The Tipping Point

We predicted a digital revolution with all the fervor of true believers. Then the revolution conquered all.

by Adam Rogers

W e won, was the problem. WIRED tumbled into the mid-2000s in a whirlwind of validation and confusion. The main justification for our claim that the digital revolution would reshape the world had been brash confidence and what our founding editor in chief calls "militant optimism" (see page 26). And then, somewhere around 2003, it turned out to be true. Everyone got email—on their phones! Genomes were getting sequenced. Songs were getting downloaded. Algorithms were getting refined. The people we'd covered because they were merely interesting, ambitious, or cool were now famous and influential. Companies we'd written about for their good ideas were solidly profitable and worth giant, sticky gobs of money.

So, yay! But also, uh-oh. The dog had caught the car. Back then, as now, WIRED editors would ask each other if their ideas were "WIRED enough." But in a world getting taken over by YouTube, Facebook, and iPhones ... what wasn't wired? The victory of the digital over the real sparked an acute identity crisis.

At least, that's the way it seemed when I showed up for work at WIRED, about 10 years after the magazine's birth. The office was the same junky tree house fort it had been since the start, but the crew in charge was mostly new. The new editor in chief had been on the job for just a couple of years; half the assigning editors were even newer.

So month after month, with every new story, we built a new identity. If the whole world is driven by technological change, by scientific discovery, we realized, then the answer to the question of what WIRED covers is: everything. WIRED's subject wasn't a counterculture anymore. We didn't cover the fringe; we covered the center.

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That meant our responsibilities changed too. During the first half of WIRED's lifespan, the magazine largely functioned as a discovery engine, showing readers revelations, inventions, or subcultures that didn't show up on the mainstream's radar. Like I said, the fringe. Now we'd turn, in part, to explanation—to opening an access port on the world our readers inhabited and showing them how it was wired together. To keep it all vivid, we welded a mechanistic, engineer's view of the world to a screenwriter's sense of storytelling.

WIRED would stick to the notion of optimism, but that didn't necessarily mean we had to be comforting or naive. It meant we'd use possible solutions as vehicles to cover the world's real problems—that we'd be rigorous and clear-eyed in our descriptions of how everything fit together, how the gears of culture and politics and business and science meshed with technology and innovation. As an editor, I used to tell writers: WIRED doesn't make predictions. Write about things that are happening right now, today—the unevenly distributed upwellings of the future here in the present, to borrow from William Gibson. Our stories sound like science fiction. But they're true.
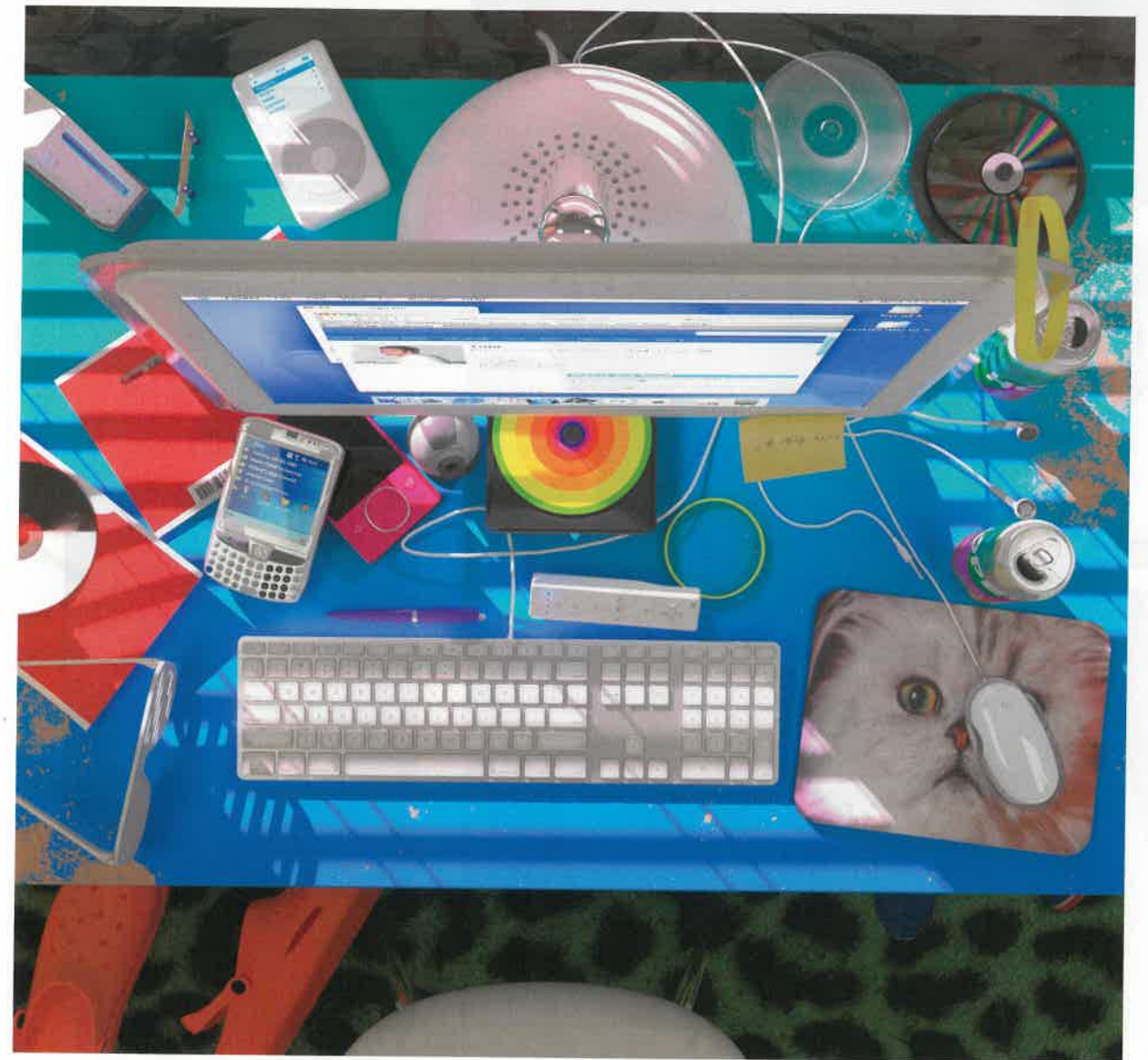
An editor at a great magazine once suggested to me, ungently, that WIRED was still way too optimistic about technology. We were cheerleading, he implied—blind to some possible outcomes and consequences. I've come to see his point. We thought we were talking about rationality and data, and we forgot that human beings can be awful when they get rich or powerful. Increased connectivity disrupted business, culture, and politics, as we promised, but that enabled new monopolies to arise and corporate-funded sociopathy and narcissism to take political power. We started thinking investments and valuations were as important as actual innovations and achievements, and sometimes covering what we thought was the center meant we missed a much more compelling fringe. And for a while there, almost everyone in charge at WIRED was a white man. Even the most well-intentioned of us might not have understood how dangerous the online worlds we touted could become to other kinds of people.

Not coincidentally, those same blind spots and mistakes—being naive, obsessed with company valuations, overly optimistic, exclusionary—were the ones made by the tech industry itself. Today's unfolding reckoning for those missteps is now very much part of the larger story we cover.

Optimism means we're invested in good outcomes, not that we ignore a sea of troubles. We wanted to tell the truth about change, about a chaotic system. So, in some ways, the world of today is one we were always meant to cover. Technology underpins every aspect of society, and our planet faces the threat of multiple apocalypses, but our mandate hasn't changed. If anything, it's more relevant than ever. Things turned out exactly the way we said they would.

We won. And then things changed again. That just gives us more to write about. ▥