

# The Terrorist Tract That's Hot Reading

Marc Fisher

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A murderer writes 35,000 words, including these: "The technophiles are taking us all on an utterly reckless ride into the unknown. Many people understand something of what technological progress is doing to us, yet take a passive attitude toward it because they think it is inevitable. But we don't think it is inevitable."

The urge is to get inside his mind, to understand the unfathomable. Does he, could he have anything to offer?

So what if the Unabomber's treatise takes hours to read? So what if its author is considered a dangerous killer responsible for three deaths and 16 bombings?

There's something there, some readers say, and they are snapping up copies, combing through the text, searching for answers, even if they're not quite sure what the questions might be.

Thousands – librarians, professors, teenagers, men wearing fatigues – have called or visited The Washington Post looking for extra copies of "Industrial Society and Its Future," the Unabomber's manifesto published by the paper this week at the recommendation of the FBI and Attorney General Janet Reno.

The Post, which printed the eight-page pull-out section in hopes that the bomber would live up to his promise to halt his killings, is out of copies. The Oakland Tribune reprinted the 35,000-word manuscript at the behest not of the bomber, but of its curious readers. At a newsstand frequented by movie types in the Westwood section of Los Angeles, the salesclerk turned away more than 20 requests for the tract before 7 a.m. on the day of publication.

Within hours of publication, Time Warner put the entire screed on Pathfinder, its free World Wide Web site on the Internet. Other Web sites followed suit. By day's end, thousands of readers of everything from Joshua Aasgaard's Universe of Knowledge to Stardot Consulting to Wired magazine's Web site HotWired were downloading the text, taking it every bit as seriously as a bomb.

Paula Hayes, an artist who lives in lower Manhattan, went to five newsstands in search of a copy of The Post, only to learn they were sold out. "I was really busy, but I spent the time looking because I thought it was historically important," she said. "He's not the only one for the demise of computers and technology on that level – that it's ruined humanity. I don't know what he wants as a solution, that's what I'm interested to see."

Some people admit only a bit sheepishly that they have read the whole thing. Others plow through it under the guise of helping the investigation.

"A lot of intelligence information will come in," said David W. Holmes, an anti-terrorism consultant who toiled for the FBI for 23 years. Holmes compared the public interest in the bomber's treatise to the TV show "America's Most Wanted," hoping that leads might emerge from ex-acquaintances of the terrorist.

In some circles, among environmental extremists in the Pacific Northwest, for example, the bomber's message rings true enough that some may see him more as seer than as sick killer.

"His critiques of society's failures are right on!" one reader on the Internet wrote late yesterday. "I'll see you guys in alt.fan.unabomber," an Internet news group devoted to the bomber, "where we will discuss the rebirth of the human species."

Richard Grusin, a Georgia Institute of Technology professor who teaches a course on the rhetoric of environmentalism, plans to have his students study the manifesto this term. "In many ways, he sounds like a modern-day Henry David Thoreau," said the professor, whose initial reading of the tract has already identified one direct reference to Thoreau and "many more affinities."

The Unabomber "recognizes that something has gone deeply wrong in this society," said a prominent West Coast author who went to great lengths to get the manifesto, but demanded anonymity for fear of attracting the bomber's attention. "He is a murderous fellow who needs to be caught. On the other hand, do not throw away the document with the felon."

Among conspiracy-minded members of the political fringe, some manage to see the bomber as part of a larger scheme. One Internet writer wanted to know why paragraph No. 116 of the tract was missing. "Was it censored by the FBI for some reason?" (Actually, as a correction in yesterday's Post explained, a typist at the newspaper mistakenly omitted a short passage. The missing lines were published yesterday.)

"I find it well researched and fairly focused," said Tatiana Divens, a former Army ordnance officer who has followed the Unabomber case closely. "He's erudite and lucid, even if he is a maniac."

No matter how persuasive the bomber's arguments, his history of violence disqualifies him from being taken as a serious thinker for many readers. "In the end, it's a long, tedious screed," said William McCarthy, a technology buff and professor of Greek and Latin at Catholic University.

The terrorist writes: "Almost everyone will agree that we live in a deeply troubled society."

Some of those who burrow into the text out of curiosity or voyeurism find something familiar in the Unabomber's anger, in his belief that government has grown too large, the system too complex, the controls on the average person too constricting.

Others think they can figure out what kind of man this is. Hints in the text indicate that the bomber is a '60s kind of guy, with a certain fondness for marijuana, an affinity for gun ownership. He likes the outdoors, probably the deep outdoors. He doesn't like conservatives and he doesn't like liberals. He hates TV. He hates stress. Above all, he hates the system. He's mad as hell and he isn't going to take it anymore.

Few people encountered on the streets of Washington had read more than a bit of the document. Ray Pushkar, a business-suited lawyer, did get through it and found it "well written. It didn't seem crazy."

But Ellie Briscoe, a National Geographic librarian who was on her lunch hour, said, "I don't respect someone who tries to make me believe what he believes in by force."

The Unabomber writes: "...we don't claim that this article expresses more than a crude approximation to the truth."

This touch of self-doubt from the typewriter of a determined, solitary killer has helped make the bomber a hit on the Internet, the computer world where voyeurism and a deep mistrust of authority run rampant.

The Net is governed by an ethic that values the raw, scurrilous and rejected over anything that has been massaged, filtered or improved by self-anointed experts or elites – editors, corporate managers, academics. The previously secret text of an anonymous and dangerous renegade fits in neatly.

Netizens might be forgiven for thinking that the bomber is at some level one of them. He's off the reservation, off the rails. They like that about themselves.

But perhaps he's not too far out there. After all, he reads the New York Times.

Some Internet users believe putting the manifesto on the World Wide Web may help the FBI find the Unabomber.

"This is something a lot of us have been pushing for for a couple of months," said Stewart Brand, a founder of the WELL, a San Francisco-based electronic conferencing service. Brand believes the virtual community – people who know each other through electronic messaging and on-line services – could ferret out the identity of the Unabomber.

Brand says it reminds him of a Frank Zappa concert. Someone threw a bottle of beer at Zappa and the musician stopped the concert until the culprit was found out. As Brand describes it, the attention of the crowd began in the far reaches of the auditorium. They looked toward the origin of the thrown bottle. Then the next wave of people looked toward the spot. Then the people around the bottle thrower looked to the spot. Finally only one person was not looking at anyone else. The security guards hustled him out of the room and the concert continued.

"With any luck," Brand says, "this could happen on the Net." Staff writers Linton Weeks, Judith Weinraub and Phil McCombs contributed to this report. CAPTION: Librarian Ellie Briscoe: "I don't respect someone who tries to make me believe what he believes in by force." CAPTION: Downtown lawyer Ray Pushkar: The Unabomber manifesto was "well written. It didn't seem crazy."

The Ted K Archive

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