

‘His ideas resonate’: how the Unabomber’s dangerous anti-tech manifesto lives on

Ted Kaczynski’s ‘prescient’ views have been praised by Elon Musk and Tucker Carlson – and continue to draw misguided new followers

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The bomb was disguised as a tangle of wooden planks and protruding nails, and when he encountered it in the car park behind his computer-repair store, Gary Wright thought nothing of pushing it from his path.

“I put my thumb and middle finger on the end and moved it,” he recalls. In this way alone, he was lucky. Had he reached over the top, he says, “I’d have no hand.”

The explosion that followed left his body studded with more than 200 pieces of shrapnel, some of it organic material that did not show up in X-rays and could not be surgically removed.

Years later, when shaving or washing his face, “I’d catch something that felt like a whisker, but if I grabbed some tweezers, it’d be like a half-inch piece of wood embedded in there, you know?”

That morning in February 1987, Wright became the latest victim of the “Unabomber”, the terrorist who would be unmasked nine years later as Ted Kaczynski, the mathematics prodigy whose 17-year bombing spree – targeting universities, airlines and others that he linked, however vaguely, to technological progress – killed three people and injured nearly two dozen others. Kaczynski, 81, died by suicide in a North Carolina prison cell on Saturday 10 June.

For years after his attack, Wright had pondered the bomber’s motivation. In 1995, he received an answer in the form of a 35,000-word manifesto that Kaczynski successfully pressured the New York Times and Washington Post into publishing, on the promise that he would stop killing if they did so.

Entitled “Industrial Society and Its Future”, the essay laid out Kaczynski’s nightmarish vision of humanity in an ever tightening embrace with technology that promised comfort and convenience, but left us enfeebled and alienated. “I got a copy,” says Wright. “And I was like: OK, this is not my style of reading. I would periodically glance [at it].”

Among those who also read the manifesto was the bomber’s brother, David, who recognised the monomaniacal style, and contacted the FBI, leading to Kaczynski’s arrest.

Yet over the years, something unexpected happened. Wright began to grow suspicious of the creeping reach of technology. And he became increasingly curious about Kaczynski’s ideas.

“I can look at [the manifesto] and see a lot of value in saying that we have mental health issues because of social media, or gaming, or pick a thing. He kind of warned against that. He also talked about the value of being in nature, which I one thousand percent believe in,” says Wright, who now works as an entrepreneur and life coach.

“I feel like, if you were able to step out of the story of murder ... and say, [he was an] intelligent kid, bullied, had no friends, could see something coming that others didn’t – what value could I take from that?”

His view points to perhaps one of the most perplexing and enduring turns in Kaczynski’s story. Nearly 30 years after it was published in an eight-page insert in the Washington Post, the manifesto is Amazon’s bestselling book in the category of radical

political thought. Another book of his essays is among the website's top 10 books on political philosophy.

TikTok and other platforms abound with clips that intersperse quotes from the manifesto with footage of industrial disasters and pollution, or the logos and CEOs of technology giants. Some users drily refer to "Uncle Ted", or of being "Ted-pilled": a reference to the red pill ingested by the protagonist in the 1999 film *The Matrix* that begins his journey to understanding the true nature of reality. The conservative writer Sohrab Ahmari wrote this week of the disturbing growth of a "Unabomber right" ("bad person, but a smart analysis", Tucker Carlson remarked of Kaczynski in 2021).

After the terrorist's death was announced, the entrepreneur Elon Musk tweeted that Kaczynski "might not be wrong" in his diagnosis that technology had been a disaster for humanity, one of a list of Silicon Valley figures who have praised the clarity of the bomber's reasoning (while condemning his violent acts).

This intense interest in Kaczynski's ideas is not new, says Sean Fleming, a research fellow at the University of Nottingham, who is writing the first book-length study of the Unabomber's ideology, and has spent years combing through archives filled with his journals, letters, drafts, prison correspondence and "even his grocery lists and lists of bomb-making materials," Fleming says.

Kaczynski talks about depression, anxiety, AI, global warming ... His concerns seem prescient in retrospect

At the time that media outlets were considering whether to publish the manifesto, some within the FBI had figured that the tract would be too dense and idiosyncratic to find much purchase among the public. One columnist quipped it was the "Unabomber's yawn". They miscalculated.

"The manifesto certainly had a lot more popular appeal than the FBI anticipated," Fleming says. "It sold out at newsstands within days. There were people frantically calling the Washington Post asking where they could get a copy. Then smaller presses, such as anarchist publishers, started publishing paperback editions and pamphlet versions of it.

"And what was more striking than the quantity of the manifesto was the quality of the coverage," Fleming says. "So columnists would publish comparisons and debates between Kaczynski and some of his victims. They would present the ideas of this terrorist alongside the ideas of an Ivy League professor that he had bombed, and argue about who had the more compelling vision of technological society."

Over the past decade, fascination with Kaczynski and the manifesto has risen again, becoming fodder for a 2021 feature film, *Ted K*, a Netflix documentary, a Discovery Channel drama and an Apple podcast series.

In a world where so few feel they have control over their circumstances, that is saturated in social media and rushing into the age of AI – whether it is ready or not – it is perhaps unsurprising that interest has grown in such an infamous technological critic.

“I think [his ideas] resonate because they seem to respond to some of the crucial problems of our time,” Fleming says. “Kaczynski talks about depression, anxiety, artificial intelligence, global warming, so many things, that so many of his concerns seem prescient in retrospect.”

James R Fitzgerald, an FBI profiler, was assigned to the Unabomber case in 1995 just as the manifesto surfaced, and remembers reading it for the first time. “A lot of his ideas, I couldn’t help but say, ‘Yeah, right.’ Maybe big business is a little too big sometimes, and maybe big government shouldn’t be running amok here. And this was before social media was even popular,” he remembers.

“But the other part of my brain was saying, ‘Look, he’s a killer. He’s a serial killer, we’ve got to get him off the streets.’”

The remote cabin in Montana where Ted Kaczynski lived and built his bombs. Photograph: Sipa/Shutterstock

Much of the embrace of Kaczynski’s ideas is self-serving and selective, Fleming argues. “Hardly anyone who draws on the Unabomber’s ideas accepts the whole package. So different people, with different motivations, pick different ideas and run with them.”

If Kaczynski did raise valid points, he says, it is because he took them from others, including the French sociologist Jacques Ellul, whose 1954 text, *The Technological Society*, electrified the bomber as a young man. “Few of his arguments are actually original,” Fleming says. “He borrowed most of his ideas from fairly mainstream academic authors who would never have condoned his violence.”

“I don’t think we should read Kaczynski as a theorist or philosopher, and try to separate his ideas from his violence,” he says. “He’s a self-described terrorist, and revolutionary, and this is how I read him.”

This distinction is not lost on everyone. In his later years, his prison letters and other writings indicate that Kaczynski had started to attract more hardcore supporters. “It’s clear that there’s a turning point around 2010, where he actually has devoted followers,” Fleming says.

The past decade has seen a rise in anti-technology radicalism, much of it with clear ideological links to the manifesto, Fleming says. European anarchists have attempted to blow up an IBM nanotech facility in Switzerland, shot a nuclear-energy executive in Genoa in 2012, and last August mailed a bomb to the head of an Italian weapons manufacturer.

A group of Mexican “eco-extremists” known as ITS, whose missives lavishly praise Kaczynski, have been targeting scientists since 2011, prompting the brother of one victim to write to the journal *Nature* urging researchers to “take the threat seriously”. A purported member of the group was jailed last year for attempting to detonate a bomb in Edinburgh.

Publishing the manifesto led to Kaczynski’s capture, but it set his ideas free. Was it a mistake? “I stand by it,” says Fitzgerald, who was a leading voice inside the FBI arguing for its publication. “If Kaczynski never did any writings, only sent his bombs to people, he very possibly could still be out there.”

“I say all the time [now], when it’s an unknown suspect, in a case where there’s some writings, put it out there. Someone’s hopefully going to recognise it, and if there’s enough of it, it will also help explain why they’re killing people.”

Over the years, conversing with journalists and supporters from his prison cell, Kaczynski, too, indicated he felt the trade-off had been worth it. “In his earliest writings ... he was trying to organise an anti-tech lobby group before he took his violent turn,” Fleming says. “In [an interview from] 1999, you see him finally taking some comfort that his efforts are paying off. And he’s so much more assured by the 2020s than he is in previous decades.”

The Ted K Archive

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