Die, Computer, Die!

Haven't you heard? It wants your job. It peddles you SMUT. It corrupts your kids. It's cold, STERILE, inhuman. Suddenly, it's okay to hate your COMPUTER. America unplugs.

Bob Ickes

July 24, 1995

Some neo-luddites flee to the woods; others, taking a courageous stand, are content to dis the microwave.

"IF you'd had any brains," the Unabomber wrote the Yale University computer-science professor he'd savagely disfigured, "you would have realized that there are a lot of people out there who resent bitterly the way techno-nerds like you are changing the world."

Talk about blaming the victim.

Those 30 words have turned up in nearly every media analysis of the manhunt. Invariably, they exile the bomber to the lunatic fringe—to Timothy McVeigh's World of Ideas. (The Unabomber actually belongs on an entirely different fringe. He targets primarily computer scientists and salespeople, not government bureaucrats, and has denounced McVeigh in a letter to the Washington Post.)

But has anyone noticed how lucidly—how *deliciously*—the words have come to express the befuddlement, frustration, and rage with which many affluent, putatively sane Americans behold the computer revolution? You know: Its arrogance. Its vocabulary. Its inhumanity. Its nonbiodegradability.

Certainly, it is no accident that the Unabomber, after a six-year hiatus, has resurfaced just as techno-fear has reached a particularly feverish pitch. With his outre fetishes, he is a villain worthy of Batman. But while his brush with Bob Guccione may seem radical and titillating, his 35,000-word "manifesto" is a redoubtably neoclassical text. However monstrously, the Unabomber has merely appropriated a 200-year-old ideology. It is called Luddism. Or, more fashionably, neo-Luddism.

"Yes," says Kevin Kelly, executive editor of *Wired,* the neo-anti-Luddite, or anti-neo-Luddite, computer magazine. "And if I didn't know better, I'd say he sounds a lot like Kirkpatrick Sale."

POOR KIRKPATRICK SALE. SUCH A GENTLEMAN. HE HAS WELCOMED US into his home. He has served light refreshments. He has introduced his wife, a distinguished editor of fiction. He has allowed us to call him Kirk. And here we are, in his Greenwich Village bedroom, asking all the wrong questions. We're trying to understand why someone who believes that the personal computer and the information superhighway are moral catastrophes—someone who calls the Brooklyn Bridge a needless technology—would choose to own a telephone answering machine.

This, apparently, is a *very* wrong question.

"My answering that won't really get us anywhere," growls Sale, 58. A slender, bearded man, he has a magisterial voice and weary eyes. A contributor to *The Nation* and *The New York Times Magazine,* he has written several books, including *SDS,* widely regarded as the definitive study of the radical (and crypto-Luddite) sixties student movement, and *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy,* which portrays Columbus as the Patient Zero of the ecocide.

He continues. "I mean, what difference does it make? What I'm talking about in my newest book are computerized systems that have been imposed upon us without our assent. They destroy our experience of nature. And, of course, they take our jobs."

That book is *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution,* just out from Addison Wesley. For the uninitiated, it defines *Luddite,* which we'll do shortly. It also explains one of the guiding tenets of the movement, which these days is fundamentally nonviolent: "Technologies are never neutral, and some are hurtful." We're not talking flea-market retro here. This mind-set has nothing to do with the Martha Stewart return to rusticity. It in no way resembles the "Simple Life" cover stories that *Time* runs every decade or so. These Luddites are, quite literally, unplugged. Read on, and you'll meet them: The woman who lives in a mud hut! The man who's obsessed with pencils! The Ohioan who has renounced the zipper!

They believe that we face an Orwellian, Huxleian, Toffleresque, *Blade Runner-ish,* Newt Gingrich-ish future, in which machines, especially computers, behave unspeakably. A future in which the kitchen appliances of *Beauty and the Beast* never stop dancing—and, in fact, compel you to join them.

Yet the neo-Luddite resistance is remarkably disparate. Some flee to the woods; others, taking a less courageous stand, are content to dis the microwave oven and cellular phone. But on one major point, the neo-Luddites agree: They would loathe computerization even if hordes of unwitting neo-Luddites hadn't suddenly made technophobia so trendy.

Witness the recent flurry of anti-digital scholarship. The Unabomber is hardly the first author this year to peddle a cyber-squeamish tract. Among the more respected texts is *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway,* by Clifford Stoll. The book advances the now stock arguments against the internet, contending that it subverts traditional notions of intimacy, conversation, and letter-writing. Meanwhile, in *The Gutenberg Elegies,* Sven Birkerts asserts that "we are living in a state of intellectual emergency—an emergency caused by our willingness to embrace new technologies at the expense of the written word." These books have sold surprisingly well.

Then there's the growing congressional antipathy toward those baroque forms of self-expression, protected in other media by the First Amendment, that allegedly infest the Net's Web sites and bulletin boards. The modem-less neo-Luddites, of course, will never see these pictures of women having sex with German shepherds. But in Senator James Exon, Democrat of Nebraska, they definitely have a friend; Exon presided over the Senate passage last month of the Communications Decency Act. The Internet has been assailed by both the right and the left for cultivating the type of behavior deemed antithetical to family values. After Exon, Senator Arlen Specter, the moderate Republican of Pennsylvania, is perhaps the Internet's most relentless congressional critic. But his more liberal colleagues can be just as prickly. California's Dianne Feinstein has no time for those who maintain that the First Amendment protects even bombmaking recipes online.

THE NEO-LUDDITES LOOK ON HELPLESSLY AS ARCHETYPAL machines are deleted from the popular imagination (most recently, the Smith-Corona typewriter). What's more, the technocrats can be so ... cruel. At a recent colloquium, a heckler

shouted: "Luddites! Meet the Luddites! They're the modern Stone Age family." To which a bearded historian replied: "No, we're not like the Flintstones at all. It is my understanding that the M Flintstones embraced many superfluous technologies."

He cited the toucan record player.

Until the Unabomber volunteered his services, the Luddites and the cyber-backlash lacked a defining, mediagenic emblem. But this terrorist has also done the most to discredit the cause. Indeed, the neo-Luddites claim to be sickened by the Unabomber. He reappeared just as they'd begun to crawl out from the shambles of the counterculture. They'd been turning up (if only to be derided) in *Time, Newsweek, L/.S. News & World Report,* and the family of prestigious, infrequently published journals.

The neo-Luddites are determined to preserve this progress toward respectability. Like the right in the days after the Oklahoma bombing, they are loudly denouncing bodily harm. But they are not above roughing up a discarded (or dysfunctional) PowerBook or two.

"Our movement is growing," Sale says. "But as the Unabomber shows us, we can't let frustration lead to violence. You could argue, I suppose, that no successful movement in history has ever done without violence. If you choose to use it, you must be sure that it's not antithetical to your cause. We can't go the way of the Weather Underground."

Armed only with pencils, the neo-Luddites have rekindled the skirmishes begun in Nottinghamshire, England, in 1811. At the height of the Industrial Revolution, a band of weavers protested the nascent automation that threatened their jobs. Traditionally, they had worked from their homes. The rebels—in the name of their mythical hero. General Ned Ludd—attacked the mills with sledgehammers. They achieved modest success, pestering the factories for months. Then, when four Luddites were murdered in a factory raid, they responded by killing a manufacturer. This proved to be a public-relations disaster. The Luddites were persecuted mercilessly—and the movement eventually disintegrated.

In a blistering essay in *Newsweek,* Steven Levy, an author of its special "TechnoMania" issue, distinguishes the neo-Luddites from their more heroic antecedents: "It is a telling fact," he writes, "that the neo-Luddites consist not of blue-collar workers, but elite symbol-shufflers who will never themselves be displaced by computers." James Gleick, the *New York Times Magazine* columnist who also started the Internet access provider Pipeline, concurs: "They want to decide for you which technologies you cannot use. Implicit in their philosophy is the element of government conspiracy, as if it's forcing these things down our throats. They're outrageously patronizing to the rest of us. It's crackpot."

Sale doesn't think so. "Who decided, for instance, that I have to have a credit card in order to function? That the windows in my car can be operated only electronically, and if the electronics fail, I can't get air?"

He has a car?

"Look," Sale says without a trace of defensiveness. "The way our society is structured today, there are some technologies that are unavoidable. They are necessary evils. What

I'm saying in my book is that we need to reassess that structure." Ashamed, we look away. We are not, Sale assures us, uniquely stupid. Others, he says, have asked these questions before.

He resumes his harangue against the Information Age. "We need to ask ourselves, 'What arc the problems that these gadgets are meant to correct?' " Often, he contends, the problem is other gadgets. Sale says power steering is a technological "innovation" that was occasioned only by the addition of so many other newfangled devices, which made cars impossible to turn.

As he completed this thought, we spotted something in his window. "Mr. Sale, please pardon the interruption. But could you describe that white, rectangular object? Might that be ... *an air conditioner?"*

He smiles politely. "Yes, it is. But it's for my wife, not me. She hasn't been well. We've lived here for 30 years, and this is the first summer we've had an air conditioner. I can't expect my family to suffer for my beliefs."

On paper, however, Sale opposes even medical technology. "The triumph of modern medicine is responsible for vast overpopulation and the attendant social and environmental crisis," he says. *Wired's* Kevin Kelly, who actually shares a literary agent with Sale, lets out a "whoa" when he hears this. Kelly stops short of calling Sale a hypocrite. In fact, he appreciates Sales's dilemma. "It must be rough," Kelly says, "when it's your wife who's not well." But Sale will not be deterred. In Manhattan, he rides a bicycle but won't submit to the technology of an advanced lock. "I like to pedal down to the South Street Seaport," he says. There, he chooses to ignore the pernicious technologies implicit in retailing and fast food. Instead, he revels in the boat museum and repair facility, where age-old craft are restored by hand.

Over the years, the neo-Luddites have been quite elastic in their dissent. They have opposed, chronologically, the space program (they have flocked *to Apollo 13,* which, they believe, proves their point and overshadows the recent space-station triumph), nuclear power, and nafta. They view the homeless as their spiritual brethren. Some think the homeless cannot find a place in the technological world.

You might think that the neo-Luddites are of a certain age— that, having never received computer education, they arc too frightened or too cranky or too feeble to learn. But that is simply not the case. Says Evelyn Lau, 24, a memoirist and poet: "Computers just sort of leave me cold. I spent days last summer retyping a 900-page manuscript. It's like I can only connect with paper."

Bill Henderson, publisher of Long Island's Pushcart Press, agrees. He says, "1 hate this term *word processing.* You process cheese; you process salami. You do not process words." Two years ago in the New York *Times,* Henderson said as much in an op-ed piece. Jokingly, he called for the formation of the Lead Pencil Club. Within a month, he received more than 200 letters. Now he is its president. Its mottoes are "Not So Fast" and Thoreau's "Simplify, Simplify." (Thoreau's father, by the way, was a manufacturer of pencils.) For $20, a member gets a T-shirt and one Dixon Ticonderoga

pencil. Henderson, age 54, adds, "We don't really do anything. But we have a little creed. We promise ourselves that we'll always hang up on voice mail."

Scott Savage is the editorial director of the magazine *Plain* and the director of the Center for Plain Living in Chesterhill, Ohio. "I support the neo-Luddite philosophy," says Savage, 36. "But it seems to me they're about tearing things down and building up new ideas. We're simply subtracting from our lives. Every time we take away a technology, we find a gift underneath." Savage is a member of the plain Friends, a subset of the Quakers, the Religious Society of Friends. He and his family dress plainly—no collars, belts, or zippers. Savage has used the Internet at work, writing medical grants for Ohio University. "But wherever I turned on the Net, I'd always end up with this invitation to look at supermodels."

In April—Savage calls it Fourth Month—he and his family traveled by train to San Francisco, to a vegetarian luncheon with the editors of *Wired* magazine. There Savage told them that "people really do have a higher nature, that they are not infinitely moldable and downloadable. I pointed out that the page design seemed very cluttered. That seemed so much the opposite of what *Wired* is trying to tell us—that computers will liberate us, set us free."

When he heard about the Unabomber, Savage says, he felt "real bad." He adds, "After Oklahoma, I remembered how I blamed those awful radio hosts for the hate in this country. Then I thought, Gee, I wonder if anyone would blame me for the Unabomber?"

A FEW YEARS AGO, WITHOUT the benefit of explosives, Chellis Glendinning persuaded the *Utne Reader* to print her "Notes toward a NeoLuddite Manifesto." Not unlike the Unabomber's manifesto, it advocates the dismantling of nuclear technologies, chemical technologies, genetic-engineering technologies, electromagnetic technologies, and—who knew?—television.

"As neo-Luddites," says Glendinning from her mud hut in New Mexico, "we aren't anti-technology per se. Rather, we want to evaluate technologies *individually,* from a systemic place. We oppose only the sorts of technologies that are destructive to humans and communities." (The clothespin, for instance, is safe.) The author of *When Technology Wounds,* Glendinning is a psychologist specializing in trauma wrought by modern contraptions. These maladies include repetitive-stress disorder, food additives, and career crises caused by automation.

She is also a pioneer in the fight against "techno-addiction." Glendinning contends that users of fax machines and ISDN telephone lines simply cannot help themselves. She employs the twelve-step metaphor nimbly. Responding to reviews of her new book—*My Name's Chellis and I'm in Recovery From Western Civilization*—she says most critics are "in denial."

No census has been taken of the neoLuddite population. But you know a movement has a hold on Manhattan when the Learning Alliance offers a two-day course. In the first session, described as "a fun night of drama" by Learning Alliance founder David Levine, Glendinning "interviewed" Kirkpatrick Sale, who was garbed in 1812

vestments and channeled the spirit of Ned Ludd. Having learned the Yorkshire dialect from Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley,* he spoke of the glories of resistance. In turn, Mr. Ludd interviewed Glendinning, his contemporary analogue, to learn "what became of the movement." Then Sale wheeled out a personal computer. He raised a sledgehammer above his head, and brought it crashing down upon the machine.

He bowed.

Similar high jinks ensued when Sale participated in a forum at Town Hall. The capacity crowd of urban professionals had paid $20 each to hear 27 visionaries, chosen by the *Utne Reader,* address the questions "Where is the darkness? Where is the light?" Sale, in breeches once more, spoke for two minutes. In closing, he took the sledgehammer to another computer. This audience was horrified. Afterward, a shaken guest approached Sale. She said, "Wouldn't you have wanted to give that computer to a child?"

His answer: "No."

We ask him one last time about violence. "The Unabomber must learn the lesson of the original Luddites," Sale says ominously.

Will Sale keep smashing computers— an action that, as performance art, is informed more by Pete Townshend than by Ned Ludd? "I've smashed five so far," Sale says. "And it's an incredible feeling. The machine goes up in a delightful poof. I think it was Twain who said that when you have a hammer, all your problems look like nails."

But doesn't he feel for the machines?

"Not really," he says. "They all look alike to me."

Bob Ickes
Die, Computer, Die!
Haven't you heard? It wants your job. It peddles you SMUT. It corrupts your kids.
It's cold, STERILE, inhuman. Suddenly, it's okay to hate your COMPUTER.
America unplugs.
July 24, 1995

New York Magazine. <books.google.co.uk/
books?id=jOUCAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA22&hl=fr&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2>
Large photographs by Fredrik Broden. Book photographs by Monica Buck.