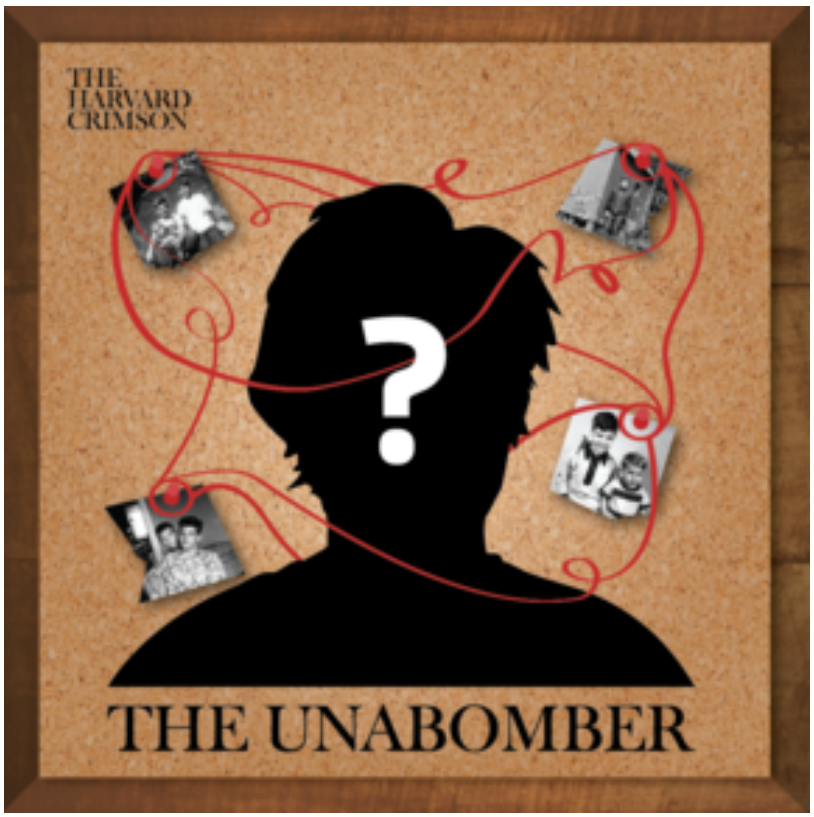
The Unabomber: the Man, the Myth, and the Manifesto

Jem K. Williams and Maya M. F. Wilson



April 24, 2023

Contents

From The Harvard Crimson's Fifteen Minutes Magazine, writers Jem K. Williams and Maya M. F. Wilson take a closer look at the public image of the Unabomber. The serial bomber, caught in the 1990s, continues to remain a fixture in the imaginations of countless podcast hosts, documentary makers, and journalists — why? As they break down the common stories used to explain his path to violence and examine the aftershocks of the publication of his manifesto, they'll explore the dark spaces of the internet, the true crime industry, and the responsibility of the media as a whole.

Listen Here

Trailer - The Stories We Tell

Episode Description

"What do you get when you mix Harvard, homemade bombs, and a deep-seated fear of technological advancement?" In this episode, JKW and MMFW introduce Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. They ask why, several decades later, we still talk about him. More importantly, they ask *how* we can talk about him responsibly and with integrity.

Full Transcript

CONTENT WARNING: This podcast contains description of murder, discussion on mass murder and terrorism, strong language, and discussion of discrimination against transgender individuals. Listener discretion is advised.

MAYA: What do you get when you mix Harvard, homemade bombs, and a deep-seated fear of technological advancement?

JEM: A serial killer. Or, an oversimplification. This is the story of a Harvard graduate. A serial bomber. And the audience that watched him.

MAYA: His name is Ted Kazcynski. The Unabomber.

JEM: I'm Jem Williams.

MAYA: And I'm Maya Wilson. And this is: The Man, The Myth, and The Manifesto.

JEM: Dec. 9, 1994. It was a Friday. The bomb arrived in an ordinary package on the doorstep of Thomas Mosser's family home in New Jersey. Mosser's wife received the package that day, and she left it on the kitchen table. That night, Friday night, one of their neighbors had a party, and a group of kids wandered over to the Mossers', probably to get away from the adults. One of their daughter's friends, a 13-year-old named Robin, spent the night at their home.

MAYA: The girls were all in the house the next day when the bomb went off in the kitchen. The windows of one side of the house were blown out. Shattered. Glass scattered across the yard. And in the house, their father was dead.

JEM: The bombing was horrific, but seemingly random: why target a hardworking man, a dependable father? The Unabomber chose his targets carefully: university professors, airports, corporate executives. The only pattern? Ted saw his targets as

criminals. Criminals who let technology run unchecked. Whose actions were destroying the environment and the world. Ted was an intellectual killer, a political killer. And Mosser was a perfect target. Just days earlier, Mosser had been promoted to the general manager of Young & Rubicam, a global marketing agency. The way Ted saw it, Mosser was a criminal.

MAYA: People who lived through the bombings remember them well. They remember the paranoia and anxiety that took over America — its neighborhoods, offices, college campuses – over the 17-year mail bombing campaign. They remember people got their mail scanned for years, terrified to open any mystery parcel. They remember that more than 20 people were injured. Three people were killed. They remember the New York Times headlines:

FRANK: "United Airlines Chief Seriously Hurt in Blast From Package-Bomb; Four Groups Investigating;" "Mystery Bomber Sent Taunting Letter to Victim at Yale, F.B.I. Says;" "BOMBING IN NEW JERSEY: THE SUSPECT; Meticulous in Building His Bombs, Fastidious in Remaining At Large."

MAYA: And they remember how nothing like it had ever happened before. How even the FBI was stumped.

JEM: They remember the day the Washington Post published the Unabomber Manifesto: the document that spilled the secrets behind it all. 35,000 words, printed as an insert, its own separate leaflet tucked inside the newspaper.

MAYA: Sept. 22, 1995, was an unusually warm day for Cambridge in the fall. It was even more unusual to see a serial killer's manifesto in the Washington Post.

JEM: And so they might also remember the day the FBI lured him out of his cabin in Montana five months later. April 3, 1996. At Harvard, it was an otherwise ordinary spring day. But not for The Unabomber — once again on the front page of the papers — but this time without his anonymity, his pen name, and his rambling intellectualism. The Washington Post headline that day read: "UNABOMBER SUSPECT IS DETAINED IN MONTANA." No more hiding. Just Theodore J. Kaczynski '62 — his scruffy mugshot a pathetic, eerie emblem. In the months to come, his image would return. Ted pleading guilty, avoiding the death sentence, and receiving eight consecutive life sentences.

MAYA: But, what brings him to mind today? That's less obvious. The name might ring a bell, but the details are less clear. You might've seen one of the movies that feature him or listened to a podcast about him.

JEM: But for some people, seeing Ted in the media sparked more than passing fascination. It sparked a fixation. A sense of resonance. A movement, a purpose. A figurehead.

MAYA: People have made the Unabomber into many things: villain, recluse, genius, hero. The complexity of human personalities generally resists such definitions. But the human narrative is all about myth; it embraces myth. Depending on where you stand, where you dive in, you can turn any story into the myth you need it to be.

JEM: We're always searching for an origin story. To pinpoint the moment a man becomes a murderer. We tell ourselves he's different in some way. Eric L. Benson, who created the "Project Unabomb" podcast, sums it up perfectly:

BENSON: Like what was it about him? Why him and not us?

MAYA: But that's not exactly the question we're trying to answer here. We're not actually that interested in the Unabomber, or Ted himself. We want to get to the bottom of the myth.

JEM: Ted himself did not respond to a request for comment, but we spoke to the people who have told this story before us — producers behind the camera, journalists on the ground, publishers who greenlit the manifesto — but also the people who knew Ted. Not as the Unabomber, but as ... Ted. His classmate. The woman who grew up next to him. His own brother.

MAYA: Why is the Unabomber still lurking in the background of the public imagination 30 years later? What makes this 80-year-old's ideas so exciting for 20-year-old kids on Telegram? And, what makes the Unabomber so notorious that modern terrorist groups — ecofascist and right-wing extremist groups — are still quoting his manifesto?

JEM: How do we tell stories responsibly, with integrity?

MAYA: How do we cover political violence without contributing to the mythmaking?

JEM: I'm Jem Williams.

MAYA: And I'm Maya Wilson. And this is:

JEM: The Man

MAYA: The Myth

JEM: And the Manifesto

I: The 'Unknowable'

Episode Description

In this episode, JKW and MMFW start from the beginning talking to Ted's brother, David, and his neighbor, Jamie Gehring, to dive into the Unabomber's many "origin stories." Some point to his participation in a psychological study at Harvard as the reason for his crimes — some point earlier, to when he was hospitalized at just nine months old. Some point to his fraught relationship with his gender. To this, Eric Benson, host of the "Project Unabomb" podcast says: "You want to find the reason that this really bad thing happened. And to me, it is ultimately kind of unknowable."

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JEM: Each story about Ted tries to trace the path from genius child to reclusive academic to domestic terrorist.

MAYA: His own parents start the story early, when Ted was a baby. He was born in Chicago in 1942 to working-class Polish American parents. His father was a sausage maker. At nine months old, Ted was hospitalized for a week. When he was finally discharged, his mother noticed that Ted seemed less happy than before — disengaged, unwilling to make eye contact. She worried he felt abandoned, and that he was developing a distrust of people. She tried to look for answers and spent long days and nights poring over studies about childhood psychological trauma from hospitalization.

MAYA: David was Ted's younger brother. Of course, he put his big brother on a pedestal. First, when Ted skipped the sixth grade, then when he skipped the 11th. Even more so when he went off to Harvard at 16.

JEM: David has fond memories of playing music together with Ted and their parents.

DAVID: My father had some sheet music, or we would tend to sometimes play Ted's compositions. Usually, it was my father on an alto recorder, I was on a soprano recorder. And Ted would have been on his trombone or piano. And every once in a while, my mother who had a beautiful singing voice would join us singing and there you see, gosh, the potential, you know, like this, golden moments still live for me in which the family was really together and in harmony.

MAYA: Over the years, David and Ted would go on camping trips together. For David, camping with his brother was always different than camping with his friends.

DAVID: I went camping with this other friend and, you know, he pointed his tent in a certain direction, I pointed my tent in the opposite direction. He says, Why don't you point it toward my tent? I said, Oh, my brother and I always pointed our tents in opposite directions. So there was this real strong sense of yes, we are together. We are brothers, but we are separate also. I think you see that running through Ted's personality a lot.

JEM: David was the closest person to Ted, but their relationship was still fraught.

MAYA: That separation would only continue to grow, especially as Ted began to close himself off more and more.

DAVID: You know in some ways, as a brother, I feel like I should have been more awake to his suffering. Like he didn't really talk about it, but I should have deduced it.

After Ted graduated, he got his master's and Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. When he was just 25, he became a professor at UC Berkeley. He quit abruptly after two years, withdrew from society, and moved to a cabin in the woods of Montana.

JEM: But this timeline doesn't tell us when things started to go wrong. The first bombing was in 1978, and they continued until 1995, just a few months after the Manifesto was published. Linda, David's wife, thought the writing style sounded familiar. David was less sure.

DAVID: It was a lot of months, a couple of months of, you know, talking every night studying the manifesto, reading Ted's letters constantly, pillow talk about what we should do.

MAYA: Later that year, they consulted a language specialist, who confirmed there was a reasonable chance Ted's letters and the manifesto were written by the same person.

DAVID: I was finally convinced by Linda that we really needed to act.

MAYA: They finally felt certain enough to turn Ted into the FBI.

DAVID: We'd have blood on our hands if Ted ever hurt another person.

JEM: Other stories, such as an article in the Atlantic and two books from Alston S. Chase '57, focus more on his time at Harvard. Specifically, the notorious psychological study he enrolled in as a first year, ominously titled "Multiform Assessments of Personality Development Among Gifted College Men." More on that in a moment.

MAYA: At Harvard, Ted lived in 8 Prescott — the designated dorm for the youngest and most gifted of the freshman class back in 1958. Like many of his housemates, Ted studied math, the kind of theoretical math we couldn't even begin to explain. 8 Prescott was also known for being socially isolating; most of its freshmen lived in singles and interacted very little with each other, let alone the rest of the freshman class.

JEM: As the "reclusive intellectual" story goes, even after moving out of 8 Prescott and into upperclassman housing, his isolation continued. He moved into Eliot which — in the days of self-selected housing at Harvard — was the preppy house. Think students from New England private schools. Again, Ted had gone to public school in Chicago. He kept to himself.

MAYA: John V. Federico '62, Ted's classmate, didn't know much about him. But he got a vague impression.

FEDERICO: He was younger and he was rather quiet. He seemed introverted.

JEM: Federico says the extent of his interactions with Ted were sitting at the lunch table with him a few times. The way Federico saw it, Ted was not the kind of guy who would ever be spotted getting a few pints after class at Cronin's, the undergraduate watering hole. After graduation, there weren't many people who could say they knew Ted well.

MAYA: Though many narratives talk about his social isolation, Chase chose to center his story in the Atlantic on the General Education curriculum at Harvard. Chase, a Harvard alumnus himself, writes that, around the time, the Harvard faculty was divided between those who saw science as the future and those who saw it as a threat to Western social values. Chase writes:

FRANK: "It was part of a more generalized phenomenon among intellectuals all over the Western world. But it existed at Harvard in a particularly concentrated form."

JEM: According to Chase, The academic landscape promoted the inevitable advancement of science and technology. But science also threatened to destabilize religion, morals, and philosophy — reducing any nonscientific discipline to nonsense. These conclusions were devastating for students.

MAYA: Harvard, science as the future, autonomy, Ted. Put a pin in that for a sec.

JEM: Others, including Chase, point to one man, and one experiment to explain how Ted became the Unabomber: Henry A. Murray, Class of 1915, and his psychological trial.

MAYA: Though it wasn't, and still isn't, out of the ordinary for students to enroll in psychological experiments, Ted's situation was not above board. There wasn't a clear code of ethics. Or informed consent. And Murray was a man with no formal education in the field of psychology. But he did manage to gain quite a bit of respect for his work.

He helped develop the entrance test for people looking to join the Office of Strategic Services (which was the precursor to the CIA). It was a test with a notorious — and psychologically brutal — interrogation portion.

MAYA: It went like this: the facilitator, disguised as a fellow participant, would launch into an attack on the real participant's core values. On and on. Attack after attack. It was meant to break them. But Ted didn't cower. By the end of the interview tapes, Ted was fighting back against his facilitator.

JEM: So it's no surprise that, in hindsight, people suspected that something was off with the Murray experiment. But it's an oversimplification to say this experiment altered Ted in any significant way. Ted himself agreed as much.

MAYA: In a letter published in the 2022 book "Madman in the Woods" by Jamie Gehring (Ted's neighbor in Montana), Ted wrote:

TED K: The truth is that in the course of the Murray study there was one and only one unpleasant experience. It lasted about half an hour and could not have been described as 'torture' even in the loosest sense of the word.

JEM: Ted described the experiment as consisting mainly of "interviews and the filling-out of pencil-and-paper personality tests."

MAYA: But here's where the story diverges. David's recollection is different.

JEM: As David remembers it, the trials went on for three years. When David asked him why he continued going back to the lab, week after week, his response was simple. Ted told his brother, "I wanted to prove that I could take it, that I couldn't be broken," David recounts this in his memoir, "Every Last Tie."

MAYA: The Murray experiment was the perfect just-so story to explain why Ted went down the path he did. So with the introduction of this narrative thread, Harvard was forever tied to the genesis of the Unabomber.

JEM: Jamie Gehring was a little girl growing up in the cabin next door to Ted in Montana. She, too, came face-to-face with the media's Murray fixation. During research for her book on Ted, she asked the FBI for pointers.

JAMIE: There were some things that it was more like, 'maybe don't put emphasis on this particularly.' And that the Harvard experiments have definitely been, as the FBI stated, very blown up by the media.

I think the Murray experiment one, I think is a little bit convenient.

JEM: That's Benson again. Remember him from the Project Unabomb podcast?

"It's definitely an oversimplification. And it's kind of tying it into a neat, tidy story about American militarism and capitalism and placing those kinds of social forces maybe a little higher than this one man's individual journey as a person, which I think had more to do with who he became."

MAYA: These stories look for the moment the man became a monster. For an explanation that doesn't exist. Not in childhood, not at Harvard, not even just within his own mind.

"You want to find the reason that this really bad thing happened. And to me, it is ultimately kind of unknowable."

JEM: David had a lot to say about people's impulse to spin these stories and oversimplifications. He doesn't point to any specific moment in his brother's life. He's more caught up on one of Ted's most closely-held beliefs: individual autonomy. David believes it was seeded, in part, at Harvard. Remember that whole Harvard story with the fear of science and the Gen Ed curriculum? Unpin that.

"Ted was very, very stuck on the idea of personal autonomy."

"People, I think, expected, you know, to have a sort of real grasp of how Ted became the Unabomber. And I have to admit, I'm still struggling with that question." "It's so many causes and conditions — innumerable — as it is for all of us, I guess, but I can't clearly put it together in any sort of formula."

MAYA: In 1998, after he was caught, Ted requested that he defend himself in court, frustrated that his lawyers tried to use a partial mental illness defense, which he vehemently rejected. After a psychiatric evaluation, Ted was determined unfit to represent himself, though he could stand trial. The evaluation was made public, and part of it discloses that while Ted was at the University of Michigan, before he disappeared into the woods, he sought a consultation for sex reassignment surgery.

JEM: David was shocked. He tells us about his childhood impressions of what it meant to be masculine — namely, to avoid expressions of traditional femininity.

"I think I was captured by that. My belief was that Ted also was captured by it, I thought he was a sort of macho guy."

MAYA: David also wonders if there was a connection with Ted's fixation on autonomy.

"Did Ted struggle with that, you know, what he was? Did he feel self-judgment? And want to assert masculinity through this idea of autonomy? To the very extreme of violent revenge against society? I don't know."

JEM: But even this, the notion that Ted's ideas on autonomy can explain his violent crimes and his attempted sex reassignment, plays into yet another narrative. After that 1998 trial, the media found another just-so story. They folded their incomplete idea of Ted's gender identity into the model of a sexually repressed, mentally unstable killer.

JEM: One Washington Post headline published that year reads: "GENDER CONFUSION, SEX CHANGE IDEA FUELED KACZYNSKI'S RAGE, REPORT SAYS"

MAYA: And a Chicago Tribune article from the day before: "UNABOMBER'S PSYCHIATRIC PROFILE REVEALS GENDER-IDENTITY STRUGGLE"

JEM: But here are the facts: Being transgender is not a mental illness. It is not an explanation for violence. Transgender people are not using their identity as a means to an end. These articles only reduce the deeply personal conversation Ted was having with himself about his gender identity.

MAYA: The tendency to conflate transgender people with criminal activity is not new. A Washington Post article, this one from just a few weeks ago, reads: "The right exploits Nashville shooting to escalate anti-trans rhetoric." This rhetoric continues to put the lives and rights of trans people in danger.

If Ted did struggle with his gender identity, why would that have anything to do with his expression of rage at modernization and environmental degradation?

JEM: The truth is, making conjectures about the "real" reason Ted did what he did doesn't help anyone. Even the man who grew up with the Unabomber doesn't claim to understand him.

"People say, 'Oh, you're the person who knew him best.' It just adds to this immense mystery that my brother has become to me. Sometimes I feel like the closer I look, the more I remember, the more things that come out, the less I know."

II: Catch and Release

Episode Description

In Sept. 1995, Ted Kaczynski published his manifesto in the Washington Post. JKW and MMFW talk to Donald Graham, the publisher of the Post at the time, to learn about how the Post came to its decision to publish the Manifesto. They interview Jake Hanrahan, terrorism journalist, about how the Manifesto has been adopted and adapted by far-right extremists and trolls.

Full Transcript

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MAYA: In 1995, the bombings weren't like anything the United States had seen before. The Unabomber was one of the first in a wave of domestic terrorist attacks. This was before the Oklahoma City Bomber in 1995, the Columbine shooting in 1999. Today, these attacks are commonplace. Back in the '90s, they weren't. Though the public was closely following Unabomber's attacks, Donald E. Graham '66, the former publisher of the Washington Post, wasn't particularly interested.

"And then, one morning, sitting in my office at the Washington Post at 8 in the morning, I got a call from Bob Bucknam at the FBI."

JEM: Bucknam had reason to believe there was a package in the Post mailroom from the Unabomber. There was an identical package sent to the New York Times. When Bucknam requested to take custody of it, Graham didn't object.

MAYA: At this point, the Unabomber was the most energy-intensive case the FBI had ever seen. 125 people were working on it. And despite having no shortage of physical evidence — the bombs themselves, the letters that accompanied them — they had no leads, only red herrings. After 17 years, they were no closer to catching the killer. The FBI was stumped.

JEM: The FBI collected the package, and they dusted it for fingerprints. But this parcel didn't contain a bomb. It contained a 35,000-word essay, "Industrial Society and Its Future." Also in the package was a warning. Either the Times or the Post had 90 days to publish what would soon be known as the Unabomber Manifesto. Or else, the bombings would continue.

MAYA: On its own, the essay wasn't newsworthy — it was at times rambling and borderline incoherent. The Manifesto railed against the advancements of industrial society, modern leftists and environmental degradation. It championed anarcho-primitivism, a branch of anarchism that emphasizes a return to "the natural world." Over and over again, the Manifesto says one thing: the revolution "may or may not" require violence.

"It tried to make perfect sense out of a world that doesn't make perfect sense."

JEM: That's Graham. But they couldn't run the risk of someone else dying. And more importantly, they thought someone might read the essay and recognize the writer through their voice. Maybe the Unabomber had just identified himself.

MAYA: And since the Post's circulation was slightly smaller than the Times', it would be cheaper if printed in their regular distribution than the Times'.

"We didn't want to spend one more dollar on the son of a bitch than we had to."

Over a series of meetings with the FBI, Attorney General Janet Reno, and first amendment lawyers and top editors at both publications, the Post decided to publish.

FRANK: Here's a part of the statement that Graham and Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Jr., then publisher of the New York Times, put out alongside the manifesto.

"From the beginning, the two newspapers have consulted closely on the issue of whether to publish under the threat of violence. We have also consulted law enforcement officials."

"Both the attorney general and the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation have now recommended that we print this document for public safety reasons, and we have agreed to do so."

"They basically broke journalistic rules to give a voice to a terrorist because they thought it might save lives. And it turned out they were right."

JEM: But they couldn't see into the future. They couldn't predict the kind of notoriety the Manifesto would endow Ted with for the rest of his life. They couldn't predict that 20 years down the line, the Manifesto would grab the attention of ecofascist movements, of young men in dark corners of the internet, and of bored women fantasizing about corresponding with a serial killer.

JEM: To Graham, this continued interest in the Unabomber Manifesto comes as a shock.

"I wasn't aware that there were people who thought Ted Kaczynski was anything but a lunatic."

MAYA: The Manifesto came back into the public imagination after the Discovery Channel released "Manhunt Unabomber" as a Discovery Original Series in 2017. It spurred a fascination among young people known as the pine tree community. They identify one another through pine tree emojis and profile pictures of Ted. From across the extremes of the political spectrum, they come together to talk about their admiration for his ideas and their fear of how his words have rung true.

JEM: Jake Hanrahan is a terrorism journalist and founder of the media company Popular Front — and has spent a lot of time in the scariest parts of the internet. He spent over a year in conversation with a few young Kaczysnki fans in the pine tree community. These were people who sent Ted birthday cards...

"They went over his writings with a fine tooth comb, you know."

JEM: and memorized the entire Manifesto, word for word..

"Like line six, page four, you could probably quote, You know what I mean?"

"Honestly, most of our conversations were me arguing with them saying how, yes, Kaczynski was right about a lot of things. But actually, he was just a fucking narcissist."

MAYA: Some of the pine trees seem more committed to violence; others, less so. Hanrahan says that increased interest in violence doesn't necessarily translate into being increasingly violent.

"I've heard worse in a Call of Duty lobby than I've ever heard from any of these guys in pine trees."

JEM: What's most clear from Hanrahan's exploration of this community is that the internet — the very thing that grew this strain of Kaczynski-ism — is also the thing Ted hates most.

MAYA: Around the darkest corners of the internet, pine tree communities have taken root, moved by Ted's words. But there are Kaczynski sympathizers in plain sight as well. Kaczynski has six books currently available for purchase on Amazon — mostly different iterations of the Manifesto. They have thousands of reviews and an average rating of about four stars. The comments are pretty sympathetic.

JEM: But Ted's ideas in the Manifesto aren't original. In fact, anything but. He draws from anti-technology thinkers before him: Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, Jurgen Habermas, to just name a few.

MAYA: And he's not known for these ideas specifically, he's known for the violence he backed them up with. It's the violence that gave his one-man war all its power.

JEM: Anti-tech and environmentalist movements have a long and complicated history. It extends well before and beyond the Unabomber. His ideas are trite and overdone, so why cite him instead of the people he's pulling from? Is it because they didn't kill people?

MAYA: In Ted's author description on his Amazon page, his work is lauded for critiquing "the global 'techno-industrial system'" and his "life-long ambition of living an autonomous and self-sufficient life off the land, which he did for twenty-five years."

It's not until the last paragraph that the other shoe drops and it's revealed that he's been in solitary confinement since 1998 for "a long-term violent campaign he staged to call worldwide attention to the colossal dangers inherent in technological growth."

JEM: We don't know if Ted wrote this author description himself, or if it was his publisher, or someone working for Amazon. He very well might have. But whether it was him or someone else, he somehow got to maintain his authorial autonomy, and put his ideas first.

MAYA: This brings us back to the moment the Manifesto was published. Graham Macklin is an academic and journalist who studies extremism. Here's him talking about the Post's decision to publish:

"I suppose you have to weigh the two things in the balance: the short-term gain of having captured him, downstream from that you have these manifestos being cited all the time and kind of more broadly disseminated out there."

"I don't know what the editors of the Post and all the rest of it think about that decision now. I'd be very interested to know."

JEM: And we do know – Graham could've never predicted any of this. And Ted warned us against the technology that enabled all of it. Let's consider the irony that his book is for sale, of all places, on Amazon.

III: One Person's Revolutionary

Episode Description

In this episode, JKW and MMFW interview extremist experts Graham Macklin and Joshua Farrell-Molloy to talk about how the Unabomber has captured the attention of eco-fascists. They speak with Mick Grogan, producer of a Netflix documentary about the Unabomber, to understand how Ted has also captured media attention. Gehring discusses the mechanics of the true crime industry. Bryan Denson, who wrote a book about the Unabomber, speculates on the characteristics that create public intrigue around Ted, even now.

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MAYA: At this point, the Unabomber was the most energy-intensive case the FBI had ever seen. 125 people were working on it. And despite having no shortage of physical evidence — the bombs themselves, the letters that accompanied them — they had no leads, only red herrings. After 17 years, they were no closer to catching the killer. The FBI was stumped.

JEM: The FBI collected the package, and they dusted it for fingerprints. But this parcel didn't contain a bomb. It contained a 35,000-word essay, "Industrial Society and Its Future." Also in the package was a warning. Either the Times or the Post had 90 days to publish what would soon be known as the Unabomber Manifesto. Or else, the bombings would continue.

MAYA: On its own, the essay wasn't newsworthy — it was at times rambling and borderline incoherent. The Manifesto railed against the advancements of industrial society, modern leftists and environmental degradation. It championed anarcho-primitivism, a branch of anarchism that emphasizes a return to "the natural world." Over and over again, the Manifesto says one thing: the revolution "may or may not" require violence.

"It tried to make perfect sense out of a world that doesn't make perfect sense."

JEM: That's Graham. But they couldn't run the risk of someone else dying. And more importantly, they thought someone might read the essay and recognize the writer through their voice. Maybe the Unabomber had just identified himself.

MAYA: And since the Post's circulation was slightly smaller than the Times', it would be cheaper if printed in their regular distribution than the Times'.

"We didn't want to spend one more dollar on the son of a bitch than we had to."

Over a series of meetings with the FBI, Attorney General Janet Reno, and first amendment lawyers and top editors at both publications, the Post decided to publish.

FRANK: Here's a part of the statement that Graham and Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Jr., then publisher of the New York Times, put out alongside the manifesto.

"From the beginning, the two newspapers have consulted closely on the issue of whether to publish under the threat of violence. We have also consulted law enforcement officials."

"Both the attorney general and the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation have now recommended that we print this document for public safety reasons, and we have agreed to do so."

"They basically broke journalistic rules to give a voice to a terrorist because they thought it might save lives. And it turned out they were right."

JEM: But they couldn't see into the future. They couldn't predict the kind of notoriety the Manifesto would endow Ted with for the rest of his life. They couldn't predict that 20 years down the line, the Manifesto would grab the attention of ecofas-

cist movements, of young men in dark corners of the internet, and of bored women fantasizing about corresponding with a serial killer.

JEM: To Graham, this continued interest in the Unabomber Manifesto comes as a shock.

"I wasn't aware that there were people who thought Ted Kaczynski was anything but a lunatic."

MAYA: The Manifesto came back into the public imagination after the Discovery Channel released "Manhunt Unabomber" as a Discovery Original Series in 2017. It spurred a fascination among young people known as the pine tree community. They identify one another through pine tree emojis and profile pictures of Ted. From across the extremes of the political spectrum, they come together to talk about their admiration for his ideas and their fear of how his words have rung true.

JEM: Jake Hanrahan is a terrorism journalist and founder of the media company Popular Front — and has spent a lot of time in the scariest parts of the internet. He spent over a year in conversation with a few young Kaczysnki fans in the pine tree community. These were people who sent Ted birthday cards...

"They went over his writings with a fine tooth comb, you know."

JEM: and memorized the entire Manifesto, word for word..

"Like line six, page four, you could probably quote, You know what I mean?"

"Honestly, most of our conversations were me arguing with them saying how, yes, Kaczynski was right about a lot of things. But actually, he was just a fucking narcissist."

MAYA: Some of the pine trees seem more committed to violence; others, less so. Hanrahan says that increased interest in violence doesn't necessarily translate into being increasingly violent.

"I've heard worse in a Call of Duty lobby than I've ever heard from any of these guys in pine trees."

JEM: What's most clear from Hanrahan's exploration of this community is that the internet — the very thing that grew this strain of Kaczynski-ism — is also the thing Ted hates most.

MAYA: Around the darkest corners of the internet, pine tree communities have taken root, moved by Ted's words. But there are Kaczynski sympathizers in plain sight as well. Kaczynski has six books currently available for purchase on Amazon — mostly different iterations of the Manifesto. They have thousands of reviews and an average rating of about four stars. The comments are pretty sympathetic.

JEM: But Ted's ideas in the Manifesto aren't original. In fact, anything but. He draws from anti-technology thinkers before him: Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, Jurgen Habermas, to just name a few.

MAYA: And he's not known for these ideas specifically, he's known for the violence he backed them up with. It's the violence that gave his one-man war all its power.

JEM: Anti-tech and environmentalist movements have a long and complicated history. It extends well before and beyond the Unabomber. His ideas are trite and

overdone, so why cite him instead of the people he's pulling from? Is it because they didn't kill people?

MAYA: In Ted's author description on his Amazon page, his work is lauded for critiquing "the global 'techno-industrial system'" and his "life-long ambition of living an autonomous and self-sufficient life off the land, which he did for twenty-five years." It's not until the last paragraph that the other shoe drops and it's revealed that he's been in solitary confinement since 1998 for "a long-term violent campaign he staged to call worldwide attention to the colossal dangers inherent in technological growth."

JEM: We don't know if Ted wrote this author description himself, or if it was his publisher, or someone working for Amazon. He very well might have. But whether it was him or someone else, he somehow got to maintain his authorial autonomy, and put his ideas first.

MAYA: This brings us back to the moment the Manifesto was published. Graham Macklin is an academic and journalist who studies extremism. Here's him talking about the Post's decision to publish:

"I suppose you have to weigh the two things in the balance: the short-term gain of having captured him, downstream from that you have these manifestos being cited all the time and kind of more broadly disseminated out there."

"I don't know what the editors of the Post and all the rest of it think about that decision now. I'd be very interested to know."

JEM: And we do know – Graham could've never predicted any of this. And Ted warned us against the technology that enabled all of it. Let's consider the irony that his book is for sale, of all places, on Amazon.

IV: Picking Up the Pieces

Episode Description

What is the role of the media in all of this? That is, what is *our* role? MMFW and JKW finish up the series by talking about the benefits and the harms of Ted's media coverage, and they reflect on how we force narratives unto people, and how the real stories will inevitably elude us.

Full Transcript

CONTENT WARNING: This podcast contains description of murder, discussion on mass murder and terrorism, strong language, and discussion of discrimination against transgender individuals. Listener discretion is advised.

MAYA: What do you get when you mix Harvard, homemade bombs, and a deep-seated fear of technological advancement?

JEM: A serial killer. Or, an oversimplification. This is the story of a Harvard graduate. A serial bomber. And the audience that watched him.

MAYA: His name is Ted Kazcynski. The Unabomber.

JEM: I'm Jem Williams.

MAYA: And I'm Maya Wilson. And this is: The Man, The Myth, and The Manifesto.

JEM: There's no singular goal for a project like this, a project that seeks to chronicle a figure of any kind. A production company is concerned about quality, views, and profit. The producers and directors each have their own motivations — even if it's just paying the mortgage. And the sources have their own motives for participating, or opting not to. These projects have had varying degrees of success at either capturing the honest nuance of the Unabomber's story, or, on the other hand, capturing the attention of their rapt audiences.

MAYA: David's identity was supposed to be kept anonymous by the FBI. For good reason, he didn't want the world to know he was both the brother of the serial killer and the one who turned him in. But the news got leaked. Initially, David did not want to speak to the media. He told us how his experience with the media changed over time:

DAVID: I guess it felt like the decision and the relationship and everything was so complex, there was two things: it was too complex for words, at least the kind of

words that the media wanted to hear and it was like sacred space for me. So on a very personal level I was thinking, 'I will never talk to the media.'

JEM: David and Linda had hired an attorney, Tony Bisceglie, to advise and represent them. He was the one who eventually got through to David, convincing him that in the long run, he would be happier if he spoke for himself. Otherwise, Ted was at greater risk of being sentenced to death.

DAVID: He said, 'David, I think you should speak to the New York Times.' And I say, you know, I said no way, no way. His argument was this: that if our families pardon, this word wasn't told, if my picture and description of my brother wasn't presented, the only description that would be out there would be the description made by the prosecutors. And of course, they had an agenda, they would want to put Ted to death.

So he said, look, the chances of saving your brother's life are very, very much reduced unless your voice is heard.

MAYA: David went from thinking he would never talk to the New York Times to becoming a central narrator of this whole chronicle, including being the centerpiece interview for "Unabomber: In His Own Words," Mick Grogan's Netflix documentary. David's narration grounds the four-part series, and he is given the last word.

"As painful as parts of it were for me, I thought it was a real honest attempt and that my voice was not distorted in any way."

JKW : However, the Discovery Channel's "Manhunt" dramatization was a different story. David was played by an actor. He wasn't involved in the production. And the online Kaczynski enthusiasts loved it. They've made entire TikTok montages out of the clips.

DAVID: I never saw that one called 'Manhunt,' the dramatization. I'd heard enough about it to be very suspicious. I decided not to watch it.

JEM: What is the role of the media in all of this? They're the people that make the information public: his crimes, his ideas. Even if it means potentially giving ideas to copycats. Graham grappled with the same issue while deciding whether or not to publish the Manifesto. If it had explicitly advocated for violence, he wouldn't have published it. The risk of more violence would have outweighed the reward of catching Ted.

MAYA: It's the reason Macklin and Farrell-Molloy warned us against linking to any unnecessary material in this piece. They didn't want people going down the same rabbit holes of ecofascist research they go down themselves. Didn't want more people to get sucked into these dark spaces.

JEM: Benson believes exposure to these things is inevitable.

BENSON: I don't think there'd be a way to suppress or a reason to suppress why he did these things. And I don't think we do that with anyone. You know, like al-Qaida has a political program, we didn't suppress the news about why Osama bin Laden blew up the World Trade Center."

MAYA: So is it simply the news? Is it possible to report on the facts and not take responsibility for what individuals do? Say, publish a manifesto from a known killer,

risk more violence, and leave it at that? Maybe the blame is lessened in hindsight once everything has been made public. But what about in the moment, in real-time reporting, as the violence is unfolding? Is it subject to the same guidelines? When, and for what, are we responsible?

JEM: Days before the morning of Wednesday, April 3, 1996, CBS News learned, anonymously, that Ted was the prime suspect in the case. The FBI was still racing to acquire a warrant to search his cabin and arrest him. If this had gotten out, they feared Ted would have fled into the woods, turning their sting operation into a search for a needle in a haystack. So, at the last minute, the FBI met with executives at CBS News, and they agreed not to run the story ... yet. In exchange, CBS News got the first scoop when the story became public.

MAYA: That was the day the Unabomber was given a face, but by then he already had a character in the minds of the populace. He was the anonymous threat in the postal system. He was the bumbling intellectual behind the Manifesto. He was a myth before he was a man.

JEM: Is this myth the result of true-crime-fueled fascination? Was Ted a mystery we're trying to solve? The less we know about him, the more we think about him.

MAYA: We theorize. It's a tendency that's seen in narratives — the reduction of a person, their life, and their actions to a simple moral punchline: villain, recluse, genius, hero. To look for something to learn from it all. It's impossible to tell a story with every single detail. It's unreasonable to expect every single detail. So when you line up to tackle a story like the Unabomber's, a story that big, and that violent, it's natural that people prioritize certain parts over others. We're doing it ourselves right now. And at the end of this process, we're left wondering what we should be walking away with.

JEM: David has a remarkable capacity to see the silver lining.

DAVID: All these levels of non-ego-based cooperation that really went into getting the best result possible in a very tragic situation, I think is worth talking about. And the same was so definitely true, I mean, with Ted's defense team, and our attorney Tony Bisceglie, our interactions with the media — I mean, if we hadn't turned in Ted, irony is, as much as I resented being sort of outed as the person who turned in his brother. It gave me a voice, you know, so that and Tony did his best to amplify that voice and to make it skillful and help people realize, hey, you know, even this criminal has a whole, has a family that loves him. But a good family that did the right thing, you know, when they were really forced to do something. So all of that, I think, as I look back on this whole thing, the people who played a role, honestly and honorably and without a lot of ego involvement, but trying to do the right thing really impresses me.

MAYA: David has learned many times over that there's no real way to maintain control of the stories we spin, and the myths we create.

JEM: So we'll leave you with a question: What should we be walking away with?

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