
COVID-19 Cannot Censor: Banned Books Week Programming During a Pandemic

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Abstract: In the fall of 2020, COVID-19 impacted traditional programming at Greenwood Library, including campaigns and events for the American Library Association's Banned Books Week. In efforts to continue to promote the week, programming was revamped for a mostly online environment. Programs included online Banned Books Trivia, a Zoom interview with *New York Times* bestselling author, Todd Parr, an online presentation on the censorship of comic books, and an in-person labyrinth featuring photos of banned book covers. The purpose of this article is to discuss the details of planning and implementing this nontraditional programming and how this type of programming has changed how the library will plan programs in the future.

Keywords: Banned Books Week, virtual activities, online programming, zoom, zoom fatigue

Introduction

Longwood University, located in Farmville, VA, has about 5,864 students. Of those students, 5,124 students are undergraduate and 740 are graduate students. In Fall 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Longwood University held in-person classes on campus; many of those classes included virtual options through the learning management system, Canvas, and

through Zoom conferencing. Though campus was open, campus life looked different, including life in the library.

The Janet D. Greenwood Library, or simply Greenwood Library, is located near the center of campus. The two-story building holds multiple volumes and ample seating for students' studying and gathering needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the library introduced a mask mandate, many seats were removed from the building, library classrooms were rearranged to support social-distancing, and use of virtual library resources expanded exponentially. Some examples of virtual resources included information literacy sessions taught online through Zoom and Canvas, virtual librarian research consultations, and as this article will outline, virtual student programs.

Greenwood Library prioritizes student engagement. The library has a designated Marketing and Outreach Librarian who plans student programming and leads the library's marketing committee. There is also a librarian who liaises with the Office of Student Affairs, and who serves on the marketing committee. The librarians are joined on the marketing committee by five staff members; together they plan programs, design posters and other marketing materials, write announcements, and coordinate all of the library program advertising. Greenwood Library has hosted many successful programs in the past, including end-of-semester and exam week activities, late night studying programs, a Human Library, and more. The library also engages the Longwood community through active social media accounts. Facebook is the library's most popular platform with 1,878 followers. The library also has 208 Instagram followers, and 648 Twitter followers.

Every year during the last week of September, the Greenwood Library, among many of the nation's libraries, celebrates Banned Books Week. According to the American Library Association (2020), "it spotlights current and historical attempts to censor books in libraries and schools. It brings together the entire book community — librarians, booksellers, publishers, journalists, teachers, and readers of all types — in shared support of the freedom to seek and to express ideas, even those some consider unorthodox or unpopular." The theme for Banned Books Week 2020 was "censorship is a dead end," and Greenwood Library used that theme to focus the week's programming.

Greenwood Library's past Banned Books Week programming included banned book readings in the library in partnership with Longwood's Department of English and Modern Languages, social media campaigns, and book displays. In Fall 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, programming had to change. The library hosted several online programs including Banned Books Trivia, a Zoom interview with *New York Times* bestselling author Todd Parr, and an online presentation on the censorship of comic books. The library also incorporated book displays in the library and a labyrinth taped to the library floor featuring banned book covers.

Literature Review

Knowledge of censorship is important, and librarians play a large role in that education. Both school and academic libraries have incorporated banned books and intellectual freedom instruction into their curriculum. From librarian Lakisha Brison who designed an intellectual freedom curriculum in an elementary school involving writing and creating posters (Jones, 2013) to academic librarian Nadean Meyer who partnered with an education professor to teach an intellectual freedom course to education students (Meyer & Bradley, 2013), many librarians work to combat censorship in more ways than simply providing programming just during Banned Books week. However, many libraries, due to time and budget constraints, focus on providing censorship education during Banned Books Week.

While there is curriculum research, there is little research on programming for Banned Books Week in academic libraries. This could be because, as Oltmann (2017) found by interviewing academic deans and directors, academic librarians do not spend a lot of time explicitly thinking about intellectual freedom because academic libraries typically do not face challenges. Instead of providing programming, some libraries have instead used their collections to promote the week.

For example, the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale used Banned Books Week to engage the community in a discussion about censorship and access to literature by using a collection that was donated to the library by Ralph McCoy, an avid scholar of First Amendment freedoms. This collection includes books about freedom of expression as well as examples of books that have been banned, burned, or censored throughout

history. The main outreach event for the week is a reading of selections of banned books from the collection (Hubbard, 2009).

In past years, Greenwood Library focused solely on in-person events for Banned Books Week; the only virtual medium Greenwood Library used in the past was social media to advertise those events and raise awareness about censorship. Other libraries have been using virtual options for Banned Books Week for many years, though. For example, Marquette University has included a virtual interactive research guide and a virtual readout to their in-person programming (Zegers, Kowalik, & Reilly, 2013). Greenwood Library used this example to jumpstart ideas for its own programming in Fall 2020.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries and booksellers that were meant to host in-person events had to quickly transition their plans to virtual options. The Toronto University Press had to transfer book events and author interviews to a Zoom format; the Press recommended several steps to planning a virtual event including Facebook or Eventbrite marketing and having a “dress rehearsal” a few days before the event (Stileman & Nyren, 2020). Another example is Stephen F. Austin University (Breen et al., 2021) which offered a faculty-led Zoom discussion that covered books banned or challenged on political grounds.

An example of creating a virtual experience that does not involve Zoom is creating a virtual game to promote Banned Books Week. The ALA Intellectual Freedom Round Table Education Committee developed a virtual escape room for Banned Books Weeks titled *Escape The Dead End Of Censorship! A Virtual Escape Room Adventure*. Gamers used their knowledge of intellectual freedom to successfully escape the comic-based game (Hartman-Caverly, 2020). Like the booksellers and ALA committee, Greenwood Library also had to pivot most of its in-person event ideas to an online format and come up with new creative ideas for COVID-19 safe programs. The library’s Banned Books Week celebration is outlined in the following section.

Greenwood Library’s Banned Books Week Celebration

Social Media Campaign: Facebook & Instagram

Greenwood Library’s social media campaign for Banned Books Week included posts to both Facebook and Instagram. For Banned Books Week, most

of the posts were informational graphics provided by the American Library Association. These graphics included statistics on Banned Books Week, reasons for challenges, information on who initiates the challenges, a breakdown of challenged books, and total materials affected in 2019 censorship attempts. The librarians also submit their favorite banned books quotes to be featured on social media. These quotes were also posted as digital signage in the library; there are two digital monitors in the library and digital slides scroll on the screen that promote services, events, and other important campus updates. Throughout the week on Facebook, there were 32 likes for all Banned Books Week content; Instagram also had 32 likes for the week. Social media engagement for individual events and programs are outlined below.

Banned Books Trivia

Virtual Banned Books Trivia kicked off the week-long celebration of Banned Books Week. This event was hosted by a librarian and it was held on Zoom on a Sunday afternoon from 3:30 pm - 5:00 pm. Faculty, staff, and students were all encouraged to attend. The event was marketed through various channels, including a Facebook event, Facebook and Instagram posts, the campus weekly student email, digital signage throughout campus buildings, and Student Government Association meeting announcements. Unfortunately, while it was well advertised, the event occurred with only one professor and one student in attendance. Anecdotally, both said they enjoyed the event. An example trivia question was, “being a true story about two penguins that become parents didn't keep this award-winning children's picture book safe from being accused of being ‘anti-family’ and ‘unsuited for age group.’” The answer of course was Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell’s *And Tango Makes Three*. At the end of the event, both participants were notified that prizes, a Starbucks gift card and library promotional products, were available for them to pick up at the library’s front desk.

As with every event, lessons were learned for future planning. The library will plan to offer this event again with a few changes. The first change will be the day and time. Many students are traveling back to campus from weekends away on Sunday afternoons, so that may have contributed to the low attendance. The second change would be to offer the event on a different platform than Zoom. Since most students spend the majority of their week in

meetings and classes on Zoom, they may have avoided this event due to Zoom fatigue, a phenomenon that will be explained more in a section below.

Interview with New York Times Best-Selling Author Todd Parr

When planning for a virtual Banned Books Week celebration, the Marketing and Outreach Librarian was inspired by a blog post from The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association by Ellie Diaz titled, “40 Virtual Program Ideas for Banned Books Week” which included the idea to invite the author of a banned book to an interview about how it feels to be censored (2020). The librarian reached out to the founder of the Virginia Children’s Book Festival, an annual event held at Longwood University, to see if any of the Festival’s authors would be interested in an interview.

Todd Parr’s publicist was the first to express interest in the interview. Parr’s *The Family Book* was banned by Illinois School District for a gay parent reference. Greenwood Library asked for a 30-minute Zoom interview that would be uploaded to the library’s new YouTube channel. After the price was negotiated, the interview was planned to occur the week before Banned Books Week, but to be released during the week-long celebration.

The Dean of the Library and the Marketing and Outreach Librarian hosted the interview. Some of the questions involved how the author felt when he heard his book was banned, the author’s opinion on censoring books, and if the author’s writing style changed since the book was banned in 2012. The interview was advertised on Facebook and Instagram on the same day the video was released. The video received 26 total views on YouTube and reached 943 people on Facebook and 4 users on Instagram. Through that engagement, the librarians learned that more marketing may be needed in the days prior to a video going live. A live interview (in-person or virtual) with audience engagement may also be an option for the future.

The Horror! The Horror!: Comics, Censorship, and the Comics Code

Scott McDarmont, professor of English, presented his talk, “The Horror! The Horror!: Comics, Censorship, and the Comics Code,” live on Zoom. Professor McDarmont presented this program in-person for Banned Books Week 2018 with high attendance and engagement, so a virtual adaptation seemed appropriate. The presentation explored the “Comic Book Scare” of the

1950's (mostly centered around Dr. Frederic Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* and his allegations of comics contributing to juvenile delinquency) and how comics have become closer than any medium to having content dictated by the federal government.

Attendance during the live presentation was around 30 people, the highest number of participants for the week. There was also a high level of engagement during the question and answer portion of the presentation; students seemed to be really interested in the subject matter. The presentation was also streamed live on Facebook and later uploaded to the library's YouTube channel; it reached approximately 260 people on Facebook and had 3 views on YouTube.

A potential reason for the high attendance and high level of engagement was that Professor McDarmont offered extra credit to his students who attended the event. This proves that faculty support is an important factor in library marketing and programming. Having faculty who encourage students to attend library events is beneficial not only to the students, but it also facilitates creating more collaborative relationships between librarians and teaching faculty.

Book Displays

In addition to several online programs, Greenwood Library spread the celebration into the library building as well. Open space in the library's atrium entrance is perfect for book displays. During Banned Books Week, the library displayed banned books with book flags in them that stated the reasons for banning. The display included Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, the anonymous *Go Ask Alice*, and several others. Approximately six books were checked out during the display's duration; this was an increase over the 2019 banned books display which only had three check-outs. The display was also promoted on Instagram, and the post received fifteen likes.

Labyrinth

Labyrinth walking can be meditative, and there is a multitude of research about labyrinths in libraries. In one study, librarians and nursing faculty partnered to determine if labyrinth walking reduced stress in library users;

results showed lower systolic blood pressure and pulse rates and higher satisfaction and relaxation in labyrinth walkers versus control subjects (Zucker, Choi, Cook, & Croft, 2016). Based on this research, Greenwood Library initially incorporated labyrinths into the “De-Stress for Success” exam week programming. Because of the theme for Banned Books Week 2020, “Censorship is a Dead End,” the labyrinth also seemed to be a relevant, socially distanced, in-person addition to the week’s activities and programs.

There are many ways to incorporate labyrinths in libraries. Cook and Croft (2015) and Chant (2014) discussed the use of high-tech labyrinths in libraries in which the labyrinth is projected onto the floor. Greenwood Library opted for a low-tech option of using tape to map out a labyrinth on the floor. Pictures of a selection of banned book titles were featured throughout the maze. The labyrinth was featured in the library’s Learning Commons, the area of the library that houses the public-use computers. While library staff did not receive any complaints, the location of the labyrinth may have caused a disruption to students using the computers. In the future, librarians will consider moving the location of the labyrinth to the library’s more open atrium area or in the group study section of the library’s second floor.

The Censorship is a Dead End Maze was promoted on digital signage throughout campus, in the weekly student email, and on social media. Library staff witnessed some students using the maze, but a formal assessment was not done. In addition to moving the location of the labyrinth, the next time this activity is planned, there will also be a plan to assess how many people completed the labyrinth and possibly how they felt during and after completing the labyrinth.

Moving Forward

Zoom Fatigue

An aspect of moving to an online environment that Greenwood Library did not anticipate was how it would have an effect on attendance, due to a new phenomenon, Zoom fatigue. This phenomenon stems from how people process information over video. Users tend to spend most of the time in a Zoom session staring at the camera to show they are paying attention; this amount of concentration causes exhaustion after several online meetings or classes a day (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020). With many Longwood students attending classes via

Zoom for at least some, if not all, of their course load, students likely did not wish to attend any outside events using the platform.

Fosslien and Duffy (2020), identified five ways to help combat Zoom fatigue. These include avoiding multitasking during the call, building in breaks, reducing on-screen stimuli, making social events opt-in only, and switching from phone calls to emails. Greenwood Library already makes its social events optional, but the library plans to adapt a few more of these strategies during future events. For example, the event host could make having the camera turned on optional for students; the hope is that switching to just audio rather than video may help combat this fatigue. Another factor that the library plans to implement is building breaks into longer Zoom events such as the Zoom trivia; a short break at the halfway point could enable students to return refreshed.

Future Programming

In a semester that has completely changed how institutions across the country hold events, Greenwood Library was able to flip the switch to offer innovative online programming. Moving forward, the Marketing and Outreach Librarian and committee will plan both virtual and in-person programming for the foreseeable future. In Spring 2021, the library plans to host a Zoom conversation for Fair Use Week, a Zoom trivia session, offer online digital displays for archival materials, and continue the end of semester event, De-Stress for Success, where the library offers grab-and-go snacks and goodie bags for students to take home. The library will also host a year-long community reading challenge in which readers will choose a book from an assigned theme; early events and programs will also be hosted via Zoom and the Facebook Groups feature.

In this unprecedented year, the Marketing and Outreach Librarian learned a lot about providing virtual programming. Flipping the switch to online programming requires more detailed and thorough steps than traditional in-person programs. Below are the steps the Marketing and Outreach Librarian suggests for the planning process of online programming. The first step in the process is selecting a platform that works best for the institution. For example, Longwood University has a university-wide license for Zoom, so that is the chosen platform for programs. The second step is to

decide whether the event should be a live event or a pre-recorded version to upload on YouTube. For Banned Books Week, a pre-recorded video was used. The third step is to think about how the audience should view the programming. Does it require a single speaker view or gallery view where all participants are able to see each other during the programs? In the Banned Book author interview, Greenwood Library used a speaker-only view which is more appropriate for the interview format. The fourth step is to ask the interviewee or the featured speaker if it is appropriate to record the meeting and stream directly to social media. For the author interview, Greenwood Library recorded the meeting, uploaded it to YouTube, and later shared the link on social media. The last step to be considered is if the event should be open to everyone or a registration should be required. Since the Dean of the Library and the Marketing and Outreach Librarian conducted the interview, no registration was required. These new programming skills, such as a renewed appreciation for organization and using shared spreadsheets for brainstorming ideas and practical implications with the marketing committee, will continue into planning future programming.

Conclusion

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, academic libraries have been resilient in providing services. At Greenwood Library, the Marketing and Outreach Librarian and the librarian liaison for Student Affairs wanted to ensure that student engagement remained a priority. The library had always provided Banned Books Week programming, so the week seemed to be the right opportunity to test the library's adaptability. Book displays in the library and a censorship themed labyrinth allowed for students within the library to participate in the week while following the university's COVID-19 protocols of social distancing. Previous library programs, like the comic book censorship presentation and trivia competition, were adapted to be presented over Zoom. The virtual format also allowed for new program ideas that wouldn't have been feasible in the past due to travel and other expenditures; the author interview with Todd Parr is an example of a unique addition to Banned Books Week that may not have been possible in-person.

Librarians learned from providing these adapted programs and will use that knowledge to provide programming in the spring semester and moving forward. Greenwood Library will continue to consider phenomena like Zoom

fatigue when planning online events as well as social distancing protocols for possible in-person events. Ultimately, through hosting Banned Books Week virtually, Greenwood Library has learned that students are not only still willing to engage with the library, but they are enjoying engaging in new ways.

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