

CONCOURS EDHEC 2019

ORAUX LANGUES

ANGLAIS

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Make an impact

How France redistributes more from rich to poor than Sweden

When Emmanuel Macron launches his promised “great national debate” on January 15th, he hopes to show a willingness to listen to the popular rage behind the gilets jaunes (yellow jacket) protesters who have been occupying roundabouts and motorway toll booths in anger initially at fuel tax rises, but now with a much longer list of grievances. The French president has asked for ideas on four topics, which he wants to be discussed online and in town halls until mid-March: the environment, democracy, public services and taxes. It was the claim of unfair taxation—and a feeling among protesters that the money raised did them no good—that first mobilised the gilets jaunes. “But what do you do with all that dough?” asked one early gilet jaune in a clip that went viral.

France has a long-standing preference for taxes and spending. Its tax take as well as its level of public spending, which accounts for 57% of GDP, are higher than in any other European Union country. Much goes on subsidising public services, whether riding in high-speed trains or studying at university, that cost users more elsewhere. As Mr Macron pointed out in his new year’s address, France has excellent infrastructure, (mostly) free education and first-rate health care that comes at little direct cost to patients. Such services are often taken for granted. If the French want lower taxes, some of that spending will have to give, too.

The gilets jaunes, however, argue that they are unfairly squeezed by taxes to pay for all this while the rich are let off. Their tax revolt began against a rise in green taxes on diesel and petrol. But the backdrop was Mr Macron’s decision in 2017 to abolish the country’s wealth tax, in line with a manifesto promise. Although the president introduced a (more modest) mansion tax in its place, the tag “president of the rich” has stuck. No longer subject to the wealth tax on top of income tax, the richest 1% have indeed seen the single biggest increase in disposable income under Mr Macron, according to the Institut des Politiques Publiques.

Still, unlike in America, the richest 1% in France collectively earn less before taxes than the poorest 50%. At least until the most recent change, the gap has remained fairly stable since 1995 in France, whereas it has risen sharply in America. And the broader redistribution picture is considerably more balanced. Thanks to high taxes and benefits, France stands out among big European economies as the country that does the most to reduce income inequality, says James Browne, an economist at the OECD. Sweden does end up with a slightly more equal overall income distribution, but the French system reduces the gap by more. A recent study by insee, the national statistics body, shows that the gross income of the top 10% of people is 22 times that of the bottom 10%. Yet that gap is reduced to just six times by taxes and transfers. “Let’s stop pretending that France is a country where solidarity doesn’t exist,” said Mr Macron in his address.

So why do the gilets jaunes feel so squeezed? The answer is not stagnating average wages. Real household income in France grew by 8% from 2007 to 2017, despite the financial crisis, more than in many other European countries, as Jean Pisani-Ferry, an economist at Sciences Po (and a former adviser to Mr Macron), points out. He identifies a breakdown in social mobility, and thus in faith that the system can improve lives for the next generation, as part of the explanation. Another, according to research by the World Inequality Lab, linked to Thomas Piketty, a French economist, is that the bottom 50% are disproportionately touched by non-progressive social-security charges and indirect taxes, such as those on fuel. Include these, and the French redistribution system still works, but rather less well.

Such matters will form part of Mr Macron’s consultation. Town halls have already opened “books of grievances”. The government has ruled out certain demands—including a return of the wealth tax—as well as subjects that fall outside the designated topics. In one early online forum, a common demand has been the abolition of gay marriage. Mr Macron’s promise of a debate, along with €10bn to boost pay packets, may have calmed some of the protesters. But he now needs to persuade people that the consultation is not just a gimmick, while not jeopardising his reform programme.

Do you want ethics with that?

Bartleby

Every day McDonald's serves 69m customers, more than the population of Britain or France. The company has what is estimated to be the most valuable fast-food brand in the world, cherished as a cheap dining option for families. But do consumers perceive McDonald's as a socially or environmentally responsible company? If they do not, it is in spite of the best efforts of Bob Langert. In 1988, he took a temporary assignment managing a furore over polystyrene "clamshells" in which the company's burgers were served, and which were being damned for their contribution to America's litter problem. That turned into a 25-year career (he has since left the firm) dealing with the chain's various negative external effects.

It was a Herculean task, akin to being fashion consultant to Steve Bannon. Apart from litter, he had to deal with animal welfare, environmental destruction, obesity and workers' rights. When he began, the company's mascot was being dubbed "Ronald McToxic" because of the clamshell problem. But he had more success than outsiders might think. His book "The Battle to Do Good: Inside McDonald's Sustainability Journey" is a must-read even for those who are cynical about the business of corporate social responsibility.

At times, the fast-food chain did not help itself. In the 1990s, it sued two Greenpeace activists for producing leaflets about its practices. The ensuing "McLibel" trial gave the claims worldwide publicity and was described as the world's biggest corporate-pr disaster. Mr Langert tried to reduce the damage. The company consulted panels of independent experts and engaged with campaigning groups. On occasion it aimed to keep one step ahead of the activists, McDonald's took action even when there was little sign of public concern. Shaving one inch off the napkins saved 3m lbs of paper annually, for example, but few consumers noticed.

Environmentalists did attack the firm for its impact on the Amazon rainforest, saying trees were being cut down to make room for cattle pasture or the expansion of soy farming for cattle feed. In 1989 the company announced that it "never has and never will buy beef from recently deforested rainforests" and it has also worked to limit the expansion of soy farming in the region. The rise of veganism amid doubts about the health effects of eating meat have given McDonald's new worries. Accomplishing change is not just a matter of the company snapping its fingers. Most McDonald's restaurants are operated by franchisees and its goods are bought from a wide range of suppliers, so three or four layers may separate the McDonald's head office and the cattle-rancher who supplies the firm's beef.

In the late 1990s, after complaints from campaign groups about the living conditions of hens, Mr Langert visited an egg facility to find that conditions were indeed terrible. In August 2000 the firm said it would buy eggs only from suppliers that gave hens 72 square inches of space, compared with an industry average of 48 square inches. Suppliers resisted so strongly that McDonald's had to find new sources for its eggs. But those who complied found that the mortality rates of hens decreased and egg-laying rates increased, offsetting the extra costs.

Mr Langert found it took a long time to get agreement within the company on a particular subject and then to persuade suppliers to comply. But once he reached that stage, he had enormous clout; McDonald's is the largest purchaser of beef and pork in America, as well as the second-largest buyer of chicken. Another victory was persuading a supplier to phase out the use of gestation stalls for sows which make it impossible for the animals to move.

Human working conditions also caused the company trouble. One day Mr Langert got a call from a Catholic bishop who was concerned about the low wages paid to tomato-pickers. Another issue was the use of "trans fats" to cook the restaurant's fries, which were deemed to increase the risk of heart disease; it took six years for the chain to phase out the practice. But the company has also added more salads and healthy options.

Was all the effort worth it? It seems likely that many of the people who care a lot about these issues would never eat a fast-food burger in the first place. But Mr Langert did more than most to reduce environmental waste and animal cruelty. A decent career record for an obviously decent man.

Amazon's retreat represents a turning point

Ross Barkan,

Amazon was ready to impose its will on the largest city in America. The trillion dollar corporation had lined up the support of the mayor of New York City, the governor of New York, and began hiring the fleet of well-compensated lobbyists and strategists necessary to see its vision through. It was a typical American story: a corporation with unfathomable wealth getting exactly what it wanted. Amazon would promise 25,000 jobs, many of them supposedly well-paying, and get its gleaming second headquarters, along with a buffet of tax breaks that added up to \$3bn, generous subsidies it never really needed but sure wanted.

On Thursday, that all changed. After unrelenting pressure from politicians and an energized grassroots movement that drove these politicians to act, Amazon has said no more. The company is walking away from New York. It's taking its ball and going home.

This is not just about New York now. Amazon's retreat may represent a turning point in the way cities do business—or think they can do business in this age of income inequality and precarity. Amazon is one of five corporations that utterly dominate the economy, deciding how we shop, what prices we pay, and what leverage most businesses can or can't have.

Amazon has eviscerated brick-and-mortar retailers, broken countless unionization efforts, offered its facial recognition technology to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and, for anyone who cares about the written word, tried to crush the publishing industry. Amazon's surrender is a warning to all Democrats who want to occupy the progressive flank from here on out: you don't get to support a company like this anymore. Amazon's defeat was a direct product of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's election, which was waged in a neighboring district. Younger, progressive residents joined forces with groups like the Democratic Socialists of America to mobilize against Amazon and pressure more moderate Democrats to quickly close ranks against the corporate titan. They did.

The weather has now changed. You don't get to champion unions out of one side of your mouth and praise a company that loathes them with the other. You don't get to bemoan economic exploitation and welcome a corporation that thrives on it. You don't get to say you support small businesses, fair play, and good government while embracing a company that negotiates in secret, tries to circumvent the democratic process, and undercuts as many competitors as it can.

Amazon is a monopoly, a product of this new and twisted Gilded Age. Like Apple, it flourishes on an exploited, low-wage workforce that is mostly invisible to the average American. Like Google and Facebook, its market share is unrivaled. There is no competing with Amazon. It will swallow you whole before you try.

The national competition for the second Amazon headquarters, or HQ2, in 2017 represented a certain economic nadir for the country. Dozens of municipalities battled against one another in a race to the bottom, offering absurd tax breaks in the hopes that Amazon would deem them worthy. An HQ, unlike a warehouse, needs a more educated workforce, so New York was always a logical destination.

American cities have long, regrettable histories of subsidizing highly profitable corporations and entities that don't need such breaks. Precious dollars for roads, schools, and housing are denied in taxes that are never paid. In turn, municipalities are just supposed to be grateful for this welfare, praying daily the corporation doesn't deign to pack its bags and go elsewhere. Too many politicians have been complicit in this game, Democrats especially. While Amazon will continue to poll "well"—Americans prize cheap and convenient consumption—politicians, especially those running for president, should not use this as an excuse to defend Amazon or look the other way. The "pro-business" Democrat is the anti-worker Democrat—at least in the era we live in now.

The only businesses that really matter are these mega-corporations, and most of them find democracy inconvenient. If they can obliterate the remnants of organized labor in this country, they will. Since Donald Trump, beyond slinging Amazon founder Jeff Bezos for running the Washington Post, has no serious interest in breaking up corporate monopolies, it will fall to the next Democratic president to do so. All of the contenders, like Elizabeth Warren, must articulate clear anti-trust platforms and speak forcefully on behalf of the American worker.

Amazon must become a defining issue of this campaign, because it's not going anywhere. Bezos will hunt for his tax breaks elsewhere. He will continue to accumulate wealth. Candidates must shun his business and say why. Then, and only then, will we exit this neo-Gilded Age for something better.

What if social media firms paid us?

Vanessa Baird

Data, we are told, is the new gold, the new oil. The most valuable commodity of all. How much is it worth? Hard to say, but the profits of companies that have been most successful at mining it provide a clue. In 2017 Facebook made \$40 billion revenue, \$39.9 billion of which came from targeted advertising using the personal data it had amassed from users. Google, the other giant in the data-based digital advertising world, has a different method of accumulation, serving up ads based on keyword searches. But its profits from such activities are similarly eye-watering.

Compared with, say, big retailers like Walmart the digital giants employ few people. This is because we – the users of their ‘free services’ – are doing most of their work for them for free. We are data serfs, enthralled to surveillance capitalism by companies that have sneakily and ingeniously extracted vast amounts of raw material from us and are exploiting it for all it’s worth.

Jaron Lanier, techie, musician and visionary author of several books including *Who Owns the Future?* is calling upon the tech giants to do the right thing and ‘pay people for information gleaned from them’. To social media users he says: ‘You ought to be owed money for the use of that valuable data. It would not exist without you.’ It sounds fine in principle, but the detail on how it would work is rather unclear. Would it take the form of micro-payments according to your data’s perceived ‘value’? Or a more general scheme like that being discussed in relation to compensating news media for all that quality content they currently provide for free to social platforms to drive traffic and advertising?

As social media users become increasingly disenchanted with being spied upon and exploited by the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Google, more radical and ethical initiatives are gaining traction.

Minds.com, for example, is a social media network that rewards people for their online engagement while not spying on them or selling their data to third parties. Launched in 2015, it’s like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in that there is a feed which gets populated with posts. Users can comment, ‘upvote’ and form groups. But unlike Facebook it is open-source, decentralized and operates an ‘autonomous peer-to-peer payment system’. Users are rewarded for their online activity with tokens and can interact with the content of others – sharing, upvoting, commenting – to earn more tokens that are recorded in a bitcoin-like public ledger. Transactions are transparent and content creators are rewarded for their efforts.

Admittedly, it’s all rather idealistic at the moment; payments are not in real money, but in tokens which can be used to push posts, but it might also be turned into a cryptocurrency that could one day be worth real-world money. Its purpose, says Minds’ CEO Bill Ottman, ‘is to be the opposite of established social media that abuses its users, spies on them, has no transparency, no privacy, no rewards and restricts reach’. It seems to be working. In August Minds reached 1.25 million members, many escaping from Facebook and Twitter.

It’s part of a wider resistance movement. As Jaron Lanier says: ‘It’s not just that you’re making people rich even if you are not getting rich yourself, but that you are accepting an assault on your own free will, bit by bit. In order to make tech into something that empowers people, people will need to be willing to act as if we can handle being powerful... We must demand an information economy in which the rising tide raises all boats, because the alternative is unbounded concentration of power... A surveillance economy that is neither sustainable nor democratic.’

Payments and rewards alone won’t solve all the evils that plague our digital world – fake news, social media addiction, surveillance, cyberwarfare, subversion of democracy. But with other measures, such as tougher data privacy regulations and support for ethical platforms, it might get us on the road to a fairer, more transparent, democratic and people-powered digital economy.

Maybe the monopolistic, surveillance-based power of the tech titans is weaker than we think.

Can you teach entrepreneurship? Five MBA graduates think it helped

Bartleby

THE stereotype of a typical MBA graduate is that of a confident, well-dressed person who is destined for a career in management consultancy, finance or climbing the greasy pole at an S&P 500 company. The stereotype of an entrepreneur is a college drop-out. Yet business schools, eager to prove that they are not just factories for manicured professionals, are increasingly keen to teach entrepreneurial skills to their students.

The temptation is to think that the ability and drive needed to start a business cannot be taught. After all, who can engender the combination of opportunism and paranoia usually needed to start a business? But some of those who have taken the path argue that an MBA course has several advantages. Shoshana Stewart, the chief executive of Turquoise Mountain, a crafts business that started in Afghanistan, who studied at the London Business School (LBS), says an MBA gives you three things; a network of people, confidence and exposure, and an array of skills.

The network effect can operate in several ways. Oliver Samwer, who along with his brothers founded the investment group Rocket Internet in 2007, thinks the guest speakers at the WHU-Otto Beisheim School of Management in Germany, provided him with role models. “My view is that it is all about the dream,” he says. Every time a leader came to the school, it inspired him to dream of a bigger, more global business. He has undoubtedly achieved lift-off: Rocket Internet was valued at \$8bn when it floated in 2014 and the Samwer brothers have invested in several other successful technology startups.

Sometimes the contacts are more immediate. Vanessa Coleman started a business called FINsix—which built an efficient and compact power converter—at MIT’s Sloan business school with three other graduate students. They combined their studies with their project, getting initial funding in the second year of the course. And some of the advisers that helped the company had connections to MIT. A business school can also organise events where budding entrepreneurs meet potential investors and, in some cases, those backers will be former students.

Self-belief is another quality that students can gain from the classroom. Bilikiss Adebisi-Abiola came from Nigeria to MIT and took a course run by Bill Aulet, a well-known author, on entrepreneurship; she says that helped her gain confidence in pitching to a room full of investors. When she went back to Africa she set up a business which collects waste from Nigerian households. The rubbish is sold to recycling plants and the homeowners get points, which can be turned into cash.

Ms Stewart had worked for Turquoise Mountain before taking her MBA at LBS. While doing the course, she realised that the business, which helps artisans with marketing, sales and logistics, could expand into more countries; when she returned, she expanded its operations to Myanmar, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

The final element is practical skills. Jon Smith set up Pobble, a for-profit education service, with his brother and others, just before taking an MBA at LBS. Previously, he had been a civil engineer and he says that elements of the course were useful. “Management accounting allowed me to read a profit-and-loss account” he says, while another course taught him how to negotiate and bargain. Mr Smith found that developing the business while simultaneously studying for the course was also helpful. “We saw lots of case studies about what can go right and wrong,” he says, adding that “doing an MBA gives you the time to think through what you care about.”

Clearly you do not need an MBA to start a successful business. And plenty of people take MBAs and then continue on to mundane corporate jobs. It is one thing to start a business where the technical skills learned in an MBA may go far. It is another thing to build that company into a structure that can last for decades. Ms Coleman, who has now left the business she founded, says that the guidance provided by the school was less helpful in the later stages.

But business schools will certainly need to work harder to prove their relevance; the cost of the qualification has been rising and the number of applicants has been falling. Around 11% fewer people took the GMAT test (which acts as a de facto entrance exam) in 2016 than in 2012. If business schools can improve the skills of those who try to build companies, that has to be good news. We have enough management consultants already.

Why isn't Felicity Huffman's career toast?

John Doyle

On Tuesday, Netflix announced it has postponed the release of the movie *Otherhood*, a romantic comedy scheduled on the streaming service for April 26. The movie features Felicity Huffman, Patricia Arquette and Angela Bassett. Take note that the movie is “postponed.” It's not cancelled. And that Netflix made the announcement after Huffman agreed to plead guilty to fraud and expressed remorse for her part in the U.S. college admissions scam. Huffman is one of 13 people who have admitted paying bribes to get their children into desirable colleges.

Also take note that Netflix has said nothing about its miniseries *When They See Us*, a drama about the Central Park Five. In it, Huffman plays Linda Fairstein, the head of the sex-crimes unit of the Manhattan District Attorney's Office who oversaw the prosecution of the five young men charged with beating and raping the victim known as “The Central Park Jogger” in 1989. All five were later exonerated. *When They See Us* is still scheduled to stream on May 31 and you can find the Netflix trailer online.

The matter of Huffman and her career raises uncomfortable questions about star power, privilege, entitlement and fan worship. Basically, even in this age of outrage and the mob mentality of online attacks, some showbiz careers aren't ruined by scandal. It just depends on the scandal and the image the showbiz figure has in the public consciousness. Huffman is considered a serious actress, a feminist and a serious person. That's what matters. Maybe there is a crisis of morality when it comes to punishing showbiz stars and maybe the public never quite gets beyond its affection for some of them. Initially, when U.S. federal prosecutors revealed they'd indicted 50 wealthy people involved in paying money for cheating on standardized tests or bribing college officials to accept students as college athletes, there was public outrage and media denunciation of the indicted. The two showbiz figures, Huffman and Lori Loughlin, were the focus of hatred and scorn. Loughlin's contract with Crown Media, which produces the Hallmark Channel series *When Calls the Heart* in which she stars, was cancelled immediately.

The difference between Huffman and Loughlin is that Lori Loughlin has never been considered a serious actor or a serious person. Loughlin didn't appear on Broadway in David Mamet's play *Speed-the-Plow*. Huffman did that. There's a lip-smacking quality to the media coverage of Loughlin. Not so with Huffman. And, after all, Loughlin and her husband reportedly spent \$500,000 to get their daughters to college, Huffman only spent \$15,000. It's like the amount gives her artistic credibility.

Now, it's true that money crimes are treated differently than physical crimes. And a rich person's money crime is treated very differently from a poor person's money crime. Punishment is harsher for the latter, even if a poor person's money crime is committed out of need – the need to eat, survive and feed a family – while a rich person's money crime is usually done out of greed. Everybody seems okay with this reality. It's also true that there are various levels of reaction to different kinds of showbiz crimes. Netflix severed ties with Kevin Spacey when the actor was accused of sexual misconduct by numerous men. That cost Netflix millions but it had to be done. Yet, nobody seems to be severing ties with Felicity Huffman. What's interesting about the entire college-admissions scandal is that privilege is foundational in the American culture. It's just that nobody ever wants to admit it. And Hollywood is all about wealth and privilege, but the perception of Hollywood's elitist entitlement is warped by stardom and the public's admiration and affection for certain figures. While there can be public outrage about the very wealthy paying little tax and buying college admissions for their children, the same level of outrage will never be aimed at movie and TV stars.

It's fair to say that the sexual misconduct revealed by the #MeToo movement was allowed to flourish because so few people wanted to believe the sordid side of show business even existed. It seems bizarre now that an industry run mostly by men, and in general fuelled by male desire, was not seen in all its awfulness for so long. These days, sexual misconduct and racism are the top two sins in showbiz. Matters of money and using wealth to cheat are far down the list. You have to wonder why. There is something disproportionate about the moral tone that is taken in reaction to and in coverage of the college-admissions scandal. Felicity Huffman's career should be toast, but it isn't. Far from it.

It's just postponed, not cancelled.

Degrees for the rich, apprenticeships for the poor – that’s not a world of parity

Laura McInerney

The education secretary wants to end snobbery over vocational qualifications. Tell that to the wealthy

Somewhere, right now, a 17-year-old is afraid to tell her family she wants to go to university. At £9,000-plus a year it feels like a luxury, a thing for other people. Even though she achieved the highest results in her school, and has spent her whole life wanting to be an engineer, she knows her parents are terrified of university debt and that attending the best institutions, in far-flung cities, would mean moving away.

Now imagine this 17-year-old was listening earlier this year as the education secretary – the guardian of aspiration – announced that poorer young people would be better off studying near to home through a “commuter degree” in order to save pennies. That would be the education secretary, Damian Hinds, by the way, who studied at Oxford University, 153 miles away from his hometown near Manchester.

Last week, Hinds made another speech, this time saying we need to get over our snobbery towards vocational education. To this end, the government is changing school performance data so that it rolls together the measure for the numbers of children who go on to do a degree, with the measure for those who do an apprenticeship. “The message here is not don’t do a degree – the message is simply: you don’t have to do a degree.”

Oh well, thinks the 17-year-old, studying engineering at Durham was a nice thought but it will be cheaper to do an apprenticeship with the local factory. She’s right, too. The route will indeed be cheaper, it may lead to a good job, and there’s no reason to feel any less esteem for taking the factory path.

And yet. Across town there’s another 17-year-old, with wealthy parents, studying in a private school that pumps children into top universities, with a sense that his future shouldn’t depend on a single employer because one day he intends to be the employer. Let’s be serious: this kid won’t be taking the apprenticeship route – and Hinds knows it.

Conveniently, however, both choices will now look the same in school performance statistics, meaning Hinds can take credit for “more young people than ever before going into higher education”, even if the number of university places drops in the near future (a real possibility). The new measure will mask the inequalities among those taking up the different routes.

A world in which rich kids do degrees and poor kids do apprenticeships is not a world of parity. It makes for lower debt, better employment rates, reduces the need for immigrants, and gives the education secretary a warm and fuzzy feeling. But equality, it ain’t.

It also misses out some cold, hard facts about the labour market. Women who attended university in the 2000s earned over 50% more by the age of 29 than those who did not, according to a new study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Some of that was owing to pre-university characteristics, such as family wealth or prior attainment. Cancel all that out and female graduates still earned 28% more than non-graduates. If you’re a woman, and your teacher pushes you towards a degree, it probably isn’t snobbery. It’s economics.

For men, the picture is more complicated. Around a third who attend university earn less than their counterparts who don’t, though much is related to the subject. The truth is, one can earn a lot more by becoming a plumber than by studying English literature. But if a bookish pupil is desperate to study classical texts, is a teacher supposed to tell him no because statistics show that working-class boys like him are better off learning a trade? If it is “snobbery” to tell a pupil to aim for their dreams, sign me up.

Apprenticeships can be the right route for young people. So can going to university. But let’s not pretend everyone’s children will be equally pushed down these routes or that the wealthy will be the ones to give up their aspirations.

Town smothered by 17,000 tonnes of rubbish

Yvette Tan

Malaysia has become one of the world's biggest plastic importers, taking in rubbish the rest of the world doesn't want. But one small town is paying the price for this - and it is now smothered in 17,000 tonnes of waste. It began last summer. Every night, after the clock struck midnight, Daniel Tay knew exactly what was coming. He would shut his doors, seal his windows and wait for the inevitable. Soon his room would be filled with an acrid smell, like rubber being burned. Coughing, his lungs would tighten. Over the next few months, the strange smell would return every night, like clockwork. Illegal recycling factories were secretly burning plastic.

At that point he had no idea that in 2017 China had decided to ban the import of foreign plastic waste. The bulk of the plastic waste - most of it from the UK, the US and Japan - just went somewhere else and that was to Malaysia. It could have been any town but Jenjarom's proximity to Port Klang - Malaysia's largest port and the entry point for most of the country's plastic imports - made it the ideal location.

From January to July 2018 alone, some 754,000 tonnes of plastic waste was imported into Malaysia. What the council describes as illegal plastic recycling factories began cropping up, hoping to make a quick profit from the burgeoning plastic recycling industry, worth over RM3bn (\$734m, £561m). There were soon 33 illegal factories in the district Jenjarom is located in. Some sprang up near dense palm oil plantations, others were closer to town. But it would be months before residents learned of their existence - and then only after the symptoms started appearing.

"I started to feel unwell and I would keep coughing. I was really angry when I found out it was because of the factories." Plastic waste is typically recycled into pellets, which can then be used to manufacture other types of plastic. Not all plastic can be recycled, so legal recycling plants should send unrecyclable plastics to waste centres - something which costs money. But many illegal recycling plants instead choose to dispose of it in free but unsanitary ways, either burying it or more commonly - burning.

Ngoo Kwi Hong says the fumes from the burning sparked a cough so violent she even coughed up a blood clot. "I couldn't sleep at night because it was so smelly. I became like a zombie, I was so tired," said Ms Ngoo. Those who lived nearest to the factories were affected the most. Belle Tan, who found out there was an illegal factory just 1km from her house, spoke of the impact on her 11-year-old son. "He got a really bad rash around his stomach, neck, legs and arms. His skin would keep peeling. I was angry and scared for his health but what could I do?"

It's unclear if these ailments can be directly linked to air pollution, but one expert said inhaling burnt plastic fumes was likely to have had an impact on their respiratory health. "The main thing about [these plastic fumes] is that they are carcinogenic. Carcinogens [are involved] in causing cancer," Tong Yen Wah, a professor of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering said. "It also depends a lot on the types of plastics being burnt and the exposure to it. If you have short term exposure at a high level you might have difficulty breathing... [or it might] trigger some effects in your lungs. But if it's long term exposure... that's where the carcinogenic effects come in."

But many in the town remain completely unaware or indifferent to the potential effects of the burning. "They'll just say it's smelly and get on with their lives, they don't understand that it is something that could be slowly poisoning them." said Mr Tay. The BBC spoke to several residents, many of whom said they had smelt the fumes, but hadn't given it much thought. "You keep smelling it and your body gets used to it," joked one resident. "Maybe it could even be good for you." The Malaysian government has now shut down 33 factories it says were illegal in Jenjarom, and for the most part, the fumes are gone. But the 17,000 tonnes of rubbish left by these factories is still there - and not insignificant for a town of 30,000. Most of this waste has been repossessed by the authorities, but a staggering 4,000 tonnes of waste plastic still sits on a single site - open to anyone who might walk by.

A mountain of rubbish greets you the minute you arrive at what was once an unused piece of land, but is now a makeshift landfill. A quick walk around the site reveals that a staggering amount of plastic waste comes from foreign countries, with a huge portion of it from Japan and the UK - brands like Asda, Co-op and Fairy can be seen strewn around. "We are trying to identify who is the owner of the land, we are still investigating this," Minister of Housing and Local Government Zuraida Kamaruddin said. The state that Jenjarom sits in - Selangor - has tried to auction it off but to no avail.

How governments should deal with the rise of the gig economy

Leaders

THE Archbishop of Canterbury sees it as “the reincarnation of an ancient evil”. Elizabeth Warren, a senator from Massachusetts, says that, for many workers, it is the “next step in a losing effort to build some economic security in a world where all the benefits are floating to the top 10%”. Luigi Di Maio, Italy’s deputy prime minister, is going after it as part of his “war on precarious work”. For many, the “gig economy”, in which short-term jobs are assigned via online platforms, is a potent symbol of how modern capitalism has failed. Critics rail that it allows firms to rid themselves of well-paid employees, replacing them with cheap freelancers. Workers who once relied on an employer to pay into their pension, or to cover their health care when they fell ill, must instead save for the future themselves. On this reading, the gig economy turbocharges insecurity and the erosion of workers’ hard-won rights. There is a grain of truth to this. But it misses the bigger picture.

For one thing, despite city streets clogged with Uber drivers and Deliveroo cyclists, gigging is not about to take over the world. Across the OECD club of mostly rich countries, the share of workers in full-time positions, which dropped after the financial crisis of 2008-09, has been rising. In America the average job tenure has barely changed in the past 30 years. Depending on whom you ask, 1-5% of Americans gig—but many of those have salaried jobs as well.

However, the fact that it is smaller than you might think is not the gig economy’s strongest defence. That rests on how gigging brings important benefits to the economy. The advantages for consumers are clear. With a swipe or a click, almost anyone can get Rover walked in the park or a vital document copy-edited within hours. Crucially, benefits also accrue to workers. The algorithms that underpin gig-economy platforms improve the “matching” between giggers and jobs, leading to less dead time. The evidence that gig workers face a pay penalty compared with conventional employees is patchy; many say they value the extra autonomy they enjoy compared with salaried workers. Gig platforms are a useful way of topping up income or smoothing out earnings if other sources of work dry up. They can also break open closed industries. Research shows that the arrival of Uber in American cities leads on average to a 50% surge in the number of self-employed taxi-drivers.

But the gig economy is not perfect. Platforms argue they are no more than neutral marketplaces in which workers and customers meet. By this logic, workers ought to count as self-employed. But the standards to which some platforms hold workers tell a different story. Food-delivery riders are often told to wear a uniform; drivers for ride-hailing apps need to maintain a good rating or can be kicked off the platform. Platforms have a legitimate interest in maintaining their quality of service. But it cannot be right that some firms specify how workers must submit to the duties of acting like employees even as they reject the responsibilities of acting like employers.

One proposal, being floated in America, is to create a third category of worker, sitting somewhere between self-employed and employed. Yet the boundaries between classifications will always be fuzzy. Britain already has such a third category. It is also the place where arguments about the legal status of gig workers are most vigorous. Better to rely on two other mechanisms. The first is the market. Unemployment is low and pay is starting to rise—Amazon this week announced big bumps in the minimum wages it pays American and British workers. The platforms will need to respond. Some gig-economy firms are voluntarily offering their workers health insurance. Competition between gig firms also helps. Italian food-delivery riders boast of how they play platforms off against each other in their efforts to get better pay and benefits. Innovations such as Australia’s GigSuper, a fund which makes it easier for gig workers to save for a pension, are also welcome.

The other mechanism is to help workers claim their existing rights. One option is to make it simpler for disgruntled gig workers to use the judicial system. Precedent-setting rulings on the status of gig workers may be piling up, but the barriers to going to court in the first place are often too high. Another option is to help giggers organise, in order to mitigate the low bargaining power the self-employed often face compared with employees. A third option is to boost the credibility of the system for detecting and prosecuting deliberate infractions of employment law. America has just one labour inspector for every 100,000 employed people, the world’s joint-lowest ratio. Simply insisting that firms follow the rules would give workers greater protection while ensuring that the gig economy lives up to its enormous promise.

Even Google Can No Longer Hide Its Gender Pay Gap

Bryce Covert

On Monday, Google announced something unusual: After its annual pay equity analysis, it gave most of the raises to adjust for unequal practices to men.

The company says that it was about to make changes this year that would have compensated many men less than women in a certain job category, so it headed off that inequity. But the analysis appears to leave out many of the factors that women at the company say have led them to be paid less. The company's annual reviews only compare people in the same job categories, yet women say the problem is that they are hired into lower-tier and lower-pay positions while men start in higher-level jobs with higher pay brackets.

It's hard to know for sure what's going on with Google's wage gap, because the company won't release all of its data publicly. In prior years it claimed that it had no gap in pay between men and women, while arguing that it shouldn't have to hand over detailed data to the Department of Labor, which analyzes pay practices at government contractors. Yet in 2016 the Labor Department found that Google had "systemic" disparities, which an official called "quite extreme."

A new rule could help make sense of what's going on. On Monday, a federal judge cleared the way for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to start requiring companies with 100 or more employees to collect and report their pay scales broken down by gender and race. President Barack Obama proposed the rule in 2016, but when Donald Trump came into the White House, he halted its implementation, saying it imposed too large a burden on businesses and wasn't likely to offer meaningful enough insights into pay discrimination.

The judge ruled that the Trump administration had failed to show that it would have created an actual burden on companies, and she ordered the government to move forward with its implementation. The rule could not only clarify the internal pay practices of companies like Google, but also make some headway in closing the gender wage gap, which remains stubbornly wide. To comply with the rule, companies will have to analyze their pay data in a uniform way and report differences that emerge based on gender and race. The public will get to see the data only in aggregate. The rule will also be useful to people who sue over discrimination. Women suing Google, for instance, could find themselves armed with more than just the internal analyses of pay data provided by the company.

There's good reason to think this rule could reduce the pay imbalance in the United States, which hasn't made much progress over the last decade, by shedding light on companies' pay inequities. Recent research on pay transparency in Denmark found that it reduced the gender wage gap by slowing men's salary growth. A study looking at a British survey found that making pay practices transparent raised all employees' wages. And gender wage gaps are far smaller in both unionized workplaces and the public sector, where pay scales are usually available to anyone. In other words, sunlight's disinfecting qualities are quite powerful for combating unequal pay.

Of course, once they disclose pay disparities, companies could choose not to do anything about them. But that would risk the intervention of the E.E.O.C., which is tasked with ensuring companies pay men and women equally. Other countries have gone much further on public disclosure of pay equity gaps. In 2018, Britain began requiring companies with more than 250 employees to report their mean and median gender pay gaps. Australia and Germany recently passed similar mandates. Iceland makes companies undergo yearly audits to prove that they pay men and women equally and to fix any gaps larger than 5 percent. France has also started requiring companies to report how much they pay women compared with men and, if the gaps aren't fixed within three years, will fine them up to 1 percent of their payroll.

We can already see the fruits of these kinds of efforts at transparency. Google, for example, has been forced to cough up the fact that in 2017 its female British employees on average earned 17 percent less per hour than the male ones. It has been illegal for an employer to pay women less than men for the same work in this country for over half a century. And yet women are still fighting unequal pay in the tech sector and beyond. American women who work full time year-round make 20 percent less than men. But before they can do something about it, they have to know what the men around them earn and whether they're unfairly getting less. Anything that brings this information to light will help in the fight for equal treatment.

Why I protested a British Museum exhibition of my own people's history

Yasmin Younis

One day, on my daily commute to university in London, I noticed a big poster with a blown-up ancient image of a majestic Assyrian warrior riding a horse, and the phrase in big white and light green text, 'I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria.' Immediately, I thought to myself, 'No way?! I have to check this exhibit out!' – not solely because I love to learn, but because I'm Iraqi.

From as early as I could remember, my history-loving Iraqi father would always boast about our rich and incredible past, as descendants of the land between two rivers; the home of some of the world's most powerful empires. But right underneath this exhibition's title was the seemingly harmless green, white, and yellow flower logo that the world knows all too well: BP. In that exact moment, I took to social media and posted a picture of the poster with the caption 'F*** BP.' I mean, what else do you expect when an Iraqi sees a poster promoting a special exhibition on their cultural history, only to find out that the exhibition's sponsor is one of the companies complicit in the destruction of their homeland?

Thus began several months of internal moral conflict for me, of wanting to visit the exhibition and enjoy the right to learn about my history and culture but feeling unable to do so, because purchasing a ticket felt like surrendering my dignity as an Iraqi and becoming complicit in BP's campaign to 'artwash' its neocolonial business practices. I wanted to make a statement, I needed to make a statement, because this was so wrong. I therefore decided to join with BP or not BP?, an activist theatre group who had targeted BP sponsorship for many years and were now planning a mass 'takeover' of the museum to highlight exactly these problems.

So last Saturday morning, ahead of the group's protest performance in the museum, I arrived at a top-secret rehearsal in Central London and, standing in a circle amongst 30 or so artists and activists, we introduced ourselves and how we felt. Looking around the room, I couldn't help but smile. 'My name is Yasmin Younis, and I feel grateful,' I said. To see that even 30 people cared about how problematic and damaging both the exhibition and its sponsorship were made me feel humble. For the majority of my life it seemed like the world had turned against my people, and didn't care that Iraqis were slaughtered, demonized, and dehumanized so long as it meant that gas prices were low and oil 'flowed' freely in the West. But on that day in the rehearsal room and later at the museum, where hundreds of allies showed up dressed in black and chanting proudly in solidarity, it felt as though times are changing and people around the world care about me, my culture, my people, and my homeland.

More than 300 people poured into the museum to join the performance. Together, we circled the central rotunda of the museum's Great Court with 200 metres of fabric – equivalent to twice the height of the tower of Big Ben – containing words and symbols that spelled out the links between BP, climate change, colonialism, pollution, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. We sang, we chanted, then we gathered in a huge crowd outside the doorway to the BP-sponsored exhibition itself.

Standing in front of the exhibition alongside two other incredible Iraqi speakers as we shared our painful stories, and gave a voice to Iraqis both in Iraq and in the diaspora, was like no other feeling. Seeing the crowd of activists and museum goers attentively listening and validating our pain, our frustration, our struggles, and our demands seemed to sum up everything that this campaign represented.

The words I shared with the crowd still represent my feelings now:

'The most formidable years of my life were filled with self-hatred and self-doubt as the world turned against my people and "Iraq" became synonymous with "war" and "violence." Whenever I tried to learn about my history or my culture outside of intimate familial settings, my searches were limited to violence, war, and casualty. This is a sad reality for all Iraqis, as our culture is rich and beautiful and should be celebrated with dignity and respect. I should be able to learn about my culture without moral conflict. Iraqis in Iraq should be able to learn and celebrate their culture and history, but they can't as these artifacts were stolen from them... To BP and the British Museum, I say how DARE you use my culture and my history as an attempt to hide your colonialist skeletons. Not my culture, not my country. No war, no warming!'

Is Google an evil genius?

Schumpeter

As a child, Shoshana Zuboff accompanied her grandfather as he walked through his factory, greeting workers. He was an inventor and had made his fortune creating a mechanism to release drinks from vending machines. It was a blissful time, both for her and for American business, she recalls. In the 1950s and 60s, “business had integrity. Those companies barely exist anymore.” That sense of loss clearly lies behind Ms Zuboff’s latest book, “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism”. For the work of a professor emerita at Harvard Business School, it is written with unusual outrage. Its arch-villain is Google, a company as far removed from a blue-collar production line as can be imagined. It sweeps beyond business to society at large, where it warns of an “overthrow of the people’s sovereignty” by the surveillance capitalists.

To be sure, this is a good time to draw attention to the dark forces at work on-screen. Surveillance capitalism, a phrase Ms Zuboff coined in 2014, is a good way of explaining the Faustian bargain at the heart of the digital economy: the services that users enjoy free of charge are costing them more than they think. It describes the compulsion Silicon Valley’s data-gatherers have to mine ever larger portions of people’s daily existence—how they shop, exercise or socialise—to turn into products that predict and shape their behaviour.

She argues that users are sleepwalking into this new world of “smart” devices and smart cities, created more for the benefit of those who Hoover up their data than for them. In order to get the best use out of their robo-vacuum cleaner, or “sleep-tracking” mattresses, or internet-enabled rectal thermometers, they consent to surrendering their most intimate details, not realising these are put up for sale in “behavioural futures markets”. Beyond the home, little do they know how their phone doubles as a tracking device, enabling firms to geotag them for advertisements. More Americans used apps that required location data in 2015 than those who listened to music or watched videos on their phones, she notes. Because all this is unprecedented, it is ill-defined in law and regulation. In this drama Google makes for a compelling evil genius. In 1998 its founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, wrote a landmark paper explicitly warning that advertising-led search engines would be biased against the true needs of consumers. But their idealism was coshed by the dotcom crash of 2000-01, which forced them to turn a profit. Ms Zuboff picks apart Google’s patent applications to find evidence of its switch to surveillance as the means for its power grab. It was transformed from a “youthful Dr Jekyll into a ruthless, muscular Mr Hyde, determined to hunt his prey anywhere, any time”, she writes.

Several factors need to be taken into account, however, before reaching such a damning verdict on Google, Facebook or any of the tech companies in her sights. First, she barely mentions the benefits of Google’s products, such as search, maps and gmail. No company has taken the age-old tools of discovery and communication—quests, voyages and messages—and made them more widely available. It may be true, as Tim Cook has said, that “if the service is ‘free’, you are not the customer but the product”. But arguably, only religions do a better job of providing something for nothing. In a sign that people value “free” stuff despite the surveillance costs, a National Bureau of Economic Research paper has calculated that users of search engines would need to be paid over \$1,000 a month to give up access to the service.

Second, if people become fed up with Google’s tactics, they can always switch. DuckDuckGo, a smaller search engine, assures users that it does not track them. Amid all the potentially creepy internet-of-things devices at the recent Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Apple made privacy a marketing pitch with its ad: “What happens on your iPhone, stays on your iPhone.” Ad blockers and subscription services, such as Netflix, are a reminder that advertising’s stranglehold is not invincible. There is eventually a political reaction, too. Witness the congressional grillings of Facebook when the Cambridge Analytica scandal surfaced. The political furore is one reason why its share price has slumped.

But in a book that calls surveillance capitalism “a threat to human nature in the 21st century”, perhaps the biggest shortcoming is taking the genius of Silicon Valley—evil or not—too seriously. One of Ms Zuboff’s sharpest criticisms is of “inevitablism”: the belief, from Karl Marx to the tech giants, that Utopia can be predicted with certainty—in tech’s case, that “everything will be connected”. Others, too, find this unconvincing. In his book “Life After Google”, George Gilder notes that, since Marx, intellectuals have often erred in thinking that their own eras were the final stage of human history, ie, that they had reached the peak of human achievement. The tech titans do too, he says, not least because this serves to endorse the significance of “their own companies, of their own special philosophies and chimeras—of themselves really”. Ms Zuboff, falls into a trap. Shining a light on the way data can mess with people’s heads is fine. But defining surveillance capitalism as a Big Brother autocracy that threatens human freedom? However dystopian, that has the whiff of inevitablism all over it.

Does the First Amendment protect Julian Assange?

David Ignatius

Is Julian Assange a journalist? The Justice Department sidestepped that question in its indictment of Assange. But his case is still certain to stir a debate about whether the WikiLeaks founder deserves protection under the First Amendment.

Assange was arrested in London on Thursday, as U.S. prosecutors unsealed an indictment accusing him of conspiring with Chelsea Manning to hack a Defense Department computer network in 2010 to obtain secret documents that WikiLeaks hoped to publish. The indictment focuses on Assange's alleged attempt to help Manning crack a password and gain special "administrative-level privileges," an effort that proved unsuccessful. But the underlying "purpose and object of the conspiracy" was "so that WikiLeaks could publicly disseminate the information on its website," prosecutors said.

Assange's supporters describe his arrest and proposed extradition to the United States as an attack on press freedom. But there's some skepticism about that claim, even from several of the country's most prominent defenders of the First Amendment. "When you read the indictment, it doesn't look like anything that turns on whether Assange is or is not a journalist," said Bruce D. Brown, the executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, in an interview Thursday. "No newsroom lawyer would tell a reporter it's okay to do what's alleged in the complaint - to help a source break a password and hack a computer."

Assange's lawyer Barry Pollack countered that his client deserves to be treated as a journalist. He said in a statement that while the indictment alleges a conspiracy to commit computer crimes, "the factual allegations . . . boil down to encouraging a source to provide him information and taking efforts to protect the identity of that source." Pollack amplified his comment in an email: "I do not find the question of whether he is a journalist a tricky one. Mr. Assange publishes truthful information that is of public interest. I think that is a pretty good definition of 'journalist.' "

Actually, the federal legal meaning of what constitutes journalism is all but nonexistent. Garrett Epps, a professor of constitutional law at the University of Baltimore, describes it as "a strange twilight zone in terms of the Constitution," because the Supreme Court has never clearly explained who gets the Bill of Rights freedom afforded to "the press."

"The courts haven't extended any protection to journalists that they haven't extended to the public at large," explained Jameel Jaffer, director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University. "This is in part because extending special protections to journalists would require the court to say who's a journalist and who isn't." Assange's information-dumping actions make some First Amendment lawyers queasy. "There is a fundamental difference between someone who shines a spotlight on classified information and someone who turns on all the lights," said David Kendall, who represented President Bill Clinton during his impeachment hearings and Hillary Clinton during the 2016 email investigation.

Because Assange hasn't shown "calibrated judgment" about what information to share with readers, he isn't acting as a journalist, Kendall told me. As for the prosecutors' allegation that Assange facilitated Manning's hacking of classified information, Kendall added: "People in the press typically are not burglars." Lincoln Caplan, a Yale Law scholar who has written widely about journalism, said in an interview that there's an important distinction between "curating" information, as reporters do, and "dumping" it, as has often been WikiLeaks' practice.

An intriguing footnote to the Assange case is that as part of a failed plea-bargain negotiation with the Justice Department in 2017, he offered to help vet some highly classified CIA files that WikiLeaks was publishing in a document dump known as "Vault 7." As I wrote last September, this "risk mitigation" discussion collapsed after WikiLeaks revealed some especially sensitive CIA hacking techniques. Assange could argue that the 2017 offer showed he was sensitive to national security concerns. Similarly, he could point to his cooperation with the New York Times and other news organizations that edited and vetted WikiLeaks files before publication.

Complicating this case is WikiLeaks' role in disseminating documents hacked by Russian intelligence from Democrats during the 2016 presidential campaign, when Assange appeared to be a tool of Russian meddling to support Donald Trump. Assange wants to fight his case under the banner of press freedom. His problem is that the Justice Department has drawn its indictment carefully enough that the issue is theft of secrets, rather than their publication. That's why so many press advocates seemed to be distancing themselves from Assange after the news broke Thursday.

The Washington Post, 12 April 2019

Wealthy Brexiteers like James Dyson are jumping ship. Why might that be?

Jonathan Freedland,

Let's give James Dyson the benefit of the doubt. Let's take at face value the assurances issued by his multibillion pound company – whose products involve the generation of hot air – as to why it is relocating its headquarters from Wiltshire to Singapore. Apparently, it has “nothing to do with Brexit”.

What's more, it's barely a move at all, since it will see only two people, both top executives, actually moving to Singapore. Dyson will continue to employ 4,000 people in the UK, many of them in research and development, and the relocation is just about keeping a closer eye on the firm's investments in Asia. That it chose to do that in Singapore, where companies pay a mere 17% in tax – rather than, say, India or South Korea – is surely pure coincidence.

Let's accept all that and agree that the Dyson decision is merely symbolic. What's it symbolic of? First, it's worth remembering the special place in Britain's mythology that the company acquired early in its life. Before Dyson, so the story went, we were terrific at inventing bright ideas but rubbish at turning those ideas into profitable businesses. Brits would have the lightbulb moment, but when it came to manufacturing the actual bulbs, that work – and profit – would be shipped far away.

Then along came James Dyson, hailed by successive governments, who proved it didn't have to be that way. A British idea produced a British business. Well, that story has now come full circle. With its headquarters in Singapore, Dyson will no longer be a British firm. Indeed, the CEO, Jim Rowan, has asked that from now on it be referred to as a “global technology company”.

Second, and for all its protestations to the contrary, Dyson's decision is inevitably rolled in with all the others that suggest UK companies, and those based here, are now guarding themselves against Brexit, especially a Brexit of the no-deal, crash-out variety. How else are we to interpret Dyson's admission that it's moving to Singapore to be “future-proofed”? What future exactly does it wish to be proofed against?

After all, Dyson's announcement came on the same day that P&O revealed that it will be re-registering its entire cross-Channel fleet of ferries under the flag of Cyprus. To their credit, P&O were upfront: they're doing this because of Brexit. Similarly, Sony is moving its European HQ from London to Amsterdam. Meanwhile, Bentley is stockpiling parts, and Dixons Carphone and Pets at Home are making similar moves. “We don't want families to run out of food for their pets” after March 29, the latter company said in a line that, oddly, did not appear on the side of a bus during the 2016 campaign. Again, these firms could not be clearer. In the words of Bentley's chief executive: “It's Brexit that's the killer ... It would put at fundamental risk our chance of becoming profitable.” Another line that never made it as a Vote Leave slogan.

So why then might James Dyson be so coy? Why would he not admit it if he is shipping out to avoid Brexit, rushing to Singapore, whose trade agreement with the EU, signed in October, could well give Dyson better access to European markets than the company would have if it stuck around in no-deal Brexit Britain?

Perhaps he feared the charge of hypocrisy, given that he was one of the few business leaders to back the Leave campaign, a man who once urged a no-deal exit from the EU, arguing that “they'll come to us”. And yet had he faced such a charge, he'd have hardly been lonely. For hypocrisy is emerging as a defining trait of the loudest Brexiteers.

Whether it's Nigel Farage taking care to ensure two of his children can live, work and travel freely across the EU by having German passports, or Nigel Lawson, who lives in France, taking the precaution of applying for French residency, the pattern is familiar. It suggests a Brexiteer elite who believe that the pain of Brexit is for the little people. They are rich or powerful or connected enough to be insulated from the damage it will cause, making them free to sound off about its supposed benefits in the abstract – sovereignty! control! – while everyone else deals with the grim reality.

So Dyson and his base will be safe in Singapore, leaving Britain to deal with the consequences of the disastrous decision he demanded. With every day the mess of Brexit is becoming clearer, and it will take more than a high-priced vacuum cleaner to clear it up – no matter how much it sucks.

School summer holidays should be shorter

Leaders

Excessively long breaks are bad for children and for social mobility

You return from work on a muggy August evening. Your unwashed teenage son is on the sofa playing Fortnite, as he has been doing for the past eight hours. Your daughter, scrolling through Instagram, acknowledges your presence with a surly grunt. Not for the first time, you ask yourself: why are school summer holidays so insufferably long?

This is a more serious question than it sounds. Many children will return from the long break having forgotten much of what they were taught the previous year. One study from the American South found that this “summer learning loss” could be as high as a quarter of the year’s education. Poor children tend to be the worst affected, since rich ones typically live in homes full of books and are packed off to summer camp to learn robotics, Latin or the flute. A study from Baltimore found that variations in summer loss might possibly account for two-thirds of the achievement gap between rich and poor children by the age of 14-15. Long holidays definitely strain the budgets of poor families, since free school meals stop and extra child care kicks in.

Summer holidays vary greatly from country to country. South Korean children get only three weeks off. Children in Italy and Turkey get a whopping three months. So do those in America, where their parents, unless they are teachers, have an average of only three weeks off a year, among the shortest holidays in the rich world. Companies should let them take a bit more, since burnt-out workers are less productive. But, for their children, six weeks out of class is plenty.

Youngsters will hate the idea of a longer school year. Many grown-ups will object to it, too. It would cost taxpayers more, since teachers would have to be paid for the extra days. Schools in hotter areas would spend a fortune on air-conditioning. Sceptics also note that, although those barely rested South Korean pupils do superbly in exams, they are often miserable. Is that really what you want for your darlings?

We got no class, we got no principles

It would be unwise to import South Korea’s pressure-cooker approach, in which a single exam determines every child’s future. But plenty of Western children could usefully spend a bit longer at their books. Yes, it would cost money, but there are ways to pay for it. One is to have larger classes. Many parents are obsessed with teacher-to-pupil ratios, but there is scant evidence that they make much difference. The average Japanese lower-secondary class is more than 50% larger than the average British one, but Japanese children get better results.

More time in school need not mean repeating the same old lessons. Some extra drilling would be beneficial, particularly for those falling behind. But the summer could also be a time for different kinds of learning: critical thinking, practical skills, financial literacy, work placements with local firms—schools should be free to experiment. Space should not be a problem. Many school buildings sit idle in the summer.

Well-off children often already use the summer to broaden their minds and burnish their college applications at pricey camps or doing summer jobs found through connections. Schools should help the rest catch up. Other public services do not simply vanish for a quarter of the year. It would be unthinkable for hospitals or the police to do so. So why do schools get away with it? Their responsibility to educate does not end when the mercury rises.

Don't just walk the walk -- plalk the plalk

Editorial

Fancy a plog? How about a plalk?

If your response was a resounding "Huh?" allow us: "plalking" is a growing fitness trend that combines walking with picking up trash. That's it. "Plogging," meanwhile, originates in Sweden and is a little more advanced. It's a portmanteau of jogging and the Swedish phrase "plocka upp," or "pick up" — and yes, it does sound like a euphemism for a different activity entirely.

Our minds are not the only things we should retrieve from the gutter. When the snow melts in Winnipeg, it reveals all manner of detritus — Slurpee cups, pop bottles, rims that have been rolled, an alarming number of socks. Receipts and chip bags get caught in hedges; plastic bottle caps stud our boulevards. Things blow out of garbage cans or never make it into one in the first place.

Not only is plalking a novel solution to our city's post-winter litter blues, it's the ultimate in multi-tasking. It allows individuals to work on twin problems ailing society simultaneously: our general lack of physical movement during the day, and the declining health of our planet.

Need more convincing? David Sedaris does it. The bestselling American humorist and essayist is an early adopter of plalking, spending anywhere from three to eight hours per day — roughly 25,000 steps — picking up litter around his adopted home of West Sussex, England. His community even named a garbage truck after him: "Pig Pen Sedaris."

As Mr. Sedaris himself has pointed out many times, those who walk by garbage every day and do nothing about it are just as culpable as those who put it there in the first place. We are all responsible for where we live, and it's hard to feel pride in your neighbourhood if it looks like a Dumpster. Trash lining our streets and parks — including many items, such as single-use containers and packaging, that are symptoms of our society's lingering addiction to convenience — should be a pretty hard problem to ignore, yet ignore it we do.

Plalking can be a self-directed activity, of course — just remember to arm yourself with a thick pair of gloves and a trash bag — but it can also be a community-building activity.

To that end, Take Pride Winnipeg and the Reh-Fit Centre have partnered on the Heart Winnipeg Plalking Club, which will meet every Saturday throughout the spring and summer months. The club will meet at a different location each week, spreading the beautification around town. Anyone can participate and supplies will be provided.

Many neighbourhood BIZ associations also have local cleanup days scheduled over the next few weeks; takepride.mb.ca has a full list. Of course, it's also the City of Winnipeg's responsibility to ensure city garbage bins are emptied and maintained. Residents should report overflowing or tipped-over bins to 311. Residents can also make requests for more bins, as well. If you find a needle, you can usually safely dispose of it yourself — using gloves, pick it up, place it in a sturdy plastic container with a lid and throw it in the garbage, not recycling. If you need help, call 311 for public property or Street Connections for private property.

Plalking serves as an important reminder on this Earth Day that small, easy actions can add up. And who knows? You might just get a garbage truck named after you.

Can't stand the rain? How wet weather affects human behaviour

Jamie Flook

Rainfall affects our mood, our propensity to commit crime and how hungry we feel – but why?

It's raining, it's pouring, the old man is snoring. He bumped his head when he went to bed, and he couldn't get up in the morning. This was possibly because in the absence of sunlight his body was still producing the hormone melatonin, which makes you sleepy. There are many ways that rainfall affects human behaviour. Why do crime levels drop when the heavens open? How much does rain really affect people's moods and behaviour?

In 2008 university researchers published a paper proposing that weak summer monsoons were influential in the downfall of three dynasties in ancient China. By analysing stalagmites from a cave, they were able to match periods of significantly decreased rainfall with periods of social upheaval and the demise of the Tang, Yuan and Ming dynasties. This is thought to be related to reduced rice cultivation.

But how might rain affect social behaviour in the modern world? A 2009 New York Times investigation found that homicide rates in New York drop significantly on rainy days. Meanwhile, in Britain, Dr Peter Langmead-Jones of Greater Manchester police published a study in 2015 detailing an analysis of 6.6m police records over one decade in Manchester. He found that crime rises as temperature increases up to 18C, then starts to tail off again as the mercury rises further.

But does rainfall influence the prevalence of certain types of crime? Langmead-Jones believes so. "The research showed that the heavier the rainfall, the lower the recorded crime," he said. "This confirms a cornerstone of police craft that heavy rain reduces or suppresses crime. This is commonly referred to as PC Rain. There is a strong association between heavy rain and violence including domestic abuse, but we know that domestic abuse is frequently fuelled by alcohol. It may be that heavy rain deters people from going out to buy alcohol and to consume alcohol and the reduced alcohol consumption results in fewer crimes."

Psychologist Dr Keri Nixon, who has experience dealing with violent criminals, says people "tend to not want to go out and commit crime in bad weather unless [they're] desperate. Also for opportunistic crimes against individuals there are fewer people out."

It's not all good news though. One study in 1997 concluded that the behaviour of children can predict oncoming storms – they were observed to exhibit their worst behaviour when barometric pressure fell. One theory as to why this happens is that positive ions in the atmosphere increase blood pressure and irritability. Another study in 2012 found that women are disproportionately adversely affected psychologically by rain and that they report much lower levels of life satisfaction than men on rainy days. Furthermore, heavy rainfall can also make you hungry; when the sky is overcast or sunlight is blocked, the hormone serotonin decreases, which in turn can increase carbohydrate cravings and make you hungry.

For all the complaints about rain, it does have some characteristics that hold broad appeal. The sound of raindrops can be very comforting and often features on sleep-inducing relaxation CDs. The theory behind this is that the pitter-patter of raindrops is a form of "pink noise", which decreases brain activity and consequently improves the quality of sleep. So if it's raining where you are, the best thing to do may be to curl up.

Parenting in Manhattan is a Darwinian struggle

Emma Brockes,

Should we raise children the way we run businesses? I say we, though I have no idea how to run a business. Yet the number of books on the market that discuss parenting in terms one might use to discuss maximising an investment – to approach one’s child as one might any other product launch – is simultaneously completely depressing and almost impossible to resist. Why wouldn’t one want to turn out successful children? On the other hand: stuffing them from the age of three with skills best suited to careers in corporate law is surely an expensive and self-defeating insanity.

In a new book, *Love, Money and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids*, two economists try to untangle the long-term impact of what has come to be known as “helicopter parenting” – the high-investment, high-involvement approach that, on the evidence of the book, increases test scores and the likelihood of kids graduating from college, even as other data suggests it stresses kids out.

The research, by Fabrizio Zilibotti and Matthias Doepke, economists at, respectively, Yale and Northwestern, shouldn’t be surprising: when you stand over kids and make sure they perform, those who don’t burn out will do better, in conventional terms, than those with parents who just let them get on with it. As middle-class parents throw more and more resources at their smaller and smaller families it is also, predictably, widening the inequality gap.

The question, of course, is one of happiness and how we define “success”. It’s a key word in all child-rearing tracts, yet for all the window-dressing about kindness and flexibility, it most commonly correlates with earnings. I would quite like it if my kids weren’t still clogging up the family home when they’re 30, and I’ll be happy if they don’t drop out of college. If one of them should say that happiness, to her, means training as a mime artist or a performance poet, I wonder how enthusiastic I’ll manage to be.

This question is a particularly heavy one in America, where the cost of health insurance keeps people in unhappy corporate jobs for years. It also flushes out all one’s liberal hypocrisy. I recently went on a tour of a progressive private school in Manhattan, in which prospective parents thrilled at the freedoms afforded the kids while discreetly checking to make sure everyone still got into the Ivy League.

For a moment, I considered myself resistant to this urge: let children be children, I thought smugly. At four, my kids are already in what feels like a rat race and the idea of tethering them to standardised tests for the next decade makes progressive school look wonderfully inviting.

Then we went on a tour of the upper school and, showing us around the gym, and the parent tour-guide informed us, “We don’t believe in competitive sports.” I nearly tipped over with the force of my eye roll. Good God, these children will sink when they get out into this horrible world and when the seas rise, they’ll be last to the lifeboats. I’ve recalibrated since then. The more one thinks, the more wrong-headed my response seems. It’s the kind of Darwinian thinking that will bring about the very disaster we are prepping our kids to survive.

I'm living a cash-only life in a tap-and-go world

Brigid Delaney

Before ATMs and electronic payments, people had to walk into a bank to get money out. I remember my mother with her passbook, the teller entering amounts in a small column, his script neat, and the rush to get to the branch before it shut at 5pm.

The way we do currency has changed so much in a relatively short amount of time. Who uses cheques or even traveller's cheques anymore? Who goes into a bank? Who carries cash? Only the very poor and stateless.

Now it's expected, particularly in busy bars, restaurants and service stations, that you'll tap and go. The arm holding the machine juts out before you even have the chance to pull out your wallet. There are some millennials who haven't been to the ATM in a year.

The other night a barman told me that most customers tap their cards when they buy drinks. "On weekends we used to get \$180 cash in tips per worker," he said. "It covered my rent. We don't get tips anymore because no one carries cash."

Twenty years ago, I got a credit card for my first overseas trip and put big things on it – like a plane ticket. Lately I've been looking at my credit card statements and it's all small tap-and-go stuff: coffees, lunches, top-ups for my travel card. All little sums, and they add up. Over the last couple of years I've rarely carried cash, but my spending has gone up.

With tap and go, my credit card was hitting the ceiling with increasingly regularity. The technology – and laziness (who can be bothered pulling out the correct change?) – made it even easier to mindlessly spend. Then three weeks ago I lost my ATM card and decided not to replace it (it would be my fourth lost or stolen card in a year). I decided to live a cash-only life in a tap-and-go world.

Now, once a week I race into a bank branch before it shuts at 4pm and get out a sum of money to last me all week. It's annoying, but so is going into the weekend with no money. Then I have to queue up for my wad of cash that's going to last me all week.

With an allocated amount of cash to spend each week, I find I'm spending less because I am not just mindlessly tapping my card every time I want to buy something. A finite amount of cash in your wallet changes how you spend – it makes you less reckless and more deliberate. My friends throw their cards down at brunch, scarcely looking at the bill. I look and carefully count out my cash.

While I'm saving money by using a strict cash allocation as a budgeting tool, I'm finding that I am excluded from some things due to my cash-only lifestyle: flying on a budget airline last week (ticket bought before I lost my card), I wanted to increase my luggage limit – something I couldn't do online without a credit or debit card. Instead I had to queue up (people who are cash-only find they spend a lot of time in queues) and I had to pay a premium with cash at the airport. There are also fewer self-service grocery aisles or transport card top-up centres available for people without cards.

The move to a cashless economy is happening now without much questioning of whether or not it's a good thing (it's certainly good for banks). But there is a subtle psychological benefit to using cash.

One of the problems of modern capital is its increased alienation from the fruits of labour. The modern knowledge worker doesn't actually produce anything tangible to account for the hours at their desk. For many workers, it is only the numbers in the bank account that is proof of their labour. Cash was only ever a token, but by handing it over the counter there was a clear trade: here is a percentage of my day's labour.

That transaction has now been squeezed into a split second of time – the time it takes to "tap". And in doing this, something is being devalued.

Europe Seeks New Frontiers in Space Race

Daniel Michaels and Andy Pasztor

Six small prototype satellites slated for launch on Wednesday amount to a light payload with weighty significance: a new vision for European space programs eclipsed by the U.S. and China.

The OneWeb communications satellites were produced in France by Airbus SE, a global leader in space equipment, and their launch will be handled by Arianespace, Europe's premier rocket company. But the concept -- mass-producing hundreds of inexpensive satellites resembling refrigerators rather than custom-building a handful of bus-sized spacecraft -- came from an American entrepreneur, Greg Wyler.

Airbus Chief Executive Tom Enders jumped to work with Mr. Wyler largely to shake up his own satellite operation -- and Europe's view of its role beyond the atmosphere. In a sign of European hunger for outside thinking, Airbus is installing OneWeb's assembly line, which will build at least 650 satellites in Florida, near the Kennedy Space Center. With the initial OneWeb-designed satellites produced in France, assembly will move to Florida where the joint venture will finish manufacturing the rest.

For decades, Europe was a world leader in space probes, satellites and launchers. It contributed several of the most sophisticated elements of the international space station. Pan-European ventures leveraged private and government investments to remain a strong second place behind much heftier U.S. spending led by the Pentagon. Europe's momentum has stalled amid budget constraints, pressure from other entrants such as China and India, and eroding national consensus -- leaving it caught between Washington and Beijing.

Elon Musk's SpaceX and a new wave of U.S. rocket ventures, combined with a raft of startup micro-satellite producers, have slashed prices and upended the business of sending commercial payloads into orbit. More recently China staked a claim to rivaling the U.S., including deploying antisatellite weapons and eventually launching its own space station. In response, U.S. military leaders are dramatically increasing spending. Simultaneously, they are investing billions in new rocket-propulsion, satellite-defense, missile-warning and ground-surveillance systems.

"In Europe, we do not have a clear collective sense of where we are going together on space matters," Elzbieta Bienkowska, the European Union's commissioner for industry, said recently. She said the issue is "a question of strategic autonomy and technological dependence." The strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing is fueling a push to the moon and beyond, while U.S. entrepreneurs such as Mr. Musk, with his Space Exploration Technologies Corp., and Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com Inc., are chasing commercial opportunities in space.

"For Europe, the question is, how do we remain in the race? How do we preserve our autonomy in space?" said Arianespace Chief Executive Stephane Israel.

Arianespace -- once secure as Europe's pre-eminent launch option -- is trying to stay in the game by developing a less-expensive booster and eventually phasing in its first reusable rocket engines. Many of those initiatives are years behind U.S. efforts. Mr. Wyler's team aims to turn out satellites for around \$1 million each, relying on automated testing and quality-control safeguards never used for space hardware on such a scale. For the budding small-satellite segment, he said, "it's comparable to introduction of Henry Ford's Model T.

Stop biodiversity loss or we could face our own extinction, warns UN

Jonathan Watts

The world must thrash out a new deal for nature in the next two years or humanity could be the first species to document our own extinction, warns the United Nations biodiversity chief. Ahead of a key international conference to discuss the collapse of ecosystems, Cristiana Paşca Palmer said people in all countries need to put pressure on their governments to draw up ambitious global targets by 2020 to protect the insects, birds, plants and mammals that are vital for global food production, clean water and carbon sequestration.

“The loss of biodiversity is a silent killer,” she told the Guardian. “It’s different from climate change, where people feel the impact in everyday life. With biodiversity, it is not so clear but by the time you feel what is happening, it may be too late.”

Paşca Palmer is executive secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity – the world body responsible for maintaining the natural life support systems on which humanity depends. Its members – 195 states and the EU – will meet in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, this month to start discussions on a new framework for managing the world’s ecosystems and wildlife. This will kick off two years of frenetic negotiations, which Paşca Palmer hopes will culminate in an ambitious new global deal at the next conference in Beijing in 2020.

Conservationists are desperate for a biodiversity accord that will carry the same weight as the Paris climate agreement. But so far, this subject has received miserably little attention even though many scientists say it poses at least an equal threat to humanity. The last two major biodiversity agreements – in 2002 and 2010 – have failed to stem the worst loss of life on Earth since the demise of the dinosaurs.

Eight years ago, under the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, nations promised to at least halve the loss of natural habitats, ensure sustainable fishing in all waters, and expand nature reserves from 10% to 17% of the world’s land by 2020. But many nations have fallen behind, and those that have created more protected areas have done little to police them. “Paper reserves” can now be found from Brazil to China. The issue is also low on the political agenda. Compared to climate summits, few heads of state attend biodiversity talks. Even before Donald Trump, the US refused to ratify the treaty and only sends an observer. Along with the Vatican, it is the only UN state not to participate.

Paşca Palmer says there are glimmers of hope. Several species in Africa and Asia have recovered (though most are in decline) and forest cover in Asia has increased by 2.5% (though it has decreased elsewhere at a faster rate). Marine protected areas have also widened.

But overall, she says, the picture is worrying. The already high rates of biodiversity loss from habitat destruction, chemical pollution and invasive species will accelerate in the coming 30 years as a result of climate change and growing human populations. By 2050, Africa is expected to lose 50% of its birds and mammals, and Asian fisheries to completely collapse. The loss of plants and sea life will reduce the Earth’s ability to absorb carbon, creating a vicious cycle.

“The numbers are staggering,” says the former Romanian environment minister. “I hope we aren’t the first species to document our own extinction.” Despite the weak government response to such an existential threat, she said her optimism about what she called “the infrastructure of life” was undimmed.

One cause for hope was a convergence of scientific concerns and growing interest from the business community. Last month, the UN’s top climate and biodiversity institutions and scientists held their first joint meeting. They found that nature-based solutions – such as forest protection, tree planting, land restoration and soil management – could provide up to a third of the carbon absorption needed to keep global warming within the Paris agreement parameters. In future the two UN arms of climate and biodiversity should issue joint assessments. She also noted that although politics in some countries were moving in the wrong direction, there were also positive developments such as French president, Emmanuel Macron, recently being the first world leader to note that the climate issue cannot be solved without a halt in biodiversity loss. This will be on the agenda of the next G7 summit in France.

“Things are moving. There is a lot of goodwill,” she said. “We should be aware of the dangers but not paralysed by inaction. It’s still in our hands but the window for action is narrowing. We need higher levels of political and citizen will to support nature.”

Free money wouldn't make people lazy – but it could revolutionise work

Anna Dent

The danger of so-called “free money” not only underpins critiques of universal basic income (UBI), but also the incredibly strong narratives that underlie the attitudes to work in the UK (and elsewhere) – and our unemployment benefit system. Paid employment is held up as one of the ultimate markers of being a valuable member of society, with those not in paid work (always described in these narratives as a voluntary position, rather than as the result of issues outside their control) seen as a drain on society. Those out of work are positioned in direct contrast to those in paid employment: the shirkers versus the strivers, the “welfare dependent” versus the hardworking families.

For those in paid work, working hard and being constantly busy are worn as a badge of pride, and there are whole industries promising to make us more productive and efficient. For some, hard work is enforced through workplace monitoring, impossibly short breaks or expectations of staff being “always on”, for example responding to emails outside work hours. Work is idealised as providing meaning in our lives, while at the same time removing us from other sources of meaning, such as family, friends and our communities, through long hours and unpaid overtime. The negative psychological, social and physical effects of these narratives and assumptions are now being investigated, and the centrality of work in our lives and society questioned.

Preliminary results from Finland’s basic income experiment found little to no impact on recipients’ likelihood of undertaking paid employment. This has led some to suggest that the experiment is a failure – indeed, the Finnish government had hoped the plan would increase participation in paid work. However, although it was not a trial of a full UBI (universal, unconditional, non-withdrawable and non means-tested) it is being celebrated by many who advocate the idea, as it provides important evidence about the interaction of UBI and work. One of the major objections is that getting “free money” would undermine recipients’ motivation to undertake paid work: the Finnish case shows this is not so.

The notion that paid employment is the cure to all ills has been seriously undermined, if it were ever true. Work as the best route out of poverty may still hold true for some, but the majority of households in poverty in the UK are now consistently those with at least one person in work. The likelihood of people becoming stuck in low-wage, low-skilled work is significant, and hard work among the lower paid is doing nothing to reduce economic inequalities. Coupled with the potential threat to many jobs and industries from automation and AI (although we need to be careful not to overstate this), the relentless prioritisation of paid work seems less defensible.

For its proponents, a UBI can provide a lifejacket and a route through some of these challenges. A UBI could provide a stable income floor, a guaranteed minimum below which no one would fall. Depending on the amount paid, it could enable low-paid workers to turn down the worst jobs on offer, or enable time away from paid work to retrain, or start a business. It would financially compensate those (usually women) caring for family for their work, support more people to be creative, to volunteer, or simply to do nothing. A UBI is not designed to promote “laziness” or any other type of behaviour, simply to allow individuals to make their own decisions about how they wish to spend their time. The pure idea of a UBI does not hold any inherent position when it comes to paid work, but promises freedom and choice. A UBI as a way to live securely without paid employment features regularly in mainly leftwing discussions about post-work, interrogating the centrality of paid employment in our lives and societies, and our ability to liberate ourselves, or be liberated from, our roles as paid workers.

In reality, the likelihood of any western country introducing a UBI at a rate to enable the average worker to entirely opt out of paid employment is extremely low (in Finland, participants received €560 (£475) a month). Most of the current trials around the world actively frame UBI as a pro-employment policy, smoothing the sharp edges of benefit systems and the insecurities of the modern labour market, to make paid employment more feasible, attractive and sustainable. The utopian vision of a life of leisure in which a UBI offers us a comfortable standard of living is not about to become reality, but the ideas of working less, and receiving a stable, humane basic income are gaining traction and starting to influence debate in ways unthinkable even 10 years ago.

No, Kamala Harris is not a 'female Barack Obama'

Holly Thomas

This week, on Martin Luther King Day, Democratic California Sen. Kamala Harris announced that she will run for president in 2020. Almost immediately, headlines appeared declaring her the "female Barack Obama." Like many other prominent women, she is -- wrongly and inaccurately to boot -- best known as a derivative of a more-famous predecessor. There are similarities between Harris and Obama, to be sure. Both are Democrats, both have a background in law, both have a mixed-race background. There is an obvious convenience to the comparison. It neatly captures the public imagination at a time when Harris is yet to be world famous, but is charismatic, on the rise and prepared to challenge President Donald Trump, while Obama's name continues to conjure a nostalgic, anti-Trump emotion. It makes superficial sense. But it's also symptomatic of a lazy habit that infantilizes high-profile women in America and abroad.

Kamala Harris is the first Indian-American woman to have a seat in the US Senate. She was also the first woman, black, Indian-American or South Asian, to serve as district attorney of San Francisco, and as California's attorney general. The most famous instance of public sexism she faced before announcing her presidential bid occurred in 2013, when none other than Barack Obama called her the "best-looking attorney general." Obama later apologized to Harris after the remark was widely criticized (rightly) as sexist. The two are very different political beings. Obama, with some liberal moves such as reduced sentences for drug offenses aside, did not make prison reform a priority, and was against mass incarceration. But the prison system is a subject close to Harris' heart. Despite personal reservations, she promised to defend the death penalty in California as attorney general, and proved herself an often harsh prosecutor, favoring long periods of imprisonment. In other areas, Harris has positioned herself further to the left than the former President. Those only aware of her overlap with Obama might make assumptions about her attitudes elsewhere, which would turn out to be untrue.

Harris is far from the only female politician to receive this media treatment -- and that treatment isn't always limited to comparisons to more famous men (though admittedly that's overwhelmingly the case when it comes to world leaders). Take Theresa May. Coverage of the British Prime Minister is regularly peppered with references to Margaret Thatcher. Throughout her negotiations over the Brexit deal in Brussels, Belgium, in December, newspapers referred to May's "handbag-wielding" "Maggie" moments -- Thatcher's handbag being the mythical weapon with which she would supposedly clobber her opposition. Considering Margaret Thatcher was in favor of Europe, fought for Britain's interests within the EU, and for Britain to strengthen its position as a member of the EU, this likeness is especially ironic. Theresa May's Brexit strategy has been to make determined noises while championing a cause -- leaving the EU -- she campaigned and voted against, and she consistently makes zero productive headway with it. Her predecessor David Cameron's negotiation of the ultimately null EU reform deal in 2016 was far more Thatcher-esque in its intention and execution (even if the referendum he called subsequently was not). Coverage of his doings, however, didn't call him "Maggie" -- or indeed, refer to other male PMs who went before him. When he acted in his own name, he was treated as such.

The fudging of political personalities can be derogatory in both directions, depending on individual sympathies. When Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer succeeded Angela Merkel as leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union last year, she noted the commentary describing her as a 'mini Merkel,' or 'Merkel 2.0.' "I have read a lot about what I am and who I am," she told her party. "Mini, a copy, simply 'more of the same.' Dear delegates, I stand before you as I am and as life made me". The attention paid to Kramp-Karrenbauer's likeness to Merkel distracts from the future implications of her attitudes for the country, and indeed, Europe at large. Kramp-Karrenbauer is extremely conservative on same-sex marriage, and has likened it to incest in the past. Her stance on migration is also vastly stricter than Merkel's, and she has made it clear she is keen to dial down the more liberal attitude exhibited by the party in the last decade. While Merkel's political career was catalyzed by the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification, Kramp-Karrenbauer's has been forged in the wake of Merkel's. That by definition gives her an adapted frame of reference, which merits its own scrutiny.

Politicians, every person, is a product of their own time and place. In the coming months, it looks quite possible that Kamala Harris might win Obama's endorsement of her bid for president. If she does, the comparisons between the two are likely to reignite. As with May and Kramp-Karrenbauer, those watching would do better to pay attention to the political landscape Harris is working within now, rather than any nostalgic connotations. The president whose footsteps are most pertinent to Harris, the president who she will be measured against should she prevail against her fellow Democratic candidates, is Donald Trump. If she finds herself competing with him, the very least Harris deserves, the very least the voting public deserves, is to be judged as an adult in her own right, running under her own name.

AI can write just like me. Brace yourself for the robot apocalypse

Hannah Jane Parkinson,

Elon Musk, recently busying himself with calling people “pedo” on Twitter and potentially violating US securities law with what was perhaps just a joke about weed – both perfectly normal activities – is now involved in a move to terrify us all. The non-profit organisation he backs, OpenAI, has developed an AI system so good it had me quaking in my trainers when it was fed an article of mine and wrote an extension that was a perfect act of journalistic ventriloquism.

As my colleague Alex Hern wrote yesterday: “The system [GPT2] is pushing the boundaries of what was thought possible, both in terms of the quality of the output, and the wide variety of potential uses.” GPT2 is so efficient that the full research is not being released publicly yet because of the risk of misuse.

And that’s the thing – this AI has the potential to devastate. It could exacerbate the already massive problem of fake news and extend the sort of abuse and bigotry that bots have already become capable of doling out on social media (see Microsoft’s AI chatbot, Tay, which pretty quickly started tweeting about Hitler). It will quash the essay-writing market, given it could just knock ‘em out, without an Oxbridge graduate in a studio flat somewhere charging £500. It could inundate you with emails and make it almost impossible to distinguish the real from the auto-generated. An example of the issues involved: in Friday’s print Guardian we ran an article that GPT2 had written itself (it wrote its own made-up quotes; structured its own paragraphs; added its own “facts”) and at present we have not published that piece online, because we couldn’t figure out a way that would nullify the risk of it being taken as real if viewed out of context.

The thing is, Musk has been warning us about how robots and AI will take over the world for ages – and he very much has a point. Though it’s easy to make jokes about his obsession with AI doom, this isn’t just one of his quirks. He has previously said that AI represents our “biggest existential threat” and called its progression “summoning the demon”. The reason he and others support OpenAI (a non-profit, remember) is that he hopes it will be a responsible developer and a counter to corporate or other bad actors (I should mention at this point that Musk’s Tesla is, of course, one of these corporate entities employing AI). Though OpenAI is holding its system back – releasing it for a limited period for journalists to test before rescinding access – it won’t be long before other systems are created. This tech is coming.

Traditional news outlets – Bloomberg and Reuters, for example – already have elements of news pieces written by machine. Both the Washington Post and the Guardian have experimented – earlier this month Guardian Australia published its first automated article written by a text generator called ReporterMate. This sort of reporting will be particularly useful in financial and sports journalism, where facts and figures often play a dominant role. I can vouch for the fact newsrooms have greeted this development with an element of panic, even though the ideal would be to employ these auto-generated pieces to free up time for journalists to work on more analytical and deeply researched stories.

A glimpse at GPT’s impressiveness is just piling bad news on bad for journalism, which is currently struggling with declining ad revenues (thank you, Google! Thank you, Facebook!); the scourge of fake news and public distrust; increasingly partisan readerships and shifts in consumer behaviour; copyright abuses and internet plagiarism; political attacks (the media is “the enemy of the people”, according to Donald Trump) and, tragically, the frequent imprisonment and killings of journalists. The idea that machines may write us out of business altogether – and write it better than we could ourselves – is not thrilling. The digital layoffs are already happening, the local papers are already closing down. It’s impossible to overstate the importance of a free and fair press.

In a wider context, the startling thing is that once super-intelligent AI has been created and released it is going to be very hard to put it back in the box. Basically, AI could have hugely positive uses and impressive implications (in healthcare, for instance, though it may not be as welcomed in the world of the Chinese game Go), but could also have awful consequences. Take a look at this impressive/horrifying robot built by Boston Dynamics, which keeps me from sleeping at night. We’ve come a long way from Robot Wars.

The stakes are huge, which is why Musk – again, in one of his more sensible moods – is advocating for greater oversight of companies well on their way in the AI race (Facebook, Amazon and Alphabet’s DeepMind to take just three examples. AND TESLA). Others have also stressed the importance of extensive research into AI before it’s too late: the late Stephen Hawking even said AI could signal “the end of the human race” and an Oxford professor, Nick Bostrom, has said “our fate would be sealed” once malicious machine super-intelligence had spread. At least as we hurtle towards this cheering apocalypse we’ll have the novels and poetry that GPT2 also proved adept at creating. Now you just need to work out whether it was actually me who wrote this piece.

France terrified of losing EU influence in election wipeout: 'We're facing Catastrophe!'

Paul Withers

France is terrified of losing its political clout following the next European Parliament elections, with several parties forecast to suffer crushing defeats.

The rise of Emmanuel Macron and his centrist party has dealt huge blows to the conservative Les Républicains and the Socialist Party (PS), and they could both become bit-part players in the two biggest blocs in the chamber. This would mean fewer influential posts for lawmakers and far less say in Parliament over crucial decisions shaping Europe. The PS is polling at just five percent, and if it falls below that threshold in the upcoming election, it will not send any MEPs to the next Parliament. An official from the French delegation of the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) bloc in the legislature told Politico: "The risk is that the left is so deeply divided that there won't be any French person to represent it in the Parliament.

"What we're facing is a catastrophe." According to forecasts from Politico, the Socialists would drop to just five seats in the next Parliament, having secured 13 spaces during the last election in 2014. Christine Revault d'Allonnes-Bonnefoy, a Socialist MEP who has been touted as a possible candidate to lead her party in the upcoming election, said: "We are going to lose a lot of MEPs.

"Right now, we are doing the job, we're getting on with things. It's not enough, but I don't have any magic wand to change things." Centre-left parties in France have become deeply divided lately, with MEPs such as Isabelle Thomas, Guillaume Balas and Edouard Martin quitting PS to join "Généérations-s" - the left-wing party created by former Socialist presidential candidate Benoît Hamon. Other MEPs including Emmanuel Maurel have joined France Unbowed - the far-left party led by former MEP Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

According to Politico's forecasts, the Republicans are set to win 11 seats in the election, but this is still down from the 20 spots five years ago. The party has been in free fall recently, with some of their most influential European parliamentarians, including Alain Lamassoure, Michel Dantin and Françoise Grossetête, set to bow out of the chamber. Ms Grossetête attacked the Eurosceptic tone often emanating from the leadership under party chief Laurent Wauquiez has not helped.

In an interview with French magazine *Le Point* last month, she said: "Their call to reform Europe has become a mantra, and shows the total ignorance of everything that has been carried out in the last five years when the right has led the governing majority in Europe." If current projections prove accurate, the Republicans would have a smaller delegation in the European Parliament than Hungary's ruling Fidesz party, while the once dominant Socialists would bring in the same number of seats as Denmark's Social Democrats.

The dwindling influence would be a huge blow to France, who for years have seen their MEPs push for progress on issues the country regarded as priorities, including a change to the rules on EU citizens working temporarily in another of the bloc's countries. The next European Parliament is expected to be more fragmented than the current one, but the EPP and S&D are on course to again be the largest groups. A loss of MEP influence within these groups would see their chances of winning senior posts lessen. The loss of MEPs in the European Parliament could also have a huge impact in France itself. The S&D official told Politico: "There will be fewer people in France to explain what the Parliament does for voter.

"The two big European parties will be inaudible [in France], and that will only strengthen extreme forces." The main beneficiary of the downfall of the Republicans and Socialists would be Mr Macron's *La République En Marche*, a party consisting of Eurosceptics from both the left and right.

According to Politico, eurosceptics would be boosted by 35 French MEPs - 21 from Marine Le Pen's National Rally, eight from the far-left France Unbowed and six from the nationalist *Debout la France*.

Despite the French President's party being forecast to win 20 seats during the next election, it will unlikely be part of the two biggest groups in the European Parliament.

Political Economics: Germany's Slowdown That Dare Not Speak Its Name

By Joseph C. Sternberg

Berlin -- Of all the reasons to worry about Germany's economy, the biggest is that Germans themselves don't seem to be concerned enough about it. The eurozone's largest member is coasting into a slowdown. Where's the outrage?

Indignation may be too much to hope for, but surely if Europe's economic engine is downshifting you'd expect the political class and the economic caste to notice. They're noticing the data. Berlin this week cut its economic-growth prediction for 2019 to 1% from 1.8%, as business sentiment wobbles. But many German economists and politicians still hope this is only a moderation in the growth rate and not the first step toward a recession.

That's how you end up with the policy debates Germany has at the moment. Those include a plan unveiled over the weekend to phase out coal-fired power generation over the next 20 years, at a cost of 40 billion euros on top of the tens of billions of euros Berlin already has spent on its so-called Energiewende, the "energy transformation" to nowhere. Then there's the plan voiced by Finance Minister Olaf Scholz a few days ago to increase taxes on the middle class (to 45% from 42% starting at incomes as low as 56,000 euros, or around \$64,000) lest the government's books fall into the red as a downturn weighs on revenues. The policy debates Germany needs concern chronic weaknesses that would be laid bare by a recession. Those include a failure to cultivate entrepreneurial startups, especially in service industries; a stubbornly unreformed banking system, made vulnerable by decades of political meddling in management and years of profit-sapping ultralow interest rates; and a tax code that kills incentives and investments.

That's for starters. The surprise is that almost none of this has bubbled into the political sphere. Germany has had its own version of a popular uprising, with the antiestablishment party Alternative for Germany, or AfD, coming third in 2017's national election with an unsettling 13% of the vote. That result roiled German politics, as did strong showings for the AfD in two state elections last autumn. The party is expected to fare even better in a round of state elections in its heartland of the former East Germany this year.

The AfD is often called a "far right" group, but its true base of support is disaffected blue-collar former members of the center-left Social Democratic Party. Those workers have been left behind by an economy that works beautifully for those who already have high-tech jobs and considerably less well for those who don't.

Americans know where this is going. Some nontrivial number of votes for the AfD are a cry for help from Germany's abandoned-feeling voters, in the same way that votes from disaffected former Democrats pushed Donald Trump over the finish line in crucial states in 2016.

But there the similarities end. In America, Mr. Trump's ascent has catalyzed a policy debate we haven't seen in many years. On the left, this means Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris and others who are exploiting the opportunity to advance a radical agenda while the likes of Starbucks' Howard Schultz try pitching liberal centrism. On the right, it means new arguments between Reaganesque supply-siders drawing strength from the success of the 2017 tax cut and Mr. Trump's deregulation agenda, so-called reformicons appealing to more socially conservative instincts, and many somewhere in the middle of those schools. The net effect is to give American voters real choices -- and real consequences.

Meanwhile in Germany . . . crickets. Recent elections have left all major parties weakened and in need of a new direction, thanks in part to the all-scrambling rise of the AfD. Yet the dominant center-right Christian Democratic Union has taken as its new leader a local politician from a small state whose economic views remain a mystery. The Social Democrats lack any exciting thinkers on the economy, even though one of its number is Mr. Scholz, the finance minister.

The AfD's electoral successes have catalyzed only the ascent of the Green Party from among the portions of the center-left that haven't fled to the AfD. Green economic views are confused, other than to voice the insight that decades' worth of government meddling have not created an economy that works for everyone.

Otherwise, Germany lacks meaningful debate about the proper size of the state in a modern economy, how tax laws should shape incentives for investment and job creation, how entrepreneurial startups can or should be financed, or any other topic that serious politicians and economists should be discussing in a serious country. The next downturn will show that Germany can't afford this complacency -- and neither can the rest of the eurozone.

‘Stress interviews’: another way to make millennials’ lives hell

Gaby Hinsliff

It sounds like the job interview from hell. Olivia Bland ended up crying at the bus stop, after what the 22-year-old describes as being deliberately torn to shreds over everything from her writing skills to her posture. Company boss Craig Dean, the man on the other side of the desk, ended up posting what he called a “sleep-deprived and anxiety-driven” apology on Twitter after her account of it all went viral. Tell me your gender, age and political leanings and I can probably guess with reasonable certainty whether your sympathies lie with her or with him. But if nothing else, the rejection email she sent, explaining where Web Applications UK could stick the job it eventually offered her, certainly demonstrates the “timely, concise and effective” communications skills stipulated in the job description.

It should be said that Dean’s board of directors later put out a statement, insisting it was confident that there had been “no bullying or intimidation”, while promising to reflect on what had happened. But whatever went on inside that interview room, it patently hasn’t ended well for anybody. Bland compares the whole thing to a conversation with an abusive ex, picking apart everything that was supposedly wrong with her; social media naming and shaming being what it is, Dean must now be experiencing something very similar. Since she must have wanted the job originally, and he evidently wanted her to have it, it should not have been impossible to put two and two together without making something that sounds like a particularly squirm-inducing episode of *The Office*. And yet here we are.

So much for trendy management theories about “testing the resilience” of prospective employees. For Dean presumably didn’t pluck his unorthodox conversational gambits out of thin air. The so-called “stress interview”, designed to provoke, embarrass and intimidate interviewees to see how they cope in a crisis, has evidently come a long way since apocryphal stories of Oxbridge dons greeting nervous sixth-formers by putting their feet up on the desk and ordering them to “impress me”. A quick Google of US recruitment sites uncovers endless suggested comments for the would-be boss from hell, ranging from, “It doesn’t look like you accomplished much in your last position,” to, “If you were really good, you would have been promoted. Why haven’t you been?” Other techniques include asking the interviewee questions that seem inappropriately personal to put them off their stride, or simply being deliberately rude. Sighing and rolling your eyes during answers, even turning your back on the interviewee, all come recommended.

It’s the employment equivalent of “negging”, or attempting to pick up women by insulting and undermining them so that in theory they’ll be even more desperate for your approval which made for some truly grim dates during its briefly fashionable heyday. In stress interview theory, the candidate is supposed to remain emotionless throughout, thereby demonstrating that they won’t lose their cool with a difficult client and can take criticism. It says a great deal about what’s wrong with management in too many British companies that anyone would think this is how you uncover talent. Yet sadly, not many candidates would have the nerve to fight back in the current job market. Bland is trying to enter a competitive industry at a time when a lot of people aren’t hiring, at least until they know what’s happening with Brexit. She’s far from the only English graduate with an apparently glittering CV being made to jump through ridiculous hoops for jobs that almost certainly weren’t what they dreamed of in college. For those further down the pile it is, if anything, worse.

A few years ago, Currys had to apologise after a man applying for a job in one of its stores was asked to do a “robot dance” in the interview. In the pub and restaurant trade, it has become all too common to be asked to work an unpaid shift by way of interview. The tougher the economic climate gets, the stiffer the competition, and the more brutal the efforts made to weed out a desperately overcrowded field. It’s true that some industries aren’t for shrinking violets, my own included. Newsrooms can be brutal, and so can the places in which young reporters may find themselves in pursuit of a story. But good reporters need empathy and sensitivity to deal with the people whose lives they’re invading, as well as grit. An industry staffed with human battering-rams serves nobody. And while plenty of employers doubtless have their own horror stories of snowflake graduates with ridiculously high expectations and badly spelled CVs, all too often they’re forgetting how much they still had to learn in their 20s and, more importantly, how they learned it. Nobody looks back with gratitude and affection on the bosses who had evidently watched way too many series of *The Apprentice*. It’s the ones with the patience to explain, and the skill to build up other people’s confidence rather than knocking it down, for whom you end up going the extra mile. Ironically, Craig Dean must have been exposed to something of a stress test himself over the past 24 hours, with half the internet now scoffing at his management techniques. Somehow, I doubt he has emerged from it convinced of the usefulness of ritual humiliation.

Cooking Sunday roast causes indoor pollution ‘worse than Delhi’

Ian Sample

Cooking a Sunday roast can drive indoor air pollution far above the levels found in the most polluted cities on Earth, scientists have said. Researchers found that roasting meat and vegetables, and using a gas hob, released a surge of fine particles that could make household air dirtier than that in Delhi. Fine soot and tiny organic particles from gas flames, vegetables, oils and fat combined to send harmful PM2.5 particulates in the house to levels 13 times higher than those measured in the air in central London. Peak indoor pollution lasted for about an hour. “We were all surprised at the overall levels of particulate matter in the house,” said Marina Vance, who led the research at the University of Colorado in Boulder. She advised people to open windows and use extractor hoods if possible to ventilate the home while cooking. PM2.5s are particles that are smaller than 2.5 micrometres across. They are small enough to be inhaled deep into the lungs where they exacerbate respiratory disorders and cardiovascular disease. Smaller particles can spread from the lungs into the bloodstream where they build up in the liver, heart and even the brain, where they may contribute to depression and other mental health issues.

In what Vance described as the most comprehensive investigation yet into chemicals in the home, the researchers cooked a series of meals in a three-bedroom test house fitted with indoor and outdoor pollution monitors. One day they cooked a Thanksgiving dinner with roast turkey, roast Brussels sprouts, boiled sweet potatoes, bread stuffing and cranberry sauce. During the day of cooking, PM2.5 levels in the house rose to 200 micrograms per cubic metre for one hour, more than the 143 micrograms per cubic metre averaged in Delhi, the sixth most polluted city in the world, and far higher than the central London average of 15 micrograms per cubic metre. Ranked on the US air quality index, a measure applied to city pollution, the indoor air was either “unhealthy” or “very unhealthy” for nearly two hours. The levels breached World Health Organization guidelines of 10 micrograms per cubic metre for eight-and-a-half-hours. The simple act of making toast sent PM2.5 levels up to 30 micrograms per cubic metre. While gas flames and charred food churned out fine soot particles, others came from animal fat, cooking oils, and grime in the oven and on pots and pans used in making the meal. Still more came from tiny particles of skin that the cooks and their guests shed from their clothes. “We know that inhaling particles, regardless of what they’re made of, is detrimental to health. Is it equally bad as inhaling exhaust from vehicle emissions? That we don’t know that yet,” Vance said. “This compares to a very polluted city, but what’s important to remember is that this was for a short period of time. When you live in a polluted city you’re in it for 24 hours a day.”

Instruments around and inside the test home in Austin, Texas, found that when no one was cooking, the house kept outdoor air pollution out. But during a full day of cooking, the levels of particles indoors rose to about 30 times that outside. Ian Colbeck, an expert in air pollution at the University of Essex who was not involved in the study, said he had measured particulates in his kitchen for the past 10 Christmases. “PM levels are much higher than in cities in the UK,” he said. “A roast is one of the worst ways of cooking as regards indoor air pollution.” Vance was speaking at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Washington DC where researchers highlighted the risks of indoor air pollution from cooking, home furnishings, and household products such as bleach, window sprays and paint. Unlike outdoor pollution, which is regulated, indoor pollution is not, even though people spend as much as 90% of their time indoors, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency.

In one study, researchers looked for chemical contaminants in the blood and urine of children in 190 families. Some came from homes that had sofas containing flame retardants, and had six times the levels of the chemicals in their blood than other children. When children lived in homes with vinyl flooring, levels of hormone-disrupting phthalates in their urine were 15 times higher than those found in other children. “As with any pollution there will be more susceptible groups such as the young and elderly,” said Joost de Gouw, another pollution researcher at the University of Colorado. “What’s clear is people spend a lot of time indoors and they are exposed in some cases to much higher levels than what you see outdoors.” Vance advises people open windows and use kitchen extractors to remove the invisible pollution, but said it was unclear whether fans would help, since they recirculated air without adequately filtering it. “The joke we’ve been telling each other is boil everything, avoid roasting, but it’s too delicious,” she said.

Parent and grandparent relationships play an important role in encouraging altruistic acts

Esther Muddiman

There are conflicting ideas about the role of the family in wider society. Some, particularly in the US, argue that family units are essential for a strong civil society, and make a big contribution to public life. Others – mostly in Europe – say that families act in self-interested ways.

We already know that families pass down certain traits and resources to benefit younger generations. They share skills and talents, or leave money to children and grandchildren in wills. However, our research team believes that young people's relationships with their parents and grandparents can actually help explain their participation in activities that help other people and the environment.

For our newly published study, we asked 976 teenagers aged 13-14 in Wales about their activities to help others, and their family relationships too. More than a quarter of teenagers in the study said that they did at least one activity to help other people or the environment often. While nearly two thirds said they did at least one activity either often or sometimes. Of these, the most popular activity was providing support for people who are not friends or relatives – for example helping out at a local foodbank – followed by giving time to a charity or cause.

The teenagers also expressed a range of different motivations for their involvement. The most popular response was to improve things or help people (43%), followed by personal enjoyment (28%). This suggests that they were inspired by a mixture of self-oriented and selfless goals, which is also reflected in the fact that a third of them said their involvement had been personally beneficial and had benefited others and the environment too.

The young people we spoke to identified family as the most important route into participation, and told us that their parents played a strong role in encouraging them to get involved in voluntary activities. Family was more important than both school and friends for these teens. Over half of them said that their parents encouraged their involvement – higher than all other options including friends (29%) and teachers (24%).

We also found that the better the relationship that teenagers felt they had with their mothers, the more likely they were to take part in activities to help other people and the environment. Having a good relationship with a close grandparent also seemed to be important. From what we found, the benefits of having a positive relationship with both of these family members doubled the likelihood that these young people would engage in activities to help others and gave a dual benefit (compared to if they only had a positive relationship with one family member).

When asked to focus on the grandparent they saw most often, four out of five of the teenage group said it was a female grandparent (mother's mother or father's father). This finding gives strong support to arguments made by feminist scholars for better recognition of the role of women in civil society, and of the domestic or personal domain as a political space. It is puzzling that the influence of fathers isn't visible in our data, especially as our follow up interviews with parents suggest that both mothers and fathers encourage their children to participate in activities to help others. This is something that we will need to investigate further.

Overall, our study reveals that parents seem to play a key role in providing a route into civic participation and encouraging young people to get involved. This link between family ties and civic participation suggests that some of the values that get passed between parents and their children might aid their participation in activities to help others and the environment. In this sense, it indicates that there could be an intergenerational transmission of civic participation.

Our research findings also undermine the idea that strong families do not contribute to civil society, and suggests instead that strong bonds forged within the family can lead to linkages outside it. This undermines the separation of "public" and "private" that runs through European conceptualisations of civil society.

Our data shows that family is far more important in developing a propensity for engagement in civil society than is commonly understood, even more important than school, perhaps. More research is needed but these results call for a re-evaluation of the family home as a potential site of civil society engagement, and a wider recognition of the role of women in civil society too.

What France Has Money For

Michaël Foessel and Etienne Ollion

PARIS -- For Georges Duby, a historian of the Middle Ages, one of the defining features of a historic event, or "évènement," is that it triggers waves of commentary that bring out what had been kept unspoken. The fire that broke out at Notre-Dame this week is a historic event of our times. Monday night, even before the flames had been quenched, while we were still wondering whether the cathedral's two towers would withstand the fire, the incident had already become a symbol -- many symbols. It was a sinister omen of France's decline, some promptly said. For a columnist in these pages, it was a sign of the fragility of Western democracy and civilization.

On Tuesday, the environmental activist Greta Thunberg, seeing in the building's embers the image of an incandescent Earth, told the European Parliament in Strasbourg, "Notre-Dame will be rebuilt," and urged the legislators to save the planet, too, by shifting gears to "cathedral mode." President Emmanuel Macron solemnly declared: "What we saw last night in Paris is our capacity to mobilize, to unite, in order to overcome." Notre-Dame, he vowed, would be restored within five years. Celebrating the Paris firefighters' heroic work in bringing the blaze under control, the president said on Thursday, "The state and public authorities often are criticized. But in moments such as these, the entire nation knows how to organize itself." In no time, it seemed, the charred cathedral became a rallying cry for bringing together a fractured country -- a way for France "to find again the thread of its national project," Mr. Macron said.

But how could one not see behind these grand pronouncements that this fire already was obscuring a slower but vaster one that has been burning steadily for months, on occasion literally torching cars and upscale Parisian restaurants? Since November, the so-called Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) have demonstrated throughout the country against the rise in inequalities and the drop in living standards, claiming as well that French democracy is not representative enough.

History has a sense of irony. France's most famous monument ignited Monday evening just as Mr. Macron was expected to address the country on television and explain how his government proposed to put out that social brazier. His speech was postponed, understandably, and for a few hours much of France focused its attention on Paris' historic center, which it usually turns over to tourists.

But history also is cruel. Only a little bit of information about the government's proposed reforms has been disclosed, and it's difficult to imagine that it will have any of the soothing, much less redemptive, effects the government may have hoped for. If anything, the Macron administration's continued vagueness about major demands -- a wealth tax, greater democratic participation -- suggests that it is still dead-set on reducing deficits and refusing to put pressure on the rich, that it will not bow to the Yellow Vests' demands for fiscal justice. Yet even as the government was whimpering, in effect, that the country's coffers were running low, money came pouring in for a cathedral.

In a matter of hours, François-Henri Pinault, one of France's wealthiest men, offered 100 million euros to rebuild Notre-Dame; Bernard Arnault, who heads the luxury brand LVMH, offered 200 million. Within less than two days, about 850 million euros (more than \$960 million) had been pledged for the cathedral's reconstruction. A journalist sarcastically asked Philippe Martinez, the leader of a major labor union, whether the flood of donations was evidence of trickle-down economics. "Money doesn't trickle down for everything," Mr. Martinez answered, adding that the outburst of generosity from French billionaires only exposed the inequalities that divide the country.

Such gifts aren't just a private matter; they cost the state, too. For one thing, and certainly in the eyes of some Yellow Vests, these philanthropists are offering only a small fraction of enormous fortunes they have amassed partly by avoiding taxes otherwise needed to fund basic public services. And since their proposed gifts are destined for France's national heritage, the bulk of them could benefit from major tax exemptions -- up to 90 percent if a proposed bill presented this week were to pass. A number of state bodies also have offered to contribute, drawing on strained budgets. Laurent Wauquiez, who heads both the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region and the conservative party Les Républicains, has offered two million euros in public funds. Other local governments have followed suit.

The rush to rebuild Notre-Dame, however well-intentioned, risks only underscoring the government's slowness in helping the people whose lives, some say, have been ruined by neoliberalism and globalization. France's elites quote Victor Hugo in the name of saving the cathedral he wrote about, apparently forgetting that he also wrote "Les Misérables." It is a sad, and dangerous, signal to be sending. That other, greater, fire still needs putting out.

The New York Times, 20 April 2019

Nearly a million more young adults now live with parents

Aamna Mohdin

Nearly a million more young adults are living with their parents than was the case two decades ago, a study has found. The figures, in a report by the cross-party thinktank Civitas, will fuel concerns that too little is being done to protect young people from Britain's housing crisis. The proportion of people aged 20 to 34 who live with their parents has risen from 19.48% in 1997, equating to 2.4 million people, to 25.91% in 2017, equating to 3.4 million.

The report says the findings have profound implications for the government's housebuilding targets. It also notes a "collapse in single living" among those who do move out of their parental home, as young people are now far more likely to be living with partners or friends. "The data is bearing out what we feel anecdotally to be the case," said Daniel Bentley, the editorial director of Civitas. "Younger people are beginning to live with their parents for longer and are finding it more difficult to move out. If they do move out, they're often living with larger groups of people."

This has implications for how many homes will need to be built in the future. The government develops its housebuilding targets using household projections, calculating how many households are likely to be formed in the future by looking at patterns over recent decades. Bentley said if the government failed to acknowledge the drop in the number of young people moving out or living alone, "it will reinforce an undersupply for housing for decades".

The growth in young people living with their parents has been strongest in London, which saw a 41% increase between 1996-98 and 2014-15. "Jeffrey Patrick", 26, who asked for his real name not to be published, moved back in with his parents in north London six months ago after struggling to find a stable job. After six months of being on employment support allowance, he was told he no longer qualified for the benefit. "The most frustrating things about it is, one, you're 26, you're meant to have achieved so much at life, but you're back at home living with your parents. It's also unfair on my parents – they have to have a 26-year-old move back into the house, which creates all sorts of pressures on them," he said. "It has a massive effect on your social life. It's difficult to sustain a relationship when you're next door to your parents, you're geographically distant from your friends and you're in an area that's really grim."

Umar Parkes, 22, an estate agent who lives with his mother in London, said: "The figures don't surprise me. I almost feel like I'm born a generation too late ... I don't know anyone, from the top of my head, younger than 30 who has purchased a property." Parkes said he was keen to move out but could not afford to do so. "It's going to take a long time to save up," he said.

The shadow housing secretary, John Healey, said: "These figures should shake the government out of their complacency. Home ownership has been in freefall for younger people and the number of new genuinely low-cost homes being built has fallen to near-record lows."

Nick Ballard, a national organiser for Acorn, a renters' union, said: "Uncapped rents and house prices force young people into a kind of 'suspended animation' where they are unable to take many of the steps associated with adulthood. "The independence and confidence that comes with making your own home are denied them, often accompanied with increased dependence on parents, leading to increased stress and mental health issues for all concerned."

Liz Emerson, co-founder of the Intergenerational Foundation, said the report's findings were a symptom of a housing crisis that prevented young people from striking out on their own. "For young people this means a loss of independence and shattered dreams and reflects that the older generation own more than their fair share of housing wealth," she said.

The fear that lies behind aggressive masculinity

George Monbiot

What strikes me most is the fragility. Gillette makes an advertisement calling on men to challenge abusive behaviour, and thousands furiously proclaim they will never use its products again. The American Psychological Association (APA) issues new clinical guidelines advising that a masculinity characterised by dominance, aggression and emotional repression can be harmful to men's mental health, and the world's conservative media falls into a collective faint. So much for the strong and silent types. If "real men", according to the men's rights movement, are tough and commanding, why are the exponents of this doctrine so easily discomposd? Why does the slightest challenge to the norms they proclaim – by a razor ad or an obscure academic body – trigger this frenzied testeria?

In thinking about male identities, I'm struck by the inadequacy of the terms we use. The notion that men should be distant, domineering and self-seeking is often described as toxic masculinity, but this serves only to alienate those who might need most help. Its proponents describe their behavioural ideal as traditional masculinity, but conceptions of maleness, like conceptions of the family, have changed radically from century to century. In the furious response to the advertisement and the new guidelines, in the enthusiasm for the psychologist Jordan Peterson and similar macho ideologues, what I perceive is a fearful masculinity.

If you are at ease with yourself, you don't feel the need to call other men cucks. If you are strong, you don't feel threatened by strong women. In a fascinating article last year, Pankaj Mishra argued that perceived crises of masculinity often accompany anxiety about economic or national decline. Just as US humiliation in Vietnam stimulated an appetite for "such cartoon visions of masculinity as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger", 9/11 helped to spread morbid fears about the emasculation of western powers, and the need to assert a new ideal of manliness. The perceived loss of both political and gender dominance has provoked some men to respond with homophobia and misogyny in a crude attempt to restore male authority.

As the APA guidelines reveal, fearful masculinity inflicts tremendous harm on men as well as women. The men who are most exercised about their manliness, a 2011 study suggests, are half as likely to seek preventive healthcare as those who are less anxious about male identity. They are also less willing to request psychotherapy. The APA links these attitudes to the far higher rates of suicide among men than among women.

In researching both prostate cancer and loneliness, I discovered the extent to which manly reserve kills. Fears we cannot bring ourselves to name soon grow into terrible secrets. As they grow, they become still harder to share, and therefore to assimilate and endure. Because men have often been unwilling to discuss an issue that threatens their virility as well as their lives, funding for prostate cancer research has lagged behind the money allocated for other malignancies. As with breast cancer, effective treatment requires the breaking of taboos.

One of the many he-men responding to the new guidelines, David French, writing in the National Review, asserts that becoming a "grown man" requires "oppressive" discipline, aggression and risk-taking. But to me, growing up – whether as a man or a woman – means abandoning anger, aggression and the need to dominate. It means learning to talk about fear, loss, joy and love. It means learning both to listen and to share, to name your troubles and engage with other people's. You need to be strong to admit your weaknesses. In admitting them, you build your strength.

The age-old mistake, which has stunted countless lives, is the assumption that because physical hardship in childhood makes you physically tough, emotional hardship must make you emotionally tough. It does the opposite. It implants a vulnerability that can require a lifetime of love and therapy to repair and that, untreated, leads to an escalating series of destructive behaviours. Emotionally damaged men all too often rip apart their own lives, and those of their partners and children. I see both physical fitness and emotional strength as virtues, but they are acquired by entirely different means.

Those who deny their own feelings tend to deny other people's. Some men clearly find it easier to order a drone strike, separate children from their families or build a wall than to admit and address their own vulnerabilities. There is, as Madeleine Somerville has discussed in the Guardian, a powerful association between perceived masculinity and a lack of concern for the living world: real men don't recycle. A study in the Journal of Consumer Research suggests that meat-eating is strongly associated with conceptions of maleness, which inhibit a switch towards a plant-based diet, essential to avoid environmental breakdown. What sort of a man are you if you have to go to such lengths to prove your masculinity? The confident construction of identity does not require crude cultural markers, but emotional literacy and honest self-appraisal. The more we proclaim our strength and dominance, the weaker we reveal ourselves to be.

Facebook has built a Frankenstein's monster. When will it admit that?

David Carroll

“We need to do more.” This is the now standard refrain from big tech’s executives caught in yet another civil rights scandal or breathtaking data breach. Sometimes I wonder if they need to do less. Less invasive surveillance into our lives. Less PR-managed spin. Less dissembling before lawmakers. Less lobbying against regulation. Fewer reasons to quit, or wish you could quit.

This week marks the release of two reports commissioned by the Senate select committee on intelligence studying the special counsel-indicted Internet Research Agency’s digital influence campaign. Two groups of independent researchers analyzed data provided to Congress by Facebook, Google and Twitter and came to parallel conclusions. The report by New Knowledge with support from the intrepid researcher Jonathan Albright, who singlehandedly caught Facebook downplaying the scope and scale of the operation, offers clear evidence that the tech companies provided the absolute bare minimum of datasets necessary to study the attack. In particular, Facebook still refuses to disclose the conversion pathways of American users through its targeting and measurement systems, the very analytics it sells to advertisers to prove campaign effectiveness.

This would tell us with considerable precision just how many Americans were targeted and influenced by the hostile foreign operation. There is no evidence that votes were swayed because no control group experiments were conducted, but ample evidence indicates that people engaged deeply with the troll factory’s disinformation, were duped into attending false events, purchased bogus merchandise, and fell into kompromat traps where they divulged incriminating personal information to foreign agents impersonating fellow citizens.

A second report issued by the Computational Propaganda Group at the Oxford University Internet Institute independently corroborates the New Knowledge report, but offers rigorously analyzed details of the astonishing scale of Instagram “meme warfare” offering charts that show how that activity dwarfs the paid ads Facebook hoped we would dismiss and forget.

The OII’s report also helpfully maps the quantity and depth of engagement chronologically to key moments in the political cycle, furthering the evidence that Putin’s digital propaganda agency deliberately engaged in an agile campaign responsive to primary, debate and the news cycle itself. Indeed, big tech’s tools are explicitly designed to target and test on precise segmentations to sell ads for ski vacations and hair product alike while promising the advertiser it will eliminate the waste inherent in the advertising of the 20th century. The Kremlin used our US marketing machine as it was intended, to divide us into many different Americas useful for merchandising and eliminating wasted ad spending.

Facebook’s Chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, issued a statement in response to this week’s Senate intel committee reports. She appeared to be alarmed by how a hostile adversary had focused heavily on attacking the African American community and promised to “do more”. She didn’t suggest that being able to target people by their political beliefs, ethnicity, or sexual orientation is a dangerous proposition and it is time to radically rethink how people can be micro-targeted on Facebook. She didn’t apologize for being many months late on rolling out a new privacy center to revamp controls to be in better compliance to European data protection laws and norms (GDPR) and the looming showdown in Washington DC over an adaptation of data privacy protections for the United States.

It’s clear that Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg believe they can maneuver their way around each scandal as it unfolds, whether it’s another catastrophic data breach (we also learned last week that millions of users had their private photos leaked to unknown third parties), an attack on our democracy, or systemic human rights crises. They can’t admit that they have built a Frankenstein monster. Former students of mine work at Facebook and Google. For many who earn a master’s from the design and technology graduate program where I teach, Facebook and Google are the ultimate jobs to land. But after this tumultuous year of rethinking big tech, I wonder if these jobs will remain the most coveted careers, despite the inescapable dominance of this duopoly in most people’s lives. Attitudes have profoundly shifted in a short period of time, evidenced by the reactions to the parade of scandals that have emerged from Silicon Valley over the course of 2018. The industry itself prefers to gather data (or analytics, in their speak) to conduct surveillance on our behavior rather than survey what the press and our social media chatter indicates (“enough is enough”).

To them, people say they want their privacy back and greater competition in the technology industry but we act otherwise. We still use these platforms, enjoying the conveniences only having to switch between as many apps as we have fingers on one hand to do our daily lives online. We may want to explore alternatives, but do any really exist?

Filthy rich have a distorted world view

Rick Whelan

Did you ever notice how too much money almost always spoils everything? Well, let's rephrase that. Rather let's say that a foolish application of too much money spoils everything. In this instance, I'm referring to the current college-admission scandal rocking our neighbours to the south. It seems that certain very wealthy parents took extraordinary measures (and spent obscene amounts of cash) to get their sadly under-qualified kids into prestigious institutes of higher learning.

But their reason for doing this was ill-advised from the get-go. They must have realized, after a lifetime of observing their kids, that little Johnny and Joanna weren't academically remarkable in any way. Perhaps a wiser course of action would be to encourage their offspring to attend less prestigious schools. Or perhaps they could enrol for a semester or two in a junior college in the hope that they would thereby discover their true passion and proceed from there. Or (considering some parents spent well over a million dollars to fix the entrance applications) they could simply have taken that money and set their kid up in a convenience store or shoeshine business and let them figure things out from there.

But noooooo! These idiot parents, in many instances, were at the top of their fields and (perhaps because their egos demanded it) their kids had to be equally successful. Some flew their kids across country so they could take college-entrance tests with a co-operating (and well-paid) proctor who was willing to feed the little darlings the answers. Still others have been accused of staging (via Photoshop) pictures of their kids excelling in certain sports (rowing and soccer among them) thereby qualifying for an athletic scholarship, even though the little ones had never participated in an organized version of said sport in their entire lives. The chutzpah is mind-boggling! All this, U.S. federal prosecutors allege, so their kiddies could gain entry to elite American colleges. As if, once these unremarkable scholars got into Yale or Stanford, their success in the world would be assured. I think someone forgot to tell them that once admitted into elite universities, students are expected to perform with distinction. Oops! So far, thirty-three parents face conspiracy-related charges in a sweeping investigation known as Operation Varsity Blues.

According to a news report, one accused parent wrote in an affidavit that "it's just so hard for these kids to get into prestigious schools." Boo-hoo! Please don't think that what I'm about to say is at all bragging. But I got into an elite college, the Ivy League undergraduate school of Columbia University. I did pretty well in high school and my guidance counsellor suggested I apply to three tiers of schools ... a few elite institutions, maybe one or two middle-of-the-road schools and perhaps the state facility, the University of Connecticut. Truth be told, I got shot down at most of my elite choices but for some reason Columbia seemed to like me. And I liked it! During high school I'd developed a love affair with the city of New York and I'm sure that had a lot to do with my ultimate choice. But I honestly don't remember there being a rabid desperation about which school I would attend. My parents supported my attending a decent college, but the cost back then, although considerable, was not what it is today.

According to current figures, it cost upwards of \$250,000 to attend an elite university for four years. I knew my father was eager that I attend college, not having had the opportunity himself. But he was not prepared to spend that kind of money! For some reason, many parents today equate the attendance at a prestigious school of learning with a person's success in life and they are willing to mortgage their lives to the hilt in order for their offspring to be put on the road to fame and fortune. William Rick Singer, who headed an agency that purported to help students gain entry into elite schools, boasted to prospective clients that he had "created a side door" that would allow wealthy families to gain entry into top U.S. colleges. This "side door" was a sophisticated criminal enterprise that was made to appear as a charity that claimed to help "disadvantaged youth." But in fact, according to court documents, Singer used parents' donations to bribe college entrance administrators, coaches and other high school officials.

If these foolish parents are ultimately found guilty, I know of a perfect punishment. Have them serve at least six months serving lunches at a school cafeteria in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. Let them be exposed to what the average Joe and Jane must endure in order to succeed in this life.

International Mother Language Day

There are about 6,500 languages in the world, but did you know that a language disappears and dies every two weeks? International Mother Language Day, on 21 February, is a day to celebrate and protect all the languages of the world.

A language is much more than just a way of communicating. Language, and particularly our mother tongue, is an important part of our culture. Some people even think that our language can change how we see the world.

A special day

In 1999, a special day to promote mother languages was created: International Mother Language Day. The day was also intended to raise awareness of just how many languages we have on this planet (around 6,500) and to protect them. The idea for this special day came from the country of Bangladesh, and 21 February is also the day when Bangladeshis mark the day that the Bangla language was officially accepted. Bangladeshis celebrate both days by holding literary competitions and singing songs.

Different themes each year

Every year, UNESCO chooses a different theme and holds different events at its headquarters in Paris, France. For example, in 2005, there was a focus on Braille and sign languages, and in 2017, a focus on how multilingual education could help the world to have a better future.

Other countries have also set up special projects to mark this day. For example, in 2014, the Indian government released digital learning materials for schools and colleges in the 22 most widely spoken Indian languages. It is estimated that there are around 750 languages or dialects in India, and, sadly, that around 250 more languages have been lost in the last 50 years.

The importance of the mother tongue in education

The Director General of UNESCO, Audrey Azouley, pointed out in a recent speech on International Mother Language Day that mother languages 'shape millions of developing young minds'. She believes that children learn best in their mother tongue, and that it is important that children should have this opportunity. Around the world, 40 per cent of the population does not have access to education in a language they can understand or speak. Using certain languages can make it easier, or much harder, to do well in life.

Language goes to the heart

Nelson Mandela once said, 'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.' At least 43 per cent of all languages are endangered, and fewer than 100 of the world's languages are used in the digital world. Most internet communication is in one of the following languages: English, Chinese Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Indonesian, Malayan, Japanese, Russian and German. But everyone has the right to use their own mother language, and to keep the memories, traditions and ways of thinking that their language represents. And this is what International Mother Language Day is all about.

What would happen if we banned work emails at the weekend?

Chris Stokel-Walker

For the average working person, there's no greater feeling than powering down your computer and kissing goodbye to your avalanche of work emails for the day. If we're lucky enough to disconnect from the job on evenings and weekends, we're overjoyed to leave work email and the stress that comes with it in the office.

But experts say we're increasingly failing to do so, instead bringing the burden home with us and fielding emails during our free time. Unsurprisingly, this routine has some serious consequences.

Working abnormal or long hours has long been linked with depression, anxiety and even coronary heart disease. Crucially, the importance of weekend recovery has also been correlated with weekly job performance and personal initiative. While further research revealed psychological detachment during off-work time, reduced emotional exhaustion caused by high job demands and helped people stay engaged.

So, if we know all this, it begs the question: why are we still letting work invade our precious weekends?

"It started when I lacked experience, I feared I might miss important information," says Romain Gonord, a technical expert for Smile, an IT service provider with offices across France. "Now, it is a reflex, like checking my Facebook or Twitter timeline."

Some feel this shift is just a natural evolution of the workplace and a result of our stubborn inability to unplug. Others find it more sinister.

Last year France introduced a law giving some workers at companies with 50 or more employees the ability to negotiate the responsibility to check emails outside standard working hours. Xavier Alas Luquetas, chairman of Eléas, is positive about the change. "The right to not answer emails or professional requests outside of the office (not during working time) is gradually gaining ground in people's minds and also into practical reality in France," he says.

Meanwhile, the move sparked change in Germany, too, although it depends which sector you're working in. Auto maker Volkswagen was one of the earliest adopters of a ban on out-of-work emails, configuring servers so that emails would only be sent to employees' phones for half an hour before the start and after the end of the working day – and not during weekends

Samantha Ruppel was given a work laptop that she appreciated, but also felt could be a millstone, chaining her to her desk remotely. Many of her friends work in Germany's banking and financial sectors, and much of the chat at weekend parties is about work.

"They don't have access to their emails at the weekend and find it frustrating," she says. "But I think it's good: they could work 24 hours-a-day." During the week, she says "they come home, eat their dinner then check their emails again. If they had the chance, they'd do it at weekends: it's a competitive world, where they're always trying to be faster and better than their competition."

Today work emails are just a tap of a smartphone away. "The smartphone changed everything." Even if you're not a compulsive checker of work emails, simply having the ability to check them has an impact.

But a blanket ban on emails outside working hours isn't universally welcomed.

Cox believes we've swung so far away from traditional 9-to-5 working that implementing strict "timetables" for checking emails would be as vehemently opposed in the UK or the US as it was supported in France.

There's one further concern, too.

"It's unenforceable," says Cooper. "If you're feeling job insecure and there's high unemployment like they have in France, are you going to go to your employer and say, 'I'm sorry, I'm taking you to court?'"

Life admin is boring and ceaseless but these tricks can help

Oliver Burkeman

It's helpful to have a reminder that life admin exists, in great quantity – and that living as if it doesn't is a recipe for unnecessary stress

Early in her new book, the American law professor Elizabeth Emens admits she nearly didn't get it written thanks to the crushing weight of what she calls "life admin". Any writer could sympathise, but the irony is that her book is about life admin. I suspect you know what she means by the term. Life admin is all the irritating nonsense that's neither paid work, nor housework or childcare, but that's an inescapable feature of 21st-century existence – from the paperwork triggered by a big event (marriage, parenthood, a house move, bereavement) to the mundanities of online banking, travel planning, and all the other so-called shadow work we do, as customers of companies who used to pay people to do it. Life admin is boring, ceaseless, and it warps relationships. "Admin is not just a burden on marriage," one of her interviewees glumly explains. "Admin is marriage."

A big part of the problem is that life admin is invisible: we forget it exists, and the world doesn't value the labour involved, so it's almost impossible to factor it in when you're planning your day, or debating whether to take on a new commitment. It's apparently invisible even to the authors of most time management books, which is what makes Emens's book, *The Art Of Life Admin*, so refreshing. I've lost count of the times I've been advised to strip my to-do list down, so that my discretionary time contains only deeply meaningful activities. But that's like a follower of Marie Kondo inspecting a toilet plunger and asking "Does this spark joy?" The answer is no; but chuck it out, and you'll be in trouble.

Emens doesn't pretend self-help tips can solve the scourge; it's a societal problem, especially in its outsized impact on certain populations, such as people claiming benefits. But she has solid advice. Don't assume that because someone else wants something done, it needs doing. Schedule admin for when you don't have energy for focused work. Use strategic delay (some things sort themselves out), and train friends and family to recognise when "Google it yourself!" is the answer to their question. But her book's greatest service is the sheer reminder that life admin exists, in great quantity – and that living as if it doesn't is a recipe for unnecessary stress.

My own life admin breakthrough came six months after our son was born, when I realised I was constantly haunted by about 40 "urgent" tasks, of the "buy a new nappy bin" variety, that never got done. I eventually saw the contradiction here: the definition of an urgent task is that something bad will happen if you don't do it quickly; but I'd failed to do these tasks for months, and nothing bad had happened. Of course, some things become urgent through neglect. (Getting a dental checkup isn't urgent, until suddenly it is.) But I had to face facts: most of those tasks weren't urgent at all.

Now, I keep them on a separate list, out of sight and mind, and schedule time to power through them every two or three weeks. They get done belatedly, which is better than never. The only downside is that the better I get at life admin, the more of our household's life admin I seem to end up doing.

Venice Is Not Disneyland: The City Is Going To Charge Tourists With An Entry Fee

Annalisa Girardi

Venice's lagoon, with its charming waterways and maze of narrow passages, is the favorite destination of millions of tourists from all over the world. From this year, it might cost a little more to visit the Italian city which, fearing to look and be perceived more and more as a theme park, decided to put an entry ticket.

Every year Venice gets overrun by tourists, around 30 million people invading the ancient city built on numerous little islands in the Venetian lagoon. Last year, during peak periods of the high season, gates were installed at key sightseeing spots, Saint Mark's square and the Rialto bridge, to reduce congestion and to regulate touristic flows. When there were too many people and the sites risked dangerous overcrowding, the gates closed, allowing in only local residents or people with hotel reservations. It created a little relief during high season cramped days, but the measure was far from solving all the problems the city is suffering because of mass tourism.

Over the years, locals have protested against an industry that, continuously bringing floods of people, went from sustaining the city to suffocating it. Over-tourism is not only having an impact on the fascinating and unique character of the city, but it is also getting harder and harder to bear logistically, especially in such peculiar conditions when everything has to enter and exit by boat. The island city depends much on tourism and has long been cultivating it with its carnival, film festival, art exhibitions, glass handicraft and gondola rides, but it will perish from the very same source if this does not undergo regulation.

The mass arrival of cruise ships, which giant silhouettes clash with the surrounding picturesque landscape of the lagoon, has deteriorated residents' quality of life. Not only the large number of tourists has damaged the environment, ruining ancient monuments, undermining the city's fragile facilities and leaving a trail of litter, but it has also driven residents away because of the higher and higher rents and generally rose the cost of living. Locals are slowly becoming unable to pay extremely pricy rentals, leaving the field to companies like Airbnb or Booking to lease places to tourists who are willing and more easily adapt to rising tariffs.

The city's mayor, Luigi Brugnaro, has been a big supporter of an entry fee to Venice, particularly aiming at those day-trippers arriving on cruise ships that spend not even 24 hours in the lagoon, generating an irrelevant income but creating a lot of trash, pollution and congestion. While campaigning for the tax Brugnaro said it will at least help to keep the city clean, a job that becomes almost impossible at the top of touristic flows.

The measure has not been enforced yet, but it is part of the 2019 Italian Budget Law. In this year's budget, the Italian government has allowed local authorities in Venice to implement the tax on tourists who will reach the island city by boat, bus, train or other means of transport. Most likely the disembarkation contribution will be incorporated into the transportation costs; it will then be up to bus or train companies to transfer the amount to local institutions. The Budget Law has authorized other touristic areas which are being endangered by the industry, like the Elba island, part of the Tuscan archipelago and the Aeolian islands, to do the same.

The admittance tax is going to oscillate between different prices, depending on the time of the years. Estimations predict that it could be around €2.5 (\$2.8) / €5 (\$5.8) per person in the off-season, reaching up to the maximum of €10 (\$11.5) during peak season. It is supposed to come into force by summer 2019.

View on consumerism and Marie Kondo: stuff this society of excess

Editorial Board

The popularity of her book and TV show reflect our discomfort with a culture that encourages non-stop acquisition. But for many the problem remains owning too little, not too much

How much is enough? The question seems unlikely to trouble Ken Griffin, the hedge fund founder who has reportedly bought America's most expensive home for \$238m. His purchase of the 24,000 sq ft New York penthouse is said to have come days after he spent \$122m on a London mansion, and a few months after he acquired his fourth luxury property in Chicago. He is said to own nine more in the US.

Meanwhile Marie Kondo, who urges people to discard anything which does not "spark joy" (so much for tea towels and ice scrapers), is surfing a fresh wave of popularity thanks to her Netflix series. US thrift stores report a surge in donations. Yet while her message is of elegant sufficiency, the success of her \$8m empire seems an equally potent symbol of late capitalism. Upwards of £250 will buy you an introductory session with a certified KonMari consultant, to help you throw out things you heedlessly bought. As critics point out, this is a first-world solution to a first-world problem: it's easy to discard possessions if you can afford to replace them at any time. And some see such "home detox" programmes as encouraging an unsustainable, throwaway mindset.

The show's appeal may reflect shrinking home sizes (at least for non-billionaires) and the rise of Instagram, with its unrealistic, but envy-inducing, Scandi-style white spaces. But above all, it has been perfectly timed to capture the "new year, new you" impulse for self-improvement: "Tidy your space, transform your life," her website promises.

For some, watching may be a displacement activity for tidying rather than a spur to it. For others, decluttering stands in for a greater change: having established carefully folded order in their sock drawer, they may not feel the need to tackle deeper-rooted confusion elsewhere in their life. Some of her clients may just make space for fresh purchases, in an endless binge-purge cycle.

But an apparently trivial reassertion of control can pave the way for more substantive shifts. In an overwhelming world, where we are encouraged to measure ourselves by belongings and projects, letting go can be liberating. Some feel it more keenly than others. Research suggests that women are more likely to be stressed by clutter than men, probably because they are more likely to deal with it, since they shoulder a greater share of household chores.

Few, thankfully, are as anxious as Ms Kondo about the state of their homes. There is serenity to be found in accepting that life itself is messy. But her central message is of mindful possession and appreciation: focusing on what truly matters to us. Those who seem to heed it least are those who have acquired most. There is something strangely joyless about the shopping lists of the super-rich and their aspiration inflation, though no violin is required for them as the gulf between the haves and have-nots yawns larger and more conspicuous by the day. If they cannot see the excess, it is glaring to the rest of us. Enough is enough.

Meet entomologist Barbie: still white, pink and unattainably thin

Coco Khan

Another day, another faceless corporation attempting to capitalise on the drive for gender equality without doing anything meaningful at all. Today's own goal comes from Mattel toys – its latest gimmick revolves around everyone's favourite childhood instrument of patriarchy, Barbie.

The new range, in collaboration with National Geographic, sees Barbie get in touch with her scientific side: there is an astrophysicist Barbie, a polar marine biologist Barbie, and my particular favourite, wildlife conservationist Barbie (because nothing quite says "save the planet" like a bit of mass-produced plastic).

Entomologist Barbie is dressed in a pink gilet, clutching a magnifying glass, a blue butterfly daintily resting on her hand – just like Disney's Snow White. There is not a bit of mud in sight. Because female entomologists collect butterflies – not cockroaches or weevils or fleas or giant beetles or spiders. Mattel's attempt at wokeness is hollow; it says you can be anything you want to be, as long as you remain a white, skinny girl, with a full face of makeup and a forced smile.

Mattel claims its intention was to stimulate young girls' interest in Stem (science, technology, engineering and maths). But even a child's imagination would struggle to see a future version of themselves in this unattainable Aryan body. Studies have shown that playing with a Barbie (the study used a Doctor Barbie and a Fashion Barbie) lowers a girl's career expectations. Children do not live in a vacuum – they can read between the lines of what it is that makes Barbie so darn special, and it isn't her job. Instead, they will learn they will never measure up. No one could: her dimensions would make her 7ft tall and probably unable to stand against the full weight of her breasts.

This isn't the first time Barbie has come under fire for its shallow, tokenistic approach. There was the computer engineering Barbie book in which Barbie relied solely on men to solve her tech issues. Or last year's "Sheroes" collection, inspired by real-life inspirational women (such as the Olympic fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first hijabi Barbie) and still managed to homogenise them into portrayals of unachievable, conventional standards of white beauty.

Even the "bigger" Barbies are still thin in comparison to real women, and although some racial diversity has been achieved in the black Barbies, these dolls still mostly feature light skin, westernised faces and straightened hair. Insultingly, the Frida Kahlo Barbie (which her family sought an injunction against) did not don the artist's iconic unibrow. A doll designed by a multinational corporation and touted to young girls across the globe behind eye-watering marketing budgets can never be anything but a triumph of white patriarchy and capitalism. History has shown us that whenever Barbie changes, it is always too feeble – and always too overdue.

Because we excel against tough odds

Laverne Cox

"A voice like yours is heard once in a hundred years", Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini told Marian Anderson after he heard her sing during a European concert tour. The brilliant black singer had traveled to Europe in the 1930s to avoid the racial prejudice she faced in America. During her European concert tour, the operatic contralto became a sensation. But when she returned to the U.S., she was often not able to perform for segregated audiences. She was denied entry to many restaurants and hotels in the cities she toured. She sometimes had to iron her beautiful gowns in the alley of the hotels instead of the basement.

In 1939, her manager tried to book her a show at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. But it turned out the venue, which was run by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), only allowed white artists. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt heard that Anderson had been turned away and withdrew her membership from the DAR. Instead, she arranged for Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial.

When I need hope, I often look to history – specifically the history of black artistic excellence in America. Anderson herself was never overtly political. But there was something inherently political about a black woman singing classical music on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to 75,000 people. Her voice – and the dignity and artistry with which she performed – was a commentary on the racial politics of the time, but was also capable of transcending those politics. She continues to inspire generations of artists like me.

I'm not the only one. Leontyne Price, who turns 92 on Feb. 10, went to hear Anderson sing at a recital in Jackson, Miss., when she was 9 years old. She said she immediately told her mother. "This is it, Mama. This is what I'm going to be." In 1955, Price became the first African-American singer to appear in televised opera in an NBC production of Tosca. That's the same year Anderson broke the color barrier at the Metropolitan Opera, becoming the first black soloist at the famed opera house.

Price says her ground breaking appearance on NBC caused uproar. The South chose not to air the broadcast. Black people were rarely on television at the time and interracial marriage and dating was also illegal in many Southern states. (Price had a white leading man.) But Price says she didn't focus on any of that noise. She put all her energy into her voice and her performance. She was exceptional – so much so that when she made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1961, she received a 42-minute standing ovation, still one of the longest ovations in the history of the opera house. In 1982, Price was invited to perform for the DAR. Aware of the history, she stood there and dedicated her performance to Anderson, who 43 years earlier had been turned away by that organization. I watch the video often. I get goose bumps every time.

Anderson and Price dared to create a space for themselves that did not exist before. They show you that you can create a way when there is no way. I've always hoped that's what I would do with my life, and in some ways, I've begun to: as the first openly transgender person to be nominated for a prime-time acting Emmy, as the first to appear on the cover of this magazine. Hopefully, I, too, have opened some doors and many more will follow.

The tough times for black folks and trans folks in this country are not over. During a college tour for the past five years, I've gotten to meet hundreds of trans and LGBTQ+ students and have heard about their struggles. It is rough for a lot of them. Many can't access health care or are studying at a university that doesn't even acknowledge their identity. But they're finding ways to push back, to fight, to follow their dreams.

My ancestors went through slavery, Jim and Jane Crow, and yet managed to come out with some of the best music, art and culture that the world has ever known. So many of us have managed to excel and have love in our hearts in face of such a degradation. When I look at the history and the brilliance of African Americans, it gives me a tremendous amount of optimism with perspective. It is horrible what far too many of us have endured. But the history of black excellence in America gives us a template for how to fight – and how to not be demoralized by the fight.

— Cox is an actor, activist and producer, and the first openly transgender person to receive an Emmy nomination for acting.

Disney, Huawei and EY among worst offenders in disclosing lobbying

Jasper Jolly

Big Four accountant EY, entertainment conglomerate Disney and phone maker Huawei are reported to be among the worst offenders in a newly launched index tracking secrecy in corporate lobbying. The UK arm of Transparency International, a non-governmental organisation that campaigns against corruption, ranked 104 multinational companies, finding that four in five firms had “poor standards” in disclosing lobbying activities.

Only one of the 104 companies analysed, the pharmaceutical company GSK achieved a top rating on the A to F scale for transparency of political engagement. None of the companies analysed – ranging from US tech firms, to FTSE 100 multinationals to Asian manufacturers – reported their global spending on lobbying in 2017.

David Cameron, the former prime minister, said in 2010 that corporate lobbying would be the “next big scandal waiting to happen”. However, little has been done to enforce tougher standards, leading to a continuous stream of lobbying scandals.

Facebook scored in the second-worst band, E, but was one of the worst performers with regards to “responsible lobbying”, which includes the visibility of activities and its values when lobbying. The US social media firm on Thursday admitted it had hired lobbyists to attack George Soros, the financier and philanthropist. Amazon and Google were both rated as having poor standards on lobbying transparency. Apple achieved a C, meaning its standards are fair. EY, Disney and Huawei all fell in rank F, as did digger maker JCB, software firm Sage and chemicals firm Ineos, which is run by Jim Ratcliffe, Britain’s richest man. Car manufacturers scored particularly badly, with Ford, Honda, Nissan and Toyota all in the bottom rank. Kathryn Higgs, the director of Transparency International’s UK business integrity programme, said: “There are some pockets where it’s clear that some companies haven’t thought about managing certain risks, such as the ‘revolving door’.”

The report is highly critical of the “revolving door” between government and business, with 97 out of 104 of the firms ranking poorly on issues such as “cooling off” periods for former government ministers taking up employment in the private sector. MPs and anti-corruption campaigners have repeatedly criticised the weak controls on former politicians exercised by the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (Acoba), which is tasked with reviewing politicians’ job moves.

The revolving door is not limited to the UK, however. Members of the European parliament have no barriers to lobbying immediately after they leave politics, while the report highlights figures cited by author Mark Leibovich that in 2012 half of all retiring US congressmen went into lobbying, compared with only 3% in 1974.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy held the most meetings in 2017 with the firms monitored within government. The Department for International Trade, which was founded only in 2016, was second on the list, followed by the Treasury, according to Transparency International’s open database.

Transparency International said almost a third of companies improved their political engagement policies after being approached for data, and another 17% pledged to do so. The organisation plans to repeat the review biannually. “Companies are increasingly realising that transparency [on lobbying] is the future,” said Higgs.

A government spokeswoman said: “Since 2010 the UK has been at the forefront of opening up data to allow parliament, the public and the media to hold public bodies to account. This government openly publishes details of ministers’ external meetings on a quarterly basis.” She added: “Transparency is crucial for accountability, delivering the best value for money, cutting waste and inefficiency and ensuring every pound of taxpayers’ money is spent in the best possible way.”

Honda said in a statement: “Our engagement with local and international governments and political organisations is carried out in compliance with all relevant laws and regulations. Honda will continue to work closely with industry groups and political stakeholders in this spirit. Toyota, which also ranks in the lowest category, said it wanted to be “a good corporate citizen” and build “positive relationships with all stakeholders, including shareholders, customers, business partners, local communities, and employees”. It added: “The guiding principles at Toyota state that Toyota shall ‘honour the language and spirit of the law of every nation and undertake open and fair business activities to be a good corporate citizen of the world’. Toyota believes that by adhering to this principle in its actions, it can fulfil its corporate social responsibility and ensure compliance.”

'Panda Diplomacy': A \$24 Million Zoo Enclosure Angers Some

Lisa Abend

COPENHAGEN -- It was designed by Bjarke Ingels, the renowned Danish architect, and cost \$24 million to build. It was inaugurated by Queen Margrethe II, Denmark's reigning monarch. And it now accommodates a celebrity couple with peculiar eating habits and an almost year-round animosity toward each other. Welcome to Copenhagen Zoo's new panda house. Officials at the zoo estimate that the combination of adorable animal star power and innovative Danish design will draw an additional 400,000 visitors per year. "For such an iconic animal, we needed an iconic setting," said Bengt Holst, the zoo's director. "You wouldn't put the Mona Lisa in an ugly frame."

But not everyone is a fan of the new house, a circular enclosure in the shape of the yin and yang symbol that cost \$24 million to build and that has made front-page news in Denmark over the past weeks. Opponents believe the pandas, which are on loan from China under a 15-year agreement requiring the host to pay \$1 million annually, will limit Denmark's willingness to criticize Chinese policy. The campaign to bring the pandas to Copenhagen began in 2010, just after Denmark's parliament approved a memorandum recognizing China's sovereignty over Tibet. Although the panda house is privately funded, some also object to the project's cost. Shaped like the Chinese symbol representing opposites in balance, the enclosure has two tilting halves. Visitors can observe the pandas from above, or from a ground-level restaurant where they can dine while watching the male panda, who spends most of his waking hours scarfing down bamboo, at close range. "Normally, zoos have a front of house for the audience, and a back of house for the animals," Mr. Ingels said in an interview. "We thought we would make this 360 degrees, so that no aspect of the pandas' life was off limits."

The panda's unusual mating habits posed the main challenge for the architects. Male and female bears only mate during two or three days each year; the rest of the time, they must be kept far enough apart that they cannot see or hear one another. "We didn't want to have two separate structures," Mr. Ingels said. "And we wanted to stay away from the typical pagoda. We realized that this ancient Chinese symbol, of black and white, male and female, offered the architectural solution." A separate area within the enclosure -- normally a sort of no panda's land -- will be opened to both bears during their exceedingly brief mating season and includes trees that the female panda can climb up if her suitor is not to her liking. The rest of the year, the animals will live mostly outdoors in their separate areas, which have been landscaped to resemble the panda's two main habitats, a dry bamboo forest and a denser woodland kept misty by a fog machine.

The pandas have already proven popular -- 5,000 people showed up for Thursday's public opening, double the average attendance on that day -- but so has the structure. Karsten Ifversen, the architecture editor for the Danish newspaper Politiken, said that while pandas were "very lazy animals," the enclosure "goes in the opposite direction." "There's a lot going on everywhere you look," he said. "The architecture is almost as much an attraction as the animals." As for the cost, the pandas do not have the most expensive home in the Copenhagen zoo. The elephant enclosure, for instance, was designed by Norman Foster and cost over \$36 million.

But for critics, the panda house is not so much a feat of animal architecture with a hefty price tag than it is a signal of overly cozy ties with China. Pointing to other instances of so-called "panda diplomacy," both the far-left Unity party and the far-right Danish People's Party criticized the new enclosure as a symbol of political appeasement. "Denmark gets the pandas because we have dropped our criticism of the Chinese repression of Tibet, and because Chinese human rights violations aren't being criticized so much," Eva Flyvholm, a member of parliament for the Unity party, told the Danish television station DR.

The Danish government has welcomed this new phase in its relations with China. When the panda loan was confirmed in 2014, it was accompanied by 40 new trade agreements between the two countries. At the panda house's inauguration on Wednesday, Mette Bock, Denmark's culture minister, said in a speech that this was a project "about friendship." But outside the zoo, a few dozen protesters dressed in panda suits disagreed. Cecillie Sita, 19, and Christina Kalesh, 18, said they were protesting because they objected to Denmark "kneeling" before a country that violated human rights. They said they were disappointed by Mr. Ingels' decision to design the enclosure. "As a representative of Denmark, it would be nice if he came out in favor of human rights," Ms. Sita said. Mr. Ingels said the protesters -- and the media -- were overblowing it. "The fact is, we all collaborate with China -- just look at the phone in your pocket," he said, adding that the previous night he had seen firsthand how excited people were by an invitation to dine at eye-level with the pandas. "At the end of the day, this is about two really cute animals," he said.

Algorithms have already taken over human decision making

Dionysios Demetis,

I can still recall my surprise when a book by evolutionary biologist Peter Lawrence entitled “The making of a fly” came to be priced on Amazon at \$23,698,555.93. The steep price was actually the result of algorithms feeding off each other and spiralling out of control. It turns out, it wasn’t just sales staff being creative: algorithms were calling the shots. This eye-catching example was spotted and corrected. But what if such algorithmic interference happens all the time, including in ways we don’t even notice? If our reality is becoming increasingly constructed by algorithms, where does this leave us humans?

Inspired by such examples, my colleague Prof Allen Lee and I recently set out to explore the deeper effects of algorithmic technology in the *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*. Our exploration led us to the conclusion that, over time, the roles of information technology and humans have been reversed. In the past, we humans used technology as a tool. Now, technology has advanced to the point where it is using and even controlling us.

We humans are not merely cut off from the decisions that machines are making for us but deeply affected by them in unpredictable ways. Instead of being central to the system of decisions that affects us, we are cast out in to its environment. We have progressively restricted our own decision-making capacity and allowed algorithms to take over. We have become artificial humans, or human artefacts, that are created, shaped and used by the technology.

Examples abound. In law, legal analysts are gradually being replaced by artificial intelligence, meaning the successful defence or prosecution of a case can rely partly on algorithms. Software has even been allowed to predict future criminals, ultimately controlling human freedom by shaping how parole is denied or granted to prisoners. In the job market, excessive reliance on technology has led some of the world’s biggest companies to filter CVs through software, meaning human recruiters will never even glance at some potential candidates’ details. Not only does this put people’s livelihoods at the mercy of machines, it can also build in hiring biases that the company had no desire to implement, as happened with Amazon.

In news, what’s known as automated sentiment analysis analyses positive and negative opinions about companies based on different web sources. In turn, these are being used by trading algorithms that make automated financial decisions, without humans having to actually read the news. In fact, algorithms operating without human intervention now play a significant role in financial markets. For example, 85% of all trading in the foreign exchange markets is conducted by algorithms alone. The growing algorithmic arms race to develop ever more complex systems to compete in these markets means huge sums of money are being allocated according to the decisions of machines.

On a small scale, the people and companies that create these algorithms are able to affect what they do and how they do it. But because much of artificial intelligence involves programming software to figure out how to complete a task by itself, we often don’t know exactly what is behind the decision-making. As with all technology, this can lead to unintended consequences that may go far beyond anything the designers ever envisaged.

Take the 2010 “Flash Crash” of the Dow Jones Industrial Average Index. The action of algorithms helped create the index’s single biggest decline in its history, wiping nearly 9% off its value in minutes (although it regained most of this by the end of the day). A five-month investigation could only suggest what sparked the downturn. But the algorithms that amplified the initial problems didn’t make a mistake. There wasn’t a bug in the programming. The behaviour emerged from the interaction of millions of algorithmic decisions playing off each other in unpredictable ways, following their own logic in a way that created a downward spiral for the market.

The conditions that made this possible occurred because, over the years, the people running the trading system had come to see human decisions as an obstacle to market efficiency. Back in 1987 when the US stock market fell by 22.61%, some Wall Street brokers simply stopped picking up their phones to avoid receiving their customers’ orders to sell stocks. This started a process that, as author Michael Lewis put it in his book *Flash Boys*, “has ended with computers entirely replacing the people”.

The financial world has invested millions in superfast cables and microwave communications to shave just milliseconds off the rate at which algorithms can transmit their instructions. When speed is so important, a human being that requires a massive 215 milliseconds to click a button is almost completely redundant. Our only remaining purpose is to reconfigure the algorithms each time the system of technological decisions fails.

As new boundaries are carved between humans and technology, we need to think carefully about where our extreme reliance on software is taking us. As human decisions are substituted by algorithmic ones, and we become tools whose lives are shaped by machines and their unintended consequences, we are setting ourselves up for technological domination. We need to decide, while we still can, what this means for us both as individuals and as a society.

Seeking true happiness? Harness the power of negative thinking

André Spicer

Early on New Year's Day, I began scrolling through the messages people had left on social media. Usually you find a note of hope among popping corks and exploding fireworks. Not this year. All I found were posts like "2018 was a terrible year. Don't expect more from 2019" or "I dread the year to come".

I started to suspect that those I followed on social media were all just a bit depressing. But that theory evaporated when a new batch of articles trying to capture the spirit of our age appeared. "It's all over," one piece declared. "All that's left to us is making the best of a bad situation," another announced. A fascinating new book bore the title *The Worst is Yet to Come*.

It seems that 2019 is the dawn of an age of deep pessimism. According to some, things are going down quickly. All we can do is try to survive. The editors of *n+1*, one of the hippest intellectual journals on the planet, claim that our only hope seems to be that "our arrow-slinging children will bear us on their backs out of the civilization we ruined for them".

Upbeatsters rubbish such dark resignation. Things aren't actually that bad, they claim. Life spans are expanding, GDP is rising, female empowerment is growing, poverty is declining. Even if there are a few pesky problems, such as falling life expectancy among poor people in rich nations due to deaths of despair, that's no reason for negativity. If we are to believe we can do something about these big problems, we are told that we need to think positively. After all, there is a significant body of work showing that people with an optimistic outlook tend to suffer much less distress when faced with big life events such as childbirth, starting a business or facing a significant illness.

In recent years, we have started to recognise the limits of being relentlessly upbeat. There is a growing movement of people prompting us to harness the power of pessimism. Pessimism is experiencing a strange revival in philosophy. Eugene Thacker reminds us that it will all inevitably end in ruin one day. Accepting that insight can give a strange sense of consolation and can free us to live.

In self-help circles, people are beginning to embrace negative thinking by turning to stoic philosophers such as Seneca. Instead of closing their eyes and imagining the perfect future, they are sitting back and trying to envisage the worst-case scenario. Rather than envisaging themselves living in a luxury minimalist house in Malibu, these postmodern stoics try to imagine themselves sleeping in a cardboard box outside the downtown Los Angeles bus station.

These exercises are not just perverse forms of psychological masochism. There is increasing evidence that positive thinking can impede action. In an experiment, the psychologist Gabriele Oettingen found that thirsty people in the lab who were asked to imagine a glass of icy water showed less energy, which could be put into getting hold of an actual glass of water. In another study, Oettingen found that while people who developed clear and defined goals for the future fared well, others who simply nurtured positive fantasies seemed to flounder.

Psychologists have also found that pessimism can actually motivate us. For instance, one study by Julie Norem and Nancy Cantor found that people often adopted a pessimistic stance to steel themselves against future disappointments. This helped to motivate them to undertake what would otherwise seem like insurmountable tasks. More recent work suggests that pessimism and optimism are not polar opposites, but separate systems in our brains. You are not either pessimistic or optimistic. You can be both at the same time, or either.

Perhaps the pessimism that infuses our age is not something we should recoil from or wallow in. Maybe pessimism could force us to realistically consider the worst-case scenario. Pessimism could help steel us against the inevitable anxieties that the future brings. A good dose of pessimism may actually motivate us in our attempts to address the problems we face. Pessimism could console and even free us. When mixed with some optimism, pessimism may help us to think more soberly and realistically about challenges that we face. Although being pessimistic is painful, it is certainly better than harbouring delusional fantasies about sunny uplands of the future.

Don't trust the adults in the room on climate change

Kate Aronoff

There's an inspiring new slogan gaining traction among venerated pundits and politicians of a certain age that claim steadfast commitment to the cause of stopping catastrophic climate change: "Get off my lawn."

Most recently, California senator Dianne Feinstein, 85, scolded a group of middle-schoolers with the group Youth v Apocalypse, who had joined the Sunrise Movement to call on Feinstein to back a resolution in the Senate supporting a Green New Deal. In a now infamous exchange, Feinstein barked that "I know what I'm doing" and that she has "been doing this for 30 years", so they better just bugger off and let the adults work. (To be fair, the video was edited to comply with Twitter's content guidelines. In the full clip she also offers them an internship.)

When Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey introduced their resolution for the Green New Deal, House speaker Nancy Pelosi, 78, off-handedly called it the "green dream or whatever", before backtracking later in the day and voicing support for the enthusiasm of the idea – just not the resolution itself. Months earlier, Congressman Frank Pallone, 67, battled Ocasio-Cortez's resolution to create a select committee on the Green New Deal based on unfounded, territorial fears that it would undermine the authority of his prized energy and commerce committee.

Former Fed chairwoman Janet Yellen, 72, recently told the Financial Times the Green New Deal was simply too expensive to work, joining a record number of economists in backing a modest carbon tax as the more "feasible" and "sensible" option. New York Times columnist Gail Collins, 72, mused that Green New Deal campaigners would be better off sticking to "one really important climate-control thought", perhaps – she spitballed – wind power: "If the country really threw itself into wind power, we could, er, breeze toward our goals on that alone."

None of these figures deny climate change in the conventional sense of spouting junk science from rightwing thinktanks. They have all agreed publicly and even forcefully that climate change is a pressing issue, and that human activity is its cause. Several have been vocal advocates for climate action of one sort or another. But none have proposed a workable alternative to the economy-wide mobilization the Green New Deal sets out to accomplish, to rapidly electrify the American economy and reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2030. Details still need to be worked out on that plan, of course. But it remains the only idea on the table even remotely approaching the "wartime footing" climate scientists are increasingly insistent is necessary to avert catastrophe.

The kids, in other words, are right. They will also be the ones forced to live with the consequences of the choices politicians make in the next several years. That's not an unfamiliar dynamic in climate politics. Residents of climate vulnerable nations who are already dealing with rising tides and temperatures have long been the ones pushing for the most ambitious action at the international level, chanting "1.5 to survive" through the halls of UN climate talks. Communities in the US forced to live with the health impacts of extraction – from Houston to the Bay Area – have for years sought an end to the drilling that's threatening to cook us. As they have in the last few weeks, adults in the room – whether US negotiators at the UN or big beltway conservation organizations – have in each case offered sage counsel: be realistic!

Yet realism on climate means something different than it did even a decade or two ago, when a modest carbon tax and a smattering of tax credits might have gotten the job done. As the IPCC noted in its latest report, avoiding climate breakdown at this point will mean a "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society", including massive investments in renewable energy and new technology and going to war with the world's most powerful industry, fossil fuels. Thankfully, Sunrise, Ocasio-Cortez and other Green New Deal advocates are updating our shared definition of what being realistic in a climate-changed 21st century looks like. The adults in the room would do well to listen.

UK-US trade deal: Envoy attacks 'myths' about US farming

Fears over chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-fed beef are "myths", according to the US ambassador to the UK. In the Daily Telegraph, Woody Johnson urged the UK to embrace US farming methods after Washington published its objectives for a UK-US trade deal. EU rules currently limit US exports of certain food products, including chicken and beef - but Mr Johnson wants that to change in the UK after Brexit. Downing Street has repeatedly denied it will accept lower food standards. A No 10 spokeswoman said: "We have always been very clear that we will not lower our food standards as part of a future trading agreement."

Mr Johnson, however, described warnings over US farming practices as "inflammatory and misleading" smears from "people with their own protectionist agenda". He also said the EU's "Museum of Agriculture" approach was not sustainable, adding: "American farmers are making a vital contribution to the rest of the world. Their efforts deserve to be recognised. "Instead, they are being dismissed with misleading scare-stories which only tell you half the story." On chlorine-washed chicken, Mr Johnson said the process was the same as that used by EU farmers to treat their fruit and vegetables. Describing it as a "public safety no-brainer", he insisted it was the most effective and economical way of dealing with "potentially lethal" bacteria such as salmonella and campylobacter.

President of the UK's National Farmer's Union (NFU) Minette Batters said that while Mr Johnson was correct in saying chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-fed beef was "safe" to eat, there were other factors that needed considering. "The difference is welfare standards and environmental protection standards," she told BBC Radio 4's Today programme. "Our consumer has demanded high standards of animal welfare, we've risen to that challenge - he's right to make the point that food security is crucially important, we would say the same - but all we're saying is: 'Produce the food to our standards and we'll have a trade deal.'" Ms Batters said chicken farms in the US were not required, for example, to include windows in their sheds or clean out in between flocks.

The US National Farmers' Union has always maintained that its chicken and beef, which use processes banned by the EU, are "perfectly safe" and argues there has been a lot of "fear-mongering". The US wants the UK to import more of its farm produce. However, its British counterpart said the UK government should not accept a US deal "which allows food to be imported into this country produced in ways which would be illegal here". That, Ms Batters said, "would just put British producers out of business". Amy Mount from Greener UK, an environmental lobby group, said: "This wish-list shows that a hard-Brexit pivot away from the EU in favour of the US would mean pressure to scrap important protections for our environment and food quality. Any future trade deals should reflect the high standards that the UK public both wants and expects."

Despite the NFU's insistence that consumers are keen to maintain the current welfare standards in farming, Ms Batters said there was a possibility the UK would give in to the US. She said: "There's always been the risk - and agriculture has always been the last chapter in any trade deal to be agreed - so yes there is a huge risk that British agriculture will be the sacrificial lamb in future trade deals."

Meanwhile, Dr Emily Jones, who is an associate professor of public policy at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, also said the issue was likely to be a sticking point for the US. "I think the US won't buy it in negotiations with the UK," said Dr Jones, referring to the UK's insistence on maintaining its current standards. "It's wanted, for a very long time, the EU to harmonise with US regulations and approaches to the production of food and it's exactly what it'll ask of the UK as well."

In the US, it is legal to wash chicken carcasses in strongly chlorinated water. Producers argue that it stops the spread of microbial contamination from the bird's digestive tract to the meat, a method approved by US regulators. But the practice has been banned in the EU since 1997, where only washing with cold air or water is allowed. The EU argues that chlorine washes could increase the risk of bacterial-based diseases such as salmonella on the grounds that dirty abattoirs with sloppy standards would rely on it as a decontaminant rather than making sure their basic hygiene protocols were up to scratch. There are also concerns that such "washes" would be used by less scrupulous meat processing plants to increase the shelf-life of meat, making it appear fresher than it really is.

New drug raises hopes of reversing memory loss in old age

Ian Sample

An experimental drug that bolsters ailing brain cells has raised hopes of a treatment for memory loss, poor decision making and other mental impairments that often strike in old age. The drug could be taken as a daily pill by over-55s if clinical trials, which are expected to start within two years, show that the medicine is safe and effective at preventing memory lapses. Tests in the lab showed that old animals had far better memory skills half an hour after receiving the drug. After two months on the treatment, brain cells which had shrunk in the animals had grown back, scientists found.

Etienne Sibille, at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, said the treatment was aimed not only at the “normal” cognitive decline that leads to senior moments, but at memory loss and mental impairments that commonly afflict people with depression, schizophrenia and Alzheimer’s disease. If the drug did well in human trials, Sibille said it was possible that “anybody over the age of 55-60 who may be at risk of cognitive problems later on could benefit from this treatment”.

“Our findings have direct implications for poor cognition in normal ageing,” he said, with the drug potentially improving learning, memory, decision making and essential life planning. “But we see this deficiency across disorders from depression to schizophrenia and Alzheimer’s.” There are no medicines on the market that improve the sort of memory loss seen in old age and psychiatric disorders such as depression and schizophrenia. But the Toronto researchers believe their drug can reverse failing memories by targeting specific cells involved in learning and memory, and rejuvenating them. The changes the drug brings about in the brain suggest it could prevent memory loss at the beginning of Alzheimer’s and potentially delay its onset.

Research on memory loss has shown that it is partly linked to levels of a neurotransmitter known as GABA. Its normal job is to slow down the rate at which neurons fire, effectively dampening down electrical “noise” in the brain. Lower this background noise and important signals in the brain can be processed more easily, or so the theory goes. The new drug is a derivative of benzodiazepine, a family of medicines that includes the anti-anxiety pills Valium and Xanax. While Valium and Xanax have broad effects in the brain, the new drug is designed to target specific GABA “receptors” found on neurons in key parts of the brain, such as the hippocampus, which are heavily involved in cognition.

Scientists tested the drug on mice in a maze and found that half an hour after receiving a single dose, old animals performed nearly as well as young mice. The drug also restored the performance of young mice whose memories had been temporarily impaired by the stress of being kept in a confined space. “An old mouse will naturally perform at about 50-60% on this test. Its working memory is basically not working. But within 30 minutes of administration of the drug, their performance is back up to 80-90%, so almost at the level of a young mouse. We have a rapid reversal of age-related working memory deficit and that is exciting,” Sibille told the Guardian.

In the latest work, the Toronto team showed that brain cells which had shrunk in older mice grew back after two months of having the drug put in their drinking water. “We can actually grow the brain cells,” Sibille said. “They tend to shrink with age and they shrink in neurodegenerative diseases. What we see is that the cells grow to a level that’s pretty close to that in young animals.”

The lab tests showed no benefit when the drug was given to healthy young animals, suggesting that it would not work like a cognitive enhancer and give healthy people superhuman memory skills. “It’s not a drug a student would take if they wanted to be smarter when they study for their exams,” Sibille said. The researchers submitted a patent on the drug on Wednesday before a talk at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Washington DC. Scientists now hope to test the drug in humans, with the first trials expected to be in people with depression. When people are in remission from depression, those with poor memory and other mental impairments are often most likely to relapse, Sibille said. “If we could somehow treat those deficits we could potentially have a major impact on the lifelong trajectory of the illness in those people. It would be a gamechanger in how we treat depression.”

I Learned in College That Admission Has Always Been for Sale

Rainesford Stauffer,

Shortly after my freshman year of college, when I was debating whether to transfer to another college or drop out and venture into the work force sans degree, I met with an older friend who had attended an Ivy League-adjacent school. I wanted her advice on whether to apply to her alma mater. I'd love it there, she assured me, with one caveat: You have to be really smart, she said. It became evident that her "smart" and my "smart" were different things. She casually rattled off hours she'd logged with a personalized standardized test tutor, paid to boost her score. Her parents opted not to pay an editor to work with her on her application essay, but plenty of her classmates' families had.

I suddenly felt as though I'd failed a test I didn't know I was taking. I was even more gobsmacked when I realized how common her experience was. Asking around, I learned that a subset of my peers had been carefully groomed with tools I hadn't even known existed. I came to realize that my "A" in Literature from my freshman year and a job between classes and on weekends were not going to compete with pedigrees buffed to application perfection thanks to highly compensated college admissions coaches.

I did end up transferring, not to my friend's school but to The New School, where I finished my degree remotely while working full time, and I graduated in January 2017. Now I talk to young people, including my own sister, who agonize over the fact that, no matter how hard they study, they will never compete with students who have test and application boosts. Even so, I know I've enjoyed benefits that many other students haven't because I'm white and have parents who are college graduates. I'm more angry on behalf of those with fewer resources than me who have to compete with those gaming the system.

So when news broke that celebrities, top university coaches and other ultrarich individuals were accused by the Justice Department of engaging in college admissions bribery, my initial thought was that this latest round of revelations is no more abhorrent than what happens every day. It's obviously a scandal when rich people are accused of breaking the law to get their kids into top schools. But the bigger outrage should be that a legal version of purchasing an advantage happens every college application season and that there's an entire industry supporting it.

Anyone can see the kinds of things outlined in the indictment — bribes paid by wealthy parents in exchange for their children's admission to top universities, and accompanying schemes to secure athletics scholarships for teens who didn't even play high school sports — are unacceptable. But what about the standardized test prep industry, worth around \$840 million, which involves parents forking over up to \$200 an hour for Ivy League tutors tasked with increasing their children's scores. That doesn't include application essay writers, who coach students on what to write about, edit their writing and, in some cases, write for them. It doesn't include college coaching firms, which charge up to \$40,000 to strategize an applicant's entire process.

Donations made to schools by the parents of legacy students can essentially buy acceptance letters. Meanwhile, there are some students who don't have a parent to skim their essay for typos or can't afford to pay to enroll in a prep course or to repeatedly take a standardized test until their score rises. Natasha Warikoo, a professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of "The Diversity Bargain," says while there's no debate that the actions the people involved in this week's admissions scandal are accused of are reprehensible, there's actually very little agreement among Americans or admissions officers about what is and isn't O.K. in terms of application assistance. "A fair system to me would produce an outcome in which people who are selected are representative of 18-year-olds overall in the United States," Ms. Warikoo said, noting that while wealthy students are overrepresented, working class and poor students, black, Latino, Native American and first-generation students are underrepresented on most campuses."

"If you had to design a system that would give rich, white kids the best odds of getting into prestigious colleges and universities, look no further than the current system," said Nikhil Goyal, author of "Schools on Trial". His research has found that universities ending legacy admissions and making standardized tests optional "would boost class and racial diversity and signal to youth that their worth is less defined by test scores and more by their creativity and passions." It's no coincidence that one of these can be bought: the test scores. Creativity and passion cannot. Perhaps it wouldn't sting so much if we scrapped the college rankings, or if we didn't bill college as the foremost experience for young people, one that sets the tone for their entire lives. This newest admissions scandal is infuriating, but the ongoing, perfectly legal one that lets wealthy families pay for the things that lead to greater chances of admission hurts even more.

We have a bleak view of modern life. But the world is making real progress.

Fareed Zakaria

This year's World Economic Forum, more than usual, prompted a spirited round of elite-bashing, which has now become the trendy political posture on both the right and left. On one side, President Trump and Fox News hosts slam the out-of-touch establishment that, according to them, has run things into the ground. On the other side, left-wingers decry the millionaires and billionaires who, in one author's phrase, "broke the modern world". Underlying these twin critiques is a bleak view of modern life, seen as a dysfunctional global order, producing stagnant incomes, rising insecurity and environmental degradation. But is this depiction, in fact, true? Are we doing so very badly that we need to bring back the guillotines?

On the simplest and most important measure, income, the story is actually one of astonishing progress. Since 1990, more than 1 billion people have moved out of extreme poverty. The share of the global population living in these dire conditions has gone from 36 percent to 10 percent, the lowest in recorded history. This is, as the World Bank president, Jim Yong Kim, notes, "one of the greatest achievements of our time." Inequality, from a global perspective, has declined dramatically.

And all this has happened chiefly because countries, from China to India to Ethiopia, have adopted more market-friendly policies, and Western countries have helped them with access to markets, humanitarian assistance and loan forgiveness. In other words, policies supported by these very elites. Look at any measure from a global perspective and the numbers are staggering. The child mortality rate is down 58 percent since 1990. Undernourishment has fallen 41 percent, and maternal deaths (women dying because of childbirth) have dropped by 43 percent over roughly the same period.

I know the response that some will have to these statistics. The figures pertain to the world in general, not the United States. Things might have improved for the Chinese, but not for the denizens of rich countries. That sense of "unfairness" is what is surely fueling Trump's "America First" agenda and much of the anger on the right at the international system. (More bewilderingly, the left, traditionally concerned about the poorest of the poor, has become critical of a process that has improved the lives of at least 1 billion of the world's most impoverished people.)

When criticizing the current state of affairs, it's easy to hark back to some nostalgic old order, the modern world before the current elites "broke" it. But when was that golden age? In the 1950s, when Jim Crow reigned in the United States and women could barely work as anything more than seamstresses and secretaries? The 1980s, when two-thirds of the globe stagnated under state socialism, repression and isolation? What group of elites — kings, commissars, mandarins — ran the world better than our current hodgepodge of politicians and business executives? Even in the West, it is easy to take for granted the astounding progress. We live longer, the air and water are cleaner, crime has plunged, and information and communication are virtually free. Economically, there have been gains, though crucially, they have not been distributed equally.

But there have been monumental improvements in access and opportunity for large segments of the population that were locked out and pushed down. In the United States, the gap between black and white high school completion has almost disappeared. The poverty gap between blacks and whites has shrunk (but remains distressingly large). Hispanic college enrollment has soared. The gender gap between wages for men and women has narrowed. The number of female chief executives at Fortune 500 companies has gone from one to 24 over the past 20 years. Female membership in national legislatures of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries has almost doubled in the same period. No countries allowed same-sex marriage two decades ago, but more than 20 countries do today. In all these areas, much remains to be done. But in each of them, there has been striking progress.

I understand that important segments of the Western working class are under great pressure, and that they often feel ignored and left behind by this progress. We must find ways to give them greater economic support and moral dignity. But extensive research shows that some of their discomfort comes from watching a society in which these other groups are rising, changing the nature of the world in which they'd enjoyed a comfortable status. After 400 years of slavery, segregation and discrimination in the United States, blacks have been moving up. After thousands of years of being treated as structurally subordinate, women are now gaining genuine equality. Once considered criminals or deviants, gays can finally live and love freely in many countries. The fact that these changes might cause discomfort to some is not a reason to pause, nor to forget that it represents deep and lasting human progress that we should celebrate.

To Connect With Youths, France Takes Forum Online

Elian Peltier

PARIS -- In the thousands of town halls and gymnasiums where the French government has organized "great debates" as a response to the "Yellow Vest" protests, one group has been noticeably absent: young people. So rather than keep hoping that French youth will show up in person, on Tuesday the government met them (at least some of them) where they already are in virtual form. Ten government ministers took part in an 11-hour discussion that appeared live on Twitch, a popular platform best known for showing people playing video games.

"I understand why there are not a lot of young people in these meetings," Prime Minister Édouard Philippe said on Tuesday, as he discussed the nationwide series of discussions known as the Great National Debate. "They are interested in politics, but maybe not in that way, so we must adapt."

President Emmanuel Macron, whose popularity has plunged since he took office in 2017, embarked on the national debate in an attempt to defuse the anger of the Yellow Vest demonstrators, a movement that began in response to a proposal to raise fuel taxes but has developed into a much wider threat to his political fortunes and economic plans.

The marathon discussion on Twitch was the latest attempt by the government to diversify the format, which has taken the form of 7,000 meetings, and over a million online comments. With the exception of an exchange between Mr. Macron and some 1,000 young people in a gymnasium earlier this month, people in their teens and 20s have mostly stayed away from the debates, which have been more popular among older people, especially retirees. "So many young people are interested in the news, but they reject the current political class, and there's a huge split between them and the ministers," said Hugo Travers, a 21-year-old journalist who helped organize the daylong debate on Twitch. "We don't want to make such or such minister likable," he said. "We want to recreate some bonds between politicians and the youth, to help break that split."

Tuesday's debate was initiated by the journalist Jean Massiet, the founder of Accropolis, a Twitch channel that focuses on French politics. His weekly live-streaming of parliamentary sessions attracts thousands of viewers. He reached out to the French government, which welcomed the idea, financed the daylong production and provided the set. The debate was organized within a matter of days. Mr. Travers, who runs a YouTube channel focusing on news for young audiences, reached out to his community of over 263,000 subscribers to choose those who would debate the government officials. He said the government did not know which young people would speak, and that the organizers were left free to structure the debate without interference.

Small groups of young people took turns on the set, as did the ministers of education, urban planning and housing, and culture, among others, discussing the four main topics of the Great National Debate -- taxation, the environment, the government and public services, and democracy and citizenship. They also tackled education issues, youth participation in politics, and homelessness. One student, Pauline Boissinot, asked about lowering taxes on menstrual products. Another, Maxime Korsak, told the education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer: "When you speak on television, it doesn't reach us." The talks, which remained mostly polite, contrasted with the sometimes-virulent messages that viewers posted in a live chat that scrolled down one side of the screen.

The 11-hour, uninterrupted discussion mirrored a style of broadcasting popular among Yellow Vests protesters, who favored long, raw reports of their protests live-streamed by the television channel RT France, or by the news website Brut. RT France is an arm of RT, formerly known as Russia Today, the Kremlin-financed operation that often plays up dissension and conflict in Western countries.

Twitch, which was founded in 2011 and bought by Amazon in 2014, is mostly known for live-streaming people playing video games like Fortnite or League of Legends. It has expanded to include some talk shows and cooking shows, and Tuesday marked the first live appearances on it by French government ministers. Mr. Travers, who moderated several debates during the day, said the organizers would collect the best exchanges and chat comments, and would submit them to the platform dedicated to online contributions to the national debate. Despite his own role in the live stream, he said he was skeptical that such debates would lead to positive change. "But we shall at least try," he said, "so the youth can rejoin the national debate."

The New York Times, 20 February 2019

‘Oh my God’ — Meghan takes aim at male, pale and stale universities

Sian Griffiths

The duchess is urging students to question ‘antiquated’ teaching and to push for more diversity among staff

The Duchess of Sussex has supported a campaign by black academics and students to “decolonise the curriculum” and confront the legacy of empire and racism on university campuses in her first apparently political intervention since joining the royal family. The movement to add black and female thinkers and writers — rather than focusing heavily on “male, pale and stale” ones — has been hugely controversial since campaigners tried to topple a statue of the Victorian imperialist and slave owner Cecil Rhodes at Oxford three years ago.

When the Duchess of Sussex visited City University in London on one of her first outings as patron of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) this month, her enthusiasm for change became clear. After hearing a presentation from Meera Sabaratnam, who is leading a push to decolonise the curriculum at the School of Oriental and African Studies (Soas), the duchess responded animatedly.

“Just open up that conversation so we are talking about it as opposed to continuing with that daily rote. Sometimes that approach can be really antiquated and needs an update,” she said. On the same visit she was visibly surprised to learn about the lack of black and female professors in British universities. She reportedly said “Oh my God” when she was shown a sheet of data showing that UK professors were overwhelmingly white men.

Ntokozo Qwabe was the South African student who led the protests at Oriel College in 2016. He argued that the statue reminded him of the burden of imperialist slavery and oppression. It was not just in Britain that he encountered fierce resistance. FW de Klerk, the former president of South Africa, urged Oriel College to be “more gracious in its treatment of its most generous benefactor” while Tony Abbott, the former Australian prime minister, said removing the statue of the Victorian-era empire builder would be an act of “moral vanity”. An associated campaign to “decolonise” university curriculums has been almost as controversial. Scholars have criticised attempts to banish “dead white men” and replace them on degree courses with black, female and ethnic minority thinkers. They have also challenged attempts to rewrite the history of the British empire from a victims’ perspective.

There are signs that Britain is copying the US university model. Baroness Amos, director of Soas and the first black female vice-chancellor in the UK, has helped draw up guidance that will be published later this month on decolonising the curriculum in all UK universities. Campaigners fighting to combat racism and discrimination on UK campuses are delighted that the ACU was among the first four organisations Meghan has chosen for her personal patronage. In Britain, only 56% of black students achieved a first or 2:1 degree compared to 80% of their white peers in 2016-2017. Only 2% of academic staff are black.

The duchess’s reaction may be due at least in part to her experience studying for a degree in America. She graduated in 2003 with a double major in international studies and theatre from Northwestern University, where she had explored her mixed-race identity by studying works by African-American playwrights. Statistics on the ethnic profile of staff and students are published on American university websites. At some universities, campaigns to remove Confederate statues or to spell out campus links with slavery are ongoing, but many such battles have been fought and won. “American campuses have had a legacy of affirmative action and African-American studies for a lot longer than the UK,” said Soas’s Sabaratnam.

As the daughter of a white father and an African-American mother descended from slaves, the duchess has often discussed her mixed-race heritage. She once wrote about her struggle as a schoolgirl with what racial box to tick on a form at school. “You could only choose one, but that would be to choose one parent over the other — and one half of myself over the other. When I went home, I told my dad what had happened. He said the words that have stayed with me: ‘If that happens again, you draw your own box’.”

Meera Sabaratnam said it was “wonderful to see the duchess standing up for female equality”, adding: “Many of the issues around racial equality are similar and it is great to see her embrace this. Change is long overdue.” Dr Joanna Newman, secretary general of the ACU, said: “The duchess is passionate about the power of higher education to transform lives, and so we are delighted that she has chosen the ACU and its progressive agenda.”

How to keep workers engaged, not vacant

Bartleby

How do you rate this sentence? Please give a number between one and five where one is “I’ve stopped reading already” and five is “give this columnist a Pulitzer prize.” If this rings a bell, you are probably one of the millions of workers who have undertaken an employee-engagement survey.

Such questionnaires are all the rage in America. Korn Ferry, one of the biggest survey groups, says that three-quarters of the largest American companies regularly poll their workers. The firm itself has surveyed over 7m employees working for more than 400 companies in the past three years alone.

Employer enthusiasm for surveys is easy to understand. A highly motivated workforce is seen as the secret sauce for corporate success. Employee engagement has been shown to have a statistically significant relationship with profitability, productivity, worker retention, safety and customer satisfaction.

Surveys show that firms mostly fail to motivate the majority of their workers. A Gallup survey last year found that, on average, only 15% of workers around the world felt fully engaged with their jobs, although America was doing better than most, with a 34% level of engagement compared with 10% in western Europe. Many employees clearly feel they are stuck in dead-end jobs.

Having workers who care about what they do rather than going through the motions is even more important in a modern, service-based economy than in a manufacturing-driven one. The principle that tasks should be broken down into small, efficient steps to be mindlessly repeated by employees all day has thankfully gone the way of the Model-T Ford. Firms now automate repetitive tasks. Service workers need to be flexible and creative, particularly when responding to customers’ desires. The more content and committed they are, the better such workers will perform.

Of course, managers can hardly expect their workers to arrive each day like Snow White’s seven dwarves singing “Hi ho”. (Although the efficiency of the dwarves must be doubted since, despite all the jewels they found, they lived in a rundown shack.) And firms should probably pay less attention to levels of satisfaction than to whether the trend is up or down.

The most important factors in employee engagement, according to a forthcoming book from Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall, are whether employees understand what is expected of them, feel they are surrounded by supportive colleagues and believe they will be recognised when they perform well. As well as gauging overall morale, many companies use surveys to test the impact of group initiatives or to see if individual divisions show signs of staff disenchantment.

Alliance Data, an American marketing-services group, has been running engagement surveys since it was set up in 1996. So far its workers have not tired of answering the questions; the survey has a 92% response rate, according to Karen Wald, the group’s chief of staff. The firm carefully scrutinises results for specific management problems. A few years ago, a survey revealed that employees’ perception of newly appointed managers as a class was poor. Training for managers was revamped and the results duly improved. This year the survey will concentrate on diversity and inclusion to ensure that minority workers feel they are being well treated.

At Toyota Motor North America, Terri von Lehmden, vice-president of HR transformation and strategy, says that the car company has been conducting surveys for more than 20 years. One came in handy when it needed to combine its manufacturing and sales divisions, a change requiring around 4,000 workers to move to Texas. Before going ahead, the firm conducted a survey which found that many workers were willing to uproot their families and move across the country. When staff choose to attend internal “town-hall” meetings and join workplace clubs, that is also a sign of commitment.

Indeed, one suspects that firms which put a lot of effort into keeping their workers happy hardly need to conduct surveys—they will always get fairly good results. Worker-retention rates tell them all they need to know. It is inattentive companies that need surveys to tell them where and how they are going wrong. Like Tolstoy’s families, every unhappy company is unhappy in its own way.

Thanks for the vegan idioms, Peta, but there are bigger fish to fry

Jessica Brown

In 1801, Vice Admiral Nelson is said to have deliberately raised his telescope to his blind eye and insisted he couldn't see a sign from his superior telling him to withdraw from the Battle of Copenhagen. This is where the phrase "turn a blind eye" is said to have originated. However, future idioms may not have such a colourful story of origin, thanks to those arguing we should rephrase those that mention meat and animals into anodyne, plant-based phrases.

The animal rights group Peta says that many common phrases in the English language perpetuate violence toward animals. The organisation caused a stir when it argued on Twitter that phrases such as "bring home the bacon" trivialise cruelty to animals, going so far as to compare such phrases to using racist, homophobic or ableist language. Peta encourages us to swap our linguistic assaults for phrases such as "bring home the bagels", "take the flower by the thorn", and "feed a fed horse" instead of "flog a dead horse" (which still sounds cruel to be honest). Peta isn't the first to make this suggestion – a Reddit thread going back to 2015 offered suggestions for "veganised" idioms. But this time it coincides with a tribunal that will decide if veganism is akin to a religion, and therefore proponents can be discriminated against, after a vegan worker was sacked for misconduct.

Veganism has gone from fringe to fashionable in a relatively short time. According to the latest count, around 3.5 million people in the UK, 7% of the population, are vegan. Long compared to cardboard, meat-free burgers have taken on international cult status in the form of the Beyond Burger brand, while supermarkets and restaurants are becoming increasingly vegan-friendly (that is, with vegan menus – there's no data on staff eschewing meaty idioms). It's easy for vegans to get excited by these recent shifts, but those who think veganism is so ingrained in the UK as to justify changing our language and law are in danger of getting too big for their fake leather boots. The downside of having supportive communities for vegans to go to for advice and support, both online and offline, is that it can easily create an echo chamber: we must remember that around 93% of the population is still non-vegan.

These are precarious times for veganism. Some of the most obvious changes have happened across supermarkets and restaurants, which have quickly responded to a shift in eating behaviours. But while it's in everyone's interest for the pattern to continue (I'm a veggie striving to be a vegan), there is a chance that the pace could slow – or worse, go into reverse. For a cause like this to have longevity, we need solid arguments effectively communicated. Slow and steady change is for the best: there is a mountain of research arguing we can't scare or guilt people into making positive change for the planet.

The chance that idioms such as "kettle of fish" may offend vegans is not an argument grounded in evidence or common sense. It suggests people aren't capable of distinguishing a neutral phrase embedded in the English language, used to communicate a complex idea in a colourful and efficient way, from something genuinely offensive. And a comparison to racist language, and the structural problems that enables, is downright offensive.

Shareena Hamzah, a researcher at Swansea University, argued in an article for *The Conversation* earlier this week that increased awareness in veganism will be reflected in language, but that may take some time. It also points out that not all vegans would welcome this change, given the rise of "bloody burgers", which suggests the cultural associations we have with meat may stick around long after our diets have shifted.

British English is littered with nonsensical phrases inspired from a variety of places and eras. Each one offers a mini time capsule that reflects how we used to live. To take just one example, to have one's head in the clouds is suggestive of a time when aviation was unfathomable. Suggesting we can purposefully change our language not only seeks to eradicate our omnivorous history, it also hints at a chicken-and-egg/jackfruit-and-scrambled-tofu debate. On the whole, culture precedes language change, not the other way round.

When it comes to idioms, we can't just go cold Tofurky – they're ingrained in our language, for better or for worse. Attempting to abruptly change them would do more harm than good. Even Hamzah's reasonable observations received backlash online, suggesting there is still a lot of reputational damage that needs mending, and a lot of work to be done untangling the negative associations linked with veganism – the stereotypes of being moralistic and militant – which tarnish the good-humoured vegan majority.

This parasite might turn you into an entrepreneur

Ben Coxworth

In order to be an entrepreneur, it helps if you're not afraid of taking a risk or two. Well, a University of Colorado Boulder study indicates that if you lack the entrepreneurial spirit, it might help to become infected with a parasite known as *Toxoplasma gondii*.

One of the most common parasites in developed countries, *T. gondii* produces no obvious symptoms in healthy human adults, apart from mild flu-like symptoms in the weeks immediately following initial exposure. In previous studies, however, infection has been associated with higher-than-average instances of impulsive behaviours such as road rage, drug abuse and suicide.

Theoretically, this behaviour could be caused by the parasite, in order to ensure the survival of its species. That's because although *T. gondii* is capable of infecting pretty much any species of warm-blooded animal, it can only reproduce in wild and domestic cats. It would then follow that if an infected small animal such as a rodent were behaving "without due care and attention," a cat would be more likely to catch and eat it.

We've seen such behaviour-altering parasites before – the fungus *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis sensu lato* causes carpenter ant workers to clamp their mandibles to the underside of leaves, where the insects eventually die and give the fungus an ideal environment in which to complete its life cycle.

In the University of Colorado study, it was found that out of 1,495 undergraduate students, *T. gondii*-infected individuals were 1.4 times more likely to major in business and 1.7 times more likely to emphasize management and entrepreneurship in their studies. Additionally, when 197 adult professionals attending entrepreneurship events were surveyed, people with the parasite were 1.8 times more likely to have started their own business.

Although these increases aren't huge, when the scientists studied statistics from 42 countries over the past 25 years, it was found that *T. gondii* infection "proved to be a consistent, positive predictor of entrepreneurial activity." Additionally, in countries with higher rates of infection, fewer people cited a fear of failure as a reason not to start a new business.

"We can see the association in terms of the number of businesses and the intent of participants, but we don't know if the businesses started by *T. gondii*-positive individuals are more likely to succeed or fail in the long run," says associate professor Stefanie K. Johnson, lead author of the study. "New ventures have high failure rates, so a fear of failure is quite rational. *T. gondii* might just reduce that rational fear."

That said, the scientists note it's also possible that people prone to high-risk behaviour could be more likely both to become infected with the parasite, and to pursue entrepreneurial ventures.

A paper on the research was recently published in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society*.

The joy of pettiness: why everyone needs an office nemesis

Elle Hunt

Six in 10 people say they have an archenemy at work, a survey of 7,000 workers has found. The remaining four, I can only assume, must be lying, lacking rich internal lives or between archenemies.

Martin Talbot, of the recruitment firm Totaljobs, which carried out the survey, said the findings – that 20% of people called in sick because they could not face seeing their nemeses, and that nearly a quarter were driven to alcohol or cigarettes – were proof that “we should take the concept of work enemies seriously”.

No one takes work enemies more seriously than I do, and my perhaps controversial view is that they are not only inevitable, but, approached with the right mindset, a joy.

Let me be clear: I am not talking about bullies, narks, saboteurs or anyone who actively strives to make your time at work unpleasant. (The most hated colleagues, according to the Totaljobs survey, were those who took credit for others’ ideas.) That is obviously unacceptable behaviour; employers should be attuned to it and committed to flushing it out.

I am talking about the colleague you cannot stand, who can be a cheerily oblivious outlet for your innate human pettiness.

Of course, you’re a professional about it – you don’t let your private antipathy get in the way of your job, only your closest colleagues know about it and you don’t really wish them harm. In fact, you are extremely nice to them out of spite, while secretly delighting in their inconsequentially misaddressing an email, their saying “would of” instead of “would have” and their criminally unself-aware tweets about #Veganuary.

The best workplace nemesis is someone you don’t work with directly, of approximately the same seniority as you, mostly oblivious and ultimately harmless. (I respect those who say the nemesis dynamic is by requisite reciprocal, but in a professional environment, they’re playing with fire.) Also, the dynamic is only sustainable in big offices, where you can surround yourself with people you like.

The benefits of having friends at work, not only for employees’ morale and motivation but organisational function, are well known – I’d argue the same applies to enemies. You may well love your job, but let’s not kid ourselves. If work is ever going to be more than something you do for money, you need to be engaged in something other than the actual workaday business of it. A little low-stakes antagonism, lightly worn (and freely shed once you leave the office, lest it fester), motivates you to work harder and be better. If you’re a bit competitive and a lot petty, there is no greater motivation than winning – even if it’s against someone who has no idea that you’re in competition with them.

They can even foster better relationships with colleagues: the office enemy of my office enemy is my work friend. The idea, basically, is to write your own workplace sitcom – and no one watched *The Office* for the paper sales. You need a work spouse (someone you can count on to cheer you on and commiserate with), an office crush (with whom you can harmlessly flirt over Gchat and time your trips to the water fountain with) and an office nemesis to spur you on to greatness.

Right now, I am blessed with so many work husbands and wives that I am virtually a professional polygamist (and I also have a delightful office crush), but I am short one subplot. In response to the handful of colleagues who have messaged me this morning asking: “WHO IS IT???” I regret to say that I am currently sans an office nemesis. But – who knows – perhaps, after reading this, one will make themselves known.

A new law decrees French supermarkets must get greedier

The agriculture ministry is forcing retailers to raise the price of staple foods

Given that five supermarket chains control around 80% of all organised food retailing in France, the authorities there may seem justified in probing how competitive the market really is. Too competitive, apparently: on February 1st a new law forced retailers to raise prices of food staples lest consumers be unduly profiting from shops trying to lure them with good deals.

The aim of the new “Loi Alimentation” is to ensure better pay for French farmers and for small-scale food producers, who currently earn little. Its flagship measure aims to stymie price wars by ensuring no food can be sold with less than a 10% profit margin.

But the immediate impact is not to raise prices of vegetables, meat and other products sold by French farmers to supermarkets: margins on those are already far higher than the mandated floor. Rather, newspapers have been full of horror stories about the rocketing price of pastis, a boozy staple (up by 9.9% in one retailer, according to *Le Parisien*), Nutella (up 8.4%), Président camembert (8.6% dearer) and Coca-Cola (5%), which were previously sold more or less at cost to attract penny-pinching shoppers.

How consumers paying more for Coke will result in higher milk prices for France’s farmers is unclear. Proponents of the law argue that retailers making fatter margins on pots of Nutella will have more money left over to pay farmers higher prices. They fall short of mandating exactly how this might happen.

Sceptics abound. Michel-Édouard Leclerc, chief executive of E. Leclerc, France’s largest supermarket chain, says that the idea pennies added on to junk food will trickle down to farmers is “a scam”. Farmers complain that in spite of the new law they are still at the mercy of supermarkets whose hypercapitaliste behaviour has prompted the need for legislation in the first place. Consumer groups think shoppers will be €1.4bn a year out of pocket as a result.

Supermarkets are already finding ways of circumventing the spirit of the law. Offering steep discounts on food, such as buy-one-get-one-free deals, is now banned, but retailers have simply promised to push the savings onto loyalty cards instead. Forcing up the cost of Nutella and Nescafé is an opportunity for them to promote their own-brand equivalents, where margins are well into double digits already.

The agriculture ministry says the average family will pay just 50 cents per month more as a result of the law, as long as its shopping basket is not stuffed with the wrong kinds of food. It understandably wants to find more ways for France’s 400,000 farmers to square up to an ever-more concentrated retail sector. But trying to put more money in farmers’ pockets means someone else losing out. The new law was due to come into force late last year, but was pushed back after gilets jaunes protesters drew attention to the many ways that government meddling was pushing up the cost of living.

MPs call for 1p clothing tax and darning classes in schools to cut waste

Jonathan Watts

UK fashion industry bigger source of carbon emissions than aviation and shipping

A penny on every shirt, skirt and stocking could fund better recycling and repairing in the fashion industry, according to a parliamentary report that recommends new taxes to end the throwaway consumer culture.

The cross-party environmental audit committee also proposes tax incentives for companies that offer repair services for clothes, and urges schools to introduce darning and mending classes. The report warns the fashion business in the UK creates 1m tonnes of waste each year and is a bigger source of carbon emissions than aviation and shipping combined. It calls on the government to force all retailers with a turnover of more than £36m to take responsibility for the waste they create. A producer responsibility charge of one penny on each item of clothing should be levied to pay for better clothing collection and recycling, it said.

“Fashion shouldn’t cost the earth. Our insatiable appetite for clothes comes with a huge social and environmental price tag: carbon emissions, water use, chemical and plastic pollution are all destroying our environment,” said the Labour MP Mary Creagh, who chairs the group.

The report is the culmination of an inquiry by MPs into the sustainability of the fashion industry. After gathering evidence from 16 retailers, they found their voluntary efforts to reduce their environmental footprint had been outweighed by a 200,000-tonne increase in sales since 2012. Creagh said people were buying and discarding clothes more quickly than ever.

“‘Fast fashion’ means we overconsume and underuse clothes. As a result, we get rid of over a million tonnes of clothes, with £140m worth going to landfill every year,” she said.

Britons buy more clothes per person than any other country in Europe, according to the report. On average, consumers in the UK buy 26.7kg of fashion items each year, compared with 16.7kg in Germany, 14.5kg in Italy and 12.6kg in Sweden.

The environmental and social implications are enormous. The report estimates textile production creates 1.2bn tonnes of CO₂ each year and 20% to 35% of all “primary source” microplastics: microbeads, fibres, pellets and capsules, in the ocean. A kilogram of cotton, equivalent to a shirt and jeans, needs between 10,000 to 20,000 litres of water to produce it and often involves dire labour conditions both in the UK and overseas.

Several companies were cited for failing to prioritise sustainability, including Amazon UK, Boohoo, Misguided, JD Sports, Sports Direct and TK Maxx. Others were praised for being more engaged on the issue, including Burberry, Marks and Spencer, Primark, Tesco and Asos, but MPs noted that overall the voluntary approach was not working and said it should be replaced with mandatory environmental targets for all big retailers.

As well as the proposed one penny charge, it said the government should reduce VAT on repair services, ban incineration or landfilling of unsold stock that can be reused or recycled, and draw up a “net zero” emissions blueprint.

It also recommends incentives for companies that reduce the material consumption needed for growth. This would require research into the environmental performance of different materials (for example, polyester shirts have more than double the carbon footprint of cotton shirts) and to measure microfibre pollution. Ministers, it says, should explore ways to foster a “sharing economy” with more hiring and swapping and less buying and discarding.

'No one likes being a tourist': the rise of the anti-tour

Oliver Balch

“From this point on, we’re going to be trespassing,” announces Margarida Castro casually. “Everyone comfortable with that, right?” Our group of eight follow her across the threshold of an abandoned house in central Porto, Portugal’s second city. This once-sleepy, cobble-paved place is turning into one of Europe’s hottest tourist destinations, thanks in no small part to sweetener deals with low-cost airlines and a sophisticated government marketing drive.

But being the darling of the 48-hour city break comes with its costs. Old cafes are starting to make way for Starbucks and Costa. Locals are finding themselves outpriced by the boom in short-term rentals. And, while Porto has yet to see anti-tourist protests as in Venice or Barcelona, there’s a growing sense of disquiet. And if locals are souring on tourism, so are some tourists. Porto’s sightseeing hotspots can be covered in a day or two, and middle-class city-breakers are looking for something different. A 2016 study by the online travel firm Expedia, for example, found millennial travellers are especially anxious for experiences that involve “living like a local” and finding “hidden gems” off the beaten track.

That suits Castro just fine. A 36-year-old Porto native, she is one of a trio of architects who set up The Worst Tours five years ago. They show people around the city’s disused factories, old railway lines, empty lots and down-at-heel backstreets. The highlight? A downtown shopping mall that went bust in the mid-1990s, now offering cheap rent to cafe bars and practice studios for local bands. Their “anti-tour” was a response to how tourism was changing Porto. “We were needing to vent and find a way of pouring out our energy and frustrations, so we set up a walking tour to spark political debate,” she says, adding with a smile: “It was either this or hard drugs.”

The Worst Tours is one of string of alternative city tours now popping up in popular tourist destinations around the world. In one way or another, all pledge to pierce the marketing blurb, unveil the real side of their cities and provide an “authentic” experience. “It’s obvious, no?” says Castro when asked why the format appeals. “No one likes being a tourist.” Martin Finlayson, a British first-time visitor to Porto who took the tour, agrees. “There are so many tourist bars and restaurants here nowadays,” he says. “I wanted to see what the real Porto was like – you know, where local people hang out, where they eat and drink.”

Locals, too, are looking for novel ways to engage with their home cities. Eugene Quinn leads “urban adventures” around his adopted city of Vienna, including the Ugly Vienna Tour, the Corruption Tour, the Midnight Tour, and even a Smells Like Vienna Spirit Tour, which explores the olfactory delights of the Austrian capital. He says they attract as many as 80% locals. “It’s a shame that more people don’t actually see their own cities,” says Quinn, who, rather than carrying a flag, wears the orange trousers of the municipal street sweepers.

Castro agrees, arguing that tours aren’t just for tourists, but encourage creativity along the peripatetic tradition of ancient Greece, sparking an exchange of ideas and experiences of urban living. The visit to the abandoned house in Porto, for instance, prompted a discussion about squatting: a common but little discussed practice in the city. Other topics addressed during the four-hour walk included social housing policies, rent hikes, green space and fachadismo – the practice of property developers ripping out the interiors of historic buildings while keeping the facades intact. “With our salaries, we don’t travel much,” Castro says. “So walking the city and debating with someone from Warsaw or Barcelona about this or that keeps my ideas in check.”

Kylie Jenner's makeup makes her the world's youngest billionaire

Rupert Neate

Jenner's fortune comes from Kylie Cosmetics, the makeup company she runs largely from her iPhone, with the help of her mother Kris. Forbes estimated that the cosmetics company, which is 100%-owned by Jenner, made \$360m (£274m) in sales last year. Forbes's estimate of Jenner's wealth comes in its annual ranking of the world's billionaires.

Most of Kylie Cosmetics' sales come directly from Jenner's social media accounts. She has 128 million followers on Instagram (three-quarters of whom are estimated to be aged 18-24). She has one of the most viewed accounts on Snapchat, and is followed by 26.7 million on Twitter. Such is the weight of her influence that when she tweeted that she was "sooo over" Snapchat last year, more than \$1bn was wiped off the company's stock market value.

Sales are driven higher by Jenner sparking fomo (fear of missing out) among her fans with warnings that collections are in very limited quantities. Her initial stock of \$29 "lip kits" – matching lipstick and lip liner – sold out in less than a minute, crashing the website.

The business, which Jenner founded in 2015, employs just seven full-time staff. It is almost totally outsourced. Jenner comes up with ideas for styles but the products are made by Seed Beauty, a private-label producer. Orders and sales are outsourced to Shopify, a Canadian online company that also runs shops for Drake and Justin Bieber.

Jenner also does not have to worry much about the business's finances or the day-to-day management of her 12 staff (including five part-time). Those matters are outsourced to her mom or "momager" Kris Jenner, who manages all her children's financial operations – in return for a 10% cut. Jenner, who used her reality TV exposure to secure modelling work with brands such as Topshop, said she had struggled to decide what to do with her life. Then her thoughts turned to her most talked about feature: her lips.

She trademarked the phrase "Kylie Lip Kits ... for the perfect pout" two years before setting up her company with \$250,000 of money she had made through modelling and reality TV work.

"Ever since I was probably 15 I've been obsessed with lipstick. I could never find a lip liner and a lipstick that were the perfect match. So that's where I thought of the idea that I wanted to create my own product," Jenner said.

Jenner said she was scared that sales might not take off when the website first launched. "I kept calling my mom, saying: 'Mom, I'm so scared. Do you think it's going to sell?' Because I put all my money upfront. You know, it's all my money. I put everything into this."

The total combined wealth of the world's billionaires is \$8.7tn – more than three times the gross domestic product (GDP) of the UK – down from \$9.1tn last year. The shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, said: "This is another reminder of the enormous wealth that, under the Tories, has been hoarded by a tiny number – tearing at the social fabric that once held us all together. It's shocking that there are 54 UK billionaires on the Forbes billionaires list while rough sleeping continues to rise and Universal Credit causes hardship and misery."