Fail

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1 There are certain rules I try to follow as a writer. One rule is to never place the word *and* directly following a semicolon. Another is not to write positively about diabolical mathematicians who murder people through the U.S. mail. As a consequence, I'm nervous about saying anything non-negative (or even neutral) about Ted Kaczynski, simply because there are always certain readers who manage to get the wrong idea about everything. For most of the world, the fact that Kaczynski killed three people and injured twenty-three others negates everything else about him. There is only one socially acceptable way to view the Unabomber: as a hairy, lumber-obsessed extremist whose icy brilliance was usurped only by a sinister lack of empathy. Writing about Kaczynski's merits as a philosopher is kind of like writing about O. J. Simpson's merits as a running back—at first it confuses people, and then it makes them mad. I would advise against it. You absolutely cannot win.

But who wants to win?

Like so many modern people, my relationship with technology makes no sense whatsoever: It's the most important aspect of my life that I hate. The more central it becomes to how I live, the worse it seems for the world at large. I believe all technology has a positive short-term effect and a negative long-term impact, and—on balance—the exponential upsurge of technology's social import has been detrimental to the human experience. Obviously and paradoxically, I'm writing these sentiments on a laptop computer. And because I've felt this way for years (and because I've e-mailed these same thoughts to other people), there are those who tell me I'm like Ted Kaczynski.[1] The only thing everyone knows about Kaczynski (apart from the violence) is that he was an enraged hermitic technophobe who lived in the woods. His basic narrative has been established: He left academia for rural Montana, he spent seventeen years sending anonymous letter bombs to innocent people he'd never met, he demanded that his thirty-five-thousand-word manifesto be published in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and he was apprehended in 1996 after his brother and the FBI deduced that Kaczynski was the Unabomber. All of that is true. This is why the Unabomber matters to historians: He's a fascinating, unique crime story. But the problem with that criminal fascination is how it's essentially erased the content of his motives. Kaczynski believed he had to kill people in order to get his ideas into the public discourse. He was totally upfront about this: "If [I] had never done anything violent and had submitted the present writings to a publisher, they probably would not have been accepted," he plainly writes in *Industrial Society and Its Future*. "In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people." On the most primitive level, this goal succeeded. But not the way he hoped. Because Kaczynski sent bombs to people, nobody takes anything he says seriously (they might in three hundred years, but they don't right now). Despite the huge circulations of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and its ever-present availability on the Internet, the "Unabomber Manifesto" is an unread, noninfluential

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[1] My physical appearance might play a role in this.

document. And that's regrettable, because every day, the content of *Industrial Society and Its Future* becomes more and more interesting. It's like an artless, bookish version of the Kinks song "20ᵗʰ Century Man," amplified by a madman who's too smart to be reasonable. I will grant that it contains a lot of problematic fascist ideology (not surprising, considering that the author was a problematic fascist who shared both the good and bad qualities of Martin Heidegger). But it's not nearly as insane as it should be, at least relative to how we view its author. I can easily imagine a distant, dystopic future where it's considered the most prescient work of the 1990s.

As I read it now, three things strike me:

1. As it turns out, I am nothing like Kaczynski. In fact, I represent precisely what the Unabomber hates about humanity, as do most of the people who embody the target audience for this book.

2. Just about everyone who hasn't read *Industrial Society and Its Future* assumes it's a screed against technology, and sometimes it is. But it's mostly about the concept of a specific type of political freedom. Kaczynski is not interested in *feeling* free; Kaczynski is interested in a kind of freedom most people don't even realize is possible.

3. *Industrial Society and Its Future* was written by an isolated man living in a cabin without electricity during the 1980s and early '90s. The text mentions the Internet several times, but one has to assume it was impossible for him to fully understand what the Internet would eventually become. Yet Kaczynski's core ideas about this specific technology are competitive with those of virtually everyone who's written about it since. He couldn't have fully understood what he was writing about and his language is often unsophisticated, but his sense of the web's inherent problems is natural and spot-on.

He was a bad person, but sometimes he was right.

2 The psychological profile of Ted Kaczynski reads like an origin story for someone who'd eventually become one of the Watchmen: Born in 1942, he's smart and weird. His IQ in fifth grade is 167. He's so smart that they skip him from sixth to seventh grade, and this ruins his life. He's teased constantly and has no friends. The socially retarded Kaczynski is accepted into Harvard at the age of sixteen and immediately excels at math, specializing in the field of geometric function theory. But something unorthodox happens while at Harvard—he takes part in a psychological experiment that's based on deception. Participants in the study believe they are being asked to debate philosophy with a collegiate peer, but the "peer" is actually a lawyer whose sole purpose is to aggravate and attack the unwitting applicant; Ted has unknowingly volunteered for a stress test. When the reality of the hoax is eventually explained to

Kaczynski, he feels betrayed and outraged. This experience seems to change him. At his eventual trial, Kaczynski's lawyers will argue that this was where his hatred of authority truly began.

After earning a PhD from the University of Michigan, Kaczynski takes a post as an assistant mathematics professor at the University of California–Berkley in 1967, but he leaves the position in '69 without explanation. Two years later he starts living in a remote Montana cabin; six years after that he starts mailing homemade bombs to people. Because his early targets were either universities (*UN*) or airlines (*A*), authorities dubbed him the Unabomber. Part of the reason he was able to avoid apprehension for almost twenty years was his ability to embed the bombs with misleading clues: He kept using the code word *wood* in the missives, sometimes inscribed the random initials "FC," and once included a note to a nonexistent person named "Wu." Since these were the only clues the FBI had, they always pursued them to the ultimate extreme (which was always a dead end). Our only visual aid was the most recognizable police sketch of the twentieth century, a preposterously generic image that suggested (a) the Unabomber didn't like the sun in his eyes and (b) he owned at least one hooded sweatshirt. Had Kaczynski's own brother[2] not figured out who the Unabomber was after the manifesto's publication, it's plausible that Kaczynski would never have been caught.

Now, before I go any further, I want to stress that I am not a "fan" of the Unabomber. None of the bombs he sent were justified. Every person who was hurt was hurt for no valid reason. But I still want to think about the reasons why he sent those bombs, and those reasons are found in *Industrial Society and Its Future.* He became a domestic terrorist so that people would consume this document. In and of itself, that relationship is immaterial (a manifesto doesn't become important just because its writer is merciless and desperate). The main thing one can deduce from Kaczynski's willingness to kill strangers is that he is an egotist. That said, the fact that a document's creator is an egocentric murderer does not preclude the work from being worthwhile (Phil Spector shot a woman in the face, but that doesn't make the harmonies on "Be My Baby" any less beautiful). The fact that Kaczynski has a deeply damaged psyche doesn't mitigate its value at all: Not all crazy people are brilliant, but almost all brilliant people are crazy.

3 Cultural criticism is a temporary kind of art. Works of this variety sometimes experience massive spikes in popularity at the time of their release, but the shelf life is short. If a piece of cultural criticism truly succeeds, its ideas and theories are completely absorbed by mainstream society (which means that the book itself becomes unnecessary). This has happened with lots of influential books from the past forty years that are now rarely purchased by new audiences—*The Closing of the American Mind, Within the Context of No Context*, the novel *Generation X*, and other works in this vein. One of the most fascinating examples of the phenomenon is Jerry Mander's

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[2] Kaczynski's brother David deduced that the Unabomber was probably Ted when he noticed that several of Ted's pet phrases were used in the manifesto, most notably the term "cool-headed logicians."

Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television. Part of what makes this book so entertaining is the laughable impossibility of its nonmetaphorical goal: The author seems to have written this book with the hope that everyone in America would read it, agree with all its points, and literally destroy their television sets with sledgehammers. This did not happen. But there are still tons of great ideas in *Four Arguments*, and it's amazing that Mander came to these realizations in 1978, before the advent of cable or the inception of the web. When Mander rails against his version of mediated culture, he's really just railing against three networks and PBS. But three channels and *Sesame Street* were all he needed to see the truth, which is this—TV takes away our freedom to have whatever thoughts we want. So do photographs, movies, and the Internet. They provide us with more intellectual stimuli, but they construct a lower, harder intellectual ceiling. The first time someone tries to convince you to take mushrooms, they often argue that mushrooms "allow you to think whatever thoughts you want." This sentiment makes no sense to anyone who has not taken psychedelic drugs, because everyone likes to assume we already have the freedom to think whatever we please. But this is not true. Certain drug experiences *do* expand a person's freedom of thought, in the same way that certain media experiences make that freedom smaller.

On page 243 of *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Mander lists a variety of scenarios and asks the reader to imagine them inside their own mind. These are things like "life in an Eskimo village," "a preoperation conversation among doctors," "the Old South," "the flight of Amelia Earhart," or "the Old West." This is very easy to do, and you can do it right now— pick any one of those situations and watch it inside your mind's eye. But once you've done so, consider what Mander says about the process:

> It is extremely likely that you have experienced no more than one or two of [these situations] personally. Obviously, these images [inside your head] were either out of your own imagination or else they were from the media. Can you identify which was which?

In all likelihood, *all* of your internal images did (at least partially) originate from television. Your supposedly unique mental picture of a Georgia plantation during the Civil War is just an interpretation of what you unconsciously recall from *Gone With the Wind* or *Roots* (or some other show that used the same set). Mander goes on to make an even more troubling request—he asks the reader to imagine a basketball game. Do that right now. Close your eyes and imagine a basketball game in your head. What did it look like? One can assume that virtually everyone in the United States has attended a live basketball game at some point in his or her life, and almost as many have played in a basketball game for real (at least for five minutes at recess in sixth grade). I played organized basketball for thirteen years. So why is my first mental image of a basketball game a moment from game four of a Celtics-Lakers championship series I saw on CBS in 1984? Why is *that* my immediate, galvanized definition of a sport I actively played?

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It's because we really can't differentiate between real and unreal images. We can describe the difference, but we can't manage it.

Decadent French critic Charles Baudelaire made a comparable point about photography way back in 1859, but the process is accelerated a thousand fold when applied to images that move and talk and morph. Mander's point is that technology evolves much faster than we do physically or mentally, and the consequence is that vague sense of alienation expressed by Thom Yorke on *OK Computer*. Humans have existed for 130,000 years. *The Great Train Robbery* was made in 1903. For roughly 129,900 years, any moving image a human saw was actually real. It was *there*, right in front of you. If a man in 1850 saw a train chugging toward his face, it was actually a train. For 129,900 years, we were conditioned to understand that seeing something in motion had a specific meaning. But that understanding no longer exists; today, we constantly "see things" that aren't actually there. Intellectually, we know that there's a difference between *The Great Train Robbery* and a real train. Intellectually, we know there is a difference between a living person and a Facebook profile. We know that *The Sopranos* and our own life are different. But is there any possible way that 129,900 years of psychological evolution can be altered within the span of a single century? Is it any wonder that people feel paradoxically alienated by the mechanical devices they love?

We do not have the freedom to think whatever we want. We don't. And until we accept that, it's useless to think about anything else.

2A I don't expect consumers of this book to read *Industrial Society and Its Future*, or even to spend more than two or three minutes scanning it on Wikipedia. I know how this works. But just to make things a little more collectively cogent, here is the document for Matt Damon fans who prefer the editing of *The Bourne Ultimatum* to *Gerry*:

1. The first line of the introduction is "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race." The important thing to note here is that the words *Industrial Revolution* have been capitalized. Kaczynski's complaint with society starts around the year 1760, almost two centuries before he was born.

2. The next sections discuss "the psychology of modern leftism," which is an attack on a certain kind of person—not necessarily a *political* liberal, but people whose worldview and morality are marked by "feelings of inferiority" with characteristic traits that include "low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, depressive tendencies, defeatism, guilt, self-hatred, etc."

3. A big chunk of the manifesto is about the desire for power and socialization. He argues that modern people are so obsessed with socialization that they deceive themselves about everything—about what they feel, why they do things, or what their true morals are. It's weird to take moral advice from a guy who sent bombs

to strangers, but his thoughts are not invalid: Basically, the Unabomber believes modern people have no idea how they're supposed to think or feel, so they convince themselves to care about whatever rules the rest of society seems to require. It's something of a rudimentary loop—people conform to the status quo because the status quo validates the conformity they elected to adopt.

4. Kaczynski was obsessed with autonomy. "For most people, it is through the power process—having a goal, making an *autonomous* effort and attaining the goal— that self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of power are acquired." This is the root of his hatred of technology—he could not be a singular individual if his livelihood was dependent on machines.

5. In a section titled "Sources of Social Problems," he argues that conservatives are "fools" for complaining about the deterioration of values while supporting economic and technological growth. This is a key point for Kaczynski. He sees these things as interrelated.

6. Science, the Unabomber argues, is the ultimate "surrogate activity." This is the term Kaczynski uses to refer to pursuits that give people an artificial goal and a constructed meaning to their lives. As applied to the Internet, the argument is almost unassailable.

Now, here are the three points that matter most:

1. The manifesto outlines five principles of history. Only the fifth principle is important: "People do not consciously and rationally choose the form of their society. Societies develop through processes of social evolution that are not under rational human control."

2. Technology is a more powerful force than the desire for freedom.

3. We cannot separate good technology from bad technology.

If you mention these last three statements to most normal people, they will say number 7 is usually true, number 8 is possibly true, and number 9 is probably false. But they're all equally accurate.

3A While writing this essay I read Lee Siegel's *Against the Machine*, a 2008 book subtitled *Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob*. One of the author's central thoughts involves the way the Internet has negatively transformed people's sense of self and about how widespread anonymity on the Internet has inadvertently lowered the level of American discourse. These are good points. But *Against the Machine* is ultimately an unreliable book, simply because of Siegel's motive for writing it.

The author describes all this in the book's introduction: In 2006, Siegel wrote a piece for *The New Republic* that questioned Jon Stewart. When the article was posted online, dozens of people hurled childish, ad hominem insults against Siegel in the comment section—a phenomenon that now happens when almost anything interesting is published in public. But Siegel responded in the worst possible way. He created a fake profile for himself and wrote self-aggrandizing attacks directed at his critics. (He injected insights like "You couldn't tie Siegel's shoelaces.") Siegel was suspended by *The New Republic* for doing this. According to the author, the debacle prompted him "to write the book on Web culture that I'd long wanted to write," which turned into *Against the Machine.*

I believe Siegel is lying, at least to himself. I don't think *Against the Machine* was the book he'd been waiting his entire career to publish. The whole tome reads like an ill-advised reaction to the controversy on *The New Republic*'s website. He wasn't against "the machine" until it personally wounded him.[3] Had the commentators only praised his arguments, it's easy to imagine Siegel writing a completely different book about how the Internet is saving the American intellectual. This is why reading about the social meaning of technology tends to go nowhere: Such works are almost always written for wholly personal reasons. The only people who think the Internet is a calamity are people whose lives have been hurt by it; the only people who insist the Internet is wonderful are those who need it to give their life meaning. Web philosophy is an idiom devoid of objective, impersonal thinking. In 2008, the *Columbia Review of Journalism* interviewed a man named Clay Shirky about the pitfalls of modern Luddism and the meaning of information overload. Shirky teaches interactive telecommunication at NYU and wrote a book about social media called *Here Comes Everybody.* In the *CRJ* interview, Shirky said things like "I'm just so impatient with the argument that the world should be slowed down to help people who aren't smart enough to understand what's going on." This is the message net-obsessed people always deliver; the condescending phrase most uttered by frothing New Media advocates is "You just don't get it." The truth of the matter is that Clay Shirky *must* argue that the Internet is having a positive effect—it's the only reason he's publicly essential. Prior to 1996, no one wanted to interview Clay Shirky about anything. He used to be just another unassuming intellectual (of which the world has many). Now he's the prophet for a revolution. By promoting online media, he promotes himself. And this is not uncommon—the reason so many bloggers fixated on the TV show *Gossip Girl* was because inflating the import of *Gossip Girl* amplified the significance of blogging itself. The degree to

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[3] I would never argue that Siegel isn't a smart guy, nor would I expect him to take my criticism of his work seriously. However, much of this book is inundated with weirdly transparent explanations for his cultural values. At one point in *Against the Machine,* he attacks Malcolm Gladwell, insisting, "Back in high school, people like him were the reason you drank, brooded over Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling,* and imagined which celebrated public figures would speak at your (imminent) funeral." I halfway assumed the next sentence was going to be "And you know what else—Gladwell thinks his hair is so cool, but it's totally not."

which anyone values the Internet is proportional to how valuable the Internet makes that person.

This is why *Industrial Society and Its Future* feels so different. Unlike just about everyone else who writes about technology, Kaczynski doesn't have a horse in the race. Had he elected to embrace the trappings of the modern age, there is no doubt he could have been wildly successful—I suspect he could have been one of the Internet's architects, were that what he wanted. It wasn't that he was frozen out or ostracized— he *chose* not to be involved. Moreover, he was ultimately able to live separate from the electronic age as successfully as any American could expect; it wasn't tangibly impeding him at all, unless you count the occasional airplane coasting twenty-eight thousand feet above his head. Technology wasn't damaging him in any real way. Were he not a sociopath, he could have stayed in his cabin and avoided the advancing world forever. He made things personal by mailing bombs to strangers, but his complaints were not about himself or his career or what anonymous cretins might be saying about him on *The New Republic*'s website. His ideas were too radical, but at least they were his own.

2B The Unabomber writes that society evolves irrationally, which is probably how he justified mailing people bombs. But what would a rational society look like? He never explains that part.

When it's warm out, I like to sit inside air-conditioned rooms. This feels rational to me. It seems rational to want to be comfortable. But is it rational to expect to be cool when the outside temperature is 95 degrees? I suppose it isn't. But why would it be irrational to build and use a machine that makes things cooler? Here again, that seems rational.

Yet what am I giving up in order to have a 70-degree living room in July?

Nothing that's particularly important to me.

For the air conditioner to work, I need to live in a building that has electricity, so I have to be connected to the rest of society. That's fine. That's no problem. Of course, to be accepted by that society, I have to accept the rules and laws of community living. That's fine, too. Now, to thrive and flourish and afford my electric bill, I will also have to earn money. But that's okay—most jobs are social and many are enriching and unnecessary. However, the only way to earn money is to do something (or provide something) that is valued by other people. And since I don't get to decide what other people value, what I do to make a living is not really my decision. So—in order to have air-conditioning—I will agree to live in a specific place with other people, following whatever rules happen to exist there, all while working at a job that was constructed by someone else for their benefit.

In order to have a 70-degree living room, I give up almost *everything.*

Yet nothing that's particularly important to me.

When Kaczynski wrote, "Technology is a more powerful social force than the aspiration for freedom," I assume this is what he meant.

3B When I was younger, people would often ask what my political affiliations were. These days, I find that people will just tell me what they assume my political affiliations *must be*, usually based on something I've published that wasn't remotely political. Everyone I've met in New York or California tells me I'm conservative. The rest of America tells me that I'm almost comically liberal. I feel good about this. I enjoy writing about my own life, but I don't like people knowing anything about me.

However, the Unabomber knows me. He knows me better than I know myself.

I would never have guessed that I am a Modern Leftist; I've never been involved in a Parisian riot or aligned myself with a black bloc or campaigned for Russ Feingold. But I embody at least half of Kaczynski's Modern Leftist criteria. Here (once again) are the qualities he assigns to the Modern Leftist: "feelings of inferiority," "low self-esteem," "feelings of powerlessness," "depressive tendencies," "defeatism," "guilt," and "self-hatred." Granted, some of these traits are amorphous. *Low self-esteem* is a totally meaningless designation, simply because there's no extension of human behavior that doesn't qualify. If you have no self-confidence, you are believed to possess low self-esteem; if you have an abundance of self-confidence, it's assumed your arrogance is an attempt to overcompensate for a lack of self-esteem. I don't think I've *ever* met a person with the "correct" level of self-esteem. But some of Ted's other designations are more telling. To me, it seems naïve *not* to feel as though one is powerless, a sentiment that probably proves that I also possess a feeling of inferiority. I'm depressed a lot, usually for no reason (although sometimes I'm just hungry, which often feels the same). I'm extremely defeatist about anything that doesn't come easily to me. I don't have much guilt (in fact, my wife claims I don't have enough), but I do hate myself. In fact, I can't relate to people who *don't* hate themselves, which might mean I have low self-esteem (or, I suppose, the complete opposite). Another trait of the Modern Leftist (according to Ted) is someone "interpret[ing] as derogatory almost anything that is said about him." I understand how this feels, too: I always suspect people are saying negative things about me, even if they are being friendly and flattering. But I'm sure I make other people feel this way, too. For years, I tried to avoid overused words like *nice* and *cool* whenever I made small talk. I'd always try to offhandedly compliment strangers with less predictable phrases, like "Wow! That's an unorthodox haircut." As it turns out, most people— and especially most women—hate this. They typically respond by hiding in the bathroom, trying to get drunk, or (on one occasion) attempting to get drunk *in* the bathroom. This used to bother me. But now I realize I was simply partying with too many Modern Leftists. I should have spent more of my social time with Post-modern Leftists; they never care what you say to them, as long as you don't criticize architecture or Girl Talk.

My point, basically, is this: Even though I am defending several of Ted Kaczynski's ideas, I'm the kind of human he hates most. It was people like me who made him mail bombs to university professors he'd never meet. I suspect that if you went to his supermax prison cell in Colorado and asked Kaczynski who most represents the problems he outlines in his manifesto, he would say something along the lines of "People

who know the truth, yet still refuse to accept what they know to be true." That's who I am (and—if you're reading this—you probably are, too). Even though he deserves to die in jail, Kaczynski's thesis is correct: Technology is bad for civilization. We are living in a manner that is unnatural. We are latently enslaved by our own ingenuity, and we have unknowingly constructed a simulated world. The benefits of technology are easy to point out (medicine, transportation, the ability to send and receive text messages during Michael Jackson's televised funeral), but they do not compensate for the overall loss of humanity that is its inevitable consequence. As a species, we have never been less human than we are right now.

And that (evidently) is what I want.

I *must* want it. It *must* be my desire, because I would do nothing to change the world's relationship to technology even if I could. My existence is constructed, and it's constructed through the surrogate activity of mainstream popular culture. I understand this. And because I understand this, I could change. I could move to Montana and find Ted's cabin and live there, satisfied in my philosophical rightness. I could go the Christopher McCandless route and shoot a moose for food and self-actualization. But I choose the opposite. Instead of confronting reality and embracing the Experience of Being Alive, I will sit here and read about Animal Collective over the Internet. Again. I will read about Animal Collective *again*. And not because the content is important or amusing or well written, but because the content exists. Reading about Animal Collective has replaced being alive. I aspire to think of myself as an analog person, but I am not. I have been converted to digital without the remastering, and the fidelity is appalling.

A few hours ago, someone asked me if I thought it would be good for the world if the Internet spontaneously went black and never returned. It was a hypothetical, so I said, "Yes." It would be a positive insurrection for the world. We would have less access to information, but we would not be any less informed about reality. People like to assume the democratization of media is a wonderful concept, but that's only because most Americans are childishly obsessed with the word *democracy*: They want to believe anything becomes better if you make it more democratic. This may be true for governments and birthday parties, but not for everything else. Should we democratize the world's supply of uranium? Should we democratize guns? Should we democratize cocaine?[4] The Internet is not improving our lives. It's making things (slightly) worse. But because I'm not free—because I am a slave to my own weakness— I can no longer imagine life without it. I love the Internet. *I love the Internet.* And I will probably love whatever technological firebomb comes next. My apologies, Ted. Your thirty-five-thousand-word document makes sense to me, but I cannot be saved. You'll have to blow up my hands.

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[4] Well, maybe.

The Ted K Archive

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Eating the Dinosaur. <archive.org/details/eatingdinosaur00klos>

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