

Publish or Perish

The Unabomber's treatise on society causes anguish at two newspapers, but may help the FBI

Paul Gray

Aug. 14, 1995

College professors as a rule do not lead swashbuckling lives. But some 50 or 60 of them last week were given a chance to help in the pursuit of the nation's most wanted serial killer. The FBI gave them copies of the notorious Unabomber's 35,000-word screed against technology, the same document the terrorist mailed on June 24 to the New York Times, the Washington Post and Penthouse (which had previously offered to publish it). Since then, both papers have been fretting over the bargain the Unabomber proposed: publish the tract in toto within three months—and promise to make space available afterward when requested—and he will stop sending the lethal package bombs that have killed three and wounded 23 over the past 17 years. Penthouse publisher Bob Guccione, meanwhile, took out a whiny full-page ad in the New York Times last week to convince the Unabomber that publication in Penthouse is a respectable alternative—and to offer the bomber a regular column.

The FBI's decision to enlist professors prompted the Times and the Post to print 3,000-word excerpts of Unabomber prose, treating the document as an item in the news. That approach seems unlikely to mollify the terrorist—but it did provide the public with its first real exposure to his philosophy, which seems to prove a point made by Alexander Pope more than two centuries ago: “A little learning is a dangerous thing.”

The excerpts from “Industrial Society and Its Future” bear the stamp of an earnest thinker who has reinvented the wheel and wonders why nobody is paying attention. Modern life is hard, the Unabomber announces: “The moral code of our society is so demanding that no one can think, feel and act in a completely moral way. For example, we are not supposed to hate anyone, yet almost everybody hates somebody at some time or other, whether he admits it to himself or not.” Why are things so fouled up? “The industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race.”

The Unabomber, who writes as “we” though authorities believe he acts alone, complains that freedom of the press is a sham: “If we had never done anything violent and had submitted the present writings to a publisher, they probably would not have been accepted.” Hence the Unabomber's murderous logic: “In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people.”

On the evidence of the excerpts, the Unabomber is a rather bland but careful writer, fastidious about his grammar; “to be able personally to influence” is his somewhat labored way of avoiding a split infinitive. In another passage, lambasting white liberals who champion black culture, he writes, “But in what does this preservation of African-American culture consist? It can hardly consist in anything more than eating black-style food ...”

The FBI is hoping that one of the professors who read the manuscript will remember a former student who used “consist in” when he meant “consist of,” or that some other grammatical tic will trigger an association leading to the Unabomber's unmasking. Mathematical code breaking is a far more precise science than detective work on lan-

guage. But writing in sufficient samples does betray unique characteristics, including vocabulary range, repeated sentence structures and preferred figures of speech.

“Some professor, if he had this guy, will recognize him,” says John Douglas, a recently retired FBI agent who has been tracking the Unabomber since the late 1970s. “The ideas that this person has would not have changed over the years.” But James Alan Fox, dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University in Boston, is less optimistic. “His thoughts have probably developed and changed from the time he could have been in school in the ’70s,” Fox says. “And how accurate are the memories going to be of those in the academic community who have encountered thousands of graduate students over the past 20 years?” Yet Fox does not fault the FBI’s strategy. “They’re doing the right thing by trying this, he says, “but from where I sit they don’t look all that close to catching him.”

In fact, notes Douglas, the FBI’s efforts to draw the Unabomber further into a written dialogue may provoke him to send another bomb. “The thrill for the serial killer,” he says, “is manipulating and controlling the victim.” Nevertheless, the killer’s prose does seem to be the most promising clue in the case. Already, in ways not disclosed, the manuscript has helped the FBI refocus its search on universities in Chicago; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Berkeley, California. Many of the Unabomber manuscripts were sent to professors in those cities, as well as to academics whose work or ideas are identifiable in his screed. Hope is keen, particularly at the Times and the Post, that one of the academics will make a connection.

The newspapers have until late September to decide whether to publish the bomber’s text in full or let others possibly perish. The Post has reportedly prepared type and graphics to run the document on seven broadsheet pages, but says executive editor Leonard Downie Jr., “We don’t really know what to do. We’re doing a lot of thinking and a lot of talking. It’s obviously agonizing.”

—Reported by Wendy Cole/Chicago, Jenifer Mattos/New York and Elaine Shannon/Washington

A critique of his ideas & actions.



Paul Gray

Publish or Perish

The Unabomber's treatise on society causes anguish at two newspapers, but may help the FBI

Aug. 14, 1995

Time Magazine

www.thetedkarchive.com