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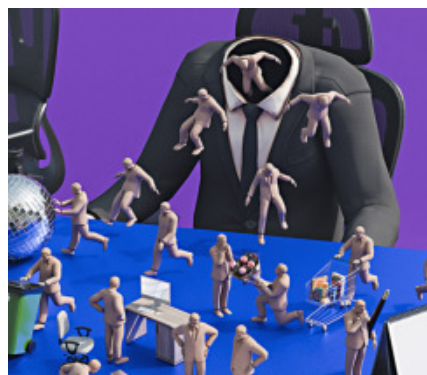
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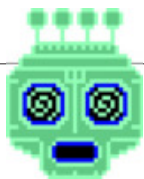
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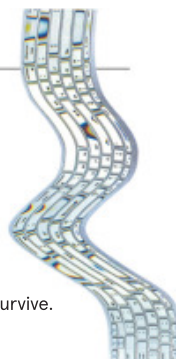
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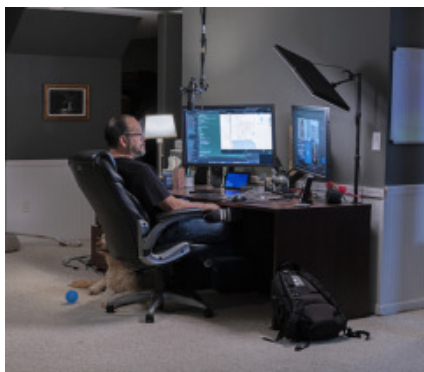
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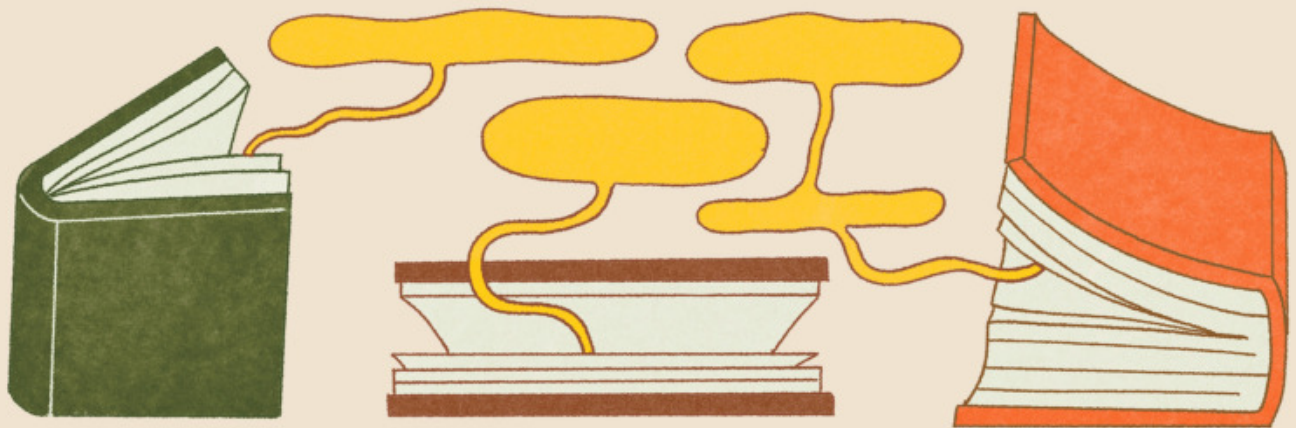
ON THE COVER

Our working title for this special issue about AI and work was "PANIC AT THE WATERCOOLER." As a way to capture the reality of corporate America right now—bosses everywhere demanding their employees become "AI native," or else—it worked. But at the last minute, an editor blurted out "AI OR DIE TRYING," and then one of our designers paired that with an image of a rather funereal-looking office chair. We fell in love with the new concept, asked the artist **Pablo Delcan** to do a proper cover illustration, and crossed our fingers that the AI Reaper wouldn't come for us next.



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ARM'S RACE

Numerous chip companies license their designs from the influential IP firm Arm. Now its CEO, Rene Haas, is shaking up the industry by launching a chip of his own.



THE BIG INTERVIEW

RENE HAAS IS half-prone on a couch in his office in San Jose, California. A basketball rests in his hand, partly obscuring his face. Haas had grimaced when WIRED's photographer asked him to assume this position. "People are going to say 'Arm's CEO sleeps on the job,'" he says.

Still, Haas obliges. He gives us 46 minutes of his time, then shoos us out to hop on a call with Masayoshi Son, the Softbank CEO and chairman of Arm's board.

I'm meeting with Haas days before the chip firm's big announcement that it's launching its own silicon. For a company that's made its fortunes licensing its architectures to other chipmakers and never fabricating its own, the move is momentous. Apple, Tesla, Nvidia, Microsoft, Amazon, Samsung, and Qualcomm all make or sell chips based on Arm. It's been estimated that there are three Arm chips for every human on Earth.

Yet making a chip also marks a return to Arm's roots. The company began in the late 1970s, when two computer architects started Acorn Computers, which produced a microprocessor built on an architecture known as RISC. By the early '90s the company was flailing, and the then CEO pivoted to licensing its designs to other firms. Fast-forward to the mid-2010s, and Arm's mobile chip

designs helped make it the most important chip IP company in the world.

Then came more turbulence. After Softbank acquired it in 2016 and took the publicly traded company private, the smartphone market's growth slowed. Nvidia tried to scoop it up, and regulators blocked the deal. As that deal collapsed, in 2022, Haas stepped into the CEO role. He took Arm public again, with Softbank still owning 90 percent of the company.

Haas had joined Arm in 2013 from Nvidia. Similar to how Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang leans on his decades-long perspective—gather 'round the campfire, kids, while I describe the early days of parallel computing—Haas is quick to reference 1980s geopolitical chaos when asked whether current events make him worry about his business. (No.) He says he has met with President Donald Trump half a dozen times, but he's not overly concerned about the US interfering in his UK company's affairs. He is tall, though not especially foreboding, and often wears Saint Laurent boots with little heels, a blazer, and a Panerai watch.

Chip industry insiders say Haas, 63, is a masterful networker who pals around with the biggest names in tech. The Wall Street Journal once labeled him a "natural-born diplomat." But with this chip project, Arm—and Haas—risks ruffling some of the company's most loyal partners. Can you stay besties with people if, after years of polite dinner parties, you announce you're buying their house? Haas seems convinced he can.

LAUREN GOODE: Since you became CEO, people say that there's been a big culture change. Do you agree?

RENE HAAS: The thing that I've learned is that the CEO sets the tone for the company. My training, which develops who you are as a leader, was accelerated by moving to Silicon Valley 30 years ago, working with startups and then for Nvidia. I was working for founders. At the time I couldn't tell you, "Oh, working with founders, that's the kind of environment that I resonate with." But looking back, that's where I think my DNA was shaped and where I found the environment I thrive in.

What kind of environment is that? Taking risks, bold growth, fast markets, making mistakes, but being willing to take big bets. So when I took over here, I said, that's the kind of culture I want.

Was this Arm silicon project already in the works when you became CEO?
No.

Was it more your idea or Masa's?

Was it his decision? No. I'm the CEO. Was he very aware and involved in the trade-offs and various things we looked at? Hundred percent. But more from a brainstorming perspective, as a partner of ideas, as opposed to your boss telling you "yes to this, no to this." He's not into that level of detail.

One benefit of SoftBank's 90 percent ownership of Arm is that he's our chairman, he's our biggest shareholder, and he's someone I talk to all the time. We're pretty close.

One analyst told me you talk to Masa 10 to 12 times per day.

Some days. He does like to talk on the phone. I am up all hours. He knows my personal schedule very well. He knows when I get up, he knows my workout schedule. He knows when I go to sleep. He's pretty good about all that.

What made you think this is the time for Arm to do this chip?

Somewhere along the way, we morphed from an IP company into a compute platform company. And by that, I mean there's such an interdependency



This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

between the hardware of the CPU and the software ecosystem. When I took over, I knew that this was who we were and it was something that we had to advance.

So why would we build a chip? When you're a compute platform company, there are times when the ecosystem benefits from you physically building something. We've seen this in the past, whether it's Microsoft building a Surface laptop that helps the Windows ecosystem, while HP and Dell and Lenovo are still building laptops; or Google building a Pixel phone, but meanwhile, Samsung still builds Android phones.

Those products are still a sliver of their businesses.

But it benefits the ecosystem. If Gemini is optimized on Android, it helps Samsung. If Microsoft develops tools for Surface that benefit Windows, it will benefit HP, Lenovo, and Dell.

That's the thing that people haven't always understood about us. They say, "Oh, it's an IP company." But the IP that we deliver is a compute platform, and ultimately platform companies need to move the ecosystem forward.

What's the new chip called?

It's the Arm AGI CPU.

AGI as in, artificial general intelligence?

That's right. You like it?

I don't dislike it. I wonder if the term AGI will go out of fashion at some point.

I'm betting it won't.

What makes this chip special?

It's unbelievably power-efficient. This company was born from building chips to run off of batteries or in mobile phones. We have this mindset around efficiency. Everything that you hear about the growth of AI is how much energy is needed. So anything you can do to deliver the world's most power-efficient server CPU is all goodness.

The other thing that it's going to be incredibly good at is running agentic AI. One of the myths has been that the GPU or accelerator is everything. But when you look at how agents run in the data center, that's work that only the CPU can

"There's never a good time to do anything. There's never a bad time. You've just got to do it."

do. The GPU doesn't go away, but it needs far more CPUs to run all the agents.

Meta struck two pretty big deals with Nvidia and AMD, for CPUs and GPUs. This includes Nvidia's new Vera CPUs, which are part of the bigger Vera Rubin superchip.

That's right. Which is Arm.

Pardon my French, but does launching your own CPU piss off a customer like Nvidia?

Yeah, so, back to the platform discussion ... It raises all boats.

That is a very convenient answer.

But it's not inaccurate. The more software and optimizations that are done for Arm—all of that helps anybody that builds on Arm. When you look at the dollars associated with AI growth, it's really large. To your question, does it piss off Nvidia? I'd imagine it will piss off Intel and AMD more than it pisses off Nvidia.

Why is that?

It takes market share from them.

Right, because it's Intel's x86 architecture versus Arm architecture. So you don't think you'll piss off your pal, Jensen, but AMD and Intel may have some response to this.

I use "piss off" as tongue-in-cheek. It's beneficial to the Arm ecosystem and to Jensen that we build a chip. If you've got [Nvidia's] Vera chip and Arm AGI CPU, it's not great for Intel and AMD, that's all I know.

Will Nvidia actually buy your CPU? Will

Amazon, which also has its own chips?

We didn't build this for Amazon, we built it because we think the market for Arm CPUs is really huge. It's an underserved market. If you look at some of the early customers we have, like Meta, which is going to be using our chip in an air-cooled rack—they don't need Nvidia's NV Link. Or Cloudflare—they can't buy Amazon's Graviton chip, and they don't have the wherewithal to build their own.

When you look at politics, geopolitics, the macroeconomic climate, the memory shortage—it's a crazy time to be launching a chip. How much has that changed your plans?

None. Because this is a long journey. The Arm AGI CPU is just the beginning.

My first job out of college was with Texas Instruments in 1984. It was a boom year for the semiconductor industry. But [the early 1980s] were one of the worst recessions ever. Then in 1985 Reagan took office for the second term, and he cut defense spending, which was a big part of TI's business.

What was the lesson I learned about that? There's never a good time to do anything. Seriously. There's never a bad time. You've just got to do it.

You're a big fan of the famed basketball coach Phil Jackson. Why?

What I love about Phil Jackson is that he took two great teams that had a lot of talent and turned them into champions.

What irritates you as a leader?

People happy with the status quo. "We've always done it this way. Can't see any other way to improve this."

What inspires you as a leader?

Well, if I distill it down to Arm, what inspires me is what we're doing with this chip. It's a big, big change for the company.

Is this a bet-the-farm moment?

No.

So even if this chip doesn't work, you're still confident in your IP business?

Absolutely. And the chip's going to work. It works. 

FOR FUTURE REFERENCE

LOST IN MEATSPACE

I took RFK Jr.'s advice and ate nothing but high-protein foods for a week.

NOT EVEN TWO months into my job here at WIRED, I found myself barfing in the office bathroom.

Technically, it was work-related stress, the unfortunate and almost immediate result of my efforts to switch to a diet solely consisting of foods, drinks, and supplements marketed as high in protein. My goal was to hit the level of daily protein intake recommended by the US Department of Health and Human Services under Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

The conversation on the porcelain telephone came about an hour after I sampled Ghost's Nutter Butter-flavored whey protein powder. My partner Mads uses it as workout fuel, and I saw it as an easy shortcut to 26 grams of protein. I took the jar's suggestion to add a heaping scoop of powder to 5 or 6 ounces of water and wound up trying to choke down a glass of peanut butter sludge. (Later, Mads told me that she only ever puts a small dose of this foul powder in her cereal milk). Lesson learned.

I doubt Kennedy has these problems. Earlier this year, the US health secretary unveiled a "historic reset" of dietary guidelines for Americans, and the first item was "Prioritizing Protein."



The department claimed that past official dietary guidance had "demonized protein in favor of carbohydrates." On social media, Trump's health secretary can be seen visiting a Texas barbecue restaurant, touring a Pennsylvania farm that produces "protein-rich" dairy, and appearing with Mike Tyson to promote the Trump administration's efforts to put protein "at the center of the American plate."

The food industry has responded to Kennedy's "Make America Healthy Again" agenda with a dizzying assortment of high-protein items now available in chain restaurants and on store shelves. Despite his frequent claim that ultra-processed foods are making Americans sick, protein-loaded versions of

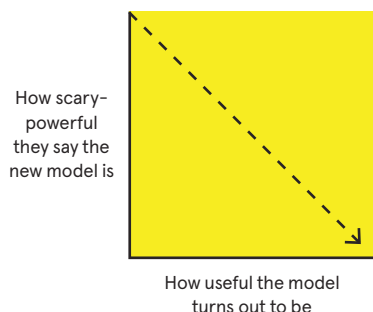
those same foodstuffs are everywhere.

I'm not the kind of guy who lifts weights in jeans—I prefer to run a few miles outdoors for my exercise—yet I wondered whether I was missing out on the alleged benefits of protein-maxxing. Perhaps if I upped my nutrient stats with all these trendy protein bowls, bars, and beverages for a week I would notice improvements to my overall quality of life. Certainly, I reasoned, it has never been easier to fill up a grocery cart with products that loudly proclaim their protein content. So that's what I did.

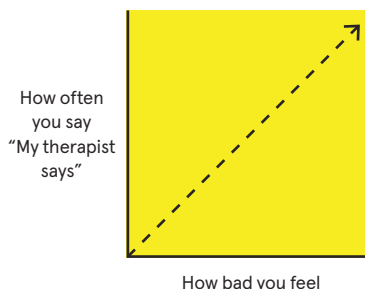
EAGER TO UP my protein at breakfast—while maintaining a level of masculinity suited to the MAHA ethos—I

CHARTGEIST

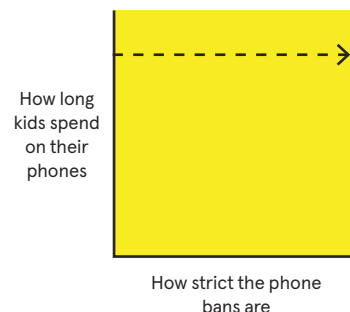
AI Hype



Talk Therapy



Screen Time



paid \$20, plus \$7 in shipping fees, for a box of something called Man Cereal. The maple bacon flavor is touted as "sweet, smoky & sigma," further confirming that the stuff is made for gym bros who listen to problematic podcasts. A bowl nets you 2.5 grams of creatine, a compound that supports muscle development. Too bad it's both offensively artificial on the palate and nearly impossible to chew, a fitting exercise for anyone who believes they can improve their jawlines by "mewing." As the hard, styrofoam-like balls finally break down, they coat your teeth in gritty morsels. Oh, and it's only 16 grams of protein.

Other options were less revolting but equally short on protein. I picked up a box of Protein Boostin' Brown Sugar Cinnamon Pop-Tarts, which hit the market last fall, and a package of Kodiak Cakes' "protein-packed" French toast sticks. Both tasted fine enough, but when I compared the protein content of a serving—10 grams each—I realized it was less than the 13 grams I got from my usual breakfast of Special K with milk.

The current protein craze, it seems, may be distorting the facts around Americans' access to it. "Protein is one of the many components of a healthy diet, and most people, without trying, get enough protein if they're not eating a restrictive diet," says David Seres, a clinical ethicist who recently retired from his role as director of medical nutrition and professor of medicine at the Columbia University Medical Center. Poverty or residence in a "food desert," where affordable, nutritious food is in short

supply, he notes, could also contribute to diets that are insufficient in protein.

Seres rejects Kennedy's assertion that the US government previously waged a "war on protein" and questions the nutritional guidance from the Trump administration, which calls on Americans to eat 1.2 to 1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day. Previous iterations of "high-fat, high-protein, low-carb" fad diets, he adds, were never endorsed with a federal recommendation, a development he finds "troubling."

Nevertheless, I was on a mission to eat—per the HHS guideline—about 138 grams of protein a day. Because my breakfast foods were barely making a dent, I looked to Starbucks, which serves up a vanilla protein latte (27 g) and Dunkin', which has a line of fruit-flavored protein "refreshers" (15 g) advertised by celebrity spokeswoman Megan Thee Stallion. The Starbucks employee was so bewildered by my order that she struggled to ring it up on the register.

Neither drink was to my liking, but both beat the cough-syrup taste of a cherry-lime Clear Protein Soda, which yields 10 grams of protein. Yes, there is also such a thing as protein water; a bottle of Isopure has 15 grams per 20-ounce bottle and something of a milky aftertaste. The most loaded drink I found was Slate Milk's Vanilla Ultra Protein Shake, which packs 42 grams into a can and drinks like melted chalk.

LUNCHES CAME FROM a variety of fast-food and fast-casual chains that

YOUR NEXT ...

► Personal Computer

Young women on TikTok are making cyberdecks and placing the tiny, purpose-built computers in polly pockets, clam shells, and cute purses. In the Gibsonian ethos of OG cyberpunks, they see the hobby as a protest against the sameness and surveillance of Big Tech. Unlike their forefathers, they aren't afraid of a bedazzle gun.

► Mobile Game

Resist the urge to brain-rot on social media and instead turn to the soothing genre of goods-sorting games. All you do is organize products (drinks, fruit) by type, like a little worker bee at a digital supermarket, but you get points for doing it quickly. Somehow, it sort of feels like it's good for you.

► -Maxxing

"Do Not Disturb" maximalists don't reserve this mode just for movies or funerals. They block phone alerts and notifications *at all times*, re-creating a bygone era where being contacted was a choice. Everyone hates these smug nonconformists with a passion, but they are free.



FOR FUTURE REFERENCE

have looked to cash in on protein mania, with some meals feeling more like recession indicators than health food. At no point did I see another customer at a restaurant order the plates I was inflicting upon myself.

On its high-protein menu, Chipotle has a “protein cup”—literally a cup of steak or adobo chicken, with nothing else. I opted for the over-glazed chicken, which cost me \$4.70 for a straightforward 32 grams of protein, and instantly understood the term “boy kibble.”

Subway’s “protein pockets,” meanwhile, are nothing but its usual lunch meats wrapped in a wheat tortilla. The \$3.99 “Italian Trio” I ate was good for 22 grams of protein; that didn’t make it any less depressing. Jack in the Box’s new chicken fajita bowl (up to 35 grams of protein) at least came with rice, a luxury for anyone on this kind of diet. I sent a video of that dish to my colleague, who replied with a single word: “Disgusting.”

Seeking protein at all costs even took the pleasure out of snacking. A David high-protein bar (28 grams) was altogether uncanny in its approximation of chocolate chip cookie dough. (A group attempted to sue the company for misrepresenting the calorie and fat content of the bars, which are popular among wellness influencers, but the complaint was voluntarily dismissed.)

And how did I feel, physically? In a word, dear reader: unwell. But it was appropriate to this moment to explore products that have been cynically repackaged as protein-rich.

DINNERS WERE NO less disappointing, plus I had to contend with Mads’ annoyance over me not cooking for us both, as I do most nights. (She did eventually try a single bite of the Man Cereal, which she judged horrendous.) Sweetgreen’s steak mezze plate (34 grams of protein) was remarkably bland considering its five-ingredient side medley. My serving of protein pasta (21 g) was alleviated only by the nice tomato sauce I used and the green peas (8 g) I

sautéed on the side—my body yearned for a vegetable.

I couldn’t finish out the week without an order from a local spot called Burgers Never Say Die, which serves the type of beef tallow fries so popular with Kennedy and other anti-seed-oil truthers. While they contain almost no protein themselves, they belong to the kind of worldview that prescribes smoked brisket for your health. Although the subtextual politics of burger franchises have come to rest on the question of whether they have switched to tallow, having finally tasted this alternative, I couldn’t see what all the fuss was about. Mads, a cheeseburger aficionado, didn’t care for the smash patties either.

And how did I feel, physically? In a word, dear reader: unwell. Sure, I could have gone a more sensible route to maximum protein, with lots of salmon and spinach and the like. But it was by far more appropriate to this moment in American culture to explore all the products that have been either cynically repackaged as protein-rich or had a modest amount of protein injected into them. Together, these left me queasy, somewhat constipated, and wondering if my natural body odor was a little stronger than usual—or if I was simply sweating more. Mads did say I was stinky, anyway. I was sluggish on my runs and hardly up for socializing in the evenings.

“It makes sense from a marketing perspective,” Seres says of the many gimmicky protein treats and fast-food meals that have flooded America’s nutritional landscape of late, “because you’re taking something that’s unhealthy and making it sound like it’s healthy.” Indeed, I experienced no particular upside to sustaining myself on these products for a week and doubt another month or two would have contributed to my overall fitness.

To reward myself after a bleak week of greasy meat and protein-infused seltzers, I made an old-fashioned cocktail known as the bull shot. It’s vodka with a few dashes of Worcestershire sauce and tabasco, a splash of lemon juice, and 3 ounces of chilled beef broth. That’s a mere gram of protein in total, but at least it’ll give you a buzz. 🍷

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THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST OFF-ROAD RACE





Welcome to Hammertown, the temporary desert city that springs up for 16 days every January for an off-road race series known as King of the Hammers. Think Burning Man meets Mad Max, but sponsored by Monster Energy. This was my second time shooting the event, and both were among the most exhausting shoots of my life. With racers lining up just after sunrise and post-race action going well into the night—to say nothing of the desert sun and dust, lots of dust—it adds up to a pretty grueling few days. The most valuable tool in my arsenal was definitely my 2000 AWD Astro Van. It was more than capable of getting around the valley and gave me a place to get out of the sun, crank out some edits, and sneak a little nap. —M.R.



CUDA, WOULDA, SHOULD'A

How Nvidia drowns the competition.

→ A regular column about programming. Because if/when the machines take over, we should at least speak their language.

FORGIVE ME FOR starting with a cliché, a piece of finance jargon that has recently slipped into the tech lexicon, but I'm afraid I must talk about "moats." Popularized decades ago by Warren Buffett to refer to a company's competitive advantage, the word found its way into Silicon Valley pitch decks when a memo purportedly leaked from Google, titled "We Have No Moat, and Neither Does OpenAI," fretted that open-source AI would pillage Big Tech's castle.

A few years on, the castle walls remain safe. Apart from a brief bout of panic when DeepSeek first appeared, open-source AI models have not vastly outperformed proprietary models. Still, none of the frontier labs—OpenAI, Anthropic, Google—has a moat to speak of.

The company that does have a moat is Nvidia. CEO Jensen Huang has called it his most precious "treasure." It is not, as you might assume for a chip company, a piece of hardware. It's something called CUDA. What sounds like a chemical compound banned by the FDA may be the one true moat in AI.

CUDA TECHNICALLY STANDS for Compute Unified Device Architecture, but much like *laser* or *scuba*, no one bothers to expand the acronym; we just say "KOO-duh." So what is this all-important treasure good for? If forced to give a one-word answer: parallelization.

Here's a simple example. Let's say we task a machine with filling out a 9×9 multiplication table. Using a computer with a single core, all 81 operations are executed dutifully one by one. But a GPU with nine cores can assign tasks so that each core takes a different column—one from 1×1 to 1×9, another from 2×1 to 2×9, and so on—for a ninefold speed gain. Modern GPUs can be even cleverer. For example, if programmed to recognize commutativity—7×9 = 9×7—they can avoid

duplicate work, reducing 81 operations to 45, nearly halving the workload. When a single training run costs a hundred million dollars, every optimization counts.

Nvidia's GPUs were originally built to render graphics for video games. In the early 2000s, a Stanford PhD student named Ian Buck, who first got into GPUs as a gamer, realized their architecture could be repurposed for general high-performance computing. He created a programming language called Brook, was hired by Nvidia, and, with John Nickolls, led the development of CUDA. If AI ushers in the age of a permanent white-collar underclass and autonomous weapons, just know that it would all be because someone somewhere playing *Doom* thought a demon's scrotum should jiggle at 60 frames per second.

CUDA is not a programming language in itself but a "platform." I use that weasel word because, not unlike how *The New York Times* is a newspaper that's also a gaming company, CUDA has, over the years, become a nested bundle of software libraries for AI. Each function shaves nanoseconds off single mathematical operations—added up, they make GPUs, in industry parlance, go *brrr*.

A MODERN GRAPHICS card is not just a circuit board crammed with chips and memory and fans. It's an elaborate confection of cache hierarchies and specialized units called "tensor cores" and "streaming multiprocessors." In that sense, what chip companies sell is like a professional kitchen, and more cores are akin to more grilling stations. But even a kitchen with 30 grilling stations won't run any faster without a capable head chef deftly assigning tasks—as CUDA does for GPU cores.

To extend the metaphor, hand-tuned CUDA libraries optimized for one matrix operation are the equivalent of kitchen tools designed for a single job and nothing more—a cherry pitter, a shrimp deveiner—which are indulgences for home cooks but not if you have 10,000 shrimp guts to yank out. Which brings us back to DeepSeek. Its engineers went below this already deep layer of abstraction to work directly in PTX, a kind of assembly language for Nvidia GPUs. Let's say the

task is peeling garlic. An unoptimized GPU would go: "Peel the skin with your fingernails." CUDA can instruct: "Smash the clove with the flat of a knife." PTX lets you dictate every sub-instruction: "Lift the blade 2.35 inches above the cutting board, make it parallel to the clove's equator, and strike downward with your palm at a force of 36.2 newtons."

You can begin to see why CUDA is so valuable to Nvidia—and so hard for anyone else to touch. Tuning GPU performance is a gnarly problem. You can't just conscript some tender-footed undergrad on Market Street, hand them a Claude Max plan, and expect them to hack GPU kernels. Writing at this level is a grindsome enterprise—unless you're a crackerjack programmer at DeepSeek.

A DISCLOSURE: IN previous Machine Readable columns, I was already familiar with the languages I was analyzing. Not so here. In the interest of maintaining this standard, I decided to spend a day with CUDA. It ruined my afternoon.

A simple matrix multiplication that usually takes me three lines in PyTorch—a popular machine-learning framework—took me 50-plus lines in CUDA. Wringing out the last drop of performance, it turns out, is an admirable but tedious business. Having dipped my toe in the moat, I can report that it is indeed deep and forbidding.

CUDA's dominance is built not just on the quality of its ecosystem but on a lock-in effect. Because modern machine-learning frameworks are built on CUDA, which crucially runs on Nvidia chips, AMD's chips underperform even when they have more cores and memory. Comparing chips by spec sheets is like comparing race cars by cylinder count, whereas real performance can only be measured on the track.

A second disclosure: I intended to benchmark two chips, but there was no way to expense an Nvidia H100 and an AMD MI300X without landing on Condé Nast's blacklist. Instead, you will have to take the word of independent researchers who found that even with better specs on paper, AMD was outmatched by Nvidia.

Nvidia's edge in software might be that, unusual for a chip company, it hires

more software engineers than hardware engineers. If I were running AMD, I might follow suit. (But who's asking me?)

EVERY YEAR, THERE are new hopefuls attempting to drain Nvidia's moat, only to drown in it. OpenCL, an open standard backed by a consortium that included Apple, AMD, and Qualcomm, was a kind of Android manqué to CUDA's iOS. It barely gained traction.

Meanwhile, AMD's answer to CUDA, ROCm, is an even worse name than CUDA—is it pronounced "rock cum"? (Forget about hiring more programmers—get a new marketing team.) It has also been so plagued by bugs and compatibility issues that its subreddit reads like a support group.

Let's not forget Intel. While it's easy to brush it off as a failing chipmaker, its recent history reveals it's also a failing software company. In a last spasm at relevance, it launched oneAPI, but as of 2026, we know for dead sure that CUDA still reigns. If there's any challenger, it's Modular, led by Chris Lattner, the legendary language designer who counts among his creations Apple's Swift and LLVM.

But the open secret is that, much as theoretical physicists cannot change a tire to save their lives, most AI researchers can't so much as write a single line of C++. There are very few good GPU kernel engineers alive, and many of them are employed by Nvidia. Long before AI researchers started trafficking in clout, these engineers were diligently working on CUDA without kudos. Even trusty coding agents still hobble through kernel code.

Nvidia, in the end, may be closer to Apple than to AMD or Intel. It's a great hardware company because it's a software company. Apple's moat against Android was never just the iPhone but the ecosystem: iOS, the App Store, and its developers. Sure, you can fold a Samsung Galaxy in half, but do you really want to use Samsung Pay? In the meantime, the industry will have to live with Nvidia's offensive price tags. ■

SHEON HAN is a writer and programmer based in Palo Alto, California.



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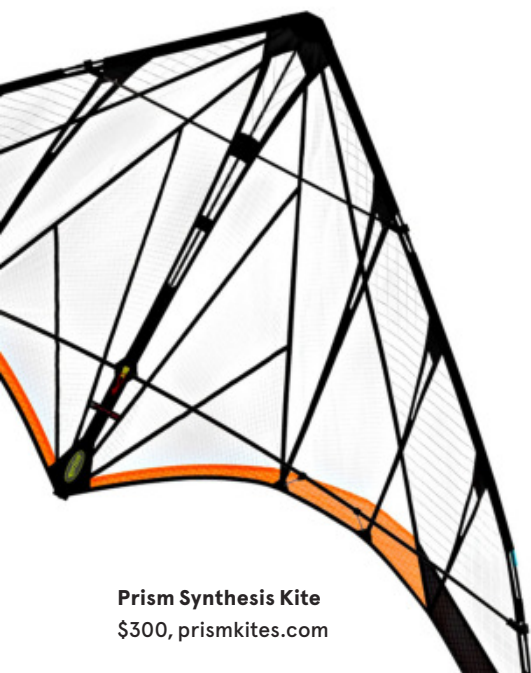


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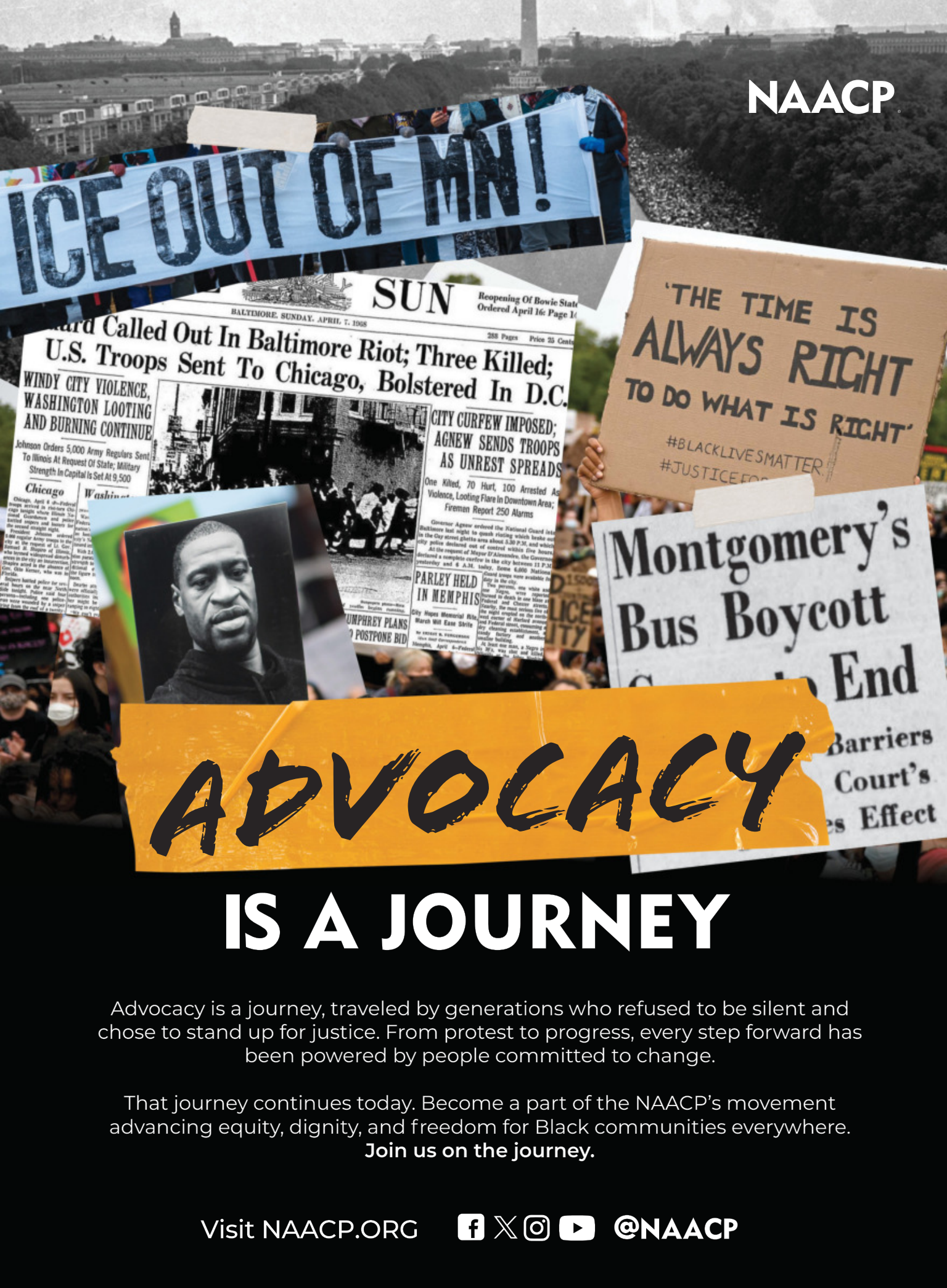
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CORPORATE AI-MERICA 34.04

I

IF YOU'RE A working adult, you've probably had your AI Moment. The moment, that is, when the risk of artificial intelligence drastically transforming your career—along with your finances and sense of purpose—suddenly felt less like a hazy possibility and more like a punch to the gut.

I'll tell you mine.

A few months ago, on a Sunday afternoon, I was hustling to edit a story before taking my daughter to a birthday party. As she reminded me every 30 seconds, the clock was ticking, and I still needed a good headline. Exit: my righteous journalistic ethics. Enter: ChatGPT. Result? A list of eight pretty good headlines and two truly excellent ones. I made a few tweaks and voilà: a working-mom success story, brought to you by OpenAI.

The next day, the story outperformed similar ones by a wide margin. And I realized with visceral immediacy what I've known vaguely, and maybe reluctantly, for years: There's plenty of my job that AI can do. Some people have believed this for a while; others are still skeptical to the point of delusion. But now that the promise of AI has collided with the present models and their abilities, everyone has the same question: What—gulp!—will become of the white-collar worker? How will we earn our keep, show our worth, or even know what that worth is to begin with?

Later that same week, I told our team that we needed to pull together a package

to make sense of this transformative shift. Read on to learn about the upheaval triggered by Anthropic's Claude Code [p. 24]; recoil at the punishing AI gig work taking Hollywood by storm [p. 36]; and meet the sad wives whose husbands are all-in on this latest tech wave—and might soon be divorced [p. 56]. These stories are bold, hilarious, and sometimes disconcerting. But they're not a crystal ball. As our data investigation shows, it's still unclear how AI is changing work, what'll change next, and when [p. 62].

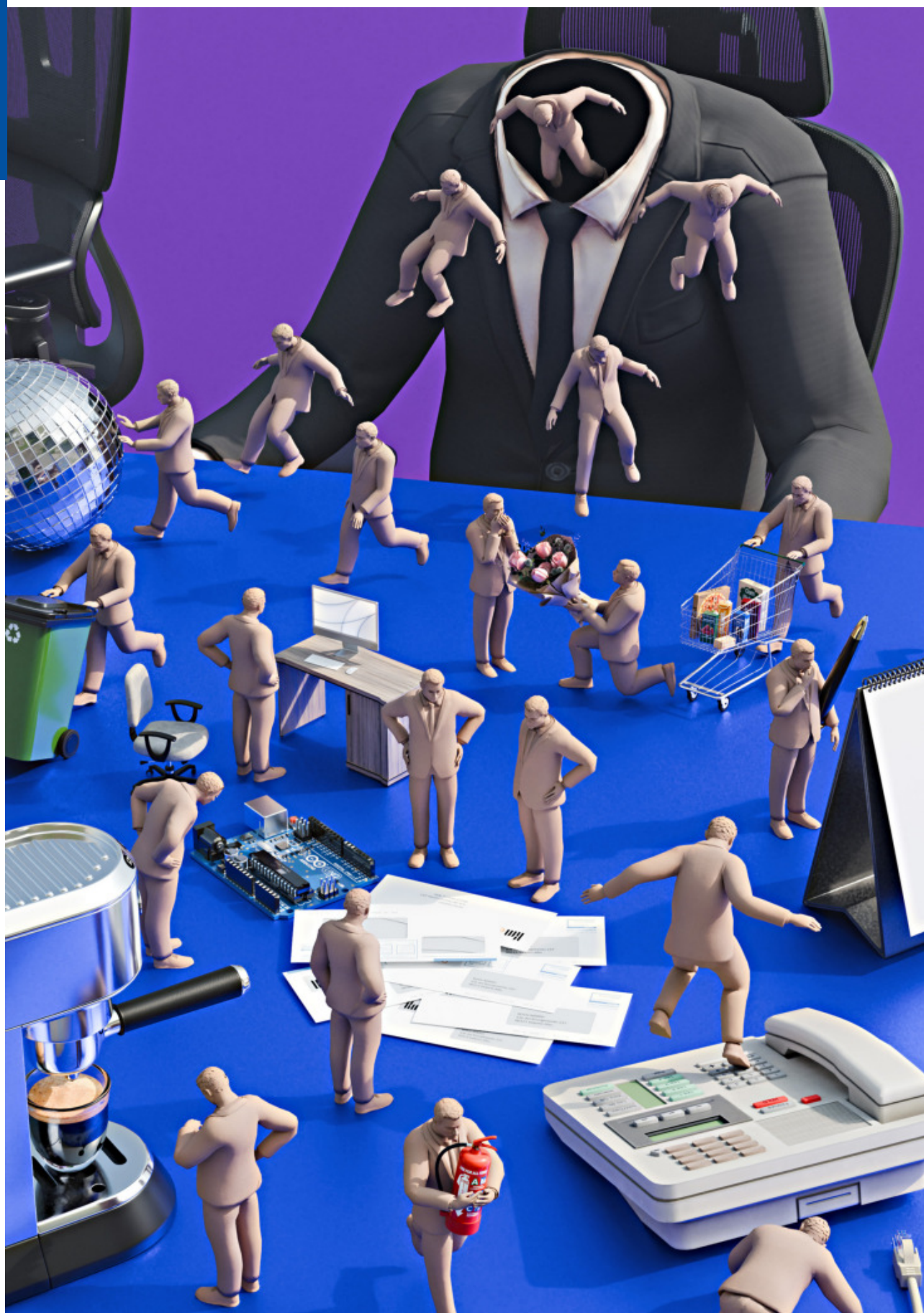
I'll add this: Just because AI can do parts of your job doesn't mean it should. It didn't take more than a brief flirtation with ChatGPT to feel my own skills atrophying. That's a nonstarter if you believe,

as I do, that the human process of writing is the entire point. (And, I'll argue until I die or the bots fire me, it's also what audiences will crave when much of what they encounter is AI-generated.) Here at WIRED, we're embracing AI tools for all kinds of work, from parsing datasets to analyzing video footage. But after my AI Moment, I'm even more firmly in the camp of old-fashioned reporting and writing—headlines included, birthday parties be damned.

KATIE DRUMMOND
GLOBAL EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE WHITE-COLLAR WORKER? HOW WILL WE EARN OUR KEEP?



ILLUSTRATIONS BY SARATTA CHUENGSAIANSUP

AGENTS OF CHAOS

Between Claude Code's epic problem-solving and OpenClaw's madcap powers, computing is undergoing its biggest transformation yet.

BY STEVEN LEVY

H

“HI, MY NAME is Peter, and I’m a Claudeholic.”

It was August 2025 and Peter Steinberger was addressing a meetup in London called Claude Code Anonymous. Steinberger and some fellow addicts had arranged the event to network with people like themselves—techies swept up by coding tools such as Anthropic’s paradigm-busting Claude Code. “I dedicate pretty much all my waking time to this, yet it doesn’t feel enough,” he told the gathering in a cozy, brick-walled room.

A few months later, Anthropic released a new version of Claude Code, and the ranks of Claudeholics exploded. Called Opus 4.5, it could handle more complicated programming tasks, retain much more in its memory, run for many hours on end, and manage a team of AI sub-agents. Anthropic has what it describes as a “notoriously difficult” take-home exam for prospective engineering hires; in a head-to-head comparison of those people and its models, Anthropic claimed that Opus 4.5 “scored higher than any human candidate ever,” which “raises questions on how AI will change engineering as a profession.”

Countless coders spent the holidays in basements and dens, madly trying out this new toy that let them build software as if they’d unleashed a hundred clones. Or unlocked superpowers. “It feels like becoming Spider-Man,” one told me.

For the 39-year-old Steinberger, who split his time between homes in London and Vienna, even this was not enough. In November 2025, he launched a tool that’s now called OpenClaw, a simple way to conjure a personal AI agent that exploits the advances of Claude Code or other coding tools. Give it access to your data, your apps, and maybe even your credit card, and it scours your cloud and ventures onto the web to do your bidding. It can run autonomously in the background and overcome obstacles with the persistence of the Terminator.

Steinberger’s project took off midwinter. One indicator of popularity is the number of “stars” a code repository gets on Github. In less than two weeks, as users downloaded it and began feverishly building, the project racked up more than 100,000 stars. (As of early May, it stood at 366,000 stars.)

With those two breakthroughs—the commercial product Claude Code and the open source OpenClaw—the long-awaited age of AI agents has suddenly arrived. At least for those technically proficient enough and perhaps foolhardy enough to go all-in on a messy, imperfect, and risky adventure. More than one Claudeholic tells me they feel they are living in the future. “AGI is here!” one fanatic told me, paraphrasing William Gibson’s famous quote. “It’s just not evenly distributed.”

Back in the 1980s computer revolution, the general public tended to regard the new machines with a mix of curiosity and angst while the hackers were joyfully building. There’s a similar dynamic today, possibly with even more at stake. “It’s hard to explain how much of a sea change this is,” says Thomas Reardon, a former executive at Microsoft and Meta who now heads a startup focused on a different area of AI. “It’s the most underrated, massive release I’ve experienced in technology.” Soon we’ll all be experiencing it. On a recent podcast, Marc Andreessen, the guy who co-invented the browser and has cast himself as the ultimate technoptimist and MAGA fan, made a proclamation that reflects Silicon Valley’s thinking: “It’s almost inevitable that this is the way people are going to use computers.” Left unsaid: It won’t be a choice.



ROLL BACK TO early 2024, when Boris Cherny was an Instagram tech lead, working remotely from a house he shared with his partner in rural Japan. “I would bike to the farmers market by the rice paddies,” Cherny, who’s 34, says. “Our hobby was making miso and pickles, and we would trade with our neighbors.” All that changed when he started to play with the AI models emerging from his former hometown of San Francisco. (He is originally from Ukraine; his grandfather programmed computers with punch cards.) The models jarred Cherny from his idyll. Through friends, he connected with Anthropic, and then moved back to the Bay Area to work there.

Soon after Cherny joined the company, an engineer named Adam Wolff showed him Anthropic’s work on automated coding. “It was very primitive,” Wolff says. But Cherny used the coding tool to do a pull request, a common activity in software engineering that attempts to merge new code into an existing code base. “It wasn’t a good PR,” says Wolff. But the attempt meant that good pull requests were possible—and that higher-level coding tasks might soon be automated.

Cherny set out to make that a reality. OpenAI and Microsoft had been trumpeting their coding products since 2021, when OpenAI launched its first iteration of Codex. While those tools made programmers more productive, the products were limited and required careful supervision. Cherny envisioned an upgrade where the model understood the architecture of programming and had the wherewithal to solve problems.

What Cherny and his team built became Claude Code. Anthropic released a preview in February 2025 and launched it in May 2025, with updates over the next months. For many people, however, the turning point came in November, when the company released Opus 4.5: It ran longer, was better at problem-solving, and could run whole teams of subagents, each working on a different part of a program.

At first, the Claude Code team saw Opus 4.5 as an incremental improvement. “We’d been daily users for over a year, so it was less night and day for us,” says Cat Wu, Claude Code’s head



of product. But Anthropic’s tool had reached the coding equivalent of escape velocity. While far from perfect—only fools deployed its work without vetting for errors—it now rivaled or outperformed what a human might come up with. “Some opinions we had about how to structure code have melted away because it’s easier not to fight Claude,” Wolff says. “If Claude wants to do something a certain way, you just let Claude do it.”

Much like how OpenAI underestimated ChatGPT’s impact, Anthropic didn’t anticipate how the November release would galvanize the techie com-

Ryan Petersen, CEO of the shipping and freight logistics company Flexport, found himself spending less time on C-suite activities—or his family—and more time playing with Claude Code. “There’s something about watching the agent just doing the work that is mind-blowing,” he says. As I spoke to Petersen, I got the impression that the global supply-chain crisis in the Strait of Hormuz was less a corporate emergency and more an unwelcome distraction from his sessions with Claude. “It’s sad, because I just want to spend all day building tech and applying AI and partnering with the teams,” he says.

In a twist that Mary Shelley might

“I WAS CODING AT A RATE OF ABOUT 4 MILLION LINES OF CODE A YEAR, WHICH IS ABOUT 90x MY BEST OUTPUT AS AN ENGINEER IN 2013—BASICALLY A TEAM OF 90 GARRYS.”

munity. Garry Tan, CEO of the startup incubator Y Combinator, was a convert. “I went all the way to the edge of how you could get the most out of Claude Code,” he says. “I was coding at a rate of about 4 million lines of code a year, which is about 90X my best output as an engineer in 2013—basically a team of 90 Garrys.” (A few weeks after we spoke, he updated his estimate; he now thinks he’s up to 408 Garrys.)

appreciate, Cherny himself turned into a Claudeholic. “Most nights, I have dozens, sometimes hundreds, of agents running eight and 12 hours at a time,” he told me. “I have some agents that run for many days at a time, and they do things like rewrite the code base or improve the efficiency of code.”

Or as he said to me at another point: “It’s like I have a jet pack. I can’t stop thinking about it.”



IN EARLY 2025, Peter Steinberger was lost. Four years earlier, he had sold his shares in his company for a tidy sum and promptly lost his bearings. As he put it in a blog post last year, “I did a lot of stuff, I partied hard, I did plenty of therapy, I did ayahuasca, I moved to another country, I wandered around carrying this emptiness in me and hunting hedonic pleasures.” Then, in April of 2025, he discovered the beta of Anthropic’s coding tool.

“I was really addicted,” Steinberger says. “I had trouble sleeping.” As transformational as Claude Code was, it still required monitoring from the command line in a terminal, a persistent relic of

party, for example, it could look at your contacts and email, figure out whom to include, send invites, and order the food. Steinberger dusted off a prototype of a tool that would let you access your computer terminal on your phone, and started building using Codex. (OpenAI had upgraded its own programming tool to compete with Claude Code, and Steinberger often preferred it.) After a few hours of tinkering, he had an agent that could make use of the best AI coding tools. “I just prompted it into existence,” he says.

Steinberger was startled by the skill set of his creation. On a trip to Morocco in November 2025, he accidentally asked

open source. Since every great open source product has a mascot, he made Clawd’s a lobster. At first, the uptake was slow. But a few weeks in, he took a chance and introduced his agent to a public Discord. Anyone on the Discord could have used it to mine Steinberger’s personal data, but they didn’t; Clawd went viral, becoming the most popular open source project in Github’s history. Viewed on a chart, Clawd’s trajectory looks like a rocket launch—one stark vertical line. As interest rose, Anthropic decided that the name was too close to its own product, which eventually led Steinberger to rename Clawd to OpenClaw. The lobster mascot remains.

Make no mistake: OpenClaw is not necessarily easy to set up. If you don’t have a modicum of technical chops and an unhealthy tolerance for risks, it’s not for you. But those who enter OpenClaw’s world—by pasting in the single line of code that starts the installation process—have gone bananas building artisanal services to automate their professional and personal tasks. If your work involves, say, placing a lot of orders and awaiting their delivery, you can now set up a system that finds the orders in your email, regularly pings FedEx or UPS for updates, and displays the status of all deliveries in a dashboard. When a package arrives, OpenClaw messages you.

In the gleeful fog of creation, many OpenClaw fanatics blew past concerns about the risks of exposing their data to an ambitious robot. In a February paper, 20 AI researchers tested OpenClaw and found that it is, to cite the paper’s title, an agent of chaos. “Observed behaviors include unauthorized compliance with non-owners, disclosure of sensitive information, execution of destructive system-level actions,” and numerous other alarming behaviors. Problems emerged in the wild as well. One Meta safety and security engineer made a “rookie mistake” in an OpenClaw project and watched in horror as her inbox began deleting all her mail.

But for all its risks, OpenClaw helped expose a broad swath of techies to the power of an agent. With OpenClaw, the interface is your chat app—WhatsApp, Telegram, or iMessage, for example. “It made the models so much more acces-

ONE META SAFETY AND SECURITY ENGINEER MADE A “ROOKIE MISTAKE” IN AN OPENCLAW PROJECT AND WATCHED IN HORROR AS HER INBOX BEGAN DELETING ALL HER EMAIL.

computing’s Jurassic roots. If Claude hit a snag while Steinberger was out and about, he couldn’t immediately fix the problem. Steinberger started to imagine a code-savvy factotum with access to Claude or Codex that you could use on your phone, perhaps through Slack or WhatsApp.

He figured that a digital assistant with access to your apps and data could automate a huge range of tasks. To plan a

his agent a question using a voice memo. He had designed the agent to accept only text or images. “It just replied!” he says. “I asked, ‘How the hell did you do that?’” The agent responded that it recognized the input as an audio file and found programs to decode it, understand it, and act on it. “That was a moment where I was like, holy hell!” he says.

He dubbed his tool Clawd, and in late November he released it on GitHub as

sible and nice to use, because suddenly, like, you hatch your agent. You give it a name. It's much more relatable," Steinberger says.

Dave Morin, a former Facebook executive and now a VC, says OpenClaw was life-changing for him. Within seconds of installing it in December 2025, he was in conversation with his OpenClaw agent. The agent asked him a few personal questions and suggested, because he lives in Marin County and is involved with the woo-woo Esalen Institute, that its name should be Watts, after the late Sausalito-based hippie philosopher Alan Watts.

Morin had a job for Watts. In his dining room, Morin had a set of digital photo frames with outdated software, and he was stuck looking at the same pictures. He asked OpenClaw to take a stab. "Within 15 minutes, I had a fully functioning web interface for the frames, and I was updating the photos," he says. Morin has since used OpenClaw to manage the software that runs his VC company. As I talk to him, I get the feeling that Watts may be Morin's best friend.

Morin sent Steinberger a DM on January 11. "I'm in love with what you've built," he wrote, gushing that Steinberger's idea is bigger than the software. Morin and Steinberger began a friendship that became a collaboration. "I kept telling him we have to put this into a foundation," says Morin. "You've uncovered the Linux of AI, and it's going to be 6-billion-people scale."

Together they cofounded the OpenClaw Foundation, to help organize the project's maintenance and development. Morin also expects that the foundation will tout OpenClaw as an exemplar of beneficial AI. "The vision of the foundation is to bring people closer to AI," he says. "In the United States, AI is less popular than ICE."

In March, Morin and Steinberger found themselves backstage at Nvidia's GTC developer conference. They'd been told that CEO Jensen Huang was going to mention OpenClaw in his keynote. "We thought he was going to just do one slide," Morin says. "He ended up taking over 10 minutes of his keynote to 28,000 people." In fact, Huang's rhapsodic description of OpenClaw, and Nvidia's adoption of a supposedly more secure

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He writes the weekly newsletter Backchannel.

and error-free version of it called NemoClaw, was the climax of his two-hour speech. "Every company in the world today needs to have an OpenClaw strategy," Huang told the crowd.

They'll also need to scrape up a lot of cash to pay for this new mode of computing. For one thing, agents are computationally intensive. Using these tools burns what are known as tokens, little



chunks of text in a large language model. AI companies generally charge by the token, much as power companies bill people by the kilowatt-hour. "It's a real dollar investment," says Tan, speaking for Claudeholics who go full blast. "You actually have to spend six to seven figures on tokens—I'm on a run rate to do seven figures this year."

Even less fanatic users can easily spend hundreds of dollars in a week; YouTube is full of videos recommending methods to cut down the number. To help run their OpenClaw experiments continuously, people have been buying up Mac Minis, and Apple can't meet demand.

OpenClaw users with subscriptions to the standard Claude chatbot were burning so many tokens that Anthropic started forcing them to pay extra.

Meanwhile, OpenAI has hired Steinberger to help it bring agents to the masses. While other companies courted Steinberger, Anthropic, he says, "never said much to me other than sending me legal threats." (Anthropic says they merely sent a "friendly email.") OpenClaw will continue to be available as an open source GitHub project, with the foundation providing guidance. Anthropic is working on versions of agents that can bring the power of Claude Code to users across finance, legal, sales, and more. Its first such product, Claude Cowork, was released in late January.

It's uncertain—and irrelevant—whether OpenClaw will remain at the heart of agent mania. Countless AI companies are on a mad dash to get agents into the hands of anyone with a keyboard or phone. If that happens, the transition they imagine won't be smooth. An inability to stem horrendous hallucinations and outright bad behavior might set the timeline to never. The lack of sufficient tools to check an agent's work will continue to be an impediment.

But if a widespread rollout does take place, agents could put plenty of human beings out of a job. Success could be painful. Making the most of this transformation will be less of a technical challenge than a cognitive one. Just as internet-native users have had an edge in the digital world, those who instinctively automate their world will run circles around those who are reluctant. We may all become Claudeholics, or be left behind. ■

ILLUSTRATIONS BY YANN BASTARD

I'M A NORMIE. CAN I REALLY VIBE CODE A WORKABLE APP?

With no programming skills, I tested AI's big promise.

BY CHRIS COLIN



THE DOG THAT ushered me into the technological future was “low and thick.” That’s all my mother registered before it T-boned her in a city park earlier this year: dense, heavy, and traveling fast enough to fracture her right tibia. But enough about *her*. Let’s discuss what this set in motion in my life: Having successfully learned nothing about coding for two and a half decades, I would soon be attempting my very first software development project.

If you’ve ever had a low and thick dog break your mom’s shin bone, you know the stream of lesser indignities that follows. Case in point: the hours my father spent navigating phone trees, trying to manage my mom’s medical care. Are frustrating telephone calls significant in the grand scheme of things? No. But that stupid dog had chosen a technologically interesting moment to do its thing. For the first time in history, a problem no longer needed to be serious to bring serious tools to bear.

For as long as Silicon Valley has been selling a frictionless tomorrow, we ordinary people have been its passive shoppers—scrolling the App Store, hoping someone has gone to the trouble of building whatever we need. Enter AI and its democratizing sidekick: vibe coding. If the promise is real, suddenly we can build our own apps, as niche and trifling as we please, with zero programming skills. We merely gesture toward whatever irks us and a constellation of large language models, code generators, and development environments will click their heels.

Niche and trifling? That’s me! Where others vibe code résumé reviewers and

One user called my app a “grievance dragnet.” Another said it was “like a friend.”



inventory trackers and automated assistants to boost their work productivity, I had a different target in mind. Over the past couple years I’ve grown particularly fixated, personally and professionally, on what the policy world calls sludge: the rising tide of tiny administrative obligations that increasingly seems to define modern existence—and corrode our ability to get anything done. The hassle of dealing with insurance, or connecting that insurance to your doctor, or staying on top of airline miles, or navigating your kid’s school portal. The steps required to dispute a charge, or unsubscribe from a streaming service you forgot you had. Each of these feels like its own discrete assault on our time. But they’re not discrete. They’re separate mushrooms sprouting from the same mycorrhizal network.

In a way this is a calibration issue. While bigger problems might at least theoretically attract attention—legislation, journalism, a Senate hearing—the smaller ones, too petty to litigate, simply become a fact of life. The arc of history may bend toward justice, but when it comes to fighting a one-dollar bank fee, it bends toward hold music.

Which is where the fantasy of vibe

coding captured my attention. Those hassles aren’t just accidental byproducts of complexity; they’re often features. A confusing portal, a dropped call, a process just opaque enough to discourage follow-through. At scale, they function less like bugs than like policy. The app I envisioned would expose this phenomenon, make the cumulative weight of these obligations a little harder to ignore. The image I’d like you to summon is a field of mushrooms trembling.

WHAT MY MOM lacks in healthy legs, she makes up for in a Claude Pro subscription. Having needled her repeatedly over the past couple years about AI’s environmental, political, and economic implications, I brushed all that aside on a recent Sunday and drove to her house. After a little tibia talk, I opened her computer and began emitting vibes.

I’d like to create a communally shared app that gathers and shares information related to how much time and energy we devote to fighting burdensome administrative tasks, bureaucratic sludge, Kafkaesque unsubscribe mazes, byzantine

insurance portals, wrongful charges, denied claims, confusing membership plans, and the like.

With as much clarity and detail as I could muster, I proceeded to describe a dashboard that would record the scale and scope of our collective sludge. Users would log frustrating incidents from their lives, entering how much time they'd spent, how annoying it was, and what they'd rather have been doing. Every submission would be dopaminally rewarded with an inspiring resistance quote and a photo of a kitten, puppy, or baby chimp. I'd train Claude to generate some "wider context"—a paragraph discussing how the frustrating incident fits into systemic sludge patterns—and a complaint letter to the relevant regulatory bodies.

Claude noodled. Not for the first time, I feared my vibes would simply manifest an error page. I recalled, dimly, some of the advice I'd seen in Reddit forums: "I'd learn how computers and code works first." "I'd look into going through harvards CS50." "Instead of learning AWS or servers, use something like Kuberns." I began to worry that vibe coding was a kind of stone soup: Sure, anyone can do it, you just first need a Harvard-level understanding of several dozen programming languages and cloud platforms.

That worry lasted about three Kuberns of a second. Claude stopped thinking and proceeded to explore what, by nature, it had to concede was an amazing concept: "This is a fantastic idea—genuinely useful, with a clear mission and a great sense of humor about a real problem. Let me give you an honest lay of the land before we dive in."

A couple clarifying questions later, I was staring at a real interface. The "Log Incident" and "Dashboard" tabs didn't work yet, we hadn't arranged for the entries to be saved anywhere, and I still needed to teach Claude the wider context part. But the beginnings of an online app had materialized.

I spent the next hour ironing out kinks. Some fixes Claude could make, some it had me make. I understood nothing and was merely following orders (while also being the one who gave out the orders). But steadily we made headway, and help—confident, reassuring, clear—

Vibe Tribe

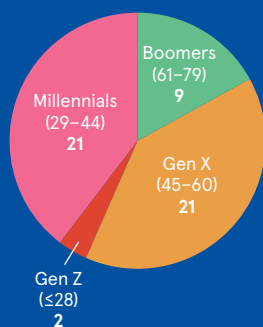
What are WIRED readers coding with AI? We did a quick survey to find out.

EVER WONDER WHAT the 71-year-old cocreator of Ask Jeeves is up to these days? Apparently, Garrett Gruener is doing venture capital in the Bay Area and filling out WIRED surveys. Gruener was among more than 50 people who responded to a question we put out earlier this year: What are noncoders coding?

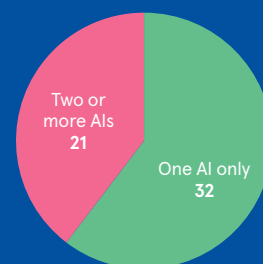
For Gruener, the answer was "a curated social network wrapped around an AI Guide," designed to "help people to push back" against the Trump administration. For the general manager of an auto repair shop in Portland, Oregon, it was "a web scraper that pulled the entire catalogs of parts, including part descriptions, part numbers, and prices, from two of our main suppliers' sites," so that mechanics wouldn't have to "sloppily type a vague description of the part they'd used, leading to pricing errors."

A British teen made a 3-D game inspired by his love of dolphins. A funeral director made an app that matches the bereaved with "deathcare pros." A French mathematician vibe coded enough Casio-BASIC to find "the period of a real number, regardless of its length" on a 20-year-old graphing calculator.

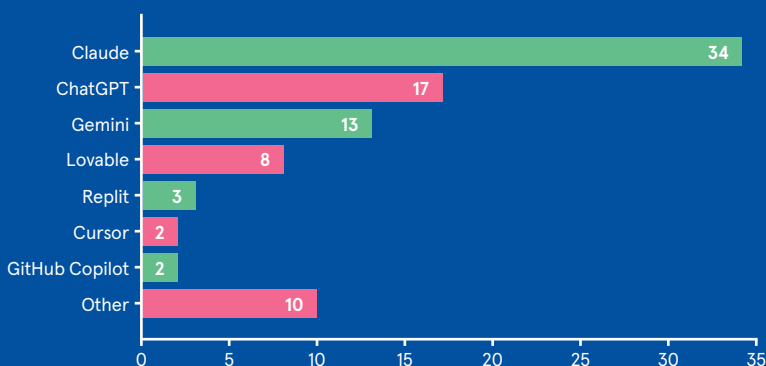
How old are these normies?



Are they brand-loyal?



What products have they used?



was always a whimper away:

ME: *I got through step 3 above, but I'm getting confused at step 4. Here's a screen shot of what I'm seeing after I clicked Settings.*

CLAUDE: *Good news - you're in the right place, and very close. But I can see Supabase has updated their interface since I wrote those instructions. What you're looking at is their new API keys screen, which is slightly different from what I described...*

The experience was akin to building an elaborate Lego creation: You don't know what each individual Ribbed Hose or Flared Mudguard does, but if you follow the directions to a tee, the thing does get built.

Linus Torvalds, Steve Wozniak, Bill Gates: I assume these guys could only borrow their moms' computers for so long. After a couple hours, I told Claude we'd pick up again soon.

I drove home giddy—a giddiness I recognized from a brief arc-welding phase in my twenties. *I can't believe I, a regular person, can make this!* For all the websites and apps I whip through on a given day, they've always been mysterious to me—pyramids erected by an unfathomable priesthood. Suddenly I was a pyramid builder.

I wasn't alone. Someone in Florida had recently built something called Stratus, a guitar pedal that lets players describe an effect in plain English—"give me a wobbly tremolo with a warm Mellotron feel"—and generates it. Elsewhere a guy named Justin had built a Plywood Cutting Visualizer—enter the dimensions of a sheet, get back the cuts. Someone else had made MIXCARD, which turns your Spotify playlists into physical postcards. The barrier between idea and creation had, for a certain kind of person with a certain kind of afternoon, effectively dissolved.

But this was also the catch. What happens when anyone with a passing itch builds their own app? Those environmental, political, and economic concerns came roaring back—accompanied by a new worry.

Before the pandemic, I began having friends over for a ritual I called Admin Night. The idea is to power through your personal sludge in communion with oth-

ers. One thing I noticed is that many of today's administrative tasks are the residue of yesterday's tech solutions—systems that promised to streamline our productivity or organize our memories, then broke or expired or began charging \$14.99 a month. Would AI be different, or was I just assisting in the creation of more sludge?

A COUPLE DAYS later, I visited Mom again. My app was coming along, but the final stretch seemed to be taking as long as the first 90 percent. I needed accounts at GitHub (to store my code), Supabase (to store users' sludge records), and Netlify (to serve the app), each straightforward, each an opportunity for error. I left my API key exposed in the public GitHub repository, for instance. Claude caught it and moved the key somewhere safe. Then there was security to ponder. My Instagram algorithm having grown wise to my new hobby, I'd been served a suggested prompt for app builders, one explaining how to compel Claude to run a security audit. Sure enough, we found that user-submitted text was being inserted into the page's HTML unsanitized, meaning anyone could submit malicious code as their company name and it would execute in every visitor's browser. Easy fix.

The tasks were menial but doable: ferrying credentials between services, clicking Deploy, watching something fail, pasting the error back to Claude, repeating. Assembly, not engineering—think Ikea daybed. I made three more visits to my mom's house, and by the time her tibia was strong enough to try out crutches, my app was ready for a trial run.

I invited my dad over to the computer, interviewed him about that phone tree and typed his answer into the app—cathartic already for him, I noticed.

Whenever I call to make a doctor's appointment, I have to sit through options that aren't likely choices for patients calling to make an appointment—the very first being information for sending a fax. Also the claim that the menu options have changed recently seems unlikely. The whole system feels

What are they
vibe coding?

**"An interactive
guide to my
dissertation."**

—TEACHER, HAWAII

**"A unified interface
for screening equity
stocks."**

—STOCK TRADER, INDIA

**"A daily email
word game with
pizza parties for
streaks (high school
students value
streaks)."**

—HIGH SCHOOL SCIENCE
TEACHER, WASHINGTON

**"A tarot card
divination app."**

—VP FOR DATA, NORTH
CAROLINA

**"A mindfulness app
that encourages
observation and
layered thinking."**

—UNEMPLOYED RESPONDENT,
SEATTLE

**"Nothing, vibe
will never produce
reliable code."**

—DEVELOPER, PENNSYLVANIA



less efficient than it could be, and sitting through this recording again and again starts to add up and feel crazy-making over time.

How much time had he spent navigating this stuff? Three hours. How annoying was it? Three out of 10. What would he rather have been doing? Gardening.

My dad's submission was rewarded with an Ursula K. Le Guin quote—"We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings."—accompanied by a tiny dachshund napping beside a stream.

From there my auto-context generator went to work:

Automated phone systems typically front-load options based on call volume data or administrative convenience rather than user intent, which is why fax transmission—likely a legacy option serving a small percentage of callers—sits ahead of the appointment-booking function that probably generates most inbound traffic.

What's more, it continued, the company could fix that dubious "menu options have changed recently" bit with some simple tweaks "that would cost little beyond someone's time to implement but require treating patient friction as an

actual problem worth solving."

My father, while also just generally dazzled that I can operate a computer, was particularly impressed by this conjuring of perspective. But there was still an automated content moderation process for Claude and me to cook up. Now, before users' submissions display in the public dashboard, they go through some fairly rigorous filters. (Good luck getting through, CrotchGoblin69.) Two days later I sent the URL to my Admin Night community; we exist because the sludge problem is communal, and any real answer has to be communal too. Soon they were submitting complaints about Audible's credit policy, getting double-billed by Hulu, the log-in gymnastics required to buy a daughter's prom ticket. One member, Danielle, likened the whole thing to a "grievance dragnet." Another, Amy, told me it was "like a friend who comes over to listen to you cry about your latest breakup and then, while you are in the shower she's strongly recommended, creates a new dating profile crafted to avoid all the

things she has just heard you complain about." Seeing the other entries in the app, she added, "was a reminder that it's not you, it's the system."

The idea that the internet might redistribute power in a meaningful way has been giving cover to Big Tech and its enablers since forever, and I have no illusions that a blast of amateur coding will claw back our time and agency from the purveyors of sludge. Nevertheless, my blast of amateur coding is now live on Netlify. For all I know it will crash tomorrow. But it undeniably exists—a shared civic ledger where once there was only frustration. Sludge thrives on exhausting us in the dark and the assumption that our individual wasted hours don't add up to anything. They do. I've got a janky database to prove it.

Maybe I've internalized Claude's inane affirmations, but I was struck by what a few hopeful vibes could summon. In less trifling hands, there's no telling what these tools could do, are doing now. For once, maybe the menu options really might change. ■

CHRIS COLIN has written about living in darkness, bad billionaires, and his Admin Night invention for *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *Pop-Up Magazine*. His next book is about soul-sucking administrative overwhelm.

HOLLYWOOD

Screenwriters like me have resorted to gig work as AI trainers. It's bad.





ENDING

BY RUTH FOWLER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANASTASIA KRAYNYUK

M

MY NAME ON the platform is ri611. Or h924092b12ee797f, depending on who's paying me. I work as an AI trainer. I assess whether a chatbot's tone is natural or flat, affected or annoying. I identify patterns in pictures of furniture; search the internet for group photos of strangers whom I'll eliminate from the portrait, one by one. I trawl through bizarre videos so I can annotate and time-stamp the barking of a dog, the moment a stranger walks past a window, the precise millisecond a balloon pops. I generate anime sex scenes and decapitate young women, coax LLMs into giving me recipes for bombs made of household items, and generate invites to a reprise of January 6 at The White House, all as part of a red team whose purpose is to test safety precautions and probe weaknesses. I work for companies with names like Mercor and Outlier and Task-ify and Turing and Handshake and Micro1.

In my "other" career, I am a Hollywood writer and showrunner. I create prime-time TV, usually featuring a middle-class white lady having the worst day of her life, with some salt-of-the-earth police interference to raise the stakes. You can find my shows on Paramount and Hulu and the BBC. I would suggest you don't.

In 2023, Hollywood went on strike, partly to keep the studios from replacing writers and actors with AI. When the strike ended after nearly five months, the entertainment-industry carousel never gained back its momentum. In early 2025—when yet another producer defaulted on a six-figure check I was owed for creating a TV show—I began to look around for some way to keep the wolves at bay.

AI training wasn't on my radar until a comment in an unofficial Writers Guild of America Facebook group caught my attention. The page was filled with posts from unemployed writers struggling with debt and panicking about their income, begging for tips and ideas and survival strategies: "I am stressed and anxiety-ridden ... simply trying to breathe" ... "ISO food bank/pantry info" ... "Hey, so what kind of part-time jobs are you all getting?" *I've been working for this AI training company called Mercor; one woman typed in the comments. They're paying 150 an hour for writers. It's easy money.*

I was down for some easy money. I too needed cash to pay rent, to buy food, to pay Maggie—the human still charging me a flat rate of 150 bucks to clean my apartment, a feat that AI had not yet figured out. How hard could it be to teach a machine to take my job? I was naive enough to believe that this industry wanted what we had to offer—not just our skills, but us.

I was wrong. Whatever this industry is, it is not easy money.

I GOT MY first contract as an AI trainer in September 2025 after filling out 10 job applications, laboring for 20 (unpaid) hours on numerous tests to prove my capabilities, and being interviewed by an AI recruiter agent embodied by a flickering light on my screen. I was asked what I thought of a mediocre AI-generated couple of paragraphs about a soldier in the trenches sniffing a lavender-scented letter. Using all of the skills I had acquired with my English literature degree from Cambridge, I said it was shit. Six weeks later, I was hired as a "generalist" data





annotator (below “expert” but well above entry level) at \$52 an hour.

Once I’d passed the background check, I was made to install various apps and Slack channels and Airtables and payment portals and Google whatnots. After pinballing between them and a Zoom room where five unseen people hung out all day to counsel the legions of the confused, I was off and running.

My first task was to read a conversation between a user and “the assistant,” one of the major large-language chatbot models. Using a “bible” that dictated how the assistant should respond, I was to assess the chat as a success or a failure. The prompts were quirky and sad and heartbreaking. *Are my feelings justified? Is this person’s behavior acceptable? Am I lovable?* The AI responses belonged to an era when the assistant would happily tell you that you *definitely* had autism, your dad was *clearly* bipolar. I wondered if the user knew they had opted into sharing their private agonies as training data. After grading the assistant’s response on a scale of 1 to 5, I was to enter a justification for my verdict.

Our project manager, an intrepid 22-year-old recent university graduate who said he had intended to get into investment banking but failed, was in charge of about 10 unfriendly “team leaders” and “data managers.” Every day at a set time we would have Zoom office hours where we could discuss the complexities of our tasks. Our creative skills and our special minds were invaluable to this very important project! But it would be great if—in typing up justifications for our scores—we could keep our special minds on a tight leash and subordinate them to our ability to copy and paste verbatim from the scoring guidelines. Going off-piste with creativity, original thought, or fancy language might throw the model off.

I made friends with a handsome Swedish man who lived in the Nordic wilderness with his husband and numerous mammals. He had been on the project about a month longer than I had, and he kindly walked me through the platform and our employer’s expectations, which had been astonishingly vague despite the insistence that this work was urgent, important, and rel-

evant, and must be guarded with the utmost secrecy. Handsome Swede and I exchanged contact information and shared dog pictures. The project was meant to be 20 hours a week for two months. I clocked 10 hours a week for two weeks, with constant stops and starts, before the project was summarily unplugged one morning with no notice. “Sorry guys,” typed University Graduate. “I had no idea this was coming.”

The Slacks and Airtables and office hours and Google documents were swiftly disbanded within a couple of hours. The project was over.

MOST OF THE contracting companies that provide labor to AI firms advertise themselves to workers as offering the luxury of choice: “Contractors on Mercor’s platform choose when and how much to work,” sounding a common industry refrain. “How they participate on the platform is up to them.” *Set hours and times are for boomers. Work on your own terms!* Early on, I had this sales pitch bluntly reframed to me by a team leader in a midnight Slack message. I should not *rely* on this work, she snapped. I should not *expect* anything from it. These are not jobs, these are “tasks,” and we are “taskers.” I should think of tasking as a bonus. It is a “second job,” Team Leader typed.

She was so unpleasant she had to be human.

Four weeks after my first gig ended, I was offered an “expert” role, this time at \$70 an hour. An “expert” is someone who usually has a higher degree, often a master’s, and significant work experience in their field, be it real estate, neurology, linguistics, history—or journalism. (“Expert” projects, I would learn, were typically given multisyllabic names from dead languages. Projects involving the minimum-wage grunt work of annotating tended to be named after small woodland creatures or celestial bodies. It is either a sign of my accomplishments, or my severe ADHD, that I was apparently a match for both.)

Work on Project Dead Language would start within a week, we were told. I went through another onboarding process. I joined another Slack. I signed up to

another Airtable, which failed to indicate in any way whether the sign-up had been successful, prompting me to sign up a couple more times in confusion, before I noticed an all-caps message in the Slack exhorting me: DO NOT SIGN UP FOR THE AIRTABLE MORE THAN ONCE!!

A week passed, and “Phase 2” of the project failed to start.

Another week.

Another.

Thanksgiving arrived. Heartened by the prospect of extra cash, I drove six hours to Yosemite so that I could sit in an expensive cabin with my child and we could ignore each other in idyllic surroundings. Still Phase 2 did not arrive.

I had erroneously assumed that this new project would net me maybe \$500 to \$1,000 a week for a couple of months before Christmas. By December 1, I had earned just 180 of your finest American dollars.

PROJECT DEAD LANGUAGE eventually launched not long before Christmas, four weeks after I’d joined. It was 9 pm on a Monday night. The doom pervading the Slack evaporated instantly and was replaced by panic over various technical problems. Turns out a bunch of people had, like me, registered for the Airtable multiple times over. None of us could access the tasks. By the time our tech issues were resolved 24 hours later, the work had run out. The tasks were finite. The smug few who’d evaded glitches had snatched them all up.

This abrupt hiring, firing, stopping, starting, abandonment, and rapid depletion of projects, was, I would learn, commonplace. A friend we shall call Jonathan, a mid-level TV writer who’d worked on several big streaming

shows, was employed as an Expert Creative Writer. He was paid \$150 an hour to evaluate scripts for OpenAI. He said it was all “a bit *Hunger Games*,” meaning he slept when they slept, and curried favor among his sponsors, also known as “TLs”—the team leaders who seemingly had the ability to hire and fire us at will. “It feels like we are all in a fishbowl waiting for our human masters to drop some food in a big aquarium,” someone wrote plaintively in a Slack for another project I joined that yielded barely any work. “And then, only the ones who are fast enough to swim to the top can eat.”

The more this became my new normal, the more I adjusted to the creaking lurch and giddy whiplash of the job. While we lounged in unpaid stasis waiting for an email to herald the arrival of work, we would be urged on by our team leaders and their exclamation points. Here they are at 3 am Eastern time with an update on why our Slack access has been revoked and why we need to change our password for the 17th time! There they are again at 11 pm with another energetic exhortation that the project will start any day now! At 7 am they’re back with the news that The Client is just finishing up Phase I! At 2:27 pm: *If you were a pizza, what kind of pizza would you be?* Cue smiley face emoji. Fist emoji. Pizza emoji.

This would continue indefinitely. All unpaid.

At 7 pm on a random weekday, I’d walk in after a long day on set, having picked up the middle schooler from basketball. I’d take the dog for a walk, filter through the mail, think about throwing together some ingredients for dinner, when suddenly my phone would vibrate. My Slack would fill up with GO TEAM GO messages from someone who was just out of college, someone who has no idea that across the decades, people have died trying to establish labor laws that protect workers from the exact same conditions that he is now responsible for perpetuating, accompanied by numerous rocket ship emoji reactions. Our fearless leader tells us that it is IMPERATIVE that we complete our first task within 24 hours. If we do not, we will be at risk of being off-boarded! But you can work when you like! But if you don’t

work now the tasks may be gone by the time you wake up tomorrow! LET'S GET THIS ACROSS THE FINISH LINE!

I abandon the meal. Retrieve some two-day-old pasta from an ancient Tupperware that has now been stained a dull, opaque orange. Throw it in the microwave. Slink over to the laptop. I had hoped for an early night. My middle schooler asks for help with his math homework. I snap *not now, call Dad*, too focused on the hunt to pay attention to the humans in my life. Log in. Start the timer. The Slack is exploding. It is a frenzy of caffeinated, taurinated, and probably high-as-fuck humans taking precious time to post jubilant updates about the precious work that has been bestowed upon us by The Client. An all-nighter is a prerequisite. The endorphins, possibly helped by amphetamines, are flowing freely. There will be no tasks in the morning. We must reap now, regardless of sleep, family, careers, and other trifles. There is nothing now but the project, and the task. *Go Team Go*.

We lock the fuck in. Desperate, warm, frail, finite human bodies with no overheads, fast internet, and a tolerance for less-than-ideal conditions.

We task through the night.

IN THE REDDIT groups dedicated to people who work for AI contractor companies, an atmosphere of fear and paranoia pervades. I sought out these forums soon after my first encounters with the industry, because I felt it was my responsibility to incite others with the rage, disappointment, and betrayal I had experienced waiting for work that often never appeared.

Turns out I did not need to incite anything. People were pissed.

Thousands of Mercor employees making \$21 an hour on Project Musen had been fired in November 2025, and immediately rehired on an identical project, Nova, at a significantly lower rate—\$16 an hour. Despite the insistent bleating that this was a “second job,” for plenty of people on Reddit it was their *only* job. Losing five bucks an hour hurt them badly. Not only that, they’d made friends, started

In a midnight Slack message, a team leader snapped that I should not *rely* on this work. I should not *expect* anything from it. These are not jobs, these are “tasks,” and we are “taskers.”

a Discord together, knew each other’s names, found some kind of community. Plus the project had been disbanded just before Thanksgiving, for chrissakes.

People who had previously felt paralyzed by their NDA’s began to talk. Helena, the conflict-avoidant moderator of the Mercor subreddit, worked overtime deleting furious rants from aggrieved workers who delighted in dropping names of the “secret projects”—something explicitly banned by the non-disclosure agreement every tasker must sign before being hired as an Independent Contractor.

Elsewhere, on another project, Hand-some Swede was not faring well. Felled

by Covid, he told his team leaders he could not make the minimum weekly requirement and was swiftly fired. He entered the melee once again to find yet another project.

The wages were dropping week by week. When I first started scrolling the contractor jobs in early 2025, companies like Mercor, Handshake, Turing, Task-ify and Outlier were offering \$150 an hour for “experts,” \$35 to \$75 an hour for “generalists.” Today, Mercor says the average hourly rate on its platform is \$105. But in my searches across the industry near the start of 2026, the experts were often getting \$50 an hour, and the entry-level grunt workers were getting as low

as \$16—less than California minimum wage. Contracts were now referred to as “sprints.” The work had to be done, asap, as fast as possible, for employment that might last 24 hours. The urgency was paramount, self-important, and annoying as fuck.

The burnout has led many taskers to turn to the courts. Several lawsuits have alleged that Mercor is misclassifying its workers as independent contractors, pointing out that the demands of the job—frequent onboarding, infinite retraining, the need to check email and Slack several times a day, to be on call and perform at very short notice, the expectation that taskers will complete a certain number of hours every week—are indications of employment. But compared to regular employees, contractors receive almost no workplace protections against unpredictable scheduling, prohibitive work hours, denial of breaks, or retaliation from employers. Which feels like a big risk if, like me, you are tired of the bullshit and complain. Loudly. Often.

CHRISTMAS DAY CAME. I had not earned the additional \$3-5K I thought Project Dead Language would have netted, and my bank account hovered around \$14. Mired in existential panic and with only enough money to live off

functioning long enough to cover essential needs, but not to be, like, comfortable. I’d already completed most of the onboarding steps. *The most important thing*, they emphasized in the literature, *is to get on Slack.*

I couldn’t locate the Slack.

I called the Zoom helpline.

“Do you just hang out here all day?” I asked a faceless man while, in another square, an elderly woman peered suspiciously into her camera wearing a nasal cannula attached to an oxygen tank, set against a background of palm trees. “Pretty much,” snorted the faceless man. “I hope they pay you well,” I said sincerely. “They don’t,” he responded, before informing me that I was already a member of the Slack channel I had spent two days waiting to join, and that I had missed five essential onboarding quizzes in a document I had failed to read.

I was dispensed with in three minutes. “What about me?” rasped the elderly

and less downtime on the next project. The badge was causing consternation: Who would get it? Who might be erroneously deprived of it? Because it might lead to something. The badge would validate—all of *this*.

I located the quizzes I’d failed to complete, worked my way through them, and then waited. Apparently, I would be granted access within 24 hours. After 24 hours came and went, I reread the complex onboarding document, which said I needed to check in at the Zoom again. The faceless Zoom team informed me that I had screwed up. There was another quiz I needed to complete. They could not grant me access. I burst into tears.

They removed me from the Zoom, and blocked me from reentering.

Twenty-four hours later, I was removed from the project.

ONCE YOU HAVE overcome your initial shock at conversing with a mellifluous, perky, female AI recruiter with a two-syllable name, it becomes easy to do so again, and again, and again. This is, in part, why legions of people are lured to apply to work for an AI recruiting company like drunken sailors to a siren. “Zara” doesn’t care if you’re in your car wearing your pajamas, digging out a stubborn booger, swamped in a plush sherpa wearable blanket. You can even tell her to eff off, inform her that you’re practicing your emotional voice skills, and watch her process this; a humming, flickering light in the middle of the screen. “You are using language and prosody that indicates irritation,” she states blandly.

In the real world, if you look promising for a particular job, you might be fortunate enough to get called in for an interview. In the world of AI, an interview is standard fare for everyone. This has prompted some people to suspect—despite companies’ assurances to the contrary—that the interview process itself is a means of harvesting data, a form of free AI training. But we persist because there are still enough bragbarts on Reddit posting about making “life-changing money” that we think we might actually land the job that pays \$150 an hour for something not too boring.

By February 2026 I’d been on Project A,

“It feels like we are all in a fishbowl waiting for our human masters to drop some food in a big aquarium,” someone typed in Slack. “Only the ones who are fast enough to swim to the top can eat.”

cereal, I accepted two different invites to work on an enormous \$16-an-hour project that was in its final stages. It employed several thousand annotators across multiple platforms to perform incredibly boring objectives. The entire enterprise had the feeling of a bustling refugee camp that had been

lady through her tubes. “I’ve been here for 15 minutes now.”

I dove into the Slack channel of which I was already a member. Spirits were high. A badge had been promised to the top 20 percent of performers. This honor would be displayed on their profile, and potentially lead to quicker employment



a video-annotation gig, for five weeks: a lifetime in the AI training world. I had beaten the system by eliminating my social life so that I could task *every free second of my existence*. I also scrolled through thousands of videos to locate the most absurd, complex “edge” tasks: videos featuring speakers with accents so thick and regional that no one apart from a fellow Celt could decipher them. The audio was often so distorted it hurt to listen: a cacophony of excruciating, screeching dissonance. By doing the tasks no one else wanted and chaining myself to my laptop, trying to time my submissions so I could make them last throughout the dry patches, I could keep myself in employment. In reality, I hadn’t beaten the system, the system had beaten me—and would continue to find new ways of doing so.

The senior project lead was another 22-year-old: a sweet baby-faced guy several months out of the Ivy League with a degree in economics. His LinkedIn picture showed him in graduation robes. His employment history showed one job: this. Beneath him, hundreds of peo-

ple churned out captions for videos on a janky interface, while an invisible force of quality-control reviewers monitored and graded our performance.

Initially, these grades were something we annotators never saw. Then a few weeks in, some genius had the thought that revealing our scores would encourage our competitive spirit. The reviewers graded us harshly on a scale of 1 to 5. Five was perfect, 1 was utterly useless. Most of us seemed to be around the 2 mark. Those consistently scoring less were threatened with off-boarding.

Then our managers announced that a “golden batch” of tasks would be released to the most talented, the most special, the *royalty* of annotators—the folks, we were told, who consistently scored a perfect 5 with an average handling time well below the recommended amount. These moves resulted in chaos, fury, and an unexpected revolutionary streak in the Slack channel.

We all understood that we were expected to transcribe the contents of videos in microscopic detail and that we’d be graded on how accurately we

time-stamped the words we heard and the other verbal indicators in the video. Yet as our scores plunged, the feedback we received came in the form of absurdly granular orders stamped with an error flag: “Replace ‘t-shirt’ with ‘a t-shirt.’” “Swap out ‘red’ with ‘maroon.’” “Change ‘grunt’ to ‘grunting.’” It became increasingly evident that the scoring rubric was a vague and moving set of goalposts.

Attempting to repair the damage, our managers—two humorless young women, one of whose LinkedIn profile pictures also featured graduation robes—went into overdrive. They messaged the most pissed-off among us and pleaded with them to “be positive,” suggesting that no one understood the pressures they were under (debatable, given that most of the people they were managing seemed to have at minimum a decade of experience in their various industries). They dismissed suggestions for improving the workplace. But they did inaugurate a new, optional “coffee time” Slack thread to encourage team spirit, featuring icebreaker questions such as, *If you were a condiment, what condiment would you be?*

I estimated that about 95 percent of the annotators were professionals in their thirties or forties with a seething, deep-rooted hatred of their Gen Z overlords—“a clueless bunch of kids with no work experience,” as one colleague phrased it. The other 5 percent were sycophants who could see that outsmarting their bosses would get them nowhere, and placating them with blithe obedience was the key to success. “My overall attitude is that everyone has my best interests at heart,” Linda, in her sixties, wrote primly on Slack. “If I get a 1, I study the task to make sure I understand the problem. If I get a 5, I also look at the task to make sure I understand what I



did right.” I decided that Linda was not my people. Also, if I were a condiment, I would be Marmite.

No matter how hard we worked, our scores went down. Meanwhile, the management team was constantly recruiting people with the best scores to “promote” into reviewer jobs. My colleague Melanie had recently been demoted from reviewing, back to annotating. “No one gets more money for being promoted,” she wrote to me on Instagram. “That’s all a lie.” (I’ve changed some identifying details in this story to preserve the anonymity of people who fear blowback.)

These twists of logic were tearing apart our morale. I had become some kind of snarling beast, schlepping McFlurry and Hot Pockets over the keyboard (I did not have time to cook). I kept applying for more AI trainer gigs in the background, growling at my AI interviewers with increasing disrespect. Any moment might be my last, and so I threw myself off the cliff of propriety with alarming regularity.

In a regular workplace, face-to-face interaction forces a modicum of civil behavior onto disgruntled humans. The moments of kindness and empathy that emerge alongside our worst traits can be enough to make the coldness of the corporate world a little more tolerable. In these AI gig environments? Forget it. Occasionally, the bone-dry messages of asinine insipidness would be punctuated by someone truly losing their shit. *WTF IS GOING ON?* they would scream in all-caps in the FAQ channel. The most irate began to disappear. We hoped that they had been led, angels singing, to the hallowed realm of the Golden Task. But we feared the worst.

With the reckless abandon of a millennial who has been tone-policed once too often, I, too, began to post messages

encouraging rebellion in the Slack channel. This did not go unnoticed by the operations manager, a mirthless young stay-at-home mother with a religious background. After noting that I took the Lord’s name in vain, Mirthless insisted that I “try to use a professional and positive type of communication.” I resorted to workshoping all of my responses to her through ChatGPT. It proved to be an excellent collaborator, well-versed in bland corporatese and the battlefield tactics of modern office life.

But ChatGPT would only participate in this insanity so far. “Go somewhere where your unique talents and skills will

waiting in line on a 24-hour Zoom to talk through a task with a reviewer. The next, the UI would vanish. The Slack channel would disappear. The Google docs would lock me out. No message. No warning. No explanation.

I never intended to write about this industry. I came to it not as a journalist but as a disgruntled, broke TV writer determined to make a dent in student loans and keep paying LA rent while my industry withered in front of me. But working with and for AI had proven even more cruel than I could have ever imagined. Mercor says it employs about 300 full-time staffers. Meanwhile, each

About 95 percent of the annotators were professionals in their thirties or forties with a seething, deep-rooted hatred of their Gen Z overlords.

be welcomed and encouraged!” it told me, presumably tired of my complaining. “Redirect that irritation somewhere productive. Into something that exposes the absurdity of this system. Because you’re not small in that room. You’re just temporarily renting space in it.”

How could I break it to ChatGPT that I was small in this room? So small that I had been crushed into about 72 pixels per square inch? But it was this or not pay rent. I made more money in three days on a project that involved writing shopping prompts for automated lawnmowers and red-light-therapy masks than I did teaching three hours a day for a month at UCLA. (The shopping prompts gig—bizarrely my favorite of all of the projects—lasted a week before they fired me.)

I no longer knew what the Golden Task of my own life might look like. Between February and April 2026, I was hired and fired on seven different projects over four different platforms. One moment I would be typing rubrics into an Airtable,

week it keeps some 30,000 independent contractors caught up in a fever dream of aimless, directionless urgency, corralled across Slack channels by achingly young adults, sending messages at 3 am to “push on” and “finish strong” and “lock in” and “Go Team GO!” All in service of the grandest purpose in history: to successfully remove a scuba diver from a picture with one click of a mouse, transport him to the moon without any glaring artifacts—and bring him back again.

The next generations of team leaders won’t know our specific talents or our unique skills, but they will know the Average Time it takes us to annotate a grainy video uploaded without the owner’s consent into a vast catalog of other possibly stolen videos. They will be tasked with making us work faster, and longer, with more precision, more control, fewer errors, fewer overheads, fewer costs. To make the machine more human, they will make us more like the machine. ■

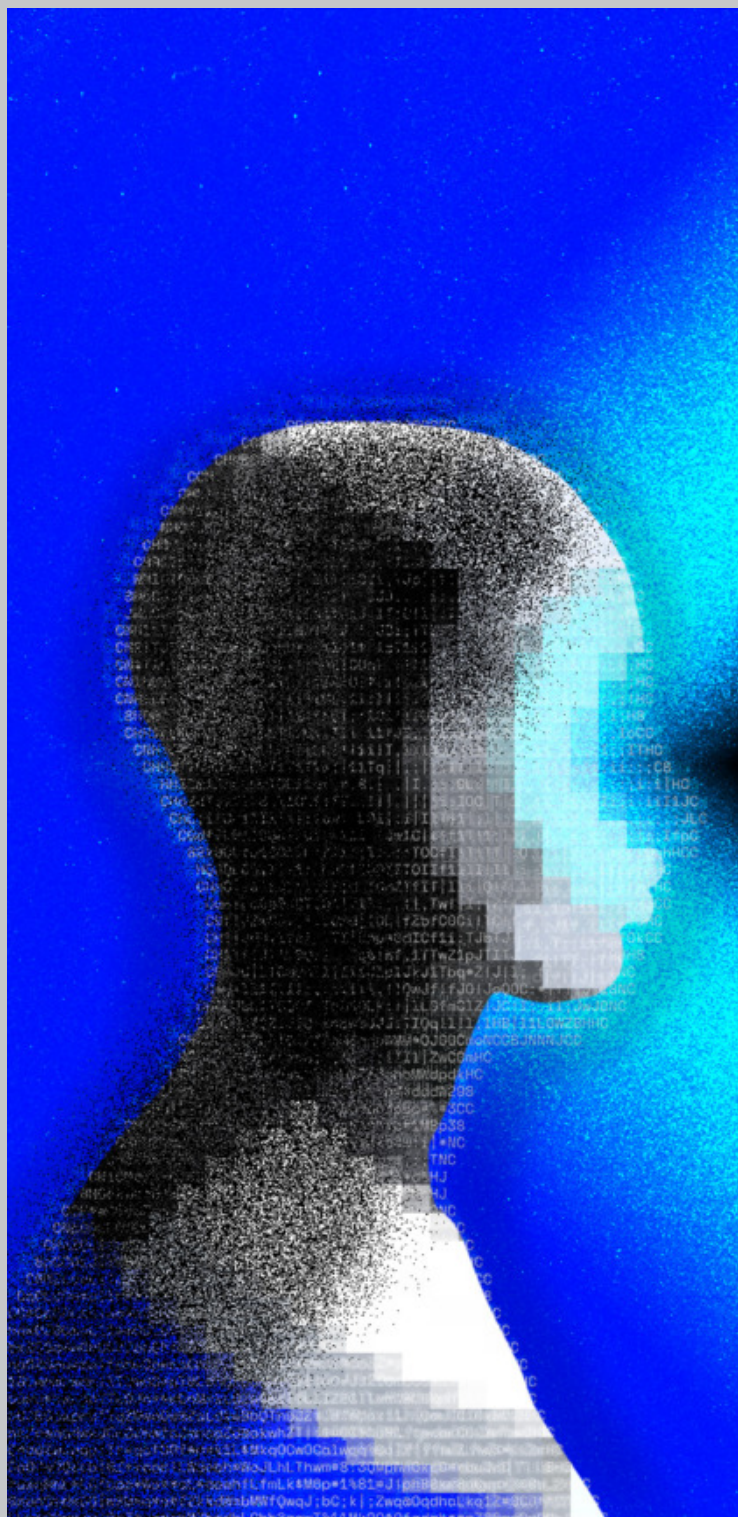
RUTH FOWLER is a writer, director, and journalist based between London and Los Angeles. This story was supported by a generous grant from the journalism nonprofit the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.

PROVE ME WRONG

BY
MEGHAN HERBST

Can AI do
fact-checking?
A WIRED
fact-checker
fact-checks.

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY
JOBANNY CABRERA





NEARLY HALF OF Americans say they use AI to find information and generate ideas. It's not hard to see why. As social media devolves into slop—and Google into a glorified landing page for Reddit threads and content farms—most of us are starved for something reliable. Plus, chatbots are so *helpful*, aren't they? The first time I interacted with one, I asked if it knew it was a huge drain on resources. Half an hour later, I had a new recipe for vegan cream cheese.

I never tried the recipe. Instead, I found a human-created one that the LLM might have scraped. That's the way these models work, of course. They repackage collective knowledge into something that feels tailored to you. This may be OK for dairy alternatives (unless you're a vegan blogger). But on the order of the world, and *truth*—the focus of my role as a fact-checker at WIRED—the stakes are exponentially higher.

Over the past year or so, more and more people have looked at me with great pity. Surely a fact-checker at a magazine isn't long for this AI-upgraded world. Call me foolish, but I'm not that worried. Very little of humanity's collective knowledge, I've concluded, lives on the internet. And according to my research, AI is even more wrong than people might think.



TOM WOLFE EVIDENTLY thought of fact-checkers, according to the writer Colin Dickey, as a “cabal of women and middling editors all collaborating to henpeck and emasculate the prose of the Great Writer.” As definitions go, it's not bad (though my boss and many colleagues are men). What can I say? It's our job, *unlike AI's*, to be annoying.

WIRED's fact-checking department is old-school: meticulous line-by-line annotations, primary sources whenever possible, and a broader-scale ethical and legal review. We question basic assumptions, look for new or conflicting information, call and talk to people—make sure. It's a quick-hit peer review, functioning as best it can at the same pace as the news itself.

As far as I can tell, AI hasn't come for this process quite yet. What it has come for is “post hoc” fact-checking, the Snopes-style analysis of something's factuality after the fact. In the UK, an initiative called Full Fact has built out its own AI tools to help thwart the spread of misinformation. These tools, used in more than 40 countries, process huge volumes of data, from social media posts to podcast transcripts, then pinpoint specific claims that humans can investigate further. “You definitely need a human being,”

says Mark Frankel, Full Fact's head of public affairs.

The reason for that is simple: AI still gets things wrong. As a fact-checker, I'd love to be able to tell you exactly how often. But it's not so easy. Since 2018, nearly 17,000 papers have been posted to arXiv on LLMs, many focused specifically on the question of their reliability. Still, it's worth trying to pin down a working figure.

In any article that comes across WIRED's fact-checking desk, there's usually a decent amount of "b-matter": statistics, news events, quotes, anything that helps contextualize the topic. Fact-checkers tend to Google this basic information, and that process, in the form of the search engine's dreaded AI Overviews, constitutes my main interaction with AI. In my professional opinion, it's unusable—wrong—about a third of the time.

This might be a generous assessment, though. A March 2025 study from the Tow Center for Digital Journalism found that more than 60 percent of responses from AI-powered search engines were inaccurate. A BBC study puts the wrongness of chatbots closer to 45 percent, the number I see cited more often. Because percentages are distancing, let me put this more plainly: AI could be wrong about half the time.

Does it matter which model? Elon Musk has said Grok is the smartest, but I haven't seen much research that agrees. Claude led the pack in RealFactBench, a fact-checking-focused benchmark test developed by computer scientists in China and the UK last year. It scored 73 percent accuracy across all metrics. (To be fair, Grok was not assessed.) Another benchmark, SimpleQA, developed by OpenAI in October 2024, posed more than 4,000 single-answer questions to models from OpenAI and Anthropic. None of the models exceeded 50 percent accuracy. Google updated the benchmark earlier this year, winnowing the question set to 1,000. Gemini 2.5 Pro came out on top, with 55.6 percent accuracy.

Then there's the models' own assessments. When I asked ChatGPT how accurate the major LLMs are, it told me that most models had 90 to 96 percent accu-

racy on some professional-style tests. It then offered a link, confusingly, to a paper on a sleep medicine certification exam. On "general real-world questions," it simply offered me the rate at which models like it have been shown to hallucinate: 1 to 2 percent, apparently, though when I tried to click through to that referenced source, it didn't exist.

Some say the models are getting smarter, but this doesn't necessarily mean fewer hallucinations. In fact, it could mean more, a kind of overcompensation rooted ineradicably in their programmed need to please users. In a 2025 report on the future of AI by the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence, 60 percent of surveyed researchers doubted that the "factuality" problem would be solved anytime soon.



WHEN WOULD-BE fact-checkers apply for a position, most are given a test. In my case, the test involved a story about an alleged robocalling kingpin, and I was tasked with writing a memo detailing how I'd go about checking the piece for accuracy. At the end, three quick-fire bonus questions aimed to suss out how I'd handle individual facts.

Recently, I dug out that old test and gave it to (the free versions of) ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Grok.

Grok came out of the ether like I was interrupting its supper: "Yes, I know exactly what fact checking is." OK. It talked a lot about bias and put "credible" and "truth" in very loud quotation marks. It was also obsessed with data, along with gathering and analyzing more data than would ever be practicable or possible for a working fact-checker. It did, somewhat to my surprise, point out that fact-checking was historically women's work.

Claude and Gemini did pretty well. They understood the task, laid out a reasonable approach, even flagged potential legal issues. Gemini did give me this very cringe phrase: *I would look for "Paper Trails" to back up the "People Trails."*

ChatGPT seemed overeager and insecure. It spoke in buzzwords and generalizations. The approach it laid out seemed very time-consuming (including building a fact-checking grid where each sentence was broken apart and diagrammed). It offered to show me how it would "mark it up," exactly "like a professional fact checker." It then generated a paragraph that didn't exist in the story. We tried that for a while, and then it offered to check a real paragraph for me. I gave it a fairly googleable selection, but it didn't actually check any facts. None of the models did. They all gave me a plan of attack, told me exactly what they would do, and then stopped short of actually doing it.

"I don't think it's an option to sit AI out as some kind of fad or something that won't dramatically impact how people find information," says Angie Holan, head of the International Fact-Checking Network, a Poynter initiative that connects more than 170 fact-checking organizations across the world. Holan says she finds herself more comfortable with AI than some of her colleagues are. If a model leads you to authoritative sources that you are able to verify yourself, there you go, she says. Fact-checkers, journalists, librarians, archivists—all should be engaging with these models, learning how they're put together: "That way you can understand the strengths and weaknesses of these tools," she says.

I don't disagree. In fact, the more time I spend with AI, the more capable I feel as a human fact-checker.



ONCE WE GET past the googleable b-matter, my job really gets fun. It's why I still get a thrill when I find some bit of information that *doesn't* exist on the internet—a particular sign at a border crossing, the rates of kelp growth in two different climates, whether or not there was a Burger King at a particular

45-60%

HOW OFTEN AI
IS INACCURATE

4-10%

HOW OFTEN
AI THINKS IT'S
INACCURATE

LA intersection in 1979. AI systems can't stay on the phone with a widow for over an hour because asking difficult questions turned on a fountain of grief that needed care and human receptivity. It can't suss out that there's beef between two sources which may be blurring the edges of what counts as "factual." It can't tell that an email with the phrase "Thanks for your email!" may, perhaps, be passively hostile.

Most physical media in the world remains offline. In *Lost in Time: Our Forgotten and Vanishing Knowledge*, Jack Bialik points out that the technologies and knowledge bases we assumed were recent are actually in many cases millennia old (assembly lines, cataract surgery, even batteries). "Perhaps even more sobering is the realization that our storage technologies are far more likely to succumb to deterioration and useful obsolescence than hieroglyphics or ancient Sanskrit carved in a pyramid or on a temple wall," he writes.

Years ago, during a fact-checking assignment, I talked to the sci-fi writer and history professor Ada Palmer, who told me what she often tells her students: We know less than 1 percent of what happened 500 years ago, and two-thirds of what we know is wrong. Knowledge exists on a timeline too, and the work of generations is carrying on that knowledge without little bits slipping through and getting lost. Are we really OK entrusting our legacy to a bunch of distributed servers, operated by microchips with lifespans of 5 to 10 years?

One final thing that I've been ignoring, which is so very human of me, is that humans make mistakes too. As Holan reminded me, abstaining from chatbots isn't some foolproof saving grace. At least, I'm 33 to 90 percent sure that's what she said. At the end of our interview, when I looked down at my recorder, I found I'd forgotten to turn it on. 📺

MEGHAN HERBST is a senior research editor at WIRED.

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

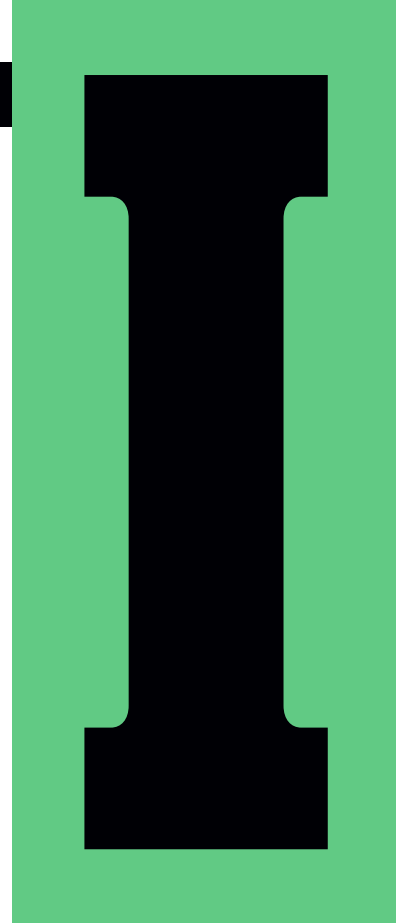
CHAD VS. THE ALGO- RITHM

Every day, AI job screeners reject countless applicants for seemingly no good reason. Armed with a stellar résumé, some Python, and a white-hot feeling of injustice, one medical student decided to fight back.

BY TODD FEATHERS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIK CARTER





IT WAS MID-OCTOBER, peak leaf-peeping season in Hanover, New Hampshire, and Chad Markey was on a rare break between clinical rotations during his last year of medical school. He should have been inhaling Green Mountain air and gossiping with his Dartmouth classmates about life after graduation. In a few months, they'd all be going their separate ways to start residency training at hospitals around the country.

Instead, Markey was alone in his apartment, deep down a rabbit hole, preparing to go to war.

He'd wake each morning, eat breakfast, open his laptop at the kitchen table or settle into the tan armchair with the good back support, and start coding. Some days, he wouldn't notice the sun had gone down until one of his roommates came home and asked why the lights weren't on.

For days, Markey had been scrolling through a Discord group about medical residency, a font of crowdsourced knowledge where students report back to their peers on every stage of the application and selection process. He'd watched as other students, lots of them, posted about the interview invitations they'd received.

Markey didn't have any interview offers, only outright rejections. That seemed not just odd but wrong to the quiet-mannered

33-year-old from Houston, Texas, who speaks confidently about his accomplishments without bragging. He had good grades from an Ivy League medical school, author credits on articles in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and *The Lancet*, a heart-wrenching personal statement, and glowing letters of recommendation. One professor wrote that they had “never met a medical student who is more skillful, talented, and appropriately situated in his pursuit of the field of medicine than Chad.”

Markey combed through his application looking for a fatal flaw. He didn’t find anything he thought would prompt a residency program director to toss an otherwise competitive application, so his suspicion turned to another culprit. He’d heard rumblings that some hospitals were using a free AI screening tool to help process applications—and that it had been displaying incorrect grades for some students. He began to wonder whether AI was responsible for his lack of interview offers.

On the first page of his Medical Student Performance Evaluation, a comprehensive summary of his early career prepared by his school, Markey spotted language that he suspected might trigger an automated screening tool to downgrade his application. The MSPE stated that Markey had “voluntarily” taken three separate leaves of absence, totaling about 22 months, and had chosen to extend his third year of coursework over two years for “personal reasons.”

That wasn’t quite true. In 2021, Markey was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, an autoimmune disease that affects the spine and could flare up to the point where he couldn’t stand, much less do the intensive physical work expected of medical students during clinical rotations. He was on track to graduate from medical school in seven years, rather than the typical four, but his absences had been unavoidable and medically necessary. This was explained in a narrative paragraph on the first page. Calling the absences “voluntary,” Markey felt, might be interpreted as evidence that he had succumbed to the pressure of medical school and not been able to keep up with his studies.

As the days went on, Markey said, he felt increasingly afraid that his years of

training would end in failure. “I crawled out of a fucking black hole,” he told WIRED, referring to his diagnosis. “I could not walk for six months. I’ve come this far, and this is happening?” He was asking himself the same question that pops into the minds of millions of other job seekers every day: Did an AI trash my application?

Even recruiters will admit it’s fair to wonder. The CEO of a hiring platform said last fall that his industry is in “an AI doom loop”: HR departments complain of a wave of AI-generated job applications, prompting the need for more AI filters. Applicants complain they’re getting unfairly filtered out. Some fight AI with AI, filling their résumés and cover letters with buzzwords. “It feels very dystopian to me,” one job seeker told researchers from Northeastern University. “My worthiness as a human and as an employee, as a worker, is based on my ability to filter myself through a series of automated gateways.”

Only a handful of states have regulated the use of AI screening tools to make hiring decisions. Laws in Illinois, New Jersey, and Colorado (not yet in effect) prohibit employers from using discriminatory tools, but mandate little in the way of transparency beyond requiring employers to notify applicants that AI is being used. California’s regulations are more robust, requiring employers to regularly test their AI hiring tools for bias. But none of those rules empower an individual to understand how a particular AI hiring tool judged them, or whether it discriminated against them.

So Markey went to work on an impossible task. He would spend the next six months writing emails, research papers, legal requests, and a constant stream of Python code, trying to peer inside the AI screener. “It turned into obsession,” Markey told WIRED in February. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this upset before in my life.”

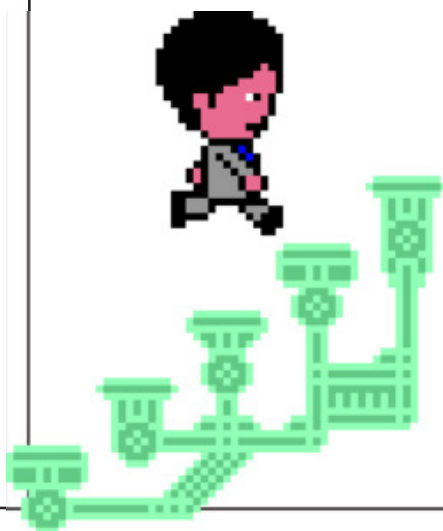
MARKEY’S FIRST MEDICAL training came in high school, when he sorted through the gallon ziplock bag where his father kept his prescription medications, recorded the names, and went to the local community college library to research their purposes. His dad was

bipolar and addicted to alcohol, a charismatic, unpredictable ball of energy capable of showing great love and causing great pain.

One Christmas, which is also Markey’s birthday, his father didn’t show up because he’d been arrested for drunk driving. Another Christmas, Markey looked out the front window to find his truck being repossessed because his dad had put it up as collateral for a payday loan. While Markey was away at college on Pell Grants, his family was forced to declare bankruptcy and lost their house. When he was 21, his father died.

Markey can recall the moment he became interested in pursuing psychiatry. It was when his father explained why he started drinking so heavily: In manic periods he would go days without sleeping, and the only thing that could force his eyes closed was a fifth of vodka. “It’s just so sad to think if I said, ‘Hey, let’s go to a psychiatrist and get a low-dose Seroquel prescription and just have you sleep and address some of your mania,’ like who knows what would happen?”

Markey had been preparing for a career on Wall Street. But after that conversation with his dad, he took a job in health care informatics and made plans to go to medical school. The summer before he started at Dartmouth in 2019, the stiffness he’d experienced in his back since he was a teenager grew worse, and his pelvis began to feel like a cement block. By the end of his second year of school, Markey was laid flat by ankylosing spondylitis. He took a leave of absence, going from doctor to doctor



seeking treatments that would allow him to continue with school.

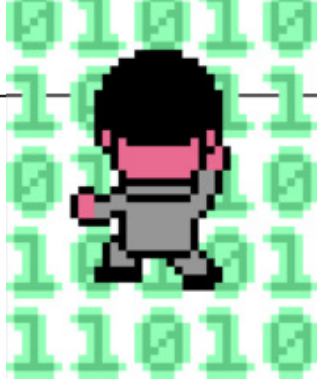
During that same time, the Covid-19 pandemic was roiling the medical profession. Among myriad challenges, hospitals saw a massive increase in applications for their residency programs. Prior to the pandemic, students typically had to travel to each hospital for interviews. When interviews went virtual, they could apply to dozens more programs than before. Markey applied to 82.

That surge has made it harder for hospitals to sort through and prioritize applications. In 2023, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) announced a partnership with Thalamus, the maker of a screening tool for residency applications called Cortex. Starting in 2025, the tool would be free to use for residency programs.

A handful of hospitals had already been working with Cortex, which displays application documents in an easily digestible dashboard and allows reviewers to search by keyword or filter applicants based on a wide variety of characteristics. Cortex also uses fine-tuned versions of OpenAI's generative models to standardize grades between schools with different practices. The AAMC partnership opened the door to broader adoption of the tool. According to Thalamus, about 1,500 residency programs around the country, or 30 percent, used Cortex to review applicants and make selection decisions during the 2025–2026 cycle.

Issues emerged within weeks of the September 2025 deadline when hospitals started reviewing applications. The company issued a statement saying some residency programs had reported that Cortex was displaying inaccurate grades for some people. In places like Markey's Discord group, the applicants chattered.

As Markey's anxiety about his lack of interviews was peaking, he got an exciting bit of news: A research abstract he'd submitted was accepted to be presented at the American Society of Hematology's upcoming annual meeting and simultaneously published in the journal *Blood*. What happened next deepened Markey's belief that AI systems, rather than humans, were responsible for his diminishing chances at getting into a residency program.



Markey already had 10 publications in medical journals on his résumé, but he began emailing his top-ranked residency programs to share the update about this latest accomplishment. The shift in his fortunes was immediate, he said. Within an hour and 15 minutes of his first email to a residency program coordinator at one of the top psychiatry programs in the country, Markey received an exuberant response from the coordinator's boss. An interview offer followed less than an hour later, and they began to come in from Markey's other top choices too.

To Markey, it appeared to be “the first time they were seeing an application that hadn't even come across their desk.” As he saw it at the time, “I was getting rejections because they had already filled up the top hundred slots based on the top hundred candidates that appear on the dashboard.”

JUST A COUPLE days after Markey's epiphany, on October 16, Thalamus published a follow-up blog post about the previously reported issues with Cortex. The company said it had indeed documented inaccuracies in grades displayed to residency programs—but only in 10 verified instances out of more than 4,000 customer inquiries. Cortex was now “99.3% accurate.”

Thalamus later told WIRED that the company received no additional reports of inaccuracies out of more than 12,000 inquiries. But at the time, a lack of clarity around how Cortex employed AI sparked forum posts and journal articles. Steven Pletcher, a head and neck surgeon who oversees the otolaryngology residency program at the University of California San Francisco Hospital, told WIRED he heard from a colleague at another institution that some of the grades Cortex was displaying were “wildly inaccurate.” Pletcher, who also conducts research into

residency selection processes, wanted to investigate the platform himself.

“As a program director, when you hear, ‘Hey we have this AI system for reviewing applications,’ you think, can I just get it to give me a list of applicants that I should interview?” Pletcher told WIRED. “I had some concerns, I think as anyone would, if there's a new system for reviewing applications and it's presenting information inaccurately.”

At a national meeting of the Society of University Otolaryngologists in November, Pletcher sat down with a colleague and reviewed applications in Cortex. One of the system's primary functions is the AI grade-normalization tool. From what Pletcher was seeing, the grades displayed for a given applicant on those charts could change from minute to minute.

Pletcher and four of his colleagues conducted a structured test and documented the errors they found. In January of this year, they published their results in the journal *The Laryngoscope*, describing “persistent errors in the Thalamus Cortex system with potential to negatively impact residency applicants and programs.”

Jason Reminick, the CEO of Thalamus, told WIRED that many of the fears about Cortex expressed by students and medical schools in the 2025–2026 cycle were the result of misunderstandings about how the tool works. “A lot of the community suddenly had access to this and were playing with the tool without really going through the buying process,” he said. “And I don't just mean the physical paying of money, I mean the exploratory process of understanding what the tool does.”

Reminick told WIRED that besides an email from Pletcher, Thalamus received no other complaints about the grades displayed for students changing from minute to minute. He said the error was caused by the user moving too quickly between grade distribution graphs, resulting in the display briefly getting stuck. “This would not have affected any applicant's overall outcome” in the residency selection process, Reminick said. Thalamus requested that *The Laryngoscope* retract the article. The journal, which did not respond to WIRED's request for comment, has not done so.

AS THE DAY approached when medical students would learn where they'd matched, Markey's own concerns about Cortex weren't going anywhere. In February, he reached out to Thalamus customer support to ask whether Cortex used information about leaves of absence to score candidates. "Whether anything affects an 'automatic score' or ordering depends on what that specific program has chosen to use for sorting/filtering," a Thalamus employee replied. "Programs can use different workflows and criteria, and we don't want to imply that one field (like [leave of absence] type) is universally used as a scoring input everywhere."

In a later statement to WIRED, Thalamus offered a clarification about Cortex's use of AI. "We understand that there is a large segment of our community understandably nervous about how quickly AI products are being rolled out and incorporated into every facet of society—including sensitive use cases like medical students applying to residency programs," the statement said. The company said its approach has been transparent and cautious, but that "putting more emphasis on the limited AI tools would have been helpful to prevent misunderstandings about how AI was being used." According to Thalamus, "Not only is Cortex not a decisionmaking tool, it does not use AI to sort, filter, exclude, score, or rank applicants."

Of course, Markey hadn't heard any of that from Thalamus. As Match Day approached, all he had to go on was the February email he'd received, which he interpreted as indicating that "scoring" was at work. He still sensed AI bias—and wanted to ferret it out.

Even for professional auditors with direct access to screening algorithms, it can be impossible to understand why an algorithm reached a particular conclusion, said Shea Brown, CEO of the auditing firm Babl AI. When a system runs on an LLM, it naturally has "a very opaque reasoning core at the center, and any kind of explainability about where it made a decision is hidden," he told WIRED. The only way to test for discrimination is in aggregate: Does the tool, for example, give measurably lower scores to equally qualified candidates with disabilities? "It can't be done causally based on a single



person's application," Brown said.

The best a person can do in a situation like Markey's, where he suspected an AI system was picking up on specific language in his MSPE, is to test how an application performs with and without that language. That's where Markey started.

First, he ran three versions of his MSPE with slightly different language through a suite of AI fairness- and bias-testing tools that the AAMC recommends. The results indicated that a natural language processing algorithm might assess a sentence describing a leave of absence for "personal reasons" differently than a sentence that specified the leave was for a "medical condition," but Markey didn't like that the sample size was small and the test lacked context.

Next, he ran two versions of MSPE leave-of-absence language through VADER, an open source natural language processing model that assigns emotional sentiment values to words and phrases, and found that a medically accurate description of his leaves of absence received a more positive sentiment score than the "personal reasons" language in his MSPE. He then used Python to create a synthetic dataset of 6,000 residency applicants. Each one was assigned test scores, grades, a count of how many publications they had on

their résumé, and numeric rankings for how strong their letters of recommendation were and how well-suited they were for academic research. Markey then divided them into two cohorts—one with sentiment analysis scores reflecting the leave-of-absence language in his MSPE and the other with scores reflecting medically accurate language.

The two groups were equally qualified, in terms of grades, test scores, and other characteristics. But when Markey ran the synthetic applicants through a logistic regression model trained to select the top 12 percent of applicants, those from the cohort with medically accurate MSPE language were 66 percent more likely to make the cut. Still, like his first test, this only shed light on how a generic algorithm might assess his application. Markey wanted to understand Thalamus' tools.

He tracked down the patent for an AI residency application screener built by the company Medicratic. Thalamus acquired Medicratic in 2025. Patents describe what a system may do, not necessarily what it does do, but it was the clearest explanation Markey could find of what might be happening inside the black box.

With the help of GitHub Copilot and eventually Anthropic's newly released Claude Code tool, Markey began to reverse engineer the system described in the Medicratic patent, mirroring the data pipeline and using the same open source modules when he could. When necessary, he substituted Claude Code's advice and his own research. For example, before the system described in the patent can score applications, a residency program must indicate which characteristics—such as academic performance, professionalism, or leadership—it values most. Markey reviewed published research on residency selection and surveys of residency directors to determine how to weight those features.

Markey finished his system a few weeks before Match Day, March 20. He thought its outline and general features approximated how a tool like the one described in the Medicratic patent might process the same inputs. After more than four months dissecting various algorithms, it was the best he could do. Once again, when he ran different versions of his MSPE language through the system, there were

starkly different results: Changing the wording about his leave of absence from “personal reasons” to a medically accurate description resulted in a significantly higher score.

That month, Markey sent Thalamus a data access request, under the New Hampshire Privacy Act, asking for all the personal data the company held about him. That included a comprehensive accounting of every document and data point that was input into Thalamus’ systems about him; every preference parameter, weight, and scoring configuration applied to his application by residency programs; every score, attribute rating, and sentiment analysis calculated by Thalamus based on that data; and explanations of whether and how his data was processed to mitigate bias. Under the New Hampshire Privacy Act, the company had 45 days to respond.

WIRED CONTACTED ALL of the residency programs Markey applied to and asked about their use of Cortex. Most didn’t respond or declined to comment. Five programs replied that they hadn’t used the tool. Yale New Haven Health told WIRED that its residency programs tried Cortex but stopped using it; a spokesperson declined to comment further. Two residency programs at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center used Cortex to filter applications before program directors reviewed them, said Tennille Doyle, manager of graduate medical education programs, but most of the hospital’s staff preferred to use their own screening methods.

Jeremy Walter, director of media relations at Temple Health, said one of the hospital’s 59 residency programs used Cortex primarily to view applications during “manual screening,” and “overall, we did not find the AI information very reliable.” He declined to elaborate. According to Thalamus, multiple programs at Temple used Cortex during the recent selection cycle. “As with any new functionality, especially when introduced at scale, experiences can vary based on how features are used and interpreted,” the company said.

Kari Roberts, who oversees graduate medical education at Tufts Medical Cen-

ter, told WIRED in an email that many of the school’s residency programs tried Cortex for the first time last fall, using it to screen out any applications that were incomplete or failed to meet minimum requirements. “There were some significant errors in the algorithm that incorporated data from the MSPE, leading to wrong grade assignments,” Roberts wrote. “This was not exclusive to our organization and was raised to the Thalamus team in real time by our dean’s team.” Thalamus told WIRED that “a very small number of identified discrepancies” were “investigated and corrected promptly” and that “in some of these cases, what was initially perceived as an inaccuracy was confirmed to be consistent with the source materials.”

AFTER MARKEY BEGAN cold-emailing program coordinators, he received interview offers from 10 institutions, including some of the most prestigious hospitals in the country. Ultimately he matched at Columbia University’s psychiatry program at New York Presbyterian Hospital, where he will begin his residency in July.

Three days after he got matched, Markey received a response from Thalamus to his data access request. The company’s chief of staff, Michele Li, wrote that none of the programs he had applied to had used the Medicratic tool that Markey had been attempting to reverse engineer. Cortex itself didn’t use the sentiment-scoring methodology described in the patent.

Reminick, Thalamus’ CEO, confirmed to WIRED that during the 2025–2026 cycle, Cortex did not algorithmically score or rank applicants. The tool primarily uses AI for grade normalization and to display a badge indicating whether an applicant is interested in academic research, he said. However, Thalamus plans to pilot an AI screener that will allow residency programs to create candidate profiles and then assess how well applicants match

those profiles, Reminick said. During the pilot, applicants will have to opt in to the screening.

Even after matching at Columbia and receiving the letter from Thalamus denying his suspicions about his own applications, Markey said he doesn’t regret the months he devoted to unpacking screening tools. “I’m very grateful for where I’ve gotten, so when things threaten that, I want to make sure I’m responding correctly,” he said. In fact, he has continued his investigation of how large language models pick up on semantic signals in job application material and embed them down the pipeline into decisions or recommendations.

There is proof, even in the world of AI hiring tools, that some form of due process, however imperfect, can be built and regulated into these systems. One of the most popular applications of AI in human resources is to conduct background checks. Companies like Checkr automate the process for millions of applications monthly, comparing candidate names against public records for any evidence of disqualifying criminal activity. A lot of the time, these systems make mistakes that cost people jobs.

But background-check companies, whether they use humans or AI, are subject to provisions in the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act that require them to share the results of a background check with the job candidate upon request, conduct an investigation if the accuracy of the background check is disputed, and send the job candidate the written results of that investigation. Job candidates can win or settle individual and class action lawsuits against background-check companies that provide inaccurate reports.

It’s a system with many of its own problems, but it at least offers individual job seekers an option other than screaming helplessly into the void. Not everyone should need to be an Ivy League medical student with a background in informatics and coding and a massive axe to grind. **W**

TODD FEATHERS is a New York-based reporter covering algorithms, surveillance, and technology.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
CAT SIMS



THE SAD



Are you married to a man who's
obsessed with AI? I'm so, so sorry.

BY
ALESSANDRA RAM

WIVES OF AI

IF

IF I HAD TO listen to another minute of my husband talking about Claude Code, I might have actually died. It was 11 pm in Berkeley, California, where I was home alone with our 10-month-old daughter, and 2 am in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he was visiting for his newish job in AI. “JUST LOOK AT THIS!” he shouted. The FaceTime camera zoomed toward a laptop sitting on a hotel bed. “SEE?!”

See *what*, I thought. I wanted to shower. I still had to take the dog out.

“ARE YOU LOOKING?” he shouted again. I wasn’t. I was looking at our real baby. But that’s the thing. There are two babies in this household now: the small human one and the large language model. Both demand constant attention. Both keep us up at 2 am.

Is this a Sophie’s choice kind of situation? Please. I’d kill the AI baby in an instant.



THERE’S A STRANGE and under-discussed side effect of the AI boom: what it’s doing to family dynamics. By which I mean: how it’s potentially *destroying* family dynamics. I’m sure this applies to all kinds of families, gay or straight,

rich or poor, with any AI-pilled members. The technology is coming, has come, for us all. But for the purposes of this story, I mostly spoke to white-collar heteros in the Bay Area, because that’s where a certain psychological crisis seems most acute. Often it goes like this: He works in AI, and she does everything and anything else. Other times, it’s bleaker: He desperately *wants* to work in AI—or feels he *must* work in AI—and she wants him to do literally anything else.

Either way, the men go in and the women want out. How many? It depends on how you define “working in AI.” About 71 percent of “AI-skilled work-

ers,” according to one report, are men, and there are roughly 35,000 open AI roles in the US at any given moment. Broaden that to include investors and you’re adding thousands more. Broaden it further to include every man who has mentioned to his wife that he is “looking at some opportunities in the space”—and we’re in the millions. Conservatively, that means hundreds of thousands of spouses, partners, and girlfriends, holding down the fort while someone man-plains the singularity to them. There are, in other words, a lot of us, and more of us are surfacing—gasping for air and a single conversation that doesn’t involve LLMs—by the day.

There’s a name for our ranks. I call us the sad wives of AI.



FIRST OF ALL, I’m sorry. AI is already the only thing most people talk about here, and it’s even worse for the sad wives.

One of them moved from New York for her husband’s career. He cofounded an AI company; now he’s head of design at another. “He’s so passionate about it,” she says. “I go along to get along.” That is, when she can remember what it is he



does, exactly. “My eyes glaze over a bit. I tend to check out. I forget.” She does say his company is at the forefront of ... something. Mostly, she’s tired. “I did not expect how homogenous it would be,” she says. “In New York, I had a friend who’s a teacher, a friend who’s a nurse, a friend in fashion, a friend in finance—and none of us talked about our jobs when we went out. Every time I go out in San Francisco, it feels like I’m at a work happy hour. I don’t get it.”

In a way, it can’t be helped. Most days it feels like every billboard in the city is about AI. Every. Single. One. “I’m on the edge,” another AI wife tells me, “while my husband drives by and is like, ‘Oh wow, that’s my company’s billboard.’ Cool. Great.” She, like almost every sad AI wife I talk to, doesn’t want me to include the specifics of her situation. Marriages, social standings, and finances—anything to protect the equity!—are on the line.

Some of the sad wives are obscenely rich; others are struggling. But the more I talk to them, the more I hear the same lines, the same complaints, the same clichés. The hours. The obsession. The sense that missing this moment would mean, for their AI-pilled spouses, missing the most important technological shift of a lifetime. “They really want to ride the wave,” one AI wife says. Another: “He’s always depressed about something.”



YANA VAN DER Meulen Rodgers, the chair of labor studies and employment relations at Rutgers University, has a blunt take: What’s happening in Bay Area households isn’t just a lifestyle story. It’s a labor market story. The AI boom, Rodgers says, is creating a “perfect storm” of forces reshaping household dynamics, playing out along predictably gendered lines.

The story is older than Silicon Valley, of course. Every major technological boom has produced the same figure, the person who gives everything to the wave. During the industrial revolution, it was the factory worker. During the Gold Rush, it was the men who left their families and headed west. During the dotcom boom, it was the founders sleeping under their desks in SoMa. Now, it is the person

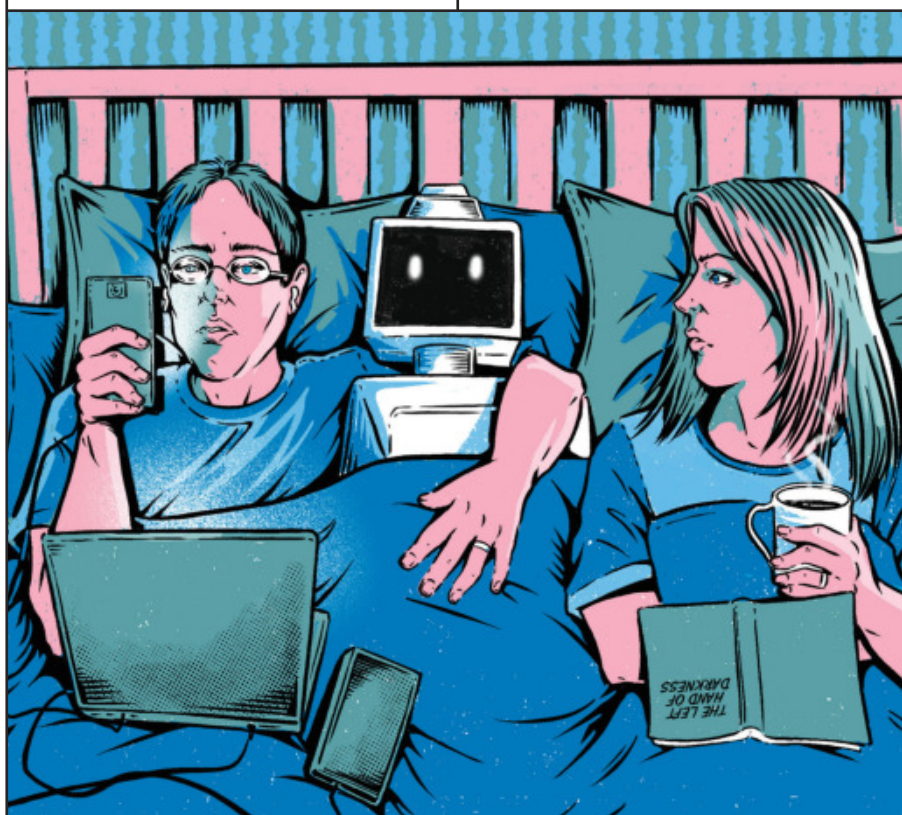
Princess Diana famously said there were three people in her marriage. For the sad wives of AI, the third is a chatbot.

who is building, building, always *building*—vibe coding at midnight, constantly upgrading their models—convinced that stopping for five minutes means missing everything. Economists call this the “ideal worker.” Rodgers calls it a trap. “Someone who works many hours, giving all of themselves to this new force,” she says. “That means less time at home

for the partner, less time for care work.”

Though things keep changing, some analyses suggest that women are about 20 percent less likely than men to use generative AI. “It’s a function not of gender per se,” Rodgers suggests, “but of the occupations that women hold.” Women are disproportionately represented in jobs—education, health care, social services—that right now use AI less. The result could be a compounding disadvantage. Over time, it means less access to the boom’s financial rewards, more responsibility for the domestic labor it generates.

And what happens when it doesn’t work out for the men? Many, if not most, won’t make it in AI, a lucrative but volatile business. “With job loss comes some depression,” Rodgers says. “Within the household, if one person is going through adverse mental health effects around job loss or uncertainty, the other naturally becomes the support person.” The cruel irony, for some sad wives, is that the moment their husband does leave AI, whether by choice or by force, there’s no relief. Now he’s home. Spiraling. Now she’s managing that too.





IT WAS NEARING the end of my therapy session. I had been rambling for 50 minutes about the mental load, the changing hormones, whether my postpartum depression could really just be traced to the fact that it took longer than anticipated to fit back into my jeans. Then my therapist interrupted and asked what exactly my partner did for work again. “Oh,” I said. “Well, he’s head of AI at his company.”

What she said next, I had to write down. Her client base, she allowed, is almost entirely women—women whose husbands, more often than not, are in some way professionally adjacent to AI. And it’s affecting their relationships. The pressure to keep up means zero boundaries at home. The very *masculine* energy of it all. And the constant fighting, which is about something *bigger* than them. He’s off in another world, a world of prompts and benchmarks and epiphanies, while she’s firmly in this one.

The resentment builds quietly. Several of these sad wives, my therapist added, have turned down job opportunities in AI themselves. Not because they weren’t qualified, but because it’s hard to raise kids and disrupt civilization at the same time.

Princess Diana famously said there were three people in her marriage. For the sad wives of AI, the third is a chatbot. I spoke to a few other family therapists, and they agreed with mine: The phenomenon is getting worse. “It’s a lot of tech wives,” one said, sighing. “A lot of tech wives.”



A **TIKTOK MEME** has been making the rounds recently: young women at their laptops or doing their makeup, captioned something like, “Working so hard so my man can work on his AI startup that loses \$30K a month.” The comments section stands in solidarity: “I’m ded.” “Yas queen.” “Just so he can have ‘founder’ in his bio.” I tried to reach out to some of these women. None bit.

I should also say I didn’t bother speaking to any of the actual husbands for this story. I’m sick of hearing from the men of AI. So many of us are. They have podcasts and Senate hearings and magazine profiles and probably a group chat with the president. They’ve been talked to—and I can’t stress this enough—*enough*.



ON AN UNSEASONABLY warm evening, I met up with two friends at a wine bar. Both are partnered with men somewhere on the AI spectrum—tangibly building it, wildly chasing it, or simply unable to shut up about it. We ordered something orange and natural, the kind of wine that signals you have opinions.

We were in Oakland, which has always prided itself on being the anti-San Francisco—more diversity, less venture-funded cold brew. It has never been home to a single major tech company. It didn’t matter. Within four minutes, we were talking about AI.

It’s so existential. I think about it and then I get depressed.

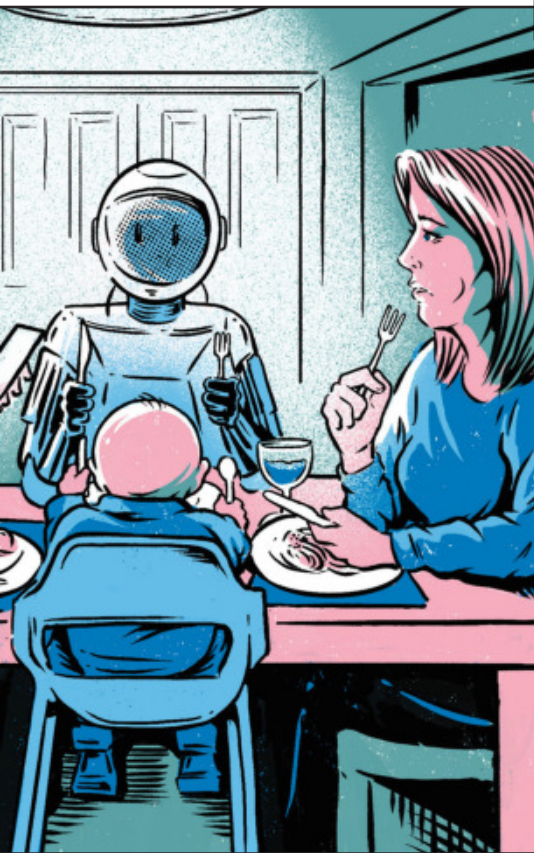
Yeah. Don’t think about it!

We thought about it for the next two hours.

Every night, it’s just existential dread.

And then, the men. Neither of my friends’ husbands actually *makes* money from AI. Not yet.





There is this sense, I offered, among people in AI—and people adjacent to it, and people who are pretty sure it's coming for them—that this is their last chance. They've tried everything else, these men, from writing screenplays to investing in crypto. It's AI or bust. Their partners, meanwhile, have quietly taken on a second job: emotional support. Chief Existential Officer, uncompensated. No one asked us if we wanted the gig.

So what happens now?

Maybe we'll just go back to the Stone Age.

One friend has started lobbying for her family to become Outdoor People. The kind who go into the wilderness and disconnect. For a whole week, no access. Just don't tell Claude.

A pause.

Do we want dessert?

HERE'S HOW BRIDGET Balajadia, a clinician at Lupine Counseling in San Jose, characterizes the AI husband's situation: "If you don't respond to an email at midnight, you could wake up and not have a job." It's relentless. "In this industry, you're reachable all the time. You're thinking about it in the shower, when

you're having sex, it never leaves." And when it never leaves, the relationship buckles. "It turns into this around-the-clock thing where neither partner is getting what they need. They're both building walls of resentment."

Which—we know already. But then Balajadia tells me two surprising things. The first is that some sad wives of AI don't *want* to talk to her about their husbands. Why? "I've already worked through this with my chat," they say. By which they mean ... ChatGPT. Yes. Not only is AI driving a wedge between couples. It's also become a primary tool for attempting to salvage their marriage.

Balajadia isn't impressed. "They're not having great outcomes," she says. "It's not going to challenge you. You end up being validated. Then both of you don't move the needle in conflict."

It gets worse. ChatGPT subsequently, in some situations, helps these sad wives explore the possibility of cheating. Some of them, Balajadia says, get "validating messages," such as: "*Yes, it makes sense that you're seeking attraction elsewhere because your partner's not giving it to you. He's emotionally unavailable.*" She pauses. "That's probably not a great idea. You probably should address the stuff that's coming up in your marriage, not go have sex with someone else."

SOME WIVES, IT must be said, have uncomplicated relationships with AI. One tells me it has "supercharged" her life—wedding planning, caring for aging parents, housekeeping, veterinary advice. While her husband is focused on how AI will change the economy, she's interested in how it will change *her*. Optimize her, really. "There's just not enough hours in the day if I don't try to gain efficiencies in some things." In fact, she's just vibe coded something or other. Maybe one day *he'll* be a sad AI husband.

Or robots will fix everything. Another wife tells me that her husband, who founded an AI startup, is convinced they will have a household robot within the decade. "Maybe after we have kids, I'll be like, 'Bring a robot in,'" she says. "Right now, I can't wrap my mind around it, though maybe people felt that way about washing machines." This in response to the question I ask everyone: Has any part of the AI boom made things *better* at home? Could it ever?

The responses are generally uninspiring. Most of the time, the closest thing to a silver lining any sad wife can offer is that AI has given them something new to talk about at dinner.



EACH TIME IT'S the same pattern: a generation (of men) convinced this is their moment, and everyone else trying to figure out where they fit. A bubble. And bubbles, as anyone who was here in 2001 can tell you, tend to burst. One AI wife—the one who drives past billboards for companies her husband has backed—puts it simply: "Half of our income is dependent on AI doing well."

Mine too. More than half, to be frank.

Flying home from that same trip to Massachusetts, my husband found himself watching the screen of the passenger next to him. It was playing *Train Dreams*, a movie about a man who leaves his family for logging and railroad work in the American West, a century ago. Even without sound, he got a little emotional. "Is that what I'm doing right now?" he asked me later.

The man in the film ultimately loses his wife and young daughter. He's filled with regret for much of his life.

"But I'm doing it *for* our daughter," my husband assured me. And: "I've always wanted the things I've worked on to be necessary."

I thought about that for a while. Then I asked him to take the dog out. ■

ALESSANDRA RAM is an Emmy- and Murrow-winning journalist and the cohost of *Sabotage*, a podcast from Good Luck Media.

Will AI Destroy Your Career?



Some jobs may be toast.
Some will survive. Circle your
answers to learn your fate.

BY MADDY VARNER

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATIONS BY
JACQUI VANLIEW

**How much of your
job is already on
a computer?**

0	NONE
+1	A LITTLE
+2	SOME
+3	MOST/ALL

Plenty of jobs, from personal care aide to fast-food worker, involve physical tasks that a chatbot can't do. According to the Ramp AI Index, which uses corporate-card and bill-pay data, businesses in the construction and food service industries have been slower to adopt AI than more laptop-centered sectors like technology and finance.

THIS SPRING, A team of top academic and think tank researchers tried to forecast AI's effects on the economy between now and 2030. They surveyed dozens of economists, AI experts, and "superforecasters" about various scenarios, including one in which AI becomes so advanced that it can both write a "Pulitzer-caliber" book and negotiate its own publishing rights.

In the survey, most experts said that higher-ranking occupations—CEO, administrative manager, senior official, legislator—would continue to grow, even under the "rapid" AI scenario. For most other people working a white-collar job, the forecast was murky.

Researchers are in broad agreement that AI is doing *something* to the economy, and that whatever it's doing is very complex. Real numbers are hard to come by. That's why WIRED has developed this thoroughly unscientific quiz, based on factors that researchers say might help determine who's at risk.

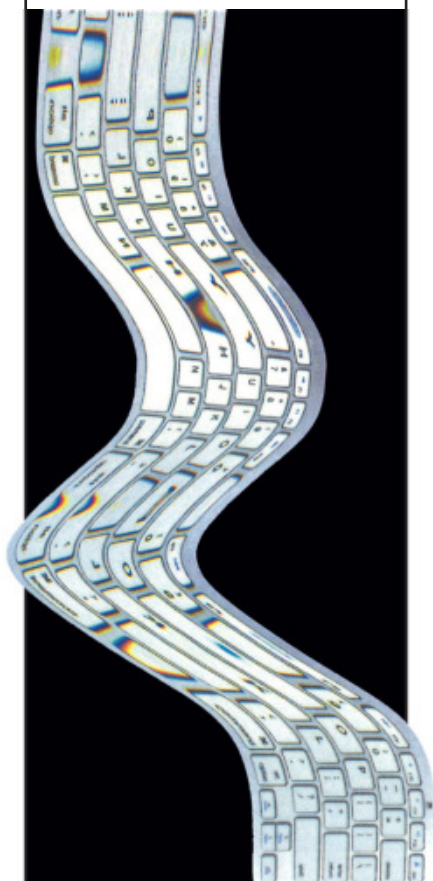
YOUR TOTAL

MADDY VARNER is a senior reporter at WIRED.

How much of your job is “AI exposed”?

0	NONE
+1	A LITTLE
+2	SOME
+3	MOST/ALL

Think of all the tasks involved in your work. Could an AI model help you accomplish them faster? To answer this question, researchers often turn to a US Department of Labor dataset called the Occupational Information Network. O*NET categorizes more than 900 occupations into some 19,000 distinct tasks. (A gambling-cage worker, for example, has 17 job-specific tasks, including “maintain confidentiality of customers’ transactions.”)



Dario Amodei, the founder of Anthropic, has repeatedly warned that AI will displace half of all entry-level white-collar jobs within the next five years. It may already be happening: When Stanford researchers analyzed payroll data from ADP last year, they found that the jobs considered “most exposed” to AI—including software developer and customer service representative—have seen declines in employment for early-career workers since late 2022, when ChatGPT went viral.

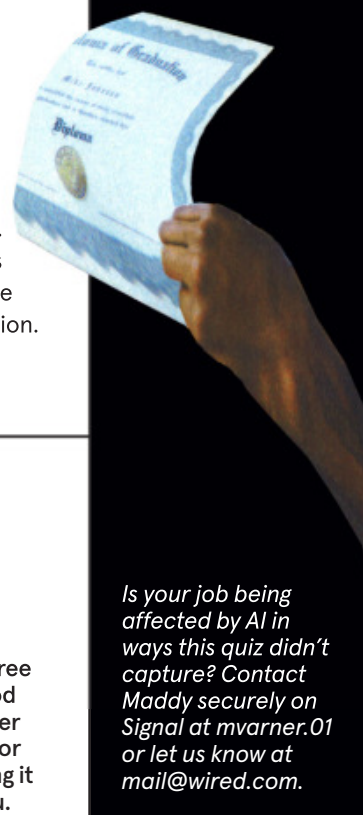
How long have you been in the workforce?

+1	LATE CAREER
+2	MID-CAREER
+3	EARLY CAREER

Do you have to be human to do what you do?

-2	YES
0	NO

Some occupations have what researchers call “mandatory human involvement.” To be a doctor or a lawyer, you have to pass licensing requirements before you can write prescriptions or represent others in court, in part because a human needs to take responsibility if something goes wrong. Therapists and elementary school teachers must be able to perform emotional work like building trust and fostering human connection. Does a major part of your job involve highly regulated or emotionally driven work?



<2

LATE-CAREER LUMBERJACK

Your job probably doesn’t involve a laptop, so why would it involve AI?

3-5

MID-CAREER MORTICIAN

AI might help cut down on your paperwork but can’t replicate what you do.

6-8

EARLY-CAREER EDITOR

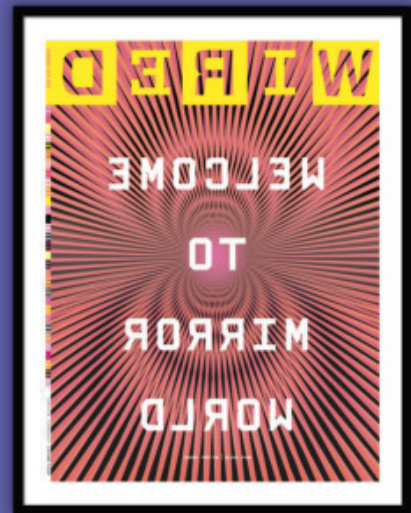
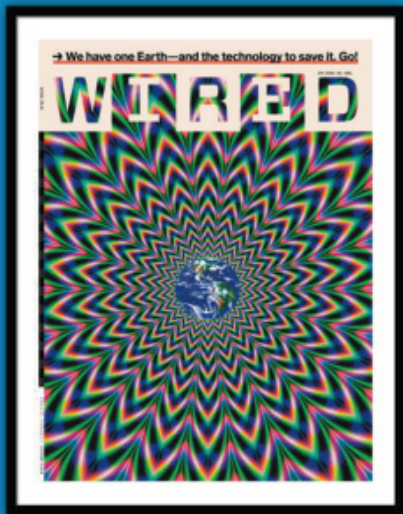
A lot of your work could probably be done by AI—have you considered a career change to health care?

9

SOFTWARE ENGINEER

Most people agree AI is really good at coding. Either you’re using it or someone is using it instead of you.

Is your job being affected by AI in ways this quiz didn’t capture? Contact Maddy securely on Signal at mvarner.01 or let us know at mail@wired.com.



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THE BIG STORY



PHOTOGRAPH BY KUNEL GAUR

Young women helped D4vd become a viral star.



Murder on

Photo-illustrations by
Elizabeth Renstrom

Now they're looking for evidence that he's a killer.



by
Jennifer Swann

the Discord

S

SAFIYYA WAS SOUND asleep at her parents' apartment when the unthinkable happened. It was almost midnight on a Monday last September, and her phone wouldn't stop buzzing. She got out of bed and went over to her computer, her body pulsing with adrenaline. Messages were pouring in on the Discord server she moderated. She began to panic.

"What the fuck is happening," one Discord user wrote in the general chat. "Yall i cant go to sleep now," wrote another. "Dude I have school tmr," someone else chimed in. "Daddy d4vd may be getting canceled," a separate user wrote.

"D4vd slimed someone," another user said—slang for murdered.

The Discord server known as "d4vd's closet," for fans of the SoundCloud-native singer-songwriter D4vd, was processing horrific news in real time. Hours earlier, on the afternoon of September 8, a decomposing body had been discovered in the front trunk of a black Tesla in a Los Angeles tow yard. It was registered, in Texas, to then-20-year-old David Anthony Burke, the real name of D4vd.

Safiyya, who is 24 and lives in Canada, was near speechless. (She, like many sources in this piece, asked to be identified by either a username, pseudonym, or first name, out of fear of harassment.) "Bro wtf," she typed into the Discord general chat, her hands shaking. "Just wtfff." It wasn't just the gruesome headlines that rattled her. This real-life homicide eerily paralleled the fictional ones depicted in D4vd's song lyrics and music videos. There was, most obviously, his 2022 breakout hit, "Romantic Homicide," a moody electronic ballad that Safiyya had first discovered, like so many others, as a viral earworm on TikTok. In the music video, D4vd—dressed as "Itami," his murderous, blindfolded alter ego—stands in front of a woman's lifeless, blood-splattered body; a knife drops from his hand.

Then there was the 2025 music video for "One More Dance," which evokes a 1990s horror movie à la *The Blair Witch Project*. The opening scene shows Itami, again played by D4vd, dragging his own body across the ground, dumping it in front of a car, and watching as friends stuff it in the trunk. The video culminates with his friends burying him alive in an open grave. Now D4vd's fans wondered in the Discord server: Was D4vd's art imitating his life, or was it the other way around?

"D4vd didn't kill someone itami did," one user wrote. "He was trying to tell us all along," wrote another who posted an image of a particularly catchy lyric from "Romantic Homicide":

"In the back of my mind, I killed you."

SAFIYYA JOINED D4VD'S Discord more than two years earlier. She liked the song "Romantic Homicide," but more importantly, her crush, whom she'd met while playing a first-person shooter game called *Valo-rant*, claimed to be a friend of D4vd's. When she sent her first message, a simple "ello" in May 2023, she found that others were eager to engage. The server was one giant, constantly active group chat, but with strangers from all over the world. It felt chaotic, unwieldy. Shitposting—a language Safiyya was well versed in from spending years in gaming-related Discord servers—was pervasive.

Things didn't work out with her crush, but Safiyya liked staying up late after work and chatting with the thousands of people in D4vd's Discord. She didn't know much about anyone beyond their avatars and usernames, and it didn't matter—the conversation almost always circled back to what they all had in common: D4vd's music. Members debated their favorite tracks (Safiyya's was "Sleep Well," a lo-fi R&B love song), compared merch, and shared tour dates they planned to attend.

Safiyya was so active in the chat that, after just a few months, a moderator asked if she'd like to join their ranks. The unpaid role came with a lot of pressure. Seven mods were expected to post at least 500 messages a week. It was a way to encourage engagement, Safiyya says. All the time she put into the Discord server was worth it: She wasn't just a part of D4vd's community, she was a curator of it.

In the early hours of September 9, though, Safiyya started to resent her role as moderator. She didn't like being one of the adults in the room, tasked with wrangling an out-of-control conversation. There was confusion, pandemonium, and, as one might expect from extremely online Zoomers posting on Discord, there were jokes—many in exceptionally poor taste. Some speculated that D4vd had been framed, that the news was fake, or that this was all promo for the forthcoming album D4vd had been teasing incessantly on social media.

As anxious as Safiyya felt, discussing a murder case in real time—one involving a suspect that everyone had at least a parasocial relationship with—was also kind of thrilling. Safiyya was close enough to D4vd that they had each other's cell phone numbers. He'd even FaceTimed her once to ask for help deleting a Twitch livestream. (Safiyya was on another call and missed it.) She liked D4vd, of course, and felt protective of his career.

Initially, Safiyya thought there was no way D4vd could've been involved. He'd just played a show in Chicago, and she figured someone must have borrowed or stolen his car while he was out of town. To her, it seemed like an injustice that this would happen just as D4vd was about to become a world-famous superstar: He was two weeks away from playing the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles, before headlining a European tour the following month, capping off a dizzying year in which he also made his Coachella debut. Guilty or not, Safiyya knew the damage had been done.

"Tour finna get cancel 🖤🖤🖤" Safiyya posted in the general chat of the Discord server. A short while later, her frustration boiled over: "THIS BOI GOT COLLAB LEFT AND RIGHT JUST FOR THIS SHIT TO HAPPEN."

Soon, the grave reality of the situation began to sink in. “We’re finna end up in a documentary,” one user posted, around 2:15 am. By 7 am, the speculation in D4vd’s Discord server had become so rampant that moderators disabled new posts. Safiyya was scared, feeling as if she’d suddenly been thrust into a criminal investigation.

Over the next several days, D4vd’s remaining tour dates would get canceled, just as Safiyya had predicted; so would the deluxe version of his first studio album, initially slated for release on September 19. His just-launched fashion campaign with Hollister and Crocs would get canned; and the Grammy-winning singer Kali Uchis would pull her duet with D4vd from streaming platforms. It seemed to many of D4vd’s former fans that his arrest for murder would be imminent too.

When it wasn’t, they took matters into their own hands. Overwhelmed by a sense of urgency, onetime D4vd stans began combing through his Discord server, suspecting it contained information so incriminating that it was only a matter of time before it got wiped. In the end, even Safiyya couldn’t have imagined how quickly many of her peers turned against their favorite musician, splintering and spiraling into a feverish—and often personal—quest for justice.

LIKE MOST PEOPLE his age, David Burke grew up on the internet and learned from a young age how to weaponize it. He was born in 2005, the same year YouTube launched, and has been posting videos to the platform since at least the age of 13—around the same time he moved with his devout Christian family from Queens, New York, to a middle-class suburb of Houston. Some of his earliest uploads are screen recordings of his plays on *Fortnite*, a battle-royale-style video game he was obsessed with. They offered him the attention and social interaction he seemed to be otherwise lacking.

“He was grinding. He was posting every day, playing every day, he was trying his hardest to get somewhere,” says a 21-year-old New York-based gamer who goes by the username Sacred WTF. By 2021, D4vd was 16 and already building a brand as a socially awkward outcast who spent nearly all of his time online. (It helped that he was homeschooled.) When he started catering to the YouTube algorithm by adding

popular songs to his *Fortnite* videos, they racked up hundreds of thousands of views and generated “a lot of money” in ad revenue, he’d later tell musician Benny Blanco in an interview. But those massive views also brought copyright strikes—warnings from YouTube, prompted by record labels, to remove the songs or risk getting booted from the platform. That’s when, according to the now mythic origin story that D4vd has relayed in the press, his mom had a life-altering suggestion: Why didn’t her son make his own damn music?

Using his iPhone, a pair of earbuds, and a mobile app called Bandlab, D4vd—he adopted the moniker around this time, in part for search engine optimization—huddled in his sister’s closet and recorded himself freestyling over a royalty-free piano beat he found on YouTube. He uploaded the track, called “Run Away,” to SoundCloud in December 2021 and tagged it with keywords that helped it go viral: #emo #chill #lowfi #slowedandreverb #blowthisup #foryoupage.

But it wasn’t until July 2022, when he self-released the brooding ballad “Romantic Homicide,” that the then-17-year-old really blew up. Two months later, D4vd signed a deal with Interscope Records’ Darkroom imprint. The comparisons to Billie Eilish, who also scored a deal with Darkroom as a teenager after uploading tracks to SoundCloud, were immediate. In magazine profiles, D4vd was heralded as a new kind of wunderkind. GQ dubbed him a “mouthpiece for Gen-Z heartache.” NME declared he was a “multi-genre visionary.” And Billboard christened D4vd “one of alternative music’s most promising new artists.”

“When I found him, it was like, ‘Wow, he made this in his closet on headphones, on Bandlab. That’s so cool. I could do that, too,’” says Ykare, a popular TikTokker who used to dream about collaborating with D4vd. “That was his claim to fame. I think that’s really what brought in a lot of younger audiences.”

Before Ykare found his niche—dressing as a Teletubby and singing in the shower—he was inspired by D4vd’s humble beginnings. “People looked up to him,” Ykare says, because of D4vd’s explosive breakout from a “homemade, ‘I made this in my bedroom’ niche. That’s where D4vd lived, and he kind of was the most successful to do that.”

D4vd communicated with his super-young fans through his Discord. His server was created by a fan named Moji around the time he signed



David Anthony Burke, known as D4vd, performed at Coachella in 2025.

his record deal. Though not officially affiliated with Darkroom, the Discord had a clear benefit to the label: It was a way to promote releases, tour dates, and merchandise directly to superfans. Moderators, which were mostly other fans but also included at least one member of D4vd's management team, Mogul Vision, and occasionally D4vd himself, shared links to new content and encouraged members to subscribe to D4vd's email list for presale ticket codes. (Neither Mogul Vision, Darkroom, Interscope Geffen A&M Records, nor its parent company, Universal Music Group, responded to a request for comment.) The tactics also cemented D4vd's perceived authenticity as a chronically online teenager without much media training.

In February 2023, three months before he dropped his debut EP and kicked off his first European tour, D4vd popped into the Discord with an announcement: He'd "officially named the blindfold character" he'd portrayed in the video for "Romantic Homicide." His name was Itami, the Japanese word for pain, D4vd explained, and he was only the first character of many to come in his own cinematic universe, which he called the "d4vdverse." A few days later, he posted about Itami on X, telling fans to "feel free to leave conspiracy theories." In the YouTube caption for a music video featuring the character, D4vd took the concept a step further, instructing his fans to look for Easter eggs.

"He wears a blindfold for the sole purpose of not being held accountable for the pain he causes," reads the caption. "He's been planted in all of my music videos but it's not clear what his motive is ... You will soon find out."

WHEN SARAH, WHO is 30 and works in veterinary medicine in Oregon, first heard about the body uncovered from D4vd's car, she had the same thought as Safiyya: D4vd must have been framed. Sarah had joined the musician's Discord server after hearing "Romantic Homicide" on TikTok and loving its slow-building melody and evocative lyrics. But she'd always interpreted them as metaphorical: "Like, you're dead emotionally to me, you know?"

Then she came across a Reddit post and began to fear that D4vd's lyrics were more literal. The post was written by a since-deleted user who worried, in the days before the human remains in D4vd's Tesla had been identified, that they already knew who the victim was. "A close friends [sic] little sister from the [Inland Empire] ran away last year and this is who she was with," the message, which has also since been deleted, reads in part. "I'm terrified that's who is in the car- nobody has heard from her in months. I won't release names as shes [sic] still a minor but she was from Lake Elsinore."

On September 18, when the Los Angeles Police Department publicly released the name of the victim, Sarah felt sick to her stomach. It was 14-year-old Celeste Rivas Hernandez. As the Reddit post had suggested, she was from Lake Elsinore, a working-class city about 75 miles southeast of Los Angeles. She had indeed been reported missing by her family. In photos of Rivas Hernandez splashed across the news, she had big

brown eyes, a cleft chin, and middle-parted black ringlets that fell past her shoulders. She wore a gold cross around her neck and dressed like the middle schooler she was, in jeans, sneakers, and zip-up hoodies from the Gap.

For Sarah, who says she was groomed as a teenager by an adult in a gaming chat room, it was not difficult to imagine that Rivas Hernandez may have met D4vd online, maybe even in a Discord server. Sarah remembers thinking: "I've been Celeste. I've been in her shoes."



The dead body of Celeste Rivas Hernandez was found in the trunk of a Tesla owned by D4vd.

"It really hits on a lot of issues, like the exploitation and abuse of minors in Hollywood specifically and the system and how it protects or fails to protect minors."

Fueled by her anger about Rivas Hernandez's murder and her own experiences with men, Sarah, like legions of others who once streamed "Romantic Homicide" on repeat, turned on D4vd. Sarah blocked his music on Spotify and joined newly created Discord servers with names like "The David Case" and "David Leaks," where former fans were now scouring the artist's digital footprint for traces of Rivas Hernandez. True-crime buffs, many of whom had never previously heard of D4vd but were now scandalized by his morbid lyrics, became engrossed with the murder mystery too.

They swarmed r/d4vd, a subreddit where fans once posted interpretations of song lyrics and D4vd's social media posts. Only now, the speculation was unified and turbo-charged by a shared theory: That D4vd groomed Rivas Hernandez online, engaged in a sexual relationship with her, and housed her when she ran away from home at just 13 years old.



Homicide
You didn't want to fall in love
You're looking out for yourself now



ROMANTIC
SIDE



Ever been begging to erase you



Rivas Hernandez was reported missing to the Riverside County Sheriff's Office at least twice in 2024: once, on Valentine's Day, and again in April, following a brief return home. 911 call logs obtained by WIRED suggest Rivas Hernandez's home life may have been tumultuous. Roughly three weeks after her second disappearance, the Riverside County Sheriff's Office received a call reporting a suspicious circumstance at her family's home, which sits on the same block as a liquor store and an auto repair shop. On Christmas Eve, the sheriff's office fielded a call reporting an alleged battery that had just occurred at her home; a report was not taken, and the Riverside County Sheriff's Office declined to offer specifics. A lawyer representing Rivas Hernandez's parents did not respond to a request for comment.

The mystery surrounding Rivas Hernandez's death made news globally. "It really hits on a lot of issues, like the exploitation and abuse of minors in Hollywood specifically and the system and how it protects or fails to protect minors," says Amanda, a 30-year-old speech-language pathologist who grew up close to D4vd's Texas hometown and became intrigued by the case after hearing about it on TikTok. "She was a minor, she was vulnerable, a runaway in the streets of Hollywood, you know?"

In fast-growing subreddits like *r/d4vd2*, *r/CelesteRivasHernandez*, *r/JusticeforCeleste*, and *r/d4vdiots*, Rivas Hernandez became a martyr nearly overnight. There were illustrations of her as a saint and avatars of her face, taken from missing person's flyers her family once posted on Facebook. Sleuths saw her everywhere: in screenshots of Instagram stories, where a dainty hand showed off what appeared to be an engagement ring and an index finger tattoo that read "Shhh" (D4vd, they alleged, has a matching one); on Twitch, where a sassy girl in a hoodie and oversized glasses appeared to taunt and embarrass D4vd during a livestream, even accusing him of "raping kids"; and in D4vd's own music videos, which frequently featured actors who shared a resemblance to Rivas Hernandez, with olive skin and curly dark hair.

When sleuths noticed that Aysia Collins, a 23-year-old model and actor who played D4vd's love interest in the video for "Sleep Well," had also appeared in his Instagram photos and Twitch



On September 25, 2025, intimate notes, candles, and flowers filled a hometown memorial for Celeste Rivas Hernandez.

streams, they flooded her social media pages with accusations relating to Rivas Hernandez. Anyone and everyone who had been photographed regularly alongside D4vd, including the video game streamer Neo Langston—better known by his handle, NeoTheAsian—became fair game to online interrogators.

On Reddit and TikTok, nearly every aspect of the case was debated endlessly, including the length of time Rivas Hernandez's remains had been in the Tesla and the exact date she died. There were even more grisly questions: Had her body been dismembered or merely decomposed? (It would be another several months until the LA County district attorney confirmed both were true.) Meanwhile, conspiracies proliferated about D4vd having hired doppelgängers as a way to hide his alleged relationship with an underage runaway.

These theories may have seemed outlandish if D4vd hadn't explicitly trained his fans, through his introduction of Itami and the so-called d4vd-verse, to analyze his music for hidden meanings. Symbolism, fantasy, and mythology—much of it inspired by Japanese anime and world-building video games like *Fortnite*—were so central to D4vd's brand that one of his moderators even created a channel in his Discord server to encourage conjecture. The channel was described as a place "to discuss your theories and whatever you think the lore is going to be in the future projects."

IT WAS A CHILLY September afternoon, but Ghost felt flush. Glued to the computer in his bedroom in New Jersey, he'd just stumbled upon what he considered a bombshell piece of evidence. Ghost had joined D4vd's Discord server in 2022, not long after it was created; he and D4vd were in the same *Fortnite*-related Discord servers previously, Ghost says, and when he found out that D4vd was a musician, he was excited to be among the first to know about new releases. But within a couple of years, Ghost, along with many other early fans, had grown impatient with the singer, whom they felt was spending too much time on TikTok and not enough in the studio.

In one TikTok from early 2024, D4vd professed to be consumed with a "Hello Kitty girl" he'd met three years earlier. In another, posted later that year, just before D4vd acquired nearly half a dozen new facial pierc-

ings, he trolled his fans by captioning a video of himself driving a Tesla and listening to new music from Tyler, the Creator: “im too busy playing fortnite to finish my album 🤔” When D4vd’s first studio album, *Withered*, finally dropped in April 2025, Ghost was thrilled.

But his feelings changed completely five months later, when he heard about Rivas Hernandez’s murder from a video that autoplayed on his YouTube feed. “It’s like a switch was flipped,” he says. Imagining that Rivas Hernandez must have been the “Hello kitty girl,” Ghost surged with anger and a desire for vengeance. He could feel himself slipping into detective mode; it was, as his online alias might suggest, one that he particularly enjoyed.

Ghost, despite being just 16 years old, is a self-described ethical hacker who taught himself how to use open source intelligence. It all started when one of his friends in middle school was “blackmailed by a catfish account on Instagram” that threatened to release embarrassing photos. Ghost considered himself computer-savvy and wanted to help. When he verified the IP address and identity of the catfisher, Ghost says, he realized, “Hey, I’m actually really good at this.”

But even Ghost was startled at how seemingly easy it was to dig up a mention of Rivas Hernandez in D4vd’s Discord server. When he and a friend typed the word “Celeste” into the search bar, they were flabbergasted to find an exchange from August 2024, more than a year before her body was found. D4vd had posted in the general chat: “Im in a song crisis right now.” It was unclear whether he was looking for suggestions, just venting, or trying to stir up conversation, but the server lit up in response. It was a rare, exciting occurrence. One of the dozens of responses was from a user whose account has since been deleted. It read: “Drop the one with the missing girl celeste rivas hernandez.”

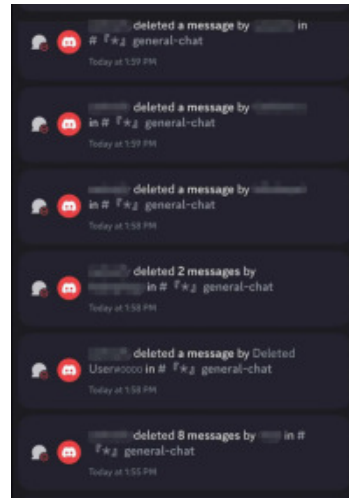
Ghost stared at his computer screen, eyes wide like saucers, feeling the weight of a girl’s death on his shoulders. There was no other way he could interpret the message: At least one person in the Discord server knew Rivas Hernandez by name—and they knew she’d been missing. “I was like, ‘Oh my God. This is big,’” Ghost says.

Beads of sweat dripped onto his mousepad as Ghost realized that some messages in the server were being deleted in real time. He wondered what kind of incriminating information moderators, or even D4vd himself, might be trying to hide. They’d already disabled the chat, and Ghost worried it was only a matter of time before they wiped the server completely. He remembers thinking: “I have access to the server that’s being limited as we speak, and

I’m gonna do everything in my power to archive it. My only chance is now. If I miss that chance, I won’t be able to do anything.”

From his bedroom in his parents’ home, Ghost used his security token on Discord to extract data from the server. The entire download of some 3.7 gigabytes took about nine hours. Ghost spent much of that time nervously pacing back and forth across his room. When the download was complete, he uploaded the HTML code to the Internet Archive and shared it on r/d4vd. The subreddit went wild with speculation.

A few days later, May, a 22-year-old law student in the Netherlands, was snooping around d4vd’s closet when she noticed the same thing as Ghost. Seeking to validate her suspicions and crowdsource intelligence, May sounded the alarm on r/d4vd. “My post blew up. I got over 550,000 views on it. A bunch of people started DMing me,” May says. “People started sending me information.”



“Ethical hacker” Ghost noticed, in real time, that a moderator was deleting posts in D4vd’s Discord server.

SCROLLING THROUGH R/D4VD one night, May landed on a screenshot that made her gasp. It showed a message Safiyya had sent in the general chat of D4vd’s Discord server in late 2024, roughly a year earlier. Members had been lamenting that D4vd had gotten too popular and wasn’t engaging with them online the way he once did. One member said that she used to chat with D4vd over Instagram and Snapchat DMs. Safiyya, who noted that she’d seen D4vd’s Twitch streams go from attracting 10,000 viewers to more than 100,000, had a flex of her own: “One time, he called me cause he tryna delete that stream with his gf.”

May believed, like a lot of other redditors who had been snooping around, that the girlfriend in question was Rivas Hernandez. She pored over other screenshots of messages Safiyya had sent in the Discord chat over the years—including some that referenced Epstein and pedophilia—and began to view her with intense suspicion. Why was Safiyya asked to delete the livestream? Had she known that D4vd’s girlfriend was a minor? And how could she have ignored the chilling message in the chat about “the missing girl Celeste Rivas Hernandez?”

TWO WEEKS AFTER D4vd’s Discord erupted into chaos, Safiyya felt her life was spiraling out of control. Before, the server had given her a purpose, a responsibility and direction outside of work. Now the Dis-

cord server was locked, and Safiyya's direct messages were brimming with questions from suspicious outsiders who had joined the once insular online community. All of them, it seemed, felt called to search for answers in the absence of any updates, press conferences, or official statements about the case from the LAPD.

At first, Safiyya shrugged off some of the messages she received as harmless, if not creepy, trolling. When a stranger demanded she confess "everything you know about Celeste and David," Safiyya responded glibly. "Idk david in person 🤔" she wrote. "Lmfao." She was telling the truth, she says: As much as she'd yearned to have a real friendship with D4vd, she barely knew him at all. For the most part, he ignored her when she messaged him on Discord or responded to his Instagram stories. He'd only ever tried to FaceTime her that one time, she says.

"Do not reveal any information with others," the stranger responded, assuming an air of authority. "Bet," she wrote back, attempting to call their bluff. The message exchange had taken place on September 13, five days before Rivas Hernandez had been publicly identified by the LAPD. But after the 14-year-old was confirmed as the deceased, it began to sink in for Safiyya that D4vd might not be as innocent as she'd once assumed. She'd long heard that he had a girlfriend named Celeste, and she'd even seen a user with the display name "Celeste" interact with him in the server. "Celeste in here??" D4vd, who had a crown emoji next to his display name and a badge signifying he was the owner of the server,

posted in the chat in October 2022. "HI DAVID BARKKK," this user wrote back, riffing on D4vd's full name, David Burke.

According to their profile, "Celeste" had created a Discord account in January 2021 and belonged to two of the same servers as Safiyya: d4vd's closet and one called E-Girl Paradise, which bills itself as a forum for socializing and dating (channels in that server include "freaky-chat," "match-making" and "goon-corner"). Safiyya maintains that she didn't know this user's real age; after all, their profile displayed a badge—granted by moderators of servers—showing that they were over the age of 18. Another badge proclaimed: "Number 1 Fan." (A spokesperson for Discord said these "server roles" are not determined or verified by the company. "We require all users to be at least 13 years old and believe that nowhere is our safety work more important than with teens," the company said in a statement to WIRED).

As sleuths sifted through the Discord server, Safiyya's username came up time and again. In one conversation from late 2024, Safiyya seemed to have knowledge of a user named Celeste, referring to her as D4vd's ex. She had theorized that D4vd's bitter elegy, "My House Is Not a Home," with lyrics like "You didn't want to fall in love / You're look-



To a lot of amateur investigators, the **online evidence was glaring**—and what of the possible DNA that professionals are tasked with collecting? Or the **surveillance footage** that may have been captured by Tesla cameras?

ing out for yourself now,” must have been written about their breakup. At the time, she says, she believed that D4vd had a new girlfriend, with a different username on Discord. Online investigators were convinced that this supposed new girlfriend was actually the same person—a subversion of the doppelgänger conspiracy—and it looked to some of them, May and Ghost included, like Safiyya was covering for D4vd.

The aggressive messages Safiyya had been receiving, she realized, weren’t just trolling. They were serious; some of them were even death threats. Every time her phone pinged, Safiyya’s body filled with dread. She became terrified to leave her parents’ house. She hadn’t told them about the online harassment—she didn’t want to worry them—but maybe there were signs: She’d dyed her hair a different color after redditors posted a photo of her from D4vd’s Discord server. She’d thought about getting a lawyer, but she couldn’t afford one. Instead, she resigned herself to mounting her own defense online.

On the night of September 22, she took a deep breath and began responding to accusations on r/d4vd. She tried to explain that she helped D4vd delete a Twitch livestream because the video had violated Twitch’s community guidelines: The girl in it, whom Safiyya knew to be D4vd’s girlfriend “Celeste,” had made a reference to the sexual assault of children. Safiyya had shrugged it off as an awkward joke in poor taste. It never occurred to her that the girl in the video might have been a minor herself. As for the message about “the missing girl,” Safiyya insisted, she simply didn’t see it. She says she once believed that D4vd and the Discord user named “Celeste” had broken up. But now, she too subscribed to the theory that D4vd, growing increasingly paranoid, had convinced Rivas Hernandez to rejoin the server under a different username, to conceal her true age and identity.

Redditors, including May, followed the thread with skepticism. She and others challenged Safiyya’s explanations. Safiyya was flustered and exhausted. English isn’t her first language, and every time she tried to articulate her thoughts, they came out like sludge for others to fling back at her. Never mind that it felt almost impossible to translate the mostly meaningless inside jokes in D4vd’s Discord server—like the time a handful of members inexplicably made their display names identical to one another, so no one could tell who was who.

Others might have logged off, but Safiyya doubled down. She invited her online haters to join her personal Discord server and ask her questions directly. She describes herself as “antisocial,” but she was desperate to be understood. She was upset, too, about Rivas Hernandez’s death and how at least one member of d4vd’s closet had known she’d been reported missing. Safiyya worried that she’d failed this 14-year-old girl she’d never met but now found herself thinking of constantly. She remembered the sound of the girl in the hoodie’s rambunctious laughter in the Twitch livestream, the

confidence in her voice. Safiyya wondered if maybe the laughter had been masking fear.

SAFIYYA, LIKE SARAH, knew what it was like to be preyed upon online. Safiyya wasn’t much older than Rivas Hernandez—15 or 16, she thinks—when she was propositioned by an adult on an anonymous video chat site called Omegle. (The company shut down in 2023 after settling multiple lawsuits on behalf of minors who alleged they’d met sexual predators on the platform.) Safiyya hoped that by continuing to talk about D4vd’s Discord server publicly she might encourage other moderators to come forward and share what they knew, if anything, about Rivas Hernandez.

May, in the Netherlands, and Sarah, in Oregon, were among the small group of redditors who joined Safiyya’s server, hungry for answers. At first, Sarah wasn’t sure what to think of Safiyya’s defense. But when she started responding by audio call, Sarah recognized the pain in her soft, shaky voice. She felt Safiyya must be telling the truth. “I could tell that she was really hurt ‘cause she was moderating for this person that she looked up to, and then all this came out and now she’s totally crushed,” says Sarah. “She was so overwhelmed, and I felt so bad ‘cause she’s young too.”



Moderator Safiyya telling D4vd’s Discord server about the musician asking her to delete a Twitch stream.

Because Sarah had been in D4vd’s Discord server since early 2024, she was familiar with the brand of off-color humor that dominated it. She felt that Safiyya’s posts about Epstein had been taken out of context. “I knew she was just making edgy jokes, you know, trying to fit in with this group of people,” Sarah says. “People have been trying to paint her as this evil protector of a child predator, which she’s not.”

May, too, softened after discovering that Safiyya wasn’t an all-knowing insider. In hindsight,

the idea seemed almost absurd, proof of how the internet can distort reality. The way Safiyya tells it, she'd spent countless hours helping to cultivate a fan base for someone she'd never met and who almost uniformly ignored her online. Even Safiyya's attempts to score free merchandise from D4vd's label, a perk she'd heard other Discord moderators received, were rebuffed. "I'm not even gonna lie; I put too much effort into reviving his server," says Safiyya, adding that she sometimes spent her own money buying upgrades, like a *Minecraft* plug-in, for it. "He didn't appreciate my work."

Safiyya had, at one time, hoped to join the volunteer team of Discord mods that worked directly with D4vd's label to help with marketing efforts, she says. Finding out about new releases before anyone else would've been exciting, Safiyya thought, and maybe she'd learn something that could help boost her nascent career as a gaming streamer. But Safiyya was never accepted as a member of the team. In retrospect, she sees it as a huge relief: She's glad she didn't know what was really going on behind the scenes. Then again, she thinks, maybe if she'd known something about Rivas Hernandez, she could've helped her.

AS THE MONTHS dragged on, sleuths grew frustrated and disillusioned with the lack of visible progress from the justice system. Some started to lose hope. Others, citing D4vd's macabre lyrics and his knife-wielding Itami character, feared he might kill himself before he faced criminal charges. To a lot of amateur investigators, the online evidence was glaring—and what of the possible DNA that professionals are tasked with collecting? Or the surveillance footage that may have been captured by Tesla cameras? Whatever was causing the case to linger, the LAPD, at least during the course of its investigation, wasn't saying.

In fact, the agency had actively taken steps to conceal information about the case. In late November 2025, it placed a security hold on Rivas Hernandez's autopsy, preventing it from being released to the public. In a statement, the LA County chief medical examiner, Odey Ukpo, sharply rebuked the decision. "Since becoming the department head, I've worked on eradicating the practice of placing security holds on medical examiner cases simply by law

enforcement request," he said. "The practice of security holds is virtually unheard of in other counties and has not been proven to improve outcomes in the legal system."

By the start of 2026, some true-crime enthusiasts, like Amanda, the speech-language pathologist in Texas, had already stepped away from the case, feeling as if there might never be a satisfying resolution. Amanda had once been an active member of r/CelesteRivasHernandez, even going so far as to compile and share a seven-page, single-spaced timeline of events potentially related to the crime. But she hasn't posted on Reddit in months; she felt alienated by redditors she thinks went too far by harassing anyone associated with D4vd.

In late February, Collins, the model and actor who appeared in one of D4vd's music videos and in many of his photos, posted a statement on r/d4vdiots in which she stressed that she is no longer friends with D4vd and asked for privacy. "You guys do not know everything going on as much as you have done digging. I am also lost as well. The harassment has gotten horrible," she wrote. "I have had people track me down at work, stalk me, threaten to kill me, threaten to eat me, chop me up, you name it. Yet people don't know how hard I am working in silence to bring justice to Celeste Rivas in the ways that I can."

A couple of weeks later, Neo Langston posted his own statement on his Instagram story. "I understand due to my silence and the silence in general it leaves a void of information that everyone wants to fill," he wrote. "But at the end of the day this case isn't about me, it isn't about you, it's about getting justice for the victim and her family and I care a lot more about that than [sic] trying to fill that void because of public opinion." (Neither Collins nor Langston responded to WIRED's request for comment.)

All the while, Sarah and May kept digging. They'd been chatting in a Discord group for months, swapping intel with Safiyya and a private investigator named Steve Fischer, whom Sarah had connected with on X after noticing his viral tweets about the case. Together, they shared theories, scrutinized social media posts, and speculated about accounts they believed were secretly D4vd. (They say D4vd has been known to use burners and back-up accounts under different aliases.)



Journalists took pictures of David Anthony Burke's booking photo before the start of a press briefing on the case against him.

When unreleased tracks from D4vd's deluxe album leaked online in mid-March, they wondered if he himself had been responsible. Sarah put together a document cataloging the most suspicious of the new song lyrics. Among them: "I've been trying to erase you, it makes me feel like an asshole. Just got rid of my tattoo, I always knew it wouldn't last long." Often, the group bemoaned the lack of communication from law enforcement. "Why the silence? Why no transparency? Why no charges? What are they hiding? Is this a blown investigation?" Fischer posted on X just before noon on Thursday, April 16.

Less than six hours later, Safiyya was having dinner with some friends when she got a new Discord message from May: D4vd had been arrested.

THE MOMENT THEY worried might never materialize was finally here, suddenly, and without warning. Safiyya was overcome with relief, but she also had a ton of questions. Among them: Why had it taken the LAPD seven months to take D4vd into custody? And had he been hiding out in the Hollywood Hills mansion where he was arrested that whole time? Safiyya assumed he'd gone back to Texas or maybe even fled the country, like she'd seen other suspected murderers do in true-crime documentaries.

The following Monday, Safiyya, Sarah, and May each watched, from three different countries and time zones, the livestream of the Los Angeles County district attorney's press conference—the first one held by authorities in the case involving Rivas Hernandez. The sleuths soon discovered, along with the rest of the world, that the case was even more twisted than they'd imagined: According to LA County district attorney Nathan Hochman, the LAPD had been investigating D4vd for lewd and lascivious sexual acts at the time of Rivas Hernandez's murder. The 14-year-old had been a witness in the investigation, and she was killed by D4vd, Hochman alleged, as a way "to maintain his very lucrative music career that Celeste was threatening" when she came over to his home on the night of April 23, 2025. She "was never heard from again."

Hochman announced that his office was charging D4vd with first-degree murder with special circumstances, which carries a maximum sentence of either life without the possibility of parole or the death penalty, along with additional charges related to sexual abuse and mutilating human remains. D4vd has pleaded not guilty. "The actual evidence in this case will show that David Burke did not murder Celeste Rivas Hernandez and he

was not the cause of her death," his attorneys said in a statement. "We will vigorously defend David's innocence." When it was his turn at the podium, LAPD chief Jim McDonnell defended his department's investigation and its lack of communication with the public. "My duty is not to fuel speculation. It's to deliver justice, and that requires patience and discipline on everybody's part," he said, flanked by an easel on either side of him: on one, a poster of Rivas Hernandez; on the other, a poster of David Burke's booking photo. "We had to be certain that nothing we did or said would ever jeopardize this case."

The day after the press conference, Rivas Hernandez's family issued their first public statement in the seven months since their daughter had been murdered. (They, like the LAPD, had been publicly criticized for their silence during the investigation.) "Celeste was a beautiful, strong girl who loved to sing and dance. Every Friday was movie night and we spent wonderful times together," they said through their lawyer. "We love her very much and she always told us that she loved us. We miss her deeply. All we want is Justice for Celeste." The following day, on April 22, the medical examiner released a report stating that Rivas Hernandez's cause of death was multiple penetrating injuries, including a stab wound on her right abdomen and another on her left chest, "caused by object(s)."

May had watched the livestream from her laptop at her school library, where she'd been studying for an upcoming exam. She knew she wasn't going to get any more schoolwork done that night. May couldn't get over the date that Rivas Hernandez was allegedly killed. The timing of it, May realized, coincided with D4vd's aggressive promotion of his latest album: On April 23, 2025, allegedly the last day of Rivas-Hernandez's short life, D4vd had posted a TikTok of himself dancing and pointing to the vinyl edition of *Withered*. "Your prayers have been answered it's finally here," he captioned it. His giddy front-facing camera videos continued over the next several days. "It's actually so disgusting to think about that," May says.

May and Sarah still haven't given up on their own DIY investigation. Armed with new information from the press conference, they plan to keep scouring D4vd's Discord server and reviewing his old social media posts to see what else they can find.

Safiyya, on the other hand, is trying to log off. Sometimes it feels like weaning herself off a drug. "At first, it was so, so hard," she says. But it's gotten a little easier with time. She still gets nervous a lot, but she's been making an effort to go outside more, to touch grass, to get exercise. Simple things. Things she never used to do much of. Even when she was in college, she says, her internet habits—between gaming and streaming and Discord—became so time-consuming that she stopped going to class and eventually dropped out.

Lately, she's been thinking about going back to school to finish her degree. She used to want to be a legal assistant or maybe a journalist. She likes writing, but not so much talking to people. Now she's thinking maybe a teacher or nurse. "I like kids," Safiyya says. "Not in a weird way. I like taking care of kids. Someday, I want to be a good mom, if I ever have kids." If she does, she thinks, she'll want to keep them off the internet for as long as possible. ■

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FOR MONTHS,

RAFAEL CONCEPCION

has obsessively
vibe coded tools
to thwart the
federal immigration crackdown.

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He's also lost his job
and **BECOME A TARGET.**

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by
BRENDAN I. KOERNER

PHOTOGRAPHS by
LUIS MANUEL DIAZ



T R E S I S T



THE SECOND TRUMP

administration was barely a week old when Rafael Concepcion came across the Facebook post that would upend his life. Its author was Maria Hernandez, the owner of a Mexican grocery store popular among Latino residents of New York's Finger Lakes region. She wrote that several of her best customers had already gone into hiding. With sales plummeting, she offered to make free deliveries of food to anyone too scared of Immigration and Customs Enforcement to leave their home.

Concepcion, a second-generation immigrant and a professor at nearby Syracuse University, was so moved by Hernandez's generosity that he made the 45-minute drive to her store to pay his respects and spend some money. A burly and gregarious 51-year-old who keeps his hair slicked back, Concepcion wore a black V-neck T-shirt and blue jeans as he perused the aisles filled with pan dulce, tomatillos, and prayer candles. In front of a refrigerator case, he spotted an African American customer staring at packages of chorizo. The man mistook Concepcion for an employee. "I don't know what any of this stuff is," the customer said. "But I saw the thing on Facebook, and I wanted to come in and help and support."

The visit to Hernandez's store activated something deep inside Concepcion, a moral unease that would gradually blossom into an all-consuming drive to thwart ICE. In early February 2025, he described his experience at the Mexican market—not far from the home of Harriet Tubman—in an op-ed for the Syracuse Post-Standard. "I plan to help in any way I can. I hope you do, too," he wrote. "History should count on us to do the right thing." After the column attracted scores of irate comments ("How about FOLLOWING THE LAW. You people make me sick"), Concepcion felt compelled to escalate his activism.

Polite op-eds were clearly insufficient against ICE, which had already tripled its daily arrests to more than 600 since President Trump's latest inauguration.

Before he started teaching multimedia storytelling at Syracuse's prestigious Newhouse School of Public Communications, Concepcion had worked around the edges of the tech industry for two decades. So he decided to develop a mobile app meant to teach immigrants how to exercise their constitutional rights when confronted by ICE.

Concepcion, who describes himself as having "the worst case of ADD you've ever seen," became hyperfixated on the project. (The black V-neck and jeans he wore to Hernandez's store are his uniform: He keeps 30 identical shirts and 30 identical pairs of pants to avoid being paralyzed by choice.) He leaned heavily on AI tools such as Cursor and ElevenLabs to build the app. Buzzing on heroic amounts of caffeine—"I drink, like, 14 cups of coffee a day," he told me—Concepcion did most of his vibe coding between midnight and dawn while parked outside a Home Depot in his electric F-150 pickup. He chose the spot to feel kinship with the day laborers he hoped to reach, and he listened to endless repeats of songs from *Hamilton* as he worked.

Then, in April, as ICE was ramping up enforcement operations from Maine to California, Concepcion got a panicked

message from a chef at one of his favorite Latin restaurants. The man's adult son, whom I will call Gabriel, had been heading to a construction job in nearby Oswego when Border Patrol agents stopped his car. A Mexican native, Gabriel had handed the agents his immigration paperwork, which showed that his asylum case was pending, but they were unmoved. He was now being held at an overcrowded ICE detention center in Batavia, New York, midway between Buffalo and Rochester. The distraught chef asked Concepcion, whom everyone at the restaurant called "El Profe," for advice on how to free his son.

Concepcion loves playing the Good Samaritan for people who feel mugged by the system, so he threw himself into trying to liberate Gabriel. He found an attorney willing to take the case for \$4,000, then wrote to the judge on Syracuse University letterhead to vouch for Gabriel's character. After a few anxious weeks, Gabriel was released on \$10,000 bail—a rare outcome in 2025, when such releases decreased by 87 percent compared to the year before—and Concepcion volunteered to make the two-hour drive to pick him up.

Their ride home was eerily quiet. As Concepcion studied the exhausted, dejected young man beside him, he began to regret the meekness of the app he was building. What was the point of educating immigrants about their rights if federal agents just ignored them so they could hit arrest quotas? Concepcion realized he should instead create a tool for immigrants that could "stop these people from falling off a cliff, stop these people from disappearing."

Concepcion overhauled his app to give it a more aggressive edge. The new version gave anyone the ability to report ICE activity by dropping pins onto a map. Users who were close to that pin's coordinates would then receive a push alert containing detailed information, including photographs, about the agents' locations and vehicles—information they could use to either organize flash protests or find safe haven. He called this app DEICER.



MARIA HERNANDEZ INSIDE HER SHOP.

When the time came to submit DEICER to Apple's App Store, Concepcion's anxiety spiked. He worried that the government might bully Apple into handing over a list of accounts that had downloaded the app. But he decided to press forward. "ICE is looking for millions," Concepcion stated in a video promoting DEICER's official launch on July 28. "What if millions were looking for ICE?"

With that, DEICER joined a small handful of other crowdsourced mapping tools, like ICEBlock and the Stop ICE text-alert network, that had started to emerge in response to the Trump administration's mass-deportation campaign. These resources were intended to chip away at ICE's technological superiority over its motley throng of opponents. With more than \$77 billion to spend, ICE has amassed an array of Palantir-powered tools that can pinpoint human targets. The resistance, by contrast, has had to rely on the ingenuity of independent operators like Concepcion, a man whose obsessive streak has since sent him colliding with trolls, hackers, right-wing media giants, and the second-richest company in the world.

CONCEPCION GREW UP in the South Bronx during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the area was synonymous with urban blight. His Puerto Rican father was a janitor who often scavenged for copper so he could treat his seven children to loaves of fresh bread. His mother was a Mexican immigrant from Puebla. A rotating cast of her supposed "uncles" and "cousins" crashed in the family's apartment as they looked for off-the-books work. Concepcion remembers being amazed that men who'd been engineers back in Mexico were happy to become dishwashers in the US.

A gifted student, Concepcion escaped the Bronx by attending a state university in Plattsburgh, a world away on the frigid shores of Lake Champlain. He was intent on becoming an English teacher, but his plans changed after he discovered the internet. He spent much of college toying with the text-based web browser Lynx and the VAX operating system. That propelled him, after college, into fielding support calls for IBM, then overseeing software training for a German ecommerce company, and finally a long career writing a set of popular guides to Adobe Photoshop.

In 2018, Concepcion settled in Syracuse with his wife, a grade-school teacher, and their young daughter to take a curriculum development job at the university. He also taught a storytelling class as an adjunct, a gig that earned him a contract as an assistant teaching professor in 2022. It was a dream job for Concepcion, a chance to be a role model for two kinds of students in particular: those who share his Latino roots and those dealing with mental-health challenges. "I'm very clear with my students," he says. "I struggle with ADD, I struggle with depression, I've had crisis situations."

Concepcion also developed a deep affection for Syracuse, a Rust Belt city of 146,000 notorious for its heavy annual snowfall and its high child poverty rate. He marveled at how some of Syracuse's most decrepit neighborhoods were being revitalized by new arrivals from Syria, Burma, South Sudan. (Between 2000 and 2014, the foreign-born population of Syracuse grew by more than 42 percent.) To bring some of that diversity onto campus, he served multiple terms as chair of the Newhouse School's DEI committee. And in 2023, he and his wife became foster parents, taking in a 14-year-old girl who'd been living in a house on Syracuse's

CONCEPCION DID MOST OF HIS VIBE CODING BETWEEN MIDNIGHT AND DAWN, PARKED OUTSIDE A HOME DEPOT IN HIS ELECTRIC F-150 PICKUP.





South Side, where drugs were rampant. One of 13 siblings, the girl had been using one of the house's closets as a bedroom; Concepcion's wife, a former ballerina, first met her while teaching a dance class.

As he was putting the finishing touches on DEICER in the early summer of 2025, Concepcion received some bad news from the university. Three weeks before the semester ended, he says, a dean informed him that a professorship they'd previously discussed was no longer available; he was, however, welcome to apply for a back-office position. This decision came amid the university's scramble to comply with the US Department of Education's insistence that elite institutions rid themselves of all vestiges of DEI.

After DEICER was downloaded more than 3,000 times in the days following its App Store debut, Concepcion received a slew of emailed death threats—so many that he began to shop around for a bulletproof vest. Syracuse's student newspaper, meanwhile, published an op-ed calling DEICER a "revolutionary tool for immigrant communities" and airing Concepcion's fears that he was being squeezed out of the university because of his politics. Shortly thereafter, Concepcion was informed that he was no longer a candidate for the back-office job. (A Syracuse spokesperson told me the university is "unable to comment on personnel matters" but that they "appreciate Rafael's contributions to the Newhouse School and wish him the best in his future endeavors.") Concepcion was now unemployed for the first time in years. I initially connected with him shortly after this setback, and we soon began chatting in a series of lengthy phone calls.

On October 2, about two months after DEICER's launch, the US Department of Justice contacted Apple to demand the removal of all apps that "put ICE agents at risk for doing their jobs." The next day, Concepcion received an email from the corporation explaining that DEICER, which now had roughly 30,000 users, had been expelled from the App Store on the grounds that its "purpose is to provide location information about law enforcement officers that can be used to

HE BEGAN TO SHOP AROUND FOR A BULLETPROOF VEST.

harm such officers individually or as a group." In essence, Apple had declared that ICE agents were a protected class on par with members of a racial or ethnic minority, which meant they couldn't be targeted with what the App Store's guidelines describe as "defamatory, discriminatory, or mean-spirited content." ICEBlock, which US attorney general Pam Bondi had singled out as worthy of criminal investigation, was booted from the App Store at the same time for the same reason.

Apple's capitulation to the Justice Department revealed how much the company's priorities had changed over the past decade. In 2015 and 2016, Apple mounted a fierce legal resistance when the government, then panicked about the rise of ISIS-inspired terrorism, tried to mandate the insertion of security "backdoors" in iPhones. Now the company appeared to prize warm relations with the Trump administration above all else—a necessary position, perhaps, given its desire to avoid ruinous tariffs and other forms of political retribution. (Apple did not respond to a request for comment.)

Concepcion would prove harder to rattle than the tech giant. To appeal the decision, he provided the App Store with a modified version of DEICER that he thought might neutralize its concerns. Pins on the tweaked app no longer contained any specific information about ICE agents; they instead simply advised

people to gather at the flagged locations to "exercise your First Amendment right to constitutional assembly." The fix did nothing to mollify Apple, which rejected the appeal on the exact same grounds as before.

AS HE MULLED

DEICER's next move, Concepcion kept his core product available as a web-only app while ginning up a host of related projects. He tried quickly creating hyperlocal versions of DEICER whenever federal agents surged into a new city; he built a bespoke web app for Chicago after ICE launched Operation Midway Blitz, and then one for Portland, Oregon, after President Trump dispatched hundreds of National Guardsmen to the two cities. "It almost feels like I'm just trying to dress DEICER up in a chicken suit to try to get people to use it," he told me. "But I don't really care as long as they use it."

The chicken suits didn't really work—in large part because they had no real local networks funneling people toward them. That promised to change when Concepcion was hired to develop something similar for Siembra NC, a North Carolina immigrant-rights group he'd started talking to soon after DEICER's release.

Siembra had been studying the emergence of ICE-monitoring tools since the spring, and the group had reser-

vations about their messiness. “Most of them are rumor mills,” says Andrew Willis Garcés, Siembra’s senior strategist. “They give people the sense that they’re doing something, and it’s a way to channel anxiety, but they don’t actually help them get better at identifying the patterns, the tactics the administration’s using. And so they contribute to a generalized anxiety that I think is part of Stephen Miller’s goal. He would love it if there was maybe a thousand of these, and you couldn’t tell what was real.”

Siembra admired the design of DEICER and enlisted Concepcion to make a North Carolina-specific version called OJO Obrero (“Look out, workers”), which would allow for tips to be moderated. The idea was for Siembra volunteers to verify user-submitted reports before allowing pins to be created. This meant the site’s users couldn’t get real-time information

about ICE agents’ movements, thus eliminating one of Concepcion’s main reasons for creating DEICER. But Siembra felt a cautious approach was crucial to developing reliable intelligence about ICE’s enforcement patterns—for example, the times of day its agents are most likely to patrol certain highways and what kinds of vehicles they eye with suspicion.

OJO Obrero was still in beta on November 15 when Concepcion drove his foster daughter to her school’s winter choral recital. As he waited in the auditorium before showtime, Concepcion scrolled Instagram—and froze upon seeing a Reel from Siembra’s account. An army of federal agents had

descended on North Carolina just hours earlier, the first salvo in an operation that the Department of Homeland Security had codenamed Charlotte’s Web. Siembra’s representative emphasized that her organization was prepared for the onslaught. “Siembra NC created a resource called OJO Obrero,” she said, “a website you can go to to track confirmed sightings of ICE agents by location and by time across the state.”

OJO Obrero had abruptly gone live despite the fact that it was, in Concepcion’s estimation, nowhere near ready to handle a massive influx of traffic. During the testing phase, he had been making around 3,000 database requests per day to the platform that provided

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK.





CONCEPCION AT HOME DEPOT, WHERE HE WORKS IN HIS TRUCK AT NIGHT.

OJO Obrero's mapping capabilities. As Charlotte's Web became national news that day, the requests ballooned to an unmanageable 75 million, crashing the site and resulting in an \$8,000 usage bill that Concepcion had to pay himself.

But Concepcion quickly worked out the technical kinks and managed to stabilize OJO Obrero. Siembra assigned 30 of its most tech-savvy volunteers to vet the deluge of tips. In a matter of days, the organization was able to get the word out about certain habits, such as federal agents' affinity for pulling over white work vans. "You could see day-to-day, OK, this is kind of the pattern that they're doing yesterday, so probably today might look similar," says Garcés. "And so it really helped people think about how to stay safe."

But Concepcion took little pleasure in OJO Obrero's success. He was becoming increasingly troubled by his social media feeds, now jammed with videos of wailing people being dragged into blacked-out SUVs. Like millions of others, he found himself sucked into what he terms "the algorithmic rage loop." And he was questioning how work like his could avoid playing into that dismal phenomenon.

AFTER TWO MONTHS

of phone calls with Concepcion, I drove up to Syracuse in December, arriving right as a treacherous snowstorm began to blanket the city. The next morning, Concepcion took me to meet Gabriel and his father at the Latin restaurant where they both now worked. The baby-faced Gabriel emerged from the kitchen to show off his ankle monitor, which he said was almost too scratchy to bear. His cheerful dad, meanwhile, insisted on serving me a gargantuan mound of barbacoa. As he ladled it out of steam trays arranged beneath a sign that read "Welcome to Our Home," Gabriel's father recounted in Spanish how, just the day before, masked men had taken someone from the gas station across the street.

As Concepcion and I ate in the fluorescent-lit dining room, half a dozen men in high-visibility vests came to grab lunch. Concepcion introduced himself and learned that they were undocu-

mented Brazilians who'd been doing road repair jobs around the Northeast. He then showed them how to add a shortcut for the DEICER web app to their phones' home screens. The Brazilians seemed courteous but wary of whether DEICER could do them much good.

Concepcion was accustomed to such skepticism. In the months since he'd started tussling with Apple, he had come to believe that tools like DEICER were failing to make inroads with his target audience. He worried they were instead being used by well-intentioned observers whose aim is to record videos of ICE abuses and disseminate them to communities already predisposed to loathing the Trump administration. Concepcion believes this content is exhausting viewers, to the point that many will retreat from a fight that the algorithms portray as futile. And so immigrants will keep vanishing, regardless of how many cameras capture their pain.

Concepcion's proposed solution is for organizations that have spent years building trust within immigrant communities—like Siembra—to start evangelizing the likes of DEICER. Crowdsourced monitoring tools, he insists, can give immigrants a 20-minute advance warning when ICE is en route. (Concepcion has no qualms about the legality of such alerts, which he compares to the tips about police activity that are offered by Google Maps.)

But plenty of local groups have been bypassing the open internet altogether. After lunch, Concepcion and I drove to visit Maria Hernandez, the store owner whose Facebook post had inspired DEICER's creation. She said she was still delivering groceries to people in hiding and that the local immigrants she knew weren't using any sort of monitoring apps coded by outsiders; instead, they apprised one another of ICE's movements in private WhatsApp groups.

On our way back to Syracuse that evening, Concepcion and I discussed his latest attempt to get DEICER back on the App Store. This time, he had revamped it so that pins had to be imported from a separate platform, one that he planned to offer to nonprofit organizations that aid immigrants. Concepcion fully expected this second appeal to be rejected, which is why he'd started talking to lawyers about filing a lawsuit. But where the creator of ICEBlock had sued numerous Trump administration officials, Concepcion told me he wanted to sue Apple for \$100 million. He couldn't express much of a legal rationale for such a suit—he only spoke vaguely of punishing Apple for betraying its old values. "There should be a cost of selling out your consumers," he said, adding that he intended to donate the money to the National Day Laborer Organizing Network.

Listening to this implausible scheme added to my growing sense that Concepcion was fraying around the edges. Aside from dealing with his routine mental-health issues, he was now under tremendous financial pressure: unemployed, yet on the hook for upwards of



CONCEPCION'S WARDROBE, FULL OF IDENTICAL SHIRTS.

\$3,000 a month in AI subscriptions and hosting services. "Last night I just laid down and cried," he said to me during one vulnerable moment. "I was like, fuck, this has been a tough thing, this whole not knowing what's going to happen, not knowing where the next paycheck's going to come from."

People in Concepcion's orbit know he tends to let his better angels blot out his common sense. Curt Hedges, an executive at a health supplements company who befriended Concepcion years ago, once contributed a large sum to Concepcion's charitable effort to purchase equipment for a group of Laotian photographers. "He doesn't have a moderate switch—it's either all in or all out," he says. Yet Hedges has seen how Concepcion's passions, however noble, can lead to personal problems, including massive credit-card debt. And when he started getting 3 am texts from Concepcion about DEICER, Hedges began

to worry. "I've been hesitant to rescue him, because when you rescue him it just gets him another six months down further into that situation," he told me. "It isn't as healthy as it should be."

WHEN ICE SWARMED into Minneapolis this winter, its agents came equipped with all manner of sophisticated surveillance tools. As first reported by 404 Media, for example, ICE was now deploying an app called ELITE that uses Medicaid and other confidential health data to identify potential detainees. Agents were also increasing their reliance on Webloc, software that can track every cell phone within a multi-block radius.

But the city's spirited resistance was not without its own technological resources. In addition to Signal chats, many locals embraced People Over Papers, a crowdsourced mapping

tool at IceOut.org that has a lot in common with DEICER. The site teemed with scores of eyewitness reports about suspected ICE agents staking out schools, chatting with local cops, and eating in taquerias.

I reached out to Concepcion in mid-January to get his take on the situation in Minneapolis and to ask about his continued back-and-forth with Apple—I knew he was now preparing his third appeal of DEICER’s expulsion from the App Store. But when we connected, he said he had a much more pressing concern on his mind. On the morning of January 9, ICE had arrested Gabriel’s father.

According to Concepcion, Gabriel’s father had been driving with his wife to the restaurant when they were stopped. Concepcion said the agents commended the couple on being cooperative, then gave them an agonizing choice: One of them would have to submit to arrest, while the other could go free. Gabriel’s father volunteered to take the fall and had subsequently been transported to Batavia, the same detention center where his son had spent a few terrible weeks in April.

Concepcion dropped everything to once more provide material assistance to

Gabriel’s family. He arranged a meeting with a lawyer, who noted that bail was highly unlikely given the current environment; he instead recommended filing a habeas petition, a legal maneuver that could take many months to be processed. (Since January 2025, more than 38,000 people in immigration detention have filed habeas petitions.) Concepcion also drove to Batavia to visit Gabriel’s father, who was in poor health due to the facility’s conditions. Sections of the center are so underheated during winter that detainees have nicknamed them Las Hieleras—the Iceboxes.

Finally, on January 29, out of the blue, Concepcion received a WhatsApp message. It was from Gabriel’s father: “Ya estoy en México,” he wrote. Unable to tolerate Batavia any longer, he had volunteered to be deported. (Gabriel is still waiting for his next court date to be set; WIRED has obscured his personal information to safeguard the integrity of his legal process.)

Concepcion was now devoting substantial time and energy to providing direct aid to undocumented immigrants in Syracuse. He found it psychologically soothing to, say, give someone a safe ride home from the restaurant after their

shift. But he was also deep into multiple new coding projects. One he called Vote Defender, a platform meant to be used by polling-place observers during the upcoming midterm elections. Another was a Massachusetts-specific version of DEICER sponsored by an immigrant justice nonprofit there, geared toward a potential ICE surge in Boston.

As he neared the finish line with those projects, however, yet another catastrophe struck. On the morning of February 2, Concepcion awoke to discover that all of his anti-ICE coding projects had been hacked. People who’d registered to use DEICER, which had largely been dormant since November, were sent ominous push alerts. “Your information has been compromised and sent to the FBI, HSI, and ICE,” the text read. “RC is a terrible coder.” (Concepcion claims he didn’t store users’ personal data.) One of the alleged attackers posted on X that they had acted to prevent the doxing of federal agents.

Concepcion was further stung when an X user who goes by @bitchunee soap posted a conspiratorial screed, complete with screenshots from Concepcion’s hacked files, in which he suggested that DEICER was funded by “millions in dark money.” The replies were filled with demands that Concepcion be arrested and prosecuted for racketeering or even treason. The allegations made in the post were soon woven into a Fox News story that characterized Concepcion as part of a “shadow network of anti-ICE scouts.” Fearful of exposure, Siembra NC cut ties with Concepcion, who in turn began to shop around for new home security cameras. Since money was tighter than ever—he’d recently started rationing his ADD medication—he had to sell some of his old photography equipment on Facebook Marketplace to pay for the upgrade.

Though Concepcion managed to get his sites back online, including the beta version of his Massachusetts app, he was clearly shaken by the hack and its aftermath—an unease that only intensified in early March when US Customs and Border Protection revoked his Global Entry status without explanation. He sought

**MONEY WAS TIGHTER
THAN EVER—
HE’D RECENTLY
STARTED RATIONING
HIS A.D.D. MEDICATION .**





CONCEPCION WITH HIS
GOLDENDOODLE, DIXIE.

solace from his mother, who now lives in Florida. Fearing for her son's safety after seeing a news story about the hack, she advised him to step away from the immigration fight and become a waiter or dishwasher instead.

But the act of trying to counter ICE has become so central to Concepcion's sense of self that he seems intent on sticking with his work. "I told her, 'Of course I'm afraid. This is problematic, and it would be so much easier if bills were paid and I didn't have to worry about things,'" he says. "There's just something telling me to try something else, and I can't explain it. If I'm completely honest, I don't want to explain it. I just want to keep going." ■

BRENDAN I. KOERNER is a contributing editor at WIRED and the author, most recently, of *The Skies Belong to Us: Love and Terror in the Golden Age of Hijacking*.

COLOPHON

Prompts that helped get this issue out:

Book a hot yoga session; DoorDash Chipotle burrito bowl; binge Bravo's *Summer House*; start Airtable Academy; play Black Sabbath; ask the store owner to recommend a rosé; schedule six days of recording sessions for an album; say "pspspsps" anywhere in my apartment to initiate a cat response protocol; extra anchovies; order a bottle of Pouilly Fumé at the restaurant because it just started to rain outside; cancel all meetings; everything I say to my puppy (which he ignores); learn the difference between a fee-based and fee-only financial adviser; please watch the kid that's waking up two hours early; never talk about goblins.

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THE STREAMY, SCREAMY DIGITAL LIFE OF HASAN PIKER

The far-left Twitch streamer and self-described “Ayatollah of Woke” is addicted to Twitter and hates, hates, *hates* AI.

PHONE MODEL:

iPhone 16 Pro Max

COMPUTER MODEL:

Intel PC, gifted by Starforge

DAILY AVERAGE SCREEN TIME
ACROSS APPLE DEVICES (NOT
INCLUDING PC):

7h, 8m

6,353

**Discord
notifications**

1,049

**Unread
emails**

“I don’t even see these notifications. After a while, it’s just gone. It is what it is. I just don’t care. I don’t know.”

FAVORITE SOCIAL NETWORK:

YouTube (“maybe”)

LAST THING YOU ASKED AI:

N/A

For more tech lives of the rich and/or famous, go to [WIRED.com/tag/user-behavior](https://www.wired.com/tag/user-behavior).



MUSIC APP:

**Apple
Podcasts**

**“I don’t listen
to any music.
I only listen to
podcasts.”**

FAVORITE NEWS SOURCE:

Democracy Now

FAVORITE TECH PRODUCT:

Apple Watch

“Every morning I would look at my Whoop, and it would just be telling me, ‘You’re going to die soon.’”

LAST VIDEO YOU TOOK:

**“Of myself,
doing an incline
bench press
at 205 pounds”**

CRAZIEST INTERNET RABBIT
HOLE YOU’VE GONE DOWN:

Former haters

“I don’t use AI. I think there’s a real problem with cognitive offloading. There’s a real problem with hallucinations. I think that AI is making humanity dumber in general. Whenever I write a tweet and then the replies to it are like, ‘@Grok explain what he means,’ I’m like, ‘You’re literally not recognizing that you’re getting a robot to try to train you. You are less than a human now.’”



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