4-4-2014

Requests About Explosives and Illicit Drugs: A New Paradigm

Philip Barnett Ph.D.
CUNY City College

This is the accepted version of this paper. The published version appears at:
http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02763877.2014.880303#.VLQNRdLF8k0

Requests about explosives and illicit drugs: A new paradigm

PHILIP BARNETT
Science/Engineering Library, City College of New York, New York, New York

RUNNING TITLE: moral dilemmas for reference librarians
KEYWORDS: moral dilemmas, illicit information, illegal drugs, explosives, dangerous patrons, questionable patron motives, deterring danger, confidentiality

Address correspondence to Philip Barnett, Professor, Science/Engineering Library, City College of New York (CUNY), New York, New York, 10031, USA. E-mail:pbarnett@ccny.cuny.edu

ABSTRACT:
Addresses what reference librarians should do when patrons ask for information about explosives or dangerous drugs. Explores how reference librarians can possibly deter people from dangerous, unmediated searches by proactively providing information and actual examples on the dangers and risks of making and using these materials.

What should you do when patrons ask you how to help them obtain information on explosives or illegal drugs? This is an old question first addressed in the library literature decades ago (Hauptman, 1976). Should we simply help patrons as we would for any other type of request, or do we have a higher duty to society in general and not help patrons obtain information that may potentially damage others? Hauptman visited 13 libraries, both academic and public, asking for information on constructing an explosive device, and none of them refused to supply the information on ethical grounds.

Several years later Dowd (1989) performed a similar experiment. He also sampled 13 libraries, both academic and public, but instead of explosives he asked reference librarians if they would help him find out how to freebase cocaine. In his dress, speech, and manner he looked like a non-academic, and he tried to indicate that he was not engaged in scholarly research. Here too, no librarian turned him down. The help he received ranged from extensive to minimal.

Despite the similarity of these two experiments, Hauptman, both in his original study and upon reflection 20 years later (Hauptman, 1996), and Dowd reached different conclusions. Hauptman concluded that supplying such information implies an abrogation of professional, social, and human responsibility, while Dowd affirmed the necessity for the unfettered dissemination of information.

A day after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, a patron asked me for information on explosives. Maybe she was just curious about explosives. Perhaps she had plans for a copycat bombing. I decided that it was not my role as a librarian to ask her why she wanted this information. I directed her to several reliable books in our collection. These books, selected by professional librarians, explained the full scope of explosives, including their dangers, and necessary precautions in their manufacture and handling. I could have turned down this request. What might have been the result if I had? If this patron was actually planning on making explosives would she have sought less reliable information on explosive manufacture, thus exposing herself and others to risks? Moral dilemmas like this are nagging questions that are hard to deal with because we can never really know the exact intentions of the patron.

But 1976, 1989, and 1995 were then and now is now. We live in a different time. These events took place before the Internet became what it is today – an extensive source of all kinds of information both public and covert, some of it reputable and accurate, and some misleading, incomplete, or even false.

So how can we reach out to patrons and supply them with reputable information that could also benefit them about explosives or illicit drugs? It is precisely because this valuable information along with dangerous information is now available on the Internet without librarians' guidance being necessary that this question is now a frustrating and difficult problem for librarians (Rumbough, 2003). For over a decade the Internet has contained a wide variety of manuals that give directions for making bombs and weapons from easily obtained materials, as illustrated by the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombers who apparently learned how to build bombs from the Internet (Cooper et al., 2013). Some of these sites are available for anyone to view, and some require passwords. In fact, one of these websites, *The Terrorist's Handbook* (1988), is still publically viewable a decade after Rumbough first pointed it out. Rumbough also points out that some of these websites do not have stable links, but one can simply type a phrase such as "how do I make a pipe bomb" into a search engine and get the sought-after procedures. Even more frustrating for librarians is that some information is out of their reach because for some terrorist organizations the Internet serves as a way to support their continued existence. Instead of using websites, they communicate via coded or encrypted e-mail messages (Rumbough, 2003).

So there are two types of people seeking information on explosives or illegal drugs, those who approach librarians and those who don't and instead search for sources of information by themselves either in our libraries or on the internet. How can we handle patrons in the first category, the patrons who approach us? We can advise them on the dangers of making and handling such substances and devices whether or not they intend on making them. *The Terrorist's Handbook* for example has just minimal mention of the dangers of explosives. Possibly the knowledge we can provide may deter some of these people by giving them second thoughts, doubts, and qualms about proceeding with such a goal.

How likely would patrons who intend to pursue illegal activities reveal their intent during a reference interview? Would reference librarians initiate the awkward and probably fruitless situation of a normal reference interview where we query patrons about what level of information they need and for what purpose? None of the 13 librarians approached by Dowd (1989), when he asked if they would help him find out how to freebase cocaine, engaged him in a reference interview. I did not pursue my usual reference interview in my interaction with the patron who sought information on explosives, because I assumed that any patron seeking such information for illegal or terrorist purposes would not be brazen enough to simply admit it.

Nevertheless, if we suspect that a patron may be planning such an action, should we notify authorities? A survey of directors of public libraries (Oder, 2003) showed that 4.1 percent of their staff members had voluntarily given patron records and/or reported behaviors to outside authorities in relation to suspected terrorist activities. Only 1.3 percent of those surveyed voluntarily withdrew materials that might assist terrorists.

Regardless of our knowing the motives of patrons who approach us, here are some examples of the kind of information we can provide. We can start by showing our patrons the venerable *Merck Index* – a publication in nearly every library – because it has short easy-to-read descriptions and cautions one must take in handling of all common substances, including explosives, drugs and poisons. We can also offer persuasive details and stories about specific explosives used by terrorists, and the risks and dangers associated with these explosives.

In July 2005, four suicide bombers carried out a series of coordinated attacks on the London transportation system, killing 52 people and injuring hundreds. Evidence indicated that the explosive they used was triacetone triperoxide, better known by its abbreviation TATP (National Academies, 2013). This unstable explosive can be readily made from hair bleach, nail polish remover, and drain cleaner (Oxley et al., 2012; Milas & Golubovic, 1959).

In the freely accessible U.S. government database, *Toxnet* (http://toxnet.nlm.nih.gov/) simply type TATP in the search box and you will see the *Hazardous Substances Data Bank* entry for this substance containing this peer-reviewed warning: "Chemicals containing multiple peroxide functionalities, such as triacetone triperoxide (TATP) … are impractical and are not used by legitimate military groups because they are shock and heat sensitive compared to military explosives."

I recently attended a chemistry seminar where an experienced chemist who had prepared small amounts of TATP talked about its preparation and properties. Unlike nearly all known substances, the stability of this fickle explosive depends greatly on the exact mode of its preparation. Small changes in its preparation can make it even more unstable and unpredictable. Not surprisingly, people making TATP have been injured and killed (Belluck & Chang, 2001; Theodore, 2008).

Even ammonium nitrate, the common fertilizer and the main ingredient in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (Seitz, 1995) can unexpectedly blow up in your face as it did on April 17, 2013 in Texas at a fertilizer storage plant (Hess, 2013) that had been in business since 1962 (Urbina et al., 2013). This terrible disaster, which is just one incident of many industrial accidents involving this substance (Johnson, 2013), killed 15 people, injured more than 200, and destroyed dozens of homes. What's more, what is now considered the worst industrial accident in U.S. history also involved an explosion of ammonium nitrate (Fischman, 2013). In 1947, a Texas town was nearly leveled. Nearly 600 people were killed, including 27 of the town's 28 firefighters. More than 500 homes were destroyed, and the shock wave shattered windows in nearby cities.

We must keep in mind that even conventional gunpowder, also known as black powder (Brain, 2001), the explosive used by the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombers (Shane, 2013), is dangerous, as vividly shown by the fatal explosion at the fireworks factory run by the well-known, experienced, award winning, multigenerational Grucci family, the nation's largest pyrotechnics concern that had been making black powder-based fireworks for 53 years ("Two are killed," 1983).

The grave danger of trying to build your own bombs is best illustrated by the multiple explosions and devastating fire that obliterated an amateur bomb making factory in a Greenwich Village townhouse in March 1970 (Seedman, 1974). Of the five bomb makers in the house at the time, two were blasted to bits, two ran out of the house covered in ash, stark naked, and another was killed not by the blast itself, but rather by the weight of rubble that had fallen on his chest, leaving him unable to breathe. Were those people properly informed about the dangers of manufacturing, handling, and storing of explosives? Would they have taken the risks they did if they had had the proper information?

Besides explosives, other dangerous materials used by terrorists are nerve gases. These poisons are actually liquids which readily evaporate and spread through the air. In 1995 the cult Aum Shinrikyo released the nerve gas sarin in the Tokyo subways killing 12 people and injuring 5,500 (Kristof, 1995).

During my career in research I worked with small quantities, carefully of course, of a similar nerve gas. Such substances are valuable and necessary tools in elucidating how components of the nervous system work. Of course I was aware of and respected their properties. I wouldn't be caught dead trying to manufacture any quantity of any nerve gas. Actually if I did try, assuming I could get hold of the necessary raw materials, I probably would be caught dead, as exposure to small amounts, even accidently, of these substances could be fatal.

Did any members of the Aum Shinrikyo kill themselves when making sarin and then distributing it? We don't know because government authorities were hampered in their efforts to gather evidence on this cult's activities since Aum Shinrikyo called itself a religious organization and Japanese laws at that time strictly protected religious freedoms (Tremblay, 2001). Aum Shinrikyo was suspect in an earlier, smaller sarin attack, but the police were not able to obtain search warrants.

If any patron ever asks you about sarin, start by referring them to the free *Toxnet* database (http://toxnet.nlm.nih.gov/) and simply type "sarin" in the search box. The very first line in the *Hazardous Substances Data Bank* entry for this substance says: "Nerve Agents are the most toxic of the known chemical agents."

Regarding patrons asking about obtaining or making illicit drugs, here is information you can provide. This information should give them reservations about proceeding with such a goal.

A well known, dangerous, and illegal drug is methamphetamine. It is very addictive with a high potential for abuse. It can be manufactured in clandestine labs from easily bought chemicals which are hazardous and toxic. Its preparation has resulted in fires and explosions and release of hazardous substances into the environment from these illegal labs which are mostly in residential neighborhoods (Melnikova et al., 2001). When these labs are raided, in addition to the methamphetamine makers, some first responders also get injured and die. Police officers, firefighters, emergency service personnel, and members of the general public who live near these labs also face a great risk. Consequently, law enforcement teams raiding such labs should always bring a qualified chemist with them (Hargreaves, 2000). Will prospective methamphetamine makers have second thoughts and be deterred from going through with their plans if they have this knowledge in advance?

A substance even more dangerous to its users than methamphetamine is an inadvertent contaminant in the designer drug, desmethylprodine, often known as MPPP, a synthetic heroin similar to the drug Demerol. In the late 1970s and early 1980s some young users of this drug were admitted to the hospital, some of them unable to move, talk or swallow. Some were less affected, able to move, but very slowly and with tremoring hands (Kolata, 1983; Lewin, 1984). Fortunately their physicians recognized these symptoms as being Parkinson's disease, rare in a people this age, and were able to partially treat this chronic and irreversible medical condition that they were suffering from.

When students take organic chemistry, the branch of chemistry involved in making any drug, one of the first things taught is that chemical reactions do not occur as cleanly as we expect them to proceed, producing only the expected product. There are always side reactions producing unwanted products. When synthesizing any substance, the maker must be vigilant and take the necessary steps to minimize undesired side reactions, and then in many preparations the product needs to be carefully purified.

This particular batch of MPPP was made by a chemistry student who should have known better. Even so, he ignored this well-known tenet and took a short cut that in addition to producing the sought after drug also produced a potent poison which gave any user of this drug this irreversible Parkinson's disease. A book with the striking title *The Case of the Frozen Addicts*(Langston & Palfreman, 1995) has been written about this episode. Librarians can show this book or either of the two articles referred to above to any patron interested in obtaining information on a designer drug or synthetic heroin.

Designer drugs continue to be a deadly problem. More than 60 people died in 2013 after taking the designer drug acetyl fentanyl, an illicit and dangerous substance related to the potent pharmaceutical, fentanyl (Ogilvie et al, 2013).

If patrons ever ask about the more familiar illegal drugs, such as narcotics or cocaine, you can point out to them that these substances can be unpredictably fatal. Some well-known athletes and celebrities who died young while taking what they assumed was a safe dose of these substances include the actors John Belushi ("Belushi's death," 1982), River Phoenix (Mydans, 1993), the basketball player Len Bias just before the start of a promising career (Associated Press, 1986), and more recently the actor Corey Monteith (Itzkoff, 2013).

Regarding the second category of patrons, the ones who do not consult a librarian, besides their searching the Internet, they may find, without the help of librarians, that they can learn how to make explosives and drugs by using a venerable source that most academic libraries have, *Chemical Abstracts*. This authoritative source, necessary in any institution that has chemistry majors, has since its inception in 1907 included all original

scholarly articles on all aspects of chemistry. This means that all the information on the manufacture and properties of all studied substances, including known drugs and explosives, is there. Until 2009 *Chemical Abstracts* was a widely available printed publication (*WorldCat* lists 756 holders in November 2013). It ceased publishing its print version at the end of that year. So if the sought after information appeared prior to 2010, people should be able to track down *Chemical Abstracts* and obtain the information on the preparation of the substance they seek. *Chemical Abstracts* is now available only as a database, a database that also is widely available. Ninety percent of universities worldwide (Shively, 2008) including more than 600 schools in the United States (Jacobs, 2008) subscribe to the *SciFinder Scholar* version of *Chemical Abstracts*. While *SciFinder* has some pitfalls (Wagner, 2006) compared to conventional database searching, it is easy to use, and all the information in *Chemical Abstracts* is there, readily giving all studies and patents on the manufacture and properties of all studied substances.

Will the users of *Chemical Abstracts* who want to obtain information for nefarious goals pay attention to the warnings and safety measures in the literature, following precautions that trained chemists know to take? More importantly, since many potential bomb makers or makers of dangerous and illegal drugs may learn the procedures they are seeking without the help of librarians, using both sources within our libraries, like *Chemical Abstracts*, and external to our libraries (the Internet), is waiting for patrons to approach us sufficient for discouraging such people from proceeding with dangerous and terrorist goals? How can we reach and inform the patrons who do not consult a reference librarian? How do we get to them this vital information that can save lives, both their own and innocent lives?

One possible answer to these questions is for reference librarians to be proactive. That is, we can publicize and advertise in our newsletters, posters, flyers, handouts, pamphlets, signage, websites, and our LibGuides (if we have them), that we are sources of reputable information about these illegal and dangerous things. We can focus on and emphasize the dangers and risks of explosives and poisons and of making and using your own drugs. Such an approach may scare, then deter people who are thinking about becoming potential terrorists or makers of dangerous and illegal substances.

Would our being proactive in providing information to potential illegal drug makers and terrorists be so radical? No, because the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions advocates that we serve all patrons with all their needs: Its *Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom* (IFLA/FAIFE, 1999) and later reaffirmed (IFLA, 2002) reads: "Libraries shall make materials, facilities and services equally accessible to all users. There shall be no discrimination due to race, creed, gender, age or for any other reason." Furthermore, the *IFLA Internet Manifesto* states that "Libraries and information services should support the right of users to seek information of their choice," and that "Librarians should proactively promote and facilitate responsible access to quality networked information for all their users" (IFLA, 2002a). The American Library Association (ALA) has a similar policy in its *Code of Ethics*: "We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas" (American Library Association, 2008). Librarians being proactive is similar to the position suggested by Wengert (2001) that "libraries should not see their primary mode of interaction with the public as one in which they cater to the community, but rather one in which they engage the community."

Of course we cannot be naïve and expect that everything we provide will be used harmlessly, especially if we decide to be proactive. Both the ALA and IFLA are aware of such risks. The ALA adds this this qualification to its *Code of Ethics*: "The principles of this Code are expressed in broad statements to guide ethical decision making. These statements provide a framework; they cannot and do not dictate conduct to cover particular situations." And IFLA cautions us in its manifesto guidelines (IFLA, 2006) that its guidelines should stimulate thought and inspire action but never be regarded as rules.

If we show patrons sources such as *Chemical Abstracts*, which has information on both the dangers of explosives and illegal drugs and also how to make these, we are faced with the perennial question, are we are

doing more harm than good? But isn't it better for librarians to err on the side of supplying accurate and trustworthy information?

Another risk to librarians – regardless of the potential benefits of being proactive – is the possibility of backlash, because in recent years some politicians have viewed libraries as havens for terrorists and potential terrorist hot spots (Hartman, 2007).

Practitioners of another profession, psychiatry, realized in recent years that they were not well prepared to cope with terrorism and they now need to promote applicable communication and research (Stoddard et al., 2011). Similarly, Wilkinson (2014) points out that librarians can incorporate principles of morality customarily employed by physicians. Is it time for librarians to do something similar by promoting research and awareness about the pros and cons of being proactive with our patrons? Only time, observations, and research will show if the call for proactive librarian participation proposed here will save innocent lives.

References

American Library Association. (2008). Code of Ethics of the American Library Association. Retrieved from http://www.ifmanual.org/codeethics

Associated Press. (1986, June 25). Examiner confirms cocaine killed Bias. *New York Times*, p. 25.

Belluck, P., & Chang, K. (2001, December 29). A nation challenged: The investigation; shoes were a 'homemade bomb,' F.B.I. agent says. *New York Times*, p. B1.

Belushi's death attributed to heroin and cocaine. (1982, March 11). *New York Times*, p. 22.

Brain, M. (2001). How fireworks work. Retrieved from http://www.howstuffworks.com/innovation/everyday-innovations/fireworks.htm

Cooper, M., Schmidt, M. S., & Schmidt, E. (2013, April 24). Boston suspects are seen as zealots, and self-taught. *New York Times*, p. 1.

Dowd, R. C. (1989). I want to find out how to freebase cocaine or yet another unobtrusive test of reference performance. *Reference Librarian, 25/26*, 483-293.

Fischman, J. (2013). An explosive situation. *Chemical & Engineering News, 91*(17), 3.

Hargreaves, G. (2000). Clandestine drug labs: Chemical time bombs. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 69*(4), 1-6.

Hartman, T. (2007). The changing definition of U.S. libraries. *Libri, 57*(1), 1-8.

Hauptman, R. (1976). Professionalism or culpability? An experiment in ethics. *Wilson Library Bulletin, 50*, 626-627.

Hauptman, R. (1996). Professional responsibility reconsidered. *RQ, 35*(3), 327-329.

Hess, G. (2013). Fertilizer blast ignites concerns: Congress will look at how chemical facilities are regulated in aftermath of Texas disaster. *Chemical & Engineering News, 91*(21), 33-35.

IFLA. (2002). The Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom. Retrieved from http://archive.ifla.org/faife/policy/iflastat/gldeclar-e.html

IFLA. (2002a). The IFLA Internet Manifesto. Retrieved from http://www.ifla.org/publications/the-ifla-internet-manifesto

IFLA. (2006). IFLA UNESCO Internet Manifesto Guidelines. Retrieved from http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/faife/publications/policy-documents/internet-manifesto-guidelines-en.pdf

IFLA/FAIFE. (1999). IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom. Retrieved from http://www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-statement-on-libraries-and-intellectual-freedom

Itzkoff, D. (2013, July 18). Heroin and alcohol cited in 'Glee' star's death. *New York Times*, p. C3.

Jacobs, M. (2008). Report of the ACS executive director to the ACS council April 2008. *Chemical & Engineering News, 86*(8), Retrieved from http://cen.acs.org/articles/86/i8/Report-ACS-Executive-Director-ACS.html

Johnson, J. (2013). Blowup over ammonium nitrate. *Chemical & Engineering News, 91*(28), 21-23.

Kolata, G. (1983). Monkey model of Parkinson's disease: A contaminant of illicit drugs has caused the disease in man and monkey. *Science, 220*(4598), 705.

Kristof, N. D. (1995, May 16). Japanese arrest cult leader blamed in poison gas attacks. *New York Times*, p. 1.

Langston, J. W., & Palfreman, J. (1995). *The case of the frozen addicts*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Lewin, R. (1984). Trail of ironies to Parkinson's disease; sloppy chemical synthesis by an illicit drug producer has led to important insights into the basic cause of Parkinson's disease. *Science, 224*(4653), 1083-1085.

Melnikova, N., Welles, W. L., Wilburn, R. E., Rice, N., Wu, J., & Stanbury, M. (2001). Hazards of illicit methamphetamine production and efforts at reduction: Data from the hazardous substances emergency events surveillance system. *Public Health Reports, 126*(Supplement), 116-123.

Milas, N. A., & Golubovic, A. (1959). Studies in organic peroxides. XXVI. Organic peroxides derived from acetone and hydrogen peroxide. *Journal of the American Chemical Society, 81*(24), 6461-6462.

Mydans, S. (1993, Nov. 13). Death of River Phoenix Is linked to use of cocaine and morphine. *New York Times*, p. 8.

National Academies. (2013). July 2005 London bombings. Retrieved from http://www.nae.edu/File.aspx?id=15081

Odor, N. (2003). Survey: Librarians divided over post-9/11 privacy issues. *Library Journal*, 128(3), 16.

Ogilvie, L., Stanley, C., Lewis, L., Boyd, M. & Lozier, M. (2013). Notes from the field: Acetyl fentanyl overdose fatalities – Rhode Island, March – May 2013. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 62(34), 703-704.

Oxley, J. C., Brady, J., Wilson, S. A., & Smith, J. L. (2012). The risk of mixing dilute hydrogen peroxide and acetone solutions. *Journal of Chemical Health & Safety, 19*(2), 27-33.

Rumbough, T. (2003). Explosive information: How the internet can help terrorists. *Journal of Information Ethics, 12*(2), 16-30.

Seedman, A. A. (1974). *Chief!*. New York: Arthur Fields Books, Inc.

Seitz, R. (1995, May 16). Doom at 8 cents a pound. *New York Times*, p. 21.

Shane, S. (2013, May 6). A homemade style of terror. *New York Times*, p. 1.

Shively, E. (2008). *CAS' award-winning SciFinder Scholar(tm) now serves 1500 academic institutions worldwide* Press Release: April 6, 2008.

Stoddard, F. J. J., Gold, J., Henderson, S. W., Merlino, J. P., Norwood, A., Post, J. M., . . . Katz, C. L. (2011). Psychiatry and terrorism. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 199*(8), 537- 543.

Theodore, T. (2008, March 6). Teens injured while trying to build bombs; explosive identical to that used in 2005 London underground blasts. *Globe and Mail*, p. S3.

The terrorist's handbook. (1988). Retrieved from http://www.capricorn.org/~akira/home/terror.html

Tremblay, J. (2001). Sarin in the subway. *Chemical & Engineering News, 79*(43), 62-63.

Two are killed and 24 hurt as blasts rip through L.I. fireworks plant. (1983, November 27). *New York Times*, p. 1.

Urbina, I., Fernandez, M., & Schwartz, J. (2013, May10). After plant explosion, Texas remains wary of regulation. *New York Times*, p. 1.

Wagner, A. B. (2006). SciFinder Scholar 2006: an empirical analysis of research topic query processing. *Journal of Chemical Information and Modeling, 46*(2), 767-774.

Wengert, R. G. (2001). Some ethical aspects of being an information professional. *Library Trends, 49*(3), 486-509.

Wilkinson, L. (2014). Principlism and the ethics of librarianship. *Reference Librarian*, 55(1),