

“Press Should Tell Unabomber ‘No’”

Theodore L. Glasser

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One of the more disturbing developments in the continuing saga of the Unabomber concerns journalism, not terrorism. It concerns a press so enamored with its own power that “news judgment” parades as national policy.

The New York Times and the Washington Post now have in their newsrooms the Unabomber’s 62-page, single-spaced “manifesto,” a “closely reasoned scholarly tract,” as the Times describes it, that would “fill about seven pages” of a standard paper. It’s precisely the kind of writing — in length and in style — that newspapers don’t publish. But these are special circumstances, we’re told. So, the Times will “study our options”; the Post is “considering how to respond.”

Indeed, the press has been studying options and considering responses since late April, when the Unabomber promised to “finish typing” a “long article” if the press responded satisfactorily by, apparently, expressing its willingness to study options and consider responses. Even uninvited publishers, like The Chronicle, offered to ponder their possible predicament. “We’d give serious consideration to publishing such a document,” the Chronicle’s executive editor announced the day before the document was even available to the Times and the Post.

No one’s committed to any course of action, of course, but everybody’s committed to reason and responsibility. “We will act responsibly and not rashly, knowing that lives could be at stake,” the publisher of the Times assures us. In a similar tone, and with no less ambiguity, The Chronicle comforted its readers: “We are willing to take extraordinary measures to ensure public safety.” It’s a tough call, journalists insist. It’s a moral quandary, a real ethical dilemma.

But in fact it’s a dilemma manufactured by the press, circumstances contrived by newsrooms that operate without plans and policies. It’s a predicament for the press only because the press lacks the courage and good sense to decline an invitation from a terrorist to play a role no journalist should want to play.

Deciding how to deal with terrorists is a matter of national policy, a question for the federal government, notably the FBI, to answer. It is decidedly not a “journalistic decision,” as the New York Times would have us believe. And that’s not because federal officials are any wiser than journalists. It’s because the FBI and other law enforcement agencies have the legitimate authority to formulate and carry out policy with regard to terrorism, and because these officials are ultimately accountable for the consequences of their conduct.

Is the press prepared to accept responsibility for the consequences of publishing — or not publishing — the Unabomber’s manuscript? Will we have an opportunity to reassign editors at the Times if we believe they acted rashly and irresponsibly? Will The Chronicle yield to a public investigation if we’re convinced that its editors didn’t act properly to ensure public safety?

It’s one thing for journalists to decide which stories to tell and how they want to tell them, but it’s quite another — in principle and in practice — to become a common carrier for manifestos that have no place in a daily newspaper.

A free press needs to be as free from the demands of terrorists as it is free from the demands of the state. To this end, the press desperately needs a policy on terrorism, and the policy ought to be simple, categorical and unequivocal: We will not publish what terrorists write.

The FBI needs to decide what to do with the Unabomber's manuscript. If it wants it published, it can buy as much newspaper space as it needs. Any additional involvement from the press — however well intentioned — could transform journalism into a kind of vigilantism, and that will serve no one very well.

Theodore L. Glasser is director of the graduate program in journalism at Stanford University.

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