

The Unabomber's Pen Pal

David F. Skrbina doesn't endorse Ted Kaczynski's violence.
But the philosopher sees merit in the anti-technologist's ideas.

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The paper “Industrial Society and Its Future” makes the case that modern technology has restricted freedom, ruined the environment, and caused untold human suffering. People have become overstressed and oversocialized. Humanity, the author writes, is at a crossroads, and we can either turn the clock back to a happier, more primitive time or face destruction.

The author has occasionally been praised for understanding the unforeseen consequences of technology in modern life. Kevin Kelly, a co-founder of Wired magazine who, even though he disagrees with the author’s conclusion, devotes a section of his latest book to these ideas, calling the paper “one of the most astute analyses” of technological systems he has ever read.

But for the most part the 35,000-word manifesto, first published in September 1995, has been dismissed as a rant.

That’s because the author is Ted Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, who terrorized academics for nearly 20 years by sending a series of mail bombs that killed three people and injured 23. His demand, accepted by authorities in the hope that granting it would unearth clues to his whereabouts, was for a major newspaper to publish that manifesto.

Media profiles from the time of his capture, several months after the manifesto’s publication, paint Kaczynski as a kind of comic-book villain, a scruffy loner in a hooded sweatshirt whose failure in relationships drove him to insane acts of violence.

But when David F. Skrbina, a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Michigan here, read the manifesto in The Washington Post on the day it was published, he saw value in the message. He was particularly impressed by its clarity of argument and its references to major scholars on the philosophy of technology. He saw a thinker who wrongly turned to violence but had an argument worthy of further consideration. That argument certainly wasn’t perfect in Skrbina’s view, and he had some questions. Why not just reform the current system rather than knock it down? What was Kaczynski’s vision of how people should live?

In November 2003, Skrbina mailed a letter to Kaczynski, then as now in a supermax prison in Colorado, asking those and other questions designed “to challenge him on his views, to press him.”

So began a correspondence that has spanned more than 150 letters and has led Skrbina to help compile a book of Kaczynski’s writings, called Technological Slavery, released in 2010. The book is a kind of complete works of this violent tech skeptic, including the original manifesto, letters to Skrbina answering the professor’s questions, and other essays written from the Unabomber’s prison cell.

Today, Skrbina is something like a friend to Kaczynski. And he’s more than that. The philosophy lecturer from Dearborn serves as the Unabomber’s intellectual sparring partner, a distributor of his writings to a private e-mail list of contacts, and at times even an advocate for his anti-tech message.

In more than 15 years at The Chronicle, I've never had so many sources refuse to talk to me for an article. Many people I reached out to simply didn't return my calls and e-mail messages.

To Skrbina, that's evidence of a societal taboo against saying anything negative about technology. But reactions to Kaczynski are not just about ideas. People died, and many others suffered serious injuries, in Kaczynski's pipe-bomb blasts. He has become such a symbol of dangerous irrationality that a climate-change skeptics' group, the Heartland Institute, recently used his face on a billboard that read, "I still believe in Global Warming."

And there's the chance that a serious consideration of the Unabomber's ideas could encourage others to send bombs to get attention. At times, that thought made me want to spike this story. In recent months copycat killers citing the Unabomber as their inspiration sent mail bombs to nanotechnology professors in Mexico, publishing their own antitechnology manifesto. A killer in Norway who gunned down dozens of students at a camp last year wrote a manifesto that included phrases lifted from Kaczynski's.

Yet the Unabomber's warnings about the dehumanizing nature of technology are popping up in more and more serious books and articles these days—even if most of the writers don't cite Kaczynski directly.

What can be learned from the Unabomber? And just as important, should we be listening to an admitted killer in the first place?

In his course "Philosophy of Technology," Skrbina highlights the great thinkers in history who have commented on the dangers of technology. He discusses one of Plato's dialogues, which considers whether writing itself is a kind of technology, one that could be deceptive. He touches on Heidegger's warnings of the "supreme danger" of technology. He asks students to read Rousseau's "Discourse on Science and Arts."

Kaczynski's writings get equal time. I arrange to visit during a session devoted to the Unabomber, and Skrbina starts the class off with show-and-tell—passing around a blue binder containing some of his letters from Ted Kaczynski. "You can just sort of flip through this," he tells the students, asking them not to take the originals home. "It includes some things like some new unpublished essays that I'm working on typing."

Each letter is handwritten, and the tone is formal. They are addressed to "Dr. Skrbina," and they earnestly tackle the questions the professor put to him.

Today's discussion begins with a letter in which Kaczynski talks about why he sees the system as beyond hope of reform. "His position is we need to revolt against the technological system because it's on the brink of either collapsing or enslaving us," Skrbina tells the students.

The primary concern of Kaczynski's writings is freedom, and he argues that the complex systems required by modern technology necessarily force individuals to give up too much liberty in the bargain. He advocates a return to primitive society, with little or no technology. His hope, it seems, is that once people read his manifesto and think about how tied we all are to our technology, a movement could emerge to

promote what he calls “an ideology that opposes technology and the industrial system.” He signed his original manifesto FC, for “Freedom Club,” suggesting an invitation to join his cause.

Several students are curious to learn what the prisoner has told their professor. Did Skrbina ask the Unabomber what he thinks of the computer hackers who call themselves Anonymous? What does he define as technology, and would things like eyeglasses count? Skrbina answers by quoting points from the letters or speculating on what Kaczynski might say, based on his other writings.

At one point an older student in the back with gray hair and a denim shirt suggests that it’s wrong to be having this discussion. “Is it even morally or ethically right,” he asks, “to be studying the works of a societal criminal—in this case a social terrorist?”

Skrbina is quick to respond: “So the question is, Can the ideas stand on their own merit regardless of who said them? It could be Kaczynski, it could be Mother Teresa, it could be Mr. Anonymous—the ideas are what they are, and the arguments are what they are. So I think from a rational standpoint we should say we can treat the ideas in abstraction from the circumstances in which they appear.”

“We have people who commit crimes, and we listen to them all the time,” the professor continues. “If I wanted to be sarcastic, I’d say our president kills people all the time, why should we listen to a murderer called Barack Obama? But we do. OK, it’s a different context and different circumstances, but there’s a kind of parallel there.”

Kayla Toma, a student across the room, notes that it isn’t controversial to study other historical figures who have led violent social movements. “We need to study bin Laden. We need to study Hitler,” she says. “He killed large amounts of people. Why did he do it?”

Skrbina acknowledges that this project is a bit different, though. “We’re looking at the arguments in themselves completely apart from preventing future terrorism. We just want to understand the arguments.”

He reads a series of passages that essentially lay out the Unabomber’s justification for a violent rebellion. “If it was acceptable to fight World War II in spite of the severe cruelty to millions of innocent people that that entailed, then a revolution against the techno-industrial system should be acceptable too,” says one of the letters he reads aloud.

“We actually firebombed women and children; we did firebombing raids,” adds Skrbina. “Kaczynski is saying this is a far greater threat and enemy that you’re facing in a technological system, so why not go to war against the technological system even if innocent people have to die?”

A student notes that this essentially means that Kaczynski is arguing that we need to kill off the majority so the privileged few can survive.

“Well, OK, fair point,” says Skrbina.

Many of the 20 students in the classroom here had not even heard of the Unabomber before taking the course, since most of them were toddlers when he waged his attacks. In their readings, they learned that Kaczynski was a child prodigy who enrolled at

Harvard University when he was 16 and later got a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The man who would become the Unabomber taught for two years at the University of California at Berkeley before he became disillusioned with society and moved to Lincoln, Mont., in 1971, residing in a 10-by-14-foot cabin that, he writes, “looked a bit left over from the old frontier days.”

There he lived a life off the grid, sometimes doing odd jobs to earn enough for essentials like flour and cooking oil. He writes that he might have been happy to remain disengaged from society for the rest of his life, but he felt that even his small pocket of nature was being encroached upon. “The rest of the world could have had a herd mentality, or an individualistic mentality or whatever, and it would have been all the same to me,” he wrote to Skrbina in a letter dated August 24, 2004. “But, of course, under modern conditions there was no way the mountains could have remained isolated from the rest of the world. Civilization moved in and squeezed me, so...”

So, in 1978 he began his campaign of violence by mailing his first homemade bomb, which made its way to Buckley Crist Jr., a materials-science and engineering professor at Northwestern University, who was listed as the return address. Finding the package suspicious, Crist alerted the campus police, and the officer who opened it triggered an explosion—though Crist avoided serious harm, the policeman’s hand was injured. The next year Kaczynski attempted to bring down a plane, using a bomb placed in the luggage compartment of an American Airlines flight from Chicago to Washington (it failed to detonate). FBI agents named their investigation Unabom because the killer targeted universities and airlines. His attacks continued until his capture, in 1996, soon after publication of the manifesto.

Several of Skrbina’s students make a habit of gathering outside the door well before class to hold a kind of prediscussion of the day’s readings. Some plan ways to challenge Skrbina. Others are clearly fans and take class after class with the professor, appreciating the way he raises questions others shy away from.

“He doesn’t make students feel like they have to agree with him,” says Rebecca Stewart, a junior who is taking her fourth class with Skrbina. “He just says, This is what this person argues, and I feel like you should at least know what this person is saying.”

His work with Kaczynski does not appear to have drawn any complaints—from students or colleagues. “We are pretty much following our own muses,” says Paul Hughes, a philosophy professor at Dearborn who has served as department chair. “Dave’s a very good philosopher. He works hard. He’s a good teacher.”

Skrbina is currently in a non-tenure-track job, doing more research than expected and hoping one day to jump tracks. He’s had a book on metaphysics published by MIT Press. Yet he knows his connection to Kaczynski is as likely to make him a pariah as a prize winner. “It’s obviously controversial to have your name on the front of a book of a confessed killer,” he tells me. “But to me the ideas are too important to allow them to be pushed aside because of the context, because of what the guy did.”

Skrbina is not the first to try to engage the Unabomber in conversation.

The list of people who have written to Ted Kaczynski interested in his story reads like a Who's Who of American journalism. Writers, editors, and producers—from CNN, Harper's Magazine, and many others—asked for an interview. Kevin Kelly, the Wired magazine co-founder who praises his analysis in his latest book, did too.

Those letters can be found in an archive of the Unabomber's papers held by the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, whose library signed an agreement with Kaczynski in 2000 to add his writings to a university collection focusing on anarchists. The larger collection, called the Joseph A. Labadie Collection, is described on the library's Web site as "the oldest research collection of radical history in the United States."

Skrbina suggests that we visit the archive together to give me a better sense of Kaczynski's work. The collection, in the campus's main library, fills 15 file boxes. Julie Herrada, curator of the Labadie Collection, says the Kaczynski writings are its most popular, and among the most popular in all of the library's special collections. As a result, the boxes are kept close at hand, and it takes just a few minutes to bring them out on a wheeled cart.

The letters in the archive show that Kaczynski refused most of the requests for media interviews. He typically wrote back that he would participate only if he had certain guarantees about how the interview would be conducted, or if he could review the final product before it appeared.

He did agree to talk with Stephen J. Dubner, for an article in Time magazine, in 1999. It focused on Kaczynski's relationship with his brother, David, who turned Ted in to the FBI. That was the last interview the Unabomber did with a mainstream publication. "I got burned," Kaczynski wrote to a friend, describing the experience, which he felt did not focus on the agreed-upon topics. "I will never consider for a moment the possibility of trusting a mainstream journalist."

Reached by phone, Dubner said, "I didn't violate any agreement at all, and I thought it was a pretty fair piece."

For the record, I did not try to reach Kaczynski.

Many letters in the Labadie archive show Kaczynski's concern with how he and his ideas are being portrayed. To counter what he sees as unfair characterizations by past acquaintances and even family members quoted in the media, he wrote a 548-page memoir called Truth Versus Lies. He had a willing publisher in Beau Friedlander, editor in chief of the now-defunct liberal talk-radio network Air America. But correspondence in the archives shows that Kaczynski got into a fight with Friedlander that derailed the project at the 11th hour.

"From the beginning he fed me a line of bullshit about the amount of material that would have to be deleted or changed because of libel and copyright problems," Kaczynski wrote to one correspondent, referring to Friedlander. "Only when the book was on the verge of being published did he reveal to me how much material his lawyers wanted me to delete or change." Friedlander, reached by e-mail for comment, sent only a terse response: "Nonsense. He was rigid, and the sole cause of the debacle."

As we look at the letters, in which Kaczynski trashes just about everyone he encounters as a liar or a fool, I ask Skrbina whether he thinks the tone and testiness displayed suggest that maybe his correspondent is mentally unbalanced—as official psychological evaluations have designated him.

No, Skrbina says. He sees Kaczynski's responses as reasonable, given the situation. "Obviously he's in a very vulnerable position," the professor tells me. "He can't personally verify anything, so he relies entirely on the integrity of the people he's corresponding with, and if that comes into question he sees them as a waste of time, I think."

Kaczynski himself has insisted repeatedly that he is sane, and a lawyer who served as an adviser on his case, Michael Mello, wrote a book arguing that the prisoner had been unfairly labeled. "In my opinion he is not crazy," Mello wrote in the book, *The United States of America Versus Theodore John Kaczynski*.

Those who have corresponded with the Unabomber agree, though, that he is difficult—exacting and often focused on details.

After reading through the letters, I appreciate what Skrbina has done. He helped publish the most comprehensive collection of this notorious killer's writings. Whether that is a positive or negative accomplishment, however, depends on whom you talk to.

Skrbina talks in such a matter-of-fact way about Kaczynski's beliefs that it's easy to forget that the potential stakes are the overthrow of civilization as we know it. The professor is clean-cut and exceedingly polite. Married, he has two college-age daughters who tease him about his antitech ideas.

The Unabomber's argument, Skrbina points out, is that not overthrowing the system will cause an even greater number of deaths than a revolution would, as a result of man-made climate changes or other potential catastrophes caused by our high-tech way of life.

For the most part, the scholar is reluctant to say whether he agrees or disagrees with Kaczynski's extreme conclusions. He is clear in condemning Kaczynski's bombing campaign, though. In his introduction to *Technological Slavery*, he says: "His tactics were deplorable, and I for one do not endorse such actions."

But he conducts his dialogue with Kaczynski with an open mind, as if he were willing to join the cause but has not quite been fully persuaded. "It's a very strong case that reform is not adequately able to respond to the challenges we face," he says, dryly. "And if that's true, then some kind of revolt becomes necessary." At one point he suggests that it makes sense that Kaczynski sent the bombs, since his manifesto would have been totally ignored otherwise, and the message needs to be heard. "It gave him the leverage to force the publication of the manifesto and to cause it to be read by large numbers of people in the public," Skrbina says.

"It may yet turn out to be true that he was a prophet and potentially a kind of savior, of humanity and the planet."

The two men are in some ways kindred intellectual spirits.

Like Kaczynski, Skrbina started his scholarly career in mathematics, earning a master's degree in the subject from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. While there, he befriended a philosophy professor named Henryk Skolimowski. Skrbina never took a course from Skolimowski, but he began hanging out at his office hours and attending gatherings at his house to discuss the professor's vision of "eco-philosophy." It posits that modern technology is debasing human nature and destroying the planet, and calls for a new mind-set for viewing the world. As Skolimowski, who is now an emeritus professor living in his native Poland, explains it to me, "it's a way of looking at the world as a sanctuary, not the world as a machine."

Much of Skolimowski's argument stems from a frustration with what he sees as an uncritical view of technology in society. "When I first came to the U.S. I realized that everyone was saying hallelujah to the wonders of technology, but no one was looking deep into it," Skolimowski tells me.

Skrbina decided to switch from math to philosophy, and, at Skolimowski's suggestion, he went abroad to pursue his Ph.D. at the University of Bath, in England, where he worked with one of Skolimowski's friends, Peter Reason. Skolimowski ultimately led his dissertation committee, working with him remotely.

In his personal life, Skrbina says he generally tries not to use technology if he can avoid it—he refuses to carry a cellphone, has never owned a microwave oven, and does not have a laptop (though he does use computers for his work). But he's not ready to retreat to some rustic cabin in the woods, as Kaczynski did. "I don't consider myself extreme in my personal life," he tells me.

His office at the university here embodies his style of technological compromise. It has two desks, a main one, where he sits to read, talk on the phone, or visit with students. And another one, over in the corner, with a computer that he uses to type papers and send e-mail. "Even, just symbolically, to keep my main desk computer-free is kind of nice, so I'm not tempted to glance up at it," he says.

His political activity similarly mixes active and passive. He ran for lieutenant governor of the State of Michigan in 2006 on the Green Party ticket, but only because he'd learned at a party meeting that they might not put up a slate of candidates because they hadn't found anyone to stand for that office. "I said, 'You've got to at least post somebody to see what kind of support you're getting,'" he remembers. So they asked him to run.

His work on the campaign was minimal; he appeared at only a handful of public events. His hope was that reporters would call—he felt happy to do interviews to spread the word about the Green Party. It was in keeping with his desire to give voice to marginalized viewpoints. But even after approaching local media outlets, he says, he got almost no coverage, and he calls the experience "disillusioning."

"You feel like you're playing along with the system, that they like to have multiple parties on the ballot to maintain the illusion of a multiparty democracy, when the system works very well at stifling any discussion of the actual views of the multiple parties," he tells me.

In his scholarly work, too, Skrbina explores the margins, trying to revive a notion in philosophy called “panpsychism.” It’s an antimaterialist view that posits that everything has a sort of consciousness—including animals, plants, and even inorganic things. “The idea is that mind is in everything,” Skrbina explains to me. “It’s a philosophically rigorous version of animism.”

In *Panpsychism in the West* (MIT Press, 2005), he acknowledges that the notion can appear ridiculous in the current cultural environment, which puts “reason and rational thinking into a position of pre-eminence.” But he argues that shifts in the collective psyche have happened before, and that we are due for one in light of current environmental degradation and other problems caused by technological society.

“We as a civilization need only summon our collective wisdom and courage; learn the lessons of history; and transcend the crude, destructive, and ultimately dehumanizing materialist worldview,” Skrbina writes in the book’s conclusion.

The argument is similar in spirit to the Unabomber’s manifesto, though argued in a more abstract realm. Skrbina guesses that his pen pal would not be interested in that work. “He’s such a practical thinker that things like this he probably considers a waste of time. Me as a philosopher, I’m more metaphysically oriented. I like to get at the root of what is the metaphysical nature of technology. What about it is causing the detrimental effects that we’re seeing on people and nature?”

Skrbina has tried to interest other critics of technology in his exploration of the Unabomber’s ideas, but has faced a chilly reception.

He reached out to Bill Joy, for instance, a technology pioneer and co-founder of Sun Microsystems, who later wrote a skeptical article about technology in *Wired* magazine in 2000 called “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us.” That article quotes Kaczynski—reluctantly. “Kaczynski’s actions were murderous and, in my view, criminally insane,” Joy wrote. “He is clearly a Luddite, but simply saying this does not dismiss his argument; as difficult as it is for me to acknowledge, I saw some merit in the reasoning in this single passage. I felt compelled to confront it.”

Since that article, though, Joy has appeared to distance himself from the questions about technology that he raised.

This irks Skrbina, who sees the silence as evidence that, as the Unabomber argues, the technological system suppresses its critics.

Skrbina reached out to Joy when he was editing Kaczynski’s papers but got no response. “I sent him two e-mails and two written letters and heard nothing,” he says. When he learned that Joy was making a visit to Ann Arbor to get a lifetime-achievement award in technology from his alma mater, Skrbina attended. During the question-and-answer period, he asked the tech pioneer why he had stopped pressing his critical views of technology.

“He gives some little winding roundabout answer that boiled down to, Well, I gave my best shot and the tech community wasn’t interested, so I dropped it,” says Skrbina. Joy did not respond to e-mails from *The Chronicle*.

Many scholars and writers taking a critical look at technology's role in society seem to have avoided quoting Kaczynski.

Just after the manifesto came out, Langdon Winner, a vocal critic of technology and a professor of political science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, wrote an e-mail to a colleague with his reactions to the work. The scholar started by saying he condemned the killer's actions, even if he espoused ideas "some of whose substance I endorse." That said, he admitted that "there are glimpses of insight" in the manifesto. He wrote that it is "sad," however, that the ideas Kaczynski put forward would now be linked with a perceived madman, making them easier for some to dismiss.

In an interview, Winner tells me that plenty of other thinkers have provided similar arguments without taking them to murderous extremes. Jacques Ellul's seminal book *The Technological Society*, for example, argues that the technological system will overwhelm and absorb anything that doesn't sustain its basic logic, and that it risks corrupting human values. Winner lists other like-minded authors, including William Morris, Lewis Mumford, and Ivan Illich. Those thinkers, not Kaczynski, are the ones scholars should focus on, he says, adding that they are more original than Kaczynski.

Other academics say that the Unabomber fills a void, though, addressing topics that even those who are critical of technology seem reluctant to tackle.

"He has provided a critical vision that we've been missing out on," argues Ben Brucato, a Ph.D. student of Winner's. Brucato points out that the most-cited antitech theorists, like Ellul, wrote decades ago, before the advent of the latest wave of computer technologies. "Either scholars should begin to place Kaczynski's work within the canon of tech critics, or they need to start producing some better work themselves," Brucato says.

Skrbina isn't just studying the Unabomber, though. He is becoming one of his representatives—in a literal sense. Sitting in his office, he shows me a letter from Kaczynski granting him power of attorney in the event that there is a "cutoff" of communication, so the scholar can handle publication of Kaczynski's works.

Such a cutoff of communications is a recurring fear expressed in the letters, which are screened by prison officials before they are sent out. "You and I know that I have been extremely careful to avoid anything that could conceivably be interpreted as incitement of any kind of illegal action," writes Kaczynski in one of them. "But that may not make much difference."

Skrbina gets the point. "If the prison officials decide he's a danger to society because he's inspiring murders, then they will completely cut off communication," he tells me.

I ask if the professor worries that these writings are, in fact, inspiring people to follow Kaczynski's actions. Sure, most of the language is abstract, but the latest essays and letters continue to argue for a revolution against the current technological system, even if they don't give detailed instructions.

"You have to weigh that risk against the benefit of discussing what is a real and serious problem," Skrbina says. "The very real problem outweighs the hypothetical and very small problem of a copycat."

New letters come in about once a month from Kaczynski, who is about to turn 70, and some include new essays.

"I'll try to put together some critical comments, like, This was a good point, this was a little bit weak, I don't understand this, what about this counterexample," says Skrbina.

So he's sort of the Unabomber's professor, I suggest.

"Well I wouldn't go that far," Skrbina replies. "It's like a collegial sort of thing. I'm challenging his ideas, and he'll say, No, you didn't understand the point that I made, and you forgot the point I made in so-and-so other letter."

Skrbina also types up the new essays, enlisting former students to help. Then he sometimes sends the writings to a list of Kaczynski's contacts, either by electronic or postal mail.

Some of the essays sent to Skrbina do talk about details of a revolution. In one, Kaczynski lists the areas to attack that might have the most impact: electric-power systems, communications, computers, advertising (which he calls "propaganda"), and the biotech industry. "His view was if you're going to press your attack, focus it there," Skrbina explained to his class after quoting from the essay.

I ask whether distributing and teaching the Unabomber's writings makes the professor a tool of this revolution himself. "The materials have been so benign I don't even worry about that," he says. "Everything that I'm aware of is strictly on an intellectual level about the nature of technology."

And he repeats that the ideas deserve a hearing.

"It's always around the same theme of, This system is irreconcilable, it has to be ended," Skrbina says. "How can we make this clear? How can we convince people that technology is the root cause of the problem? It's not bad government. It's not the capitalists. It's not minorities. It's not illegal immigrants. He really wants to get away from blaming anything else or anybody else."

The story of Kaczynski's capture involves another philosophy professor, Linda E. Patrik, of Union College, in New York. When she first read the Unabomber manifesto, she had an aha! moment very different from Skrbina's.

"I knew as soon as I saw it that it was Ted who had written it," said Patrik in an interview published by the Union College news office in 1998. "The antitechnology stance in the manifesto was as extreme as Ted's views and lifestyle."

Patrik is Ted Kaczynski's sister-in-law. The two have never met in person, but she had seen letters from Ted to his brother that had troubled her. She urged her husband, David Kaczynski, to contact authorities. "David was particularly concerned that his brother was so paranoid that if Ted were innocent, anyone showing up on his doorstep, especially an FBI agent, would be in danger," she said in the interview. "David was worried that his brother might either shoot himself or shoot the person who showed up—or, if his brother were innocent, we would be putting him through great emotional turmoil."

Both she and her husband declined my requests for interviews.

I wanted to hear from one of the victims—wouldn't a survivor be angry that a professor was legitimizing the ideas of this killer?

I called Buckley Crist, the Northwestern professor who got the first of the bombs. He was curious but not at all upset when I explained Skrbina's project.

"I'm a proponent of academic freedom," he told me.

As to whether the Unabomber's writings should be widely distributed, he questioned whether there was much interest.

"It never really occurred to me that it was worth taking seriously, because it wasn't," he says, noting that he found the manifesto dense and unreadable when it was first published, and that he quit reading halfway through. "He's not going to get me to try to read that manifesto."

What Crist wants to know, and what he has wondered about over the decades, is what led Kaczynski to turn to violence.

I find one passage in *Technological Slavery* that gets at an answer.

"Because I found modern life absolutely unacceptable, I grew increasingly hopeless until, at the age of 24, I arrived at a kind of crisis: I felt so miserable that I didn't care whether I lived or died," writes Kaczynski in a letter to someone else. "But when I reached that point, a sudden change took place: I realized that if I didn't care whether I lived or died, then I didn't need to fear the consequences of anything I might do. Therefore I could do anything I wanted. I was free! That was the great turning point in my life because it was then that I acquired courage, which has remained with me ever since."

What's missing in Kaczynski's writing is any shred of remorse.

In Skrbina and a handful of other admirers of his work, the Unabomber has gotten a serious hearing for his ideas. Which, of course, is what he wanted all along.

Correction (5/21/2012, 9:16 p.m.): This article originally misstated Beau Friedlander's title at Air America, the now-defunct talk-radio network. He was editor in chief, not founder. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.

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Dearborn, Mich.

The Unabomber's Pen Pal

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