Why the Unabomber's Manifesto is essential reading

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Jamie Bartlett

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Constant stories of shadowy data analytics firms, Russian hacking, and trolling make it difficult to see the wood for the trees. There are a lot of books which cover these issues – and expect more to come – but this year I've found it more useful to read technology books that help understand current events in a wider context.

Chief among these is Lewis Mumford's two volume *Myth of the Machine* (1966 and 1970) which examines the relationship between technology and culture from early man to now. This is everything Yuval Noah Harari has written in *Sapiens* or *Homo Deus,* and more (although Mumford is harder to read). Mumford was the pre-eminent tech critic of the 1960s and saw it as a dehumanising system of control.

In a similar vein, check out Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985). He argued that Huxley (distraction and entertainment) not Orwell (surveillance and boots) better predicted our dystopian future. The core idea is that the medium of communication dictates the sort of ideas and culture that can be sustained in a society (he was a student of philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan after all). His focus on – and critique of – cable TV in the US is brilliant, and more relevant for social media than he could have predicted.

I find the radical fringes of thought are often a source of unexpected insight that mainstream writers dare not think or say. To that end, take a look at – and hold your breath for – the *Unabomber's Manifesto* (1995). Ted Kascinski is a convicted terrorist who killed three people in a wave of anti-technology violence, and *Manifesto* is a rage against technology, which is in places violent and racist. But tucked inside are also fascinating speculations and predictions, some of which look surprisingly insightful twenty-five years on. (And don't rule out a new wave of luddist violence – something I predicted here).

In a similar vein – Timothy C. May's book-length blog 'Cyphernomicon' (1994) is a wild, bizarre, yet visionary, set of predictions about how encryption would transform society: crypto-currencies, dark net markets, ubiquitous encryption are all in there. May believed this would one day fatally weaken governments. He celebrated these trends; many of us will not.

Both of these works will shock and annoy you, but if you read them sceptically and carefully you'll get a lot from them. And they're both free to download.

Looking ahead rather than behind, two recent books set out a big problem heading our way. Both Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction* and Sayifa Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (who both had decent stints in the private sector before writing these books) show how an increasing number of decisions are taken by smart machines and algorithms – but that doesn't mean they will be less biased. In fact, they might simply replicate, or even worsen, existing economic, racial, gender or other inequalities, because they will *appear* objective and credible.

This problem – invisible algorithmic bias through search engines, or data discrimination – will become a major public preconception very soon, perhaps as soon as next year. The sooner we start thinking about it the better.

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