With Patrons like the Unabomber, What's a Librarian to Do?

Leonard Kniffel

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Theodore J. Kaczynski, suspect in the infamous Unabomber case, allegedly gave up teaching for a career in terrorism. If he is the Unabomber, what could have caused an apparently intelligent, educated man to spend 18 years creating 16 package bombs that killed three people and injured 23?

I would blame mental imbalance, but TV viewers, newspaper readers, and radio listeners across the country are getting another message loud and clear: reading and libraries.

"Local residents described him as a private man who frequently rode a dilapidated bicycle into Lincoln where he visited the library," said one article. According to some reports, the library was virtually his only contact with the world outside his isolated Montana cabin.

Other reports revealed that his mother read to Kaczynski constantly when he was growing up, something of a prodigy, in a Chicago suburb. "They read books all the time," one former neighbor told the New *York Times, as* if that made the family automatically suspect.

This anti-intellectual subtext is bad enough, but then along comes a librarian wannabe named Bev Coleman, who starts blabbing on national television about Kaczynski's reading habits and borrowing patterns.

All the PR in the world

Both the suspect's devotion to libraries and Coleman's 15 minutes of fame were big-time bad PR and seemed ironic here at ALA, where we had just polished off a new round of celebrity testimony on the positive influence of libraries (see p. 56, this issue) and published Council's latest statement on patron privacy, (Mar., p. 48 insert).

Overnight, the subliminal message that libraries are places for loners with criminal minds got mainstream reinforcement, as did the notion that librarians are perfectly happy to announce publicly what people read and borrow. Trouble is, Coleman is not a librarian; she's not even an employee.

The spotlight landed on the Lincoln Community Library, a branch of the Lewis and Clark system headquartered in Helena, which was inundated with calls. One exasperated staff member described the scene: "It's crazy."

System Director Debbie Schlesinger said she and virtually every librarian in Montana were furious over Coleman's interviews. In them, she revealed Kaczynski's taste for "classic literature in its original languages. Everything was special ordered for him because he liked such off-the- wall stuff," she told the *Times,* no doubt disappointing those hoping to uncover a penchant for *American Psycho* and *How to Build a Bomb.*

"Nobody in our system has said a word about the reading habits of our patrons, nor would they ever give out library records unless under a court order," Schlesinger told me. Coleman "is an ex-employee purporting to be a librarian. She is not part of the system, not an employee at all; she was long ago a substitute shelver."

"The place is swarming with reporters," Schlesinger said. "We have had calls from everywhere in the United States," and "the staff is handling the situation well." As for Coleman, she said, "We're hoping the county attorney can do something with her."

Ultimately, the news is out of the library's control, and reporters are not going to stop asking questions, nor should they, even though we might not like the answers.

Perhaps a more important question is, Why does a "substitute shelver" have all this information about patrons' reading habits in the first place? Anyone who has worked in an understaffed public library knows part of the answer: From custodian to page, the entire staff ends up serving the public and being viewed as "a librarian."

Would CNN have asked a Lincoln hospital employee who filled the medical supply cabinet years ago about Kaczynski's health problems? Actually, they might have. But they never would have called that person a doctor!

[signed]
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