

Ted Talks

The Unabomber's new wave of apologists miss the fact that
violence was his critique

Evan Malmgren

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Image: *Press Conference With Cabin* (2004) by Richard Barnes. Courtesy the artist.

Earlier this summer, a surreal image went viral: a primitive cabin, resting on smooth concrete in an industrial warehouse setting, presented without caption by the popular Twitter account @SpaceLiminalBot (which posts content from the r/LiminalSpace subreddit). Thousands of people recognized it as a picture of Ted Kaczynski's cabin in FBI storage. "Ya'll.... this is a terrorist's cabin in FBI lockup..... yikes," wrote one user. "He was a freedom fighter," replied another.

Kaczynski's likeness has bubbled up in memes in recent years, often accompanied with crude gestures at his philosophy. In one meme, a disheveled Kaczynski urges adults who play *Animal Crossing* to "check [their] mail," implying a (lighthearted) threat. In another, text frames Kaczynski's disheveled mugshot in a classic impact font: "Bitches be like 'e-girl' this and 'e-boy' that," it reads, "how about you disable the e-lectricity grid?" Know Your Meme features a "Theodore Kaczynski / Unabomber" entry, and dedicated subreddits like r/basedted riff on his persona.

A Harvard graduate and former UC Berkley mathematics professor, Kaczynski is best known as the Unabomber, a neo-Luddite eco-terrorist who killed three people and injured 23 others in a bombing campaign that culminated with the publication of his manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future," in the *Washington Post*. In it, Kaczynski argues that the left-right political divide is a red herring, concealing a more fundamental tension between wild nature and industrial civilization. Kaczynski turned

36 three days before his first bomb went off in a University of Chicago parking lot, but today his ideas are finding purchase among a younger circuit with no memory of the bombings. As industry fuels ecological collapse and wires anxiety across the globe, it is unsurprising that young people would be drawn to someone who attacks modern technology head-on. But given his profile's depreciation in the aughts and early teens, it is worth asking: Why Kaczynski, and why now?

Beyond resurfacing in horizontal digital media, Kaczynski has recently seen reevaluation across academia, mass entertainment, and popular writing. "I do sympathize with Ted Kaczynski," wrote Elliot Milco in a 2017 article for the conservative religious magazine *First Things*, "because he perceived something true about our society, its political imperatives, and our newly emerging technological way of life." But while columnists and filmmakers find value in aspects of Kaczynski's philosophy, they remain careful to condemn his violence. "Ted Kaczynski's campaign to kill and maim chosen victims with explosives was horrific in the extreme and beyond forgiveness," wrote longtime *Chicago Tribune* editorial board member Steve Chapman in an op-ed, "but his 35,000-word manifesto, published in 1995, provided a glimpse of the future we inhabit, and his foresight is a bit unsettling."

Milco, Chapman, and countless others have depicted the Unabomber as a singular technology critic with unfortunate baggage. But this hazy understanding overlooks the fact that Kaczynski's ideological critique is not particularly original, nor does it pretend to be. Kaczynski's most significant contribution to the work of 20th century anti-industrial thinkers is the bare fact of the bombings, which deftly played to the demands of a fear-driven media ecosystem. In refusing to grapple with this, contemporary accounts fail to capture a difficult truth: that the very decision to uplift Kaczynski's message roughly vindicates his conviction that violence was an ugly but effective medium.

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Kaczynski's terror campaign had a relatively small body count by the standards of today's mass shootings, but his persistence left an outsized impression. He mailed or hand-delivered roughly one homemade bomb per year between 1978 and 1995, evolving their designs and throwing off investigators with fake clues. One bomb was disguised as lumber and left in a parking lot; another was mailed to the president of United Airlines in a hollowed-out novel. "I believe this to be truly a book for our time," he wrote in an accompanying letter, "a book that should be read by all who make important decisions affecting the public welfare." The campaign's fatalities included a timber lobbyist, a public relations executive, and a computer store owner; others lost fingers, sight, hearing, and nerve endings.

After years without reliable leads, the FBI encouraged the *Washington Post* to comply with Kaczynski's demand to publish "Industrial Society and its Future," his iconic broadside against accelerating technological development. This decision ultimately led

to Kaczynski's arrest, but it also delivered a mass audience for his argument that industrial society leans into an unsustainable notion of "progress," delivering short-term convenience at the cost of gradually eroding psychological wellbeing. "If the system breaks down the consequences will still be very painful," he writes in the manifesto. "But the bigger the system grows the more disastrous the results of its breakdown will be, so if it is to break down it had best break down sooner rather than later."

Kaczynski's ideas were legible in the political landscape of the '90s: the Earth and Animal Liberation Fronts were active; the anti-globalization movement was at its zenith; techno-utopianism was in vogue, and the Unabomber stood in clear opposition. Even among people who disagreed, there was a sense that Kaczynski had substance — and in certain circles, daring to say so was sexy. Usenet newsgroups like alt.fan.unabomber formed to debate the manifesto, and later Kaczynski's trial; Boston artist Lydia Eccles ran a "Unabomber for President" campaign in 1996 with support from the anarchist collective CrimethInc. Arch-Luddite author Kirkpatrick Sale, who received an early copy of "Industrial Society" from the FBI, later packed a *Nation* review of the essay with petty criticism that smelled more like professional jealousy than substantive disagreement.

Kaczynski briefly conveyed an edgy rebel mystique, but 9/11 swept his relevance under the rug for a time. Political Islam usurped radical environmentalism as America's great terrorist imaginary, and the insurgent Californian Ideology cooled to hegemony, normalizing a conception of technological progress as inevitable and benevolent. Kaczynski was turned in to the FBI by his own brother, and wrestled into pleading guilty by a legal system that did not want his trial to become a media circus. As the world moved on from Kaczynski, the man himself was confined to the obscurity of eight life sentences in ADX Florence, the highest-security supermax prison in the U.S. His public persona reverted to "the Unabomber" for a good 15 years, during which time Kaczynski was recognized more for his crimes than his thinking — a boogeyman alongside Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy in the pantheon of American serial killers.

Still, a small but critical group of scholars carried the torch of Kaczynski's anti-industrial militance, developing an intellectual infrastructure to expand, clarify, and sustain his perspective through a period of limelight blackout. Chief among them was David Skrbina, a senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of Michigan, Dearborn from 2003 to 2018, and one of the manifesto's first converts in 1995. Skrbina has remained a staunch public advocate in the decades since, exchanging some 120 letters with Kaczynski and helping him publish a collection of writing, *Technological Slavery*, from prison, for which Skrbina wrote the original introductory essay ("A Revolutionary for Our Times"). *Technological Slavery* buoyed a minor ripple of critical reevaluation, and set the stage for Kaczynski's 2016 book, *Anti-Tech Revolution*, which sketched a practical vision of its namesake.

For years, Skrbina taught Kaczynski alongside technology critics like Lewis Mumford, Herbert Marcuse, and Henryk Skolimowski, positioning him as a thinker worthy of serious consideration. Skrbina found that his students grew more receptive to Kaczyn-

ski's writing as collective memory of the bombing campaign receded. "In the early years, the students remembered the Unabomber story," he said in an interview for this piece. "In the later years, they don't remember him, because they were too young. He's not just this mad killer who terrorized the nation and shut down airports."

"Industrial Society" is not only a critique of post-industrial psychological malaise but, importantly, of most efforts to reform it. One of the manifesto's core concepts, the *power process*, claims an innate human desire to consciously alter one's environment. Kaczynski argues that the system creates *surrogate activities* — sports, video games, politics — to absorb and nullify this impulse without threatening its stability. *Oversocialization* (adjacent to anthropologist Alexei Yurchak's *hypernormalization*), meanwhile, describes a state of having been so thoroughly socialized into the existing order that the only positive change one can imagine is that of making the same order more comprehensive and efficient; think of affirmative action or extending infrastructure to disenfranchised populations. The confluence of these phenomena, Kaczynski argues, not only sows psychological turmoil but causes individuals to believe they are transgressing hierarchy when they are only reifying it.

"Modern tech has become a total phenomenon for civilization, the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed on all human activity." These words may as well have been Kaczynski's, but in fact they belong to 20th century philosopher Jacques Ellul, a Christian anarchist who warned against technology's totalitarian impulses. Ellul's work argues that humans have entered a dangerous relationship with technology, selecting convenience even as it locks hierarchy into place and negatively affects innate human experience. Ellul's influence is particularly legible in Kaczynski's writing, which openly synthesizes other thinkers. Ivan Illich, Derrick Jensen, Paul Feyerabend: these and other writers have advanced similar arguments about the role played by science and industry in undermining self-sufficiency, autonomy, and free will. Kaczynski's domestic terror campaign was ultimately a vehicle for ideas with plenty of other on-ramps.

Scholars like Skrbina embrace Kaczynski not so much for his novel critique of technê, but because he added the plank of revolution, a contention that criticism itself is insufficient; that the system will not unwind of its accord; that it will eventually need to be overthrown in a revolution. In this sense, Kaczynski's terror campaign is inseparable from his contribution to the body of thought.

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Around the time of Kaczynski's 2016 book, John Jacobi was hitchhiking to Ann Arbor to dig through his unpublished writing at the University of Michigan's Labadie Collection. Jacobi's archival research served as the basis for a 2016 article for The Dark Mountain Project, "Ted Kaczynski and Why He Matters," as well as a now-defunct website archiving letters and obscure writings. Jacobi is too young to remember the Unabomber's late '90s infamy but, like Skrbina, he encountered Kaczynski's philosophy through "Industrial Society and its Future" — in his case, decades after its publication.

A 2018 *New York* article on the “new generation of Unabomber acolytes” focused heavily on Jacobi, now 26, framing him as a would-be Lenin to Kaczynski’s Marx. The story evidenced Kaczynski’s rising profile, but Jacobi has come to regret participating in it, feeling that it cast an unwarranted sensationalistic light. Aside from Jacobi, the story fixated on marginal eco-extremists like Tendiendo a lo Salvaje (ITS), a Mexican group that has advocated for indiscriminate attacks. “I want to build an above-ground organized politically oriented movement that interacts with politics as they are,” he said in an interview, lamenting that the *New York* piece peddled violence-fantasy porn rather than seriously engaging with ideas.

If the Unabomber initially resonated as a counterbalance to ’90s Silicon Valley techno-evangelism, the new Kaczynski-mania is deeply entwined with the post-2016 techlash. The acute threat of violence has long since eroded, and a new generation is beginning to suspect that something has gone horribly wrong with modern technology — an emerging market, from the entertainment industry’s perspective. “Those ideas have been increasingly relevant for decades, or centuries,” said Skrbina. “But things have accelerated. You can point to obvious changes since the year 2000, you can talk about ubiquitous cellphones, social media, Twitter, the surveillance state, things like internet addiction. If there’s a [recent] change, it’s that the average man or woman feels this presence in their daily lives.” Anti-tech radicals like Skrbina and Jacobi helped set the stage for Kaczynski’s second coming, but the dam was broken in by a slew of Unabomber-themed popular media. Philosophy is a tough sell, but Kaczynski’s dramatic bombing campaign offers the industry an emotionally intense storytelling vessel.

The 2017 Netflix-distributed miniseries *Manhunt: Unabomber* was a significant entry in the Unabomber’s mounting pop-culture rebound. *Manhunt* follows FBI profiler Jim Fitzgerald (played by *Avatar*’s Sam Worthington) down a *Heart of Darkness*-style rabbit hole, adopting Kaczynski’s pessimistic outlook amid the pursuit. Fitzgerald remains repulsed by Kaczynski’s bombings — the series renders them in gruesome detail — but nonetheless finds sympathy with his social critique. At one point Fitzgerald highlights a section of “Industrial Society,” in which Kaczynski uses traffic laws as an example of technological progress depleting human autonomy, as the part that made it all click for him. In the final moments of the series, after putting Kaczynski behind bars, Fitzgerald finds himself at a red light; the shot pulls back, slowly revealing that he is trapped in a grid of arbitrary control.

In elevating Kaczynski’s philosophy while taking pains to criticize the bombings, *Manhunt* is typical of modern Kaczynski-centric entertainment media. A more recent project, the 2020 Netflix-distributed documentary series *Unabomber: In His Own Words*, interrogates Kaczynski’s personal life through a kitschy “true crime” lens, baiting viewers with thinly spread clips of a rare interview with the man himself. *Unabomber* mainly unfolds the dramatic bombing campaign but also suggests an ominous kernel of insight, occasionally dipping into interviews with subjects like Skrbina, who take Kaczynski’s ideas seriously on their own terms. While these projects self-

consciously orbit their subject from outside, *Ted K* — a new film that premiered at this year’s Berlin International Film Festival but has not yet seen general release — takes a more intimate tack, wading through ambient vignettes of a notoriously private life. A *Variety* review notes that the film captures “the essential tragedy of the man: that he had something of a point, and the worst possible way of making it.

If Kaczynski embraced “the worst possible way” of critiquing modern technology, then why does popular media elevate his ideas on the back of his bombings, just as he had initially hoped? “He was more than just a sociologist or an intellectual; he was actually trying to affect change,” said Griffin Kiegel, a former student of David Skrbina, who is now part of a group called the Anti-Tech Collective. Kiegel does not personally endorse violence, but speculates that Kaczynski’s appeal owes to the fact that he is not seen as a hypocrite. “History is vindicating him a little bit. We’ve seen how much technology affects things like political elections and how people operate.”

“What the manifesto has to say about our relationship with technology and with society is more true right now than it was when Ted published,” said *Manhunt*’s executive producer Andrew Sodroski at a press conference promoting the series. “Part of the tragedy of Ted is that the only way he could get people to read what he wrote was by bombing people,” he continued, “and when you bomb people, people don’t take what you have to say seriously.” Yet Sodroski singled Kaczynski out for such treatment specifically because of the drama of the bombings, not despite them.

“For a guy that talked about how mass entertainment is distracting us, [Kaczynski] had his own distraction,” mused the series’ director, Greg Yaitanes, in a *Yahoo! News* interview, “which was making bombs and killing people.” Ironically, the existence of Yaitanes’ show demonstrates that the gulf between Kaczynski’s distraction and ours is not so great, and that violence is in fact an effective means of breaking into the attention economy. Knowingly or not, depictions like *Manhunt* largely vindicate Kaczynski’s central conceit, highlighted by his radical boosters, that bombings were an effective means of bringing ideas to a mass audience.

This attempt to parse Kaczynski’s violence from his ideas is nothing new. “Like many of my colleagues,” wrote Sun Microsystems co-founder Bill Joy in a 2000 *Wired* article, “I felt that I could easily have been the Unabomber’s next target.” But, he continued, “as difficult as it is for me to acknowledge, I saw some merit in [his] reasoning” that, while “engineered human beings may be happy” in a technologically mediated society, “they will most certainly not be free.” Such reasoning far predates Kaczynski, whose novel contribution is largely the fact of his bombings. The real point Joy illustrates here is that, “like many of [his] colleagues,” he was not interested in engaging such critiques unless sufficiently motivated by fear.

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Critics often point out that Kaczynski’s bombings failed to spark a revolution, but this was never his intention. In fact, Kaczynski speculates that anti-tech revolutionaries

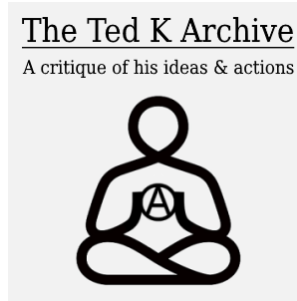
would be most likely to succeed against a backdrop of industrial collapse unfolding of its own accord, not ushered in prematurely by force. His attacks, by contrast, achieved the humbler, stated goal of getting “Industrial Society” published in a major national newspaper. The staying power of this effort is illustrated in the work of contemporary neo-Luddites like Skrbina, Kiegiel, and Jacobi, who are not shy about the influence of Kaczynski’s manifesto. And while studios and editorial boards try to demonize Kaczynski’s turn to violence, his shrewd play to the demands of a fear-obsessed culture is vindicated once again in the very existence of media like *Manhunt*, *Unabomber*, and *Ted K*.

Kaczynski has reemerged from this fanfare as one of the most famous living technology critics, with a public profile rivaling the first years after the *Washington Post* first published his manifesto. His 2016 book, *Anti-Tech Revolution*, and the paperback edition of his 1995 manifesto respectively outstrip Marshall McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* in Amazon sales. Earlier this year, a prominent gossip blogger reported that he was exchanging letters about “theory and implementation” with world-famous environmental activist Greta Thunberg. And the memes go on and on.

At 79 years old, Kaczynski has grown reclusive by most accounts. Yet his image still haunts the zeitgeist, circulating an amorphous meme economy dancing between the complementary poles of a sensationalistic mass media market and a hardened core of anti-industrial revolutionaries. Through all of this, Kaczynski retains the sheen of arch-Luddite status precisely because he hinged his ideas to violence. Popular media accounts try to have it both ways, condemning Kaczynski’s terror campaign while elevating his otherwise derivative critique of technology, all while leaning into the bombings as an audience draw. In rereading Kaczynski’s story again and again, they merely underscore his provocative contention that violence was, in fact, an effective means of getting industrial society’s attention.

Evan Malmgren is a writer who covers power and infrastructure for outlets including the Baffler, Dissent, Logic, and the Nation. He is currently working on a book about people trying to live “off the grid” in modern America.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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