The Role of Forensic Linguistic Analysis in the Unabomber Case and the Revolution It Created After

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After I heard that this year's National History Day topic involved communication, I couldn't stop my mind from wandering from subject to subject. Truthfully, the topic that I had initially thought of was the Chernobyl radiation disaster in Russia, and how miscommunication was the sole reason the disaster spread, taking the lives of thousands. The topic appealed to me at first because of its relation to science. My interest in writing and research is second only to my passion for science. However, I could not stop thinking about the new documentary series I had watched with my family, Manhunt: the Unabomber. I've always been interested in criminal documentaries such as this, but this case stood out to me in particular. The written communication aspect of the Unabomber case is impossible to miss and it interested me even more than the Chernobyl topic.

I conducted my research mainly through database searches and simple Google searches. To begin this project, it was much easier for me to grasp the events that occurred in the Unabomber case through newspaper articles. Gradually, my need for more information encouraged me to search deeper, whether it was for background information of the time period the Unabomber bombed in or to find interviews with important people regarding the case. I ensured that all the links I had used were collected onto the Noodletools citation platform. A website was the best option for me because it allowed for both visual and audio aspects, as well as written works. I was ready to begin constructing my website. It took me weeks to learn the provided NHD website builder, and hours looking through tutorials. And from then, page by page, I finally completed my project.

The Unabomber case was special in that not only did it involve a highly intelligent man who chose to write about an interesting argument, but it also involved forensic linguistic analysis, a novel technique that had not been used in the detective process before this case. This technique in fact, before the Unabomber, was hardly a broken idea. After the world saw that written works can actually effectively be analyzed to create an image of the author, the field of forensic linguistics was really born. It revolutionized the detective field. James R. Fitzgerald, the main detective who pioneered the analysis in the Unabomber case, went on to create the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Communicated Threat Assessment Database, a national database that has since linked thousands of criminal communications ranging from ransom notes to manifestos. Robert Shuy, a linguistics professor who also helped during the case, has continued to offer expertise to the FBI and has helped developed the field tremendously. This topic is significant in history because from then on, it has been used in almost every detective case. The idea of forensic linguistics rapidly developed into a highly versatile field with advanced techniques to analyze almost every single part of written communication, from syllables to word combinations, with the success of this case.