

TECHNOLOGY: CONNECTIONS;
A fascination with the Unabomber,
and the suspect, run deep on the
Internet.

Edward Rothstein

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“MAN, is this ever weird,” reads a posting on a Usenet news group that is called “alt.fan.unabomber.” “There is now a news group about the guy who despises technology.”

Weird, indeed. Since the arrest of Theodore J. Kaczynski as the suspected Unabomber, related postings and pages on the Internet have grown into a miniature world wide web of links. The suspect may have lived in a cabin without any water or electricity, but in cyberspace, he has found a high-tech home.

He has inspired fans (He “was attacking societal scum ... guilty for their crimes against humanity.”) and aspiring correspondents (“Write him a sincere note and maybe he would respond,” one posting says. “Just be REALLY careful with any replies you receive,” another cautions.)

His predilection for two-wheeled transportation has also given him wry attention in the rec.bicycles.off-road news group (“They did show his bike on TV the other day. I didn’t see the brand but it was some kind of beater bike, most likely a Trek. It did have bar ends on it, and unsuspended. Can ya believe it?”). Comedy is latent in the suspect’s predilection for hunting and his basic diet (“Given the ingredients: fresh-shot snowshoe rabbit, white flour, dried vegetables, and maybe Spam,” a posting asks, “what would the dish be?”)

The suspect’s past as a mathematician may even inspire new interest in the boundary properties of continuous functions (a Kaczynski bibliography has been posted in the news group sci.math).

And in forums on Compuserve and America Online, debates energetically respond to an editorial in The Weekly Standard about his Luddite celebration of nature: “If it were fair to blame Rush Limbaugh for Timothy McVeigh,” the right-wing magazine argues, “surely the media could find room to blame the Unabomber on Al Gore.”

But on the Net, the Unabomber has a mythic presence. The reasons are not simple. Recall again the manifesto, printed last year and now available on numerous Web sites.

“Primitive man,” it asserts, “suffered from less stress and frustration and was better satisfied with his way of life than modern man is.” The problem is that technology has been a “disaster for the human race,” breaking down social order and creating a sense of “purposelessness.”

In this world of anomie, action must be taken to restore humanity to a “positive ideal,” which the Unabomber finds in “WILD nature” — a world “independent of human management and free of human interference and control.” People must become “peasants or herdsmen or fishermen or hunters.”

“Factories should be destroyed,” the Unabomber wrote, “technical books burned.”

Apart from the apocalyptic sentiments, such views are more than 200 years old (beginning before the followers of Ned Ludd became the first Luddites, destroying textile machinery in England). Last September, in The Nation, Kirkpatrick Sale chided the Unabomber for his ignorance of this strain of thought, which he traced back to William Blake and Mary Shelley (his essay is reprinted on the Pathfinder Web site).

But the real influence on the Unabomber, if he and Mr. Kaczynski are one and the same, may be recent Luddites like Theodore Roszak or Charles A. Reich. Both articulated the Romantic ideals of the counterculture, condemning technology and “the system,” during the years when Mr. Kaczynski taught mathematics at Berkeley.

Interestingly, some of the alumni of the counterculture returned to technology via the PC, which was seen as an instrument for personal liberation. Timothy Leary began to describe the advantages of cyberspace over acid trips. David Bunnell, a veteran of Students for a Democratic Society, founded PC Magazine. The originator of the Whole Earth Catalogue, Stewart Brand, began the Well on-line service.

Wherever he may have been during the 1960’s, the Unabomber of more recent times did not find his way to the Net. He rejected all machinery except the typewriter and the letter bomb, becoming a Rube Goldberg of destruction, a technologist who spent 17 years perfecting his murderous craft.

There may have also been a kind of twisted revenge at work. The Unabomber’s manifesto blames technology for breaking down societies, tempting individuals “to move to new locations, separating themselves from their communities.”

The manifesto also refers to the sorry fate of young people who should be growing in “contact with the real world,” but who are “pushed into studying technical subjects, which most do grudgingly.” And he adds: “No one stops to ask whether it is inhumane to force adolescents to spend the bulk of their time studying subjects most of them hate.”

These resentments may or may not match Mr. Kaczynski’s feelings about his isolation and his studies. But his mathematical specialty dealt with constraints and limits that circumscribe “well-behaved” curves (the adjective has a mathematical meaning) — a subject that must have had some personal resonance when he rebelled against his middle-class constraints.

The Unabomber surely did something similar in the course of his career, embracing a series of shocking discontinuities. “In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression,” the Unabomber writes, “we’ve had to kill people.”

The fascination with the Unabomber on the Net runs so deep partly because the lure of the Net is often just what the Unabomber seeks: countercultural autonomy. One posting on the Unabomber news group proclaims that he would have felt at home on the Net, which “subverts the old industrial system.”

But the bomber’s violent subversion of moral boundaries also makes him, for most, too close for comfort, bearing the mark of Cain. The Hotwired Web site (www.hotwired.com) dismisses his manifesto as “old thinking for an old medium.”

Some postings also express relief that his crimes won’t sully the Net, if Mr. Kaczynski is found guilty of the bomber’s crimes: he was thoroughly unplugged. But the mythology of the Net and the mythology of the Unabomber share origins. As another Hotwired essay puts it, the Unabomber remains “our digital-age Monster from the Id.” As hero and demon, he looms over cyberspace.

The Ted K Archive

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www.thetedkarchive.com