Your essential guide to the year ahead from WIRED magazine

THE MUST-KNOW TRENDS IN
Technology / Business
Medicine / Lifestyle
Media / Politics / Science
& Environment

132 PAGES OF IDEAS TO FUTURE-PROOF YOURSELF AND YOUR BUSINESS

LEANDER KAHNEY ON THE FUTURE OF APPLE
IMOGEN HEAP ON TECH AFTER GOOGLE GLASS
SAUL KLEIN ON THREATS TO FACEBOOK

+120 MORE IDEAS THAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD
SOCHI PROTESTS

Visitors to the Winter Olympics in Sochi will see protests against Russia’s anti-gay legislation, which has put the Olympic hosts at odds with progressive athletes and fans. There is unlikely to be a widespread boycott but protests could be on televisions as the US medallists’ black-power salute at the Mexico City games in 1968. There will be little change in Russia’s stance, however, as home-hosts in the country has fused with anti-Western nationalism, Team Hole

THE NEXT MSPR PRESIDENT

US presidential election campaigns begin in earnest in late 2014, following the November mid-term elections. On the Democratic side, most of the action will be behind the scenes, with Hillary Clinton deploying her announcement to keep potential rivals guessing until it’s too late. The Republican race will be free-for-all, with lesser-known players seeking first-mover advantages. Chris Christie and Marco Rubio are names to watch. TH

Human nature: good or evil? The prevailing wisdom among economists, biologists, policy makers and much of the general public is that people are inherently selfish: if we help others, it is because we control our base impulses (usually under threat of punishment for bad behavior). Add to that a world built on competition and free markets, and the prospects for altruism look grim.

In 2014, however, this gloomy portrait of humankind will be overturned. Researchers from across the natural and social sciences have been accumulating evidence that humans are wired to care about each other and that our knee-jerk first responses are often co-operative and altruistic. Think of the hundreds of spectators at the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing whose first instinct was to run toward the explosions rather than away. In the coming year, we will understand that this kind of altruism is not an anomaly.

Obviously, life-and-death co-operation is difficult to study under lab conditions. Instead, scientists use “economic games”, where subjects are given money and choose how much (if any) to spend on benefiting others. Researchers have been finding that intuitive, emotional impulses play a key role in motivating co-operation, whereas careful reasoning tends to favour selfishness. A recent study from our Human Co-operation Laboratory at Yale University found that participants who reached decisions more quickly tended to be more co-operative; forcing our participants to decide rapidly, increased co-operation. Priming them to trust their gut also increased co-operation: participants spent more to help others after recalling a time from their life where intuition led them in the right direction.

Neuroscientific evidence also highlights the importance of automatic, emotional processes in co-operation. Jamil Zaki at Stanford University and Jason Mitchell at Harvard have found that when participants make altruistic sacrifices, brain regions associated with receiving rewards are activated (even though subjects were giving up rewards). Differences in brain activity between selfish and altruistic people point to regions associated with emotions rather than self-control.

In 2014 we will gain insights into why we are predisposed towards helping each other and that will help us design systems that encourage co-operative behaviour. We are beginning to understand that actions that usually get good results become internalised as intuitive rules of thumb – and co-operation often pays off. There are many reasons why co-operating in daily life is a smart idea: co-operation earns you a good reputation, increases the chances that your coworkers, friends and family will help you in the future, builds social capital by attracting new connections and opportunities, and keeps you out of trouble with the law. As a result, nice guys – with nice impulses – often finish first. In 2014 we will be designing our workplaces, communities and political institutions to foster altruism by supporting team players and rewarding co-operation directly. Jillian Jordan is a PhD student in psychology, and David Rand is an assistant professor of psychology, economics, cognitive science and management, both at Yale University.