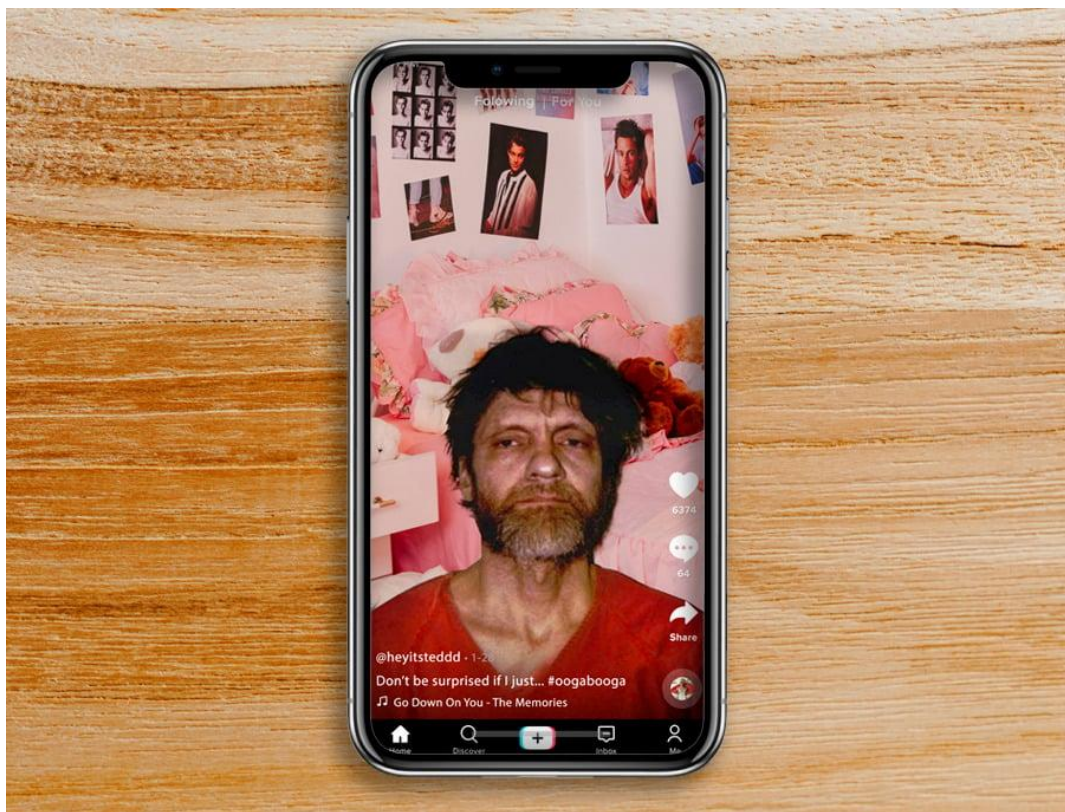


Influencer Society and Its Future

Swallow the Ted pill on Unabomber stan TikTok

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“Hello fellow tribe members.” The friendly greeting is superimposed over a familiar image of a rust-colored A-frame cabin with a green roof. Below it, a teen waves and strikes poses along with the on-screen text while percussion music plays in the video’s background. “Some of my beliefs: unga bunga > ooga booga. the industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. anti civ CHAD. i cannot wait to tear down some power lines with you guys!”

Of all the contemporary internet’s innumerable hovels, few are as bewildering as the shambly shanty of Tedpilled TikTok. There, content creators meet the platform’s trending memes in a densely ironic effort to elevate Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. Through song imitations, dialogue reenactments, reaction videos, voiceovers, and dances, Tik-Tokers broadcast the incarcerated terrorist’s views about the necessity of dismantling industrial society through property destruction and murder.

Using the hashtags #tedpill, #tedk, and #tedkaczynski—which have collectively garnered millions of views—the Tedpilled place photographs of the Unabomber in “duets” with other videos, creating a counterpoint between Kaczynski’s views and the supposed excesses of influencer culture. With the Wombo.AI, they face-morph Kaczynski into goofily singing songs about Fortnite. Elsewhere, shaggy anarchists riff on the #DontBeSurprised trend—in which TikTokers share images representing their hopes and dreams with the text “Don’t be surprised if one day I just . . .”—juxtaposing the peppy indie-folk song “Go Down On You” by The Memories with pictures of Ted Kaczynski standing next to his off-the-grid cabin. Light-hearted jokes about personal body counts and depopulation fantasies coexist alongside more earnest defenses of anarcho-primitivist politics.

To swallow the “Ted pill” is to embrace the romance of a return to a pre-industrial, hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

It’s a strange, if organic, world. It blurs the line between the hyperbolic adoration of online stan culture and a critique of the same, all unfolding in the vernacular of the young and extremely online: Ted was right. Ted is daddy. Ted is a based God. In one since-deleted video, a mop-topped kid mouths along to a hip-hop song and points to a text bubble reading, “the Industrial Revolution lowkey be cringe,” followed by a string of emojis. Another entry in the canon is labeled “ted is so fine i’m sorry”; in it, a doe-eyed teen who has superimposed herself over a photo of a young, fresh-faced Unabomber sits in front of the stars-and-stripes while lip-syncing the Counting Crows “Accidentally in Love” (originally composed for the motion picture *Shrek 2*).

To swallow the “Ted pill” is to embrace the romance of a return to a pre-industrial, hunter-gatherer lifestyle. It is to reject modernity, agriculture, and civilization itself. It offers a dystopian diagnosis of modern life, embracing a utopian fantasy of some prelapsarian state-of-nature. More paradoxically, Ted-pilling means using TikTok—a culturally dominant, globalized, Chinese-owned social networking techno-bauble—as a means of agitating for a radical political philosophy that is, among much else, vehemently anti-technology.

In a turn that presumably bedevils him, the Unabomber’s pop culture stock has been rising since the release of Netflix’s massively popular docuseries *Manhunt: Unabomber* in 2017. In 2020, a slew of other Kaczynski-related documentaries dropped, including *The Lost Unabomber Tapes* (airing on Reelz) and *The Unabomber: In His Own Words* (premiering on the Discovery Channel in Canada, before moving to Netflix for international distribution). Earlier this year, spurious rumors circulated through the right-wing blogosphere that teenage enviro-activist Greta Thunberg had struck up a correspondence with Kaczynski, who is currently serving eight consecutive life sentences in a super-maximum-security prison in Colorado.

A *Wired* article from 2018 analyzed how Kaczynski, and his infamous thirty-five-thousand-odd word manifesto titled “Industrial Society and Its Future,” was gaining new traction in online communities of anarcho-primitivists, neo-Luddites, paleo-libertarians, and far-right eco-fascists, who gather in forums and message boards like Discord and Reddit, united by a common antagonism towards a mode of living increasingly mediated by technology. Occasionally, these ideas are taken up by groups whose agendas move beyond cheeky irony or shared environmental grievance. Some of these fellow travelers have used pine tree emojis to identify as members of the “Pine Tree Gang,” a radical, armed front existing at the intersection of environmentalism and ethno-nationalism, who rally using noxious slogans like “Save Trees, Not Refugees” or the pithier “Bees, Not Refugees.”

Of course, message boards have always provided a haven for self-styled patriot militiamen and armageddon preppers. And as Evan Malmgren recently noted in *Real Life*, Kaczynski’s own cultural cache has seen periods of boom and bust, from his “edgy rebel mystique” in the late 1990s, to the current uptick, itself “deeply entwined with the post-2016 techlash.” But TikTok feels like a particularly incongruous outlet for the expression of neo-Luddite extremism as one of the world’s biggest social media platforms, with some 689 million monthly active users averaging over a billion video views a day—doubling TikTok’s pre-pandemic numbers. Among much else, Covid-19 reduced the whole world to living in conditions of Unabomber-like isolation: the perfect conditions for rehearsing choreographed dances or nurturing a nascent interest in extremist political philosophies. Still, there’s a sense of cognitive dissonance involved in advocating for the rejection of technology by adding to the flow of billions of videos uploaded to an enormous global networked infrastructure of terminals and data centers running on energy powered by coal and natural gas.

This contradiction is not lost on the Tedpilled. For all their effusive celebration of a terrorist serving a string of life sentences for committing multiple murders, most of these videos are steeped in the arch irony of internet culture. In one, the owner of a Unabomber meme-sharing account speaks directly to the question of how sincere they are about this stuff: “This account is mostly ironic. Most of us do genuinely believe that this modern life has been detrimental to our species and our planet. We’re not

delusional, we know that it is not going away very soon, and we know there's not much we can do about it. We're fully aware that we're a bunch of teenagers bitching about agriculture on TikTok and that's not going to send humanity back to a hunter gatherer lifestyle. We know that."

"Reject the false dichotomy!" one video instructs us, "We're not left or right. We condemn hate and the divide. ASCEND."

What makes TikTok special is not just its scale and reach. It's also the relative youth of its users. Compared to other major social media platforms, TikTok's demographics skew younger, with 32.5 percent of users aged between ten and nineteen, and 41 percent between sixteen and twenty-four. These demographics make up a lot of TikTok's appeal, and the platform is sometimes treated as a skeleton key unlocking special insights into authentic teen culture. According to University of Leicester lecturer Melanie Kennedy, TikTok functions in part as a "celebration of girlhood" and "bedroom culture." She points to dominance of teenage creators like Charli D'Amelio, arguing that the platform's basic logic of imitation elevates a dominant, normative "e-girl" aesthetic that amplifies "a narrow set of gendered, racialized, classed and sexualised ideals." This normativity is explicitly reinforced by design. In a report for *The Intercept*, Sam Biddle revealed how TikTok's mods were trained to algorithmically suppress posts on the "For You" page from creators who had "ugly facial looks," "abnormal body shape," senior people "with too many wrinkles," or where "the shooting environment is shabby," with "old and disreputable decorations."

If the Tedpilled trouble our understanding of TikTok as a celebration of girl power, norminess, and the standards of conventional beauty, they seem to reaffirm the platform as a site for intergenerational animus. Writers like the *New York Times*' Taylor Lorenz, or Barrett Swanson in *Harper's*, have chronicled TikTok's extremely profitable influencer culture in tones ranging from curiosity to credulous optimism to plain disdain. Swanson's essay "The Anxiety Of Influencers" cast the absurd travails of a house of TikTokers in Los Angeles against the backdrop of wildfires, pandemic death, and general calamity. "It's been strange to watch these kids gambol and twirl, since it reminds you of nothing so much as Nero and his fiddle," he writes. (Some of the platform's influencers have responded to such criticisms by labeling the older generation "cheugy," and shivering at their expressions of "millennial cringe.") Given the vaguely apocalyptic tones in which the app's popularity is sometimes discussed, the Tedpilled acquire a new level of interest. To their doubters, the generation of hyper-online influencers merely embody the crumbling of human civilization as we know it, in a way that is symbolically rich but still altogether rhetorical. The Tedpilled are actively, and perhaps literally, rooting for that collapse. They're more than symbols of the end times. They're play-acting as its aspiring engineers.

Given that the Unabomber opens his manifesto with a sloppy attempt at pathologizing the left as "one of the most widespread manifestations of the craziness of our world," before launching into his more notorious technological critique, a general antagonism towards leftism and liberalism among the Tedpilled isn't especially shock-

ing. The Unabomber symbolizes man lashing out violently at the society he rejects. Fascist accounts featuring so-called “terrorgram” aesthetics (think skull masks, Aryan Sonnenrads, and minimalist synthwave songs) share videos where Kaczynski’s picture appears beside a photo montage of women and gender non-conforming people with brightly dyed hair, while a computer-generated voice reminds us, once again, of the Unabomber’s stance on the deleterious consequences of the industrial revolution. Others are even less imaginative: simply reposting a popular TikTok video of a girl dancing and placing Ted’s mug alongside it is presumed to be sufficient commentary on the problem of “cultural degeneracy.” For the far-right, Kaczynski symbolizes the radical traditionalist who rejects modernity, and embodies the “sigma male” archetype of the lone wolf snarling at the system.

Considered on the whole, however, Tedpilled accounts promote a mushy mix of politics that do not mirror the more predictable partisan divides drawn across right-wing social media. The self-described pro-Trump anti-capitalists, anarcho-primitivists, eco-communists, and trad authoritarians have little in common, save for a shared antagonism towards people who have no problem with agriculture and electrical grids. Kaczynski, meanwhile, seems to stand astride deeper political divides. He’s an unlikely unifying figure, embraced on TikTok by both jaded environmentalists and right-leaning doomer nihilists. “Reject the false dichotomy!” one video instructs us, “We’re not left or right. We condemn hate and the divide. ASCEND.”

Following the January 6 raid on the Capitol, efforts to corral extremist online content have intensified. Those whose political beliefs fall outside of the swath of mainstream acceptability feel, more than ever, as if they’re being subjected to algorithmic scrutiny and censorship. Even before this tightening, TikTokers routinely complained of being “shadowbanned” if their videos didn’t receive the engagement they had hoped for. TikTok, in other words, trains users to be algorithmically visible: to intuitively modify and imitate certain forms of content. When it comes to teens who are, however ironically, expressing an undying love for a convicted eco-terrorist, this desire for visibility gets a little more complicated.

While hashtags can draw likeminded individuals together, they can also attract the wrong kind of heat. (Indeed: over the course of drafting this article, the platform seems to have intermittently hidden the hashtags “tedpill” and “tedkaczynski.”) This creates a certain friction: kids using social media to build communities around radical political ideas have to negotiate between the competing drives to boost popularity and to evade surveillance. In place of more loaded anti-civilization hashtags explicitly naming the Unabomber, #returntomonke (for “return to monkey”), #oogabooga (imitating the vocal grunts of a cartoon caveman), or #greenscreen are used for neo-Luddite in-group signaling. It’s not unlike how seemingly idiotic signals like the “The Big Luau” or “The Big Igloo” were used by Boogaloo Boys in a misguided effort to avoid surveillance by

algorithms or government infiltrators. On Tedpilled TikTok, videos carrying descriptions like “feds this is a joke” are posted by creators that define themselves as a “grass and dirt fan account, not federal agents.”

Getting Tedpilled, while jokey, is not merely a joke.

The internet studies researcher danah boyd uses the term “social steganography” to explain how teenagers use coded language to “hide in plain sight” online, obscuring the meanings of their messages so that they can be read by in different ways by different audiences. It’s a privacy tactic that’s been used since the earliest days of social media to negotiate the challenges of context collapse. While the youths that boyd studied were probably more concerned with the prying eyes of parents than federal counterinsurgency agents or algorithms engineered to flag and remove suspicious content, the winking tone of TikTok’s Unabomber stan culture seems like a deliberate strategy to navigate this tension. Even young teens seem to naturally apprehend irony’s function as a form of plausible deniability, a way of throwing your hands in the air and maintaining, “I didn’t *mean* it.”

Yet the overriding feeling is that getting Tedpilled, while jokey, is not merely a joke. Faced with a liberalism that has failed to offer anything beyond a strictly capitalist approach to climate mitigation, a center-left flank lacking a compelling alternative vision of an eco-socialist future, and a right wing that denies the causal link between polluting and pollution, the property destruction, eco-sabotage, monkey-wrenching, and direct action tactics advocated by deep ecology groups like Earth First! can seem more sensible than carbon pricing and COP 27. “Returning to monke” is a reasonably absurdist expression of adolescent ennui for those who have to grow up living through the cosmic horror of planetary-scale climate systems that are locked in fatal feedback loops with industrial processes while the endless churn of commodity production and circulation continues unabated.

It is easy to point out the hypocrisy of teenagers using TikTok to promote post-left anarcho-primitivism. It’s also about as insightful as leveling glib gotchas at those who critique capitalism while living inside it (“Aha! You claim to hate capitalism, and yet you depend on money to survive!”). Dwelling on the pointlessness of using technology to critique technology obscures the deeper, more troubling cognitive dissonance of Tedpilled TikTok: the feeling of inertia cultivated in a society that is hurtling towards apocalypse, and which does next-to-nothing to forestall its own end.

Against such a dominant political logic, cheering for the collapse of industrial civilization feels more honest, and less ironic, than the performative handwringing endemic among the political and corporate managerial class. As ever, humor and sarcasm seem helpful tools in surviving such large-scale hypocrisies. But as we’ve learned from the horrors of fairly recent eco-fascism-inspired terror attacks, from Christchurch and El Paso, the level of irony with which a view is expressed can often be a barometer for sincerity, and not its opposite. So don’t be surprised if one day they just . . .

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The Ted K Archive

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