It's Handled…Or Is It? The Status of Crisis Communication Planning in Academic Libraries

Jodie L. Borgerding

Introduction

It is inevitable. Murphy's Law dictates it. Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. A crisis situation can happen at any time, any place, anywhere, and to anyone. The situation could be a major catastrophe such as a natural disaster or a minor inconvenience such as a water main break on campus. However, even a minor inconvenience has the potential to spiral out of control if it leaves those affected with a bad impression of your library. How prepared are academic libraries in not only handling a crisis situation, but effectively communicating information and messages to staff, students, university administration, and even the general public? This paper will introduce the concepts of crisis communication and analyze a survey about results of crisis communication planning in academic libraries.

Crisis management scholar, Timothy Coombs, defines a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders…and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes."[1] In other words, a crisis situation is not necessarily the unexpected event itself, but the potentially negative perception internal and external stakeholders may have about the organization as a result of an unexpected event. Additionally, every crisis situation comes as a surprise to the organization, is a threat to the organization's reputation and/or operations, and the situation needs to be addressed to internal or external stakeholders within a short period of time.[2]

What exactly constitutes a crisis has varying thresholds of immediacy and impact, but can be boiled down to two basic categories: intentional and unintentional. Intentional crises include terrorism, sabotage, poor employee relationships, unethical leadership, or any act caused by an individual or group that intentionally damages an organization's reputation and performance. Unintentional crises are unavoidable situations such as natural disasters, product failures, and economic downturns.[3] Within the definition of intentional and unintentional crises are levels of impact such as major, minor, and emerging. A major crisis has a severe impact or complete disruption of all regular operations. This can be a violent incident, or a major fire or natural disaster with extensive building damage. A moderate crisis has minimal impact or disruptions of operations, such as a leaking pipe or roof, a fire contained to a small area of the building, technology failure, or vandalism. An emerging crisis is an unfolding situation or controversy that can quickly escalate, such as budget shortfalls, policy challenges, patron and/or employee complaints, or employee wrongdoing.[4]

The field of crisis management "seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and industry from harm."[5] An important part of crisis management is being prepared for the unexpected, which is why many organizations, and libraries, develop disaster plans to help manage a crisis situation.

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Coombs broadly defines the specialized area of crisis communication as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation."[6] A crisis communication plan is a detailed document that provides an organization or institution with the blueprint to develop and manage communication messages between internal and external stakeholders, including the media, during and after a crisis situation.[7] It is important to note that the main function of a crisis communication plan is not to manage a crisis situation, but to coordinate communication about it. Developing an effective communication line with stakeholders will not only keep them informed about the situation, it will help maintain the organization's credibility and reputation by building trust. This is what differentiates a disaster plan from a crisis communication plan, however in some cases a crisis communication plan may be a separate document or it may be integrated into an organization's disaster plan.

Consistent elements have emerged among successful crisis communication plans from various sectors including business, education, and non-profit organizations. Generally, an effective plan defines the roles and responsibilities of those who will be coordinating communication and messages to stakeholders during a crisis. The plan may also include information about potential crises that may impact an organization, an action plan for when the crisis occurs, guidelines for developing long-term communication strategies, and post-crisis opportunities.[8,9]

Even though there are common elements that make up a crisis communication plan, it should not be a one size fits all document. A plan developed for a Fortune 500 company will be different from a plan for a small community college library in rural Missouri. Even within the same institution, what is considered a crisis for one department may not be the same as another department on campus. For example, discovering mold at a library's off-site storage facility may cause widespread panic among library staff, while the same situation is just a minor blip on the radar for staff in the enrollment management department.

Other factors, including who exactly are the stakeholders, available communication channels, and level of public relations experience among the staff can vary among institutions and departments. Because of these variables, crisis communication plans should be developed and tailored to meet the needs and expectations of a library's internal and external stakeholders, not necessarily the stakeholders of the institution or other departments.

Literature Review

This literature review attempts to determine how academic libraries are integrating crisis communication practices into their disaster plans or emergency procedures. The majority of the research conducted so far has centered on how libraries of all types, not just academic libraries, communicate information to the public about a disaster or crisis within the community, not necessarily a crisis within the library.[10–12] Even though this information is not surprising given the nature of libraries, it is not within the scope of this specific study.

Numerous disaster planning manuals have been published but only one how-to-guide solely for crisis communication planning in libraries exists. Jan Thenell's book prepares libraries of all types for potential crises within their organizations, identify stakeholders, develop relationships with the media, and discusses how to effectively create and deliver communication messages specific to the situation.[13]

In addition to a review of the professional literature, a search was conducted to locate copies of library crisis communication plans on the Internet. This search yielded only one plan within the first two pages of search results. The plan, from Jefferson County Public Library in Colorado, is extensive and contains information on preparation, internal and external stakeholders, how to respond when a crisis occurs, the steps for developing a plan for long-term communication, and how to evaluate the plan after the crisis is over.[14]

The search was broadened to locate copies of disaster or emergency plans for academic libraries in hopes that a crisis communication plan was integrat-

ed into the disaster plan. The first two pages of search results yielded a number of disaster plans, but the majority of the plans did not provide detailed instructions on disseminating information about a crisis to stakeholders. All of the plans listed a phone tree and other emergency contacts and a surprising number had not been updated in over five years.[15,16] The plans that did incorporate minimal information regarding who handles communication during a crisis were primarily focused on damage to the library collections and no other potential crisis situations.[17–19] Only two plans provided information as to the type of crisis situation in which communication will be coordinated by the university's communication department.[20,21]
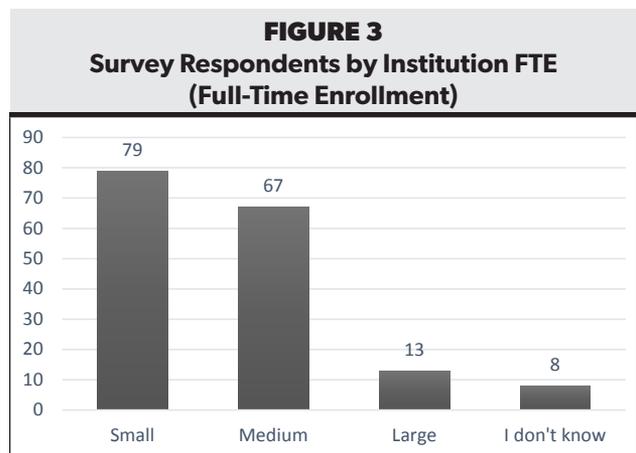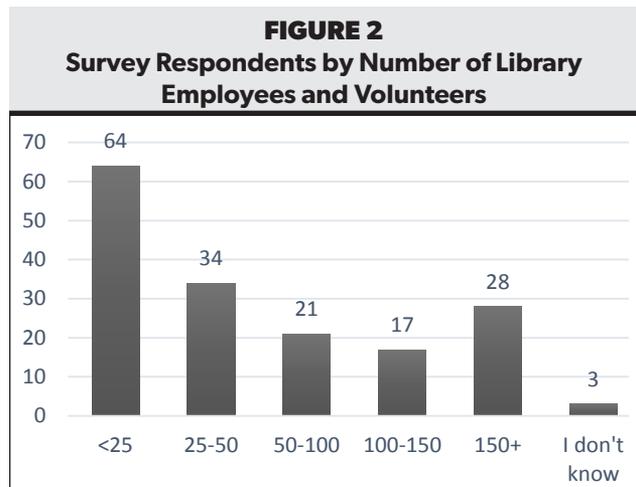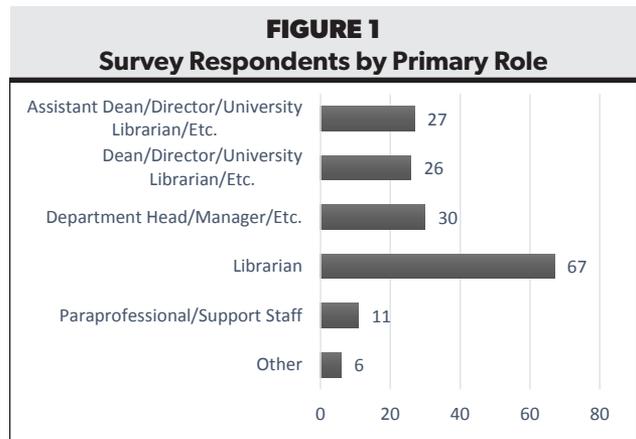
Methodology

A survey was developed in order to gain additional insight into how, if at all, academic libraries are utilizing crisis communication plans. Respondents answers questions about disaster and crisis communication planning at their libraries and who is in charge of those directives. Additional questions asked if the respondent recently reviewed the plans, demographic information about the respondent's library, and who handles communication directives at the library. If the respondent answered that their library had a crisis communication plan, the survey continued, asking for information about the last time the plan was put into action, if at all, and specific elements of the plan (See Appendix 1).
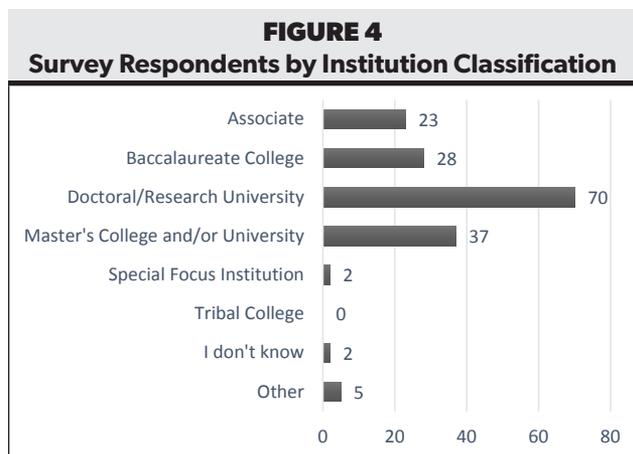
An IRB application was submitted in November 2014 and was approved by the review committee late December 2014. An online version of the survey was created using Qualtrics survey software and distributed in January 2015 through relevant academic library and library marketing listservs, social media, and word of mouth. Out of 191 responses to the survey, about 88 percent of the responses (n=167) were complete enough to analyze.

Results

Half of the respondents identified themselves as having a managerial or leadership position within the library while another 40 percent identified themselves as a li-

brarian. More than half of the respondents, nearly 58 percent, worked in libraries that had up to 50 employees and volunteers. Even though nearly 87 percent of the respondents came from institutions with an full-time enrollment (FTE) of up to 40,000, the majority of those institutions, nearly 64 percent, were from master's and doctoral/research colleges and universities.

FIGURE 1
Survey Respondents by Primary Role

FIGURE 2
Survey Respondents by Number of Library Employees and Volunteers

FIGURE 3
Survey Respondents by Institution FTE (Full-Time Enrollment)

FIGURE 4
Survey Respondents by Institution Classification

Classification	Count
Associate	23
Baccalaureate College	28
Doctoral/Research University	70
Master's College and/or University	37
Special Focus Institution	2
Tribal College	0
I don't know	2
Other	5

Only 20 percent of respondents state a public relations or communications director in their library primarily handles communication and marketing directives while 38 percent of respondents say those duties are handled by someone with a managerial or leadership position within the library. Interestingly, 15 percent say their situation is a little more complicated with no one designated person or committee overseeing communication. Instead the role depends upon the situation and if other library and/or institution departments are involved. In addition, of the 34 respondents that stated they were unsure who handled com-
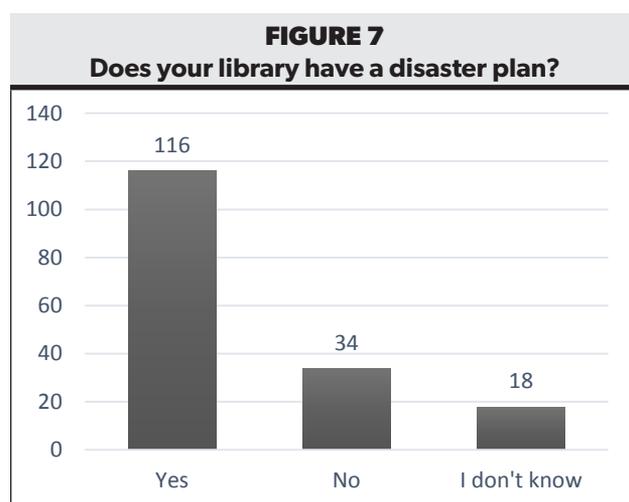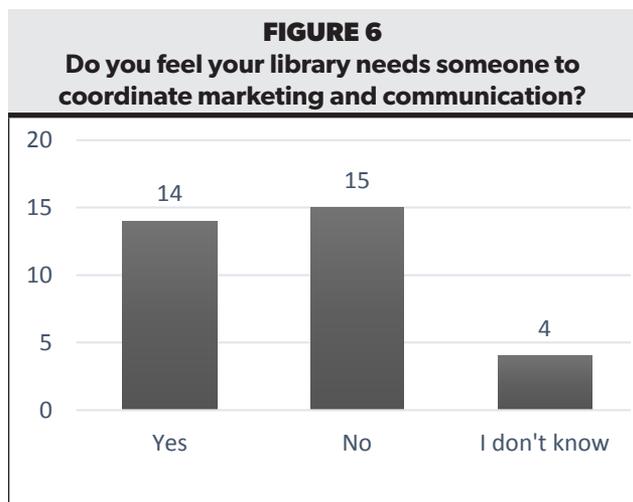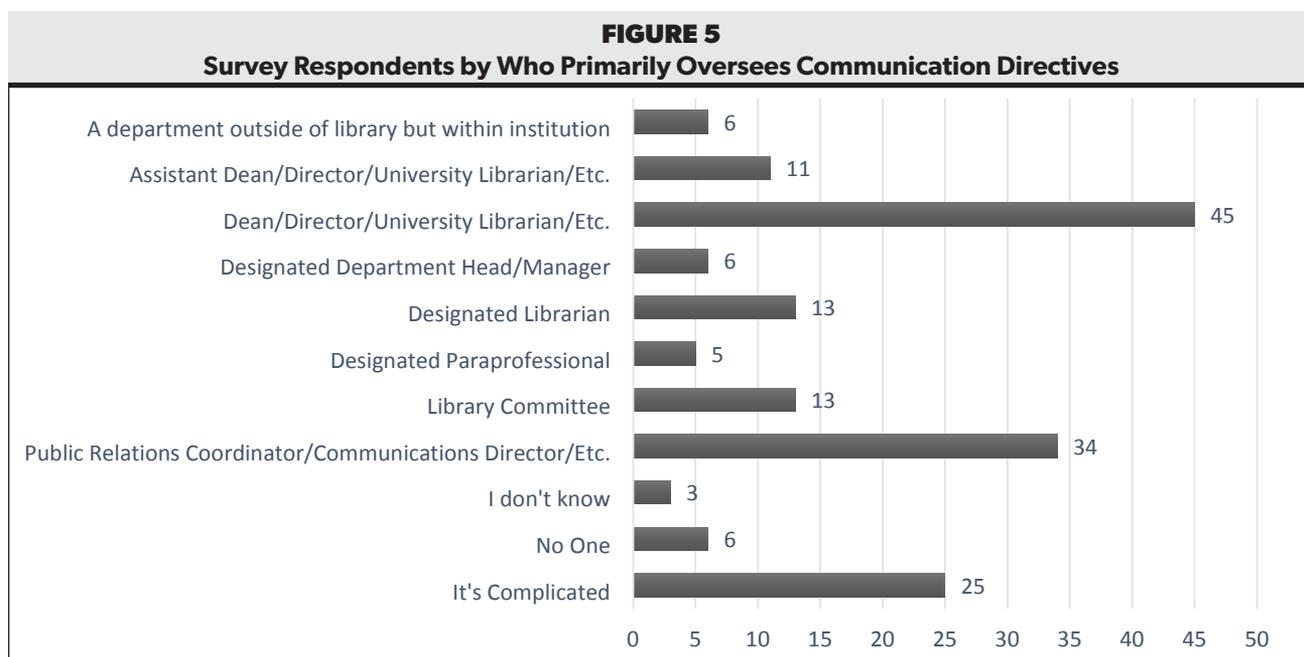
FIGURE 5
Survey Respondents by Who Primarily Oversees Communication Directives

Who Primarily Oversees	Count
A department outside of library but within institution	6
Assistant Dean/Director/University Librarian/Etc.	11
Dean/Director/University Librarian/Etc.	45
Designated Department Head/Manager	6
Designated Librarian	13
Designated Paraprofessional	5
Library Committee	13
Public Relations Coordinator/Communications Director/Etc.	34
I don't know	3
No One	6
It's Complicated	25

FIGURE 6
Do you feel your library needs someone to coordinate marketing and communication?

Response	Count
Yes	14
No	15
I don't know	4

FIGURE 7
Does your library have a disaster plan?

Response	Count
Yes	116
No	34
I don't know	18

FIGURE 8
Does your library have plans to develop a disaster plan in the near future?
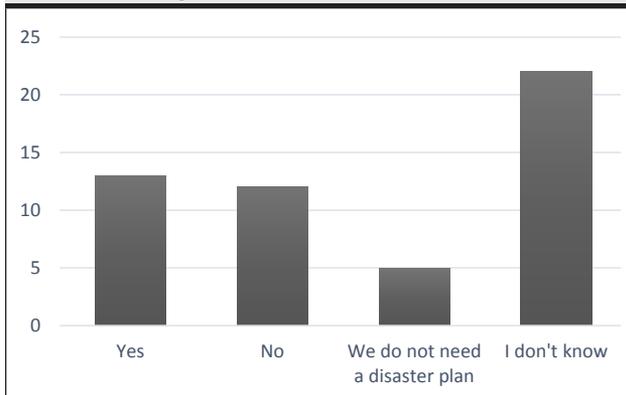
munication directives, stated their library's situation is complicated, or replied that no one is in charge of communication, 45 percent felt that their library does not need someone whose primary role is to coordinate communication and marketing.

When it comes to having a disaster plan, 69 percent state their library has one with nearly half of the plans developed by a library committee or by the library's administration. Nearly half of the plans have elements of a crisis communication plan integrated into the disaster plan instead of as a separate document. Only a quarter of those without a disaster plan intend to develop a plan in the near future.

FIGURE 9
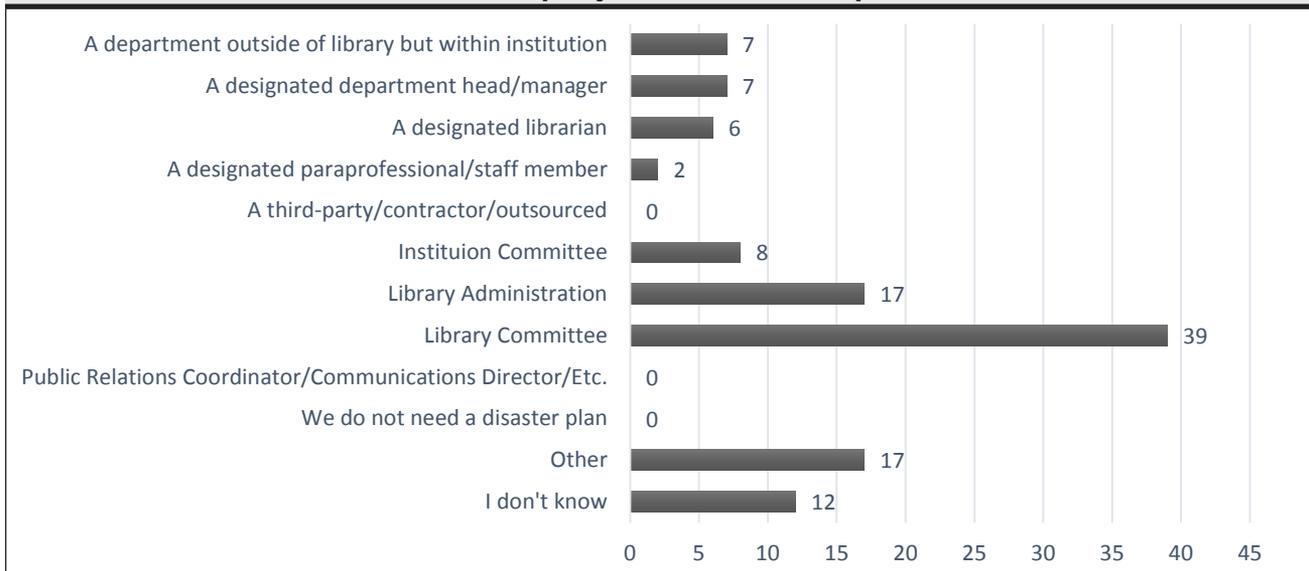**Who developed your current disaster plan?**

FIGURE 10
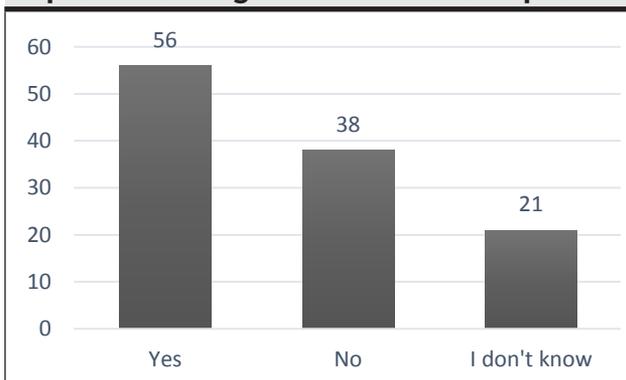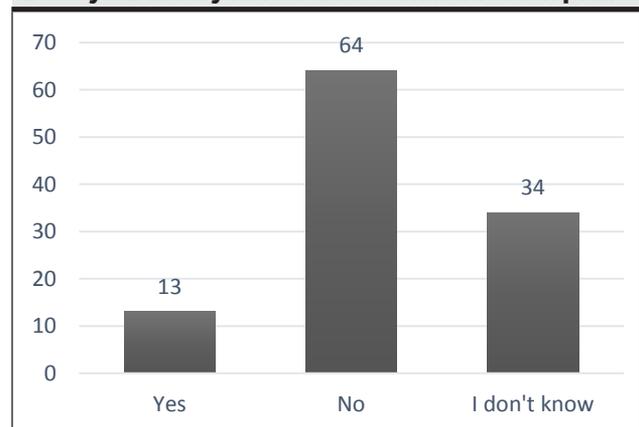**Does your library have a crisis communication plan that is integrated into the disaster plan?**

FIGURE 11
Does your library have a crisis communication plan?

FIGURE 12
Does your library have plans to develop a crisis communication plan?

Category	Value
Yes	16
No	23
We don't need one	10
I don't know	49
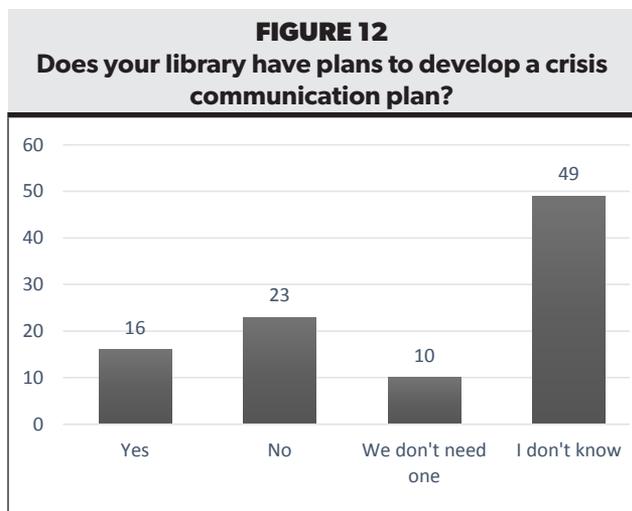
Regardless of whether or not their library has a disaster plan, 57 percent of respondents state their library does not have a crisis communication plan, while another 30 percent are not sure if their library has one. At the time of the survey, 73 percent of the respondents were either unsure if their library was going to develop a crisis communication plan or not. A small percentage felt they did not need a crisis communication plan for the library because the institution's communication department would handle directives in a crisis situation. Of the respondents who have a separate crisis communication plan in their libraries (n=13), 46 percent of the plans were developed by library administration.
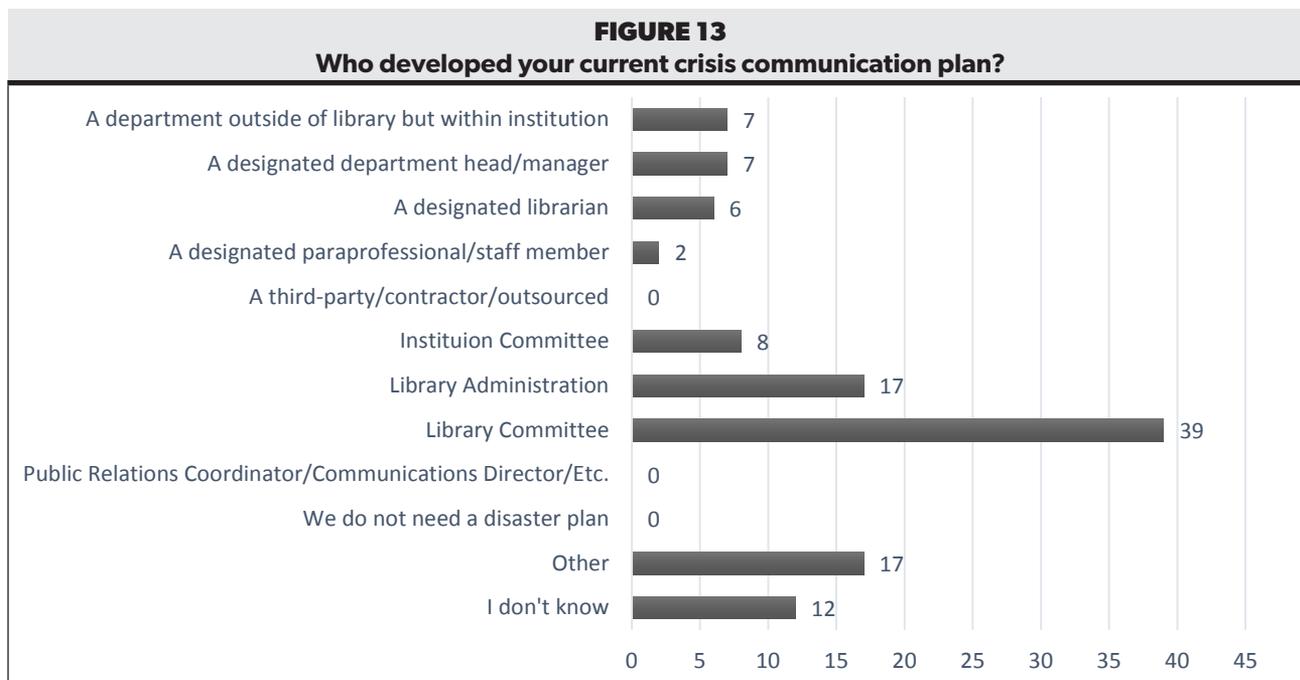
FIGURE 13
Who developed your current crisis communication plan?

Category	Value
A department outside of library but within institution	7
A designated department head/manager	7
A designated librarian	6
A designated paraprofessional/staff member	2
A third-party/contractor/outsourced	0
Instituion Committee	8
Library Administration	17
Library Committee	39
Public Relations Coordinator/Communications Director/Etc.	0
We do not need a disaster plan	0
Other	17
I don't know	12

FIGURE 14
Statements

Please answer the following statements:	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	I don't know/ NA
In case of an emergency, I know where to find my library's disaster plan.	49	7	4	6	3
In case it is needed, I know where to find my library's crisis communication plan.	46	9	4	7	3
I have reviewed my library's disaster plan in the past year.	43	3	1	18	3
I have reviewed my library's crisis communication plan in the past year.	40	6	4	17	2

FIGURE 15
Elements of Communication Plan

My library's crisis communication plan contains the following elements:	Yes	No	I don't know
Establishes a crisis response team or committee	40	16	12
Identifies a spokesperson who represents the library to the media, institution administration, the community, etc.	38	19	12
Establishes tools or benchmarks to evaluate the effectiveness of the key messages delivered during a crisis.	9	39	20
Identifies internal and external stakeholders that may be affected by a crisis situation.	38	17	13
Defines different types and/or levels of potential crises.	51	9	8
Provides guidelines for creating a long-term communication plan for ongoing crises.	22	29	17
Establishes protocols on how to respond to stakeholder inquiries when a crisis does occur.	26	27	15
Establishes guidelines for developing key messages and communication strategies specific to internal and external stakeholders.	30	22	16
Identifies channels and methods to communicate key messages to internal and external stakeholders.	44	13	11

Of the respondents with a crisis communication plan as a standalone document or integrated into their disaster plan (n=69), most agree that they know where to locate these documents. However, a slightly smaller number have actually reviewed both documents within the past year. Overall, respondents state their library's crisis communication plan contains many of the elements recommended by crisis management scholars, including establishing a response team, identifying a spokesperson, identifying internal and external stakeholders, defining the different types and levels of potential crises, and identifying communication channels and methods. It was an even split among plans that contain or do not contain guidelines on creating a plan for a prolonged crisis situation, responding to stakeholder inquiries, or guidelines on developing stakeholder specific messages and strategies. One thing that is clear is that only 9 of the 69 respondents stated their library's crisis communication plan established tools or benchmarks to evaluate the effectiveness of the messages being delivered. However, nearly 20 percent of respondents did not know or answer the questions about the elements of their library's crisis communication plans.

FIGURE 16
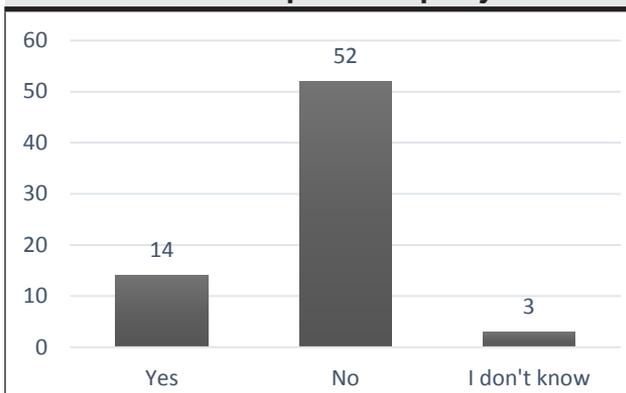**Have you had to implement your crisis communication plan in the past year?**

FIGURE 17
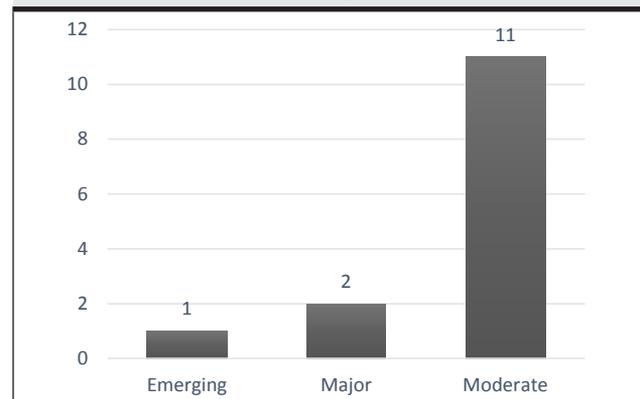**What type of crisis level best describes the most recent situation?**

FIGURE 18 Statements					
Please answer the following statements:	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	I don't know/NA
When the situation occurred, a team and/or committee was activated to oversee and develop key messages and communication materials to library staff and stakeholders.	9	2	1	2	0
Library staff was debriefed on the situation and were regularly provided updates throughout the crisis.	9	5	0	0	0
Institution stakeholders were debriefed on the situation and were regularly provided updates throughout the crisis.	11	1	0	2	0
External stakeholders were debriefed on the situation and were regularly provided updates throughout the crisis.	6	2	1	2	3
Key messages and communication materials were effectively and efficiently delivered to all stakeholders.	8	2	1	3	0
The crisis communication plan was an effective guide in getting information and messages out to the appropriate stakeholders.	8	3	1	0	2
We will be making revisions to the crisis communication plan based on lessons learned from the situation.	6	3	1	2	2

Only 14 respondents have implemented their library's crisis communication plan in the past year for mostly moderate crises. For this survey, moderate crises are situations that have minimal impact or disruptions of library operations. Examples include building leaks, technology failure, and acts of vandalism. When asked to answer questions about the effectiveness of the crisis communication plan, most of the respondents agreed or slightly agreed that the plan was an effective guide in getting information and messages out to the stakeholders, especially to library staff and institution stakeholders. However, there was a slightly higher number of respondents stated they disagreed or slightly disagreed with the statement that external stakeholders were debriefed and that revisions will be made to their current plan.

Conclusion

After analyzing the data from the survey, it is apparent that most academic libraries are not utilizing crisis communication plans as a standalone document nor are they integrating elements into currently existing disaster plans. In addition, many respondents were not aware of or are unsure about certain aspects of their library's crisis management protocol, which would include disaster and crisis communication planning. More communication and awareness should be done to ensure all library employees and volunteers are familiar with their library's emergency plans and procedures.

Libraries need to take a closer look at their disaster plans and add crisis communication elements if not already doing so. Even if the plan has those elements, or the library has a standalone crisis communication plan, it should be reviewed on an annual basis or when personnel changes occur to make sure everything is current and up-to-date.

However, keep in mind that every library is unique so a crisis communication plan that works well for one library may not work for others. The same also holds true for institutions that may oversee communication in their libraries because what is considered to be a minor inconvenience for one department may

actually be a major crisis for the library. As a result, all libraries should have a basic crisis communication plan that includes information on who will handle communication directives, contact information for library personnel and administration, identifying internal and external stakeholders, defining the different types and levels of potential crises, and identifying communication channels and methods.

Recommendations for Further Research

Overall, more research and practical guides on crisis communication planning for all libraries, not just academic libraries, needs to be published to help libraries develop their own crisis communication plans. In addition, case studies on libraries that have successfully implemented a crisis communication plan could be conducted to identify the elements, strategies, messages, and other information that helped make the plan a useful tool during a crisis situation. The results could form a framework that could help other libraries create better disaster and crisis communication plans for when the inevitable may happen within their organization.

Appendix 1. Survey

1. Consent form
   ☐ I Consent
   ☐ I Do Not Consent (if no, survey closes)
2. Are you affiliated with an academic library?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No (if no, survey closes)

This survey is about crisis communication planning.

The foundation of a crisis communication plan is to help an organization communicate key messages and information to internal (i.e. staff, management) and external (i.e. media, community, patrons) stakeholders during times of an unexpected event or emergency situation.

An example is ALA's crisis communication plan: http://www.ala.org/offices/pio/editorial_services#crisis.

3. What is your primary role within your library?
   ☐ Librarian
   ☐ Department Head/Manager
   ☐ Dean/Director/Provost
   ☐ Assistant Dean/Director/Provost
   ☐ Paraprofessional/Support Staff
   ☐ Retired
   ☐ Other (please specify)

4. How many employees and volunteers work at your library (full and part-time)?
   ☐ <25
   ☐ 25-50
   ☐ 50-100
   ☐ 100-150
   ☐ 150+
   ☐ I don't know

5. What is your institution's FTE?
   ☐ Small (1-10,000)
   ☐ Medium (10,000-40,000)
   ☐ Large (40,000+)
   ☐ I don't know

6. What type of institution (based on the Carnegie Classification)?
   ☐ Associate
   ☐ Baccalaureate College
   ☐ Master's College and/or University
   ☐ Doctoral/Research University
   ☐ Special Focus Institution
   ☐ Tribal College
   ☐ I don't know
   ☐ Other (please specify)

7. Who is primarily in charge of marketing and communication directives at your library?
   - ☐ Dean/Director/Provost (go to question #9)
   - ☐ Assistant Dean/Director/Provost (go to question #9)
   - ☐ Library Committee (go to question #9)
   - ☐ A designated librarian (go to question #9)
   - ☐ A designated paraprofessional/staff (go to question #9)
   - ☐ A designated department head/manager (go to question #9)
   - ☐ No one (go to question #8)
   - ☐ I don't know (go to question #8)
   - ☐ It's complicated (please explain) (go to question #8)

8. Do you feel your library needs an employee whose primary job responsibility is to coordinate marketing and communication directives at your library?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ I don't know

9. Does your library have a disaster or emergency plan?
   - ☐ Yes (go to question #11)
   - ☐ No (go to question #10)
   - ☐ I don't know (go to question #10)

10. Does your library have plans to develop a disaster plan within the next year? (for any answer go to question #13)
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No
    - ☐ I don't know
    - ☐ We do not need a disaster plan (please explain, if necessary)

11. Who developed your current disaster plan?
    - ☐ Library Administration
    - ☐ Library Committee
    - ☐ A designated librarian

   - ☐ A designated department head/manager
   - ☐ A designated paraprofessional/staff member
   - ☐ Public Relations Coordinator/Communications Director/Etc.
   - ☐ A specific department, office, or individual outside of the library but within the institution
   - ☐ Institution Committee
   - ☐ A third-party/contractor/outsourced
   - ☐ I don't know
   - ☐ Other (please explain)
   - ☐ We do not need a disaster plan (explain if necessary)

12. Does you library have a crisis communication plan that is integrated into the disaster plan?
    - ☐ Yes (go to question #16)
    - ☐ No (go to question #13)
    - ☐ I don't know (skip to question #13)

13. Does your library have a crisis communication plan?
    - ☐ Yes (go to question #15)
    - ☐ No (go to question #14)
    - ☐ I don't know (go to question #14)

14. Does your library have plans to develop a crisis communication plan within the next year?
    - ☐ Yes (end of survey)
    - ☐ No (end of survey)
    - ☐ I don't know (end of survey)
    - ☐ We do not need one (please explain) (end of survey)

15. Who developed your crisis communication plan?
    - ☐ Library Administration
    - ☐ Library Committee
    - ☐ A designated librarian
    - ☐ A designated department head/manager
    - ☐ A designated paraprofessional/staff member
    - ☐ Public Relations Coordinator/Communications Director/Etc.
    - ☐ A specific department, office, or individual outside of the library but within the institution

☐ Institution Committee
☐ A third-party/contractor/outsourced
☐ I don't know
☐ Other (please explain)

16. Agree, Slightly Agree, Disagree, I don't know/Not applicable
☐ In case of an emergency, I know where to find my library's disaster plan.
☐ In case it is needed, I know where to find my library's crisis communication plan.
☐ I have reviewed my library's disaster plan in the past year.
☐ I have reviewed my library's crisis communication plan in the past year.

17. My libraries crisis communication plan contains the following elements: (Yes, No, I don't know/ Not applicable):
☐ Defines different types and/or levels of potential crises.
☐ Establishes a crisis response team or committee
☐ Identifies a spokesperson who represents the library to the media, institution administration, the community, etc.
☐ Identifies internal and external stakeholders that may be affected by a crisis situation.
☐ Establishes guidelines for developing key messages and communication strategies specific to internal and external stakeholders.
☐ Identifies channels and methods to communicate key messages to internal and external stakeholders.
☐ Establishes protocols on how to respond to stakeholder inquiries when a crisis does occur.
☐ Provides guidelines for creating a long-term communication plan for ongoing crises.
☐ Establishes tools or benchmarks to evaluate the effectiveness of the key messages delivered during a crisis.

18. Have you had to implement your crisis communication plan within the past year?
☐ Yes (go to question #19)
☐ No (end of survey)
☐ I don't know (end of survey)

19. What type of crisis best describes the most recent situation?
☐ Major—A major crisis has a severe impact or complete disruption of all regular library operations. Examples could be a major fire with extensive building damage, a violent incident, or a tornado/hurricane that results in extensive building damage.
☐ Moderate—A moderate crisis has minimal impact or disruptions of library operations. Examples could be leaking pipe or roof, a fire contained to small area of the building, technology failure, or vandalism.
☐ Emerging—An emerging crisis is an unfolding situation or controversy that can quickly escalate. Examples could be budget shortfalls, policy challenges, patron and/or employee complaints, or employee wrongdoing.

20. Agree, Slightly Agree, Disagree, I don't know/Not applicable
☐ When the situation occurred, a team and/or committee was activated to oversee and develop key messages and communication materials to library staff and stakeholders.
☐ Library staff was debriefed on the situation and were regularly provided updates throughout the crisis.
☐ Institution stakeholders were debriefed on the situation and were regularly provided updates throughout the crisis.
☐ External stakeholders were debriefed on the situation and were regularly provided updates throughout the crisis.
☐ Key messages and communication materials were effectively and efficiently delivered to all stakeholders.

☐ The crisis communication plan was an effective guide in getting information and messages out to the appropriate stakeholders.

☐ We will be making revisions to the crisis communication plan based on lessons learned from the situation.

Notes

1. W. Timothy Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*, 4th. ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 3.

2. Charles F. Herman, "Some Consequences of Crisis which Limit the Viability of Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1963), 64.

3. Robert Ulmer, Timothy Sellnow and Matthew Seeger, *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2015), 10-14.

4. Heritage Preservation, *Field Guide to Emergency Response* (Washington, DC: Heritage Preservation, 2006), 3-6.

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6. W. Timothy Coombs, "Parameters for Crisis Communication," in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, eds. W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 20.

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9. Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*, 92.

10. Bradley Wade Bishop and Shari R. Veil, "Public Libraries as Post-Crisis Information Hubs," *Public Library Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2013), 33-44.

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