

Surviving the Unabomber Media Circus

An Interview

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On April 3, 1996, at 1:30 p.m., Librarian Sherri Wood arrived at her job as head of the Lincoln, Montana, branch of the Lewis and Clark Public Library. Fifteen minutes later, her phone began ringing. In the next two hours, more than 200 phone calls clogged Wood's answering machine and her professional life had changed dramatically.

Wood and her small library had become part of the Unabomber story and the media frenzy that followed. She had been best friends with Ted Kaczynski, but she was mistakenly vilified as the librarian who broke the Montana confidentiality laws and blabbed to the press about what reading material Kaczynski had supposedly taken out of the Lincoln Public Library.

On January 22 Kaczynski pleaded guilty to being the antitechnology terrorist and was sentenced to life in prison without parole. Soon after, Wood gave her first interview to the press, intending to talk to NBC News about her views of the FBI's undercover work in the library in the case. Now she speaks to *American Libraries* about the TV interview, the library issues involved in the case, and what the experience taught her about being a professional librarian.

AL: Why did you finally talk to the press and give an interview to NBC News?

SW: I agreed to the interview because NBC led me to believe that the news segment would be about the FBI working undercover in our library. I told NBC that I wouldn't do an interview if it was about Ted. The story about the FBI working undercover in my library had become public information, so I saw no problem in giving the interview. NBC, though, made it seem like I had given an exclusive interview about Ted, which was false, and I got very angry.

AL: Because you felt used?

SW: Yes, very. The next night, NBC did a second segment about the FBI and Ted and had me on for a second. I didn't even get to finish the sentence.

AL: Many of our readers might not know how the FBI worked undercover at your library. Could you summarize the events surrounding the arrest of Ted Kaczynski?

SW: The FBI began doing a background check on Ted after his brother David turned his name in to the agency. The FBI learned that Ted had spent an enormous amount of time in our library and wanted to know why. So they put an undercover agent in our library to find out to whom Ted had talked and to see if they could gather information about him.

AL: Did the undercover agent actually use the library?

SW: He came in as a patron, a freelance photographer, who had been hired by a magazine in California to do a major feature on a mine in Lincoln. He came in March and April of 1996 to take photos of the mine and we helped him in his research. We actually thought he was wonderful..., a real freelance photographer. He spent an enormous amount of time going through maps and books and asking us questions. We trusted him; he was perfect. We fell hook, line, and sinker. A couple of times he tried to steer the conversation towards Ted, but I told him that we don't talk about patrons who use our library.

AL: What did the agent say?



Sherri Wood, at work in the Lincoln Public Library.

SW: He shut up and moved on to another question.

AL: When did you find out that the freelance photographer was really an FBI agent?

SW: They arrested Ted on a Wednesday and the FBI agent came to the library that night. He showed me his badge, explained who he really was, and told me the terrible crime Ted was accused of. I got so upset that I just shook my head and walked away for awhile.

AL: What impact did that shock have on you as a professional librarian?

SW: It made me terribly paranoid for a while. When a stranger came in to use our library, my heart sank because they would either be someone who wanted to know about Ted, sit in a chair he sat in, read a book he held, or something like that, or the media after the story.

AL: You must have had a tough time doing your job.

SW: Yes, because of the outside forces. The phone was always ringing and tourists would come to be in the library where Ted had been. The FBI would call, and I had to spend a day in Helena at the U.S. Justice Department. I couldn't get anything done and the library didn't feel like our library anymore.

AL: How long have you known Ted Kaczynski?

SW: For the 13 years I have worked at the library. He was quiet and we really didn't become good friends until the last four or five years.

AL: There was no indication he might have been involved in criminal activity?

SW: No, I thought he was a quiet, lonely man who liked to spend time in libraries.

AL: What did you say to the media about him?

SW: The only thing I said was that I liked him.

AL: But that wasn't enough?

SW: No. One reporter even offered to pay my mortgage for six or seven months if I would talk about Ted. When I told him that our house was paid off, he said that something else could be arranged. The media just wouldn't leave me alone. They would follow me into stores and stick that fuzzy microphone into my face.

AL: How did you try to handle the media when the story broke?

SW: We wouldn't let the media in the first couple of days or so, but they challenged us and we found out that we had to let them in because the library was a public building. We did set guidelines, though. They couldn't film our work area or my desk. When they tried to film our patrons, we told them not to do that. We also told them they couldn't take books from the shelves and film them as the books Ted read. They would go through my desk when my back was turned.

AL: And you still couldn't kick them out?

SW: We could once we set the guidelines, but they still filmed us anyway. I would see myself on television and I hadn't given my consent to be filmed. We did have to ask some of the media to leave from time to time.

AL: Do you have security to take care of a problem like that?

SW: No, my assistant and I had to do it ourselves. Becky Foster, my immediate supervisor, told us to pick up the phone and call the sheriff, but we never had to do that.

AL: You are the head of a branch library. How did the experience affect your relationship with the main library in Helena?

SW: The administration at the main library was wonderful and supportive. For a time there was confusion and the public thought that Bev Coleman, the volunteer who talked to the press, was me (AL, May 1996, p. 36). When my supervisor found out the truth, she kicked into high gear and helped me to get the situation under control. Debbie Schlesinger [director of the Lewis and Clark Library] would call me to ask if I was okay. Becky came up one day and helped to take the pressure off me. They knew the stress I was under and the hard time I was having dealing with the situation.

We were served a federal subpoena, which our lawyer had tried to get suppressed. It was a strange, scary feeling. Some people were so ugly that I just wanted to sit in my chair and cry. They actually blamed me because they thought I should have known what Ted was supposed to have done. Some in the media came to me and said, "Ted is a murderer. You don't owe him anything. Give us his reading list."

AL: What did you say?

SW: You're not going to get it because I owe something to the confidentiality laws of Montana, so go away. Besides, he is an accused murderer and it's not a done deal. I finally started to get through it when the press realized that I was not going to give them any interviews or the reading list and began leaving me alone.

AL: What are your feelings about Bev Coleman today?

SW: I never thought one of our volunteers would have stepped forward and talked about a patron's reading habits. Our whole staff, even the other volunteers, were up in arms about it. Our library's lawyer even talked to her and gave her a copy of the confidentiality law and said, "You have to stop."

AL: Did she?

SW: No. The concept of confidentiality went over her head. It upset me that she used my title and led people to believe she was me. It gave me a huge black eye. I got hate mail you wouldn't believe, including some from librarians who said I had a big mouth. The ironic thing is that Coleman had not worked as a volunteer in our library since 1990.

AL: Public libraries have to deal with the media a lot. How will this experience affect your future dealings with the media?

SW: We are having the governor come down in March to lead a storyhour, and I am planning to use the media to come and cover it. This experience has really taught me a lot about how to use the media to the library's advantage. I was once in awe of the media, but now I realize they are just people.

AL: Would you have had to testify if Kaczynski's case had gone to trial?

SW: Yes, that's what the Justice Department told me.

AL: What has the experience taught you about being a professional librarian?

SW: It has reinforced what I've always thought being a professional librarian was all about: making the library as comfortable a place for patrons as a librarian can and to provide the best service possible, no matter what their circumstances or who they are. It also taught me to be a little stronger and quicker on the draw with the "no comment" when the media asks me questions I don't want to answer.

—*AL Contributing Editor Ron Chepesiuk, professor and head of special collections at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina News Fronts Washington (continued from p. 13)* claims the program "does not have clear, measurable goals and is not designed in law to produce specific results in terms of student achievement gains. Evaluations of the program show that school districts generally use the funds for routine activities that do not improve teaching and learning."

Title VI provides funding for school library materials as one of the uses of the block grant. The Department of Education has said that as much as 40% of the grant goes for school library and instructional materials. As a result of strong grass-roots action and House leadership, ESEA VI received \$350 million in appropriations last year.

Appendix - Other Special News Report Item

Experts Examine Shortage of Information Technology Workers

Experts from industry, government, and academia met January 12-13 at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley, California, to discuss the shortage of information technology workers in the United States, a burgeoning issue for librarians.

The National Information Technology Workforce Convocation was cosponsored by the School of Information Management and Systems at the University of California/Berkeley, the Information Technology Association of America (ITAA), and the U.S. Department of Commerce. Secretary of Commerce Bill Daley, Secretary of Education Richard Riley, Deputy Secretary of Labor Kitty Higgins, and several other senior administration officials spoke. Vice-president Al Gore participated via videotape. Despite the UC/Berkeley sponsorship, however, the convocation included virtually no representation from libraries.

The meeting and its timely topic received front-page coverage in several newspapers and network news broadcasts. The issue has been gaining attention over the past year, and last spring ITAA released *Help Wanted: The IT Workforce Gap at the Dawn of a New Century*. The report claimed a current gap of 190,000 unfilled jobs and projected that over one million new jobs would be created in the industry by the year 2004.

Big job growth projected

Some experts criticized the report's methodology, but its message was supported by testimonials from industry executives and data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that projected big job growth in the information technology sector.

The Commerce Department's Office of Technology Policy (OTP) took a closer look and issued its own report, *America's New Deficit: The Shortage of Information Technology Workers*. OTP narrowed ITAA's broad definition of IT workers to so-called core information technology professions: computer scientists, computer engineers, systems analysts, and computer programmers.

People in the library field and related information professions objected (AL, Dec. 1997, p. 28) to the exclusion of librarians from any definition of "information technology worker" simply for the analytical convenience of definitions that fit the models used for labor market projections.



The OTP report set the stage for the January conference, at which administration officials, corporate executives, and educators testified to the urgency of the problem for high-tech industry. (The Northern California meeting site was not accidental!)

Researchers from Virginia Polytechnic Institute reported on a follow-up study conducted in collaboration with the ITAA. Like the ITAA study, this one focused on counting job vacancies, but it also looked at a broader range of firms—from user sectors as well as from the IT industry. This study raised the estimates again, citing a current shortage of 346,000 workers, 129,000 in the IT industry and 217,000 in non-IT firms.

What constitutes a shortage?

Not all the speakers at the meeting agreed that there was a problem or that it was characterized correctly. In a panel session, economists argued that the concept of “shortage” is a slippery one. A shortage of a commodity might seem obvious to the average person based on visible symptoms: lines, skyrocketing prices, empty shelves, and so on. But “shortage” is a fragile concept in the economic definition of a market, in which shortages of supply are met with price increases balanced by a lowering of demand. Simply put: As long as the market clears, there is no shortage.

Labor-union and engineering-society representatives on the panel argued that employers are really complaining about rising wages and called the issue “a political problem.” When prices move up or down, there are winners as well as losers. If wages

for computer experts are escalating and good jobs plentiful, who are they to question it? Employers, on the other hand, see the rising cost of production and complain.

The message for librarians

The message for librarians out of this meeting is mixed. If the issue is framed as the need for programmers and computer scientists to feed the voracious appetite of the computer industry, the library community may conclude that it doesn't, in the old political expression, "have a dog in that fight." Judging by this conference, however, what we as a field know about information technology suggests that we have a great deal to contribute to the debate and the industry, even if the ITAA and Commerce Department don't yet recognize it.

Librarians are, in the phraseology of the experts, "information professionals." As the information infrastructure matures, we can see attention turning more and more to questions of content, structure, and building and maintaining what we might call "knowledge pathways" in cyberspace.

The future information workforce will be a diverse mixture of people, many of whom have training in skills taught in library schools. Librarians should attempt to broaden the current political debate; but even if it stays focused on hard-technology skills, the issue is one more signal for the library education community to take a fresh look at how economic and technological trends will reshape the career paths of their students.

—*Rick Weingarten, senior policy fellow, ALA Washington Office*

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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