

Zerzan & the Media

An Ignominious Tale

John Zerzan

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April 30 was a Saturday. It was raining in Eugene. What a surprise.

The phone rang and I thought, what an obvious way to have succumbed to technology. Interrupting my usual wake-up of coffee and toast, I walked over and picked it up.

Voice claimed it was Ken Noble, Los Angeles bureau chief of The New York Times. Wanted to talk about Unabomber as in where do such ideas come from. I showed some interest in the topic and he said he'd get a flight and be over that evening.

Anyway, such was the opening to my Warholian ten minutes of fame, for which the reviews have been mixed. Just before this encounter, I'd been struck by the few lines I'd read that supposedly were at the heart of Unabomber's "anarchist" critique, namely his(?) desire for the erasure of industrial society in favor of radically decentralized modes of living. It was initially rather stunning to realize that in effect, everyone was hearing, at least minimally, what had heretofore been completely blocked from public awareness. The mere fact of this "mass breakthrough" of sorts, in the absence of any further information (concerning Unabomber's 35,000 word treatise, most notably), was of major significance to me, as well as raising several questions along the way.

Certainly, and explicitly, Unabomber's lethal strikes were the reason for the Times' interest in me. Ken Noble's call came just a week or so after the death by package bomb of a top PR exec in charge of propaganda supporting the clear cutting of forests.

Predating this knowledge by a few decades is my awareness of the essential function of media. It is twofold: to maintain the general level of obliviousness created by more fundamental institutions like work and school, and to assist the circulation of commodities via advertising and other commercial information. It can be argued that Unabomber's acts of violence, especially as mediated by the . nightly news, lend themselves to the stupefying role that media play.

In the familiar Debordian construction, the "society of the spectacle" is that in which life as lived gives way to life as represented. The images of Unabomber's vengeance are thus "spectacular," that is, objects of passive consumption or entertainment and hence part of the overall social confinement.

However, it is harder to see the accompanying critique, if I understand it correctly, as just an image that serves media and its values and interests. There may be a curious minor irony, by the way, in the fact that it is journalists who have brought out the radical kernel of Unabomber's ideas. (This would be especially ironic if it turns out that some of us have assumed a greater radical lucidity for his ideas than they actually possess.)

But I digress. Mindful of media's basic functions, I met with the Times' Noble, as agreed, and did so out of a desire to situate, amplify, and if possible, deepen the critique of industrial society raised by Unabomber. I thought at the time, and still think, that to have declined to make use of the public space that had been opened would have been a failure on my part.

A few surprises were in store when the anicle appeared eight days later, on Sunday, May 8, 1995. For one thing, it had not occurred to me that the piece would take the

form it did. The five column article, headlined “Prominent Anarchist Finds Ally in Serial Bomber,” was cast as a profile of me, as much as a discussion of the whys and wherefores of a critique of industrial civilization. I suppose it should have come as no surprise that the press would rely, once again, on the manufacture of a spectacular image. By this justifying logic I was cast not only as “prominent,” but also as something of a “guru,” even an “idol,” to those in radical, anti-tech circles. To tailor this image even further, I became a shadowy figure, “rumped” and ascetic, as befits, I suppose, the popular idea of a bearer of misfit ideas.

The piece was carried by other papers all over the country, and provoked angry reactions from some of them. The May 14 Omaha Sunday *World Herald’s* lead editorial, “Technophobia Taken to an Extreme,” thundered against the sudden emergence of “cockamamie notions about modern technology”; an extreme fit of pique over a critique and an individual they had almost certainly never encountered until a few days before.

The next surprise was the huge amount of attention the *Times* article immediately engendered from other media, including television, talk radio, book publishers, and other newspaper reporters. Without having to consult more abstract criteria, it was fairly easy to reject the requests for TV appearances (e.g., “Good Morning America,” “Dateline”) due to the lack of time available for a minimally coherent presentation, and their nonsuitability for anything approaching a serious context. But I did participate in half a dozen talk radio programs by telephone, mainly out of New York City.

Interrupted by commercials, and carried, obviously, via modern technology, radio programming involved major contradictions for me. I felt that these realities were possibly outweighed by the opportunity for dialogue, especially in the case of a one-or two-hour format.

I decided in advance to try to discuss outlines of a critique of civilization itself, ranging from the anthropological to the contemporary. I also found myself dealing with other basics, such as anarchist theory (including the fact that not all anarchists oppose industrial civilization, much less civilization), and pointing out the absurdity of “gurus” in an anti-authoritarian milieu, after always being introduced as one.

The interactions with callers were generally very lively and stimulating, with almost no interest shown in speculation about Unabomber. Presumably, Unabomber would have been as pleased as I was to learn how eager callers were to discuss the pros and cons of drastic social alternatives, instead of fixating on his public persona.

Certainly, these radio encounters were not without irony; in one instance, the host on WABC (Rush Limbaugh’s home station) interrupted the dialogue with his own monologue, going on at some length, in one of the few references to Unabomber, about how violence simply never achieves anything. I pointed out the transparent fact that this discussion would not be taking place except for Unabomber’s violence-sudden shift to a commercial!

Yet another development that I should have anticipated, but didn’t, was the negative reaction to my collaboration with the media from the radical anti-tech milieu. I began to get wind of this fairly early on, receiving a bit of vaguely articulated, but

unmistakable opposition. Feeling a little hurt, I fired off an “open letter” of sorts to two dozen people in the milieu, challenging possible nay-sayers to state their views. I hoped to bring us all further along through an exchange, but my effort fizzled; I got only a couple of responses. This article is a more public second effort.

So far, the objections fall into two main categories. The first asserts that drawing publicity to radical ideas only assists the authorities in repressing the more visible radical proponents and projects. In my opinion, this just doesn’t merit serious discussion.

The second objection, less weak, relates to media’s role in spectacular society. It is evil and unclean, the argument runs, to have any dealings with mainstream media, on principle. But as Neal Keating points out, “the only way to avoid the media is by insulating yourself, forming some kind of specialized sub-elite, replete with publications.”

We know that media are complicit, part of the ensemble of modern domination; we are aware of the deformations that make up media’s usual content. But if our movement is going anywhere, it is extremely unlikely that we could avoid media attention even if we wanted to. Keating suggests that it would be self-marginalizing to have no input, and the point, as I understand it, is contact and dialogue with all of our fellow inmates.

It is noteworthy that the critique is unevenly diffused. A number of articles have appeared in popular publications (e.g., “E Pluribus Unabomber,” *The New Yorker*, August 15) noting that Unabomber’s antipathy to the present industrial order finds considerable resonance in American society. Similarly, Kirkpatrick Sale’s *Resisting the Future* has made a large impact this year with its neo-Luddite call for the overthrow of industrialism.

Meanwhile, *Anarchy* and *Fifth Estate*, our own leading publications, now appear only once or twice a year, and in the pages of the latter’s latest issue it was depressing to find two letters to the editor, by supposed anarchists, advocating the ballot.

I happen to be as involved as I have ever been with our media, with *FE* and *Anarchy*, and with other quality periodicals such as *Extraphile* and *Kaspahraster*. I am definitely not advocating switching to the mainstream. But maybe my particular experience with the media can give us all an excuse to pause and consider how to proceed in the context of a failing dominant culture.

Are we serious about mounting a real challenge to all that is? For some of us this is not a game. By taking thought now, we can be better prepared for openings to come.

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