

Penpals With Unabomber with David Skrbina

Sean Cole & David Skrbina

Mar 10, 2018

SEAN: I'm Sean Cole sitting in for Dick Gordon. This the story I want to play you this news clip. This from April 3rd, 1996.

NEWSREADER: After 17 years of looking today, FBI agents think they may have finally had a look at the Unabomber. Late this afternoon, Ted Kaczynski was taken from his backwoods cabin, leaving folks in the nearby town of Lincoln stuns. He was just a real quiet guy.

LOCAL PERSON: Just not the guy that I would think would be the Unabomber.

NEWSREADER: Locals say Kaczynski has lived here for about 18 years in his cabin, down a dirt Rd. Today the FBI sealed the area off as they searched his property. Those who have gone to his place say it has no indoor plumbing, no electricity that he grew his own vegetables and had scores of books.

SEAN: I've actually seen that cabin. It's at the museum in Washington DC now it's tiny and you can stick your head in it and smell the same wood he smelled. Those are the kinds of details that stick around about this story, and most people will remember that Kaczynski wrote a manifesto. Though, and maybe even that he strong armed to the New York Times and the Washington Post into publishing it, saying he wouldn't stop sending bombs through the mail until some respectable publication did so. But what I'd forgotten and maybe never knew was what was in that manifesto. It was called Industrial Society and its future all about how technology ruins. Our minds and our lives, and destroys the natural world. World, given how Kaczynski went about disseminating that message, it's easy to dismiss it as insanity, but lots of non murderous philosophers espouse the same thing, including a professor at University of Michigan named David Skrbina over the past 10 years. Skrbina Kaczynski have been writing letters to each other about the dangers of technological advancement. They even published a lot of that writing in a kind of anthology of Kusinski's work. All of which raised a couple of questions for us chiefly. Is that OK? Can you both reject what Kaczynski did and endorse and even support his theories? So we got ahold of David Skrbina started by asking him about their letters.

DAVID: The letters the 1st letter I wrote to him was in late 2003. I was teaching a course in environmental ethics and one of the root causes of environmental damage is technology, so I was. Pursuing that. The area of interest to what extent and how precisely does technology impact the environment. It was about the same time that I was developing a new course at University of Michigan on the philosophy of technology. So I was compiling arguments pro and con historical critiques looking at what philosophers had thought over over history about technology and then up to the current times. I was curious, even the most recent critics, what they were thinking and saying so. That naturally raised the question of Kaczynski, his manifesto, which I obviously had read when it came out in 1996.

SEAN: When it was published by the New York Times and the Washington Post, exactly.

DAVID: And I had known that this was 2003, so this was several years after he was incarcerated. Several years after his trial, which lingered on for about a year after he was arrested and we heard really almost nothing from him or about him. So I'd heard somehow rumblings that he was still active. He was still writing, he was still corresponding with people, and I was curious what that process was like, and. I was pretty sure I wasn't going to get that from the mainstream media, so I said, well, the only way to know what's going on. Is I have to write? To him myself, so I wrote directly to him in late 2003. Not really expecting answer. And having no experience writing to prisoners before.

SEAN: Do you remember what you?

DAVID: Said I just introduced myself I I told him who I was I had a PhD in philosophy. I had also have a Masters degree in mathematics from University of Michigan, and of course Ted Kaczynski has his math degree from University of Michigan. So we had that in common. I told him I was a philosopher. Now working in the philosophy of technology and I had several questions and. It was just general things, did he? Because I knew nothing? Did he admit to writing the manifesto? Did he have any assistance? What was this cryptic acronym, FC? What did this stand for? What was life like in a supermax prison? I didn't know any of those things and among those other things I also asked him about writings. So I said.

SEAN: Is is he still writing, I mean.

DAVID: Yeah, so at this was in 2003 right? So I was asking him, are you still writing? Are you active? Are you able to correspond and if so can you tell me something? And again, I was expecting no answer. But it was only about two or three weeks later I got a short one page letter from him. Back saying thanks. For your letter, they were good questions. And I will write you a longer. Letter soon wait.

SEAN: I'm curious as to what that envelope looks like and it arrives in your mailbox. Were you surprised to look at the name in the?

DAVID: Yeah, yeah, absolutely it was. It was kind of a jaw-dropping experience the first time. You know, I sent the letter from my university and of course my return address was the university so it came there.

SEAN: Upper left hand corner.

DAVID: So one day my university mailbox. Here's this letter. It's he has to hand write my address. He hand writes his return address and it says Ted Kaczynski on the outside. So obviously I do immediately what it was. So yeah, it was really sort of a shocking event to even get this letter. From from this. Guy so it was. Yeah, I like I said, I really did not expect to hear anything at all or maybe get a letter from the prison. The Bureau of Prisons saying correspondence is not allowed or something.

SEAN: Right?

DAVID: But they let the letter through and they let the response through and. About two weeks after that, he sent along. I think it was about a 25 page handwritten letter elaborating on all my dozen or so questions that I had had asked.

SEAN: Him, oh, so he just sort of needed to. The first letter was like a stopgap like I need to gather my thoughts. It's going to take me a while to like, point by point, respond to do you want to know?

DAVID: Yeah they were. I had asked them several, potentially lengthy and involved kind of questions and I made some disclaimer. Like feel free to not answer any of these if it's inappropriate or if you're not comfortable or whatever, but he addressed almost all of them and yeah, I. Was kind of like give me a little bit of time, I'm. I'm going to gather my thoughts and he wrote a lengthy reply. So that kicked off the correspondence and then we've been going back and forth ever since.

SEAN: How did it develop? Like how often? Would you guys write to each other and?, and were you always writing with? The idea that one day you might put it in a book from the beginning, or did it just start like hey, here's a couple of guys of well. Like mine in one way anyway.

DAVID: Yeah, well right? I mean, I guess it's important to point out that I had anti technological leanings for a long time. This, far longer back than I had ever heard of a Kaczynski or a Unabomber or anything like this so I was already sympathetic with his arguments. I was impressed with the case that he presented in the manifesto. It was very rational and academic. And so I was curious to press him on some of those points I was familiar with. The arguments I knew that they were valid. I knew that there were in fact serious problems with tech. Technology and so the thrust of my letters was to sort of challenge him and say, well, what would you say about this and what would you say about that? And someone might challenge your critique of technology in this. Way and how would you respond here can.

SEAN: You give us one example. Yeah, let's see so.

DAVID: He says in short, we have more freedom than ever before to have fun, but we can't intervene significantly in the life and death issues that hang over. Us such issues are kept firmly under the control of large organizations, hence our deprivation with respect to the power process, which requires that we have serious goals and the power to reach those goals through our own. This was his first reason. He goes on. He says. The second core reason why things are becoming worse is that there is no way to prevent technology from being used in harmful ways, especially because the ultimate consequences of any any given application of technology commonly cannot be predicted. Therefore the harm cannot be foreseen until it is too late.

SEAN: It's pretty thick.

DAVID: He was writing to me I, I think with a mind that yes, probably someday. This would appear in print. This would be published. He's writing it, it. It was a polished, well written piece. This not just off the top of his head, he I. I think as far as I know he will write out a draft letter. He will mark it up and then he will carefully

hand write the final letter that I see. Yeah, so in a sense I'm getting edited and carefully prepared statements by him.

SEAN: That's interesting.

DAVID: So the letters were more or less, a finished, mini essay that was ready to go to be published. I don't know if he had that in mind all the time I, I suspect he did. I did not really have that idea in mind. Until we got through about 50 letters and then there was a yeah 50 or so over the first couple of years. And then there was enough interesting material there, along with the new essays that he had written that he had sent sent to me. And then I suggested I said, well, there's a lot of there's a lot of interesting stuff here. You know you've got the original manifesto that he wanted to correct because there was some a number of small errors and changes that were needed to be made in the original version. So I knew he wanted to fix the manifesto. He had the unpublished essays. I said, we've got several pages of interesting material from these letters. I said this would be interesting material. For a book.

SEAN: Oh so the book was your idea.

DAVID: Well, I as I recall I mentioned it. I think I was the first, but he responded. He said yes. I was thinking something along those lines.

SEAN: Already you guys are so calsey welsey and you're like finishing each other's sentences over there.

DAVID: I don't know if it was quite that close. It's a kind of an academic back and forth trying to build a case. You know for the need for change in a technological society.

SEAN: Do the letters ever lapse into the casual or the personal? Does he ever ask you like how your family's doing?

DAVID: Very rarely, occasionally, if something comes up, I might mention a personal event, maybe a vacation that delayed me for some reason. I might mention a little event like I recall, one time. Of course, my family was aware of these letters coming from the Unabomber, and my wife was quite interested intrigued, but I have two daughters also. And one time my younger daughter was about, I think, 10 years old at the time and was old enough to understand that this was, a killer that dad was corresponding with and she was a little bit upset about this situation and the. I recall mentioning that in a letter to Kaczynski and I said something like, what would you say to a 10 year old girl to assuage her concerns about? You know, Dad communicating with someone like this and. You know, he answered something like yeah, what? What could you say he didn't really know what to say. I have no real real response.

SEAN: You know it's oh man, I was so on the edge of my seat there like waiting.

DAVID: No, I wish I wish yeah, no I. I mean. It was, it was all he said, well, what can you say? How can you respond to a, say, a child who understands that there's these issues you're dealing with someone who's a convicted murderer? But these are still very important issues that need to be talked about. And it was part of this larger discussion of separating the crimes from the arguments against technology. And so I

mean, this an issue I dealt with, not with just my children, but, with colleagues and friends and people I talk with.

SEAN: All the time and how do you should you compartmentalize those two things? The ideas and the. Iams Ted Kaczynski, theorist and Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. We'll get into that next I'm Sean Cole, from APM, American public media. This the story. I'm Sean Cole sitting in for **** Gordon. This the story we're weighing over a pretty sticky ethical question the show today. David Skrbina, a philosophy professor at the University of Michigan, has been pen pals for 10 years with the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski. Skrbina says the correspondence is strictly intellectual and academic. Both of them are interested. In the philosophy of technology or more against technology, trying to build a case that technology hurts society physically mentally. Et cetera. What we got into while were. Talking was the. Obvious is encouraging Kaczynski's ideas and even helping him publish a new book is that a tacit, at least endorsement of his having killed and terrorized people with mail bombs.

DAVID: Well, right, so this a basic question and. You know there's different ways to answer that. One we know throughout history that various people have advocated violence or have convicted crimes, and academic people still write about them. They still correspond with them and they still publish books and so forth, so corresponding with or writing about convicted. Killers is not particularly new or radical. What's unusual in Kaczynski's case is because he's completely rational, at least relative to the technology question. He's able to engage in an academic and intelligent debate. And the arguments. The basic case that he builds against technology. I think really is separable from his individual personal criminal actions, which In no way support those I don't. I don't condone killing anyone, obviously, and would never recommend anyone undertake bombings or anything like this, but because.

SEAN: But how are they separable?

DAVID: Well, because the argument against technology has nothing to do with. Killing anyone the need for revolt is not necessarily a violent revolt. Kaczynski talks about that several times. He says a revolution against technological society need not be violent. There is a definite role for nonviolence. In the revolution.

SEAN: And I have to jump in and say, I, I wish he had taken that route, but he did, right?

DAVID: Well, as far as I can tell, he views himself as a kind of a special case because he was trying to break into the public eye to present to this case against technology which he felt was being ignored and no one else. Was doing this so. His own justification is he had to commit the crimes to gain the infamy to force the publication of the manifesto.

SEAN: And what do you make?

DAVID: Of that I yeah I think either the case is it would something like the manifesto either would have not been published, or it would have been published in some small radical journal somewhere which has a circulation of 100 people. You know it certainly would have had no effect. There was no. In a technological society in a

mass media system to fundamentally challenge the technological basis for society or for media. So I think he's pretty much I think he's correct to think that his manifesto would not have been published. Or if it had, it would have had absolutely minimal effect and his intention was to get maximum effect and he says the only way this argument can really. Really debated understood as if it really is thrust into the public eye in a very large way, and arguably that was the only way that a single individual could force that event to happen, and to that extent he succeeded. He was able to force the publication of the manifesto. I think 1.2 million people bought the newspaper that day. I. I think it's still a. An all time record for a single day's newspaper sales was the day that the manifesto was published.

SEAN: I mean, but that does make it sound in a way like a condoning of what he did like an end. Justify justify the means calculation, yeah?

DAVID: Well, I guess I don't really take any position that. I mean I recognized that he had limited ability to publish it. He took possibly the only option he had and it succeeded, so I guess I just view that as a statement of fact. You know, I wouldn't recommend that anyone else take that same approach. I certainly wouldn't take that same approach when I publish ideas. I do it in the standard. Academic way. So I view his, his past events as just sort of this was his personal approach. He chose to do it to the extent that he did. It succeeded and there it is. It's published, it's in the public eye. You can't change the past, and the question is what do? We do now, so this a guy who.

SEAN: I mean held the media hostage, held American Society hostage. Basically saying if you don't publish my ideas, I'll keep killing people. And if you publish my ideas. In a magazine that I don't. Actually approve of, I'll reserve the right. To kill one more person, at least. So saying, what like. Well, his ideas are legitimate and they should be out. There seems to be a kind of legitimizing of how he got them out there in that. If you're saying they should be out there, they have to be. Out there it's good. That they were paid attention to. Then I don't know in a way it's like. We're it's like. Publishing a whole new book of his seems to be saying what you did actually was, right? Because it because it got these good ideas in the public eye. Do ?

DAVID: What I mean, no? I mean, I understand the point and I. You know, I. Appreciate the moral complexity involved. I mean, I teach ethics as well, so I. I don't do this lightly. But again, it's a question of what can be gained from. And admittedly, bad situation, and I think we do. We do ourselves no favors. We do humanity, no favors, and our children no favors by ignoring this guy and saying, well he committed a crime and therefore we ought never to talk about him. We ought to pretend that the manifesto was never published, and we ought never deal with these issues in a serious way. You know it's not the only way to talk about these issues. This has been another sort of criticism. Someone could say, well, why don't you? Talk about the. Problems of technology in a in a context where. You don't have to bring in consensus.

SEAN: I was going to say like I mean at. The very least, it's a terrible PR choice, Sir. Can you not? Find a thinker who didn't kill somebody. Yourself, I would point out, or a thinker who did not kill somebody who has passes the same ideas.

DAVID: Well, it's true. I mean, there are other contexts when we, when we could bring in these arguments up. For example, many of Kaczynski's main arguments are drawn from Jacques in his book *The Technological Society* which was published in English in 1964. Originally in French in 1954, so yeah, certainly we could have a discussion about the pros and cons of Jacqueline thick thick book and some of his, academic arguments which mirror in many ways Kozinski's. But It's even thicker or more academic than Kaczynski. As you can imagine, a little as a French intellectual. You know, philosopher fellow. So that's not likely to engage the public. You know, I can certainly engage fellow philosophers of technology in arguments about Alloul or Heidegger, who are sort of prominent critics of technology and that goes on. But you certainly would have never heard about that, and the public at large would never heard about that. And people in other disciplines certainly would not be engaging in obscure academics like Ellul or Heidegger. So because he's taking these arguments and he's put them very, very clearly very understatedly, but very forcefully in a in a more. Common wide-ranging context that other philosophers have not. Done, I'm not aware of anybody else who has stated the case against technology so forcefully and concisely in an accessible way as Kaczynski has. So it's not like I can choose from 10 other people who've done an equally good job and why am I picking on the one who's the killer? You know there are very few people. Who have done that?

SEAN: But like industrial society and its future was written when.

DAVID: It was, yeah it was written over a period of time. We don't know exactly what. Presumably early 90s and it right, so it shows up in 1995, so that's OK, I mean. But even then, right? So people were not doing extensive emailing in the early 90s, there were we didn't have cell phones. You know we didn't have. We didn't have cases of Internet addiction. We're not appearing in the 1990s, so.

SEAN: Well, does Theodore Kaczynski sort of understand can. He get the full. Weight of how the Internet has changed since 1996 from a prison cell.

DAVID: I, I think so because he stays in contact with current media. I help to keep him informed when new news reports and studies come out. So I try to communicate those to him. You know, people are just beginning to understand the negative sides. We always understand the positive sides, which is what you were talking about earlier. We understand the benefits of. Of e-mail and having Internet and so forth, but we really aren't grasping in a serious way the many psychological, physical and even moral problems that are introduced by a high tech Internet based society, which is what we're.

SEAN: Living in today. We're not grasping it to the point where we would. What turn back the clock?

DAVID: Look well right because we don't understand the extent of the problem. You know. I mean, just I've been keeping track of these of these of these harms that

are that are caused to humans. We have evidence that says that our brains are being altered by interacting with the Internet they have. They have data that says the Gray matter in the brain has been shrinking by 10 to 20% and people who are heavy. Internet use. You know we have we have problems of IQ being affected by e-mail interaction. You know we have just more fundamental things like electromagnetic fields that are causing impacts to our immune system. And evidence that it's affecting asthma and causing miscarriages. And various kinds of cancers. Cell phones have been in the news for years about doubts about what that's doing to our brains and our bodies. So I think people only vaguely hear from time to time they'll hear one little story will hit the news and something about cell phones will come up.

SEAN: Right?

DAVID: Or cell phones and children, which is particularly sensitive and that gets in the news for a day or two and then it sort of goes away and we tend to forget about these problems are building up and building and building over time. And when you look at the big picture, which almost nobody's doing, it's really an impressive story of harm and damage. That's that's severe and growing, and we don't know where this process is leading, and we can do almost nothing to stop it. That's the.

SEAN: Have you have? You ever other than what you said about about what? What would you say to a 10 year old girl? Have you ever addressed the killings and bombings in your correspondence with him? Have you ever asked him about it? No, no, never, no.

DAVID: I remarked I think even in one of my early letters that I made some comment to the extent that I'm sure he has an interesting past life and his own motivations for things are, I'm sure, interesting in their own way. But I told them explicitly I was not really interested in that. I'm a philosopher of technology and I'm interested in the problem of technology. And I think that's what he wants to do. I think he's not particularly interested in talking about, his background, his motivation, killing people. He has no interest in doing that. If were to get into the specifics of that, that's probably something where the Bureau of Prisons would intervene and they would not allow communication that anyway, so. We're really focusing on technology.

SEAN: Do you think the prison is reading your letter?

DAVID: Absolutely they read every letter that goes in and they read every letter that goes out.

SEAN: And how did you approach what publisher are you? Are you with technological slavery? In this new book?

DAVID: Yeah, It's through a small publisher on the West Coast Feral House publisher.

SEAN: Feral like a wild animal.

DAVID: Yes, like a feral pig and feral house publishers so they do Feral House does a variety of interesting, let's say off mainstream sort of publications, and I'm not even familiar with all the. There's they're they do, social critiques and commentaries and religious criticisms and so forth. So they're interested in kind of unusual and

challenging, and otherwise untouchable topics. So I think this was a good. Fit for feral house.

SEAN: Ohh I see. So it's not like if it's not like it would be if you went with Canon for Penguin and you're like having to sort of I don't know. Do some a bit of creative convincing like no, this a scholarly work, and it's not. You know it's not a manifesto of like let's all return to the caves. The bombings or anything like that.

DAVID: Yeah, actually. In the early days of the of the. Book process we I. Actually did approach some of the major book publishers. And it was. It was a very interesting process which repeated itself more than once. The initial contact person, the acquisition editor at the publisher said. Wow, this a very interesting idea. You have unpublished by essays by Kaczynski you have letters by Kaczynski. That's a very interesting project. Let me think about it and then a week later the letter comes back and says my superiors decided that we can't talk about this. We cannot publish this top on this topic. It repeated itself time and time again. How many?

SEAN: Did you approach?

DAVID: Oh, probably a dozen major publishers.

SEAN: Oh wow.

DAVID: So yeah, in almost every case, like I say, it was that same pattern initial, very, very interested. And then the superiors, the supervisors decided no, we won't go forward with. This, even though it was, even though we had promised, Kosinski gets no money from this script and it gets. Do you get this?

DAVID: No money from. Ohh, either no, I get I get no money I get no money from my.

SEAN: Wouldn't get money. Where would the go?

DAVID: The money would have gone to the publisher or the publisher could have volunteered to donate it. In fact, the publisher Ferrell House donates a significant portion of their profits to the American Red Cross, for example. So nobody's in this for the money, because Inski gets no money, I get no money from this. It was just about getting the ideas out in circulation. So . People could not claim profit, profit motive. I guess the publisher would make some money and maybe they felt too guilty about profiting off of Kaczynski because they would have been the only one who would have profited from his ideas. It wasn't cause and it wasn't me, so maybe they just was too much guilt for them to. To be the ones who are making money.

SEAN: I don't know, I would kind of understand that. Are you gonna mention this interview to Ted Kaczynski?

DAVID: I may I may. I mean, I talked to various people at. Various times about. You know his work and our interaction. So yeah, I mean if it comes up, if it's relevant, I'll I'll. Bring it up to.

SEAN: Him do. Do you get the sense that the publishers may have? So I read the Chronicle of Higher Education article about about. Your correspondence with Tuczynski and about the new book and the and the reporter raised the idea. That there are people who are like Andrew's bearing. Brevik who bombed public building

and shot up a camp in Norway and cited Kaczynski and that there are other people who like possibly would be inspired by. Ted Kaczynski saying well he has. These ideas, we agree with them. These were his tactics, maybe maybe.

DAVID: Yeah, well you could. There's two things to be said in response to that. Someone who is able and willing to kill people doesn't need a Ted Kaczynski to prompt them to do that. They know how to do that on their own, and if they're going to proceed, they'll proceed. So that's one thing. The second thing is the arguments and the writings. Nothing talks about or even suggests a violent course of action, so there's nothing in the manifesto. There's nothing in technological slavery that incites, or suggests suggests violence as a course of action. It's a philosophical analysis of the situation that we're in and of the need of some kind of revolutionary action to bring to an end industrial society and it's left it.

SEAN: Society well, but what else does revolutionary action mean? Like how else would you destabilize a society?

DAVID: Well, exactly well. I was my thought is we actually need a follow up book called The Practical Revolutionary so that we can sort of articulate and understand what it means on multiple levels from even very passive levels, like not running out and buying the latest iPod. Or not buying the latest laptop, even just withholding your support for technology. In the present, as a kind of a revolutionary act in its own small way, that the damage caused people physically and psychologically, it's a tremendous range of psychological problems, Internet addiction and stress related to Internet use and there's a phenomenon of Facebook depression. We have something like 50% of American adults have at least one symptom of mental illness. You know autism rates are up. A bipolar disorder is up by 4000% over the last decade. You know this not coincidental. These things are correlated and probably causally linked to interacting with technology in a very severe way. It's causing real suffering and real damage to people in their daily lives, so the sooner we understand these problems, we. The sooner we can connect them to our technological existence, the better we have a chance of remedying these things. Of, getting to the root cause of people suffering and to moving society in a positive direction.

SEAN: Professor David Skrbina. I know I don't have to say this because I'm sure a lot of you are. Doing so as I speak, but. Right to us, we're really interested to hear what you think on this one and always we're at thestory.org. I'm Sean Cole from APM, American public media. This the story.

The Ted K Archive

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Mar 10, 2018

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