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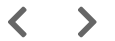
# After bomb threats in Lancaster, extremism experts see a familiar pattern

BRETT SHOLTIS | Staff Writer

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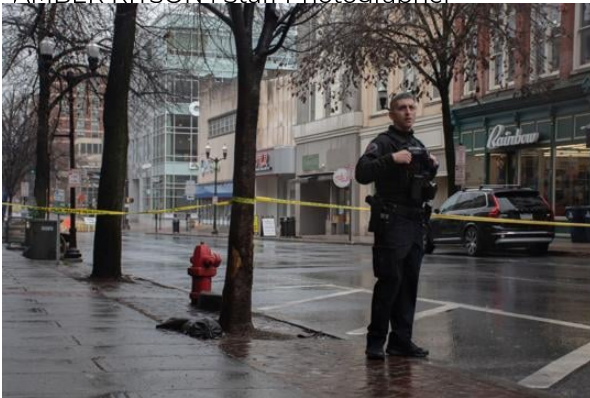


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Police tape and barricades block off two blocks of N. Queen Street amidst an evacuation order due to multiple threats in Lancaster City on Saturday, March. 23, 2024.

AMBER RITSON | Staff Photographer



**Timeline: Drag Queen Story Hour in Lancaster leads to bomb threats**

People in downtown Lancaster last Saturday were witness to an unnerving scene: A suspicious package and several bomb threats led police to evacuate buildings and close city blocks on a day when two hotels were bustling with nearly 6,000 visitors in town for a science fiction, cosplay and comics convention.

That a scheduled Drag Queen Story Hour at the Lancaster Public Library was the focus of emailed bomb threats was not surprising for researchers who study how online hate speech leads to real-world effects. To them, the chain of events leading up to Saturday follows a familiar pattern.



**How (and why) we kept reporting as bomb, death threats came in to LNP [column]**

First, an issue straddling cultural and political divides is brought to the public's attention, sometimes by a politician or community leader. Then, activists use social media to highlight the controversy, employing falsehoods, exaggerations and wild theories to heighten the tension. As support and opposition reach a fever pitch, protests are planned, culminating in a threat of violence.

"We see something that has unfortunately become pretty common regarding protests against drag events, specifically ones that are all-ages events," said Jared Holt, senior research analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a nonpartisan group that studies extremism, hate and disinformation.



**Lancaster city mayor, council president support Lancaster Public Library, canceled Drag Queen Story Hour**



**Bomb threat email that shut down parts of Lancaster city likely sent from outside US, investigators say**

Holt is one of three subject matter experts who commented on the buildup to the midday bomb threats against library and LGBTQ+ leaders, as well as the media, that tied up law enforcement and likely cost taxpayers thousands in overtime. The other two are a retired FBI field agent and a researcher at a liberal media watchdog who focuses on the use of social media to attack LGBTQ+ people. All three experts were provided with a timeline of events compiled by LNP | LancasterOnline and asked for their analysis.

READ: [Timeline Feb. 21 - Mar. 23: Drag Queen Story Hour in Lancaster leads to bomb threats](#)

Each pointed to key factors that resulted in a local issue going viral online and being influenced by harmful political narratives about LGBTQ+ people.

Predictably, Holt said, [violent threats](#) followed.

“If enough people are exposed to those allegations (who) are inclined to believe them,” he said, “I think it is almost to be expected that some of those people will have over-the-top reactions that could endanger the people those allegations are being made about.”

Lancaster’s District Attorney said Thursday the email threat likely came from [outside the country](#).



**GOP Lancaster County commissioners deny connection between comments and Saturday threats**



**Investigation continues into Lancaster city bomb threats that prompted evacuations**

## ‘What are you thinking?’

Holt wasn't the only expert to note that a key turning point happened when county Commissioner Josh Parsons turned to social media to complain about the drag queen event rather than reaching out to library staff or Lancaster Pride, the LGBTQ+ organization that was its sponsor.

Thomas O'Connor was an FBI special agent for more than 20 years and investigated everything from terrorist attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan to the 2018 synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh. Now, he consults with government and private clients on counterterrorism.

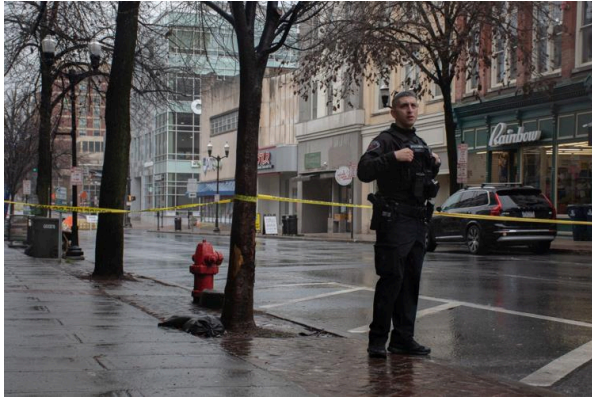


Lancaster County Republican Commissioners Josh Parsons, left, and Ray D'Agostino listen to public comment during the commissioners' meeting at the Lancaster County Government Center on North Queen Street on Wednesday, March 27, 2024.

O'Connor pointed to March 7, the day Parsons first posted about the story hour on social media, writing, “What are you thinking?” Parsons and his Republican colleague, Commissioner Ray D'Agostino, went on to allege the event would deliver adults-only content to children.

O'Connor pointed out that instead of posting on social media, Parsons could have taken his concerns directly to library executives.

Parsons and D'Agostino did not respond to requests for comment.



**Coloring books were in suspicious package that led to cancellation of Drag Queen Story Hour: police [update]**



**Lancaster Public Library, Lancaster Pride process cancellation of Drag Queen Story Hour**

Connor Hollinger | LNP  
Correspondent

Library Director Lissa Holland confirmed that Parsons has not communicated directly with the library at any point over this issue. Similarly, Lancaster Pride Director Tiffany Shirley said Parsons has never contacted her.

“He never reached out and hasn’t said one word to me since,” Shirley said. “He couldn’t even look at me when I was speaking to him at the (March 27) commissioner meeting.”

O’Connor said he understands that this is a “hot-button” topic. But talking through issues with people tends to yield a different result than what happens when complaints are posted online.

“Avoiding the false narrative, drilling down on the facts, that doesn’t take place,” O’Connor said, speaking of what happens when criticisms are posted online. “People just react to something they see on a social media platform. They replatform it. They put it out again with their own comments,” he said, “and it becomes wildfire. It just grows on top of itself extremely quickly. And once it’s out, you can’t pull it back.”



Lancaster Public Library Executive Director Lissa Holland stands for a portrait in front of police tape in the 100 block of Queen Street in Lancaster City on Saturday, March 23, 2024. The Drag Queen Story Hour at the Lancaster Public Library was canceled after police responded to a suspicious package.

AMBER RITSON | Staff  
Photographer



**Inside Lancaster Pride's decision to cancel Drag Queen Story Hour at the Lancaster Public Library**



**'It just hurts my heart': Star of Drag Queen Story Hour saddened by threat that canceled event**

READ: [GOP Lancaster County commissioners deny connection between comments and Saturday threats](#)

## Gays Against Groomers

At the Lancaster County Commissioners' meeting on March 13, 10 days before the event was to be held, D'Agostino put two images on a screen at the front of the room. LNP | LancasterOnline confirmed that the images were similar to ones from the Facebook page of Christopher Paolini, the Berks County man who was set to appear as Miss Amie Vanité at the children's story hour.



Christopher Paolini, of Berks County, recalls some of his favorite classes during his time in high school during an interview inside Prince Street Cafe in Lancaster City on Friday, March. 22, 2024. Paolini, performing as "Miss Amie Vanité", is set to host a Drag Queen Story Hour at the

The images appeared to be ads for an adults-only drag show and included language, the Republican commissioners said, that showed Paolini wasn't fit to host a children's event.

During the March 13 meeting, he said, "I looked more into it when I found out who the person was, and I found this information."

D'Agostino may have first come across the images in social media posts made four days earlier by Gays Against Groomers, a GOP-aligned activist group with ties to conservative parental rights group Moms for Liberty.



**'You are visible': Lancaster rallies in support of transgender community, calls for acceptance**

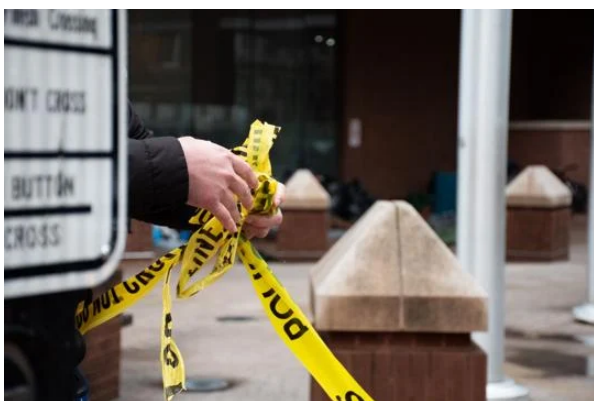
Lancaster Public Library on Saturday, March 23, 2024.

AMBER RITSON | Staff  
Photographer

Gays Against Groomers has nearly 420,000 followers on X, the social media platform formerly called Twitter. There, the post about Paolini was liked 841 times and shared more than 300 times.

The post falsely stated that the adults-only event was initially advertised for all-ages.

“They totally made that up,” Paolini said. He said the “After Hours” event he hosted was a comedy show for adults. “And I’ve always clearly specified, do not bring your children.”



**Lancaster city encourages sign ups for emergency alert system, 'Red Rose Alerts'**

READ: [Lancaster Public Library, Lancaster Pride process cancellation of Saturday's event](#)

READ: ['It just hurts my heart': Star of Drag Queen Story Hour saddened by threat that canceled event](#)

## A 'viral cyberbully account'

Just as the March 13 county commissioners meeting was ending, another social media account created a post criticizing Paolini, using photos of him performing for adults. The post came from Libs of TikTok, an account with about 3 million followers on X.

[Ari Drennen](#) is a researcher at Media Matters for America, a liberal watchdog group that documents “conservative misinformation” online. Drennen called the social media presence, run by Chaya



**East Hempfield Twp. to withhold funds from Lancaster Public Library in response to canceled Drag Queen Story Hour**

Raichik of Los Angeles, a “viral cyberbully account” that “has targeted individual minor trans people for mockery and harassment based on their appearance.”

Once a person is shared with Raichik’s large audience, they may end up mentioned on FOX News or described in the speeches and policy proposals of conservative politicians.



Members of the public were directed away from the 100 block of Queen street amidst an evacuation order due to multiple threats in Lancaster City on Saturday, March. 23, 2024.

AMBER RITSON | Staff Photographer

Drennen pointed to her team's recent report, which found 42 instances in which Libs of TikTok posted about an event or person, and threats or harassment happened afterward. Events were canceled. In a rash of cases, children's hospitals received bomb threats.

In this case, awareness of the drag queen story hour exploded after Libs of TikTok posted about it. On X, the initial post got 5,600 likes, 2,100 shares and over 440 comments. That audience included people from all over the world, who may have a wide range of goals, Drennen noted.

"It really doesn't even take that many people who are extremists, or violent, or violent extremists, to cause a problem when this happens," she said.

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READ: [Coloring books were in suspicious package that led to cancellation of Drag Queen Story Hour](#)

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## **'This sinister agenda'**

For Republican politicians who need to score points with their supporters, creating a story about how they fought against liberals can be useful, said Holt, the senior research analyst at Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

But there's a problem, he said. On its own, the idea of a drag performer reading books to children while their parents are observing probably isn't enough to get people enraged. "It's a story

time at a library. So they have to find a reason for people to care as much as they do,” Holt said. “And that’s where all the craziness comes into play.”



Local religious protesters stand on the corner of Prince and Chestnut St. sharing their opinions and beliefs about the Drag Queen Story Hour at the Lancaster Public Library on Saturday, March. 23, 2024. The Drag Queen Story Hour was canceled in addition to an evacuation order for parts of N. Lime and N. Queen St. being placed were due to multiple threats made in Lancaster City.

AMBER RITSON | Staff  
Photographer

that conservatives are evil, terrible people,” he said. “That kind of narrative sells well.”

That “craziness” often involves connecting the local issue to broader narratives that are popular in rightwing media, he said. “To get it to blow up into a national issue sort of requires some embellishing.”

“Spinning the issue is crucial,” Holt added. The more politically successful efforts are often the ones where whatever is happening locally can be woven into larger conspiracy theories or narratives that tend to enrage people and get them to see others as an enemy.

“They have constructed these stories that events like these, maybe not this event specifically... (are) part of this sinister agenda, this trajectory that the U.S. is on, to sexualize children, and to promote deviance in society, and corrupt the youth and convince them

## Real-world effects

Such conspiracy theories have contributed to tragedy, said O'Connor, the retired FBI agent. O'Connor recounted one of his difficult assignments: investigating the aftermath of the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting that left 11 people dead and wounded six. The shooter, O'Connor said, was animated by online falsehoods about a "Jewish cabal of people moving illegal aliens along the southern border."

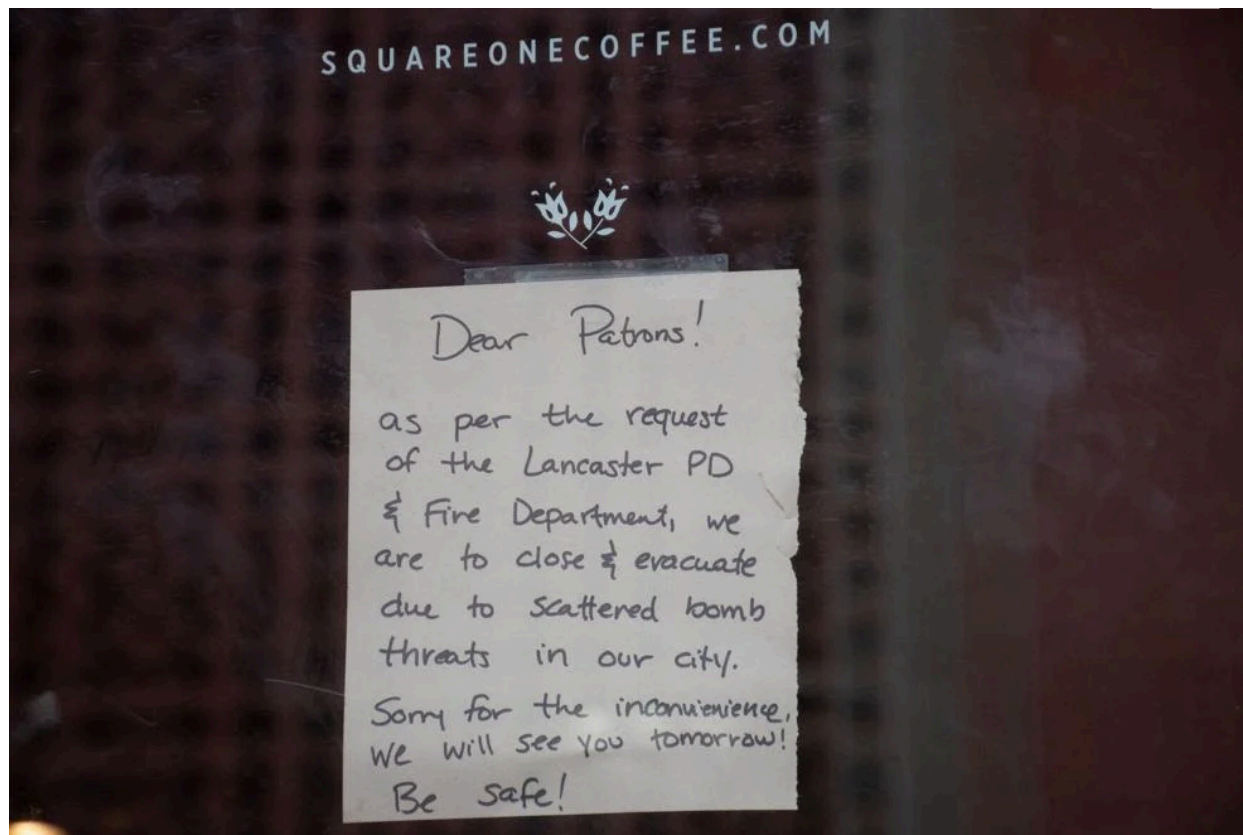
"And that's the fear," he said. "The more people you get enraged over a topic, the more chances there are for someone to do something extreme."

O'Connor said online false narratives aren't just a problem on the political right. "Both sides of the coin" are struggling to respond to a blizzard of political disinformation, including some that has been introduced by foreign adversaries seeking to weaken the U.S.

He doesn't see the problem going away soon. But people with influence and power can play a role in mitigating it by being transparent and making sure their claims are based on facts.

"So if you're a public official, if you're a news person, you should be doing exactly what we did in the FBI, you should be finding information, and going out and making sure that information is accurate before you report on it."

*This reporter's work is funded by the Lancaster County Local Journalism Fund. For more information, or to make a contribution, please visit [lanc.news/supportlocaljournalism](https://lanc.news/supportlocaljournalism).*



A handwritten note explaining the sudden closure of Square One Cafe, located on N. Duke Street, is hung up on the establishment's door during an evacuation order made in the area due to multiple threats in Lancaster City on Saturday, March. 23, 2024.

AMBER RITSON | Staff Photographer



Local News

**Full coverage of Drag Queen Story Hour, threats in downtown Lancaster [roundup]**

Letters To The Editor



## Readers respond to the bomb threat directed at Drag Queen Story Hour [letters]



### Local Business

## 'I lost a lot of business': Bomb threat disrupted downtown Lancaster restaurants, shops

