

Publishers Mull Unabomber Offer

Cyberspace May Be New Way to Deal With Terrorist
Demands

An Advertising Age Roundup

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The next media move is up to the Unabomber.

Within days after a mail bomb attributed to the so-called Unabomber killed California Forestry Association lobbyist Gilbert Murray on April 24, two media companies said they would consider publication of a lengthy manifesto by the bomber. Several other major publishing companies left open the possibility.

In an open letter to the Unabomber carried last week by several news services, General Media International Chairman Bob Guccione said he would print the manifesto in one of his magazines, which include Penthouse and Omni, or via an online service.

Mr. Guccione's offer was in response to the Unabomber's proposal made in a letter sent to The New York Times. The bomber said he would "permanently desist from terrorist activities" if a mass-circulation publication such as the Times, Time or Newsweek would publish an article of 29,000 to 35,000 words and meet certain other conditions.

Times Publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. said in response: "While the pages of the Times can't be held hostage by those who threaten violence, we're ready to receive the manuscript described in the letter. We'll take a careful look at it and make a journalistic decision about whether to publish it in our pages. But whether we publish it ourselves or not, we'll do all we responsibly can to make it public."

At press time, the Times had not returned numerous telephone calls from Advertising Age.

Officials at Time and Newsweek wouldn't officially reject the idea of publishing a manuscript written by the bomber, who has killed three people in a 17-year reign of terror that includes at least 16 bombings.

"We have no idea if we would publish it and it would be irresponsible to speculate," said a Time spokesman.

"We don't think it's appropriate to make any public comment at this time," said a Newsweek spokesman. "We're obviously going to act responsibly both as journalists and citizens."

U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno told reporters the FBI is reviewing the possibility of asking media firms to publish the manuscript.

General Media International's Mr. Guccione, meanwhile, said to the Unabomber in his release: "We could publish your entire manuscript at one time-or, as you suggest, we could serialize it over two to three months ... Obviously, I'm making this offer to save lives. Time is of the essence."

Mr. Guccione told Ad Age: "I think it would be completely irresponsible not to publish it. He intends to do more bombing but he's said he would stop killing people if we publish it."

Mr. Guccione said he did not believe publishing the manifesto would encourage other terrorists. He did acknowledge that as an "added bonus" he would sell more magazines in whatever issue it appeared. But, he said: "On the other hand, we might lose all of our advertisers."

One official for a national magazine, who did not want to be identified, called the offer "a publicity stunt. It's irresponsible. It's putting his staff and himself in danger and it's rewarding a terrorist with publicity."

The widespread availability of online opportunities to distribute information about the Unabomber and his beliefs raised the possibility of online publication of the serial killer's lengthy manifesto-or similar statements from terrorist organizations.

A spokesman for CompuServe said: "If it's on Guccione's Omni site [or other sites] on the Web, then it's accessible through CompuServe. We do not censor our content. It isn't practical or plausible and it gets into censorship."

Richard Fusco, VP-marketing at Next Century Media, New Paltz, N.Y., added: "In cyberspace, it's already possible to put out your own messages. There's been a lot of stuff published online about making a bomb after Oklahoma City. In cyberspace there are no laws and few ways of regulating what goes on."

Mr. Fusco sees this openness as a benefit. "Would I like to see a place where people can freely express ideas?," he asked. "Yes. I want to know what terrorists are thinking."

The Ted K Archive

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