs regarding the outcomes and needs of persons affected by disasters. Mobile communication technologies and the Web offer the possibility of improved communications for disasters (Jaeger et al., 2007; Shklovski, Palen, & Sutton, 2008), increasing access to stakeholder channels, information capacity, dependability, and interactivity across widely dispersed geographical areas. The use of social media (Web 2.0) tools in disaster situations is not new (Houston et al., 2015; Metz, 2016, November 10). Further, its advantages include low-cost, easy-to-use, scalable, mobile, reliable, and fast networks that provide capacity for one-to-many communication (Dabner, 2012; Mills, Chen, Lee, & Raghav Rao, 2009). The decision to conduct a social mediathon to raise awareness of the scale of the disasters was not difficult; however, hosting this inaugural event, brought challenges that the ACURIL Executive Council had to resolve. Virtual Skype meetings and WhatsAppTM messaging enabled Council members to work collaboratively on a response in the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes which devastated members' libraries in the Dutch, English and Spanish-speaking countries and to prepare for the mediathon's success in soliciting funding to assist affected libraries.

ACURIL's Response to Disasters Caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria

In 2017, many Caribbean islands, including Florida in the United States, were adversely affected by hurricanes as this region experienced an active hurricane season. In particular, the month of September 2017 proved to be the most devastating as the Caribbean experienced the wrath of hurricanes Irma and Maria which immediately followed each other within two weeks apart. Hurricane Irma hit St. Maarten on September 6, 2017, and demolished the Philipsburg Jubilee Public Library. Following the passage of Irma, ACURIL expressed solidarity with all those affected by the hurricane, including the Philipsburg Public Library. The message was disseminated via the online newsletter, *Cibernotas ACURIL Cybernotes*.

On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria made landfall in Dominica, causing severe devastation to the island. It then moved with greater intensity and struck Puerto Rico as a Category

4 hurricane. Like Dominica, the island of Puerto Rico was severely damaged and there was the loss of communication as the country had no access to electricity and water for an extended period. Other islands were also affected but official information was not available to get a full scope of the destruction in the region. Working with limited information, it was important for ACURIL to show solidarity and advocacy for affected libraries.

The President immediately convened an emergency Skype meeting on September 28, 2017 with the Executive Council to establish how ACURIL could assist its member libraries. The Executive Council was unable to contact its Puerto Rican members via email, telephone or Skype, which was worrisome. In addition, it was of great concern because ACURIL's communication platform and credentials were managed by the Executive Secretary based in Puerto Rico. To fill this void, it was necessary for the Executive Council, at this critical time, to use OA social media platforms to reach out to its membership. A second solidarity message would follow the passing of Hurricane Maria disseminated via Facebook.

At the emergency Skype meeting, these decisions were taken as detailed below:

Connectivity and Access to ACURIL's Communication Platform

Executive Council members were advised to continue to reach out to each other and share news on the status of the Puerto Rican members. Concerns were raised on how the Executive Council would communicate with the membership without access to official communication portals. Fortunately, this was resolved as the Executive Secretary was able to re-establish contact with the Executive Council when connectivity was restored in Puerto Rico, albeit at intermittent periods.

Change of Mid-year Meeting Venue

The mid-year meeting is a statutory gathering of Executive Council members where reports are presented, plans for the forthcoming annual conference are finalized and professional development activities are conducted. Although the Alma Jordan Library, The University of the West Indies, in Trinidad and Tobago was well poised to host this event in November 2017, it was decided that the venue be changed to Miami. This would allow the Puerto Rican Executive Council members easier access to travel. The Florida International University (FIU) Executive Council

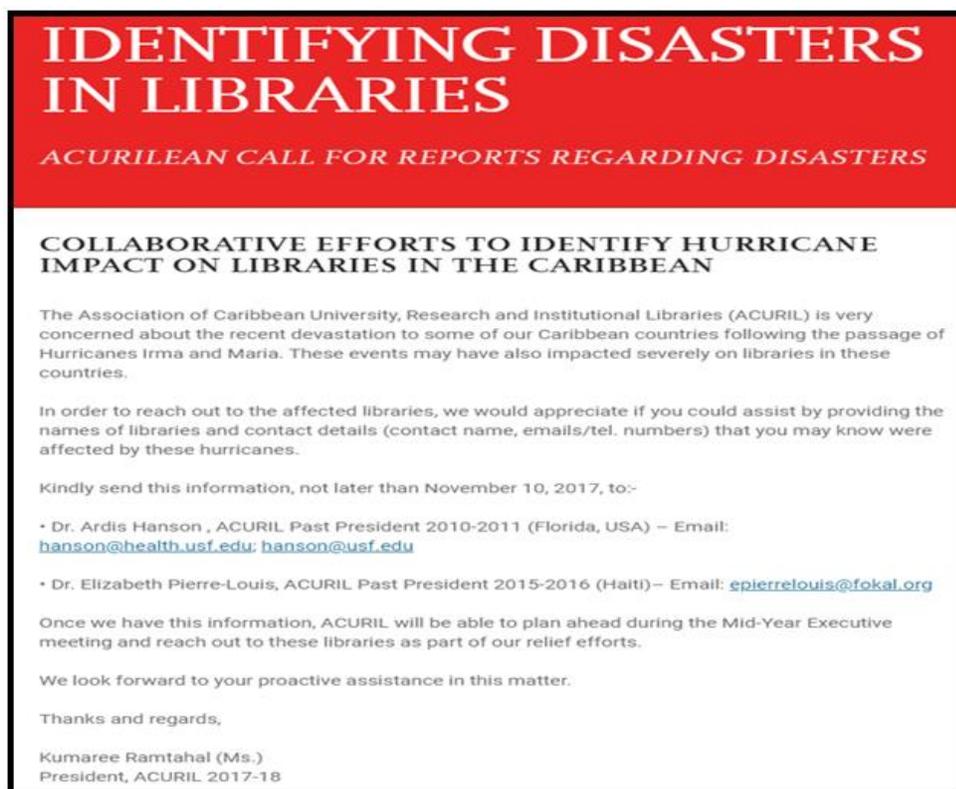
member was subsequently contacted to consider hosting the meeting and the request was successful.

Surveying Affected Libraries

Two members were assigned the task of surveying the libraries that were affected by the hurricanes. A message was posted on the online newsletter, *Cibernotas ACURIL Cybernotes* regarding the survey to solicit responses from the membership. Contact details of team members were also posted for greater accessibility. See Photo 2 which is an extract of the message.

Photo 2

Message to the ACURIL Membership to Report on Disasters



**IDENTIFYING DISASTERS
IN LIBRARIES**

ACURILEAN CALL FOR REPORTS REGARDING DISASTERS

**COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY HURRICANE
IMPACT ON LIBRARIES IN THE CARIBBEAN**

The Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) is very concerned about the recent devastation to some of our Caribbean countries following the passage of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. These events may have also impacted severely on libraries in these countries.

In order to reach out to the affected libraries, we would appreciate if you could assist by providing the names of libraries and contact details (contact name, emails/tel. numbers) that you may know were affected by these hurricanes.

Kindly send this information, not later than November 10, 2017, to:-

- Dr. Ardis Hanson, ACURIL Past President 2010-2011 (Florida, USA) – Email: hanson@health.usf.edu; hanson@usf.edu
- Dr. Elizabeth Pierre-Louis, ACURIL Past President 2015-2016 (Haiti) – Email: epierrelouis@fokal.org

Once we have this information, ACURIL will be able to plan ahead during the Mid-Year Executive meeting and reach out to these libraries as part of our relief efforts.

We look forward to your proactive assistance in this matter.

Thanks and regards,

Kumaree Ramtahal (Ms.)
President, ACURIL 2017-18

Note. ACURIL (2017d, October 12)

Status of ACURIL's Disaster Fund

The need to initiate fundraising was also discussed and a team was assigned to find out more about the existing ACURIL Disaster Fund. As contact was eventually regained with the Executive Secretary in Puerto Rico, a request was made for an update to be provided on this fund at the upcoming mid-year meeting.

Two members were assigned to prepare a list of vendors to establish contact with them to procure disaster relief funding.

Genesis of the Social Mediathon Disaster Fund Initiative

These disasters caused great concern not only to the ACURIL community but also the entire region. The social mediathon as a disaster funding initiative was proposed to the President by Ms. Cheryl Peltier-Davis, an Executive Council member. The President supported the idea as it provided an opportunity for ACURIL to produce an innovative funding strategy in response to the recent disasters – one that would reach out to the diverse community. The President and Ms. Peltier-Davis then engaged the attention of other Executive Council members to be part of the planning team. The social mediathon was spearheaded by six Council members: Ms. Cheryl Peltier-Davis, Mr. Miguel Asencio, Ms. Kumaree Ramtahal, Dr. Ardis Hanson, Dr. Elizabeth Pierre-Louis, and Dra. Luisa Vigo-Cepeda. During the planning stages, communication with the team members was conducted via Skype and emails. Promotional information was disseminated in a timely manner through ACURIL's communication platforms – email, website, Smore newsletter, Facebook, among others. The team worked assiduously towards making the two-day event a reality. It was held at the dLOC Headquarters, Florida International University, Miami during the mid-year Executive Council Meeting on November 30 and December 1, 2017. The event's goal was to support recovery, relief and rebuilding efforts for Caribbean libraries, archives and museums affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Popular open access social media tools - Skype, Facebook, and Twitter - were used as live streaming platforms to facilitate presentations, engage participants and solicit donations. The team leaders and other Council members actively participated in the highly commendable initiative – a first of its kind for ACURIL – See Photos 3 below.

Photo 3:

Executive Council Members and Guests who Participated in the Social Mediathon



Note. ACURIL (2017e)

First row, left to right (seated) Dra. Luisa Vigo-Cepeda, Dr. Ardis Hanson, Dr. Elizabeth Pierre-Louis, Mr. Miguel Ascensio, and Ms. Kumaree Ramtahal. Second row, left to right (Standing): Mr. Erick Touissant, Ms. Juliet Callender, Dr. Berthamae Walker, Dr. Jeannette Lebron-Ramos, Ms. Cheryl Peltier-Davis, Mrs. Dorcas Bowler, Mrs. Monique Alberts, Mrs. Astrid Britten, Dr. Anne Pajard, Mrs. Almaluces Figueroa-Ortiz, and Mr. Héctor Rubén Sánchez-Fernández

Creating a Relevant, Informational, and Compelling Programme

In a networked 21st century global environment there is supportive data to show the phenomenal growth of the internet (Smith & Anderson, 2018, March) and the intrinsic value of social networking sites as platforms for connecting, communicating, and collaborating with family, friends, colleagues and communities during natural disasters (Abram, 2008; Farkas, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005, September 30). Daily, billions of users log on to these platforms to post on Facebook pages (2.74 billion users), tweet on Twitter accounts (353 million users), share photos

on Instagram (1.22 billion users) and view live streaming videos on YouTube (2.29 billion users) (Hootsuite, 2021). These statistics were viewed as critical data-driven evidence which supported the use of social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) in hosting ACURIL's disaster fundraising campaign online.

To be successful and achieve fundraising goals, social mediathons, like telethons, require the development of a sustainable programme of activities and events. This online (only) programme must address four deliverables. First, it must be relevant in its objectives and content delivery to the target audience – librarians, supporters of libraries and other stakeholders. Second, it must disseminate information critical to supporting disaster recovery, relief, and rebuilding efforts in affected libraries. Third, it must engage the online audience with persuasive personal stories shared by persons adversely affected by the disasters, emphasizing their experiences and coping strategies. Finally, it must recruit engaging hosts capable of establishing and maintaining rapport with a global audience for a significant period (in this instance spanning two days). A social mediathon crafted with these identifiable elements can yield the benefits of a planned, mediated response to natural disasters. All four elements were integrated into the conceptualization and planning of programming for the social mediathon and were considered essential components in the online delivery of an interactive, engaging, and relevant two-day sustainable event. ACURIL (2017f) outlines the programme details of the two-day event on its website.

In planning the social mediathon, it was important that one person be given the responsibility of developing the programme. When presented to the Executive Council members, programme tasks were identified and distributed across the group. This allowed for targeting members with the relevant expertise to triage the list of needed activities. It was also necessary to document the planned events, collaboratively edit documentation, and create graphic materials and videos for promotion. The Executive Secretary disseminated information promptly, and members of the EC helped to market the program within their respective language groups and professional associations. The hosting site at FIU, working in partnership with all members of the EC, ensured that the program and broadcasting went smoothly. Figure 1 shows some of the ways ACURIL members were encouraged to promote the event.

Figure 1:

Screenshot of Email Sent to ACURIL Members Highlighting Ways to Promote Participation



Note. Email distributed to ACURIL members by C. Peltier-Davis (2017)

Leveraging Technology to Mount a Social Mediathon

Technology does not always support an online event even though detailed planning is involved in facilitating it. Reliance on the necessary infrastructural arrangements to allow for strong connectivity with users from the Caribbean and the United States, required contingency planning and coordination among all ACURIL members, including IT support, network operations, hosts, and guest presenters. There were connectivity challenges in broadcasting, access and participation at certain periods during the live sessions. Sound and/or image often lagged when inviting other live participants into the broadcast and network connections dropped intermittently. This necessitated immediate responses in an attempt to reconnect and redirect to other speakers to maintain audience interests. It was essential to delegate responsibilities to the Executive Council to allow members to post on different platforms, develop consistent guidelines to ensure error free credentials for the different social media accounts, and to brand the event clearly. ACURIL made the decision early that the Facebook page *must* be promoted as the institution's public page. Shared login credentials among Council members ensured efficient task management during the event. It is noteworthy that internet connectivity was the main challenge faced in hosting the event. Juggling locally hosted and remote programmes and lag time in audio

and video kept the Council members busy with troubleshooting throughout the two-day session (See Photo 4).

Photo 4:

Snapshot of Executive Council Members at the Live Social Mediathon



Note. ACURIL (2017g)

Hosting an Emotional Programme: Sustaining Interest and Evenness

Individual and group responses to disasters are shaped, contextualized, and situated in and through talk. Further, it is how individuals disseminate knowledge that makes it relevant and real to an audience. Since each person also brings his or her lived experiences to such events, it is important for persons hosting fundraising events, in response to natural disasters, to remember to make the human elements a central focus. The two hosts of the social mediathon were able to accomplish this task by focusing on a central narrative of rebuilding after disasters. This narrative served to accomplish the following goals: 1) to remember loved ones and lives ‘before’, (2) to sort

out conflicting emotions, (3) to reconsider what matters, and 4) to address perceptions of (re)creating a new reality, as things never go back to being the same (Hanson, 2014 March). Through this shared mutuality – talking about and sharing problems – that individuals not only co-construct multiple, overlapping community narratives but communally cope, whether it is material assistance or information sharing.

ACURILeans (members) are no strangers to natural disasters in the region; all, tragically, have lost friends, families, and colleagues. As ACURILeans, the earthquake in Haïti resulted in changes in what ACURIL did as an organization and showed the importance of collaboration. The 2010 conference established a day of solidarity with Haiti for the next five years, with a focus on providing assistance to Haiti. The 2011 conference focused on disaster response, recovery, and mitigation. Immediately after the earthquake, the Haiti Executive Council representative requested materials on coping with emotional trauma. Training materials for community members, who were not clinical healthcare providers were sent to Haiti to assist with trauma counselling for all ages. A small example of identifying a specific need that was outside normal experience.

It was important that the social mediathon was a success. The larger question was how to achieve that especially in a media format (online) with which many were unfamiliar. By initiating pre-emptive discussions, the social mediathon hosts (two council members) created a ‘conversational presence’ among the viewers. They tried to be consistent with the messages they conveyed. They had standard fillers regarding how to donate towards the fundraising campaign, acknowledging presenters, and seamlessly connecting each of the presentations. As hosts, they also emphasized the importance of the information presented to disaster relief and how the audience could assist with recovery and rebuilding from the hurricanes.

As guests joined the session, the hosts engaged them in the ongoing conversation and weaved a coherent storyline linking past and upcoming presenters. However, emotions ran high, with the re-telling of very personal stories of the effects of the disasters, and it was difficult at times to manage memories. Although the hosts were prepared to give time and provide empathy to the storytellers during their narratives, cohosting afforded the hosts the opportunity to also deal with their emotional challenges. If one of them needed time away from the live session, the other host continued by providing fillers on donating or opted to start another storyline. See Photo 5 showing the two hosts of the event.

Photo 5

Two Executive Council Members Who Served as Hosts



Note. Photo courtesy K. Ramtahal
Left to right: Dr. Elizabeth Pierre Louis and Dr. Ardis Hanson

Challenges in Marketing and Promoting a Social Mediathon

Given the variety in the number and types of responding organizations involved in immediate and long-term mitigation and recovery, disaster responses illustrate various organizational challenges. For the social mediathon, one element considered essential was to prepare a needs assessment of libraries affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. It was also necessary to identify contextualized solutions based on the experiences and expertise of the stakeholders and post-hurricane capacity of the affected country. In addition, each organization has different responsibilities, missions, systems, and authority, within its framework as well as with partner, supervisory, and affiliated organizations. ACURIL's partnership with dLOC, American Library Association (ALA), and organizations in the region showed the value of leveraging international contacts while working at the local level to gather information on the status of Caribbean libraries. ACURIL was able to collaborate with leaders of these organizations to build support for the social mediathon. Examples of these partnerships can be found at the ACURIL social mediathon website (ACURIL, 2017c, November 30), member websites (Taylor, 2017), and various publication platforms, such as *Cibernotas ACURIL Cybernotes* (ACURIL, n.d.-b). Garnering and disseminating information from multiple sources on ACURIL's existing online

communication channels assisted in marketing the event. See Photo 6 below of some of the images used for promoting the event.

Photo 6:

Collage of Some of the Social Mediathon Promotional Images



Note. ACURIL (2017e)

Lessons Learnt

How responses to disasters are framed is a measure of resiliency as individuals, as librarians, and as libraries. There were lessons learnt from planning, hosting, and post-event evaluation of the social mediathon. The most significant lesson was that planning for and hosting this online event brought members closer together and proved that ACURIL's watchwords of *Unity within Diversity* were true and alive. Other lessons learnt from this experience included:

Innovation as a Response to Disaster

Natural disasters are unplanned events that require timely and innovative responses to quickly bring relief and assist in short and long-term rebuilding and recovery efforts. Often, if these efforts are led by well-established organizations, there are measurable success at engagement and collaboration with membership in fundraising activities. As an initiative, it was a first-time collaborative effort for ACURIL, since such an ACURIL's Disaster Fund Social Mediathon was

viewed as the required innovative response which would enable the association to bring its membership together, both in planning and executing an online fundraising event. It provided a unique opportunity to conceptualize and deliver a relevant disaster themed online programme utilizing popular social networks, to solicit donations for the disaster fund. More importantly, the social mediathon provided a Caribbean voice and perspective to the global conversation around relief efforts. It allowed persons within and outside the region to connect and understand the coping strategies required for addressing daily issues in the aftermath of a hurricane. The social mediathon showed how to engage in designing disaster fundraising activities using new and open access technologies.

Creating a Relevant, Informational, and Compelling Programme

It is important to develop a balanced and relevant programme with diverse content, focusing on consensual themes and subthemes. The event should also be marketed and promoted to non-library sectors. These two measures would facilitate wider participation, audience engagement, and increased monetary donations from other supportive communities.

Leveraging Technology to Host a Facebook Mediathon

There needs to be consistency in access to technology. For example, the social media accounts must all be linked to the institution's official pages to reinforce branding and provide an authoritative launching pad. Issues such as sharing passwords for the relevant accounts (Twitter and Facebook) with the team can enhance management of the event. The team should also be aware of effectively managing online chat and engaging with users continuously. Hashtags should be created and used consistently throughout the planning and execution of the event.

Hosting an Emotional Programme

Never underestimate the value of open and transparent communication while retaining a sense of humour, and acknowledging the pain and the healing for the audience and guests that can come about with time. Listen to the personal stories; however, be aware that the stories can be touching and make you emotional while on camera.

The importance of a good script is invaluable to continuity, which is essential to ensure that there is no ‘dead air’ time. A consistent message is critical. Too much information overloads the viewer and reduces interest. It is best to keep messaging simple, short and pleasant.

Conclusion

It was important that ACURIL, as an organization with a distinctive regional focus, be agile at thinking globally, acting in the best interest of its members while staying focused on its objectives. The first task in this effort was to have a thorough understanding of the nature of the community served and its needs. There is no ‘one size fits all’ relief solution. All too often, the immediate response is to pack boxes and send items to those affected, not realizing that the infrastructure of the country may have been impaired and that transportation in and out of the region is tenuous. A more rational response would be to focus on fundraising so that funds solicited could be sent to the organizations and allow recovery efforts to be addressed by residents in charge of this responsibility. ACURIL’s response to disasters through the social mediathon disaster fundraising event was a brave, innovative and real-world step. It can serve as a model for future fundraising initiatives using OA social media platforms. This case study shows how ACURIL made a difference and contributed to proactive changes in the Caribbean region, even when disasters strike, by fulfilling its watchwords: *Unity within Diversity / Unidad dentro de la Diversidad / L’Unité dans la Diversité*.

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