

The Unabomber takes on the Internet

Holly Bailey & Ted Kaczynski

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Cliff Notes

The serial killer, imprisoned since 1996, has never sent or received an email or seen Facebook. But he has lots to say about technology.

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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.

They had wanted to engage with a “deep thinker.” But when a thick envelope showed up one October morning six years ago bearing the return address of the federal Supermax prison in Florence, Colo., professor Maureen Kendrick Murphy and her students at Huntingdon College, a small liberal arts school in Montgomery, Ala., were at first too scared to pick it up, much less open it.

It was a letter from Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber.

A few weeks earlier, Murphy, on behalf of her class, had written to Kaczynski as part of a critical-thinking course in which the students, all freshmen in their first weeks of college, studied the work of public figures, then wrote to invite them to expand on their ideas. They had written to 14 people, including President Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, future Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and the rapper Eminem.

And then, at one student’s suggestion, they reached out to Kaczynski. The class read “Industrial Society and Its Future,” the 1995 anti-technology treatise commonly known as the Unabomber manifesto, and sent a letter to the convicted bomber soliciting his thoughts on how the expanding use of the Internet had affected personal freedom.

“Never in the world did I expect him to answer us,” Murphy recalled in a recent interview. “I couldn’t believe it. Why us? Why would he respond to us?”

CLICK FOR SLIDESHOW: Materials used by the FBI in its search of Ted Kaczynski’s mountain cabin in Lincoln, Mont., sit outside the cabin’s door, April 6, 1996. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson)

But Kaczynski had replied almost immediately — in a handwritten 12-page letter that included meticulous footnotes and used vocabulary that sent Murphy and her

students scrambling for a dictionary. Now on file in Kaczynski's personal papers at the University of Michigan, the letter was the beginning of an exchange that offers a unique glimpse into the Unabomber's life as a man who continues to have many opinions on the impact of technology but, occupying the time capsule of a prison cell, has had almost no direct experience with it.

Kaczynski was living in a remote Montana cabin without electricity or running water when he was arrested in 1996, at the dawn of the Internet era. Now held on the most secure unit at ADX in Colorado, the toughest prison in the country, he is on lockdown 23 hours a day with access only to a television, which he refuses to watch. He has never used the Internet and knows only what he reads about in books, newspapers and letters.

But that hasn't stopped him from writing a new book — an update of his 1995 manifesto with expanded arguments and more current references to modern technology. It's unclear where the project stands. As of last fall, he was still seeking a publisher.

One of Kaczynski's arguments in his original 1995 manifesto was that the expansion of industrial society was giving a false sense of freedom to individuals, because "large organizations" could compromise people's autonomy. The shift toward computers, he argued, was putting humanity at risk of losing its self-sufficiency, or of forgetting how to think altogether.

Writing from his prison cell 15 years later, Kaczynski hadn't dramatically changed his viewpoint when Murphy and her class came calling. The Internet had increased "the individual's freedom of expression in the sense that it greatly enhances his or her ability to send and receive ideas and information," Kaczynski wrote in his first letter to Murphy, in September 2010.

Still, he suggested that the "swamping effect" of all that information, much of it unreliable, combined with people's shortened attention spans, had given "large organizations," with their vast resources, more power than average people had to exert influence online. But, Kaczynski admitted, there was still much he didn't know about the Internet.

In subsequent letters, Murphy and her students pointed to the power of Facebook and challenged his suggestion that individuals couldn't command attention and create influence via the Internet, citing people who posted videos that went instantly viral on YouTube.

"I have no idea what YouTube is," Kaczynski replied. What did it mean to go "viral," he asked. "It sounds as if the phenomena you refer to are what sociologists call 'fads' or 'crazes,'" he wrote, citing an entry on "collective behavior" from the 2003 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

As they read the letter back in Montgomery, Murphy's students were surprised and amused. In some ways, they knew what it was like to be sheltered. Their small school, affiliated with the United Methodist Church, attracts a student population mostly made up of middle- to lower-class kids from the tiny back-road towns of rural

Alabama. But though their own experiences with the outside world had been limited, none of them could really remember a world in which email or social media didn't exist.

To them, Kaczynski's statement about YouTube was so unusual, a few students later printed up T-shirts with the quote, which they proudly wore around campus. But when Murphy pressed the class on how they would explain something like YouTube to a man who didn't watch television, had never seen the Internet and spent most of his days confined in a prison cell not much bigger than a bathroom, they were stumped.

"They had no idea," she recalled.

Over his nearly 20 years in jail, Kaczynski has been, in some ways, frozen in time. The former academic, who continues to write essays and letters on the dangers of industrial society, is heavily reliant on doing research the old-fashioned way, through books and periodicals obtained from the prison library or an extensive network of pen pals who share his beliefs. But though he is still resistant to technology and preaches about its dangers, he has slowly come to embrace some aspects of 21st century communications, albeit in his own way.

To save money on postage and the time it takes to hand-copy letters — since he has no access to a copy machine — he has asked many of the people who regularly correspond with him for their email addresses to share with others in his network. Sometimes Kaczynski mails one person a letter and then asks them to scan and share it with the group. Others hold copies of his vast collection of writings and, like a library, send portions to people at Kaczynski's request.

His letters indicate he has considered posting his writings on the Internet. But he's worried it might prompt prison officials to limit his ability to write letters.

When a pen pal once proposed setting up a Facebook page for him, Kaczynski resisted. "I know so little about Facebook. But my initial reaction is strongly negative because the little that I do know suggests that Facebook is mainly a place where adolescents (of any age) post narcissistic self-advertisements in an attempt to make friends via the Internet," he wrote in June 2010.

Yet years later, when trying to learn more about the motivations of those who had written to him or track down someone he hadn't heard from in a while, he asked one longtime correspondent to look up people on Facebook and report back.

In response to people who write offering to obtain books for him, Kaczynski regularly sends them to Amazon.com. In 2010, a book of Kaczynski's collected writings, including the manifesto, was released. The newly published author, in a move that would please a publicist, if he had one, regularly promoted the book to those who wrote to him, directing them to the publisher's website and to Amazon.

A pen pal printed out the book's Amazon page to show Kaczynski some of the reviews he had been getting. He closely scrutinized the page, including the list of vendors who were offering copies of the book for sale through the site. Like other e-commerce pages, Amazon rates sellers with stars based on customer-service reviews,

but Kaczynski didn't know what any of it meant. He drew a copy of the page — saving the original — and mailed it to a confidant. “What do these numbers mean?” he asked.

When her students first raised the idea of writing to the Unabomber, Murphy, a chemistry professor at Huntingdon, wasn't so sure it was a good idea. Many of the kids were too young to remember the horror of Kaczynski's crimes, how his mail bombs had gripped the nation in fear. She was skeptical of sending a letter to someone who had killed three people with no remorse, but as an academic, she was curious about him. What would he say about technology all these years later?

While the students wrote the initial letters to the others on their list, Murphy insisted that she should be the one to contact Kaczynski. She didn't want the kids ending up, as she put it, “in some Department of Justice file.”

But when a student who worked in the school's mailroom told her a few weeks later that she had a thick letter from Kaczynski sitting in her mailbox, Murphy didn't believe her. The letter sat there eight days before Murphy, still thinking it was joke, sent the girl to pick it up. “I'm scared,” the girl responded.

Murphy pointed out that it was unlikely Kaczynski could have sent her a bomb from prison, but allowed a classmate — a member of the football team — to accompany the girl. When they returned to class with an envelope, Murphy was as stunned as anybody. The teacher and her students stared at the document for several minutes, taking pictures with their cellphones and studying Kaczynski's perfect handwriting and the combination of stamps adding up to exact postage to the penny. The envelope, apparently inspected by prison officials, had already been slit open.

Letter addressed to Unabomber Ted Kaczynski professor Maureen Kendrick Murphy. (University of Michigan)

Still, as she moved to pull the letter out, “my hands were shaking,” Murphy recalled. “Not because I was scared, but because, my gosh, something about it felt historical... He was the first person who had written us back, and everybody wanted to hold it and touch it. This was a letter from someone they had read about.”

But she was quick to remind the students who it was they were corresponding with. “Remember why this person is in prison,” she said.

Over the next three months, Murphy, on behalf of the class, exchanged several letters with the convicted bomber debating the power of the Internet. Kaczynski maintained he could not see how an individual or a small group “could exert a purposeful influence” over the Internet that would have real impact on the lives of average people. But in a letter a few weeks later, he wavered. He wrote Murphy to say he had read an article in the Atlantic about WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and conservative activist Andrew Breitbart and their use of the Internet to disseminate previously concealed information. He thought these could be examples of using the Internet in a truly influential way. Still, Kaczynski was torn. Were they influential if what they did had no concrete impact?

“More often the revelation of public information merely gives rise to a public scandal that soon blows over and doesn't really change anything. Maybe some politician's

career is ruined, but he's soon replaced by another politician," Kaczynski wrote. "So one has to ask, how much influence does Assange really have? That's a question I can't even begin to answer."

Murphy and her class marveled at how logical and sane Kaczynski's letters were for someone who had been described as a madman. "If he were on the Internet," one student told her, "he would have millions of followers on Facebook."

When Murphy took one of the letters to a logic professor at the school, he was equally surprised. "This is how you would teach somebody to argue," he told her.

As the class wrapped up that semester, Kaczynski sent Murphy another note saying that she and her class were among the "small, precious minority" who had offered "worthwhile comments and questions or challenged my arguments intelligently." It was a rare compliment from Kaczynski.

CLICK FOR SLIDESHOW: Professor Maureen Kendrick Murphy.(Huntingdon College)

Murphy and her students were flattered, but the class was over. She never replied to the letter, and Kaczynski never wrote to her again. But last July, five years later, Murphy received an email from a woman she didn't know. "Ted said you might enjoy reading this," the woman wrote. "Please do not distribute."

"Ted?" Murphy thought. "Who is Ted?"

At the bottom of an email was a link that would expire in less than 24 hours.

When she opened the document, she found a scanned copy of a new book by Kaczynski called "Anti-Tech Revolution: Why and How." The manuscript was neatly typed, and scattered throughout the text and along the margins was Kaczynski's familiar perfect handwriting, offering meticulous editing notes and changes.

According to Murphy, who has agreed not to make the document public until it is published, the book is an update of the 1995 manifesto — articulating many of the same arguments but containing more current references to computers and the Internet. In the preface, Kaczynski acknowledges that in writing the book he had to rely on sources of "doubtful reliability" like media reports because of his limited access to the outside world.

The book, Kaczynski writes, "is to be studied with the same care that one would use in studying, for example, a textbook of engineering." The ideas, he adds, "need to be applied thoughtfully and creatively, not mechanically or rigidly."

In reading the manuscript, Murphy detected subtle changes in the Unabomber's philosophy — including no mention of violence, though it's unclear if that represented a change of heart or was adopted by necessity since prison officials would likely block publication.

According to Murphy, the book is more thoughtful about the "revolution" Kaczynski has long encouraged and suggests alternate methods of protest, like learning more about coding and other computer programming in order to match the smarts of one's

opponents. Technology, he writes, will end up destroying itself. And that risk is why he feels urgency about getting his message out to the world.

“I’m 72 years old,” Kaczynski writes in the preface, according to Murphy. (He’s now 73.) “And I could be put out of action at anytime by some medical misfortune, so I want to get the most important material into print while I can.”

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The Letters

They had wanted to engage with a “deep thinker.” But when a thick envelope showed up one October morning six years ago bearing the return address of the federal Supermax prison in Florence, Colo., professor Maureen Kendrick Murphy and her students at Huntingdon College were at first too scared to pick it up, much less open it.

Letter #1

TED KACZYNSKI October 25, 2010

to

DR. MAUREEN KENDRICK MURPHY

Dear Dr. Murphy:

Thanks for your letter of October 13, which I received on October 20. I’ll try to answer your questions.

You ask whether I know of any other colleges or universities that use ISAIF as a text for a course or as a platform for critical thinking. I’ve occasionally received information (not necessarily reliable) to the effect that ISAIF was being used in a course at some college or university, but I have definitive knowledge of only one institution that has used ISAIF in the recent past: Dr. David Skrbina teaches a course in the philosophy of technology at the Dearborn campus of University of Michigan, and he has used ISAIF in his course. I assume he will use it again the next time he teaches the course. Dr. Skrbina, by the way wrote an introduction for *Technological Slavery*.

At the end of your letter you mention an article in *The Atlantic* by Walter Isaacson, and you ask, “Who will decide what [information] is important and useful, and how would one assign a price to it?” I’m not sure whether this question is addressed to me or whether you only meant to indicate the question that Isaacson considered in his article. In any case I don’t have much to say in response to this question, because I know very little about the enterprises involved in the dissemination of information. I’ll only hazard a guess that the price of information will be determined by what are called “market forces”.

Now the big question. You ask: “Do you think the power of an individual’s personal comments and beliefs posted on the internet can supersede that of large organizations so that an individual might one day theoretically have more influence than do large organizations?”

Here again I'm handicapped by my lack of the knowledge of the Internet. I have never had direct access to the Internet; I know only what I read in the print media and what people on the outside write to me, or what I can infer from Internet articles that they send me. So my answer to your question will be based mainly on general notions about the effects of the dissemination of ideas rather than on any specific knowledge of the Internet.

You write: "We have noticed that seemingly insignificant individuals are able to garner huge audiences (on the Internet and/or You Tube*) for expressing their views, singing, or entertaining others. These ideas often go 'viral' in a matter of minutes, but they are seldom intellectual ideas."

It sounds as if the phenomenon you refer to are what scientologists call "fads" or "crazes". Fads and crazes are briefly discussed in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article "Collective Behavior" (15th ed., 2003, Vol.16, pages 558–59), and are discussed at much greater length by Neil J. Smelsen, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, Macmillan, New York, 1971. Fads and crazes are usually harmless and ephemeral phenomena that serve only to entertain the people who participate in them. Fads and crazes can occasionally have dangerous consequences (e.g., the anti-Semitic outburst mentioned in the *Britannica* article), but with its powers of propaganda and of physical coercion the technoindustrial system seems to be consistently able to prevent these occurrences from getting out of hand. Moreover, even if a fad or craze did totally escape the system's restraints and have serious lasting consequences, it would probably be something like a random phenomenon, not something its initiator could predict or control.

*I have no idea what You Tube is.

Financial crazes are a possible exception. I don't know enough about economics to venture an opinion as to whether major, long lasting economic phenomena such as the Great Depression of the 1930s or the current recession could be described as results of the financial crazes, but a financial craze can certainly cause many people to lose a great deal of money (e.g., the South Sea Bubble; see the *Britannica* article), and I can well imagine that a skilled financial manipulator might be able to use the Internet to start a craze in order to profit from it.

Apart from the foregoing, I find it hard to imagine a single individual or a small group of individuals, solely by posting ideas on the Internet could exert a purposeful influence outweighing that of large organizations; and I mean an influence not merely on superficial phenomena such as fads and fashions, but influence on the decision of important questions that affect millions of people; for example, whether to continue offshore drilling for petroleum, how to reform the healthcare system, or what to do about illegal immigration.

I'll give my reasons for this opinion, and add some reservations, further on. But first I want to point out that even if a few rare individuals could exert a decisive influence via the Internet, that would not be very important in relation to the question we discussed earlier, namely, whether the Internet enhances personal freedom__ meaning personal freedom for people generally, not just for an occasional exceptional individual. Let's

assume it's true that in rare cases an individual, solely by posting his or her ideas on the Internet, can exert an influence on important issues that outweighs the influence of large organizations. Still that does nothing for the millions of other individuals who would wish to exert an influence on the same issues but cannot do so.

The nature of technoindustrial society is such that decisions have to be made that affect large numbers of people. If a decision affects a million individuals, then each individual can have, on average, only a one-millionth share in making the decision, See ISAIF, paragraph 117. Suppose for example that the question is whether, or how much, to raise property taxes in Cook County, Illinois in order to improve the school system. Since Chicago is located in Cook County the question affects several million individuals, and obviously only a minute fraction of that number can have a significant influence on the decision that will be made. Let's assume the question is to be decided by referendum. The only individuals who normally will have a significant influence over the decision will be a handful of people in positions of power, such as public officials, leaders of political parties, and officials of any corporations, labor unions, or other large organizations that may donate enough money to the political parties to be entitled to have their own views taken into account. Let's say that 5,000,000 voters will be affected by the decision and that there are just 50 individuals among them who will ordinarily have... more influence over the decision than they get from possessing a single vote among 5,000,000. That leaves 4,999,950 people who individually have no perceptible influence over the decision.

Now let's assume that a single individual among those 4,999,950 could conceivably use the Internet to overcome the influence of the large organizations involved and have the question decided according to his or her preference. That still leaves the other 4,999,949 individuals without any perceptible influence over the decision.

I have to break my letter off at this point because an urgent legal matter came up a short while ago, and I have to deal with it promptly. I'll continue the present discussion when I can, probably within the next week or so. Meanwhile, please give my regards to your critical-thinking class.

Sincerely yours,
Ted Kaczynski

The Ted K Archive

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The Cliff Notes & Letters

www.thetedkarchive.com