

Don't waste a good (library) crisis

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A question I've been pondering for a while has been: do librarians waste their crises? We all have them, of course, and as a sector we've described some of our shared challenges this way, with the serials crisis being the most prominent example. It's a question you might ask your Library Director - how often does the library service experience a crisis, and if when it does, does it make institutional waves? The answer to the former is probably more often than most of us would like, but the latter is surprisingly rare.



It's a theme that was touched on at the excellent 'Positioning the Modern Academic Library' event at Goldsmiths held in November 2018. Are our crises kept local because what we do just isn't that institutionally critical? Surely not! Is it that we're so used to things going wrong that when it does it is just business as usual? Definitely no. I think it's something else. So much of our core identity as a profession is tied to values like inspiring trust, confidence, and consistency, that I think there's a case to make that we're averse to the reputational association that comes with crisis situations, and we therefore either avoid them or minimise their visible impact.

This approach has undoubtedly served our profession well, as our reputation as the safest of hands and the lowest risk parts of our institutions is very well earned. There is, however, another path, one that does not seem to come so naturally; to embrace a crisis situation, use it to advance your strategic objectives, and certainly don't waste it.

What does wasting a crisis mean? The saying has been attributed to different historical figures, notably Churchill (but more because it sounded like something he would have said than anyone having a record of him actually saying it). It's about a crisis situation being an exception from the norm, and how in a crisis situation the status quo has already been broken. The established constraints in place may relax or change and you may simply be able to do things in those circumstances that you couldn't do before. This may only be a temporary state of flux, where a window of opportunity comes up that will soon pass. Making the most of the opportunities that such brief and exceptional situations bring, rather than passing those moments up in order to restore order as invisibly as possible, is how I would describe this concept.

Churchill is such a plausible source for this notion because many of the applications are political. A crisis (whatever the precipitating factors) can be a moment to draw attention to an issue, to bring in external expertise, or even open up new solutions. A crisis might be an opportunity to innovate, or to forge new relationships. It can be a chance to bring attention to related issues that have otherwise

not garnered interest. It can also be a chance to put things that could not be easily changed previously back together in a different way.

If a crisis has happened, for many of us our instinct is to pounce upon it – put things right as quickly as possible, restore order, get back to normal. This idea is provocative because it suggests deviating from that mindset and treating the crisis scenario as an opportunity. This may all sound rather Machiavellian and clever for clever's sake, but perhaps, if we look at it in the context of some of our own crises it may look more useful.

With Plan S on all our minds, and the pattern of ever escalating subscription renewals still unbroken, few of us feel that our own crises of providing access to what our academic communities need, getting value out of our budgets, and negotiating licences that allow innovation are anywhere close to resolution despite concerted efforts across our sector.

Our reputation of being the soundest of planners and the most trusted professionals should never be risked or sacrificed just to make a point, but do we make enough of the opportunities presented when these circumstances arise? Do librarians ‘waste’ their crises?

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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