

Officials Divided Over CBS Handling of Unabomber Story

Howard Kurtz

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The FBI praised CBS yesterday for delaying a report that the man suspected of being the Unabomber was about to be arrested, even as some senior law enforcement officials criticized the network for forcing them to speed up their timetable.

Responding to reports that CBS News in effect forced the bureau to move prematurely against Theodore J. Kaczynski in Montana Wednesday, an FBI statement praised the network for acting "in a memorably responsible manner. . . . Because of the CBS News decision, the FBI was able to carry out the arrest with complete surprise, and neither the defendant nor the FBI agents were injured."

At the same time, federal law enforcement officials, who declined to be identified, said they had no choice but to move against Kaczynski after CBS made clear it intended to air its story. Echoing charges in a Wall Street Journal report yesterday, these officials said their plan had been to wait for the suspect to leave his rural cabin with evidence, such as writings or bomb ingredients, that would more directly tie him to the Unabomber attacks.

"This whole thing went down because CBS was going to run it Wednesday, which forced our hand," a federal law enforcement official said. "We wanted to watch him at least a little bit longer. We wanted to look at possible travel. We wanted to work further on his finances. There was another installment of the manifesto due in June. There were lots of good reasons to wait and watch."

Another federal official said that CBS's plan to air its story "was the motivating factor in the decision to do the search warrant. . . . We didn't want to lose evidence."

"This was a case of the news driving the investigation rather than the investigation driving the news," an FBI official told the Associated Press.

CBS executives, for their part, said they delayed their story for several days while consulting with the FBI.

"We're satisfied we held off as long as we possibly could hold off, and as long as the FBI expected us to hold off," said CBS Vice President Lane Venardos. "When we said we had to go with the story, they totally understood and gave us a grudging acquiescence."

CBS anchor Dan Rather agreed. "Like every other American journalist worthy of the name, we try to strike an ethical balance between the duties of citizenship and the duties of journalistic integrity," he said. "The record on this clearly shows that we did that."

Venardos said "the major impetus" behind CBS's decision to have Rather break into regular programming just after 3 p.m. Wednesday was learning that two competitors, ABC and CNN, were moving to report the raid, which was underway.

Jim Stewart, the CBS reporter who broke the story, said, "I had a good story and I was afraid I might lose it," but the network acted "responsibly" in handling the matter. He added, "I'm not sure {the FBI} ever would have been happy" with a story before Kaczynski was taken into custody in Lincoln, Mont.

Spokesmen for ABC and CNN said the FBI had not asked them to delay their reports, which followed CBS's. "We had known about it for a number of days, but

made a decision not to broadcast anything until we knew the search warrant was being executed so we wouldn't jeopardize the operation," ABC's Teri Everett said. CNN's Steve Haworth said his network became aware of the imminent raid Wednesday morning.

It is not unusual for news organizations to delay reports involving arrests, hostage situations or espionage at the request of authorities who contend lives could be in danger.

The news media also have provided a forum for criminal suspects. In the 1993 siege of Branch Davidians near Waco, Tex., local radio stations agreed to a government request to air a 58-minute harangue by cult leader David Koresh. In the Unabomber case, The Washington Post and the New York Times cooperated with the FBI last fall by publishing, as a supplement to The Post, a 35,000-word "manifesto" from a man purporting to be the Unabomber.

Venardos said CBS learned last week FBI agents in Montana were closing in on a man they believed to be the terrorist whose mail bombs have killed three people and injured 23 others since 1978. Stewart said he knew Kaczynski's name by Monday night.

CBS officials said they aired their report after learning ABC's "Good Morning America" was trying to book guests related to the raid for the next morning.

"The proof is in the pudding," Venardos said. "The arrest took place. There were no incidents. We held off for many days because the FBI was concerned there could be agents in jeopardy."

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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