

The Unabomber's media strategy

Holly Bailey & Ted Kaczynski

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The Cliff Notes

He hated and mistrusted reporters almost as much as lawyers, technology executives and the rest of society

From his prison cell, Ted Kaczynski — the “Unabomber,” who terrified the nation in the 1980s and early 1990s — has carried on a remarkable correspondence with thousands of people all over the world. As the 20th anniversary of his arrest approaches, Yahoo News is publishing a series of articles based on his letters and other writings, housed in an archive at the University of Michigan. They shed unprecedented light on the mind of Kaczynski — genius, madman and murderer.

From his prison cell in Florence, Colo., Ted Kaczynski continues to have many declared enemies: modern technology, his family, his former attorneys and a long list of former pen pals he believes have wronged him in one way or another.

But in recent years, a great deal of Kaczynski’s rage has been directed at the media, which he believes has gotten the story totally wrong about his early life and how he came to be the Unabomber.

“Media people must be about the most dishonest and irresponsible people on the face of the earth, with the possible exception of lawyers,” Kaczynski wrote to a correspondent in November 2002 — expressing what, for him, was an uncommonly mainstream opinion. (He did not, as far as is known, try to murder any journalists, although one of his bombs killed Thomas J. Mosser, a New Jersey public relations executive. Kaczynski later said he targeted Mosser because he worked for the parent company of Burson-Marsteller, a public relations firm that handled the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska.)

But the Unabomber hasn’t always held reporters in total disdain. Letters in his archive of personal papers at the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan library show how savvy Kaczynski was about the media from the early days of his case and how he tried to use reporters to push his own narrative about himself and his ideas.

Sitting in jail in Montana just days after his arrest, Kaczynski, who during his reign of terror successfully forced the New York Times and Washington Post to publish his 35,000-word anti-technology manifesto, drafted a proposed press release about himself to send to a local newspaper, in part to deal with the flood of correspondence he had received but was unable to respond to.

He sent letters to the court-appointed attorney initially assigned to his case suggesting the clothes — a sensible blazer, no tie — he should wear to his first court

appearance for the benefit of the massed cameramen. And later, he wrote his lawyers suggesting media leaks to counter his family's "lies" about him, including their assertions that he was mentally ill.

Almost as soon as he was publicly identified as the Unabomber and arrested, Kaczynski was flooded with media requests from a who's who of big names in journalism, including ABC's Diane Sawyer and Yahoo News Global Anchor Katie Couric, at that time (in 1999) a host of NBC's "Today" show. Hundreds of pages of letters show that Kaczynski received requests from every major talk show, including CNN's "Larry King Live," "60 Minutes" and NBC's "Dateline." Meanwhile, reporters from every major newspaper in the country wrote to him, asking for his side of the Unabomber story. He didn't respond.

In 1998, he even received an interview request from a producer with "The Roseanne Show." "If you know anything about Roseanne [Barr], you must know that she is a nonconformist and rarely does what society expects of her," the producer wrote. "I believe that you and her with definitely 'hit it off,' and the conversation would definitely be interesting and fulfilling for both of you." Kaczynski did not reply.

The following year, he gave what would be his only mainstream media interview: a sit-down with Stephen Dubner, who later co-authored the book "Freakonomics," who interviewed Kaczynski about his brother, David. But according to his letters, Kaczynski thought the story, which ran in Time magazine, was "disastrous" because of its sympathetic treatment of David, who provided the tip that led to his arrest.

A few months later, Kaczynski granted an interview to Joy Richards, a pen pal with whom he would eventually develop a romance, hoping to present his story with full editorial control. He later shopped the piece to Playboy, which replied with a rejection notice, and to Rolling Stone's Jann Wenner, who exchanged letters with Kaczynski expressing interest in an interview, but with a writer of the magazine's choosing. Kaczynski later called off the negotiations.

Over the years, Kaczynski has written letters to the editor of publications including the New Yorker and the New York Review of Books — which responded with form-letter rejections. And he has exchanged occasional letters with reporters but has declined most interview requests, citing anger over the 1999 Time article. He did not respond to a letter requesting an interview for this series.

"I will never again consider even for a moment the possibility of trusting a mainstream journalist," Kaczynski wrote in 2003.

Read more in this Yahoo News Special Report: »

The Letters

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The Ted K Archive

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www.thetedkarchive.com