

HOAXES AND PRANKS: When the Joke Turns Tragic

MINDS-ON QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been the victim of a prank? How did it feel? Did you laugh or were you angry/upset?
2. Have you ever been the perpetrator of a prank? Why did you do it? What were the consequences of your actions?
3. A prank can be defined as a practical joke. A hoax can be defined as a humorous or malicious deception. Define in your own words the similarities and differences between a prank and a hoax.
4. List as many examples as you can of pranks and hoaxes on television and the internet. Why do you think pranks and hoaxes are popular?
5. Do you think there is a line that should not be crossed in "pranking" or creating a hoax? Explain your thinking.



SETTING THE STAGE

The internet and social media have revolutionized pranks and hoaxes. Today, millions of people can become the victims of an internet hoax. Similarly, a personal prank

between two friends can be captured on YouTube and the resulting hilarity and/or embarrassment shared with the world.

However, there are obviously differences between harmless pranks and hoaxes and more serious ones that can bring about personal tragedy and even widespread panic. The question where to draw the line between the two extremes can often involve interpretations of the law.

Spreading falsehoods — in writing (libel) or through your spoken words (slander) — that damage someone's professional or personal reputation, or for the purposes of bribery or notoriety, is against the law. A person or a company could sue you for spreading false or misleading information to a widespread audience. There are laws in many jurisdictions



that demand that you inform a person if you intend to audio or video record them and for what purposes. Being aware of these laws and following them could prevent some of the more

damaging hoaxes and pranks. However, many individuals and media sources perpetuate hoaxes either willingly or by being duped by the hoax themselves.

Prank or Hoax?

Discuss the following scenarios. Do they represent a prank or a hoax? Rank the scenarios from most serious or damaging to least serious or damaging, and share your reasons for your ranking

1. Impersonating the boss and calling someone on the phone to tell them they've been fired.
2. Releasing mice into the hallways of the school.
3. Sending a message on social media that a fire has burnt down the school.
4. Creating an ad on eBay stating that your friend's phone is for sale.
5. Posting to YouTube your friend's reaction when you present them with a "winning" lottery ticket.
6. Posting to your blog an announcement that a celebrity has died when they are indeed alive.
7. A parent tells their child that they ate all their Halloween candy and posts his/her reaction to YouTube.

Busting Hoaxes and Urban Myths

Go to Snopes.com, the self-declared "definitive Internet reference source for urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors and misinformation." Here extensive research is offered to dispel hoaxes both past and present.

VIDEO REVIEW

Important Instructions for all Students

Due to the serious need for young people today to think critically about internet and media sources, the Canadian government has established an important new learning expectation for this course. Your teacher is required to assess your answers to the following video viewing questions in order to evaluate your critical thinking skills. Do not share or discuss your answers. Write your answers clearly in the space provided. Be prepared to submit your answers at the end of the video.*

Pre-viewing Questions

1. How do you know what is real and what is "fake" on television and on the internet?

2. Why do you think that hoaxes (false stories) are getting more difficult to distinguish from truthful stories on the internet?

Viewing Questions

1. How did the wildlife expert know that the internet clip was a hoax?

2. Who created the "eagle and baby" hoax? How many hours of work did it take?

3. How many views did they receive?

4. How did the government of Canada become a victim of a hoax during the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen?

5. How was the royal family an attempted victim of a prank?

6. What was the tragic outcome of this radio prank?

7. What did the Australian DJs argue in their defence?

8. How did the radio station react to the public outcry?

Post-viewing Activity

Debate the following resolution: "Hoaxes are more entertaining than damaging."

*Are you skeptical of this information and instructions? Why? What made you think these instructions were real? What made you think they were false?

FOCUS FOR READING: Hoaxes and the Role of the Media



A hoax can be defined as a humorous or malicious deception. Throughout history, the creation and dissemination of a hoax is often affected by the emerging technology of the time period. For example, a hoax perpetuated by two young girls in England in 1917 involved the use of a camera. The girls claimed that they had taken pictures of fairies in a garden. This hoax caused international interest in the existence of supernatural creatures. Similarly, photographs of the Loch Ness Monster, Big Foot and ghosts were offered as proof of their existence. As the media helped to fuel public interest, often the hoax was put to rest by scientific experts who proved there had been tampering with the technology.

The mass media plays a significant role in the perpetuation of hoaxes. Rumours about celebrities are offered as the truth, often with altered and distorted photographs. Certain publications became notorious for stretching the truth and perpetuating lies. These publications are known as "tabloid journalism" since the

stories focus on sensationalized reports of crime and celebrity gossip.

DJs at radio stations also participate in pranks to increase ratings by calling unsuspecting people on the phone and convincing them of some untruth in order to get a reaction that listeners may find entertaining. Television shows feature celebrities and comedians pranking other celebrities and bystanders. It seems that hoaxes and pranks have become their own form of entertainment.

The internet and YouTube have made it much easier for anyone to reach the masses, and so the number of hoaxes has risen. One of the most common Internet hoaxes involves false warnings about computer viruses.

Some hoaxes can be quite elaborate and are created for political reasons. Examples of these are mockumentaries. These "faked" documentaries can show how easily public opinion and beliefs can be manipulated. *The Dark Side of the Moon* detailed how the Apollo moon landings had been faked inside Hollywood studios.

While hoaxes and pranks can be viewed as entertaining or politically important, sometimes they have unexpected and devastating results. No one could have foreseen the tragic outcome after two Australian DJs posed as the Queen and Prince Charles and convinced a nurse to talk about Kate Middleton's pregnancy.

Victims of hoaxes and pranks are increasingly looking to the law to protect them from invasion of privacy, slander, libel and the purposeful spreading of misinformation.

ACTIVITY: Famous Hoaxes

Consider the following hoaxes throughout history. Was the hoax merely entertaining? Or did it harm anyone? Why did the hoax become so widespread? Why do you think these hoaxes were successful at fooling so many people? What do hoaxes reveal about human nature and behaviour?

The Cottingley Fairies (1920)

Two English cousins, 16-year-old Elsie Wright and 10-year-old Frances Griffiths, came to international attention when they took five photographs of themselves in a garden with fairies. The pictures appeared in 1920 in *The Stand Magazine* accompanying an article on fairies written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who was a firm believer in psychic phenomenon. Public reaction was mixed; many accepted the photos as proof of "other worldly" beings while others claimed they were fake. In the early 1980s both women admitted the photographs were faked using cardboard cut outs, but Frances maintained the fifth photo was genuine. The photographs and cameras are displayed in the National Media Museum in Bradford, England.

Paul is Dead (1969)

In September 1969 American university students published articles claiming that Paul McCartney of the Beatles had died in a car crash and been replaced by a look-alike. Clues found in song lyrics (some played backwards) and on album covers were discussed on popular radio shows.

In a short period of time the world was busy trying to verify the story. Hundreds of supposed clues were shared by fans and followers of the story. By October, Paul McCartney came forward to dispel the rumours. This hoax has been the subject of several books and films, including the mockumentary, *Paul McCartney Really is Dead*.

Alien Autopsy (1990s)

Ray Santilli, a London-based entrepreneur, created and released a 17-minute, grainy quality, black-and-white film in the 1990s of what he claimed was an alien autopsy that had occurred after a UFO crash at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947. Santilli claimed that he has received the footage from a former military cameraman. The film aired on television in over 32 countries and caused international sensation. In 1995, the film was exposed as an elaborate hoax.

Yes Men (2000s through to today)

The Yes Men were founded by Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos. Their purpose is to use the media to raise awareness of social issues through humour and satire. The Yes Men have produced two films and appeared on numerous talk shows impersonating people they dislike (often CEOs of multi-national companies) for the purpose of "telling the truth and exposing lies." They also create and maintain fake websites of organizations, such as the World Trade Organization. Their antics have led to extensive media coverage. In 2009 at the UN Climate Change Conference, the Yes Men released an announcement reportedly from the Canadian government stating Canada's intention to cut carbon emissions by 40%. This faked statement was followed by a statement by the Ugandan delegation praising Canada's efforts, which was also a fake. Needless to say Canadian and Ugandan officials were not amused. The Yes Men and their followers continue to practice what they call "culture-jamming" activism.