



How Book Burning Saved a Library

An unusual campaign in Troy, Michigan proves yet again that if you want to change the world for the better, first you have to change the story.

This month marks the one-year anniversary of an unconventional campaign that prevented a beloved public library from closing. You probably haven't heard this story, and the affairs of Troy, Michigan may seem far removed from your own, but if you're in the business of changing how people think and behave, it's worth checking out.

In August 2011, things were looking pretty bleak for the city of Troy. A decline in property values had led to a 20% decrease in revenue, forcing personnel layoffs and cuts in municipal services. Despite a proud history spanning nearly fifty years, the Troy Public Library was facing permanent closure that month unless the voters passed a tax increase.



Troy Public Library

Proposed tax increases had failed twice before, and the anti-tax sentiment whipped up nationally by the Tea Party was playing well in Troy, especially as the local economy sagged. Sure, people loved their local library, but it looked like they hated taxes a lot more.

When the vote was set for August 2nd, the library's supporters had only six weeks to conduct their campaign, and turnout during the dog days of summer promised to be low. Even though the proposed tax increase would be less than 1%, local experts predicted defeat for the ballot measure. But then something strange started to happen all over the city.

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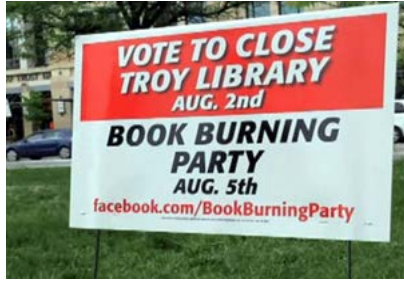
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Yard signs started to appear with the message, "Vote To Close Troy Library Aug 2nd, Book Burning Party Aug. 5th." The signs promoted a Facebook page set up to help interested parties coordinate for the event. Need a baby-sitter so you can help burn some books? Click here! Want to buy a book bag emblazoned with a book burning party logo? Order one here!

As you might expect, Troy residents were outraged, and the story blew up on Twitter, local media, and eventually national and international media. At first blush, it appeared the local anti-tax forces had gone one step too far, but here's where the story takes its most interesting twist.

The yard signs and social media campaign were actually the work of locals who *supported* the tax increase (with pro bono help from the ad agency Leo Burnett Detroit). They recognized that the Tea Party was controlling the narrative on this issue, defining it as a story about another burdensome tax increase. To win on August 2nd, the library's supporters knew they had to help voters see another story. A more resonant story. The story of what happens when a library closes.

Of course, a "book burning party" is an extreme and, some might say, perverse stretching of that story, but given the risk of losing their library forever, supporters felt that extreme measures were required. (It's worth noting that Troy Library officials weren't involved in the campaign and were shocked by the strategy.) Just a few days before the August 2nd vote, the Facebook page introduced a new message: "A vote against the library is like a vote to burn books."



[Watch this clever 3-minute YouTube video about the campaign.](#)

When the true intent of the book burning campaign was revealed, Troy residents not only breathed a sigh of relief, they turned out at the polls in numbers 280% higher than predicted. Shocked out of complacency, they passed the tax increase in a landslide and saved the library. More importantly, they demonstrated to us that stories are powerful tools of persuasion. And when they are used against us, it's our responsibility to come up with better ones.

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Our most popular online class returns September 13th, so grab your spot now.

Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative is a four-hour webinar designed to help you tell more compelling stories about your organization's work. Each class runs one hour, and over four weeks we will cover:

- The fundamental structure of good stories
- The 7 qualities that make stories memorable
- The 9 most common mistakes in storytelling and how to avoid them
- The 6 kinds of stories you must tell, and how to tell them for advocacy, development, recruitment and more



Our next set of classes is scheduled for September 13, 20, 27 and October 4 from 9-10a Pacific (12n-1p Eastern) each day. Tuition is \$500 per student and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. Find out more and reserve your space at [The Goodman Center](#).

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