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The Library that Cried Wolf

Outcomes of a Banned Book Hoax on Facebook

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In fall 2012, the Mansfield University library created a Facebook hoax banning a book from the library. Attention was quickly drawn to the book and the library. Ending a few short days later, the hoax left many unanswered questions. Through interviews with individuals on different sides of the hoax, a review of Facebook statistics and comments, and other relevant data, this paper explores the impact on the people involved, the learning outcomes achieved, and the impact on the reputation and credibility of the library and university. The information collected reveals a complex picture of feeling, perceptions, and intentions. While successful at gaining attention, the hoax strategy as employed produced a negative response warranting concern. The paper concludes with suggestions for those contemplating a hoax strategy.

Hoaxes have been used to varying degrees of success to raise public awareness about issues, to market products or companies, and to entertain. A hoax can induce a strong reaction in its audience but is not without its risks. At its core, a hoax involves deception, which people tend to react to adversely and try to avoid (Vohs, 2007). On the other hand, a hoax can be quite successful at garnering attention in a world where information onslaught seems endless.

In fall 2012, immediately following Banned Books Week, the Mansfield University of Pennsylvania library employed a hoax strategy. After postings on the library's Facebook page stated a book was being removed due to a complaint, online discussion spiked. Not limited to Facebook, the discussion quickly spread across campus and out to the community, where most were outraged at the decision to remove the book. The hoax was revealed two days later via Facebook, and the library closed the book, so to speak, on the event.

Definitions

Throughout this research, word choice proved tricky when attempting to use unbiased yet sufficiently descriptive language. Despite some resistance to using the term *hoax* due to negative connotations, hoax and *experiment* were commonly used by the interviewees. In other publications about this hoax, the term *lesson* (DiMarco, 2013), *tool* (see Appendix A) and *projec*t (Miller, 2012) were used to the exclusion of hoax.

In this case study, the term hoax is used based on the definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "a humorous or mischievous deception, usually taking the form of a fabrication of something fictitious or erroneous, told in such a manner as to impose upon the credulity of the victim," as compared to the terms *spoof, prank, tool, exercise, disinformation, event,* and *experiment,* though *project* or *scheme* could serve as broader terms. The term *hoaxer* is used for those who planned and presented the hoax. *Hoax audience* is used for people who were unaware the ban was a hoax.

Mansfield's Hoax

Mansfield University is a public 4-year university in rural Pennsylvania with just under 3,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students and a handful of graduate programs. The library is the campus's architectural centerpiece and in 2012 employed 4.5 professional librarians and 8 FTE library staff, in addition to the library director. Popular among students, the building is used heavily for study and meeting spaces, as well as computer technology. Use of the library's general collection increased by 21.8% over the 5-year period ending in June 2013 (Mansfield University Library and Information Resources Division, 2011; Mansfield University Library and Information Resources Division, 2014).

The Mansfield University library celebrated Banned Books Week from September 24 to 28, 2012, with an open mic event, two banned book panel presentations, and banned book posts on Facebook. Ten people, in addition to library employees, attended the three events (Book & Sanko, 2014). Due to the low attendance, the Banned Books Week committee felt they needed to raise awareness of the issue, and the intentionally provocative idea of the fake book banning was born. The library director, university's public relations (PR) director, and university president were approached for their support. Information about the hoax was kept on a need-to-know basis to preserve the hoax as long as possible, so less than half of the library employees were informed. Those that did know were asked not to reveal the hoax. One author of this article was aware of the hoax while it was happening but was not part of the hoax planning, while the other was not aware of the hoax until over a year after completion, as she is not associated with Mansfield University.

The book that was selected for banning, *One Woman's Vengeance,* was written by the university's PR director, Dennis Miller. The removal and associated hoax were done with his consent. All proceeds from this book fund university scholarships, so no personal financial gain was involved.

On Tuesday, October 2, 2012, library staff removed the book from the collection and catalog. They posted on the library's Facebook page: "*One Woman's Vengeance* has, due to a complaint by a parent, been removed from the library." Reactions on Facebook and from the media occurred within minutes (DiMarco, 2013; Miller, 2012).

Some of the hoax audience began positing that it was a hoax, noting the proximity of Banned Books Week. Questions were posed on Facebook and personally to the library director, the PR director, librarians, and library staff who all—to some degree—either confirmed the hoax or at least did not deny it (some because they themselves did not know). According to the library director, a total of eight people contacted him to discuss the ban (DiMarco, 2013), at least one of whom represented a student organization (confidential interview). To keep the hoax alive, on October 3, a letter was posted on Facebook from the library director, on official university letterhead, stating that the book

was removed from the collection and that "an unbiased committee was formed to review the novel and found it to be inappropriate due to extreme violence and sexual content" (see Appendix B).

The book banning was revealed as a hoax on October 4 with a letter (see Appendix A) and a video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XEKfEI5dLc) posted on Facebook. The letter discredited the ban as a hoax, briefly touched on the topic of censorship, vehemently upheld the library's stance on not banning material, and thanked those who participated. The video, which lasted slightly under two minutes, began with the library director presenting information on the challenge to the book, the results of the committee review, and the removal decision. Thirty seconds into the video, a sign and voice-over asked, "Do we have your attention now?," followed by information about book banning in the United States. The video ended with a mention that no one paid attention to the events of the previous week, and finally, an endorsement for the book that was banned. The video was posted again on October 5 in response to problems some users encountered viewing the October 4 post.

In addition to the self-discrediting post on Facebook, an article was published on October 10, 2012, in the local, weekly newspaper, *The Wellsboro Gazette,* describing the hoax and reiterating the library's stance opposing censorship (Przybycien, 2012). Since it is a local paper, this was a likely venue for those in the community to discover it was a hoax. On October 5, 2012, Dennis Miller also exposed the hoax on his blog, *The Higher Ed Marketing Blog*.

Literature Review

Hoaxes have been around since the Old Testament and Homer's epic *The Odyssey* (Silverberg, 1965). In modern times, hoaxes have been spread via newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet, all aided by word-of-mouth. Hoaxes are perpetrated for a variety of reasons including humor, marketing, art, entertainment, activism, education, and deceit. To fully explore the literature of hoaxes, it is necessary to search the disciplines of communications, marketing, psychology, and librarianship.

The meta-journalism of hoaxing mainly discusses the success of hoaxes, the associated pride in pulling off a hoax, the impact on the audience, and the ethics of the action(s). The risks involved in hoaxing are identified as an audience that may not appreciate being tricked, compromising the credibility of the organizations involved, or the hoax backfiring. There is also the professional risk the individual takes when turning a blind eye toward professional standards (Smith, 2009), such as the Public Relations Society of America *Member Code of Ethics* (2014), which states, "We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public."

The majority of hoaxes discussed in the literature are perpetrated for fun and created by newspapers, radio, or television. Newspaper hoaxes began prior to the invention of the telegraph when one paper printed a knowingly false story. Some of these hoaxes, despite retractions, were reprinted as fact for decades (Fedler, 1989). For the media, hoaxes are "measured by the volume of positive attention ... received" (Smith, 2009, p. 277). However, writers and reporters are occasionally fired for initiating hoaxes, and the Federal Communications Commission warned, at one time, that hoaxing may cause a station to lose its license (Fedler, 1989). More recently, in addition to print, radio, and television, news organizations also use the Internet to disseminate their primarily amusing hoaxes (Smith, 2009).

There is an important parallel between hoaxes done by the news media and by educational institutions such as libraries. Both have a mission and professional responsibility to provide accurate information, and hoaxing is antithetical to this. In order to retain credibility as a trusted information source, the media traditionally leverage the license given to April Fool's Day for hoaxing. Additionally, they may embed clues in the article, include information that is clearly absurd, or print a disclaimer, also known as debunking (Smith, 2009).

Debunking a hoax, however, is not always effective. Some disclaimers at the end of articles have not been seen by readers too upset by the false story (Fedler, 1989). As the goal in a hoax is to trick some or all of your

audience, at least for a little while, hoaxers do not want to give away the secret too soon. However, "publishing a disclaimer (or an apology) a day or two after the original spoof itself, has the disadvantage that the listeners may not stay to hear the end of the story or check back later" (Smith, 2009, p. 282).

Hoaxes have been used as a teaching tool in the classroom without significant backlash (Howard, 2008; Kittle, 2012). Academics have also occasionally turned to hoaxes to make a professional point. To draw criticism to the credibility of scholarly publishing in the humanities, Alan Sokal submitted a purposely fraudulent article that was eventually published, and Sokal subsequently criticized the journal for publishing it (Slack & Semati, 1997). Similarly, in 2009, a "purportedly peer-reviewed open access journal" published a paper purposely filled with nonsense and fake citations (Oder, Blumenstein, Fialkoff, Hadro, & Lau-Whelan). Whether this was to expose the peer-review process or in retaliation for e-mail spam is unclear.

Searches in the library literature revealed very few articles related to library hoaxes, and none similar to the hoax at Mansfield. The only library hoax identified in the professional literature involved a hoax done by a radio station without the library's knowledge (St. Lifer & Rogers, 1994). A hoax similar to Mansfield's, which served as a spark for the Mansfield hoax, is not represented in the traditional library literature. The 2012 hoax created on behalf of the Troy, Michigan, public library used signs and Facebook to campaign against an upcoming tax referendum by promising a book burning party. The negative response that followed is credited, by some, with the tax being passed and the library saved (Doctorow, 2012). While the campaign won an Effie award for marketing effectiveness, the Doctorow (2012) article and associated comments clearly illuminate the divisiveness that a well-intentioned hoax can create within one's local community.

The current literature regarding hoaxes in general agrees that regardless of the type of hoax, social media and the Internet have changed the way hoaxes spread. This is due in large part to the speed of information dissemination and the connectivity of people. The virtual environment makes it "faster and easier to share viral news than it is to check for accuracy" (Orsini, 2012). Gordon-Murnane (2012) notes that in our hyper-connected world, "Once intentionally false rumors have been released into the wild, it is almost impossible to correct them" (p. 109). Additionally, Internet-based technologies allow messages, including hoaxes, to spread broadly so that a viewer may see it multiple times. Research shows that the more often you encounter a bit of information, the more likely you are to believe it later. This is known to psychologists as the "Illusory Truth Effect" (Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppino, 1977), so it follows that seeing the same message repeated via the broad reach of social media makes the message more believable. As Kassler (2002) points out, technology "makes the deception swifter, more effective, and more invisible" (p. 54).

Methodology

In October 2012, immediately following the end of the hoax, the researchers saved the five library-generated Facebook posts, comments, likes, and shares. Another screen capture was taken in May 2013 to identify any subsequently added or deleted comments. Facebook likes and shares, which were indicators of how widespread the hoax posts became, were reviewed first. The 107 comments were then reviewed, categorized by both authors, and the results averaged in an attempt to characterize the nature of responses. Comments were categorized as *reactionary, informative, congratulatory, hoax questioning, joking,* and *other* (see Appendix C). Additionally, posts made by the library or that were part of an online discussion were noted. Long-term Facebook data, called *Insights,* was collected for September 2011 through May 2014 to look for trends in Facebook use over time.

All hoaxers and full-time library public services employees were invited to be interviewed confidentially about the hoax as soon as the university's Institutional Review Board approved the research project. These interviews took place in October and November 2012. Interviews with hoax audience members that were not library employees

were conducted in April and May 2013. These interviews were held approximately six months after the end of the hoax to help reveal lasting effects. The individuals invited to be interviewed had commented on at least one of the library's Facebook posts and were a Mansfield University student or employee at the time of the hoax. An attempt was made to interview a university administrator, but all requests were declined.

The hoaxers were questioned to determine the intended outcome(s), how outcomes were measured, their perception of the outcomes, and the risk management planning (see Appendix D). The hoax audience was questioned to determine their perceptions and opinions of the hoax (see Appendix E). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stripped of personal information. The recordings were then deleted and the transcripts reviewed for in-depth information about the hoax's planning, impact, and repercussions.

Other information sources were used to provide a fuller understanding of the hoax. Articles from *College and Research Libraries News* (DiMarco, 2013) and *The Higher Ed Marketing Blog* (Miller, 2012) provided first-person accounts of the hoax. Library event attendance data was reviewed to look for changes in participation rates. Library catalog data was reviewed to look for a spike in interest in the book banned

Results[1]

Hoaxers: The Planners and Presenters

A majority of the six hoaxers involved agreed to be interviewed. Some were involved in the entire hoax, while others were involved only in a portion of the hoax. Overall, the hoaxers were fairly consistent in their responses, with only one whose views generally diverged from the group.

Not all knew what the outcomes were for the hoax. Of those that did, outcomes identified included to "get people's attention," "to bring attention to banned books," "to get them interested and realize that it's a current problem," and "to make … our customers aware of what banned books" are. One person identified the need "to raise awareness about Banned Books Week and about library events in general" as the primary reason for the hoax. Another posited that it was, in part, to provide PR for the book's author. An additional goal of the project identified by the book's author was "to emphasize the importance of freedom of information to everyone, everywhere, forever" (Miller, 2012).

The only assessment the hoaxers were aware of was a review of the reactions on Facebook and unsolicited feedback from students. The hoaxers—with the exception of one who stated it "caused too much negativity for the library"—felt the hoax was successful. Hoaxers identified their measure of success as the reactions on Facebook, noting the rise in statistics and student feedback, which was "all positive." One hoaxer felt that those involved will remember this for "the rest of their lives" because of their "personal, visceral" reactions. Only one negative comment on Facebook was identified by the hoaxers.

Risk identification was mentioned by a majority of the hoaxers, but identified risks were inconsistent. Risks to the library director, the library's reputation, and the hoaxers' personal reputations were discussed. The hoax was discussed with a national media consultant to look at "all the angles." Only one hoaxer identified risks to the university, and none identified risks to students or others in the organization. None identified how these risks would be managed. Only one felt his personal reputation was harmed by participating in the hoax.

The hoaxers, with one exception, felt the hoax was positive for the library, with few negative outcomes. Positive outcomes included getting people's attention, increasing "library awareness," generating "a conversation about banned books," and "heighten[ing] awareness of censorship in the United States." Negative outcomes included the library's reputation "could be a little tainted," "some people didn't take the deceit as well as others," and that the

hoax could not be repeated. Several identified no negative outcomes. The lone dissenting voice felt that the "negative" and "hurtful remarks" aimed at the library far outweighed any positive outcomes.

When asked what they would do differently, one wanted to know more of the entire plan. Several others felt more planning would have been helpful but noted the immediacy of the hoax made this impossible. There was a mixed response as to whether the hoax should have been longer or shorter.

From the interviews, it was apparent that several felt a great deal of personal pressure during the hoax. When current students, former students, and the media asked about the veracity of the banning, hoaxers either continued to validate the hoax, deferred questions, suggested that people monitor Facebook, and/or presented a limited truth. This stress is the reason that several hoaxers cited as to why the hoax ended when it did.

The Hoax Audience

The hoax audience included people within and outside of the library. Though the interviews were conducted at different times, the results are being grouped together, as there is no marked difference in their responses. This grouping will aid in preserving confidentiality. Of the 25 people contacted, a total of 13 were interviewed, including faculty, staff, and both traditionally aged and non-traditional undergraduates.

The hoax audience represented a wider range of responses than the hoaxers (Table 1). Eight felt the hoax was, overall, a positive experience, while one felt that it was entirely positive. Five felt it was overwhelmingly negative. Four were visibly upset about the hoax when being interviewed, some of them six months after the hoax ended.

Table 1
Hoax Audience Responses

	Yes / Positive	Not Sure	No / Negative
Overall Impression of Hoax	8	0	5
Could Identify an Educational Purpose	5	3	5
Learned Something	4	0	9
Identified Any Positive Outcomes	9	1	3
Identified Any Negative Outcomes	10	0	3
Felt Personal Reputation Was Harmed	2	0	11
Felt Hoax Was Worth the Risk	7	1	5
Felt Hoax Was Successful	10	0	3

When asked about the purpose of the hoax, respondents were divided between not knowing what the purpose was (5 responses) and identifying the purpose as banned book awareness (5 responses). Others felt that the purpose was publicity and marketing for the book's author, a "response to people not coming to an event" at the

library, "to see what the reaction of the student body would be to even a single book being banned," and "basically a practical joke that didn't have any purpose."

Most responded that they did not learn anything about banned books, some because they were already familiar with the concept of banned books and/or Banned Books Week. Only 4 respondents identified something they learned from the hoax, which included a personal evaluation of their stance on banned books, that no books should be banned in college, that other people think they have the right to decide what someone can read, and that "some people who might not necessarily want to read the book take exception to it being banned."

Unlike the hoaxers, the hoax audience was divided in their reactions to the hoax. Three felt there were no positive outcomes, while the majority felt that it did raise awareness about banned books or Banned Books Week to some degree. One person commented that it let people know that banned books are still an issue today. Two respondents mentioned that the topic of book banning was discussed in their homes, one among students in his department. Another commented that it could have been positive, but that lack of follow-through in providing more information or further campus discussion on banned books "wasted the opportunity."

With a similar split in responses, only 3 identified no negative outcomes. Negative outcomes identified included negative feelings about co-workers involved in the hoax; negative feelings toward the library and the hoaxers; that the library will not be believed in the future (the "whole 'cry wolf effect'"); that some people may still think the book is banned—which colors their perceptions about the library and the university—because they did not return to the library's Facebook page after the hoax; wasted time of those who sought out confirmation of the hoax; hurt feelings; and negative perceptions of the library. There were several in the hoax audience who identified others who were taking it too personally: one recognized that some might feel diminished, and another suggested they "suck it up and stop whining." Two stated that once the perception of the library has been tainted, the negative perception cannot be erased.

While the majority did not feel that their personal reputation was harmed by the hoax, 2 students did. One represented a student organization and was "put in charge of investigating" the banning. After speaking with some of the individuals involved in the hoax, he verified publicly that the banning was real and tried to "gather student attention" and "inform students of the situation." When the hoax was revealed, he was asked by students why he lied and wasted their time. He stated: "my credibility was somewhat hindered but not to a devastating point." The other student remarked that, as a student leader of several organizations at Mansfield, his reputation is tied to that of the university, and that if people associate book banning with his university it is "a problem for me."

The perception of the reputation or credibility of the library is more complex (Table 2). Seven respondents identified an overall increase in the library's reputation, 3 felt it stayed the same, and 3 felt that it decreased. Six individuals felt the library's credibility decreased initially and only recovered after the hoax was revealed. Statements provided in response to this question help illustrate the breadth of responses.

On the positive side, these included—

- "I'm glad to see the library raising awareness";
- the library deserves "respect for pull[ing] it off";
- "it was pretty brilliant";
- and "very forward thinking."

On the negative side, one respondent stated,

> There has to be a level of trust and we have to know that what I'm told by the library staff is accurate. So add to this the element of deception, I feel like that really takes away from the credibility of the library itself.

After learning about the ban, one respondent did his "duty to follow up on this, to find out if it was a rumor, and the sources, credible sources" said it was true, and this was backed by "knowingly and willfully" false documents. The respondent concluded: "I don't know how that would actually ever help the image of a library that is supposed to be about credible information." Finally, one stated that "it was my understanding that the staff weren't actually allowed to talk about it. So the staff were basically being directed to be deceptive, and I feel like that really hurts the credibility of the library."

Perceptions of the hoax's effect on the reputation or credibility of the university as a whole were less disparate. Eight respondents felt the university was not impacted by the hoax. Two identified an overall increase in the reputation or credibility of the university, while 3 indicated an overall decrease. Increases were attributed to the university opposing book banning and to supporting raising awareness of the impact of book banning. Decreases were attributed to the university allowing a hoax to happen (this was viewed by the respondent as negative), a "deceptive message" that was "interpreted as a lie" that came from the university, and that an uncontrollable social media medium was used for dissemination.

Table 2
Hoax Audience Perceptions of Changes in Reputation

	Increased	Decreased then Increased	Decreased then Stayed Same	Stayed Same	Decreased
Library Reputation	3	4	2	1	3
University Reputation	2	0	2	6	3

The hoax audience was more evenly split on the issue of whether the deception was worth the reward of banned book awareness. Seven felt it was worth the deception, 5 did not, and 1 said he was "not sure, probably." One felt the hoax "trivialized" banned books, while another felt that there was no measurable reward as he saw it, so of course it was not worth it. Two identified the amount of discussion it created as reasons the deception was worth it. Finally, one person who felt it was worth it and stated it was not "the most moral or politically correct way to increase awareness" noted that he saw value in the hoax because he "wouldn't have seen [the discussion of banned books] otherwise."

A majority felt the hoax was successful with only 3 saying it was not. One was pleasantly surprised at the number of people willing to speak up about the banning. Another stated,

> I think any time we can bring anybody's attention to what really goes on with the quest for information and freedom to read what we want is a good thing. Even though it was a hoax and even though some people might look askance at that, I still think it's worth it.

Others identified the amount of discussion generated and the emotional connection to the topic made a difference. Another indicated that if even one person did any research about banned books, it was worth it.

Three people felt that more could have been done. They noted it was successful in getting people's attention, but it missed the opportunity to educate people about banned books, stating, "North Hall [library] really did what everyone aspires to do as a publicity person on campus, and that's to get EVERYONE'S attention." What upset him, however, was that after garnering that attention, "It wasn't really followed by much of an announcement or much follow-up."

Comments from the hoax audience about their feelings are wide ranging. Seven left the hoax with a positive feeling, even though some initially felt tricked. Comments included "a great effort," "loved it," "it was cool," and "glad to see it happen." Others reported feeling "empty" when the hoax was over, "angry," "livid," "fooled," and then "relieved," "irate," "discouraged," and "a little silly." Several felt good that they had correctly guessed it was a hoax. Two felt let down that more was not done when students were engaged and excited about the issue. One "felt completely duped, because I had done my business to check up with people" about the veracity of the banning. One identified a loss of trust and confidence in the administrative officials at the university. Two identified this research project as helping to relieve some of their negative feelings, knowing that there is follow-up and accountability for the project.

This group had several suggestions for doing things differently, should there ever be another hoax. One suggestion was that it should be discussed and agreed upon by the entire library staff, prior to the start of a hoax. Some suggested that the "long range effects on students" needed more consideration and that meaningful, measurable outcomes be included and evaluated at the end of the hoax. Several wanted the hoax to run longer, to see what further reactions could have been drawn from the students, even though extending the hoax "sounds really mean." One suggested that if it was intended to be fun, then they need to make sure *everyone* is having fun with it.

Three people identified the need for follow-up to educate students about banned books, claiming that the video was not sufficient. They recommended using attention-grabbing tactics, such as a hoax, to lead up to a discussion, event, actionable objective, or "anything that would provide a positive or progressive effort for the students." They felt the publicity generated by the hoax was an extremely successful way to engage students and teach them something but the educational piece was missing. Several ways to provide educational opportunities at the end of the hoax were suggested, including a campus discussion after the hoax and tying the banning to more subtle forms of censorship using historical examples.

Based on interviews alone, a majority of the hoax audience felt it was positive for the library and that it did help to raise awareness about banned books. Unlike the hoaxers, the hoax audience identified more negative outcomes and potential negative outcomes. But interviews do not tell the whole story.

Facebook

Facebook response was identified as a measure of success, so a look at Facebook data is in order. *Page likes*, when a Facebook user identifies a page as one they are interested in, can provide an indication of site interest. The month of the hoax, October 2012, received the largest number of page likes, 32. This is compared to an average of 7.6 page likes per month and to the second largest number of page likes in a month, 25, in September 2013 (see Figure 1).

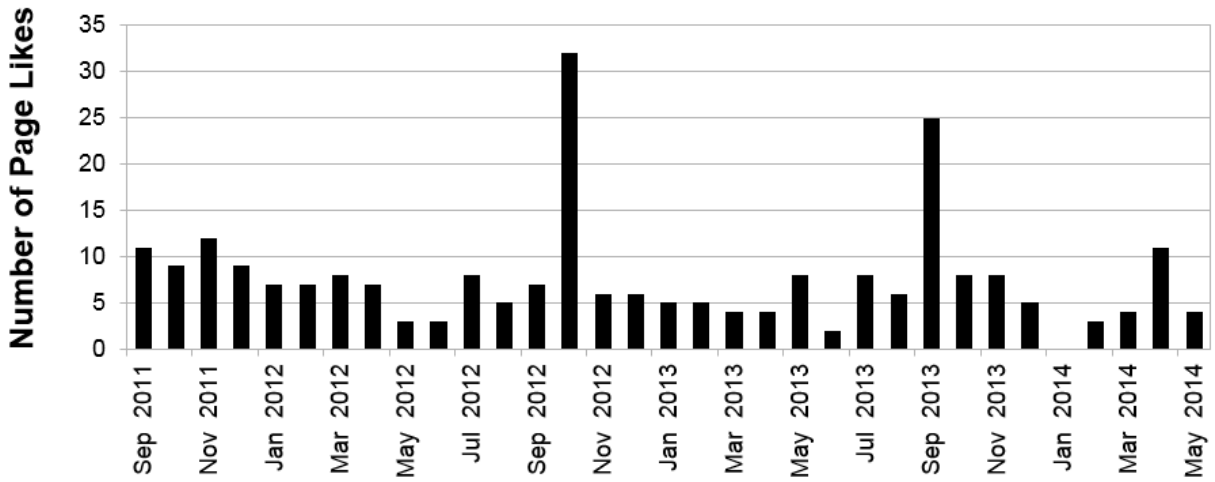

Figure 1
The number of new Facebook page likes per month

More telling is the response to the six posts made during Banned Books Week and the five posts made during the following week for the hoax. As evidenced in Table 3, a much larger number of people saw, commented on, and shared the two posts announcing the ban than any other Banned Books Week or hoax-reveal posts. The posts announcing the ban garnered 1,314 combined views and 38 combined shares, in comparison to the posts announcing the hoax, which received 626 views and 18 shares. If these numbers are indicators of how information about the hoax spread, less than half of those who learned of the banning via the library's Facebook page also saw the Facebook reveal.

Table 3
Facebook Data for Banned Books Week and Hoax

Post	Date	Views	Likes	Shares	Comments
Banned Books Week Post	09/21/2012	220	12	0	7[a]
Banned Books Week Post	09/24/2012	168	1	0	0
Banned Books Week Post	09/24/2012	177	5	1	0
Banned Books Week Post	09/25/2012	185	0	0	4
Banned Books Week Post	09/26/2012	199	3	1	2
Banned Books Week Post	09/27/2012	249	9	0	1
Post Announcing Ban	10/02/2012	435	1	11	25
Letter Confirming Ban[b]	10/03/2012	879	1	27	73[c]
Reveal Video	10/04/2012	228	16	15	2
Reveal Letter	10/04/2012	318	17	3	7
Second Video	10/05/2012	80	0	0	0

[a]Two of the comments were left during hoax week.
[b]The letter confirming the ban is the 6th most viewed post and 8th most viral post on the library's Facebook page from account creation through May 30, 2014.
[c]One comment was removed by the poster after the hoax and is no longer available online.

While there was a spike during the hoax, there appears to have been a drop in Facebook *Reach,* the number of unique users who were presented with the post (Facebook, 2014), immediately following the reveal of the hoax. Looking at the monthly average Reach per post (Figure 2), October 2012, the month of the hoax, had an average Reach of 149 users per post, the highest Reach per month up to that point. Reach drops noticeably after October and continues to drop until rebounding in March 2013. Compared to other years, this drop in the winter months parallels 2013 and may be seasonal rather than hoax-related. Looking more closely at the month prior to and during the hoax, it is apparent that Reach dropped off immediately after the hoax is completed, compared to the weeks immediately preceding the hoax (Figure 3).

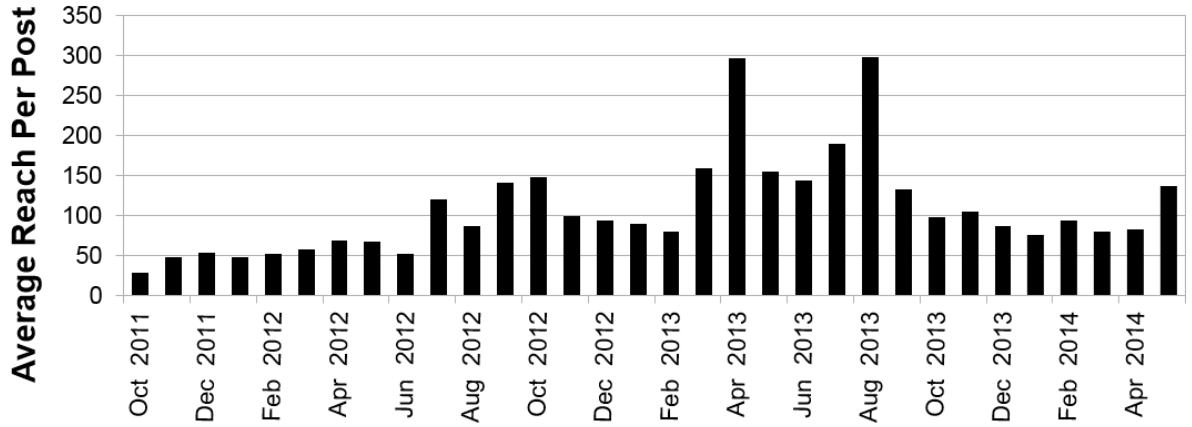

Figure 2

Average Reach of Facebook posts by month.

Data Limitation: Reach for photo posts is not included in the data from Facebook until July 12, 2012. Photos were the library's most popular posts during that time period, and, therefore, average Reach for October 2011 through June 2012 in this data is lower than in actuality.

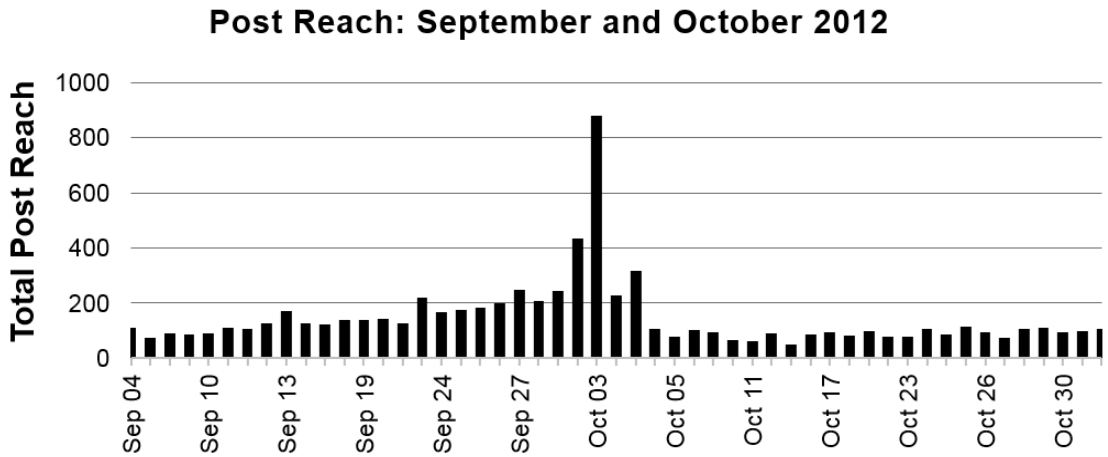

Figure 1

Daily Facebook Reach for the months of Banned Books Week and the banned books hoax

Beyond the numbers, the comments on the hoax-related posts were reviewed to explore the nature of the discourse on Facebook (see Appendix C for an explanation of comment categories and definition of *agreement rate).* The results (Table 4) show that 61 out of 107 comments (57%) were reactionary. Hoax questioning, with 19 comments (18%), was the next largest category.

Table 4
Categorization of Comments: Number of Comments

	Total Comments	Reactionary	Informative	Congratulatory	Hoax Questioning	Joking	Other	Agreement Rate[b]
Post Announcing Ban	25	13.5 [a]	5	0	4.5	0	2	72%
Letter Confirming Ban	73	47.5	5	1.5	12.5	4	2.5	90%
Reveal Video	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	100%
Reveal Letter	7	0	1	3	2	0	1	100%

[a] Two raters categorized comments independently. Results were averaged, allowing for fractional results.
[b] See Appendix C for explanation of Agreement Rate.

In a separate evaluation of the amount of discussion in the comments (Table 5), only 22.5 of the 107 comments (20%) were classified as discussion, indicating minimal discussion between commenters. The discussions included hoax questioning, expressing a desire to read the book, and supporting other commenters. Of these, 2 comments were questions posted to create discussion, neither of which received a response. Only 2 of the comments were from the library, and these came at the end of the hoax to reassert the banning was a hoax.

Table 5
Library Participation and Amount of Discussion: Number of Comments [a]

	Total Comments for Post	Comments by Library	Comments that were Discussion	Agreement Rate
Post announcing ban	25	0	8	92%
Letter confirming ban	73	1	12.5 [b]	99%
Reveal Video	2	0	0	100%
Reveal Letter	7	1	2	100%

[a] See Appendix C for an explanation of categories and Agreement Rate.
[b] Two raters categorized comments independently. Results were averaged, allowing for fractional results.

Other Outcomes

As one goal of the hoax was "to raise awareness about Banned Book Week and about library events in general," a review of the event attendance is needed to evaluate the success of this goal. Attendance for Banned Books Week events rose from 10 to 100 between 2012 and 2013 but dropped for National Library Week events from 213 to 139 between 2013 and 2014 (Book & Sanko, 2014).

The book at the center of the hoax received some attention as a result of the event. According to the author, "There was a large spike in interest and a small spike in sales" (Miller, 2013). Library circulation records for the book showed no increased interest in the book after the hoax. It was borrowed twice in 2012 prior to the hoax, once immediately following the hoax, once in 2013 (via interlibrary loan), and once in 2014 (as of July 2014).

Conclusions and Discussion

In view of the mixed results, it is difficult to determine whether or not the hoax was an effective way to celebrate and develop awareness for Banned Books Week. If the goal was merely to have people talk about banned books, both the interviews and Facebook data show that the goal was achieved. While the majority of the hoaxers felt it was an overwhelming success, their perspective is not validated by the interviews with the hoax audience, who painted a much more diverse picture of the outcomes. A vocal minority of this group was upset months after the hoax. They also repeatedly voiced concerns that others who did not learn of the hoax's reveal would view the library, and possibly the university, in a negative light. This concern is validated by the Facebook data, which shows the reveal reached less than half of those who saw the original ban. In contrast to the views espoused by the hoaxers, this hoax, according to the interviews of the hoax audience, was not entirely harmless. This disparity between the hoaxers' perceptions and the feedback from the hoax audience points to either a lack of reflection at the time of the interviews or an insufficient evaluation of the hoax by the hoaxers.

The hoax was clearly successful in emotionally engaging those it reached, an outcome that was recognized by many as being extremely difficult. However, the hoax did not harness or direct that engagement to educate students or to secure future library support. As noted by several members of the hoax audience, this was a key piece that was missing.

Most troubling are the interviews that reveal deterioration of interpersonal relationships and trust. The hoax audience articulated distrust with the hoaxers, with library staff and faculty, with co-workers, and the university's administration, not to mention potential damage to personal reputations. Also of serious concern is the possibility that there are people who still believe the library banned a book.

While there appears to be a drop in Facebook Reach immediately following the hoax, it is not clear this is a direct result. Facebook Reach did recover, and so no lasting harm is apparent. The comments reveal a great deal of outrage, which provides evidence of engagement and connection. However, there was little discussion and education in the comments and nothing substantive from the library. It cannot be concluded from the review of the comments that a meaningful discussion was started or an educational objective was attained as a result of the hoax.

While Banned Books Week event attendance increased, this may be due to different events offered each year, for example, banned book discussions versus a murder mystery. With no other assessment available to tie this attendance rise or the National Library Week decline to the hoax, no causal relationship between the hoax and library event attendance can be drawn.

Looking at the outcomes of the hoax reveals a complex picture that touches on issues of public relations, ethics, marketing, human resources, psychology, education, and assessment, to name a few. These results show that hoaxing may not be in the best interest of a library and should be done only after thorough investigation of all

potential negative outcomes. The results of the Mansfield hoax informed the following list of questions and concerns, which can be used for both investigating the appropriateness of a hoax and, should that strategy be chosen, implementing a hoax. While this is not intended to be a complete list, it is a starting point for learning from the outcomes of the Mansfield hoax.

When Considering a Hoax:

- Obtain permission from the head of the organization.
- Consult the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if at an academic institution.
- Consider using the media's strategy for maintaining credibility while hoaxing by beginning on April 1, using over-the-top exaggeration, and/or immediate debunking.
- Develop a risk management plan including a complete risk assessment.

Risk Assessment, Possible Questions:

- Will anyone be hurt by the hoax? Define "hurt." How will those hurt be identified and restitution made?
- What are the implications of lying to customers, co-workers, and the media? Will it jeopardize institutional and personal reputations? What are the repercussions and remedies for harming the reputations of others who did not choose the risk?
- How does this align with professional codes of ethics? What are the repercussions of violating such codes?
- Does the organization have policies prohibiting making false statements? Who would provide approval for a policy exemption? What are the possible repercussions of violating the policy?
- Is it acceptable to ask or require others in the organization to maintain the deception? Does this extend beyond work hours? What will happen if not everyone agrees to support the hoax?

Before the Hoax:

- Identify clear, measurable goals and an assessment tool.
- Develop a goal beyond awareness, such as to raise awareness without compromising the relationship with customers; to educate; or to engage others in meaningful discussion.
- Notify all employees in the organization of the hoax.
- Plan the entire PR cycle.
- Involve classroom faculty so they can engage students in a meaningful way about the issue through class discussions. They can lead serious conversations with their students about what happened, why it happened, what the point was, why they reacted the way they did, and what this reveals about individuals and society. These are the kind of meaningful discussions academic institutions should be fostering: getting people to think carefully, think about the complexities, multiple viewpoints, and long-range views.

During the Hoax:

- Respond to all questions promptly.
- Participate in the social media discussion in a meaningful way. A library may choose to defend its stance and thus continue the hoax. Alternately, the library may choose to encourage debate by allowing library employees to represent alternate viewpoints.

- Encourage the audience to think more deeply than just getting mad.
- Avoid lying directly to individuals, including lying by omission.

The Reveal:

- Prominently display the reveal on the organization's homepage and via all social media outlets used by the organization.
- Place the reveal moment early in the reveal piece and repeat it at the end. This will inform people who do not continue watching or reading after the first few seconds/sentences and those who miss the initial reveal.
- Comment on each Facebook post stating it was a hoax and update the post itself, identifying it as a completed hoax. This notifies other commenters of the reveal and will aid latecomers in identifying the hoax as such.
- Provide more PR for the reveal than for the hoax.

After the Hoax:

- Include an educational component and/or a call to action at the end of the hoax.
- Channel the energy and enthusiasm created by providing a way for people to become more involved with the topic or organization.
- Continue to monitor social media and respond to posts as needed.
- Debrief hoaxers and library employees. A trained counselor may be beneficial due to high stress levels, strong emotions, and blame assigning.
- Complete the assessment and address any problems promptly.
- Share the organization's story by offering information on successes, failures, and suggestions for improvement.

Notes

[1] In an effort to preserve confidentiality of interviewees, some information about participation rates has been generalized. To further protect confidentiality, male pronouns will be used for all interviewees. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes in the results are attributable to interviewees.

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Appendix A

Letter Revealing Hoax

MANSFIELD UNIVERSITY
Mansfield, PA 16933

October 4, 2012

Office of the Library and Information Resources
Ph: (570) 662-4689
Fax: (570) 662-4993
E-mail: sdimarco@mansfield.edu

To Whom It May Concern:

This past week has been a wonderful opportunity to showcase the arbitrary and damaging effects of censorship and "banning books." As many of you have already figured out, our banning of Dennis Miller's One *Woman's Vengeance,* was simply the tool that caused this conversation to become personal. It is easy to talk about censorship in the abstract, but when it directly impacts our community, it takes on a much different meaning entirely. The North Hall Library has never and will never ban any item – it simply is against all we stand for. We have regular complaints on certain books, but we have not and will not abuse our position of trust to make decisions on the appropriateness of an item in our collection to not be circulated due to complaints.

I am a grateful to several people here in the Library and in the University that had the courage to participate in this lesson, and to those who reacted in a positive and respectful manner rather than just complain and do nothing.

I am happy to address any questions on this matter.

Sincerely,

Scott R. DiMarco

Director of Library and Information Resources

Mansfield University of Pennsylvania

Mansfield University is a member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

Appendix B

Letter Announcing Ban

MANSFIELD UNIVERSITY
Mansfield, PA 16933

October 2, 2012

To whom it may concern:

Based on a complaint from a concerned parent, *One Woman's Vengeance* by Dennis Miller has been removed from the North Hall Library collection. An unbiased committee was formed to review the novel and found it to be inappropriate due to extreme violence and sexual content.

Sincerely,

Scott R. DiMarco
Director of Library and Information Resources
Mansfield University of Pennsylvania

Mansfield University is a member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

Appendix C

Facebook Categorization Descriptions

Comments were categorized using the following definitions:

- Reactionary Comments: Comments that singularly present an emotional reaction, a gnashing of teeth, or sarcasm.
- Informative Comments: Information about the book or banned books in general.
- Congratulatory Comments: Praise for a hoax well done.
- Hoax Questioning: Comments that posed the idea that this was a hoax, talked about checking sources, or indicated that it was not a hoax.
- Joking: Humorous posts including "What's wrong with band books?"
- Other: Posts that fell into none of the previous categories, for example, a comment from someone unable to read the letter.

Comments were additionally identified if they were

- By the Library: Comments the North Hall Library contributed to the discussion.
- Discussion: Comments that were in direct response to another post or were questions posted to start discussion.

The Agreement Rate indicates the percentage of comments that both researchers categorized the same. Each author independently categorized the comments, and these categorizations did not always agree. The Agreement Rate shows the percentage of categorizations that were the same. A higher number means greater agreement, with 100% meaning that both authors categorized all comments identically.

Appendix D

Interview Questions for the Hoaxers

- What was the goal of the banned books exercise?
- Would you consider it a success?
- How was success determined?
- From your perspective, how did the exercise play out?
- What was the exit strategy?
- Were possible risks to the library discussed? If so, what risks were identified and how were the risks managed?
- Were possible risks to the university discussed? If so, what risks were identified and how were the risks managed?
- Were possible risks of deceiving students discussed? If so, what risks were identified and how were the risks managed?
- Do you feel you or your reputation were harmed in any way by the exercise?
- What do you see as the positive outcomes from this hoax?
- What do you see as the negative outcomes from this hoax?
- Would you have a hoax again?
- What would you have done differently?
- Any further comments on the hoax?

Appendix E

Interview Questions for the Hoax Audience

- What do you think was the objective of the exercise?
- What did you learn about banned books?
- Do you think the library's reputation or credibility increased/decreased/stayed the same? Why?
- Do you think the university's reputation or credibility increased/decreased/stayed the same? Why?
- Do you think the deception was worth the reward of banned book awareness? Please explain.
- When the hoax was revealed, how did you feel?
- Do you feel you or your reputation were harmed in any way by the exercise? If yes, how?
- What do you see as the positive outcomes from this hoax?
- What do you see as the negative outcomes from this hoax?
- Do you think the hoax was successful? How do you determine this?
- Now that the hoax is over, what do you wish had been done differently?
- Any further comments on the hoax?