

FBI Praises Newspapers for Printing Unabomber's Tract

Journalism: Publication by New York Times and Washington Post may help crack case, agency says. But some news media ethicists condemn the decision.

Richard C. Paddock and Jenifer Warren

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SAN FRANCISCO — Upbeat FBI officials, rejecting criticism that they were bowing to terrorism, praised the Washington Post and the New York Times on Tuesday for publishing the Unabomber's manuscript and predicted that it could help break open the long-running case.

"Further widespread publication of the manuscript, we feel, is going to help our investigation," said FBI Agent Jim R. Freeman, head of the federal Unabomber task force. "We're basically allowing the Unabomber to speak for himself through the manuscript."

Freeman rejected criticism that publication of the 35,000-word document on the evils of modern technology would set a precedent for printing the writings of other terrorists. "This case is really unparalleled," he said.

He urged members of the public to read the tract for clues to the Unabomber's identity and report any leads to the FBI.

After nearly three months of intense debate, the Post and the Times decided to print the serial killer's manuscript and distribute it as an eight-page special section of Tuesday's Post. The Unabomber, who has killed three people and injured 23 in a 17-year string of bombings, had threatened to kill again if it was not published.

The publication by the two newspapers came at the request of Atty. Gen. Janet Reno and FBI Director Louis J. Freeh. The decision was questioned by some media experts and academics, but drew the cautious support of a number of newspaper editors, who said the decision was understandable given the Unabomber's threat.

In addition to concerns about public safety, the FBI's Freeman made clear that publicizing the manuscript also was part of the bureau's investigative strategy.

"We have seen through the previous publication of excerpts from the manuscript that it really does advance the investigation," he said, declining to cite any specific tips the bureau had received. "There has been helpful improvement in the quality of our leads because of the portrait the Unabomber portrayed of himself with the words of his manuscript."

However, it may take a while before people on the West Coast can peruse the document. Fewer than 20 daily copies of the Post are distributed in the Bay Area and Sacramento—the region where the Unabomber is believed to live—according to distributors.

Indeed, some crime experts suggested that the FBI may keep close track of who purchases copies of Tuesday's Post at newsstands or reads it in libraries in the hope of nabbing the Unabomber as he comes to see his own work in print.

With the FBI under tremendous pressure to solve the case, Freeman argued that the decision to print the manifesto was entirely justified and will not spawn copycat terrorists.

Whenever a terrorist contacts a news organization with a publication demand, he said, editors and law enforcement officials evaluate the case and decide on the best course of action. "I don't think it sets a precedent because these issues are decided on a case-by-case basis," Freeman said.

He compared printing the Unabomber's manuscript to negotiating with a kidnaper when members of the public are at risk.

"There have been many instances of law enforcement, including the FBI, granting various things in a negotiation phase with a hostage taker," he said.

While the FBI hopes that publication will stop the Unabomber from killing again, Freeman acknowledged that the FBI has no guarantee that the serial killer will honor his commitment.

"The assurance is not there, of course, that the Unabomber would not send other bombs," Freeman said. "He has stated that he will not."

Despite the FBI's inability to catch the Unabomber—even with as many as 150 agents working on the case at a given time—Freeman expressed confidence that the search will succeed. "It will eventually bear fruit," he said.

President Clinton also commended the papers Tuesday. "I applaud them," he told a Pittsburgh television station. Both news organizations acted "in a good and brave way," he said, adding that he supported Reno's recommendation to publish the document.

The decision was the talk of newsrooms nationwide Tuesday. Some editors agreed that the decision to publish was a difficult one, but expressed empathy with their colleagues at the Times and the Post.

"Once you open up the news pages to a lunatic, then you in essence turn over the newspaper to terrorists" and invite future demands, said Doug Clifton, executive editor of the Miami Herald.

He added, however, that "talk is cheap." Debating the "theoretical construct" is far different than having the Unabomber's publish-or-perish threat on one's desk, he said.

"I can't tell you exactly what I would do were I in the same position as the Times and the Post," Clifton said. "But I can envision coming up with a decision that's different than the one I intellectually embrace."

Shelby Coffey III, editor of the Los Angeles Times, said the newspapers made an appropriate choice under the circumstances and deserve the backing of journalists and the public.

"The Washington Post and the New York Times made a considered and responsible decision in this bizarre situation," Coffey said. "They consulted at length with the FBI and the Justice Department and faced the obvious concerns: The Unabomber is not a reliable bargaining partner and the potential for copycats is worrisome. But, under the unreasonable circumstances, they have chosen a reasonable course and deserve support."

John Seigenthaler, former publisher and editor of the Tennessean in Nashville and now chairman of the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, said he was disappointed by the decision but expressed support for the Times and Post editors.

"I don't believe these journalists would have published this if the argument was merely that it might help catch a killer," he said. "That would not be a compelling enough reason as far as I'm concerned."

But Stephen Isaacs, who teaches ethics at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, said, “The papers clearly made the wrong call.” But he reserved his harshest criticism for the federal government, arguing that the FBI and Reno had put the news executives in a “no-win situation.”

“They basically asked these publishers to be a part of the policing process of the United States,” Isaacs said. He said that request—and the papers’ acquiescence—reflect a growing and controversial trend toward “civic journalism,” in which the media are viewed less as nonpartisan observers and more as an activist force in the community.

“This is civic journalism gone amok,” Isaacs said. “Newspapers do not exist to catch murderers. Our role in the community is to portray as fair and accurate picture of society as possible and to pursue the truth.”

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