

**As technology swamps our lives,
the next Unabombers are waiting
for their moment**

Jamie Bartlett

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCTen3-B8GU>

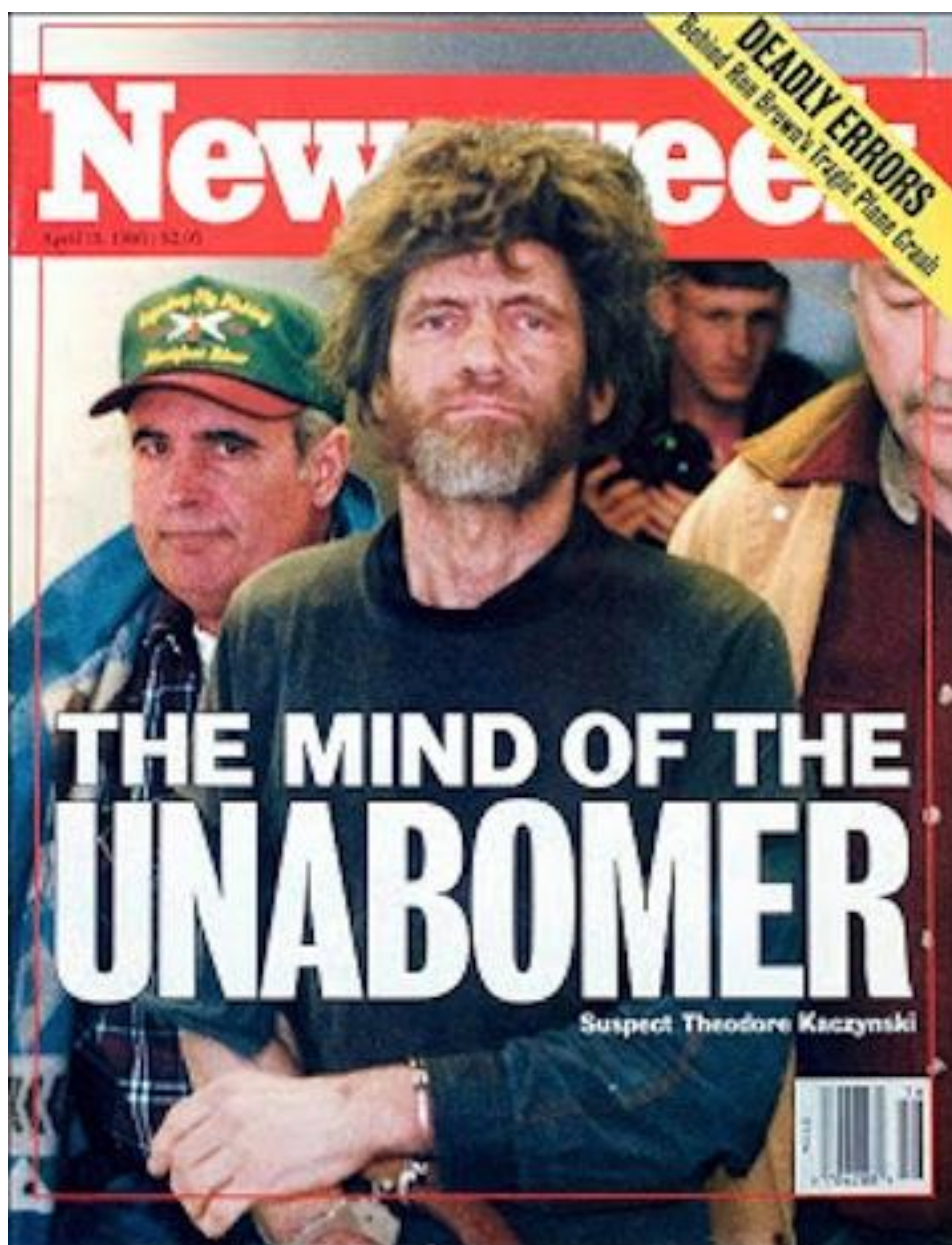
Anti-tech terrorists want to save us from this...

In Johnny Depp's latest movie, *Transcendence*, he plays a brilliant scientist called Dr Caster, who is leading a team trying to build a hyper-intelligent machine. A machine that will be smarter than the sum total of all human minds, thereby reaching what is called "the Singularity". After a TED Talk (of course) Dr Caster is shot by a member of a radical anti-technology terrorist group called Revolutionary Independence From Technology (RIFT). RIFT are sabotaging the work of artificial intelligence laboratories all over the world. Shooting Dr Caster was part of the plan to disrupt the frightening march of technology.

The film is probably not Depp's finest. But the idea of radical anti-technology groups violently rebelling against ever-accelerating technological progress is an extremely interesting one. After all, the frightening thought of Singularity – the point at which computers become smarter than us, and therefore are able to make smarter versions of themselves – sits somewhere on the line between science fiction and fact. Some transhumanists such as Google's Ray Kurzweil, think it will take place around the middle of this century. If Singularity is likely to become a reality, might we also soon see groups like RIFT too?

Yes, reckons John Zerzan. Zerzan, an American philosopher, is considered to be the intellectual heavyweight for what's called the anarcho-primitivist movement. Anarcho-primitivists believe that all technology is bad; that it enslaves us, that it controls us. Anarcho-primitivists aren't violent, but ideologically speaking Zerzan is every bit as radical as RIFT. He wants to get rid of it all: Facebook, the internet, mobile phones, televisions, electricity, factories – the lot.

Speaking over the phone (which Zerzan doesn't like, but tells me that, given that he wants to spread his ideas, he has no choice but to use it) Zerzan explains that he would be "extremely surprised" if we didn't see a group like RIFT pretty soon. He should know. The most infamous neo-Luddite of modern times was the American Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber (or Unabomer, as he originally called himself). From 1978 to 1995, Kaczynski sent 16 bombs to targets including universities and airlines, killing three people and injuring 23. In his 30,000 word essay *Industrial Society and Its Future* Kaczynski argued that his bombings were extreme but necessary to attract attention to the erosion of human freedom necessitated by modern technologies requiring large-scale organisation. During his trial in 1997–8, John Zerzan became a confidant to Kaczynski, offering support for his ideas but condemning his actions.



It will happen again, says Zerzan

So is another Unabomber type likely here I ask? “I think it’s highly likely,” says Zerzan. In fact, Zerzan explains, it’s already happening. In 2011 a new Mexican group called the Individualists Tending toward the Wild were founded with the objective “to injure or kill scientists and researchers (by the means of whatever violent act) who ensure the Technoindustrial System continues its course”. In 2011, they detonated a bomb at a prominent nano-technology research centre in Monterrey. Earlier this year they released a communiqué (radical groups always call them communiqués) which listed some of their concerns:

We employ direct attacks to damage both physically and psychologically, NOT ONLY experts in nanotechnology, but also scholars in biotechnology, physics, neuroscience, genetic engineering, communication science, computing, robotics, etc. because we reject technology and civilisation, we reject the reality that they are imposing with ALL their advanced science.

“I think it’s almost inevitable we’ll be seeing more groups like this in the coming years,” predicts Zerzan. He thinks that violence against the person is not acceptable, but property destruction and genuine resistance against technological progress is necessary to get people’s attention.

I too dislike technology sometimes. Like when my internet doesn’t load up quickly enough. And I’m generally convinced I’d be happier without being constantly connected, although I never seem to do much about it. I’m not alone in this. A growing numbers of writers have pointed to possible long-term detrimental health effects of online stimulation, such as “techno-stress”, “data asphyxiation”, “information fatigue syndrome”, “cognitive overload”, and “time famine”. And although we’re more connected than ever, we’re simultaneously as lonely as we’ve ever been. But where does Zerzan draw the line? We’d certainly all be better off without hyper intelligent robots roaming the streets; and probably happier without our smart phones. But computers? Factories? Electricity? Record players? Crossbows and arrows? These are all technologies too.

Zerzan prefers to see it as a direction of travel. “It’s difficult to define the end point precisely. But we all need to start relying far less on technology. At the moment we’re heading in the wrong direction, and we need to reverse it.” He calls it “rewilding”. For him technology controls us, prevents us from being free. The more we rely on technology to do everything for us the less autonomous we become as people, “and every day it seems to be getting worse”. What Zerzan is after is a broader discussion about the extent to which technology defines our conception of “the way things are” to the point that we no longer see it as a choice. For Zerzan, it *is* choice.

I suggest that he must feel like Canute at the shore. We live in a world where people seem quite happy to just sit back and let the waves of progress wash over us. Even if it is a little scary, the benefits are undeniable. These anti-technology movements – the anarcho-primitivists, the Individualist Tending to the Wild, the Earth Liberation Front – are still tiny.

“For now” says Zerzan, “but that’s starting to change.” He thinks our utter reliance on technology gives him an opportunity. Radical technological development is also causing people to stop for a moment, and wonder where this is all taking us. Environment-alternating technologies, nanotechnologies, genetic engineering synthetic biology, general artificial intelligence, mass surveillance, computerised trading systems: it is sometimes pretty terrifying.

“Strangely, this is a good time to be an anarcho-primitivist,” says Zerzan. “We’ve never had more technology than now, and it’s coming out faster than ever. But that’s exactly why I think people will start pushing back. They are beginning to see that technology doesn’t deliver on its promises. So I’m hopeful. I’m very hopeful.”

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The Ted K Archive

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