We Were The Unabomber

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Contents

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

It is true, for the record, that the FBI came to the Council of the Society for Social Studies of Science to distribute *Playboy* magazine.

I arrived at the office of the FBI in September 1994 a bit worried. I never even knew they had one in Baton Rouge. On the top floor of a building at the outskirts of town, through a security system, I entered a sparse room with a desk and two chairs. No high intensity lamp, thank you. My main thought was that I was going to tell them the complete truth, and deny everything—I simply could not fathom the reason for their interest in me, a law-abiding academic whose vagrancy was purely intellectual, without noticeable social consequences.

The gentleman who ushered me into the room was a Southern agent of the FBI.

"You know about the Unabomber? No? You might have heard there have been a string of mail bombs sent over the years since the late 1970s and we think they all come from the same individual. Recently he's become active again."[1]

"I think I remember reading something in *The New York Times* about that. He's the one who sends bombs to professors? Some computer guy at Yale?" I'm OK now. It's not me they're after.

"Yes. That's him. The FBI has been trying to track this bomber for about sixteen years and we have very few leads."

"It must be near impossible to catch someone who sends bombs in the mail, when your evidence explodes." This is foolish. Don't kid around with the FBI.

"Not typically, but in this case, yes. Most people who send explosives through the postal system are revenge-minded. So the recipients usually have an idea who's sent them the package. There's evidence lying around. When you're out to get someone there's part of you wants 'em to know who sent it. We usually catch these guys. But this Unabomber is different. It's hard to see the pattern here. There's not an obvious revenge motive. The victims don't have much in common with each other. It seems like he's moved from the Chicago and Northeast areas to the West Coast, but we don't have much to go on except the hardware."

"The hardware?"

"Yes, the bombs themselves. And they're getting better."

"How do you mean?"

"They're getting smaller and more powerful. I've studied some of the technology myself and taken courses in explosives. He makes most of the parts by hand—he doesn't buy them off the shelf. He really spends a lot of time, painstakingly making

[1] After a period of six years without an incident, a bomb in a padded manila envelope injured Dr. Charles Epstein in California on June 22, 1993. Two days later David Gelernter, a Yale computer scientist, was injured in the same fashion. The joint meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science, the History of Science Society, and the Philosophy of Science Association was held in New Orleans, Louisiana, October 12–16, 1994. On December 10, 1994, Thomas Mosser, an advertising executive, was killed at home in New Jersey by a package bomb.

each piece and fitting them together. I can tell you this. I wouldn't want to try to defuse one myself. They're good. He's getting more dangerous."

"So how are you going to catch this guy at all? What can you tell about him just from the bombs?" I'm excited, though a bit surprised. Who would have thought that the FBI knew about the encoding of social identity in technological products? They probably have sophisticated criminological routines to decipher the residues of humans in hardware, and maybe even the symbolic traces of social status. This is going to be really good.

"He leaves initials in all his bombs: 'FC.' It might be his initials, but probably he wouldn't do something that obvious. Some people think it means 'Fuck Computers.'"

"That's what you have to go on? Just 'FC?'" I didn't see how they were going to catch a bomber with that.

"That and two letters he sent with the bombs. We'd like you to take a look at the letters."

"How do you have letters when the packages blew up?"

"They might have been sent separately, or they could be attached to the outside of the package so the victims would open up the packages themselves. These people weren't killed—he's only killed one person so far—they were injured. We don't really know if he intends to kill or just maim the recipients. But as I say, it may be that he just didn't know how to put a very powerful explosive in a letter. Now he does."

"I have to admit I'm curious why you're asking *me* to read the letters."

"Look. We've talked to a lot of people. We're kind of at a loss. The main team of investigators is out in California and somehow they got your name from someone. Do you know Harriet Zuckerman? She said you might be able to help."

"Of course. She used to be president of the Society for Social Studies of Science. You think it has something to do with us?"

"We don't know. We've talked to thousands of people by this time. We may have even talked to the Unabomber already. Just read these and tell me your impression of the letters."

The first letter was short. It had been mailed in June 1980 to Percy Wood, president of United Airlines, in Lake Forest, Illinois. It served as an enticement to open a package containing the novel *Ice Brothers* by Sloan Wilson. The bomb that injured Mr. Wood was inside the book. The deconstructionists at the FBI had begun to wonder about environmental symbolism.

There was simply no denying the excitement. A murder case and the FBI wants your help? This was not textual analysis for the social study of science. This was important.

Much as I wanted to devour the novel and solve the mystery, I supposed the FBI had read it. And they would be better at the clues thing. Plus, I was at a loss with the Wood letter. The perpetrator is violent and builds intricate bombs. So it's a guy. A radical of some sort that hates corporate bigwigs? That narrows it down to a few million.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's a very short letter. It's hard to tell much, isn't it?"

He handed me the second letter. Less than a page long, it contained five paragraphs, three substantial. The letter was attached to a package, again a lure, in this case to open what the writer claimed was a dissertation. It was, in fact, a ream of paper hollowed out to conceal a bomb. On delivery it injured a research assistant to Dr. James McConnell at the University of Michigan. McConnell—was it the infamous wormcutter?[2] The FBI agent said he didn't know—but the man was a well-known writer of psychology textbooks, emeritus now.

"What we know is this McConnell was working on the latest revision of his book just a few weeks before he got the bomb. He had a long list of people who had used it, folks who he wanted to read it before he sent it off to the publisher. That could be important, because when he sent his book to these people he sent a letter with it. Some of them in California think the language in this letter is similar to what's in the letter to McConnell. The bomb came not long afterward."

"You think it's one of these people on McConnell's list?"

"We don't know. We've talked to them, more than once."

As I began to read the letter to McConnell, I smiled— "I am a doctoral candidate ... field ... history of science ... development of behavioral science ... more than a collection of facts." I quickly stifled the smile. How is an FBI consultant supposed to act? A smile would not do for a sleuth, and this was a crime of murder. Besides, I thought, now that I'm an insider in this investigation, I've got to learn the ropes. Of course, I wasn't an insider, as it transpired, but a suspect, like everyone else. Still, suspects help with the investigation, as any fan of Columbo knows.

As I continued reading I couldn't conceal it. I began to chuckle. Maybe I even laughed as I read.

> I am attempting to analyse the factors in society at large that tend to promote vigorous development in a given area of science, and especially I am attempting to shed light on the way in which progress in a particular field of research influences public attitudes toward that field in such a manner as to further accelerate its development, as through research grants, increased interest on the part of students, and so forth.

A bad run-on, but never mind. He's interested in the reciprocal effects of discovery reports and public support of scientific research? Too weird.

> I have selected the behavioral sciences for study because I believe that they illustrate particularly well my hypotheses concerning the interaction of science and society.

The *interaction of science and society*? I looked up at the agent.

[2] The letter and package mailed from Salt Lake City, Utah, were addressed to the Ann Arbor, Michigan, home of James McConnell. It was opened by Nick Suino, an assistant to McConnell.

"Maybe you already know this. This paragraph of the letter sounds like some kind of abstract for one of our annual meetings. Nothing particularly good, mind you." Like I'm going to admit an interest to an FBI agent investigating a murder?

He seemed to brighten. "An abstract?"

"It's a kind of brief summary of something, like an article or book."

"It sounds like something at one of your meetings?"

"Well, not necessarily, but it could be. It's the kind of stuff people in our field are interested in. The 'interaction of science and society' is what the field is all about. And he does claim he's into the history of science. I should say, it's called the 'society for social studies of science,' but people are equally interested in technology." Always take the opportunity to witness, when you have it.

"Technology and science. And society. What kinds of technology?"

"All kinds of technology." It dawns on me. "Not explosives."

"Why not explosives?"

"OK. Someone could be studying that, but I don't know of anyone. It's not a very common thing to study, at any rate." Of course, we were preparing to give the Fleck Prize to the author of a book on nuclear missiles, but no need to mention that just at the present time.

"Who are these people?"

"See, these are mostly academics. There are people from the private sector, and from government, and other places. But mostly academics. We study science and technology, particularly their social aspects. Some people study what goes on in laboratories. Some people study the careers of scientists. Some study science and engineering organizations. Some study what effects technology has on society. I've spent the summer in Africa, looking at the way scientific research is organized in developing countries. Just a whole bunch of things. The thing about it is, these are not generally the kind of people who could make a bomb. Me, for instance, I couldn't make a bomb if I had to. I can't even do the wiring in my own house. Absolutely inept when it comes to technology. I just study it." Maybe I was overdoing it bit.

"You just study technology. You don't build anything."

"Not at all. Mostly these are sociologists, historians, anthropologists, political scientists. Some philosophers, but mostly social scientists."

"So nobody who could build a bomb?"

"There's an exception to this. Some people in the field—I couldn't say how many—are ex-scientists. That is, they got their degree in some scientific or technological field, maybe they worked as a physicist or something, then they got interested in social aspects of science. So those people could build a bomb, I guess. How hard are they to make?"

"Not that hard. Some are real easy in fact. But you do need to be fairly skilled to make the kind of thing we're talking about here. Now what about the language the Unabomber uses? Is it similar to what McConnell wrote to people when he gave them his textbook?" He handed me the earlier letter.

"There are some similar phrases. But they're pretty common. They wouldn't have to be copied from the earlier letter. You just tend to say phrases like this when you send someone a draft. You have to ask them to read it, right?"

"So you don't think it might be from one of these folks in your group? Maybe a professor-type?"

"I suppose it could be. I'm not going to rule it out. But analyzing this isn't really my specialty. Are you interested mainly in the similarities between the two letters? That would be what we call 'textual analysis,' or 'discourse analysis.' We have quite a few people who are good at that. You could talk to them. Or are you interested in people who study the history of behavioral science in the twentieth century? That would be a different group. You think this guy could really be some kind of academic who studies science and society?"

"We don't know. I don't think we've talked to anyone about it, but I'm really not central to the investigation. Maybe we need to get some people down and talk more about this letter."

"They should come soon, because we're having a big joint meeting of the professional societies in New Orleans. It's the first one in eight years, and it starts in two weeks. You have historians of science, philosophers of science, people at 4S from a lot of different fields who look at science and society issues. You should come if you want to get in touch with a lot of people very quickly."

"Someone will be there. I'll call California to arrange it. We'll be in touch."

That will teach SHOT to miss our joint meeting, I thought.[3]

The agent would not let me take copies of the letters from the office. He did, however, write down the names of the alleged senders of the two letters: Enoch W. Fischer (to Wood) and Ralph C. Kloppenburg (to McConnell). Kloppenburg. Can't place it.

I returned to my Louisiana State University (LSU) office and sat. Just sat. This is too exciting to work. What do I do? Should I call Harriet Zuckerman? Should I call Sal Restivo, the current president? Should I tell someone? No. An FBI consultant plays it close to the vest. I'll try to work.

No luck.

I'll go to lunch.

I got up to leave, passing a file cabinet next to the door. On it were several books for the library. I hadn't read them but they were overdue. You know how it is.

At the sight of the top book I stopped, amazed. *First the Seed: The Political Economy of Plant Biotechnology* . Published in 1988, and winner of the Merton Prize given by the Science, Knowledge, and Technology (SKAT) section of the American Sociological Association (ASA). Written by Jack Ralph Kloppenburg, Jr.

Whoa. Now be cool. Am I lucky, or what?

I called the number I had been given for the California office. "Postal inspector's office," said the voice on the other end.

[3] SHOT is the acronym for the Society for the History of Technology.

"Postal inspector?"
"Yes. Can I help you?"
"Oh. Sure. 'Postal Inspector.' Right. May I speak to postal inspector X?"
For the next couple of weeks I thought it was a cover.

New Orleans

In New Orleans, I met with the postal inspector—who was, in fact, a postal inspector—and a young agent of the FBI. It was two days before the meeting began at the old Clarion Hotel on Canal Street, near the French Quarter. They would be at the hotel much of the week. Since one of them had never been to New Orleans before, I advised them to arrive early. Would I like to have dinner on them and discuss their strategy for the week? Certainly. Perhaps they would like to dine at the Palace Cafe, an elegant but inexpensive city restaurant. OK. Not too inexpensive.

The agents were friendly and knowledgeable. One of them had been working on the case for all these years. It was as if he had spent half of his professional career chasing one guy, a modern Moriarty. They asked what they needed to do to attend the conference. Should they use their real names?

"You don't have to," I said. "But you have to pay the registration fee."

The next day they asked me about the letter again, and I learned that the FBI was going to subpoena the 4S membership roster, as they would later do for History of Science Society (HSS). Did they really want to do that? It seemed silly. After all, we have a directory that is available. It's to protect you, as well as the Society, they said—just in case you wind up as the subject of a lawsuit. It seemed to me this whole thing was going in the wrong direction.

On the day of the council meeting we met for breakfast with Sal Restivo. Noted anarchist. Then president of 4S. The agents' main objectives, so far as we could tell, were to follow up any leads that might arise regarding the letter, to find out whether science and technology studies had anything to do with the case, to meet people. They continued to be interested in both the similarities with the McConnell letter and the potential clues in the Unabomber letter itself. We could introduce them to a variety of people, true. But what of the council meeting? It might be interesting to try an experiment.

The idea was simple, but to their knowledge it had not been tried. We reasoned that during the course of the inquiry they had shown the letter to many people, but never shown it blind. That is, the context was always a variant of, "we're investigating a serial bomber and we'd like to show you something he wrote." While such an approach undoubtedly generates interest—as well as anxiety—it seemed to us that it might not be the only way of approaching people. Especially if the question concerned the occupational identity of the author. Something new might be learned by showing the letter without declaring the identity of the author in advance. Simply show it, and

ask about the author. The 4S Council might be good for the purpose. After all, they know something about science and society. Collectively they are acquainted with a large number of people. Moreover, they were all going to be in one place. The agents agreed.

I did, of course, take the minutes as usual, but cannot report this last agenda item, as my notes left the room with the agents and did not return. But others can testify to that meeting.

Sal andI distributed the McConnell letter to the members of council at the end of the meeting. Such behavior was mildly unusual in context, eliciting curiosity, but also a useful discussion of the letter. What struck me was that no one thought there was anything especially odd about the letter. No one ventured that the identity of the writer was anyone other than who he claimed to be—a graduate student at the University of Utah, interested in the history of behavioral science. This, in the course of a number of substantive remarks about the project: "it's not really cutting edge"; "it doesn't seem like this person is really very well connected to the rest of the field"; "the student is not really up on what has been happening in the field during the past few years"; "I wonder who the advisor is?"

The agents waited in a bedroom adjoining the council meeting room—without listening devices, to my knowledge. They entered the room after most of the discussion had taken place, introduced the case, and passed out samples from McConnell's prior letter requesting comments on his text from previous adopters. The consensus on this point was clear. Although similar phrasing did appear in both letters, it seemed to occur in ways that could easily be matters of chance—the normal talk of someone asking for a favor. In the opinion of those present, there was little reason to believe that the subsequent text was modeled on the earlier one.

Sal and I had asked if, for the debriefing, the agents could provide any information about the Unabomber, so council would know how we fit into the investigation. Sure, they said. A lot of this has been in the media—even on *America's Most Wanted*, the crime show. But the best overall account had just been published in the November issue of *Playboy*. They would be happy to provide copies to council. But we could not keep the letter, and we swore not to discuss the case. Sure. The FBI may get to know academics better if they hang around awhile.

I saw the investigators again at the New Orleans meeting, but never at length. They stayed through at least two days of the full program. They sat in the sessions and listened. They were introduced to people. They introduced themselves. At all times they were friendly and courteous, very professional. An interesting pair, these two—the older gentleman, with a masterly knowledge of the Unabomber investigation but slightly apprehensive among so many professors; the fresh, young FBI agent, like a keen graduate student with his charming enthusiasm to learn something about STS in the service of his case.

As I said goodbye to the inspector—it was the last I saw him until his appearance on television after the arrest—I had to ask, "So what do you think? You've been working on this case a long time. Will you catch him?"

He paused before answering. From the look on his face he was no longer an investigator, but just a man who had been working on one thing for a very long time. "Well, I think if by chance or fate I ever wound up in the same room with him, I would know him. But as far as catching him, I don't know," he said. "I'd like to be optimistic, but sometimes ... I really don't think so. We could go on forever this way."

He turned to leave. "Unless he makes a mistake."

Of course, Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, eventually made a mistake. He made it, in part, because in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, he was no longer able to remain invisible, to stay silent after sending his bombs. Those terrorists had, for the moment, usurped his role as the best bomber on the block. He made the mistake of beginning his correspondence with *The New York Times*. Why? Owing to the desire for recognition, to use an old theory from the sociology of science, for the right to publish in the best journal of them all.[4] He made it, in the words of the FBI agent, because "there's part of you wants 'em to know who sent it." To put it simply, he made the mistake out of pride.

And so it came to pass that the FBI—not forgetting the Postal Inspector's Office—presented the Unabomber investigation at the 4S Council. In New Orleans, where all things can happen, and many do.

When word got out that the FBI had been poking around in New Orleans, the question for many people was, "Why are they here?" In retrospect, the question should have been, "What took them so long?" They had interviewed thousands of people. They had talked to everyone on McConnell's list, some of them three times. They had nosed around Utah, and Michigan, and many other campuses where bombs were sent. But the package to McConnell was sent in November of 1985. It had been close to *nine years* from that bombing to the New Orleans meeting of scholars interested, in the words of the Unabomber, in the "interaction of science and society." And they had long suspected it might be someone with an academic background.

Before long, the STS Listserv was filled with discussion of the FBI in New Orleans. The reason for this interest is telling. It was assumed that the FBI was interested in our scholarship because it was potentially subversive, because its intellectual power had driven a madman to violent acts against the industrial-technological society. That could not be further from the truth. The FBI does not care about the writings of our "esoteric wedge of academia."[5] They know that few people read our treatises. Certainly, there is no evidence that the Unabomber did, though he may have. To attribute government interest in STS to the power of our words is also to commit the sin of pride.

[4] It should also be noted that the Manifesto was refereed more extensively than any scholarly manuscript in history. I was myself against publication, but it really gets to me that the Unabomber was not even subjected to a revise and resubmit.

[5] *The New York Times*, August 5, 1995.

The reason for the FBI's interest was simple. The letter to McConnell was the most extensive written document prior to the final period in which the Unabomber began to communicate regularly with the *Times* and eventually submitted his Manifesto for publication. Not simply by virtue of its intended recipient, but by virtue of content, it introduces themes later articulated fully in the Manifesto.

It is somewhat disconcerting to realize that the Manifesto is the most widely circulated writing in the field of science, technology, and society, first by joint publication in a special section of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and then over the Web, where it was placed immediately upon publication in 1995, the most important period of the Web's initial growth. The Manifesto itself is not my favorite essay, but it is reasoned and clear. I am inclined to agree with James Q. Wilson, one of the few people mentioned therein by name, who wrote in *The New York Times* that "the argument is subtle and carefully developed ... something that a very good graduate student might have written based on his own reading rather than the course assignments" (January 15, 1998). When I assigned parts ofitto a first year university course in STS, they judged it the best reading of the semester—far better than *Soul of a New Machine* or *The Double Helix*! Perhaps it is just the story. The Unabomber is already a cult hero. That much is clear. Of course he is a madman, guilty by reason of insanity.

What is disappointing about Ted Kaczynski is that to a point, he is someone to be admired. Wittgenstein believed that the goal of philosophy was to clarify the mistaken notions behind senseless questions, so that one could stop doing philosophy. He did not stop doing it. Kaczynski, for reasons we can well imagine, quit a plum job at Berkeley at the outset of a promising career. He did not just talk about it—he went to the woods and withdrew from participation in a system he despised. But in the end, like Wittgenstein, he could not bear the consequences of his conclusions.

Instead of remaining hermetic, he continued to read and analyze the system with quite limited resources. He continued to mull over its pernicious consequences. He drew on radical activist models available in the late 1960s, concluding (erroneously) that resistance demanded violence. Rather than live an isolated existence, he was fully engaged with what he took to be the important issue—the organization of society rather than the ephemeral circumstances of politics. Rather than hole up in his cabin, Kaczynski was absorbed with the personal consequences of social structures. He never withdrew from activism, albeit in the form of terrorism. Most important, he was unable to resist the urge to publish. STS had no impact on Kaczynski, but the world of academia, a principal target of his deadly parcels, socialized him well.

There have been comparisons between the practices of the Unabomber and the Luddites. Some have called him a modern day Luddite because of their passion for smashing machines that put them out of work. The Unabomber bears virtually no resemblance to the Luddites. His fascination arises from the fact that he is a combination of modern day romantic and countercultural revolutionary. As a romantic he is successor to the German poets and artists, in the grip of raw nature, opponents of industrialization and machines. As successor to Thoreau, he is less a writer but more a

lover of solitude. But as well he is—unfortunately—a successor of the revolutionaries, a latter-day Symbionese Liberationist who absorbed the 1960s without understanding their meaning and the transformation of society that the counterculture wrought with age, not violence.[6]

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[6] This was written before it was made public that Kaczynski had requested a change in lawyers to Tony Serra, who represented the Black Panthers and Symbionese Liberation Army.

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