

The Techlash and Tech Crisis Communication

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80043-086-0 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80043-085-3 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80043-087-7 (Epub)



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ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

I dedicate this book to my beloved grandmother, Tova Rabinovitch, a Holocaust survivor and my hero. I also dedicate it to my dear daughter, Shani, our ray of light and source of happiness.

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About the Author

Dr. Nirit Weiss-Blatt, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow at the University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Her specialty is in the tech news field. Prior to her academic journey, she worked on both sides of the fence: began her career in tech public relations, representing international tech companies and entrepreneurs, and later switched sides to work as a tech journalist and a deputy-editor. Those experiences led her to examine the creation of the tech media agenda and the various forces which shape the tech discourse. Her research findings were featured in peer-reviewed papers, monographs, and chapters in academic books.

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Foreword

Fred Cook

Professor of Professional Practice, Chairman of Golin, Director of the University of Southern California (USC) Center for Public Relations

Over my 35-year career at a global public relations (PR) firm called Golin, I've worked across many different industries, from fast food to pharma and represented many global brands – such as Nintendo, Walmart, Toyota, and Disney. I was also responsible for introducing several cultural phenomena such as The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Pokémon, and the seedless watermelon. During that time, I've witnessed first-hand the roller coaster of public opinion that can elevate an industry's reputation to the heights of admiration, then plunge it to the depths of disapproval, and sometimes back again. There are many examples.

Tobacco is the most obvious. Once considered sophisticated and glamorous, smoking is now deadly and despised, and companies that market cigarettes have changed their names to disguise what they actually do. The pharmaceutical business is right behind them. A few decades ago, the average consumer marveled at every new cure created by these medical miracle makers. Today, those same companies are vilified for exorbitant pricing practices. However, their perception may rebound overnight if they can create a successful vaccine for the Coronavirus. Video games have also evolved from a benign diversion in the 1960s to a violence-inducing plague in the 1990s, until recently morphing into a legitimate eSport. Even the humble avocado has transformed its image from a fatty fruit that health-conscious consumers avoided to a superfood that everyone puts on toast.

Today, we all have ring-side seats to watch the tech industry take its turn at getting a beating. Just a decade ago, Aaron Sorkin won an Oscar for his depiction of the humble beginnings of Facebook – making Mark Zuckerberg more famous than Madonna. Now, with a net worth of \$86 billion, this 36-year-old tech wiz is being boycotted by the ad industry and interrogated by Congress. Facebook is a high-profile example of the reputational decline of an industry we once believed was the solution to all of our problems. We once hungered for scraps of news about upcoming products, we waited in long lines to buy them, and we worshiped the Silicon Valley executives who invented them. Now, we're worried that technology companies are selling our personal information, wasting our valuable time, and feeding us fake news.

What caused such a dramatic shift from techno-utopianism to techno-dystopianism? How did tech companies respond to the negative sentiment with their own

messages? What are the lessons to be learned from the Techlash? These are a few of the questions that Dr. Nirit Weiss-Blatt (Ph.D.) addresses through her extensive research into one of the most powerful forces impacting the tech industry's reputation – media.

Over the past 20 years, media interest in technology has expanded as fast as the technology industry itself. Editorial coverage that was once limited to niche trade magazines became a staple of the mainstream press. Every media outlet devoted a section to new tech products and trends, and every tech start-ups hired a PR agency to promote their brand and expand their audience. Media execs discovered that tech features attracted readers, and tech execs discovered that media coverage lured investors, sold products, and created icons. As proof of this love affair, Apple Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Steve Jobs was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine eight times, including the week he died. But increased attention led to increased scrutiny. Flattering stories about consumer products evolved into investigative pieces on business practices, which caught tech companies and their communications teams off guard.

Nirit's in-depth study of tech media charts this pendulum swing of press coverage. She chronicles the reputational rise and fall of an entire industry while providing valuable insights to those who work in it.

At the USC Center for Public Relations, where Nirit is a Research Fellow, our mission is to shape the future of the communication industry and those who will lead it. This book accomplishes that goal by advancing our knowledge about tech coverage and its evolving practices. It provides PR professionals, journalists, and students with a comprehensive analysis of the Techlash's core issues. Whether you're working in tech journalism or tech PR, the following pages will broaden your understanding of the media scrutiny, the tech clients, and, thus, help you define the future correspondence between the two.

Acknowledgments

The research for this book was undertaken during my research fellowship at the University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. It was the best home I could ask for, especially for this research. The Co-Directors of M{2e} - Media, Economics & Entrepreneurship program, Gabriel Kahn, Professor of Professional Practice of Journalism, and Prof. Chris Smith were my first hosts. Their vast experience and current projects, promoting innovation in the profession of journalism, enriched this research.

Then, I had the honor and great pleasure of working with Fred Cook, Professor of Professional Practice, the Director of the USC Center for Public Relations, and Chairman of global public relations (PR) agency Golin. His professional legacy (30+ years of experience with world-class brands) has a huge impact on the PR industry, PR education, and #PRFuture. I gained a mentor for life.

Prof. Burghardt Tenderich, the Associate Director of the USC Center for Public Relations and Co-Director of the Public Relations Studies program, helped to shape the Techlash study in a dedicated “Tech PR” research group we initiated together. Katrina Swarthout, a grad student in the Master of Strategic Public Relations program, was a helpful research assistant. Without Ron Antonette’s professionalism, dedication, and charming personality, the Center for PR wouldn’t be the same. The whole team made this research journey gratifying.

My dear colleague at USC, Prof. Aimei Yang, had an enormous impact on this study. Her valuable feedback helped to refine the research and to turn it into a book project.

On the production side, I wish to thank the anonymous book reviewers for their suggestions, and the whole Emerald Publishing team for their professional advice.

I am grateful to all of the interviewees, tech journalists, and PR executives (see the full list in Table 10), who were very kind and communicative, and who enabled me to gather a much greater understanding of the Techlash. Thanks to their insights, the book contains a wide range of perspectives from the tech industry.

Finally, and foremost, I am deeply grateful for my dear family and their enormous support. My parents paved the way for my tech geekiness. I grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, watching my father, Avraham Weiss, a tech and communication journalist and an early adopter of innovations, examining personal computers and gadgets. I was surrounded by piles of computer magazines from the United States, which drove my curiosity about tech journalism. My mother, Shoshana, a doctor of science and a researcher, taught me from an early age how to be focused

and methodical. With that background, “I had no choice” but to work in the tech industry and study communication. Both my parents, my sister Tali, and grandmother Tova Rabinovitch – published books. So, also, “I had no choice” but to publish a book myself. I, literally, couldn’t have been in this position without them.

My dear husband and partner in life, Elad Blatt, had an enormous impact throughout the years; his brilliant observations are always enlightening. The support and love from my family and good friends helped me to endure sleepless nights of working on this research project. Their encouragement means the world to me. Thank you all.

Introduction

Over the years, tech companies were used to “cheerleading” coverage of product launches and mostly a flattering writing style. Since 2017, they have been facing a new backlash, rooted in major tech scandals. The long tech-press honeymoon ended. It was replaced by mounting criticism focused on tech’s negative impact on society.

Silicon Valley – once the golden child of the American industry – has become a villain.¹ Moreover, the emerging critical tone generated a cry for government action and tougher corporate regulation, including the call to #BreakUpBigTech.

Technology news as a news genre deserves an examination on its own,² but there is a gap in the literature on tech journalism and tech public relations (PR). “The Techlash and Tech Crisis Communication” book provides an in-depth examination of this field and focuses on the coverage turning point: The Techlash (tech-backlash).

The story of the Techlash is a story of *pendulum swings*. We are currently on the techno-dystopianism side of the pendulum because we spent a great deal of time on the techno-utopianism side. The above being said, even one of the toughest critics, Kara Swisher, admitted that “We have to be aware that neither is exactly accurate.”³ Unsurprisingly, tech PR professionals believe that the media pendulum has swung too far in the negative direction.

The book’s analysis reveals when and why the tech coverage shifted to the Techlash and what were the roots and characteristics of this shift.

The timeline is divided into three main eras: pre-Techlash, Techlash, and post-Techlash.

The pre-Techlash section starts with the historical background – from the glorious days of computer magazines and the rise of tech blogs to the upsurge of tech investigative reporting. It provides the basic clarifications of both tech news and tech PR.

The Techlash era section sheds light on the evolving coverage of the tech companies and depicts the iconic stories that shifted the attention to corporate misdeeds.

The tech companies’ crisis response strategies to their accumulating scandals were underexplored. Since the tech giants were no longer perceived as the “saviors” but rather the “threats,” the Techlash research asked: with the increasing need to repair their image, which crisis communication strategies were utilized? What can we learn from the reactions to those crisis responses? As a result, the concept of “tech crisis communication” is introduced, and the “Tech PR template

for crises” summarizes the ways in which Big Tech companies defended themselves from scrutiny, over and over again.

Moreover, the research asked: what can we learn about the more profound changes in the power relations between the tech media and the tech giants it covers? As a result, it illuminates the broader meanings of the Techlash and the shift in culture.

The post-Techlash section includes the Techlash’s shortest pause: COVID-19 and “tech deserves a second Honeymoon” phase, and predictions of the next era to come.

Insightful observations by leading tech journalists and senior tech PR executives enriched the research data, and together – they tell the story of the Techlash. The debate on its core issues includes contradictory arguments on the difficulty of the tech-related problems and their fixes.

The book provides both theoretical knowledge and practical advice. It is an extensive guide for those interested in how the tech industry is being covered and how it is strategically advocating its impact on society. After finishing this book, you would probably interpret both the coverage and the companies’ responses quite differently than beforehand.

Overall, the following chapters capture the *tech media narrative* and its key actors’ explanations to “How did we get here?”

The Research Background

What is “Techlash”?

Since this book is pioneering in its comprehensive examination of the Techlash, there is a need to, first, clarify the term.⁴ There are two definitions, from Oxford Dictionaries and Macmillan Dictionary (Fig. 1):

Literature Review and the Main Methods

Throughout the years of this research project, I have reviewed more than 1,000 relevant tech media articles and communication studies. Those materials provided the essential theoretical background to structure the story. From this corpus, I chose a few hundred references to be highlighted in the upcoming chapters. They represent only a small sample of the materials, but I hope the endnotes could serve as ideas for further reading on the book’s issues.

A **Techlash** is a strong and widespread negative reaction to the growing power and influence of large technology companies, particularly those based in Silicon Valley.

(Oxford Dictionaries)

A **Techlash** is a strong reaction against the major technology companies, as a result of concerns about their power, users’ privacy, the possibility of political manipulation, etc.

(Macmillan Dictionary)

Fig. 1. Techlash – Two Dictionary Definitions.

On top of the extensive review, the book is based on three research methods:

- (1) *Media monitoring analysis – to depict the evolving criticism.* The research tool helped to identify the Big Tech companies’ coverage (in US news sites).
- (2) *Content analysis of the tech companies’ crisis responses – to reveal their strategies.* Press releases and posts from the corporate sites were analyzed. The main themes of the responses were highlighted and summarized.
- (3) *Interviews with actors on both sides of the story – tech journalists and PR professionals.* Since all of the research interviewees were asked the same core questions, it created a *virtual panel of experts*, debating the same issues: the type of content and relationship between the tech media and tech PR; the stories which formed the Techlash; the perspectives regarding the tech companies’ crisis responses; and predictions.

Journalism is legitimated through discourses around it.⁵ The tech media professionals’ quotes, discussing the elements of their coverage, highlight the “meta-journalistic discourse” about tech journalism. Their broad perspectives and anecdotal stories throughout the book explain the shifting journalistic practices – before and during the Techlash.

Fig. 2 summarizes the book’s quantitative and qualitative methods. The detailed methodologies can be found in the Appendix.

Outline of the Chapters

The relationship between the tech giants and the media is not stable but rather a rollercoaster ride; you can be on the top of the world just to find yourself a moment later hurtling toward the ground. Not an enjoyable ride (though, reading

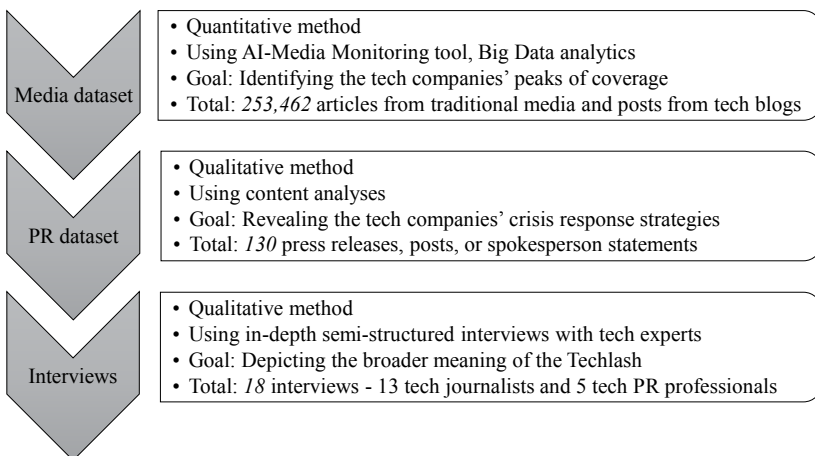


Fig. 2. Method Summary.

about it in this book is, hopefully). The outline of the chapters takes us through this rocky journey.

The pre-Techlash Era

Chapter #1: Tech News and Tech Public Relations. The historical background depicts the power imbalance between the tech companies and the journalists who covered them. The review starts in the late 1980s, move to the early 1990s, addresses the late 1990s dot-com bubble, the early 2000s bubble burst, and the early 2010s.

Among the topics are the responsibilities of tech reporters; the types of content in tech news; the main players who cover tech (computer magazines, tech blogs, and traditional media); the influence of corporate PR; and tech companies' limited access and infamous secrecy.

The Techlash Era

Chapter #2: Big Tech – Big Scandals. This chapter covers the roots of the Techlash. The pivotal year was 2017 as a result of various tech scandals, including foreign election meddling (revelations on Russian interference in the 2016 US election); fake news, misinformation/disinformation⁶ wars; extremist content and hate speech⁷; data collection and protection, and privacy violations (following cyberattacks and data breaches); anti-diversity, sexual harassment, and discrimination.

Among the contributors to the formation of the Techlash are the aftermath of Donald Trump's victory, including the Cambridge Analytica "firestorm"; Pack Journalism – Techlash agenda across all the news media; the tech companies' scale and bigness; and the political pushback – tech CEOs getting grilled.

Chapter #3: Tech Crisis Communication. There are several crisis communication theories that can help explain the crisis responses to the Techlash. Among them are corporate apologia, image repair theory, and situational crisis communication theory. Together they set the stage for the research findings. How did the tech companies respond to their scandals?

In a nutshell, although there were different tech companies and various negative stories, their responses were very much alike. The analysis identified the repetition of specific messages in the companies' attempts to reduce responsibility. The tech companies were criticized for their responses, including the pseudo-apologies or their victimization. The critics claimed that tech companies need to stop blaming others. The bigger question is around the role of humanity versus technology.

Chapter #4: Evolving Techlash Issues. The chapter discusses the Techlash effect on the tech companies, the evolving issues they needed to manage (and still do). Those issues include the deteriorated trust, tech regulation, rise in tech investigative reporting, tech conferences and interviews with tech CEOs, tech workers' activism, the overall shift in culture from techno-optimism to techno-pessimism, but also the growth in usage and business as (despite the Techlash) they are financially thriving.

The post-Techlash Era

Chapter #5: Never-ending Criticism? As COVID-19 hit the United States, there was a short “second Honeymoon” phase, full of gratitude for the technological inventions which help us cope with the outbreak. But then, very quickly, the Techlash issues resurfaced. Should tech companies acclimate to constant media scrutiny? And given that attacking Big Tech became a bipartisan practice, from a growing number of media outlets and all political sides?

The prediction is that moving forward, we could expect even more investigations around the core of the Techlash, such as content moderation, ad transparency, misinformation, algorithmic accountability, data rights, and antitrust. The Techlash as we know it – is probably here to stay.

It should be noted that the book was finalized amid the Coronavirus pandemic and before the 2020 US presidential election outcomes. Future studies could compare this book’s analyses to the tech coverage and tech PR following the ramifications of those two events, as they may also affect the volume and sentiment of the Techlash. For more future research directions, please see the “Recommendations for future studies” section at the end of this book.

Lastly, the “pre-Techlash/Techlash/post-Techlash” sections help to organize the story, but there isn’t a strict dichotomy between them. While reading, you will find a more complex depiction, as the pendulum swung from one side to the other more than once or twice.

“Jeff Bezos used to tell me, ‘Today’s poster boys, tomorrow’s piñata.’ You’re not as good as they say, you’re not as bad as they say. Just find the middle ground,” said Brian Chesky, Airbnb CEO.⁸ The book will present the difficulty of reaching such middle ground, as the pendulum is drawn to both extremes.

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The Pre-Techlash Era



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Chapter 1

Tech News and Tech Public Relations

In order to fully comprehend the current tech-backlash, the historical background should be taken into consideration. The over-glorification of tech and its leaders in the past provoked the over-criticism of today.

In the glorifying days, tech founders were worshiped as kings and even appeared on actual thrones, like Marc Andreessen's iconic *Time* cover (next to the headline "The Golden Geeks"). After a swift fall from grace, they needed to brace themselves; Techlash was coming, calling them to step down from their thrones.

The story starts with the emergence of the dot-com bubble. As the tech industry grew in the 1990s, so did tech media. Early on, if you wanted information about this fast-growing sector, you were probably a devoted reader of computer magazines.

The Rise of Computer Magazines

Computer magazines' impact is apparent in the state of tech coverage today. Notable examples for influential computer magazines can be found in [Table 1](#).

The early trade press publications were written for and by the industry itself. Historically, technology coverage had been mostly targeted at industry professionals or the Silicon Valley subculture.¹ The magazines' segments "were around the computer chip business, the computer business, the software business, and later the personal computer," described Jonathan Weber, the global industry editor for technology at *Reuters News*, in his interview for this book. "In the '80s, it started to be more consumer-oriented with *PCWorld* and the like."²

The trade publications from the 1980s led the way to other players to arrive in the 1990s, such as *Wired* magazine, which many of this book's interviewees mentioned as the publication that inspired a generation of geeks. Then, there were two main types of audiences for tech stories, generating different subcategories of tech coverage:

- (1) *The tech industry professionals*: Information about the business aspects of the tech industry. It includes the startups' ecosystem, venture capital (VC)

4 The Techlash and Tech Crisis Communication

Table 1. The Rise of Computer Magazines.

Year	Computer Magazines
1957	<i>Electronic News</i> , a weekly trade newspaper, launched by Fairchild Publications, coined the phrase “Silicon Valley” in 1971, in a series of articles entitled “Silicon Valley, USA,” written by its journalist Don Hoefler ³
1967	<i>Computerworld</i> was launched by the International Data Group (IDG)
1974–1980	The first generation of computer magazine also included <i>BYTE</i> magazine (1975), <i>Creative Computing</i> (1974), <i>Compute!</i> (1979), and <i>80 Microcomputing</i> (1980), a magazine for Radio Shack TRS-80 owners which was the template for <i>PCWorld</i> , <i>PC Magazine</i> , and every other computer magazine ⁴
1982–1984	Ziff Davis introduced <i>PC Magazine</i> in 1982. IDG launched <i>PCWorld</i> in 1983 and <i>Macworld</i> in 1984
1993–1999	As the Internet evolved from a novel idea to a game-changer, it also fueled its own media industry. Magazines sprung up, including Conde Nast’s <i>Wired</i> magazine, Ziff Davis’s <i>Yahoo! Internet Life</i> , <i>Red Herring</i> , Future plc’s <i>The Net</i> , ⁵ <i>Business 2.0</i> , <i>Upside</i> , and IDG’s <i>The Industry Standard</i>

funding, mergers and acquisitions, initial public offerings (IPOs), company analysis, and profiles.

- (2) *The end users/consumers*: Reviews and guides about the new products and services, how to use them,⁶ comparisons to competitive products, favorable/unfavorable ratings,⁷ and rumors and speculation about future product launches.⁸

The early days’ mindset of covering Silicon Valley was “Innovation Journalism.” As its name implies, the focus was on the innovation aspect. According to this approach, tech journalists’ role is in promoting innovation, helping the “diffusion of innovation to society.” The explanation was that “Given that innovations often have a game-changing impact, the innovators’ enemies are all those who have done well under the old conditions. The fear of innovation that may cause changes in society can create hostility.” Consequently, tech journalists frequently act “to increase the chances for innovators to survive those battles and thrive.”⁹

In such technology discourse, the journalists’ role is to report on, review, critique new technologies, and contribute to the “buzz” surrounding innovations.¹⁰ They were required to have specialized knowledge in order to not only report on innovation but also help audiences make sense of the innovation being reported.¹¹ Thus, tech journalists’ level of expertise was (and still is) crucial, since substantial parts of the public sphere do not have this kind of technical background and turn to tech experts for insight.¹²

Since tech reporting “plays a role in guiding public attention and setting agendas,”¹³ there are those who strive to influence the coverage. They work in tech PR.

In their traditional roles, journalists represent their readers, PR professionals represent their clients, and the attention economy requires input from both.¹⁴ Looking at the early days, tech PR, like the high-tech industry it served, was also growing up in the 1990s.

The Growing Interest in Tech in the Early 1990s

The growth of the tech industry created more news and more demand for tech information. The tech field within PR was the fastest-growing sector-fueled in large part by startups, whose biggest expenditure was often for PR.¹⁵

Tech was one of the most fertile and challenging specialties for PR practitioners, due to the far-reaching implications of new technology. When tech companies create or react to technological changes, on one side, PR professionals are expected to anticipate, define, and communicate the implications of these changes.¹⁶ They were required to help reporters “navigate through the extremely fast-paced technology industry.”¹⁷ Accordingly, tech PR was required to understand the innovation well enough to connect novelty to familiarity, conveying the vision of the innovation, making the customer understand what to do with it and why to want and need it.¹⁸

On the other side of this ecosystem, the group of tech reporters that covered the Bay Area was relatively small. Jonathan Weber, who previously had editorial positions at *The Information*, *The Industry Standard*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, reminisced the journalists’ closeness back then:

In the early days of covering the Bay, the entire Silicon Valley press core included a handful of reporters from the mainstream press, such as the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Business Week*, or the *Financial Times*. There were few other reporters from local papers like the *San Francisco Examiner* or *Chronicle* and maybe a couple of dozen correspondents from the trade press and consumer tech magazines. So, we all knew each other pretty well. That was the state of play in the early ‘90s.¹⁹

Jonathan Weber also recalled that “It was tough to get the top editors interested in tech as a story.” That started to change in 1992: “A turning point that I remember was when John Malone [*CEO of TCI – Tele-Communications Inc.*] announced that digital technology would add hundreds of new channels to your cable TV, perhaps more than 500, and TV would never be the same.” That was something that “got people to be more interested in tech.”

The Internet evolved, and “you began to see the major news outlets putting more reporters in Silicon Valley,” said Jonathan Weber. “Then, newspapers’ editors started to realize that, perhaps, tech should have a dedicated section.” An early example he gave was Daniel Akst’s “Postcard from Cyberspace” column in the *Los Angeles Times*, which covered the Internet before the World Wide Web. “His columns were very insightful and way ahead of their time.”²⁰

Scott Thurm is the business editor at *Wired* magazine. Beforehand, he was a senior deputy technology editor at the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)*. In his interview,

he reminisced those early days: “I started as a local news reporter and worked for some smaller newspapers, but ultimately landed at the *San Jose Mercury News* at the beginning of the ‘90s. It is when tech became the biggest story in town.” His focus was “the macroeconomy of Silicon Valley, and how dependent the local economy was on tech.”²¹

According to a description of the tech genre’s early days, “writing about the tech industry has traditionally fallen into a few limited camps.” Among those segments were product announcements, suspiciously redolent of press releases, dry business reporting, and lifestyle coverage, zeroing in on the trappings, trends, and celebrities of the tech scene. In different ways, each neglected “to examine the industry’s cultural clout and political economy.”²² Accordingly, tech journalists were used to defining their role in terms of disseminating innovations, explaining complicated matters, and shaping the consumers’ understanding and handling of tech products. They were *more reluctant* to define their role in terms of monitoring politics, economy, and society, or acting as a critic of social grievances.²³

Nick Wingfield is a senior editor at *The Information*. He previously worked at the *New York Times*, the *WSJ*, and *CNET*. In his interview, he shared that “In the early ‘90s, a lot of technology trade magazines started to emerge in Silicon Valley.” Then, “When my career in the industry started, I was writing primarily for trade publications. It was mostly Product Journalism focus.”

“There was a range of companies that you would deal with and how secretive they were. The press releases in trade shows were the way that new products and news were made.” Practically, “If there were a CES [*Consumer Electronics Show*] or a big event with a new wave of products coming out, you would go to those events, and you could meet people and learn things and perhaps write about them.” But “Rewriting press releases was never something that I or the publications I worked for really cared as much about,” said Nick. The main objective was “to write about things the companies didn’t want us to write about.”

For example, “Before Microsoft got into trouble with the Department of Justice over its anti-competitive behavior, I wrote a story at *CNET* about how customers were starting to choose Microsoft products over Netscape,” he shared. “These were not stories that the companies wanted to be told.”²⁴

The Dot-Com Bubble in the Mid-1990s and Late 1990s

The year 1995 was the year when Microsoft debuted both Windows 95 and its Internet Explorer browser, and Netscape Communications was the first browser company to launch an IPO. Jim Barksdale, then-CEO of Netscape, said, “The Internet is the printing press of the technology era.” Also, in 1995, Amazon opened its online bookstore, Yahoo was incorporated, and Craigslist went online.²⁵ The dot-com boom was starting to gather steam, and tech media grew as well. For example, the online news site *CNET* was launched.

In the late 1990s, there was an increased appetite for information from the tech industry. PR practitioners from Silicon Valley noted that “reporters are more

receptive to PR-pitched ideas” and “seek out PR materials more today than in the past.”²⁶

The key players in the tech ecosystem had blind faith in the inherent good of computers, AKA “Computerism.”²⁷ The computer magazines’ vision of the future and their prediction represented the broader Silicon Valley culture and the claim that the digital revolution “would bring an era of transformative abundance and prosperity.”²⁸

The narrative around technology exuded optimism. Leading technology commentators extolled the new access to information and platforms, celebrating their potential for advancing democracy and empowering people. Much of that enthusiasm spread from Silicon Valley into the academy and beyond.²⁹

Tech journalists helped romanticize the early Internet. Most tech reporting pitted the creative force of technological innovation against established powers trying to tame its disruptive inevitability. Tech companies, in this storyline, represented the young and irreverent, gleefully smashing old traditions and hierarchies.³⁰

When Tim Race, former *New York Times* technology editor, reflected on his coverage of “the Internet’s rise as a mass medium,” he wrote that back then, the news media tended to take an optimistic view of the online world. “Sure, we noted the lurking worries about privacy intrusions, data thefts and shady advertising. But the coverage was generally hopeful, and Internet pioneers sometimes seemed downright heroic.” Thus, “Journalists looked for signs that all this connectivity was truly connecting people in positive new ways.”³¹

David Karpf examined “25 years of *Wired* predictions.” He read every issue of *Wired* in chronological order and provided interesting conclusions on the history of “thinking about tomorrow.” Sometimes the tech reporters’ predictions were right, and sometimes the things they saw coming never did. For example, he described the early days: “Back in the mid-’90s, a time when most Americans hadn’t even sent an email, the magazine was already deep into speculation about a world where everyone had a networked computer in their pocket.” In 2003, when phones with cameras were just a novelty in the United States, Xeni Jardin predicted a “phone-cam revolution” that would one-day capture images of police brutality on the fly.

Wired’s techno-optimism eventually encountered a less optimistic reality: “Looking back at *Wired*’s early visions of the digital future, the mistake that seems most glaring is the magazine’s confidence that technology and the economics of abundance would erase social and economic inequality.” Both Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 imagined a future that upended traditional economics. We were all going to be millionaires, all going to be creators, all going to be collaborators. But, “The bright future of abundance has, time and again, been waylaid by the present realities of earnings reports, venture investments, and shareholder capitalism. On its way to the many, the new wealth has consistently been diverted up to the few.”

David Karpf concluded that “the digital present affords less room for open-ended, boisterous optimism”: “Old *Wired* said the swaggering, optimistic stuff out loud and muttered its critical, dystopian remarks in wry stage whispers,” but the “New *Wired* has almost reversed that formula.”³²

According to Jonathan Weber, *Wired's* techno-optimism was not the only narrative, as others, including himself, had a critical approach to the growing tech industry.

Wired magazine was a very important force. The tone and style of it were different from the existing trade media. *Wired* was one of the first publications to say, "Tech is not only a business thing or a consumer thing; it is a revolution." That was *Wired's* ideology – that technology was a revolutionary force that was going to transform business, politics, culture, and everything in society. And this was going to be a good thing that would empower people.³³

"I didn't have exactly that view as editor of *The Industry Standard*," said Jonathan Weber. "I believed that technology was a powerful force, and people needed to get a critical eye to it. I tried to take a critical approach, including investigative reporting."

At the same time, it was complicated: "We had an oppositional relationship with a lot of the companies from an editorial standpoint, even though they were also big advertisers, they came to our conferences, and we reported on things they were trying to promote." According to Jonathan Weber, "We [*The Industry Standard*] came to be a symbol of the dot-com boom even though our editorial philosophy was based on cutting through the hype."³⁴

Stephen Jones is an executive vice president at the PR firm Golin. In his interview, he said that when he worked as a tech journalist, in places like *BusinessWeek* or *Computerworld*, "Silicon Valley went from semiconductor fab plants in South San Jose to this hot rock star industry. It was very much personality-driven stuff. It was the early stage of the 'cult of personality.'" Accordingly, it was a great time to be writing about business and make profiles of the people there. He loved sitting with Steve Jobs at his office, or Steve Ballmer's office when he was number two at Microsoft.

But "access journalism" has its own problems. Stephen Jones acknowledged that it was all about, "You will get that access, and we are going to treat you like a friend, we are going to trust you, and we hope you do the same." He clarified that "It was never being said that way outright. But if you were negative and hard on them, your level of access would either go on hiatus or completely go away. They would suddenly shut you down." At that time, "It really didn't matter because all any of us wanted was to get close to 'God.' That is also what consumers wanted, the 'backstage' to those rock stars."³⁵

Mike Masnick, the founder and editor in chief of *TechDirt*, described that in the early days, the important trade publications were "*Red Herring*, *Upside*, or *Business 2.0*." Online media, like *CNET*, was "mostly focused on product announcements and product launches." But then again, "People were still really focused on the physical magazine. The magazines' covers were the most important thing. Those were the early days of Netscape's Marc Andreessen on the throne" [referring to *Time* magazine cover of "*The Golden Geeks*" in February 1996]. "That was the history of Silicon Valley: PR people focused heavily on trying to get their CEO/founders onto the cover."³⁶