

# The Unabomber's Legacy

Jon Katz

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# Contents

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Part I  | 3 |
| Part II | 6 |

# Part I

Why a series on the Unabomber now? The same week Theodore Kaczynski pled guilty to murdering three people and injuring many more, the Monica Lewinsky scandal erupted in Washington. Even without a sensational Presidential crisis, it's doubtful that Kaczynski would have captured the media's imagination for long after the conclusion of his case. But with [...]

*Why a series on the Unabomber now?* The same week Theodore Kaczynski pled guilty to murdering three people and injuring many more, the Monica Lewinsky scandal erupted in Washington. Even without a sensational Presidential crisis, it's doubtful that Kaczynski would have captured the media's imagination for long after the conclusion of his case. But with the emergence of a scandal involving sex, the US president, and a young intern, the story of the reclusive bearded murderer, bombs, and technology's value vanished almost instantly.

But the Unabomber and his story are still stuck in my mind and in my imagination.

Kaczynski, in his murderous rampage and rambling manifesto, hoped to raise issues about technology and its complex, controversial role in all of our lives. He intended for his trial to be a forum, even to the extent that he was prepared to face the death penalty rather than declare his ideas and writings to be the work of an insane person

The reporters covering the trial were never interested in that debate, however, and once he struck a deal with the government, he vanished completely from sight, probably never to reappear. It's hard to picture him chatting with Barbara or Diane anytime soon. Enough time has passed since his arrest and conviction to give us some perspective on him and on the issues he so rashly tried to raise.

I wrote this series haunted by the idea that the Unabomber business was unfinished, both for the sake of his victims and for the many issues raised by his dreadful work. This is as good a place as any to bring some of it into focus, especially since that isn't likely to happen anywhere in our so-called mainstream media.

In 1995, in an astounding act of media manipulation, a serial killer identifying himself as a member of an anarchist faction called the Freedom Club prevailed upon *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* to publish a 35,000-word essay, "Industrial Society and Its Future," that came to be known as the Unabomber Manifesto. If the papers published his tract, he promised in an accompanying letter, he wouldn't kill any more.

From his manifesto, and from the extended murderous rampage that preceded it - three dead, more than a score injured - it's clear that Theodore Kaczynski hoped

that his campaign of terror would finally focus attention on the subject he cares most about: the damage that technology causes.

As rambling and convoluted as the manifesto is, its message is simple - the world is being destroyed, and technology is the means with which human beings are destroying it. Technology and the people who create, advance, and use it must, therefore, be halted by any means, including maiming and murder.

"Many people understand something of what technological progress is doing to us yet take a passive attitude towards it because they think it is inevitable. But we don't think it is inevitable," the manifesto says. "We think it can be stopped."

Despite his isolation, in some ways Kaczynski had his finger on the public pulse: there is enormous unease about technology. We sometimes seem obsessed with technology's manifestations - from fertility drugs and cloning to pornography on the Internet. But Kaczynski was wrong if he thought we wanted to talk about it.

Sandwiched between those other media explosions, the death of Diana Spencer and the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the captured Unabomber was on the public stage only briefly. Though he'd succeeded brilliantly for years in avoiding arrest and punishment for the pain and suffering he'd caused, he stumbled badly when it came to grasping the ethos of modern media and the American public's short attention span.

In the journals FBI agents found in his tiny Montana cabin, modeled after Thoreau's, Kaczynski wrote of his fear that his campaign against the technologically driven industrial society would ultimately be trivialized as the work of a "sickie." Had Kaczynski known as much about media as he did about bombs, he would have seen that such a fate was inevitable. It was the chase, not the message, that fascinated the press.

Kaczynski was so determined to avoid being marginalized that he pled guilty to murder without any chance of parole, rather than pursue the only option that might conceivably have freed him one day - an insanity defense.

But when Kaczynski finally agreed to the plea, eliminating the need to stand trial, he left not only the stage but our consciousness. He never did get to make the argument begun in the manifesto, to launch the national debate about technology he desperately wanted to have - and that we sorely need.

Ironically, that may have been the most severe penalty our society could have inflicted. Kaczynski seems certain to languish in near-obscurity for the rest of his life as our culture rushes forward, scoring one technological breakthrough after another, spared the tedious business of having to ponder their consequences.

We can't seem to get comfortable with technology. Movies from *The Net* to *Terminator* to *Dark City* portray bleak futures ruined by technology and its evil uses.

One book and article after another warns that our society is becoming de-civilized, our culture demeaned, our children endangered by the Information Revolution. "The technophiles are taking us all on an utterly reckless ride into the unknown," the Unabomber wrote in one passage. Plenty of anxious parents, uneasy academics, and moral guardians in Washington share that sentiment.

Technology's impact on any one of these issues - medicine, media, family, education, environment, economy - could occupy platoons of scientists, ethicists, and historians for months. Kaczynski was ready to engage them all.

In his monomania, he thought his existence in itself might be important enough to spark such discussions. Once he was in custody, however, he was not nearly glamorous enough to excite journalists for long.

One of Kaczynski's victims even argued that to permit the Unabomber to argue about technology was to reward him for homicide.

In his book *Drawing Life, Surviving the Unabomber*, Yale computer scientist David Gelernter, permanently injured by one of Kaczynski's bombs, bitterly criticized the media's portrayal of the Unabomber as in any way thoughtful or interesting.

He cited *People* magazine's naming Kaczynski as one of "the most fascinating people" of 1996, and a newspaper's running Gelernter's and Kaczynski's views on technology side by side, as examples of Unabomber coverage pushing beyond obnoxiousness into the realm of evil.

In his book, Gelernter complained that "the payoff this particular criminal sought (and it's the same with other terrorists) was attention for his ideas, in hopes of our dignifying them with serious discussion. It was up to us: Would crime pay or not? We thought it over and decided yes."

From his perspective, Gelernter's views are entirely understandable. But they leave us without the means or opportunity to focus on technology and whether it is a good witch or a bad witch, or both.

As political scientist Langdon Winner reminds us in *Autonomous Technology*, from medieval times to the rise of the Industrial Revolution to the Hiroshima bombing, technology has always provoked puzzlement, disorientation, and fear. In England, the Luddites took up arms to try to halt the impact of the onrushing Industrial Revolution.

In a much less rational way, Kaczynski saw himself as taking up arms to stop technology and what he deemed its devastating effect on human and ecological life. It's understandable why the bomber's victim might not care to kick around the rationale behind these murderous assaults. But the question for the rest of us, is who, precisely, will?

Next: Kaczynski as both Dr. Frankenstein and monster.

## Part II

Jon Katz asks the Frankenstein question: Who's responsible for technology's consequences?

Mary Shelley couldn't possibly have imagined how relevant *Frankenstein* would be 100 years after its creation. Only one character in her novel wanted to talk about the frightening consequences of Victor Frankenstein's experiment - the creature he created.

Throughout the book, the monster tries to get Dr. Frankenstein to own up to what he's done. The scientist responds by labeling him a fiend and demanding that he go away. In the whole novel, Frankenstein never utters a single reasoned thought about technology or the implications of his actions. All the eloquence and introspection belongs to the creature. He's more than reasonable, this monster. He never seeks vengeance, just admission of responsibility. Not only has he thought about technology a great deal, but he gives Frankenstein one chance after another to reconsider and do the right thing. A significant chunk of the book is taken up with the monster's pleading.

"I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king if thou wilt also perform thy part, that which though owest me," the monster declares at one point.

"You propose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends."

Theodore Kaczynski was neither as eloquent nor as precise in his actions. He killed and maimed not only people who had, like Frankenstein, charged into the realm of technology and morality, but random bystanders as well.

Yet he raised questions that are as timely for us as they were for Mary Shelley's characters. Just like that other monster, the Unabomber finds that people celebrate the act of creating new inventions, but aren't particularly concerned about what happens next.

Our contemporary monster, too, has been sent away. He can't ever come back to haunt us.

Yet the modern world routinely goes about reshaping and interfering with the natural order of things in ways that pale Victor Frankenstein's efforts in comparison.

The birth of the McCaughey septuplets, for instance, provided one of the more dramatic opportunities in years for Americans to pause and consider the moral complexities of technological advances.

The births in Iowa, made possible by dramatic improvements in fertility treatment, were cause for national celebration, hailed as a triumph of human pluck and a miracle of medical technology.

There was only sporadic, muted discussion about how these children will live, how much risk was involved in carrying them, or who, precisely, will shoulder the great costs of caring for them. Instead, *People* magazine trumpeted an "exclusive." "Seven's Heaven," read the headline on the story inside.

Like the rest of the media, *People* glossed over the realities of the McCaughey drama. Kenny McCaughey, 27, a billing clerk, and his wife Bobbi, 29, a former seamstress, have become as dependent as any welfare family. Despite donations of a new home, food and clothing; despite the income from book deals, endorsements and a made-for-TV movie, the McCaugheys rely on a platoon of 60 volunteers working four shifts around the clock to feed the infants, change 150 diapers each week and help out with household chores, according to *People*.

Few readers grasped the implications of Bobbi leaving the hospital with all seven of her new children still on ventilators. The real "miracle" of the McCaughey septuplets, according to doctors, was that they had survived at all.

As *The New York Times* reported in November, in one of the few sober appraisals of the births (printed deep inside the paper), a woman who tries to carry more than three fetuses is playing Russian roulette with her babies' lives. The McCaugheys, said Dr. Richard Berkowitz, chairman of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Mount Sinai Medical Center, could easily have wound up with between two and seven children suffering severe deformities or chronic illnesses.

The healthy birth of septuplets, said another gynecologist, is not a triumph of medical technology, but more akin to winning a lottery - a case of extremely uncommon good luck.

Apart from these medical concerns, there are ethical, class and social worries. Will the country be so joyous when the inevitable moment arrives: a poor mother in Newark has seven or eight children at once, and religious objections to abortion? Will the President call her, will the CEOs of giant corporations fly into town bearing gifts? Will publishers and producers bid for rights of children who are chronically ill or severely deformed?

Were the McCaugheys really heroes for bringing into the world seven children they can't afford to raise? Given this debate, the birth of septuplets might have occasioned a graver, more reflective moment.

Here is where the legacies of the Unabomber and the ghost of Victor Frankenstein creepily converge. Like Frankenstein, we don't want to take responsibility for our technological innovations, we just want to celebrate our ingenuity in achieving them.

Unthinkingly conceived and implemented technology is dangerous technology, the kind Frankenstein's monster railed about, the kind the demented Unabomber saw as justifying murder. But often it seems that unthinking technology is the kind that surrounds us.

Next: The technological future: utopia or armageddon?

**Related links:**

Part I of this series

David Gelernter interviewed on HotSeat

HotWired's Unabomber Special Report

Katz's Netizen column after Kaczynski's capture

*This article originally appeared in HotWired.*



The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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Part I & Part II

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