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## **NOT SO FAST: THINKING TWICE ABOUT TECHNOLOGY**

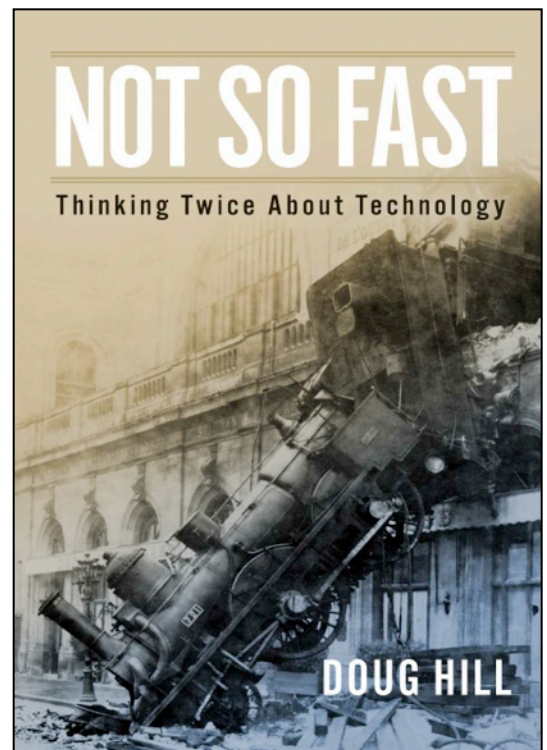
**By Doug Hill**

### **Chapter 2 Excerpt: Absolute Confidence, More or Less**

America's technological enthusiasm has always been shadowed by ambivalence. Indeed, ambivalence about technology has been a theme not only in America, but also across the landscape of modern history, at least in the West, literally for centuries. And all along the way, representative figures have emerged, like Etzler and Thoreau, to personify those tensions in a manner appropriate to their times, sometimes in opposition to other representative figures, other times within themselves.

Two individuals who have recently personified those parallel but opposing traditions in especially dramatic fashion are Steve Jobs and Ted Kaczynski, aka the Unabomber.

Some may be offended that I mention Kaczynski in the same breath as Jobs. Let me explain that the connection I'm talking about here isn't about Steve Jobs and Ted Kaczynski personally. Obviously there are huge differences between the



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lives of the two men. Rather I'm talking about them as archetypes, mirrors that reflect back to us our own feelings about technology.

The emotional reactions to Jobs's passing made it abundantly clear that for many of us he'd come to symbolize the hopeful, life-affirming potential of the technical arts, in the process buttressing our faith in technology as a vehicle of human progress. Kaczynski, by contrast, seemed a creature who had emerged from the depths of our subconscious, a malignant manifestation of our fears that technology is not our friend but our enemy, and that our enemy is gaining the upper hand.

I'm known among my friends as a Luddite—the guy who can be counted on to grumble about how out of hand our national infatuation with technology has become—and I'm used to being considered something of an eccentric because of those views. For that reason I was surprised at the time of Kaczynski's arrest by the number of respectable people who expressed the opinion that, murders notwithstanding, his feelings about technology weren't entirely misplaced.

The journalist Robert Wright said in an essay for *Time* magazine that there's "a little bit of the Unabomber in all of us." An essay by Daniel J. Kevles in the *New Yorker* said the same thing, in almost the same words, under a headline reading "E Pluribus Unabomber."

In his book *Harvard and the Unabomber*, Alston Chase argues at length that the Kaczynski's manifesto was ignored not so much because its ideas were so foreign but because they were so familiar. Except for its call to violence, Chase says, the manifesto's message was "ordinary and unoriginal." Its concerns about

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technology, he said, "embodied the conventional wisdom of the entire country...It was nothing less than the American creed."

Chase's book is a fine work overall, I thought, but that comment seems a huge overstatement. He goes on to cite a long list of popular books that represent the anti-technological consensus he feels exists, ranging from Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance* and E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* to Bill McKibbin's *The End of Nature*. The same message shows up repeatedly, he adds, in contemporary children's stories and textbooks, reflecting the fact that Americans have long been "gripped by fear of, or revulsion against, the very technology the Unabomber now warned about:

genetic engineering, pollution, pesticides, and herbicides, brainwashing of children by educators and consumers by advertising; mind control, cars, SUVs, power plants and power lines, radioactive waste; big government, big business; computer threats to privacy; materialism, television, cities, suburbs, cell phones, ozone depletion, global warming; and many other aspects of modern life.

That's actually a more comprehensive list of technological worries than Kaczynski provided in his manifesto, but I doubt he'd quarrel with it. The question remains, though: Is Chase correct that these concerns place the manifesto squarely in the mainstream of American thought?

Polling data on the question of how Americans feel about technology, broadly defined—a technique to tell us about technique—are surprisingly hard to come by. There's lots of research on Internet use, and on specific questions such as

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biotechnology and stem cell research, but not much on technology overall—a sign, I think, of how much we take for granted our immersion in a technologically saturated environment. One of the few overviews I could find is a compilation of poll data on questions related to science and technology collected by the National Science Board, which is the governing body of the National Science Foundation. Combining science and technology muddies the water a bit for my purposes (later in the book I'll discuss the blurry boundaries between the two), but you take what you can get.

According to the NSB's 2012 report, only nine percent of Americans feel that the hazards of scientific research "slightly or strongly" outweigh the benefits, while scientists and engineers were rated as among the most respected of occupational groups surveyed. The survey also found, however, that a majority of Americans agree that "scientific research these days doesn't pay enough attention to the moral values of society." Similarly, slightly more than half believe that science "makes life change too fast." The report notes as well that "significant minorities" of Americans are unable to correctly answer "relatively simple knowledge questions" about science and technology and "often express basic misconceptions" about emerging technologies.

More focused studies consistently produce similar results. The release of a 2012 Pew survey, for example, prompted this headline: "Americans Love (And Hate) Their Cell Phones." A survey the previous year by the University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future found that a vast majority of people who use the Internet consider it an important source of information, but it's not information they trust. A 2000 poll by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government found that Americans

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feel overwhelmingly positive toward the digital technologies in their lives— "Americans love their computers and the Internet," one headline read—but also registered substantial concerns about privacy, pornography, exploitation of children, equal access to computers for the poor, and the impact of computer use on family life. A 2013 poll on public views regarding nanotechnology and synthetic biology found that most of those surveyed said they know nothing about either, although the more they learned about them, the more they worried about their risks. Nonetheless a large majority of those surveyed continued to express confidence in the scientists and engineers who are exploring those technologies.

These polls capture pretty accurately how Americans feel about technology, I think: Ambivalent. And that strikes me as a perfectly logical position. Ted Kaczynski argued in his manifesto that we kid ourselves if we think we can separate good technologies from bad. That statement isn't as absurd as it may sound (another subject I'll get into later), but it also makes sense that some things about technology would please us and other things wouldn't. Kaczynski wrote contemptuously of Americans' inconsistencies toward technology: They want, he said, to have their cake and eat it too. To which I think Americans could reasonably reply, Sure we do. Who wouldn't?

**End of Excerpt**

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