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By DAVID B. CARUSO Associated Press Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) - A federal law aimed at catching terrorists has raised the hackles of many of the nation's librarians, who say it goes too far by allowing law enforcement agencies to watch what some people are reading.

The USA Patriot Act, passed after the Sept. 11 attacks, gave the FBI new powers to investigate terrorism, including the ability to look at library records and computer hard drives to see what books patrons have checked out, what Web pages they've visited, and where they've sent e-mails.

The Department of Justice says the new powers are needed to identify terrorist cells.

But some librarians, who were meeting in Philadelphia for an American Library Association convention, worry that the FBI has returned to routinely checking on the reading habits of intellectuals, civil rights leaders and other Americans.

Those tactics, common in the 1950s and 1960s, were occasionally used to brand people as Communists.

"Some of this stuff is pretty scary, and we are very concerned that people's privacy is being violated," American Library Association President Maurice J. Freedman said.

Some 10,000 librarians from around the world were expected in Philadelphia for the association's midwinter meeting, which began Friday. The group will discuss the Patriot Act at a forum Sunday and is likely to draft a resolution condemning sections of the law that open library records to police inspection, Freedman said.

Judith Krug, director of the group's Office of Intellectual Freedom, said routine government inquiries into library records could have a chilling effect on patrons. For example, she said, some might be afraid to take out books on Islam out of fear that they might wind up on an FBI watch list.

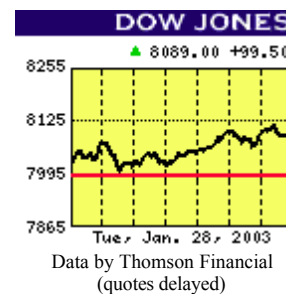
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Speaking to reporters in Philadelphia last week, FBI Director Robert S. Mueller sought to play down concerns that the bureau would abuse its powers.

Mueller said he couldn't recall a case where agents had sought library records to see what books someone had been reading. Most recent FBI inquiries into library files, he said, involved tracking suspects who had used public-access computers to communicate with conspirators or send threatening e-mails.

He said agents "would not be doing our duty" if they didn't follow leads into libraries, if that's where an investigation takes them.

The government's new surveillance powers are also limited. The Patriot Act only gives agents the power to research the library habits of "agents of a foreign power." Proponents of the law say that should offer ordinary Americans protection from unwarranted surveillance, although critics said the term could apply to anyone.

Agents also must obtain a search warrant from a judge, although the act lets them do so in a secret federal court without the library's knowledge.

"What's next, installing cameras in libraries so we can see what books people are reading?" Freedman said. "Sure it sounds far fetched, and it smacks of Stalinist Russia, but look at what's going on now and you'll see many things that you never would have believed a few years ago."

Similar outrage has been expressed overseas. On Thursday in Vienna, Austria, the media watchdog in Europe's leading security organization criticized the United States for snooping on the private lives of Americans.

Freimut Duve of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe condemned the FBI and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service for monitoring library records and bookstore receipts under the Patriot Act.

"This goes much too far," he said. "It may invite other governments to do the same."

The library convention in Philadelphia is scheduled to run through Monday. Participants are also expected to protest cuts in library funding, discuss how to incorporate Internet-based books into their collections and announce the winners of several awards.

On the Net:

American Library Association: <http://www.ala.org/>

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