

What Can We Learn from the Unabomber? - SXSW Interactive 2013

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Synopsis

Ted Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, continues to write anti-technology essays from prison, and his fans believe he makes some good points about the unforeseen consequences of technology in modern society. One of those fans is philosopher David Skrbina, the Unabomber's longtime pen pal, who recently helped publish a book of the Kaczynski's writings. Mr. Skrbina says the violent tech skeptic should be taken seriously for his ideas. In this session, we'll explore whether that's true. Mr. Skrbina will outline the Unabomber's latest thinking, and another philosopher of technology, Peter Ludlow, will offer a counterpoint, in a debate moderated by a journalist who recently wrote a popular article on the topic.

Introduction

JEFF: So first of all, just to let what you're in for. I think this a pretty unusual talk for South by S interactive, and we know that this event is about most of the panels about innovation. And like how technology is kind of making everyone's life better but. We are here, I think. Maybe challenge some assumptions, kind of think about frameworks. Things and I'm going to start by telling a little story about how, just to put this in context and let who's up here to kind of introduce the speakers that are the main event today. So in a way that I mean, this going to be a debate between two very interesting philosophers who are up here in the front of the room.

My name is Jeff Young. I'm the technology editor for the Chronicle of Higher Education and I kind of started into this particular topic. Nick by trying I was doing a story and I wanted to find an expert on the Unabomber. Of course universities are full of experts on everything and I just to remind everybody. I know it's been a long time, the Unabomber is very infamous. This sketch is kind of what a lot of people think of. This person who was led what was the long one of the longest running terror campaigns in U.S. history, sending mail. From 1978 to 1990. Five that killed. Three people and injured 23. A lot of them were university professors, but he also attempted at one point to bring down an airliner. Hence the unit. The unit bomber by the FBI so. For many years this. Person was at large and the demand at one point. Was to publish this mysterious figure at the time. Wanted the publication of this 35,000 word manifesto and remember. Or just to? Go back a 2nd 1995 South by Southwest Interactive did not exist as a conference. The World Wide Web was nascent. It was, nowadays getting a 35,000 word trees published on the blog is is no big deal and there's nobody hurt. But the idea of getting the word out. Was different and the idea was, this demand was to have this printed in a major newspaper and the FBI let it go forward on the hopes that it would. Find this person that was at large and so it was published in the Washington Post and New York Times. A lot of people know this story and how he got. You know, it did lead to his capture, but it was the manifesto itself was very much dismissed at the time as this crazy rant. It was very long. It had a lot in it. But it was overall a critique of technology and society, basically tracing the root cause of all the problems in society to technology and saying it's destroying personal freedom. And the well-being of people in a way that people weren't thinking about in this authors mind.

And so now the Unabomber which is Ted Kaczynski's living in the supermax prison in Florence Co. It's been called Alcatraz in the desert. It's probably the most secure prison in Americand that's where he's been since his arrest. Many 1996. So, but so

I was looking for this expert and what I ended up finding. Was a book that I had never heard about, even though it had been out at the time. About a year, it was the complete writings of Ted Kaczynski and it was edited by a scholar at the University of Michigan at Dearborn philosopher David Skrbina so says here it's hard to read. But it says, with an introduction by David Skrbina, it turns out he was large part of collecting this book and making it happen, he's up here today and he's going to talk in a minute. So Doctor Skrbina had an argument that I hadn't been looking for. Hadn't counted on. And it surprised me and was fascinating to me, which was and it turns out, the book is largely based on a dialogue that Doctor Skrbina has had with Ted Kaczynski over a period of years. Letters back and forth. Over 150 letters where they've been having a dialogue where doctor Skrbina is basically sort of saying OK if you think. This your argument. Well, let's take it seriously and let's what. What are what? Are you really? Saying and pushing him and trying to probe. The ideas of taking it. Taking it seriously as an argument, and so I wanted to do a story about this as a journalist. And so I flew out to Michigan to meet with him, and one of the things I found that even before Doctor Skrbina got involved with this, the Unabomber's papers are part of an archive at the University of Michigan. That is not just about the Unabomber, there's a large archive there, quite famous. That's a collection of anarchist works that date back to some of which, to the earliest part of the country. And so there are radicals whose works are collected and studied by scholars, and there's a history of people taking seriously the works of folks like this, and so the other thing that surprised me as I was kind of doing my research was I ended up interviewing. Kevin Kelly, who is not anti technology. He's the co-founder of Wired magazine. He has a book that was then recent that's so pretty recent called what technology wants and in this book there's a section of it that is subtitled the Unabomber was right. Now Kevin Kelly doesn't agree with the conclusions of Teksti, but his point was that in looking for kind of ways of the framework of technology and understanding in society, Kevin Kelly's feeling an argument was that Kaczynski had one of the most astute analysis of technological systems. Though he disagrees with the conclusion. For Kevin Kelly, this all a good thing. The technology kind of has its own drivers and forces, so one other thing I just wanted to that I kind of found and reminded me that many of you may have remembered this in the mid 90s. There was a large story in Wired magazine by Bill Joy, one of the cofounders of Sun Microsystems. A very again pro tech person, a very. Pioneering person And who started his essay with? A with and the story. The story does kind of think about what are some really critical ways to think about technology and are we going too far? Is it's too much and the start of it is actually you read for a while and it's sort of all these things that are concerns raising and then it you turn the page and it says. By the way, that was Ted Kaczynski you're reading. Not me, and then this but and I think even though these killings are certainly deplorable that there's some ideas here that as a society we should wrestle with.

So that to me was all something new and. I think the thing that David Skrbina challenged me when I went to visit him and do my article on his do the profile on him

for the Chronicle of Higher Education was that somehow there aren't enough of these voices out there critical of technology in a serious way, not the. Critical of like. Is this year's iPhone better than last year's iPhone? There's certainly plenty of that kind of criticism, but the more deep probing look at technologies. And I think the to me that became an interesting subtext and almost like a personal challenge as a journalist. Is that true? Are we not, are there not enough questions? And why would that be? And one scholar Interviewed suggested that if that's right, then the Unabomber might be. If the Unabomber is saying something that's worthwhile. Then perhaps he's the worst messenger ever. If he's now just dismissed because of violence.

So there's all kinds of this really got me thinking, and so I went to visit Doctor Skrbina to do the story and I ended up going when he was teaching a class on of undergraduates on the philosophy of technology, and he assigns works throughout the. You know, nothing would surprise most of us. Most of the syllabus. You know Aristotle and Plato and Heidegger and philosophers about questioning the role of technology in society. But he also lists on his syllabus Ted Kaczynski and has them read essays about that and so I was there one day when they were reading these essays and discussing seriously Ted Kaczynski. And a student in the back raised a question that I think, really one that's worth thinking of, and it certainly got my attention. Was, wait a minute. Even this exercise of being in a college classroom here at the University of Michigan talking about taking seriously the work of this killer isn't that morally problematic? Is there an ethical concern of doing this? And it sparked a discussion in class, and one that actually gave me pause as I even wrote this story and organized this panel, but I think it's one that It's, these are all just kind of the background to make us think. Before we get into this.

So what we're going to do is have a debate as I said the other person. Oh, and the underlying. Message I think is technology making our lives richer or poor? I think that's the. Kind of question that lurks deep inside of all this discussion. So the I mentioned, it's really a debate.

The another philosopher who has a lot to say about technology and very interesting views is up here as well, Peter Ludlow at the Northwestern University and he's somebody that has done a lot of serious work. In variety of fields, but one of the things he's probed is technology, and he's spoken at South by Southwest Interactive in the past about second life. He, in fact I really respect him as a journalist. He is somebody who started. He's a muckraking journalist of the virtual world, wrote a book a Co. Wrote a book. About his work as a, he started a newspaper called the Second Life Herald. It's now the Alphaville Herald, and it literally reports in world of virtual world activity. And they broke stories that made international headlines on cyber sex rings and cons and going on in these virtual worlds. And he brought attention to them in a way that actually because it was bringing negative publicity to one of these virtual worlds. He got kicked out of one of the virtual worlds and then made international headlines and people championing him. So he's been an interesting figure. In virtualworldsmtv.com

at called him one. Of the top 10. Gamers of all most influential top 10 most influential video gamers of all time. So that is who we have up here.

He's one of the things that we did a profile of Peter Lovell for the Chronicle of Higher Education and we said about him that his interest is. Actually thinking about. How to make virtual worlds run better that take them more seriously. And this idea that they're just run as my companies sort of Willy nilly is something that he questions and he talks about that. In a way, it's comparable to the American Revolution in the beginning, and cyberspace needs great thinkers to formulate its governance structures, like Thomas Jefferson, thinking about the Declaration of Independence.

So the format is. Going to be each one of these two presenters are going to go one. At a time. And give you guys an argument and then I'm going to ask a couple of very quick speed round questions of them to kind of warm us up. And then we're gonna have some, hopefully time for questions.

So that is just putting it in. Perspective once again. First of all, just help me welcome David Skrbina who is the pen pal of Ted Kaczynski the Unabomber.

David Skrbina's Speech

DAVID: So subject: What we can learn from the Unabomber?

Thanks everyone. It's a great chance to be able to have this debate here at South by Southwest. This obviously a key audience for questions about technology. This a very important debate which very rarely happens these days, so I really want to thank everyone for coming.

It's really important, I think with this audience, because you guys really understand technology. Your consumers, and you're also producers of technology, so you really understand this stuff from the inside.

So it's really important that I think you participate and help contribute to this whole debate about the pros and the cons of what technology is doing to us so.

Well, let me say. A couple of Things off offhand, so here's our man Ted Kaczynski. So yes, I've been corresponding with him by letter since 2003.

I prepared some material for a new course on the philosophy of technology at the University of Michigan. I wanted to include Kaczynski's material, so I had thought I had to write to him directly to get his comments on just elaboration what was in the manifesto and some of his more recent thoughts. So I have been sort of a correspondent. I have been a kind of a pen pal. I did write the introduction to. I want to be clear. I don't speak for Ted Kaczynski. I don't endorse what he's done, but I think he does have some very important ideas, so that's what we're going to look here briefly. Kind of a summary of his main points in the manifesto. We'll look at a basic argument against technology. I'll address a few objections, and then I'll turn it over to Peter and he'll give you. A sort of an opposing view. So I want to start with a couple of quotes, so here's 1 technology is the controlling power of our age affecting and shaping virtually all aspects of human existence in this century. It may be that civilization will never recover from the bad climate which enveloped the introduction of machinery. The world is now faced with a self evolving system, which it cannot stop. That was Alfred N. Whitehead, 1925. So we have some fundamental questions that we can ask. What is technology? As a first question, what is its purpose? Does it increase or decrease overall human well-being? Where is it heading? Do we control it? And might it threaten our very existence? I think all very relevant and important questions. So just a couple of comments on what is technology? Well, I favor a very general definition. A very broad definition. Technology is:

Tools, machines, devices, databases, products, procedures, organizations, institutions, human beings, animals.

I think it's summed up nicely by Jaques Ellul. His definition of technology is:

The total ensemble of means to achieve any end whatsoever.

And here's another one by Kaczynski:

Technology is a global industrial system which functions primarily to degrade and enslave nature and humanity.

So what's the core argument if we can distill the basic case against the technological system, I think we can probably put it down in six concise points.

1. Humans evolved under primitive low-tech conditions over the past 2,000,000 years.
2. We lived in small autonomous groups 25 to 50 people amidst vast wilderness.
3. Modern technological society is radically different than this, and imposes unprecedented stress on humanity and nature.
4. Technological stress will only continue to worsen. The environment will become simplified, manipulated and contaminated. Humanity will become either enslaved, genetically modified or eliminated.
5. Such a condition is undignified, abhorrent and profoundly dehumanizing. Furthermore,
6. it is impossible to fix or reform the system so as to avoid these disastrous outcomes.

The conclusion, therefore, is that the system must end. And in fact we have a moral obligation to end it.

So the manifesto published in 1995, looking at it as a whole, we can find three major themes within the manifesto:

1. The dangers of leftism. Which begins and ends the manifesto.
2. The power process and loss of freedom. And then...
3. The threat of industrial technology.

So leftism is a relatively small piece. It's about 20% of the total manifesto. Power process is about 30%. And slightly over half deals directly with the problem of industrial technology. So obviously lots of points. It's a 30,000 word essay. Just going to distill it down to six key points, which I think brings out the basic essence of Kaczynski's argument.

1. Technology is profoundly anti-human

So here's a quote:

We attribute the social and psychological problems of modern technology to the fact that our society requires people to live under conditions radically different from those under which the human race evolved and to behave in ways that conflict with the patterns of behavior that the human race developed while living under the earlier conditions.

That's an important point. I think we have a lot of data, we have empirical data that supports that position, by the way, so I just wanted to summarize a few points collectively under the categories of physical, psychological and moral problems.

On the physical side, we have myriad problems resulting from toxins, pollution, endocrine disruption, cancer, etcetera. Sedentary lifestyle leads to obesity, diabetes problems, electromagnetic radiation resulting in tumors, cancer, immune system dysfunction. Alteration in brain structure. We hear reports of rewiring of the brain, loss of Gray matter cognitive disorders.

So that leads to. Psychological problems:

- Addiction: 10% of American adults addicted to cell phones, according to a Stanford study. Up to 30% of Asian teens are Internet addicts.
- Stress problems: cell phones and e-mail use have been associated with anxiety and stress hormones.
- Depression: 10% of all Americans, 10% of all Americans are on antidepressants, up 400%. In the past decade. We've got a recent phenomenon of Facebook depression.
- Mental illness: autism rates are up 78% in the past decade. OCD ADHD is up 50 to 100%. Bipolar disorder is up 4000% in the last decade. Internet users have been shown to reflect symptoms of multiple personality disorders. And something like 40 to 50% of all American adults have at least one symptom of mental illness.

On the moral side. So, lots of things we could mention. For example, rising, plagiarism, cheating in schools. We see this problem a lot in the universities. 2010 study: "Internet kills empathy". Hyper texting is linked to smoking, drinking, sex. Pornography leads the Internet something like 4.2 million sites. Video games are reportedly continuing to be reported to promote violence. Couple of studies in the last few years on that. 2009 study Twitter is too fast for the brains moral compass.

2. Loss of freedom is inevitable

Industrial technological society cannot be reformed in such a way as to prevent it from progressively narrowing the sphere of human freedom. The system does not and cannot exist to satisfy human needs. Instead, it's the IT is human behavior that has to be modified. To fit the needs of the system. This has nothing to do with political or social ideology that may pretend to guide the technological system. It is the fault of technology because the system is guided not by ideology, but by technical necessity.

This is why we see convergence in many societies, whether they're capitalist, socialist or communist. They all converge in a common pattern according to technical necessity.

3. We can't just eliminate the bad parts of the system.

Modern technology is a unified system which all parts are dependent one another. You can't get rid of the bad parts and. Retain only the good parts. I think this relatively clear. All components of industrial technology are interconnected and interdependent. No element can function without support from any other technologies. If you try to remove the bad parts, the good parts will be affected in some way and you'll be either forced to retain the bad parts or introduce something else which has a negative consequence.

4. Technology advances through repeated compromises

While technological progress as a whole continually narrows our sphere of freedom, each new technical advance considered by itself appears to be desirable. This a very subtle. And important point. Every individual advance, every individual new component or device appears to be useful and benign, but the collective effect is to progressively erode individual autonomy and independence.

5. Human behavior will become increasingly controlled

Research will continue to increase the effectiveness of psychological techniques for controlling human behavior. Stress will increase and the system will therefore be forced to use every practical means of controlling human behavior. Each new step in the assertion of control over the human mind will mind will be taken as a rational response to a problem that faces society.

6. Technological collapse is conceivable.

This is because Kaczynski's ultimate goal is to have a revolution against the technological system. He thinks it is possible the system is currently engaged in a desperate struggle to overcome certain problems that threaten its survival. If the system succeeds in acquiring sufficient control over human behavior quickly enough, it will probably survive otherwise it will break down. We think the issue will most likely be resolved within the next several decades, say 40 to 100 years. I would note that we're 20 years into that process already.

In Conclusion

So a couple of closing quotes:

Whatever else may be the case, it is certain that technology is creating for human beings a new physical and social environment, radically different from the spectrum of environments to which natural selection has adapted the human race, physically and psychologically.

If man is not adjusted to this new environment by being artificially re engineered, then he will be adapted to it through a long and painful process of natural selection.

It would better to dump the whole system and take the consequences.

Publishing the books

So these are the two books we started. Well, I as I said, my correspondence with Kaczynski began in 2003 by about 2005. We had enough material in the letters and in some essays that he had written post incarceration that I suggested we try to publish them as a book. We spent two years trying to find American publisher and no one would take it. It was an interesting phenomenon. The initial contact person was always very interested to hear what Kaczynski was writing. Very interested in the new book. They would go away and they would come back a few weeks later and they say our management decided we cannot pursue this project.

So, we had significant rejections from another American publishers. The first book, the road to revolution, came out in 2008. This was actually published in Switzerland. We had to go to Europe to get a publisher to produce the. First book. It was produced in dual English and French versions, but it was limited circulation. That's actually quite a rare book. If you have a copy of this book, the Road Revolution, you're Lucky because it's quite rare in this in this country. We continue to look for an American publisher within about a year. We did find someone. Finally, we found Feral House in

the Washington state. They agreed to republish the book in a slightly updated form as technological slavery published in 2010. So, as Jeff said, I wrote the introduction to that book.

Common Objections

So that's the basic. Case against technology. So I guess there's some obvious objections. I encountered these all the time, so I wanted to mention three of them and then some replies. Just to kind of get those out of the way. And maybe in the Q&A time and whatnot we can, we can talk about some other issues, but these are three common objections. We hear these a lot:

1. Technology itself is neither good nor bad, it is neutral. It's how we use it that matters.

So in reply, if technology were in fact neutral, we should expect the following to be true one.

1. Its use would be optional.
2. It would be fully under human control.
3. It would result in predictable and manageable risks.
4. Any negative side effects would be incidental to and not inherent in the technology.
5. Both the benefits and costs would be fairly distributed amongst society.
6. It would yield the clear net gain after weighing all pros and cons over a sufficiently long span of time.

In fact, none of these things are true. In fact, philosophers have argued that technology cannot be neutral because it embodies its own specific values. Here's one example, Hendrik Salomonsky from 1996 identified 5 intrinsic technological values; control, manipulation, efficiency, competitiveness, and aggression.

Another interesting comment here from Jacques Ellul:

Since technology has put itself beyond good and evil, it need fear, no limitation, whatever it was long claimed that technology was neutral today. This no longer a useful distinction. The power and autonomy of technology are so well secured that it has become the judge of what is moral. The creator of a new morality. Thus it plays the role of the of a creator of a new civilization as well. It is truly autonomous.

2. Yes, technology has problems, but we can reform the system. We can fix it so. As to make it better.

In reply:

1. Technology is an independent force in society, largely beyond human control.
2. Society reacts too late to take effective reform action. Global warming would be a case in point for that.
3. The complexity of technological society makes it nearly impossible to address root causes.
4. Oftentimes the fixes produce side effects that are as bad or worse than the original problems.
5. Reform often involves unacceptably degrading and dehumanizing solutions.
6. If a given problem is inherent in technology, then of course reform is impossible.
7. The historical record of peaceful and rational social reform is not good.
8. The system effectively resists reform through pacification propaganda, temptation, and coercion.

3. Technology is here to stay. We have no choice.

That's an easy one. If we have no choice, then the debate is over. Kaczynski has won. We're little better than slaves of the system. Happy slaves, perhaps, but we're slaves nonetheless.

Solutions

So obviously a lot that could be said about potential solutions strategy, how to respond to this situation that we just can offer a few thoughts here. We don't have time to go into a detailed discussion of solutions, but I want to just say a couple of things so well. We have this bottom line situation. We eat, we evolve.

Humans evolve under certain conditions. Life today is very far removed from those conditions. Therefore, the closer we can come to our natural conditions, the better for us and for the planet. So I think we need to ask ourselves a question. How much technology is required to live a good life. And I think the answer is very little.

In fact, we know that it requires very little. We can learn from, and we can improve upon history. So we have classic civilizations of the past ancient Athens, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. We know that we can have a very high culture, a very high social achievement with very little technology.

OK, so, some final thoughts. I started with a couple of quotations, I wanted to end with a couple. So Nietzsche:

Reaction against machine culture. The machine itself, a product of the highest intellectual energies, sets in motion and those who serve it almost nothing but the lower non intellectual energies. It thereby releases a vast quantity of energy in general that would otherwise be dormant, it's true. But it provides no instigation to enhancement, to improvement to becoming an artist. It makes men active and uniform, but in the long run this engenders a counter effect, a despairing boredom. Of the soul.

Einstein:

Our entire much praised technological progress and civilization generally could be compared to an axe in the hand of a pathological criminal.

So a few closing thoughts:

- Technology has an ability to undermine our very capacity for deep philosophical thought.
- It redefines thinking as objective, analytical and quantitative, creative, sympathetic and compassionate thought is devalued and displaced.
- Technology thus functions as a kind of mental aid.
- It destroys the very sort of thinking that we need to overcome it.
- The seriousness of this situation cannot be overestimated.

Ok, thank you.

JEFF: All right, so we are I am. Going to 1st turn it over to our opposing yeah I. Have a lot of. That's me, that's not David's. Yeah, all right so. Take take a deep breath. Do you want the clicker do you want to walk around and use it all right. So that so that was the 1st that was. The first player in our. Debate now we have second. Peter Ludlow, who is going to give a rebuttal. To what you just heard, and then we're going to. Do a little dialogue.

Peter Ludlow's Rebuttal

PETER: So what can we learn from the Unabomber? My point is going to be nothing, absolutely nothing. But in saying that, I don't mean to say that his teleological system is benign. I'm not going to give you some sort of Pollyanna story and furthermore, that doesn't mean that radical measures aren't called for.

What it means is that the Unabomber is not the go to guy for answers in this particular domain, OK, that's the point. So I'm not here to defend technology. What I'm here to say is that the Unabomber is offering absolutely nothing to this debate.

OK, so here's my plan. First of all, I'm going to tell you why the Unabomber manifesto is weak. Secondly, I'm going to tell you why it's wrong. Then I'm going to offer you a better critique or just a gesture at a better critique. And then I'm going to reflect a little bit on why I think perhaps we're really here.

1. The Unabomber manifesto is weak

So first of all, why is the Unabomber manifesto weak? First of all, the bulk of the argument, if you actually read it, the bulk of the argument is an ad hominem attack.

Secondly, the argument relies on what I would call the genetic fallacy.

And thirdly, the argument that David gave you a little bit earlier. The argument from evolution is not sound. It's not a good argument.

So let's talk about the ad hominem and genetic fallacies first.

Ad hominem and genetic fallacies

What role do they play in the manifesto? Now it's by David's calculation. It's maybe 2030% of the manifesto involves his attack on so-called leftists, but it's a critical part of his argumentation, because the Unabomber uses them to dismiss arguments that we could use government or activism, or. You know standard liberal political methods of solving the crisis, right? That is in there to undermine any sort of alternative other than the very drastic alternative that he's arguing for.

The argument the ad hominem fallacy. In effect, the argument to the person and the genetic fallacy is in effect thinking or showing that the source of a belief is going to somehow falsify.

So let's look at the manifesto itself. And if you think about it, if you look at the concluding slide that David gave you and what the Unabomber actually says, they're

drastically opposed like he is not even summarizing the Unabomber's position in that last slide.

So let's look what he says about this in paragraph seven:

When we speak of leftists in the article we have in mind mainly socialist, collectivist, politically correct types. Feminists, gay and disability activists, animal rights activists and the like. But not everyone who is associated with one of these movements is a leftist. What we're trying to get at and discussing leftism is not so much a movement as an ideology or a psychological type.

Then he says in paragraph 9:

9. The two psychological tendencies that underlie modern leftism we call feelings of inferiority and oversocialization. Feelings of inferiority are characteristic of modern leftism as a whole, while oversocialization is characteristic only of a certain segment of modern leftism ...

Right? Why will leftism fail? Because they're they have these psychological problems which make them incapable of operating.

14. Feminists are desperately anxious to prove that women are as strong and as capable as men. Clearly they are nagged by a fear that women may NOT be as strong and as capable as men.

15. Leftists tend to hate anything that has an image of being strong, good and successful. They hate America, they hate Western civilization, they hate white males, they hate rationality. ...

17. Art forms that appeal to modern leftish intellectuals tend to focus on sordidness, defeat and despair, or else they take an orgiastic tone ...

I.e. sex.

... throwing off rational control as if there were no hope of accomplishing anything through rational calculation and all that was left was to immerse oneself in the sensations of the moment.

Again, this is part of his argument, right? For why standard political methods are not effective. They dismiss reason science, objective reality. Now notice the counterpoint you know this. If you go back and look at David's last slide, he suggested. Oh well, technology is making us be rationalistic. But if you read the Unabomber, he's saying no, no, no, no. These these pro technology people are led into this position. This these leftists are

that precisely the problem with them is that they're not rational enough. OK.

And then he goes on about the masochistic tendency of leftist tactics, right?

They may be effective, but they use them not as a means to an end because they prefer masochistic tactics, self hatred is a leftist trait.

So it makes me wonder, is this a masochist standing in front of the tank, or are these people masochists at the lunch counter sit INS? You know, maybe when people are throwing stuff on them? Or are these leftist masochists because they're getting? Pepper sprayed.

Well, reviewing so far what have suggested. That is, that the attacks the critical attacks on standard liberal solutions to technological problems are ad hominem. They play a role in the genetic fallacy. In any case, the psychological claims, such as they are, are not supported by any evidence.

I mean, there's no evidence for this, it's just impressionistic stuff that he's he's sort of churning out, and they're very likely.

But let's get. To the core argument. Right, and this basically taken from David's slides.

2. Why it's wrong

First of all, that humans involved under primitive low tech conditions. They lived in autonomous groups of 20 to 5 to 30. Modern technological society is radically different than this and imposes unprecedented stress on us. So this technological stress is only going to continue to worsen. This undignified, abhorrent dehumanizing and it's impossible to fix the reform the system. That's the argument.

Now the conclusion of that is that the system must end. We have a moral obligation to end it.

First of all, notice that this argument is not sound. The fact that a situation is abhorrent doesn't mean we have a moral obligation to exterminate billions of people to end it, because in effect, that's what he's talking about. A technological collapse that leads to the death of I don't know how many billions of people.

Furthermore, from the claim that people are metaphorically, note metaphorically, enslaved, it does not follow that the enslavement should end at any cost. Particularly when we're talking about ancient Greek as alternative models where much of the population is in fact in slave, which makes these lovely lifestyles. And philosophy possible.

From the fact that the species is at risk, it doesn't follow that any action is justified. For example, if if we're going to starve, we don't kill and eat someone, it doesn't follow

that we should kill and eat somebody. Furthermore, it certainly doesn't follow that we're under moral obligation to kill and eat somebody, so the fact that there's a bad situation is not some sort of argument that you. It's OK, let's go end civilization as we know it.

But critically, there's also a missing premise in the argument, right? There's a step from this premise, right? If we don't return to conditions under which we evolved, humanity will become enslaved, genetically modified or eliminated, to the conclusion that the system must end, and that we have a moral obligation to end it. And the missing premises are one that freedom optimizes for freedom, dignity, genetic stability and survival of the species, and two that the only way to stay optimized is by being in the conditions in which we evolve.

And this the really weak part of the argument. I mean, in my opinion, the book is just weak from beginning to end, but this the weakest part for sure.

First of all, this missing premise number, one that evolution optimizes for freedom, dignity, genetic stability and so forth, and that if we return to those conditions, we'll be optimizing for all of these. But the premise is false. Evolution doesn't optimize from freedom and dignity and genetic stability, or even the survival of the species. Evolution only cares about reproductive success, so if we're reproductively successful, evolution doesn't care if we're not maximally happy. Right? It's just not part of the evolutionary story, it doesn't care about freedom and dignity. It doesn't promise genetic stability, to the contrary, all it promises is that whatever creature is going to be optimal, optimally adapted is going to do the best, and it doesn't promise survival of the species. It certainly doesn't promise the survival of ours. It's just a weird view about what evolution is and what it's for.

Second, missing premise is that in returning to the original evolving conditions is the only way to optimize for dignity, freedom, et cetera. And that's not right, right?

So first of all, I mean what you could say is that this what human factors engineering is for. We engineer for people as they are evolved. So for example all of the chairs that you're sitting on are basically designed for human beings as they are evolved. They're not designed for giants or rabbits or anything like that. There are other ways though. So at Kansas University, Steve Lardy has suggested that. I mean he buys into this story about Hunter gatherer society and that were like much happier in a hunter gatherer society. And if went back, if we could reproduce. Those conditions would be. Happier I don't buy that, but suppose you buy it. Suppose you buy it then what?

Well, he says well here's what we could do. We take more omega-3 fatty acids. We exercise more. We could get better, light exposure, we could sleep more. We could be more socially connected and we shouldn't be so ruminative OK, so here are the options you could like. Exercise get more light. Sleep more, hang out more. Be less. You know not think too much about your problems or we could end civilization as we know it. I mean, I mean, it seems to be that's the kind of thing I mean. There are kind of alternatives on the table, so but here's the fundamental thing is the background assumption of this true and the background? Assumption through all of this, and now

we're just in a way. We're shifting from like Kaczynski to Jaquel and these other people which is that human technology is alien to us as human beings and I'm not buying that either.

Perhaps we actually evolved to be technological creatures. So bees surely did. Beaver surely did. Spider surely did. Each creature has evolved so that it has a certain kind of technology. You know, birds have a certain kind of technology and is it unreasonable to think that human beings, for example, are also evolved to be technological creatures.

So that if you were an alien anthropologist or an alien. Natural is coming to Earth, you would say, oh wow, this rather interesting. You know there are these many, many technological creatures on this planet. They're these bees. And then they're ants. Build these things. And birds build these nests and humans actually have some very interesting technology too. They would consider it continuous with our biological nature that we are technological.

3. A better argument against the form of technological use today

So then if that's right, then what is a better critique of technology? Because I'm not in the business of saying that technology is all good or that we should be. Polanik about our technology and first of all I would just offer anarchist critique which is perhaps we're only alienated from technology when those in power seize it from us. That is to say. Technology is part of our nature, but if someone takes it away from us and forbids us access to it and forbids us fair use to us, that can be the source of a problem, right? We're not alienated by technology, we're just alienated from technology and there's a related kind of critique which I would call the. Activist critique and the activist critique is that we become alienated when the ability to is when the ability to be technological is taken away from us. That is, we become alienated from technology when we aren't allowed to see and understand how it works, right? That's what the hactivism is about. You take the box, you open it up. You try and figure out how it works. You share that knowledge with other people. There shouldn't be technology that's shielded from us, and maybe that's the problem. It's not. Technology is evil. It's like we are inherently technological creatures and don't take it away from us. Don't deny us access to understanding how the technology works. So alienation then occurs when the ability to understand hack technology is withheld from us.

OK, so how do we fix the misuse of technology? You put the technology back in the hands of everyone, not just those in power. So information wants to be free, yes?

Kaczynski's actual appeal

All right, so question. Why do I think we're really here? And I think we have a kind of fascination with people in our popular culture who are serial killers? That is, I think this. I think this work by Kaczynski's pathetically weak, and I think the only reason we're here, and the only reason they're more than five people in the room is because. He killed a bunch of people. I mean it's there he is in the cover of Time magazine.

And we have this idea in our culture that serial killers are very intelligent people. You know they're always super smart, like Hannibal Lecter and Dexter and so forth. But that's fiction, right? It's fiction. You can't, killing a bunch of people is not evidence of intelligence.

So let's keep in mind the toll here, right? So 16 bombs, 3 people killed, 13 people maimed. Let's just take one example. This guy was an advertising executive in New Jersey. The New York Times story talks about what happened. It was sent to his house that the situation is that. There was a party in the neighborhood that night several children wandered from the party to the Maser's house. Half with a dozen kids with there with the bomb on the table, it was just sitting on the table. Then the guys daughter Robin stayed over for the night in the night and was in the house. No, the neighbor kid was there staying over for the night. With the mosses and their children. So when her dad got blown up, the girl took the little kid that took the daughter next door.

I mean, this the kind of thing we have to think about. And this weird fetish with the Unabomber and Psycho killers in general this this an art exhibit called the Una-cabin and I can't get over the impression that all these people walking around mulling over this cabin or some. I feel almost like we're in that position. But you'll notice it's not an exceptional piece of art. It's not an exceptional piece of architecture. Why are these people looking at that thing? Because the guy killed a bunch of people, you can actually go see the actual Unabomber cabin. And here's at the Newseum. They say probe the Unabomber's cabin, explore mad hermit's life with the videos and interactive.

And it's not for nothing that on the book itself there's. You know it's not a picture of a pristine mountain stream, it's the bomb that's on the cover of the book.

And I want to close, I guess with this, there's a bar somewhere I forget where exactly this, but they've got a, they have one of Jeffrey Dahmer's spoons on display. And you could say, well, look you. Know you if. Someone like handed you Jeffrey Dahmer's spoon and said, wow, like have some chili with this cause it's going to taste so much better. There's like and you could put that spoon in your mouth, but it's not going to make the chili better, you're just putting it in your mouth because it happened touch the lips of another serial killer. And I can't get over the sense that the reason we're here is because we're talking about an idea which has no merit, except that it came from the mind of a serial killer, and we find that titillating. That's it, thanks.

Presenter Questions

JEFF: All right so. I am I just, I hope that you all have an interesting. I hope you're all waiting to ask questions. I'm going to ask just one or two quick ones because in my experience as a journalist, as somebody that works a lot with colleges, It's. It's rare that there's a debate. Where there two people that actually disagree? As much and as interestingly, as the two philosophers that we have up here today. But the stakes, I think are real, and so one. We have David's Carmina, who thinks that who is arguing that he's quoting niche and jackoland French philosophers, and saying that this Unabomber argument is something we should seriously and. There's kind of a technology kind of creates this mental aids that makes us not able to. See how bad it is. And then we have Peter, Peter Ludlow talking about how actually we as humans were born to do this. The things that we're doing that are. Being on display. Here at South by S Interactive, the most cutting. Edge technology and so there's. A pretty wide gap between those two. So one very quick thing though. David and you sort of touched. On it before. I open it up to the crowd. If you could talk very quickly, which is almost impossible, but in the interest of time about, the biggest thing that interviewing. You know that. You and talking about this and. I did interview. One of the victims who was injured by the pack and he. And academic freedom. He's fine with having us talk about these ideas. It's for his view. But still, if you take the Unabomber's critique seriously that you presented, isn't isn't the only conclusion to overthrow the system, and that would include acts of violence. I mean, the. The trick is what your work and your argument. That we've talked about is that you feel like we can separate the acts that the Ted Kaczynski took in these terrible killings and maimings from these ideas that are that are, . Separate talk about those, but in a way, don't. The ideas demand? Don't they call for violence? By if the system must end, then isn't it a call to violence inherently?

DAVID: It's OK. Yeah, I mean, I think that's a good point. People think that there is some implicit violence in this process. I guess a couple. Of points first of all. We tend to forget about the violence of the technological system itself, so if It's wreaking havoc on the planet, it's affecting the global climate. It's putting tremendous stress on humanity. It's a violent process in itself, so I think first of all, we shouldn't forget that fact, secondly. Nothing in the manifesto explicitly calls out a request or demand for violence. It's a striking point when you look through the whole manifesto, and Kosinski was able to publish virtually anything he wanted there because the FBI had acceded to his demand. There's nothing in there that calls for violence on the part of anyone. It's sort of vaguely alluded to as maybe one option among many, and he just talks about

the need to bring the system down, and the system has to end. He furthermore stresses that you can't do anything against the system unless it's already. Be weakened by its own internal characteristics, so a strong, robust technological system can't be defeated in any case, but he thinks it's probably reaching some kind of crisis point, possibly to the point where it may collapse of its own accord, and we need to do nothing. But he certainly suggests we should do what we can to help. Help it collapse if in fact it's at some crisis point, which he. Yes it is.

JEFF: Well and Peter, I wanted to just ask you just kind of jumping just for any interest of time so we can throw it open to questions in a minute. One thing that David's noted and sort of projects here is that there's not enough of a radical critique of technology. Whether it's the Unabomber or anybody that there's a void. Kind of intellectual void or discourse void. What do you think of that idea? I mean, do you? Do you think David? Has a point there perhaps?

PETER: OK well look. First of all, let me just say I don't really understand David's last response because if the Unabomber doesn't believe that violence is a part of the solution here, why is he sending bombs to people that are engaged in technology? I mean surely that is part of the message on the question of whether we're not engaging enough or thinking about not enough about technology. Of course, that's true. I mean, absolutely, that's true. We're perhaps the only session in this entire South by SW thing that is raising questions about technology and isn't it pathetic that the only reason we're doing it is because we needed to have the Unabomber in the title of this thing? If it was just the if we're just talking about Jackie Lowell, or, Heidegger and technology there would be like 5 people in here, right? And so yes, that's a problem. But what does that ? I mean, that's not justificatory of anything.

JEFF: So, but why? Do you think that is, why aren't? There more, I mean, not just this session, but you're making a broader. Point about our social commentary.

DAVID: In general, philosophers of technology are not critical of technology. There are very. Few critics and you look in the literature that's indicates a problem.

PETER: Well, I'm not opposed to being critical of anything. I think there are certain reasons why you don't see criticism. I mean part of the reason is that it's. In many cases, if you're working for a newspaper or a media outlet, you need to incorporate certain kinds of values, and typically those values don't include questioning core core, political, economic institutions.

JEFF: I think that's the Unabomber's critique as well. Is that the media is kind of in on it.

Audience Questions

JEFF: Well, let's open it up for questions. Is is any is? Are there any questions? Please come to. The microphone and state your name.

SCOTT: My name is Scott Lindsey and. It's kind of ironic that. The big data meeting was over here. I have to think that we're better as a society and. All the great things that we've done with technology. I mean technology goes back to creating a wheel? So I think that as far as I'm creating myself and it's opened my eyes to a whole new world experience. Everything we have since this time. So what do you have to say about that?

DAVID: Well, surely it's not a. It's not 100% uniform process. Obviously there's going to be exceptions to any trend, but I think the empirical data when you look at the data I just gave you a few of the statistics there. The numbers are very bad and they're getting very worse collectively. For human society, the more we engage in advanced technology, the more it's putting pressure on us such that we require. Medication and antidepressants, and exhibiting psychological problems. So the fact that. You are fine is not really indicative of the larger social. Trends so. Always existed.

JEFF: The audience the question was basically those things. Are true and no. Matter what the...

DAVID: When we look in history, we see very, very little evidence of in fact depression as a good example, when you look at the study from the time of the ancient Greeks, they did not even have a word for depression. There was no concept of depression...

PETER: The word for depression was melancholia that was. And famously, Socrates had melancholia black bile. I mean, that's of course they knew about. And I mean. But I mean depression. I mean, you don't. We could even be optimized. I mean, depression could be important in our development. It makes us ruminative. It's not. It's not obvious that depression is a bad thing, I mean, but the idea that somehow we have these statistics that since Facebook came on, there's more depression. I mean, how could you possibly know something like that? What kind of longitudinal study was done to show this? I mean, we just didn't diagnose people with depression like in the 50s and 60s.

JEFF: All right, let's get another couple of. Questions in here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I just say. Thank you, thank you. We find there's any paradox in. Fact in the. All this good for these issues, problems more regularly, so the past, so that's why we all this increases that they also with. How much do you think that has to relate to the more traditional holiday people trying to make money on the drugs?

DAVID: Right, well, obviously in any incidents, there's the component. There's the physical technology itself. And then there's the motivation behind the use of it so. There, there's more than just the existence of the pills that I think that's one point.

PETER: But it's a good. It's a good point though, about many, many more people are diagnosed with depression. How much of that is being driven by Big Pharma? I don't know.

DAVID: But I don't think when you see OCD and attention deficit disorder goes up by 4000% in a decade that. But that can't be purely diagnosis that can't be purely diagnostic, maybe maybe 1/10 of that.

PETER: Why not, why not?

DAVID: Is diagnostic I mean?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Coming out of the market.

PETER: How many people even knew that was the condition when I, when I was in? Grade school none of. My classmates were I diagnosed with that condition, but I'm sure they would be now.

JEFF: All right, let's let's we're going to stick around after the official time, but. Let's get at least one more question in.

SANDY: My name is Sandy. This areand. I have a question for. Professor for the so? How far backwards I go? I mean.

PETER: That's a good question, so. It's a definition of where what is. Technology how far back? Yeah that. Yeah, that's actually very good. That's a very good question because the beginning of the manifesto says the Industrial Revolution has been a disaster for the human race, which would imply that the Industrial Revolution revolution was a turning point. And he wants to go. Prior to that, I explicitly asked him that question and he responded. He says he says, no, you can't. You can't just go back pre pre industrial revolution. Or even to an Athenian society he flat out says, we need to aim for a kind of a hunter gatherer society. This really his objective, and he says furthermore, that. You can't really even aim at something he says. All you have is a is a tremendously powerful technological system which which needs to end. It needs to collapse and it will be such a such a chaotic situation. He thinks there's no no possible way of aiming at a given level of civilization. You'll basically be back to primitive agriculture or some kind of a. Nomadic hunter gatherer situation. Yeah no, no. Nothing that I've seen. He's he's there's no level of technology that he's satisfied with it. You know very primitive levels, yeah?

JEFF: All right, let's let's get at least one more in.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Isn't technology kind of self correcting the way where. If you subscribe to that line of thinking. I mean, we all. We all rights here via signal. I mean, if you subscribe to this line of thinking you want to set an example by sort of rejecting technology in your own life, and therefore you essentially become irrelevant. You're not able to show up.

DAVID: Well, you're right. I mean, I, I, I personally experiences all the time. It's kind of a, the hypocrite charge right? So anytime I use any kind of technology and

people know my position and suddenly I'm accused of being hypocritical or something. But I guess the point is if you're going to do anything other than remove yourself from the system, you have to engage with. People who are in a technological society, and to do that you have to deal with society on its own terms. So I have to fly to get here. I have to communicate with e-mail. Personally, I try to keep those to a very minimum in my own life so I don't do Facebook. I don't have a smartphone, I I have a TV with rabbit ears at home, so I mean I try to keep it to a minimum extent possible, but I choose to stay engaged and that forces me to use a minimum level of technological capability. It's pretty minimal but I have to do it. To engage otherwise you will never hear these arguments and I could go live in the north of Michigan you might never see me again, but.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: For engaging in. Acknowledging society right?

JEFF: Well, do you want to throw that last question in the air and then we'll break up? I know we're technically over time, but unless. They kick me off, I'll try to keep the stage.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: There might be a problem. How do you spread technology powers to minute across the map? Do you think that's part of the problem? You suggested the solution spreading technology.

DAVID: I mean, that's almost Peters point. I think right that it's a distribution problem. It's or contract problem.

PETER: I believe I believe it's a control problem, so if I were, if my answer would require the ability for knowledge of technology be to be distributed and so that If I understand the question correctly, it would be a. It's not something. The kind of problem that I would have to overcome if I were going to advocate some sort of positive story about about technology and our and our relationship to.

JEFF: We're going to stick around. I really am glad you all stuck around. Thank you for being here and let's thank our panellists with a round of applause.

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