

What is done in dark may be most dangerous of all

In the good old days, if the FBI wanted to know into what books folks were checking out from the local library, it had to get to a formal subpoena signed by a judge.

But in the post-9/11 frenzy of patriotism, the U.S. Congress passed something called the USA Patriot Act. The act allows FBI agents to get into libraries or bookstores and demand a list of books obtained by anybody or to see computer records indicating which Web sites they had looked at. Sure, the government has to assure a judge that this information is required for an investigation into terrorist activities, which is a nice way of saying that all the FBI needs to do is assure a judge of its good intentions and go on its happy way.



Phil Power

Worse, the act forbids the library or bookstore from telling a patron he or she is being investigated by the FBI.

Let you think this is some abstract problem cooked up by some liberal lawyers working for the ACLU, consider the e-mail message I got last month from Charlene Huget, director of the Brighton District Library, which is used by about 6,000 people each month:

"The thing that has my board anxious is that if the FBI came into the library, took all our computers out and looked into our circulation lists, I could not tell my board they had been in. Staff who were present and observed the FBI being here ... could not go home and tell their spouses. Currently, in the library world, it is believed that 175 libraries have been visited — all rumor, of course, because this information cannot be made public."

I called Kathleen Zaenger, director of the Howell Carnegie District Library, to ask her how all this makes her feel. "Very uncomfortable."

How come? "Because it doesn't comply with the intent of our Constitution about individual privacy and because it keeps secret what information our government is gathering."

In Michigan, with the largest concentration of Amb-Americans in the country, the possibility that federal agents are secretly looking into the circulation lists of libraries in Dearborn is hardly an abstract worry, either.

The Justice Department refuses to say how many libraries have been asked for information about their patrons' reading habits. But a survey conducted by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign concluded that some 550 libraries around the country had been asked by federal or local investigators about what some of their patrons are reading.

Steven Kerslner, the executive director of the Michigan Library Association, says that local librarians are put into a bind by the provisions of the Patriot Act. The Michigan Library Privacy Act, for example, says librarians may not disclose the records of who takes out what books, except as planned by the individual in question.

The MIA is working to let librarians and library board members know what they can and cannot do with panels and workshops, posting frequently asked questions on its Web site, and so forth. Kerslner says the FBI agent in charge of the Detroit office has been pretty sensible about the agency's new powers, preferring to get court orders or search warrants instead of "barging in on innocent libraries." But he's concerned.

"It's important for citizens to know that libraries take very seriously the issue of privacy for library users, whether it has to do with books taken out or queries used on Web sites," Kerslner said. "Libraries will comply with the law, obviously, but at the same time we will be advocates for individual rights and privacy."

I asked the librarians I interviewed if lots of their patrons had been worried about the Patriot Act. It seems almost nobody knows about it, which goes to prove that what is done in the dark of public ignorance may be the most dangerous things of all.

For example, there is evidence the U.S. Justice Department has prepared for introduction to the Congress an 86-page Domestic Security Enhancement Act of 2003 that would, among other things, strip Americans of their citizenship for giving "material support" to a group designated as a "terrorist." This could mean that sending a check to help fund an organization's lawful activities without knowing of its other acts could lose somebody their right to have any rights at all.

And, according to *The New York Times*, the Bush administration tucked a surprise proposal into the intelligence authorization bill to give the CIA and the military the authority to issue administrative subpoenas — known as "national security letters" — that require Internet providers, credit card companies, libraries and other such organizations to produce material like phone records, bank transactions and e-mail logs.

Benjamin Franklin was right when he observed that, "Those who give up essential liberties in order to secure a little temporary safety deserve neither safety nor liberty."

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at power@homecomm.net.

'Uncle Farmington' needs you to volunteer

How would you like to meet new people, reduce stress, use your mind, have lots of fun, be a good role model for your child, draw new programs, teach others, build networks, have a good learning experience, manage other people, have folks think you're important, laugh a lot, reduce boredom and help mold and shape a city?

It is so easy. You can do it! Just give 1-3 evening hours a month (most meet in the evening) on one of the City of Farmington's boards, committees or commissions. I can assure you, you will get all these things back and more.



JoAnne McShane

During World War II, there were posters displayed all over the country of this boy, stern looking fellow with a patriotic hat on, pointing a finger at you, with a slogan beneath that said "Uncle Sam needs you!" This was an army recruiting poster that attracted people to join the military.

Well, I'm now pointing that finger at you and saying "Uncle Farmington needs you!" We need you to volunteer, to accept an appointment on one of our boards, committees, or commissions. You will become a VIP in our eyes and join us each December at our annual banquet with a bunch of other VIPs.

You say, "I don't have time." Well, neither do most people, but we always find time for things that make us feel good. I will give you a money-back guarantee that volunteering will make you feel good. It's not really scary, although now and then you will meet someone who is scary. Millions of people do. Volunteers are what makes the world go round.

We need all types of education, talents and life experience. For example, our Commission on the Environment seeks folks who like to plan aesthetic improvements and improve our environmental quality of life. Designers, master gardeners and tree huggers are welcome.

The Main Street Program is looking for persons to put their talents and passion to work in the revitalization of downtown Farmington. You can join one of four committees; organization, design, promotion and economic restructuring.

The Commission on Children, Youth and Families was established to encourage an environment where children, youth and families are happy, healthy, educated, safe and have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Members on the commission include for-

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mer social workers, teachers, moms, dads, business people, city officials, etc. This is a very diverse, pro-active group.

The Farmington Area Arts Commission assists the community through programs and performances of the many talented and creative artists in our community. They also encourage public interest in the cultural heritage of the community. So if you're the art type come on down. These are just some of the many interesting boards, committees and commissions that represent Farmington.

I think the one thing (or reward) that volunteering gives oneself is a sense of purpose. The feeling that there's more to life than just you. It's a good thing to look forward to. It's a good thing to influence others lives. A good thing to know you're needed.

Try it. Be part of the action. If it's the wrong match you could move to another board or commission. Give it one year, if it's not for you, move on.

So, go check your schedule, then call Farmington City Hall at (248) 474-5500, Ext. 221, and request an application be sent to you. We need you. You need the rewards and good feelings being a volunteer can give.

JoAnne McShane is a city councilwoman with the City of Farmington.

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