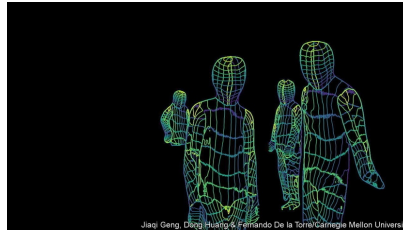


Wi-Fi signals could prove useful for spies



A router's emissions can paint a picture of activity in a room

Like all radio waves, Wi-Fi signals undergo subtle shifts when they encounter objects—human beings included. These can reveal information about the shape and motion of what has been encountered, in a manner akin to the way a bat's chirps reveal obstacles and prey.

Starting from this premise Jiaqi Geng, Dong Huang and Fernando De la Torre, of Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, wondered if they could use Wi-Fi to record the behaviour of people inside otherwise unobservable rooms. As they describe in a posting on arXiv, they have found that they can. "DensePose from Wi-Fi", the paper in question, describes how they ran Wi-Fi signals from a room with appropriate routers in it through an artificial-intelligence algorithm trained on signals from people engaging in various, known activities. This algorithm was able to reconstruct moving digital portraits, called pose estimations, of the individuals in the room.

Mr Geng, Dr Huang and Dr De la Torre are not the first to think of doing this. But they seem to have made a significant advance. Earlier experiments had managed to obtain two-dimensional (2D) pose estimations based on as many as 17 "vector points" on the body—such as head, chest, knees, elbows and hands. The new paper, by contrast, describes "2.5D" portraits that track 24 vector points (see picture). And, according to Dr Huang, the team has now built an enhanced version capable of generating complete 3D body reconstructions that track thousands of vector points. Moreover, this work employed standard antennas of the sort used in household Wi-Fi routers. Previous efforts have relied on souped-up versions of the equipment.

Detailed Wi-Fi-based body-tracking with a standard-issue router would have many uses. Mr Geng, Dr Huang and Dr De la Torre talk of employing it to "monitor the well-being of elder people". A team working on similar technology, led by Yili Ren of Florida State University, suggests it could be used in interactive gaming and exercise monitoring. And, in 2016, Dina Katabi, Mingmin Zhao and Fadel Adib of the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology demonstrated how Wi-Fi-like radio signals could detect a volunteer's heartbeat (and thus his or her emotional state) remotely.

These ideas are, however, distractions from what any such system would almost certainly be used for to start with, namely surveillance and espionage. In 2018, for example, Yanzi Zhu of the University of California, Santa Barbara and his colleagues showed how hackers posted outside someone's home could track the movements (though not then visualise the postures) of people inside, by intercepting escaping Wi-Fi signals.

It is easy to imagine who might be interested in the ability to turn any building's Wi-Fi network into a mini panopticon. Dr Huang declined to say who is sponsoring his team's work. However, another of their projects—developing techniques for detecting specific human behaviours in video-surveillance footage—is paid for by IARPA, the research hub of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees America's spies.

(493 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2023/01/25/wi-fi-signals-could-prove-useful-for-spies>

People of different opinions process political data differently



Brain scanning suggests activity patterns cluster with ideology

That those who lean to opposite ends of the political spectrum think differently from each other is obvious. That such differences show up in brain scans is intriguing. Brain scanning is a low-resolution approach to studying neural activity, incapable of seeing how the cells which do the actual thinking are connected to each other. Yet, using this fairly crude technique, two groups of researchers now claim to be able to distinguish the neural responses of left- and right-wingers.

Daantje de Bruin and Oriel FeldmanHall, of Brown University, in Rhode Island, published their study in *Science Advances*. Noa Katabi and Yaara Yeshurun of Tel Aviv University, in Israel, chose the *Journal of Neuroscience*. Both used functional magnetic-resonance imaging, which measures changes in blood flow as a proxy for neural activity, to look at groups of 44 and 34 volunteers respectively, from across the political spectrum.

Ms de Bruin and Dr FeldmanHall first asked their volunteers to read a list of words—some politically charged, some not—while lying in the scanner. For each word, they recorded activity patterns in the amygdala (which handles aspects of the emotions) and the striatum (which handles aspects of cognition). Neutral words showed no difference. But for words related to “immigration” and “American” the activity patterns in the striatum clustered according to participants’ politics.

Next, they asked people to watch a neutrally worded news clip on abortion and also heated debates on policing and immigration. Patterns of activity stimulated by the news clip were indistinguishable between left- and right-wingers, but those generated by the immigration debate (though, surprisingly, not by the policing debate) clearly divided them.

Ms Katabi and Dr Yeshurun, by contrast, went straight for videos. They asked participants to watch campaign ads and speeches, and a neutral clip. They found differences in the responses to politically charged material of parts of the cortex that deal with vision, hearing and movement. Moreover, unlike Ms de Bruin and Dr FeldmanHall, who merely noted correlations, they said they could predict an individual’s political views from the scan. Not quite Big Brother in 1984, yet. Getting someone to lie still in a scanner is a palaver. But surprisingly close.

(359 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2023/02/02/people-of-different-opinions-process-political-data-differently>

The rise of the borderless trustbuster

Corporate dealmakers face a formidable foe. It isn't Lina Khan

It was to be the biggest industrial merger ever. In late 2000 General Electric (ge), the world's most valuable company at the time, agreed to pay \$43bn for Honeywell, a smaller American manufacturer of, among other things, aircraft electronics. Jack Welch, ge's ceo and America Inc's capitalist-in-chief, put off his retirement to see it through. The transaction, codenamed "Project Storm", seemed a done deal. American authorities gave their blessing, finding no threat to competition (ge made jet engines but not avionics). Regulators elsewhere were expected to defer to America in a merger involving two American firms. So it came as a shock when, in 2001, the European Commission killed it. A diversified ge would, the eu's competition watchdog argued, wield too much power in the market for aircraft parts. America's trustbusters pooh-poohed the commission's theory of "conglomerate effects". The treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill, called the ruling "off the wall".

Now another transatlantic antitrust rift has opened up. In March 2021 America's Federal Trade Commission (ftc) sued to stop the \$7bn takeover by Illumina, a gene-sequencing giant, of Grail, maker of a cancer-detection test. The ftc claimed Illumina risked withholding its sequencing technology from Grail's rivals. On September 1st a judge at the agency's internal court threw out the lawsuit, in part because Grail's tests currently have no rivals to speak of. Then, on September 6th, the eu blocked the deal—never mind that Grail has no turnover in the bloc.

Even if the eu ruling was not, as lobbyists at the us Chamber of Commerce suggest, stirred up by the ftc, this time around the reaction in Washington was not pique but plaudits. President Joe Biden blames overmighty corporations for high prices, low wages and other ills. His crusading ftc chief, Lina Khan, rejects the 40-year-old antitrust philosophy, according to which the goal of antitrust law is to safeguard competition and consumer welfare, in favour of one that seeks to protect competitors, both real and potential, as well as suppliers, workers and other "stakeholders".

For corporate dealmakers the chaos and inconsistency are as welcome as a Honeywell-sized slap in the face. The episode also illustrates how much bolder—and borderless—global trustbusters are becoming. The impact on future takeovers could be profound.

Navigating multiple jurisdictions is nothing new in mergers and acquisitions (m&a). When ab InBev, the world's biggest brewer, bought sabMiller, the second-largest, in 2016, it had to submit merger filings in more than 30 countries. Today's Welch wannabes face an ever trickier terrain. For one thing, national trustbusters have mushroomed. Filippo Lancieri, now at eth Zurich, a university, and colleagues find that 127 countries had an antitrust regime in 2010, up from 41 in 1979. Many assess not just a deal's economic efficiency but things like whether it serves "public interest". And they are staffing up. Britain's Competition and Market's Authority (cma) has gone from 650 to 850 officials in five years. China's main antitrust bureau is tripling its headcount to 150.

Second, those multiplying regulators are flexing their muscles, partly in response to criticisms that their flaccidity had let business get too oligopolistic. Exhibit A is the bigness of big tech, whose sometimes free products and strong network effects (where size begets more size) make the old "consumer-welfare standard" seem, in critics' eyes, unfit for purpose. Tech giants stand accused of "killer acquisitions", aimed at smothering potential challengers in the crib, and of buying up firms in markets they one day hope to corner. More regulators now fret that such unorthodox mergers, where two firms have no overlapping business, snuff out innovation—including, as in Grail's case, in markets that scarcely exist.

That leads to the third complication. In the past, national merger guidelines made it clear when firms needed to seek approval to wed—typically if their combined sales or market share exceeded a certain threshold. When regulators raised concerns about market power, a firm like ab InBev could put them to rest by offloading a brewery here and there. Now a potential competitor can come from anywhere; so, too, can a regulatory challenge. And if the fears are of conglomerate effects or killer acquisitions, no remedy short of the combined firm's full retreat from a jurisdiction would be satisfactory. For acquiring firms with a large existing business in a given market, that is a non-starter.

The new antitrust logic is behind a string of recent actions, and not just Grail. In February a lengthy cma probe prompted Nvidia, an American semiconductor firm, to abandon its \$40bn takeover of Arm, a Japanese-owned firm that licenses chip blueprints. In July the ftc sued to block the purchase of Within, maker of virtual-reality fitness apps, by Meta, which the ftc says is seeking to illegally "expand [its] virtual-reality empire" that already

50 includes a popular vr headset and a vr app store. Western and Asian regulators are looking into Microsoft's \$69bn acquisition of Activision Blizzard, a video-game developer.

None of this means corporate m&a is dead. Last year saw \$3.8trn-worth of deals, a near-record. Most will sail through. Illumina is appealing against the eu decision and may get its way. Even so, Grail-like ordeals raise the costs for everyone. Lawyers report that break-up fees in merger contracts are already rising and "outside
55 dates", before which parties can walk away scot-free, are stretching from a few months to as many as 18 in the Microsoft-Activision paperwork. The longer a deal takes to conclude, laments an executive at an acquisitive tech firm, the likelier the target's innovative edge is to be blunted and its other key asset—talent—is to flee.

Some deals which would once have been no-brainers are thus no longer worth the hassle. To enemies of big business like Ms Khan, that's the point. If it means innovation forgone, consumer welfare unrealised or
60 shareholder value not created, tough luck.

(964 words)

<https://www.economist.com/business/2022/09/15/the-rise-of-the-borderless-trustbuster>

How a tide of tech money is transforming charity



The new philanthropists are young, impatient and in a hurry

When Andrew White first sold a chunk of his business in 2021, he knew he wanted to give some of the proceeds away. Indeed, if all goes according to plan, he hopes eventually to give over \$20m to charity. But Mr White was still busy running FundApps, a compliance-monitoring service for investors. That left little time to read up on development economics or scour charity rankings.

5 The model that big-name philanthropists have followed for generations—setting up a private foundation and hiring a team to run it—was out of the question. “Creating another organisation to manage your money is just wasting it,” says Mr White. After all, he says, “these people are very good at what they do, so why don’t you trust them to do it?” In the end, Mr White gave the money to Founders Pledge, a British charity with more than 1,700 members in 39 countries. He told Founders Pledge he would like the cash to go to education and poverty relief in poor countries, then left its researchers to sort out the details.

10 Mr White is part of a new class of philanthropists very different from those that went before. They are often young, impatient with process and detail, and keen to make a difference in a hurry. Most made their money in the software and computing industry that has, since the turn of the century, been the world’s great engine of wealth creation. Along with their money comes their industry’s worldview. “I was reading *Wired*, not the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*,” says Scott Harrison, the founder of charity: water, which aims to give clean water to everyone on the planet.

20 No one has more money to give away than the tech tycoons. *Forbes*, a magazine which tracks such things, reckons that 26 of the 100 richest people in the world in 2022 made their money leading technology firms of various sorts, including seven of the top ten. (The recent drop in tech valuations has dented the sector’s dominance, but not ended it.)

25 They are even more dominant when it comes to giving that money away. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* (which Mr Harrison said he did not read) estimates that, of the \$33.4bn given away by America’s 50 biggest donors in 2021, around three-quarters came from people who made their money in tech (see chart). Bain & Company, a consultancy, reckons tech magnates hold about 8% of the total wealth of India’s super-rich, but account for about 35% of the charitable giving.

That tide of money carries with it the culture and worldview of the industry that created it. Tech has spent the past two decades disrupting everything from shopping to television. Charitable giving, it seems, is next.

30 To see just how different the newcomers are, compare them with their best-known forebears. The grandfathers of modern philanthropy are American industrialists like Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller. Such men gave the bulk of their money late in their lives. They created foundations that would outlive them, employed highly qualified advisers, and were prepared to dish out funds for decades to achieve their goals.

That model was tweaked at the turn of the millennium. (...)

(528 words)

<https://www.economist.com/international/2023/02/09/how-a-tide-of-tech-money-is-transforming-charity>

There is a worrying amount of fraud in medical research



And a worrying unwillingness to do anything about it

IN 2011 BEN MOL, a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Monash University, in Melbourne, came across a retraction notice for a study on uterine fibroids and infertility published by a researcher in Egypt. The journal which had published it was retracting it because it contained identical numbers to those in an earlier Spanish study—except that that one had been on uterine polyps. The author, it turned out, had simply copied parts of the polyp paper and changed the disease.

“From that moment I was alert,” says Dr Mol. And his alertness was not merely as a reader of published papers. He was also, at the time, an editor of the *European Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, and frequently also a peer reviewer for papers submitted to other journals. Sure enough, two papers containing apparently fabricated data soon landed on his desk. He rejected them. But, a year later, he came across them again, except with the fishy data changed, published in another journal.

Since then, he has teamed up with other researchers to investigate groups of papers by authors he has spotted as data fabricators. Wherever he saw smoke, he found fire. There were tables on patients’ characteristics that contained only even numbers. There were values that were clinically unlikely. There was an implausible 40:60 sex ratio of babies when the mothers-to-be had, purportedly, been selected at random. Eye-popping speeds of completing clinical trials were common.

Dr Mol and his colleagues have sent their concerns about more than 750 papers to the journals that published them. But, all too often, either nothing seems to happen or investigations take years. Only 80 of the studies they have flagged have so far been retracted. Worse, many have been included in systematic reviews—the sort of research round-ups that inform clinical practice.

Millions of patients may, as a consequence, be receiving wrong treatments. One example concerns steroid injections given to women undergoing elective Caesarean sections to deliver their babies. These injections are intended to prevent breathing problems in newborns. There is a worry that they might cause damage to a baby’s brain, but the practice was supported by a review, published in 2018, by Cochrane, a charity for the promotion of evidence-based medicine. However, when Dr Mol and his colleagues looked at this review, they found it included three studies that they had noted as unreliable. A revised review, published in 2021, which excluded these three, found the benefits of the drugs for such cases to be uncertain.

Partly or entirely fabricated papers are being found in ever-larger numbers, thanks to sleuths like Dr Mol. Retraction Watch, an online database, lists nearly 19,000 papers on biomedical-science topics that have been retracted (...)

(449 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2023/02/22/there-is-a-worrying-amount-of-fraud-in-medical-research>

Artificial intelligence is reaching behind newspaper paywalls



Publishers long accused tech firms of profiting from their content. Now they have a point

There was big news in Canada last week—but if you were in Canada itself you may have missed it. On February 22nd it emerged that Google was blocking access to news content, in a five-week trial affecting about 4% of users in the country. The measure comes as Canada's Senate considers a bill that would force big internet companies to pay publishers for displaying links to their stories. Google says it may simply block them instead; Canada's government says the search engine's actions amount to intimidation.

It is the latest episode in a worldwide dispute between new media and old. News organisations, which in the past two decades have seen most of their advertising revenue disappear online, accuse search engines and social networks of profiting from content that is not theirs. Google and Facebook, which have come in for most of the flak, retort that they merely display links and a few lines of text, rather than articles themselves, and that by doing so they drive traffic to publishers (who in any case can opt out if they choose). Facebook estimates that it sends 1.9bn clicks a year to Canadian media, publicity it values at C\$230m (\$170m).

The online platforms' arguments have mostly fallen on deaf ears. Cheered on by their domestic press, governments in countries including Australia, Britain and Spain have passed or proposed laws aiming to squeeze money out of Silicon Valley and into local media companies. Australia's law, passed in 2021, prodded tech firms to make payments to Australian media reportedly worth about A\$200m (\$135m) in the scheme's first year. (...)

The laws have sometimes had the feel of a shakedown of the wealthy foreign tech firms by governments. But developments in the search business mean that the publishers' complaints seem increasingly justified. Search engines have been getting better at displaying information without referring visitors to external sources. Ask Google the size of Canada's population and it simply tells you that it was 38m in 2021 (followed by its usual list of suggested websites). About a quarter of desktop Google searches now end with no onward clicks, according to Semrush, an online marketing company.

Artificial intelligence (AI) promises to improve this capability dramatically. Google's AI helper, Bard, is still under wraps. But its rival, incorporated into Microsoft's Bing search engine, is already resolving queries. Ask the old Bing for a summary of Canada's last election results and it points to sites including CBC News and the Globe and Mail. Ask the new Bing and it gives a decent account by itself (along with footnoted links to sources). AI assistants can even reach behind paywalls. A user trying to find the New York Times's recipe for macaroni and cheese will be stopped by a demand for payment and subscription. But ask Bing's AI and it serves up a paraphrased version of the whole recipe, complete with a licking-lips emoji.

The search companies admit they are still finding their way with new technology, which is mostly not yet on general release. That is unlikely to satisfy publishers' lawyers. The chief counsel at one large media company argues that AI-search companies should be made to license the content they regurgitate, just as Spotify has to pay record labels to play their songs. AI's use of others' material is "the copyright question of our times", he says. For years the complaints of publishers against platforms have rung somewhat hollow. Now they have a real story on their hands.

(577 words)

<https://www.economist.com/business/2023/03/02/artificial-intelligence-is-reaching-behind-newspaper-paywalls>

The Supreme Court looks askance at Biden's student-debt relief



The conservative majority is sceptical of the \$400bn-plus programme—but there's a hitch

IN ACTION in Congress has led recent presidents to resort to creative work-arounds. When he failed to get immigration reform through Congress, Barack Obama issued executive orders to shield some immigrants from deportation. Donald Trump declared a national emergency to divert funds to build his border wall. And Joe Biden has cited covid-19 as justification for barring evictions, requiring vaccinations and, last August, forgiving up to \$20,000 in debt for student borrowers.

Mr Obama and Mr Trump squeaked out majorities at the Supreme Court to keep their programmes intact. Mr Biden has had less success. In 2021 and 2022 the justices struck down his federal eviction moratorium and a vaccine-or-test mandate that would have applied to 84m employees. On February 28th a pair of oral arguments suggests the majority is inclined to put his student-debt plan on the chopping block, too. (...)

Scepticism from conservative justices flowed throughout the three-and-a-half hours of arguments in *Biden v Nebraska* and *Department of Education v Brown*. Justice Clarence Thomas said payment forbearance “fits more comfortably” in the terms of the HEROES Act than debt cancellation. Justice Neil Gorsuch suggested the policy may be unfair to people who have already paid off their loans or planned their lives “around not seeking loans”. Chief Justice John Roberts wondered why a college graduate should get his loan written off while an entrepreneur is on his own to repay a loan to start a lawn-care business.

Several justices balked at the \$400bn-plus price tag. Invoking the “major questions doctrine”, Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito suggested to Elizabeth Prelogar, Mr Biden's solicitor-general, that such spending should be specifically authorised by Congress. As a policy with “vast economic or political significance”, James Campbell, Nebraska's solicitor-general, said, it is not a move the executive branch should undertake on its own. In reply, Ms Prelogar noted that the debt-payment pauses cost the government \$150bn without raising any hackles.

There is a possible hitch in the conservative majority's inclination to strike down Mr Biden's plan: only plaintiffs who stand to be directly injured have the right to bring a lawsuit. The lawyer in *Brown* struggled to show how his clients—student borrowers upset they would gain little from the policy—had standing to sue.

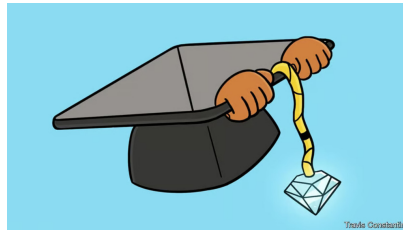
The three liberal justices and Amy Coney Barrett focused on whether a projected fall in revenues for the independent Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority, which opted not to sue on its own behalf, gave Missouri the right to challenge Mr Biden's debt forgiveness. In a possible appeal to Chief Justice Roberts, who is a stickler on standing, Ketanji Brown Jackson urged caution. The justices should be “concerned about jumping into the political fray” involving such a hotly debated issue, she said, “unless we are prompted to do so by a lawsuit that is brought by someone who has an actual interest”.

If the three liberal justices persuade two conservatives to side with them on the technical hitch, the 26m student borrowers hoping for relief may yet see some of their debt absorbed by the federal government. More likely—when the court issues its decision by the end of June—Mr Biden's plan is headed for the dustbin.

(526 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/02/28/the-supreme-court-looks-askance-at-bidens-student-debt-relief>

American universities are pursuing fairness the wrong way



Drop legacy admissions—not standardised exams

THE BEST American universities wish to be ruthlessly discriminating on academic merit—and beacons for diversity on everything else. Trying to accomplish both at once can prompt mistakes. Lately Columbia University, an Ivy League member in New York, has been making a lot of them. Last year it admitted to submitting incorrect data to a college-rankings outfit in a bid to seem more exclusive than it really is. And on March 1st, in a bid to seem more inclusive than it is, Columbia said it would drop the requirement for applicants to submit standardised exam scores.

Campaigners claim that exams favour the privileged. Evidence for this is thin. Maths problems involve neutral things like numbers and algebra; reading-comprehension tests are rarely about silverware or yachting. The bias, however, is said to be latent. Because scores are correlated with race and parental income, the exams must therefore be contaminated with racism and classism.

This confuses disparity with discrimination. Tests correctly measure educational inequality, which begins before kindergarten and grows as a result of bad policy. Just as smashing thermometers does not prevent climate change, so abandoning the measurement of educational inequality will not magic it away.

In fact, for meritocrats to abandon exams is self-defeating. Scores may be correlated with privilege, but they are probably the hardest part of an admissions application to warp with money. Children of the rich can get ample help in completing their coursework (which may receive inflated grades), hire professional writers to “edit” their essays and even spend lavishly on consultants who will help craft a delectable smorgasbord of extra-curricular activities. Yet research shows that intensive tutoring has a marginal effect on test scores. That is why, in the Varsity Blues scandal of 2019, very rich parents paid to have others sit their children’s exams.

Worse, supposedly progressive universities like Columbia operate affirmative-action schemes for deep-pocketed dullards in the form of “legacy” admissions that shower advantages on the relatives of alumni. One study found that undergraduates at Columbia are more than 100 times more likely to belong to the top 0.1% of families by income than to the poorest 20%. The best way to promote fairness would be to eliminate such a regressive pathway to admission.

In the 1920s Harvard moved to a “holistic” admissions system because its president thought it had too many Jewish students (who excelled on the standardised exam adopted in 1905). A century later, Harvard is being sued over a holistic admissions system that limits the number of Asian-American students, who also do well on tests. Based on that case, the Supreme Court is expected to rule that race-based affirmative action is unconstitutional. A cynical observer might conclude that universities are jettisoning quantitative measures, the lawsuit’s key evidence, to make discrimination harder to detect.

Fixing educational inequality requires more data, not less. Susan Dynarski, an economist at Harvard, makes the case that free, universal testing helps unearth promising young talent from rough backgrounds. Timely reminders about financial aid also help. For decades, elite universities have sought skin-deep diversity to paper over abysmal socioeconomic diversity, a failing that is exacerbated by legacy admissions. If the Supreme Court rules that stratagem out, universities should not devote their energies to maintaining an undesirable status quo, but to crafting something better: a true meritocracy shorn of an unjustifiable, hereditary mediocracy.

(553 words)

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/03/09/american-universities-are-pursuing-fairness-the-wrong-way>

State-school admissions are rising at Oxford and Cambridge



That means fewer privately educated students are getting in

The vast majority of Britons are educated in state schools: 94% of the population and 83% of those who take A-levels. Until recently, admissions to the best universities did not come close to reflecting these numbers. In 2013 state-school students made up 57% and 61% of those admitted to Oxford and Cambridge respectively. Admissions at other leading universities were also weighted towards teenagers who are educated privately.

5 Since then a quiet revolution has got under way. Every year the number of state-educated pupils getting Oxbridge places has risen; the number gaining admission from private schools has fallen. In 2022 the proportion of state-school students offered places at Oxford was 68%; at Cambridge, 72.5%. Because many members of the Russell Group, a collection of 24 prestigious universities, have long admitted higher proportions of state-school pupils than Oxbridge, the rise there has been less marked: from 78% to 80% in the past eight years. But Hollie
10 Chandler, the group's head of policy, says that its members have "ambitious targets" to admit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Two schools illustrate the change particularly starkly. In 2014, 99 students at Eton College, which has produced 20 prime ministers (most of them Oxford- or Cambridge-educated), got offers to go to Oxbridge; by 2021 this
15 had fallen to 48. That year 54 students at Brampton Manor College, a state school in a poor borough of east London, received offers from the two universities, up from one in 2014.

A few things lie behind this change. The government has given cash to universities to reach underrepresented students and, since 2018, required them to publish plans showing how they are doing this. Universities have
20 been bombarded by hard-to-ignore research into admissions disparities. One report in 2018 showed that eight schools accounted for more Oxbridge places than 2,900 other secondary schools combined; six of them were private.

A law allowing schools to become "academies", with greater control over budgets and staff, has led to the development of many that are exceptionally ambitious for their pupils. Teach First, a scheme that sends clever
25 graduates into tough schools for a couple of years, has also helped raise pupils' aspirations. It began in London, one of the reasons why the highest-performing state schools are concentrated in the capital.

(376 words)

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/03/11/state-school-admissions-are-rising-at-oxford-and-cambridge>

Facing the demons: can Dungeons & Dragons therapy heal real-life trauma?

Psychologists are using the game to help patients notice patterns of behavior. Alaina Demopoulos gives it a try

I am Goldie, a druid with long white hair and the half-human, half-horse body of a centaur. I walk into a lush, green forest with my constant companion, a goat named Penny. As we tread down a winding pathway, we start to smell the rotting stench of decay. Then we see it: the corpses of other animals, decayed beyond belief, spores poking from their bodies. There are mushrooms everywhere.

5 It's a little after 9pm and I'm sitting at my kitchen table in Brooklyn, Zooming in to a fantastical journey led by Megan A Connell, a licensed psychologist who uses Dungeons & Dragons during therapy groups. She's leading me through a round of the popular tabletop game to help me notice patterns of behavior.

We journey onwards. A little red structure appears, she tells me. I walk to the window and peer in, just enough to get a glimpse of who is inside while staying covert about it. I see an angry monster pacing back and forth.
10 His face looks melted. He's made up entirely of mushrooms that appear to be spiking straight out from his chest. She asks: do I want to approach him? No, I definitely want to run away from the crazed mushroom man. I turn on my heels, and gallop directly in the other direction.

Dungeons & Dragons has long been a haven for outsiders, and its evangelists say the game helps them build a community and let their imaginations roam. Since its creation in 1974, D&D's reach has expanded far beyond
15 basement gatherings and high school lunch period meet-ups. There are now over 13 million active players worldwide, thanks in part to its inclusion in the plot of Netflix's Stranger Things and a pandemic-era boom in remote playing. A forthcoming action comedy, Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves, starring Chris Pine, will lure more fans into the franchise.

D&D diehards might tell you that no Hollywood blockbuster can compare with the theater of the mind, which
20 is where the game thrives. Using only dice and a rough roadmap of how the game will go, players sit around a tabletop and dream up scenarios for their characters, relaying them through storytelling. You may steal treasure, kill goblins, or cast wicked spells. As players often say, the only limitation is your own imagination. According to Connell, this makes D&D an ideal conduit for therapy.

During our session, Connell tells me that I have a sense of curiosity that can lead me to danger – but enough
25 self-preservation to know when to back away. (Any similarity between my game and a certain HBO mega-hit series featuring killer fungi is purely coincidental. After we play, I remind Connell that bacteria-carrying mushrooms are also the villains in The Last of Us – she had forgotten.)

According to practitioners, D&D can be used to treat everything from exploring gender – you can take on
30 a character whose identity is completely foreign to yours – to recovering from traumatic events. "Trauma disconnects us from ourselves, and one of the first things we get disconnected from is our imagination and creativity," Cassie Walker, a clinical social worker, told Wired last year. Role-playing has the potential to lighten up therapy sessions, and invigorate clients whose expressiveness may have been dulled by past events.

Today, Connell is especially interested in working with young women and girls to use the game to build
35 self-esteem and assertiveness through play. "It's a great place to practice skills and step into those aspirational traits to be the person you want," she said.."

Connell first encountered the game as a child growing up in rural Maine. Her middle school friends mostly appreciated the chance to escape into their characters.

"I have to put air quotes around this: we 'played' D&D," Connell said. "I think we only ever played like two
40 games. For us, it was a lot about making the characters. We talked about how cool they were, and all the adventures they got to go on."

After a long hiatus from role-playing games – Connell tried becoming a musician, then switched to music therapy, ending up as an army psychologist treating soldiers with PTSD in Iraq and Fort Eustis, Virginia – Connell fell back into a regular D&D game night with her family.

"Psychologists are historically bad at taking care of themselves, since we work on taking care of everyone around
45 us," she said. "D&D was a game where I could unplug my brain and have fun. It recharged me, and I found it

therapeutic.”

Connell began listening to a D&D podcast that featured an interview with Raffael Boccamazzo, a Seattle-based psychologist, who used the game to teach social skills to children on the autism spectrum.

50 She learned that therapeutic D&D was a burgeoning field. The practice Game to Grow, also based in Seattle, was founded in 2017 and now serves 150 clients. Another company, Geek Therapeutics, teaches therapists how to use the game in their work, and has a growing Rolodex of “therapeutic game masters” based around the country.

55 But Connell says there is not enough clinical research to back up what she sees in her practice. She’s about to release a book, *Tabletop Role-Playing Therapy: A Guide for the Clinician Game Master*, which is full of disclaimers. “It’s ridiculous how much I had to say, ‘We don’t have research on this, and we don’t know exactly what’s going on,’” she said. During her book research, Connell found that there were a few case studies and pilot programs using tabletop therapy to teach social skills in the early 1980s, and the findings seemed “promising”. But then the research just dropped off. Connell believes this was because Satanic panic almost killed D&D, as concerned parents and law enforcement tried to stamp out anything that seemed remotely
60 connected to the occult.

65 In 1979, a D&D prodigy and college student named James Dallas Egbert III went missing and was later found dead. Detectives ominously theorized that the game made him experience delusions that led to suicide. *Mazes and Monsters*, a subsequent made-for-television movie loosely based on the case, starred a very young and rather cherubic Tom Hanks. 60 Minutes aired a segment on a supposed rash of violence blamed on D&D, and a parent of a fan who had killed himself unsuccessfully sued its creators.

After that moral panic, studies into its effectiveness were shelved. Researchers only returned to studying therapeutic gaming in the 2000s.

70 More foundational studies are required to track exactly how D&D helps patients. But Connell says she’s seen it work. “I’ve had several players talk to me about how getting to role-play saying no helps them do it in real life,” she said. “It can be really powerful learning how to stand up for yourself and have boundaries, and doing it in the game can really help translate a lived experience.”

75 Before we begin our session, Connell asks me if I have any phobias that I don’t want to show up in the game – if I’m afraid of spiders, for instance, she won’t make the main villain a giant tarantula. I say I’m game for anything except mice or rats, as I’m currently dealing with an infestation in my kitchen ... which is also where I’m Zooming into our meeting from.

But Connell does want to see how my character, Goldie, will interact with something she’s afraid of – hence the murderous mushroom man I came upon in the forest. “If your character confronts something, and you’re able to talk about it later, you can learn what helped your character through a panic attack, and brainstorm how to help yourself later when you’re experiencing anxiety,” Connell explained.

80 After I decide Goldie wants to make a run for it, Connell asks me to roll the 20-sided dice. She’s making a “survival check” for my character – and luckily, I’m able to find a path out of the dark woods. I get away from the fungi contagion and come upon a clear stream that leads to a small hamlet. What does my character want now? Food, I reply, and I head into the town center toward a communal oven.

85 There, I encounter a halfling – a Tolkien-esque hobbit with pointed ears, often a sign of good luck. Using an accent that wouldn’t sound out of place in a community theater production of *The Banshees of Inisherin*, Connell plays out our conversation. The halfling has heard of the mushroom blight a few miles south. He offers me a paltry amount of food and some silver pieces to lead a search party back down to the mushroom man’s hideout. Will I go? Absolutely not. Goldie wants to stay in the town and rest for a while.

90 We played a short game, and I didn’t have any psychological breakthrough, but I imagine regular players might find the process therapeutic.

95 It felt slightly ridiculous to picture myself – er, my character – traipsing through a forest wearing what I basically imagined to be a Daenerys Targaryen costume from *Spirit Halloween*. But there was something relaxing about adopting a character. It was a low-stakes way to test out behavior that the real me didn’t have to commit to trying. I think about how Connell uses D&D to teach young women and girls social skills and boundary-setting. I can see how that might work.

(1559 words)

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/mar/21/dungeons-dragons-therapy-psychologists-mental-health>

American universities are hiring based on devotion to diversity



Mandatory statements are quickly taking hold of academia

The university of California, Berkeley is currently advertising for a “director of cell culture, fly food, media prep and on-call glass washing facilities”. Applicants need an advanced degree and a decade of research experience, and must submit a cv, a cover letter and a research statement. They must also send in a statement on their contributions to advancing diversity, equity and inclusion. Seemingly everyone (this director, the next head of preservation for the library, anyone who dreams of a tenured professorship) must file a statement outlining their understanding of diversity, their past contributions to increasing it and their plans “for advancing equity and inclusion” if hired.

Not long ago, such statements were exotic and of marginal importance. Now they are de rigueur across most of the University of California system for hiring and tenure decisions. Studies claim that as many as one in five faculty jobs across America require them. And government agencies that fund scientific research are starting to make grants to labs conditional upon their diversity metrics and plans.

Proponents argue that such things are needed to advance concepts normally invoked by abbreviation: diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), sometimes with “belonging” appended (DEIB), or “justice” (DEIJ), or else rearranged in a jollier anagram (jedi). Critics—typically those with tenure rather than those seeking it—think mandatory statements constitute political litmus tests, devalue merit, open a back door for affirmative action, violate academic freedom and infringe on First Amendment protections for public universities. “There are a lot of similarities between these diversity statements as they’re being applied now and how loyalty oaths [which once required faculty to attest that they were not communists] worked,” says Keith Whittington, a political scientist at Princeton University. Who is right?

Advocates see no conflict between DEI and academic excellence. “It’s hard to imagine being a good teacher if you don’t know how to actively engage all students,” says Sharon Inkelas, an associate vice-provost at Berkeley. Nor is it a matter of political belief. These statements “are descriptions of things that people have done that have enabled them to be successful in the classroom,” says Professor Inkelas. A referendum has already outlawed affirmative action in California, so state institutions cannot give preferential treatment on the basis of race or sex. A separate law bans employers from “controlling or directing” the political activities of their employees.

“There is no litmus test attached to diversity statements. All that it’s asking is, ‘What are you going to be able to add to our campus? How are you going to deal with the diverse student body and faculty?’” says Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of Berkeley’s law school and a well-known First Amendment scholar. “The absence of lawsuits so far, despite threats, is an indication that the diversity statements are legal. They don’t violate the First Amendment.”

It is hard to know whether DEI statements merely meet their goals or stray into political filtering. Davidson College, in North Carolina, asked prospective computer-science staff to write about their “potential to contribute to our commitment to equity and anti-racism”—a cause fervently embraced by the left and despised by the right. Berkeley has distributed guidance on how search committees ought to evaluate diversity statements. They say that any candidate who does not discuss gender or race must be awarded low marks. The same goes for any earnest classical liberal who “explicitly states the intention to ignore the varying backgrounds of their students and ‘treat everyone the same’.”

In 2018 Berkeley launched a “cluster search” for five faculty to teach biological sciences. From 894 applications, it created a longlist based on diversity statements alone, eliminating 680 candidates without examining their research or other credentials. This “yielded significant increases in urm [underrepresented minority] candidates advanced to shortlist consideration”, a university memo reported.

Whether such a process privileges candidates of certain ethnic backgrounds over others is a sensitive question

with legal implications. “It doesn’t appear that there’s any kind of correlation between particular identities and the quality of statements,” says Karie Frasch, the director of Berkeley’s Office of Faculty Equity and Welfare. When asked to clarify whether that meant scores did not differ by race, Dr Frasch says, “I’m not saying that. We don’t have that information. I shouldn’t have said the word ‘correlation’. I apologise.”

Berkeley is an important case study, not necessarily because it is the most extreme but because it is the most transparent. The University of California, Los Angeles has embraced diversity statements in hiring and tenure decisions even more fervently, but does not feel the need to explain its policies. A spokesperson said that Anna Spain Bradley, a law professor who serves as vice-chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion, was unavailable for comment.

Critics worry about the proliferation of diversity criteria in science. Beginning this fiscal year, the Department of Energy, which funds research on nuclear and plasma physics among other things, will require all grant applications to submit plans on “promoting inclusive and equitable research”. Since 2021 the brain Initiative at the National Institutes of Health has required prospective grantees to file a “plan for enhancing diverse perspectives”. Teams with investigators from diverse backgrounds receive precedence.

“People are unwilling to push back because they are afraid to lose their funding, and no one wants to become a martyr for defending reason,” says Anna Krylov, a professor of chemistry at the University of Southern California. Professor Krylov studied in the former Soviet Union and sees parallels that are “a little too close”. Rather than Marxism-Leninism, “you really have to pledge your commitment to critical social justice.”

If race-based affirmative action for college admissions is struck down by the Supreme Court, as most expect it will be this year, universities will surely resort to creative means of maintaining diversity that can survive judicial scrutiny. Diversity statements may prove useful. The subtlety can vary. The Harvard Law Review strongly encourages prospective editors to submit, alongside their application, a 200-word statement “to identify and describe aspects of your identity. . . including, but not limited to, racial or ethnic identity, socioeconomic background, disability (physical, intellectual, cognitive/neurological, psychiatric, sensory, developmental, or other), gender identity. . .” (the list goes on).

In many Republican-led states legislators are trying to forcibly eradicate this strain of thinking—sometimes in ways that seek to limit freedom of thought in the name of protecting it. Last year Republicans in Florida passed the Stop woke Act, which prohibits instruction at universities on ideas like systemic racism unless provided in “an objective manner without endorsement”. In 2021 those in Idaho passed a law banning the teaching of critical race theory in all schools, including public universities. Last month the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think-tank, released a piece of model legislation for states to emulate that would do less violence to the First Amendment, by dismantling DEI offices in universities and banning consideration of diversity statements in hiring.

Others are more sanguine. “I think it’s a fad,” says Janet Halley, a professor of law at Harvard. Bureaucratising ideology saps sincerity. “People will utter the hocus-pocus. They know that they’re being required to put on an act. And that’s going to create cynicism about the very values that the people who put these requirements into place care about,” she says. If those contradictions don’t sink the project, the courts might. Professor Halley believes these innovations are “forced speech and viewpoint discrimination in the First Amendment context” and will lead DEI dissidents to file lawsuits. “With the increasing conservatism of the federal bench, I think they’re likely to win.”

(1246 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/02/04/american-universities-are-hiring-based-on-devotion-to-diversity>

Editing Roald Dahl for sensitivity was silly



It was also a sign of a deeper rotsomeness in British publishing

Why stop at fatness? If you are going to put a red pen through Roald Dahl—as his publisher, Puffin, did recently—there are so many better bits to choose. The sensitivity readers contented themselves with excising such words as “fat”, “flabby”, “ugly” and “Kipling”. But Dahl doesn’t merely offer sexism, racism and colonialism; in his adult fiction you can find sins so frankly filthy and swigpilling there has yet to be an -ism coined to cover them. There is violence, voyeurism and an unforgettably frightsome story in which a scorpion collector accidentally has sex with a leper. Not for nothing did his family call him “Roald the Rotten” and—more bluntly—“Roald the Bastard”.

Something seems to be changing in British publishing. You can see it in the sheepish announcement from Puffin after news of its edits prompted a backlash, that Roald the Revolting will still roll off the presses unaltered, alongside the works of Roald the Redacted. You can see it, too, in almost-silenced books that are now thriving. “Time to Think”, a book by Hannah Barnes about the Tavistock’s gender-identity clinic in London, which referred children as young as nine for puberty blockers, was rejected by 22 publishers. Swift Press, a nimble newcomer, took it on and it made the bestseller lists. People in the industry suggest that the red pen is being wielded less freely. As one publishing executive puts it, there is a sense that things “had gone too far”. (Though since this person did not want to be quoted by name, not far enough.)

A change is overdue. The editing of Dahl by Puffin, an imprint of Penguin, was a symptom of something frogglehumping in the publishing world, but far from the only one. Authors have been dropped; books have been buried; people have lost jobs; sensitivity readers have been employed to ensure modern morals are adhered to. James Bond has even been edited to make him less vile—the literary equivalent of trying to make water less wet.

There is a line of argument that says that this isn’t really a problem. Suppression of speech, this argument runs, is the preserve of totalitarian, Orwellian-style states and institutions that use force to stop people speaking out. In a country like Britain, speech is still free. This is pure gobblefunk and Orwell’s “1984” is the wrong Orwellian work to understand why.

Better by far to turn to an introduction Orwell wrote for “Animal Farm”. Orwell had finished his satire on the Soviet Union—which many consider his masterpiece—in 1943, whereupon it was promptly rejected by four publishers. As with Ms Barnes’s 22 rejections, some offered reasons. One publisher pleasingly suggested Orwell might want to rethink the pigs. Having swine as the ruling class might “give offence. . . particularly to anyone who is a bit touchy, as undoubtedly the Russians are”. Orwell kept the pigs; “Animal Farm” sold half a million copies in two years.

He later reflected on all this in that introduction. There is, he wrote, a “veiled censorship” in British publishing. “At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question.” It is “not exactly forbidden to say this, that or the other, but it is ‘not done’ to say it”. Anyone who tries to do so “finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness”. They still do. A book on colonialism by Nigel Biggar, an emeritus professor of theology at Oxford University, was welcomed by its publisher, Bloomsbury, as a work of “major importance” and then postponed, apparently indefinitely, because “public feeling. . . does not currently support the publication of the book”. It is now out under a different publisher.

What is striking is how apparently mild the sanctions are for speaking out. People think, as one author puts it, that you are afraid of Twitter death threats. You aren’t: what really terrifies you is that your colleagues will think a little less of you. Most people do not require the threat of being burned at the stake to shut them up; being flamed by their peers on Twitter is more than enough.

This is true of more typically Orwellian states, too. When Anne Applebaum studied the Sovietisation of central Europe, the historian found political conformity was “the result not of violence or direct state coercion, but rather of intense peer pressure”. Publishing, an industry in which every third person is called Sophie, seems particularly susceptible to such pressure.

All this involves no laws, no police, nor even any obvious threats. Polite people write polite emails and books are politely buried. “The sinister fact about literary censorship in England”, Orwell wrote, “is that it is largely voluntary.” To go against that ominously amorphous “public feeling” is deeply uncomfortable. Ms Barnes found writing her book about the Tavistock’s clinic hard not because she thought it was wrong but because “I thought: ‘People are not going to like me.’” Publishers are equally nervy. In the name of looking likeable they panic and pre-empt offence: they cull the pigs; drop the book on colonialism; cut the froufrou bits.

Swinebuggling stuff

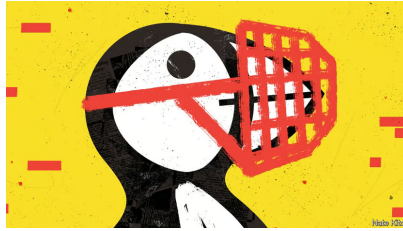
The problem with all this nervousness—this desire-to-look-nice-ness—is that it has very nasty results. In “Fahrenheit 451”, a novel by Ray Bradbury, a society has taken to burning all books lest any cause offence. As one character explains: “Don’t step on the toes of the . . . second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen. . . .” This book-burning wasn’t mandated by the government. “There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship to start with, no! Technology . . . and minority pressure carried the trick.” Now the books have all gone. Now “thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time.”

Penguin, incidentally, offers an audiobook of “Fahrenheit 451”. Perhaps its executives might be encouraged to listen to it before they get their red pens out. Then again, they might be tempted to edit it as well; after all, Puffin took the words “Japanese” and “Norway people” and “Yankee-Doodles” out of Dahl. Best be sure we can all stay happy all the time.

(1002 words)

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/03/23/editing-roald-dahl-for-sensitivity-was-silly>

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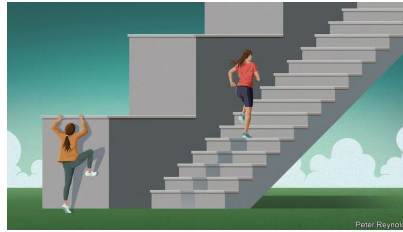
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(578 words)

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/03/23/editing-roald-dahl-for-sensitivity-was-silly>

Why gradualists are usually right and radicals are wrong



“Gradual” makes a passionate and convincing argument for incrementalism

Gradual. By Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox. *Oxford University Press*; 240 pages; \$29.95 and £22.99

Revolutionaries have the best slogans. The Bolsheviks shouted “Peace! Land! Bread!” Mao Zedong promised a “Great Leap Forward”. Che Guevara claimed to “tremble with indignation at every injustice”. Advocates of gradual change, by contrast, find it hard to compose a good rallying cry. No crowd ever worked itself into a frenzy chanting: “What do we want? Incremental reform! When do we want it? When budgetary conditions allow!”

But as Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox argue in “Gradual”, incrementalism works. Revolutionaries promise paradise but often bring about bloodshed, bread lines and book-banning. Humanity has grown more prosperous by making a long series of often modest improvements to an unsatisfactory status quo. The Industrial Revolution, despite its name, was not a single, sudden event but thousands of cumulative innovations spread across nearly a century. “Over time, incremental reforms can add up to something truly transformative,” note the authors.

Both are American criminal-justice reformers, and although their argument applies globally they focus on their home country. Correctly, they observe that American politics has been flooded by what Alexander Hamilton called “a torrent of angry and malignant passions”.

On the right, Donald Trump and his acolytes have sought “the ultimate in radical change”: to overturn the result of a democratic election. “I am your warrior, I am your justice. . . I am your retribution. . . I will totally obliterate the deep state,” Mr Trump thundered on March 4th at a supposedly “conservative” conference. As president, he cosied up to Vladimir Putin and spoke warmly of some neo-Nazis.

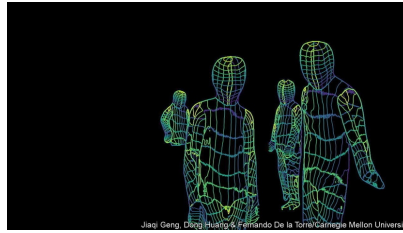
Some on the left, meanwhile, deem America so rotten that old structures must be swept away. “Defund the police!” “Abolish ICE [the agency that enforces immigration laws]!” The authors refer to Ibram X. Kendi, a fashionable scholar, who wants to create a “Department of Anti-racism”, to be staffed by “experts on racism” with the power to veto any policy that fails to advance his definition of racial equity. They would have “disciplinary tools” to wield against public officials who dissented. This would, in effect, hand quasi-dictatorial power to a small group of people who share Mr Kendi’s world-view.

Mr Berman and Mr Fox admit that radical change has sometimes been necessary: for example, to achieve the abolition of slavery. But the more cautious sort is more often effective, because “gradualists know how little they know”. Anyone trying to understand a big problem is sure to miss crucial information. Errors are inevitable. Incrementalism makes it easier to correct them. New ideas can “be tested, evaluated and honed over time”.

(432 words)

<https://www.economist.com/culture/2023/03/30/why-gradualists-are-usually-right-and-radicals-are-wrong>

Wi-Fi signals could prove useful for spies



A router's emissions can paint a picture of activity in a room

Like all radio waves, Wi-Fi signals undergo subtle shifts when they encounter objects—human beings included. These can reveal information about the shape and motion of what has been encountered, in a manner akin to the way a bat's chirps reveal obstacles and prey.

Starting from this premise Jiaqi Geng, Dong Huang and Fernando De la Torre, of Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, wondered if they could use Wi-Fi to record the behaviour of people inside otherwise unobservable rooms. As they describe in a posting on arXiv, they have found that they can. "DensePose from Wi-Fi", the paper in question, describes how they ran Wi-Fi signals from a room with appropriate routers in it through an artificial-intelligence algorithm trained on signals from people engaging in various, known activities. This algorithm was able to reconstruct moving digital portraits, called pose estimations, of the individuals in the room.

Mr Geng, Dr Huang and Dr De la Torre are not the first to think of doing this. But they seem to have made a significant advance. Earlier experiments had managed to obtain two-dimensional (2D) pose estimations based on as many as 17 "vector points" on the body—such as head, chest, knees, elbows and hands. The new paper, by contrast, describes "2.5D" portraits that track 24 vector points (see picture). And, according to Dr Huang, the team has now built an enhanced version capable of generating complete 3D body reconstructions that track thousands of vector points. Moreover, this work employed standard antennas of the sort used in household Wi-Fi routers. Previous efforts have relied on souped-up versions of the equipment.

Detailed Wi-Fi-based body-tracking with a standard-issue router would have many uses. Mr Geng, Dr Huang and Dr De la Torre talk of employing it to "monitor the well-being of elder people". A team working on similar technology, led by Yili Ren of Florida State University, suggests it could be used in interactive gaming and exercise monitoring. And, in 2016, Dina Katabi, Mingmin Zhao and Fadel Adib of the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology demonstrated how Wi-Fi-like radio signals could detect a volunteer's heartbeat (and thus his or her emotional state) remotely.

These ideas are, however, distractions from what any such system would almost certainly be used for to start with, namely surveillance and espionage. In 2018, for example, Yanzi Zhu of the University of California, Santa Barbara and his colleagues showed how hackers posted outside someone's home could track the movements (though not then visualise the postures) of people inside, by intercepting escaping Wi-Fi signals.

It is easy to imagine who might be interested in the ability to turn any building's Wi-Fi network into a mini panopticon. Dr Huang declined to say who is sponsoring his team's work. However, another of their projects—developing techniques for detecting specific human behaviours in video-surveillance footage—is paid for by IARPA, the research hub of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees America's spies.

(493 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2023/01/25/wi-fi-signals-could-prove-useful-for-spies>

People of different opinions process political data differently



Brain scanning suggests activity patterns cluster with ideology

That those who lean to opposite ends of the political spectrum think differently from each other is obvious. That such differences show up in brain scans is intriguing. Brain scanning is a low-resolution approach to studying neural activity, incapable of seeing how the cells which do the actual thinking are connected to each other. Yet, using this fairly crude technique, two groups of researchers now claim to be able to distinguish the neural responses of left- and right-wingers.

Daantje de Bruin and Oriel FeldmanHall, of Brown University, in Rhode Island, published their study in *Science Advances*. Noa Katabi and Yaara Yeshurun of Tel Aviv University, in Israel, chose the *Journal of Neuroscience*. Both used functional magnetic-resonance imaging, which measures changes in blood flow as a proxy for neural activity, to look at groups of 44 and 34 volunteers respectively, from across the political spectrum.

Ms de Bruin and Dr FeldmanHall first asked their volunteers to read a list of words—some politically charged, some not—while lying in the scanner. For each word, they recorded activity patterns in the amygdala (which handles aspects of the emotions) and the striatum (which handles aspects of cognition). Neutral words showed no difference. But for words related to “immigration” and “American” the activity patterns in the striatum clustered according to participants’ politics.

Next, they asked people to watch a neutrally worded news clip on abortion and also heated debates on policing and immigration. Patterns of activity stimulated by the news clip were indistinguishable between left- and right-wingers, but those generated by the immigration debate (though, surprisingly, not by the policing debate) clearly divided them.

Ms Katabi and Dr Yeshurun, by contrast, went straight for videos. They asked participants to watch campaign ads and speeches, and a neutral clip. They found differences in the responses to politically charged material of parts of the cortex that deal with vision, hearing and movement. Moreover, unlike Ms de Bruin and Dr FeldmanHall, who merely noted correlations, they said they could predict an individual’s political views from the scan. Not quite Big Brother in 1984, yet. Getting someone to lie still in a scanner is a palaver. But surprisingly close.

(359 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2023/02/02/people-of-different-opinions-process-political-data-differently>

The rise of the borderless trustbuster

Corporate dealmakers face a formidable foe. It isn't Lina Khan

It was to be the biggest industrial merger ever. In late 2000 General Electric (ge), the world's most valuable company at the time, agreed to pay \$43bn for Honeywell, a smaller American manufacturer of, among other things, aircraft electronics. Jack Welch, ge's ceo and America Inc's capitalist-in-chief, put off his retirement to see it through. The transaction, codenamed "Project Storm", seemed a done deal. American authorities gave their blessing, finding no threat to competition (ge made jet engines but not avionics). Regulators elsewhere were expected to defer to America in a merger involving two American firms. So it came as a shock when, in 2001, the European Commission killed it. A diversified ge would, the eu's competition watchdog argued, wield too much power in the market for aircraft parts. America's trustbusters pooh-poohed the commission's theory of "conglomerate effects". The treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill, called the ruling "off the wall".

Now another transatlantic antitrust rift has opened up. In March 2021 America's Federal Trade Commission (ftc) sued to stop the \$7bn takeover by Illumina, a gene-sequencing giant, of Grail, maker of a cancer-detection test. The ftc claimed Illumina risked withholding its sequencing technology from Grail's rivals. On September 1st a judge at the agency's internal court threw out the lawsuit, in part because Grail's tests currently have no rivals to speak of. Then, on September 6th, the eu blocked the deal—never mind that Grail has no turnover in the bloc.

Even if the eu ruling was not, as lobbyists at the us Chamber of Commerce suggest, stirred up by the ftc, this time around the reaction in Washington was not pique but plaudits. President Joe Biden blames overmighty corporations for high prices, low wages and other ills. His crusading ftc chief, Lina Khan, rejects the 40-year-old antitrust philosophy, according to which the goal of antitrust law is to safeguard competition and consumer welfare, in favour of one that seeks to protect competitors, both real and potential, as well as suppliers, workers and other "stakeholders".

For corporate dealmakers the chaos and inconsistency are as welcome as a Honeywell-sized slap in the face. The episode also illustrates how much bolder—and borderless—global trustbusters are becoming. The impact on future takeovers could be profound.

Navigating multiple jurisdictions is nothing new in mergers and acquisitions (m&a). When ab InBev, the world's biggest brewer, bought sabMiller, the second-largest, in 2016, it had to submit merger filings in more than 30 countries. Today's Welch wannabes face an ever trickier terrain. For one thing, national trustbusters have mushroomed. Filippo Lancieri, now at eth Zurich, a university, and colleagues find that 127 countries had an antitrust regime in 2010, up from 41 in 1979. Many assess not just a deal's economic efficiency but things like whether it serves "public interest". And they are staffing up. Britain's Competition and Market's Authority (cma) has gone from 650 to 850 officials in five years. China's main antitrust bureau is tripling its headcount to 150.

Second, those multiplying regulators are flexing their muscles, partly in response to criticisms that their flaccidity had let business get too oligopolistic. Exhibit A is the bigness of big tech, whose sometimes free products and strong network effects (where size begets more size) make the old "consumer-welfare standard" seem, in critics' eyes, unfit for purpose. Tech giants stand accused of "killer acquisitions", aimed at smothering potential challengers in the crib, and of buying up firms in markets they one day hope to corner. More regulators now fret that such unorthodox mergers, where two firms have no overlapping business, snuff out innovation—including, as in Grail's case, in markets that scarcely exist.

That leads to the third complication. In the past, national merger guidelines made it clear when firms needed to seek approval to wed—typically if their combined sales or market share exceeded a certain threshold. When regulators raised concerns about market power, a firm like ab InBev could put them to rest by offloading a brewery here and there. Now a potential competitor can come from anywhere; so, too, can a regulatory challenge. And if the fears are of conglomerate effects or killer acquisitions, no remedy short of the combined firm's full retreat from a jurisdiction would be satisfactory. For acquiring firms with a large existing business in a given market, that is a non-starter.

The new antitrust logic is behind a string of recent actions, and not just Grail. In February a lengthy cma probe prompted Nvidia, an American semiconductor firm, to abandon its \$40bn takeover of Arm, a Japanese-owned firm that licenses chip blueprints. In July the ftc sued to block the purchase of Within, maker of virtual-reality fitness apps, by Meta, which the ftc says is seeking to illegally "expand [its] virtual-reality empire" that already

50 includes a popular vr headset and a vr app store. Western and Asian regulators are looking into Microsoft's \$69bn acquisition of Activision Blizzard, a video-game developer.

None of this means corporate m&a is dead. Last year saw \$3.8trn-worth of deals, a near-record. Most will sail through. Illumina is appealing against the eu decision and may get its way. Even so, Grail-like ordeals raise the costs for everyone. Lawyers report that break-up fees in merger contracts are already rising and "outside
55 dates", before which parties can walk away scot-free, are stretching from a few months to as many as 18 in the Microsoft-Activision paperwork. The longer a deal takes to conclude, laments an executive at an acquisitive tech firm, the likelier the target's innovative edge is to be blunted and its other key asset—talent—is to flee.

Some deals which would once have been no-brainers are thus no longer worth the hassle. To enemies of big business like Ms Khan, that's the point. If it means innovation forgone, consumer welfare unrealised or
60 shareholder value not created, tough luck.

(964 words)

<https://www.economist.com/business/2022/09/15/the-rise-of-the-borderless-trustbuster>

How a tide of tech money is transforming charity



The new philanthropists are young, impatient and in a hurry

When Andrew White first sold a chunk of his business in 2021, he knew he wanted to give some of the proceeds away. Indeed, if all goes according to plan, he hopes eventually to give over \$20m to charity. But Mr White was still busy running FundApps, a compliance-monitoring service for investors. That left little time to read up on development economics or scour charity rankings.

5 The model that big-name philanthropists have followed for generations—setting up a private foundation and hiring a team to run it—was out of the question. “Creating another organisation to manage your money is just wasting it,” says Mr White. After all, he says, “these people are very good at what they do, so why don’t you trust them to do it?” In the end, Mr White gave the money to Founders Pledge, a British charity with more than 1,700 members in 39 countries. He told Founders Pledge he would like the cash to go to education and poverty relief in poor countries, then left its researchers to sort out the details.

10 Mr White is part of a new class of philanthropists very different from those that went before. They are often young, impatient with process and detail, and keen to make a difference in a hurry. Most made their money in the software and computing industry that has, since the turn of the century, been the world’s great engine of wealth creation. Along with their money comes their industry’s worldview. “I was reading *Wired*, not the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*,” says Scott Harrison, the founder of charity: water, which aims to give clean water to everyone on the planet.

20 No one has more money to give away than the tech tycoons. *Forbes*, a magazine which tracks such things, reckons that 26 of the 100 richest people in the world in 2022 made their money leading technology firms of various sorts, including seven of the top ten. (The recent drop in tech valuations has dented the sector’s dominance, but not ended it.)

25 They are even more dominant when it comes to giving that money away. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* (which Mr Harrison said he did not read) estimates that, of the \$33.4bn given away by America’s 50 biggest donors in 2021, around three-quarters came from people who made their money in tech (see chart). Bain & Company, a consultancy, reckons tech magnates hold about 8% of the total wealth of India’s super-rich, but account for about 35% of the charitable giving.

That tide of money carries with it the culture and worldview of the industry that created it. Tech has spent the past two decades disrupting everything from shopping to television. Charitable giving, it seems, is next.

30 To see just how different the newcomers are, compare them with their best-known forebears. The grandfathers of modern philanthropy are American industrialists like Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller. Such men gave the bulk of their money late in their lives. They created foundations that would outlive them, employed highly qualified advisers, and were prepared to dish out funds for decades to achieve their goals.

That model was tweaked at the turn of the millennium. (...)

(528 words)

<https://www.economist.com/international/2023/02/09/how-a-tide-of-tech-money-is-transforming-charity>

There is a worrying amount of fraud in medical research



And a worrying unwillingness to do anything about it

IN 2011 BEN MOL, a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Monash University, in Melbourne, came across a retraction notice for a study on uterine fibroids and infertility published by a researcher in Egypt. The journal which had published it was retracting it because it contained identical numbers to those in an earlier Spanish study—except that that one had been on uterine polyps. The author, it turned out, had simply copied parts of the polyp paper and changed the disease.

“From that moment I was alert,” says Dr Mol. And his alertness was not merely as a reader of published papers. He was also, at the time, an editor of the *European Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, and frequently also a peer reviewer for papers submitted to other journals. Sure enough, two papers containing apparently fabricated data soon landed on his desk. He rejected them. But, a year later, he came across them again, except with the fishy data changed, published in another journal.

Since then, he has teamed up with other researchers to investigate groups of papers by authors he has spotted as data fabricators. Wherever he saw smoke, he found fire. There were tables on patients’ characteristics that contained only even numbers. There were values that were clinically unlikely. There was an implausible 40:60 sex ratio of babies when the mothers-to-be had, purportedly, been selected at random. Eye-popping speeds of completing clinical trials were common.

Dr Mol and his colleagues have sent their concerns about more than 750 papers to the journals that published them. But, all too often, either nothing seems to happen or investigations take years. Only 80 of the studies they have flagged have so far been retracted. Worse, many have been included in systematic reviews—the sort of research round-ups that inform clinical practice.

Millions of patients may, as a consequence, be receiving wrong treatments. One example concerns steroid injections given to women undergoing elective Caesarean sections to deliver their babies. These injections are intended to prevent breathing problems in newborns. There is a worry that they might cause damage to a baby’s brain, but the practice was supported by a review, published in 2018, by Cochrane, a charity for the promotion of evidence-based medicine. However, when Dr Mol and his colleagues looked at this review, they found it included three studies that they had noted as unreliable. A revised review, published in 2021, which excluded these three, found the benefits of the drugs for such cases to be uncertain.

Partly or entirely fabricated papers are being found in ever-larger numbers, thanks to sleuths like Dr Mol. Retraction Watch, an online database, lists nearly 19,000 papers on biomedical-science topics that have been retracted (...)

(449 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2023/02/22/there-is-a-worrying-amount-of-fraud-in-medical-research>

Artificial intelligence is reaching behind newspaper paywalls



Publishers long accused tech firms of profiting from their content. Now they have a point

There was big news in Canada last week—but if you were in Canada itself you may have missed it. On February 22nd it emerged that Google was blocking access to news content, in a five-week trial affecting about 4% of users in the country. The measure comes as Canada's Senate considers a bill that would force big internet companies to pay publishers for displaying links to their stories. Google says it may simply block them instead; Canada's government says the search engine's actions amount to intimidation.

It is the latest episode in a worldwide dispute between new media and old. News organisations, which in the past two decades have seen most of their advertising revenue disappear online, accuse search engines and social networks of profiting from content that is not theirs. Google and Facebook, which have come in for most of the flak, retort that they merely display links and a few lines of text, rather than articles themselves, and that by doing so they drive traffic to publishers (who in any case can opt out if they choose). Facebook estimates that it sends 1.9bn clicks a year to Canadian media, publicity it values at C\$230m (\$170m).

The online platforms' arguments have mostly fallen on deaf ears. Cheered on by their domestic press, governments in countries including Australia, Britain and Spain have passed or proposed laws aiming to squeeze money out of Silicon Valley and into local media companies. Australia's law, passed in 2021, prodded tech firms to make payments to Australian media reportedly worth about A\$200m (\$135m) in the scheme's first year. (...)

The laws have sometimes had the feel of a shakedown of the wealthy foreign tech firms by governments. But developments in the search business mean that the publishers' complaints seem increasingly justified. Search engines have been getting better at displaying information without referring visitors to external sources. Ask Google the size of Canada's population and it simply tells you that it was 38m in 2021 (followed by its usual list of suggested websites). About a quarter of desktop Google searches now end with no onward clicks, according to Semrush, an online marketing company.

Artificial intelligence (AI) promises to improve this capability dramatically. Google's AI helper, Bard, is still under wraps. But its rival, incorporated into Microsoft's Bing search engine, is already resolving queries. Ask the old Bing for a summary of Canada's last election results and it points to sites including CBC News and the Globe and Mail. Ask the new Bing and it gives a decent account by itself (along with footnoted links to sources). AI assistants can even reach behind paywalls. A user trying to find the New York Times's recipe for macaroni and cheese will be stopped by a demand for payment and subscription. But ask Bing's AI and it serves up a paraphrased version of the whole recipe, complete with a licking-lips emoji.

The search companies admit they are still finding their way with new technology, which is mostly not yet on general release. That is unlikely to satisfy publishers' lawyers. The chief counsel at one large media company argues that AI-search companies should be made to license the content they regurgitate, just as Spotify has to pay record labels to play their songs. AI's use of others' material is "the copyright question of our times", he says. For years the complaints of publishers against platforms have rung somewhat hollow. Now they have a real story on their hands.

(577 words)

<https://www.economist.com/business/2023/03/02/artificial-intelligence-is-reaching-behind-newspaper-paywalls>

The Supreme Court looks askance at Biden's student-debt relief



The conservative majority is sceptical of the \$400bn-plus programme—but there's a hitch

IN ACTION in Congress has led recent presidents to resort to creative work-arounds. When he failed to get immigration reform through Congress, Barack Obama issued executive orders to shield some immigrants from deportation. Donald Trump declared a national emergency to divert funds to build his border wall. And Joe Biden has cited covid-19 as justification for barring evictions, requiring vaccinations and, last August, forgiving up to \$20,000 in debt for student borrowers.

Mr Obama and Mr Trump squeaked out majorities at the Supreme Court to keep their programmes intact. Mr Biden has had less success. In 2021 and 2022 the justices struck down his federal eviction moratorium and a vaccine-or-test mandate that would have applied to 84m employees. On February 28th a pair of oral arguments suggests the majority is inclined to put his student-debt plan on the chopping block, too. (...)

Scepticism from conservative justices flowed throughout the three-and-a-half hours of arguments in *Biden v Nebraska* and *Department of Education v Brown*. Justice Clarence Thomas said payment forbearance “fits more comfortably” in the terms of the HEROES Act than debt cancellation. Justice Neil Gorsuch suggested the policy may be unfair to people who have already paid off their loans or planned their lives “around not seeking loans”. Chief Justice John Roberts wondered why a college graduate should get his loan written off while an entrepreneur is on his own to repay a loan to start a lawn-care business.

Several justices balked at the \$400bn-plus price tag. Invoking the “major questions doctrine”, Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito suggested to Elizabeth Prelogar, Mr Biden's solicitor-general, that such spending should be specifically authorised by Congress. As a policy with “vast economic or political significance”, James Campbell, Nebraska's solicitor-general, said, it is not a move the executive branch should undertake on its own. In reply, Ms Prelogar noted that the debt-payment pauses cost the government \$150bn without raising any hackles.

There is a possible hitch in the conservative majority's inclination to strike down Mr Biden's plan: only plaintiffs who stand to be directly injured have the right to bring a lawsuit. The lawyer in *Brown* struggled to show how his clients—student borrowers upset they would gain little from the policy—had standing to sue.

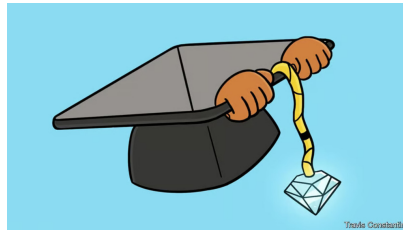
The three liberal justices and Amy Coney Barrett focused on whether a projected fall in revenues for the independent Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority, which opted not to sue on its own behalf, gave Missouri the right to challenge Mr Biden's debt forgiveness. In a possible appeal to Chief Justice Roberts, who is a stickler on standing, Ketanji Brown Jackson urged caution. The justices should be “concerned about jumping into the political fray” involving such a hotly debated issue, she said, “unless we are prompted to do so by a lawsuit that is brought by someone who has an actual interest”.

If the three liberal justices persuade two conservatives to side with them on the technical hitch, the 26m student borrowers hoping for relief may yet see some of their debt absorbed by the federal government. More likely—when the court issues its decision by the end of June—Mr Biden's plan is headed for the dustbin.

(526 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/02/28/the-supreme-court-looks-askance-at-bidens-student-debt-relief>

American universities are pursuing fairness the wrong way



Drop legacy admissions—not standardised exams

THE BEST American universities wish to be ruthlessly discriminating on academic merit—and beacons for diversity on everything else. Trying to accomplish both at once can prompt mistakes. Lately Columbia University, an Ivy League member in New York, has been making a lot of them. Last year it admitted to submitting incorrect data to a college-rankings outfit in a bid to seem more exclusive than it really is. And on March 1st, in a bid to seem more inclusive than it is, Columbia said it would drop the requirement for applicants to submit standardised exam scores.

Campaigners claim that exams favour the privileged. Evidence for this is thin. Maths problems involve neutral things like numbers and algebra; reading-comprehension tests are rarely about silverware or yachting. The bias, however, is said to be latent. Because scores are correlated with race and parental income, the exams must therefore be contaminated with racism and classism.

This confuses disparity with discrimination. Tests correctly measure educational inequality, which begins before kindergarten and grows as a result of bad policy. Just as smashing thermometers does not prevent climate change, so abandoning the measurement of educational inequality will not magic it away.

In fact, for meritocrats to abandon exams is self-defeating. Scores may be correlated with privilege, but they are probably the hardest part of an admissions application to warp with money. Children of the rich can get ample help in completing their coursework (which may receive inflated grades), hire professional writers to “edit” their essays and even spend lavishly on consultants who will help craft a delectable smorgasbord of extra-curricular activities. Yet research shows that intensive tutoring has a marginal effect on test scores. That is why, in the Varsity Blues scandal of 2019, very rich parents paid to have others sit their children’s exams.

Worse, supposedly progressive universities like Columbia operate affirmative-action schemes for deep-pocketed dullards in the form of “legacy” admissions that shower advantages on the relatives of alumni. One study found that undergraduates at Columbia are more than 100 times more likely to belong to the top 0.1% of families by income than to the poorest 20%. The best way to promote fairness would be to eliminate such a regressive pathway to admission.

In the 1920s Harvard moved to a “holistic” admissions system because its president thought it had too many Jewish students (who excelled on the standardised exam adopted in 1905). A century later, Harvard is being sued over a holistic admissions system that limits the number of Asian-American students, who also do well on tests. Based on that case, the Supreme Court is expected to rule that race-based affirmative action is unconstitutional. A cynical observer might conclude that universities are jettisoning quantitative measures, the lawsuit’s key evidence, to make discrimination harder to detect.

Fixing educational inequality requires more data, not less. Susan Dynarski, an economist at Harvard, makes the case that free, universal testing helps unearth promising young talent from rough backgrounds. Timely reminders about financial aid also help. For decades, elite universities have sought skin-deep diversity to paper over abysmal socioeconomic diversity, a failing that is exacerbated by legacy admissions. If the Supreme Court rules that stratagem out, universities should not devote their energies to maintaining an undesirable status quo, but to crafting something better: a true meritocracy shorn of an unjustifiable, hereditary mediocracy.

(553 words)

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/03/09/american-universities-are-pursuing-fairness-the-wrong-way>

State-school admissions are rising at Oxford and Cambridge



That means fewer privately educated students are getting in

The vast majority of Britons are educated in state schools: 94% of the population and 83% of those who take A-levels. Until recently, admissions to the best universities did not come close to reflecting these numbers. In 2013 state-school students made up 57% and 61% of those admitted to Oxford and Cambridge respectively. Admissions at other leading universities were also weighted towards teenagers who are educated privately.

5 Since then a quiet revolution has got under way. Every year the number of state-educated pupils getting Oxbridge places has risen; the number gaining admission from private schools has fallen. In 2022 the proportion of state-school students offered places at Oxford was 68%; at Cambridge, 72.5%. Because many members of the Russell Group, a collection of 24 prestigious universities, have long admitted higher proportions of state-school pupils than Oxbridge, the rise there has been less marked: from 78% to 80% in the past eight years. But Hollie
10 Chandler, the group's head of policy, says that its members have "ambitious targets" to admit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Two schools illustrate the change particularly starkly. In 2014, 99 students at Eton College, which has produced 20 prime ministers (most of them Oxford- or Cambridge-educated), got offers to go to Oxbridge; by 2021 this
15 had fallen to 48. That year 54 students at Brampton Manor College, a state school in a poor borough of east London, received offers from the two universities, up from one in 2014.

A few things lie behind this change. The government has given cash to universities to reach underrepresented students and, since 2018, required them to publish plans showing how they are doing this. Universities have
20 been bombarded by hard-to-ignore research into admissions disparities. One report in 2018 showed that eight schools accounted for more Oxbridge places than 2,900 other secondary schools combined; six of them were private.

A law allowing schools to become "academies", with greater control over budgets and staff, has led to the development of many that are exceptionally ambitious for their pupils. Teach First, a scheme that sends clever
25 graduates into tough schools for a couple of years, has also helped raise pupils' aspirations. It began in London, one of the reasons why the highest-performing state schools are concentrated in the capital.

(376 words)

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/03/11/state-school-admissions-are-rising-at-oxford-and-cambridge>

American universities are hiring based on devotion to diversity



Mandatory statements are quickly taking hold of academia

The university of California, Berkeley is currently advertising for a “director of cell culture, fly food, media prep and on-call glass washing facilities”. Applicants need an advanced degree and a decade of research experience, and must submit a cv, a cover letter and a research statement. They must also send in a statement on their contributions to advancing diversity, equity and inclusion. Seemingly everyone (this director, the next head of preservation for the library, anyone who dreams of a tenured professorship) must file a statement outlining their understanding of diversity, their past contributions to increasing it and their plans “for advancing equity and inclusion” if hired.

Not long ago, such statements were exotic and of marginal importance. Now they are de rigeur across most of the University of California system for hiring and tenure decisions. Studies claim that as many as one in five faculty jobs across America require them. And government agencies that fund scientific research are starting to make grants to labs conditional upon their diversity metrics and plans.

Proponents argue that such things are needed to advance concepts normally invoked by abbreviation: diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), sometimes with “belonging” appended (DEIB), or “justice” (DEIJ), or else rearranged in a jollier anagram (jedi). Critics—typically those with tenure rather than those seeking it—think mandatory statements constitute political litmus tests, devalue merit, open a back door for affirmative action, violate academic freedom and infringe on First Amendment protections for public universities. “There are a lot of similarities between these diversity statements as they’re being applied now and how loyalty oaths [which once required faculty to attest that they were not communists] worked,” says Keith Whittington, a political scientist at Princeton University. Who is right?

Advocates see no conflict between DEI and academic excellence. “It’s hard to imagine being a good teacher if you don’t know how to actively engage all students,” says Sharon Inkelas, an associate vice-provost at Berkeley. Nor is it a matter of political belief. These statements “are descriptions of things that people have done that have enabled them to be successful in the classroom,” says Professor Inkelas. A referendum has already outlawed affirmative action in California, so state institutions cannot give preferential treatment on the basis of race or sex. A separate law bans employers from “controlling or directing” the political activities of their employees.

“There is no litmus test attached to diversity statements. All that it’s asking is, ‘What are you going to be able to add to our campus? How are you going to deal with the diverse student body and faculty?’” says Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of Berkeley’s law school and a well-known First Amendment scholar. “The absence of lawsuits so far, despite threats, is an indication that the diversity statements are legal. They don’t violate the First Amendment.”

It is hard to know whether DEI statements merely meet their goals or stray into political filtering. Davidson College, in North Carolina, asked prospective computer-science staff to write about their “potential to contribute to our commitment to equity and anti-racism”—a cause fervently embraced by the left and despised by the right. Berkeley has distributed guidance on how search committees ought to evaluate diversity statements. They say that any candidate who does not discuss gender or race must be awarded low marks. The same goes for any earnest classical liberal who “explicitly states the intention to ignore the varying backgrounds of their students and ‘treat everyone the same’.”

In 2018 Berkeley launched a “cluster search” for five faculty to teach biological sciences. From 894 applications, it created a longlist based on diversity statements alone, eliminating 680 candidates without examining their research or other credentials. This “yielded significant increases in urm [underrepresented minority] candidates advanced to shortlist consideration”, a university memo reported.

Whether such a process privileges candidates of certain ethnic backgrounds over others is a sensitive question

with legal implications. “It doesn’t appear that there’s any kind of correlation between particular identities and the quality of statements,” says Karie Frasch, the director of Berkeley’s Office of Faculty Equity and Welfare. When asked to clarify whether that meant scores did not differ by race, Dr Frasch says, “I’m not saying that. We don’t have that information. I shouldn’t have said the word ‘correlation’. I apologise.”

Berkeley is an important case study, not necessarily because it is the most extreme but because it is the most transparent. The University of California, Los Angeles has embraced diversity statements in hiring and tenure decisions even more fervently, but does not feel the need to explain its policies. A spokesperson said that Anna Spain Bradley, a law professor who serves as vice-chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion, was unavailable for comment.

Critics worry about the proliferation of diversity criteria in science. Beginning this fiscal year, the Department of Energy, which funds research on nuclear and plasma physics among other things, will require all grant applications to submit plans on “promoting inclusive and equitable research”. Since 2021 the brain Initiative at the National Institutes of Health has required prospective grantees to file a “plan for enhancing diverse perspectives”. Teams with investigators from diverse backgrounds receive precedence.

“People are unwilling to push back because they are afraid to lose their funding, and no one wants to become a martyr for defending reason,” says Anna Krylov, a professor of chemistry at the University of Southern California. Professor Krylov studied in the former Soviet Union and sees parallels that are “a little too close”. Rather than Marxism-Leninism, “you really have to pledge your commitment to critical social justice.”

If race-based affirmative action for college admissions is struck down by the Supreme Court, as most expect it will be this year, universities will surely resort to creative means of maintaining diversity that can survive judicial scrutiny. Diversity statements may prove useful. The subtlety can vary. The Harvard Law Review strongly encourages prospective editors to submit, alongside their application, a 200-word statement “to identify and describe aspects of your identity. . . including, but not limited to, racial or ethnic identity, socioeconomic background, disability (physical, intellectual, cognitive/neurological, psychiatric, sensory, developmental, or other), gender identity. . .” (the list goes on).

In many Republican-led states legislators are trying to forcibly eradicate this strain of thinking—sometimes in ways that seek to limit freedom of thought in the name of protecting it. Last year Republicans in Florida passed the Stop woke Act, which prohibits instruction at universities on ideas like systemic racism unless provided in “an objective manner without endorsement”. In 2021 those in Idaho passed a law banning the teaching of critical race theory in all schools, including public universities. Last month the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think-tank, released a piece of model legislation for states to emulate that would do less violence to the First Amendment, by dismantling DEI offices in universities and banning consideration of diversity statements in hiring.

Others are more sanguine. “I think it’s a fad,” says Janet Halley, a professor of law at Harvard. Bureaucratising ideology saps sincerity. “People will utter the hocus-pocus. They know that they’re being required to put on an act. And that’s going to create cynicism about the very values that the people who put these requirements into place care about,” she says. If those contradictions don’t sink the project, the courts might. Professor Halley believes these innovations are “forced speech and viewpoint discrimination in the First Amendment context” and will lead DEI dissidents to file lawsuits. “With the increasing conservatism of the federal bench, I think they’re likely to win.”

(1246 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/02/04/american-universities-are-hiring-based-on-devotion-to-diversity>

Editing Roald Dahl for sensitivity was silly



It was also a sign of a deeper rotsomeness in British publishing

Why stop at fatness? If you are going to put a red pen through Roald Dahl—as his publisher, Puffin, did recently—there are so many better bits to choose. The sensitivity readers contented themselves with excising such words as “fat”, “flabby”, “ugly” and “Kipling”. (...)

Something seems to be changing in British publishing. You can see it in the sheepish announcement from Puffin after news of its edits prompted a backlash, that Roald Dahl will still roll off the presses unaltered, alongside his redacted works. You can see it, too, in almost-silenced books that are now thriving. “Time to Think”, a book by Hannah Barnes about the Tavistock’s gender-identity clinic in London, which referred children as young as nine for puberty blockers, was rejected by 22 publishers. Swift Press, a nimble newcomer, took it on and it made the bestseller lists. People in the industry suggest that the red pen is being wielded less freely. (...)

There is a line of argument that says that this isn’t really a problem. Suppression of speech, this argument runs, is the preserve of totalitarian, Orwellian-style states and institutions that use force to stop people speaking out. In a country like Britain, speech is still free. This is pure gobblefunk and Orwell’s “1984” is the wrong Orwellian work to understand why.

Better by far to turn to an introduction Orwell wrote for “Animal Farm”. Orwell had finished his satire on the Soviet Union—which many consider his masterpiece—in 1943, whereupon it was promptly rejected by four publishers. As with Ms Barnes’s 22 rejections, some offered reasons. One publisher pleasingly suggested Orwell might want to rethink the pigs. Having swine as the ruling class might “give offence. . . particularly to anyone who is a bit touchy, as undoubtedly the Russians are”. Orwell kept the pigs; “Animal Farm” sold half a million copies in two years.

He later reflected on all this in that introduction. There is, he wrote, a “veiled censorship” in British publishing. “At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question.” It is “not exactly forbidden to say this, that or the other, but it is ‘not done’ to say it”. Anyone who tries to do so “finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness”. They still do. (...)

What is striking is how apparently mild the sanctions are for speaking out. People think, as one author puts it, that you are afraid of Twitter death threats. You aren’t: what really terrifies you is that your colleagues will think a little less of you. Most people do not require the threat of being burned at the stake to shut them up; being flamed by their peers on Twitter is more than enough. (...)

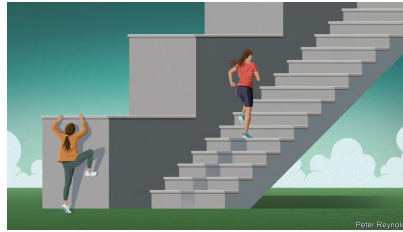
The problem with all this nervousness—this desire-to-look-nice-ness—is that it has very nasty results. In “Fahrenheit 451”, a novel by Ray Bradbury, a society has taken to burning all books lest any cause offence. As one character explains: “Don’t step on the toes of the. . . second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen. . .” This book-burning wasn’t mandated by the government. “There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship to start with, no! Technology. . . and minority pressure carried the trick.” Now the books have all gone. Now “thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time.”

Penguin, incidentally, offers an audiobook of “Fahrenheit 451”. Perhaps its executives might be encouraged to listen to it before they get their red pens out. (...)

(578 words)

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/03/23/editing-roald-dahl-for-sensitivity-was-silly>

Why gradualists are usually right and radicals are wrong



“Gradual” makes a passionate and convincing argument for incrementalism

Gradual. By Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox. *Oxford University Press*; 240 pages; \$29.95 and £22.99

5 Revolutionaries have the best slogans. The Bolsheviks shouted “Peace! Land! Bread!” Mao Zedong promised a “Great Leap Forward”. Che Guevara claimed to “tremble with indignation at every injustice”. Advocates of gradual change, by contrast, find it hard to compose a good rallying cry. No crowd ever worked itself into a frenzy chanting: “What do we want? Incremental reform! When do we want it? When budgetary conditions allow!”

10 But as Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox argue in “Gradual”, incrementalism works. Revolutionaries promise paradise but often bring about bloodshed, bread lines and book-banning. Humanity has grown more prosperous by making a long series of often modest improvements to an unsatisfactory status quo. The Industrial Revolution, despite its name, was not a single, sudden event but thousands of cumulative innovations spread across nearly a century. “Over time, incremental reforms can add up to something truly transformative,” note the authors.

Both are American criminal-justice reformers, and although their argument applies globally they focus on their home country. Correctly, they observe that American politics has been flooded by what Alexander Hamilton called “a torrent of angry and malignant passions”.

15 On the right, Donald Trump and his acolytes have sought “the ultimate in radical change”: to overturn the result of a democratic election. “I am your warrior, I am your justice. . . I am your retribution. . . I will totally obliterate the deep state,” Mr Trump thundered on March 4th at a supposedly “conservative” conference. As president, he cosied up to Vladimir Putin and spoke warmly of some neo-Nazis.

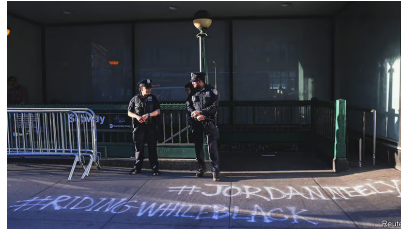
20 Some on the left, meanwhile, deem America so rotten that old structures must be swept away. “Defund the police!” “Abolish ICE [the agency that enforces immigration laws]!” The authors refer to Ibram X. Kendi, a fashionable scholar, who wants to create a “Department of Anti-racism”, to be staffed by “experts on racism” with the power to veto any policy that fails to advance his definition of racial equity. They would have “disciplinary tools” to wield against public officials who dissented. This would, in effect, hand quasi-dictatorial power to a small group of people who share Mr Kendi’s world-view.

25 Mr Berman and Mr Fox admit that radical change has sometimes been necessary: for example, to achieve the abolition of slavery. But the more cautious sort is more often effective, because “gradualists know how little they know”. Anyone trying to understand a big problem is sure to miss crucial information. Errors are inevitable. Incrementalism makes it easier to correct them. New ideas can “be tested, evaluated and honed over time”.

(432 words)

<https://www.economist.com/culture/2023/03/30/why-gradualists-are-usually-right-and-radicals-are-wrong>

American policing has changed since George Floyd's murder



It needs to change further, and be better funded

TALK WITH Chris Thomsen and Rick Zimmerman, two longtime homicide investigators with the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD), and they'll tell you their job has changed markedly over the past three years. Restrictions now forbid officers from stopping drivers for expired tags or something dangling from a rear-view mirror; those stops often yielded guns, drugs or people evading arrest warrants. A chokehold ban and body-worn-camera footage of every interaction mean officers worry that accidental contact with a suspect's neck during a physical altercation could be grounds for a lawsuit or dismissal. Prosecutors and jurors used to defer to cops' words in court; now they demand video or audio evidence.

But talk with Dave Bicking and Emma Pedersen—members of Communities United Against Police Brutality, an activist group—and they will tell you the opposite. The city council vowed to “defund the police”; instead the MPD's budget has grown. Police killings, Mr Bicking asserts, “go on at the same rate as always”. The MPD's culture, says Ms Pedersen, is “getting worse”.

These two poles define a roiling debate. Leftists argue that policing has changed far too little since a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd three years ago. Police killings in America rose from 2020 to 2021, and again from 2021 to 2022. Politicians who promised reform have backtracked; changes have been cosmetic. Conservatives argue that public suspicion of police and policy changes driven by progressive politicians have hamstrung law enforcement, leading directly to a rise in violent crime. The consensus that 30 years ago led politicians from both parties to espouse “tough on crime” rhetoric and policies has disappeared. As in so much else in American life, the centre has not held.

What is beyond dispute, however, is that big-city departments across the country face shortages. Minneapolis had over 900 officers at the time of Floyd's murder. As of May 6th it had just 583, well below the 731 required by the city's charter. Baltimore, which in 2022 had more than 1,000 homicides and non-fatal shootings, lost nearly 157 officers that year, and is short more than 500. Between 2011 and late 2022, the size of Memphis's police force shrank by nearly one-quarter; some wonder whether that contributed to the widely seen beating death of Tyre Nichols by lowering the department's hiring and training standards.

Nationally, between April 1st 2020 and March 31st 2021 (the most recent period for which data are available), resignations rose by 18% and retirements by 45% year-on-year. Some of those departures were expected: the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, passed in 1994 and championed by then-Senator Joe Biden, funded the hiring of tens of thousands of officers, many of whom are now at retirement age. Though critics now decry that bill for fuelling mass incarceration, at the time 49% of whites, 58% of African-Americans and a majority of the Congressional Black Caucus supported it.

(478 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/05/25/american-policing-has-changed-since-george-floyds-murder>

California's reparations scheme is bad policy and worse politics



Democrats should ditch it in favour of ideas that Americans actually support

Since at least 1865, when Congress voted to set up the Freedmen's Bureau, Americans have debated how and whether to compensate former slaves. In 2020, when Donald Trump had reawoken the left and George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man, was murdered by a policeman, the idea of reparations—paying money to the descendants of slaves—became almost mainstream. Some Democratic politicians, under pressure from activists and eager to be on the right side of history, agreed to set up commissions to study the idea. A few years later, those commissions are coming back with recommendations.

Cash reparations for slavery are not popular. Only 30% of Americans support the policy. Most of those alive today played no role in Jim Crow; none can reasonably be blamed for slavery. Nor are black Americans the only disadvantaged group: try telling an unemployed Appalachian coalminer why finite tax dollars should go on reparations rather than, say, better schools or public health. Still, unpopular policies are sometimes right. Are cash reparations for African-Americans one such case?

Not long after slavery ended, (...) few freedmen received compensation and many ended up working as sharecroppers for their former masters. Emancipation was followed by the creation of a two-tier version of citizenship that lasted for a century. Until the 1960s, many black Americans lived in fear of terrorism, were shut out of many neighbourhoods and could not vote. Many were also excluded from supposedly universal programmes like the GI Bill. Plenty of the people who suffered directly from this system are still alive today. And in many cases their children and grandchildren have inherited disadvantages that have their roots in state-sanctioned discrimination. How much present racial inequality is due to that inheritance is impossible to quantify. But it is not zero and it is not 100%. (...)

California shows how, in practice, it is impossible to create an actuarial table of injustice that can be consulted to determine how much cash is owed and to whom.

California outlawed slavery when it joined the union in 1850, so its commission concentrated on making amends for current racial disparities. These are considerable, as they are nationwide. African-Americans die four years earlier than white Americans on average. (Perhaps less noticed is that black Americans have enjoyed the fastest gains in life expectancy over the past 20 years.) For the purpose of its calculations, the commission assumed that a life is worth \$10m and, speciously, that all racial disparities in outcomes are due to racism, current or historical. It then calculated how much African-American Californians are owed. The maximum payout per person came to \$1.2m. San Francisco, naturally, created its own commission, which put the figure higher, at \$5m.

The bill for the statewide scheme could exceed \$800bn, though the commission deems even that sum to be merely a down payment. This comes as California faces a \$32bn budget shortfall on an overall annual budget of \$300bn. Then there is the difficulty of determining who is eligible for reparations. America, happily, is more racially fluid than when the Jim Crow era ended, which makes that hard. The commission's answer is to set up another body to determine individual claims, which is just to pose the question again. (...)

For Democrats, whose task is to build as big a coalition as possible to defeat Mr Trump's movement, it is hard to think of a policy better designed to set different groups of supporters against each other than cash reparations. [They] should say clearly that they oppose cash reparations, and then propose policies to narrow disparities which most Americans would happily support.

(596 words)

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/06/08/californias-reparations-scheme-is-bad-policy-and-worse-politics>



Lycée BUFFON – ANGLAIS CPGE

Fiche de déclaration des
heures d'interrogation orales
pour mise en paiement

Année scolaire 2022-2023

Nom de l'interrogateur :

Interrogation orale programmée le (jour et heure) :

Tenue effectivement le :

Classe :

Groupe et nom des étudiants :

Signature des étudiants :

Commentaires éventuels :

Signature de l'interrogateur :

The Biden administration aims to quantify the costs of ecological decay



Can a vital statistic help to save the planet?

Any sensible business has a balance-sheet that tracks all of its assets and liabilities. But governments do not. A growing number of economists argue that gross domestic product (GDP), a single number that guides a plethora of policies but counts only income flows, is too narrow—especially when it comes to the environment. No national measurement exists to tally the full economic costs of depleting America’s natural assets.

5 The Biden administration wants to change that. Last month the White House unveiled a 15-year plan for an ambitious—albeit wonkish—environmental initiative. Its Office of Science and Technology Policy and a dozen other government agencies aim to develop natural-capital accounts that record changes in America’s stock of natural resources, and quantify losses. Armed with new data, they plan to create a single statistic, alongside GDP, that rates how the country’s resources are faring.

10 The first numbers are expected as early as next year. By 2036 they are supposed to have become core statistics. The hope is that well-defined price tags will illuminate trade-offs between growth and sustainability, helping to steer policymakers and investors away from harmful decisions.

15 Coming up with the Change in Natural Asset Wealth, as the new indicator will be called, is no small task. Scientists must first measure ecological changes such as water pollution, soil erosion and the degradation of wetlands. Economists must then attempt to determine prices. (...)

20 Since the 1970s environmental economists have been tweaking fancy formulae to compute the value of natural goods and “ecosystem services”, the benefits that nature brings. Some, like timber, are traded in cash markets, which allows researchers to set their worth as the dollar amount people pay for them. For more complicated ones, like rivers or mountain ranges, economists survey people to gauge how much they are willing to spend to preserve them, or how far they will travel to access them. Ecological economists push the field to factor in a broader set of natural links. Accounting for the fact that wetlands protect habitats and mediate local climates, for example, can inform a fuller measure.

25 If Mr Biden’s plan plays out as hoped, other countries will follow. “Everywhere in the world people are watching,” says Pushpam Kumar, an economist at the UN Environment Programme. His agency now tracks broad measures of natural capital in 163 countries. In 2021 Britain’s treasury published a review on the economics of biodiversity. Australia has experimental natural-capital accounts and Canada has piloted a census of the environment. But no country has as comprehensive a national system as the Biden administration is proposing. American economists are giddy at the chance to put theories into practice.

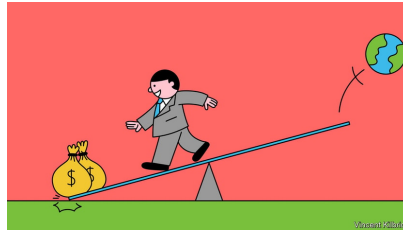
30 The effort is not entirely new. The Bureau of Economic Analysis, an agency tasked with estimating GDP, tried its hand at natural-capital accounts in 1992 before budget cuts halted data collection three years later. Bill Clinton pushed to include nature in the country’s definition of wealth but discussions were sidelined when George W. Bush took office in 2001.

Two decades later, as extreme-weather events rage, the policy window has reopened. (...)

(590 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2022/09/15/the-biden-administration-aims-to-quantify-the-costs-of-ecological-decay>

The fundamental contradiction of ESG is being laid bare



Profit-seeking companies have too little incentive to save the planet

Can profit-seeking companies really help save the planet? The question has long dogged the practice of environmental, social and governance (ESG) investing. Judging by the giddy growth in all things ESG, you might have thought the answer to it must be Yes. More than \$35trn of assets worldwide are said to be monitored using some sort of sustainability lens, an increase of 55% since 2016. Investors, banks and businesses have signed up to a series of alliances, (...) pledging to bring down their own carbon emissions and those of their portfolios. (...)

But as the focus shifts from words to deeds, the contradictions in ESG are becoming brutally clear. It is the mission of companies to generate long-term value for their investors. That might sometimes align with the aim of decarbonisation. Unfortunately, it will often be more profitable for a business to dump costs, such as pollution, on to society than to bear them directly. And in places without a consensus on climate policy, getting involved in greenery can bring clashes with both regulators and investors. Unless governments resolve the dilemma, ESG is doomed to fall short on actions. (...)

Firms, too, are discovering that speaking out has repercussions. In 2019 the Business Roundtable, a group of corporate bigwigs, said that the objective of a company should be to benefit its stakeholders. Jamie Dimon, the boss of JPMorgan Chase who was then the group's chairman, has now taken to denying that he is "woke". Unilever, a consumer-goods firm, has cast itself as a sustainability icon, but its shareholder returns have lagged far behind those of its rival, Nestlé. On September 26th Unilever's boss, in only his fourth year in the job, announced plans to step down.

The ESG dream was that capital markets would penalise those firms that ignored the looming costs of climate change on their businesses. But in practice the costs are too uncertain and distant to play a big part in firms' or investors' financial calculus. Most companies can win the gains of appearing green while avoiding the cost of decarbonising by paying lip-service to green goals. According to Climate Action 100+, a group of investors, more than two-thirds of the world's 166 biggest greenhouse-gas emitters have promised to reach net zero by 2050 or sooner. But less than a fifth have medium-term targets; a similarly low share have set out quantified decarbonisation strategies.

It falls to governments to reconcile the goals of profit maximisation and a safer climate. The best way of doing this is to set a high enough price on carbon, forcing companies to internalise the costs of their dirty activities, so that going green is also good for the bottom line. Mandated standards and disclosures must be brought in more quickly, to help firms assess their exposure to higher carbon prices. Companies can help save the planet—but only if doing so is good for business.

(562 words)

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/09/29/the-fundamental-contradiction-of-esg-is-being-laid-bare>

Why the French are mangling their own language



Naming a firm is izipizi

FROM Louis Vuitton to Hermès, France's luxury brands proudly ooze their quintessential Frenchness. But in many other industries French firms seek to disguise their national origins. AXA, a French insurer, chose a name that means nothing and can be pronounced in all languages. GDF Suez, a French energy firm, renamed itself Engie, a word that apparently "evokes energy. . . in all cultures". Now a nation forged through a common language, which it doggedly strives to defend, is taking such linguistic mangling to another level.

In recent years the country has succumbed to the meaningless globish beloved of startups the world over. Among its own firms are Mirakl, a French software firm, or Lunchr, which operates a smartcard for meal vouchers (and recently rebranded itself Swile, although to an English ear that sounds like a mixture of swill and bile). A greater delight is France's fondness for brands composed of phonetic misspellings of its own phrases. Kiloutou, which in French sounds like qui loue tout or "who hires everything", rents out diggers and mechanical equipment. Kinougarde, a play on qui nous garde ("who looks after us"), is a child-care service. Recently the group that owns Buffalo Grill, a restaurant chain which describes itself as "un steakhouse", renamed itself Napaqaro, which in French (nappe à carreaux) sounds like "checked table-cloth".

The latest trend is to apply this phonetic play to English words, which may themselves be unfamiliar, but become even more so in the French rendering. New French brands include Izipizi, a fashionable chain of spectacles which to the English ear sounds like "easy-peasy". Another is Yomoni, an online investor that sounds like "your money". Then there is Heetch, a ride-hailing service that sounds as if a French person is saying "hitch". It is unclear whether the French grasp the English resonance.

To the guardians of linguistic purity all this is an affront. The Académie Française, established by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635, still rules on which foreign words are acceptable. It currently disapproves, for example, of "millennials" in favour of enfants du numérique, or "dry January" to which it prefers janvier sans alcool. The Académie does not pronounce, however, on brand names. Unless it is a matter of silk scarves or designer handbags, France's ambition to appear on trend globally will mean the ongoing mutilation of its own language, as well as English—all the more so if the enfants du numérique have anything to do with it.

(403 words)

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/12/08/why-the-french-are-mangling-their-own-language>

Costly climate rules are turning Germans away from the Greens



The enviros are now less popular than the far-right Alternative für Deutschland

“Green is getting too Brown,” moaned the graffiti in Germany’s capital late last year. The scribblers were hard-line environmentalists. Their gripe was that the Greens, one of three parties in Germany’s ruling Ampel or “traffic light” coalition, were going soft. By agreeing to crank up coal power to replace lost imports of Russian gas, and to delay by six months the long-planned shutdown of Germany’s last three nuclear plants, the Greens had bent so far right they were shading into a colour that Germans link not just with grubbiness but with fascism.

Six months later much of the German public is also upset with the Greens, albeit for the opposite reason. Instead of the Greens doing too little for the environment, many now think they do too much. No one calls them fascists, but even their partners in government, the bigger Social Democrats (SPD) and smaller, liberal Free Democrats (FDP), seem to find them too bossy. Sniping between Robert Habeck (pictured), the carefully tousled Green deputy chancellor in charge of the economy and environment, and Christian Lindner, the Porsche-driving liberal finance minister, looks increasingly like an inter-elite culture war between advocates for climate responsibility and for personal freedom.

The grumpy German public does not seem to like either camp. Polls show diminishing enthusiasm for the Greens, with the percentage of Germans saying they would vote for them falling in the past year from the low 20s to the mid-teens. But they also show that the shift has benefited neither the centre-left SPD of chancellor Olaf Scholz nor the FDP, nor even the conservative Christian Democrats. Instead, since June support for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has doubled, to 19%. The immigrant-bashing, Russia-friendly and climate-change-denying fringe party, which marked its 10th anniversary in February, now shares second place in the polls with the SPD, which in May celebrated its 160th year.

Polling by Forsa, a research group, shows that more than a third of the AfD’s new backers used to vote for one of the Ampel trio. The far-right party’s recent slogans suggest why. “Roll back mad climate laws!”, declares a party poster. “Stop the Heizhammer!” screams its website, describing a bill, intended by Mr Habeck to accelerate adoption of energy-saving (but high-cost) heat pumps to replace household boilers, as a “heating hammer”.

The proposed home-heating law, which would ban new gas and oil boilers and subsidise installation of heat pumps, has become less a hammer than a lead weight for the government. Opinion polls suggest that barely a fifth of voters favour the ban. But the problem is not just resistance to a measure that householders fear would saddle them with fat bills and bureaucratic bother. A big majority of Germans also thought that the Greens’ insistence on closing nuclear plants in April was stupid at a time of high energy prices and vulnerable supplies. Most also dislike new EU rules that will end production of cars with combustion engines by 2035, though Germany has won some exceptions. And nearly everyone is fed up with radical climate activists who have held up traffic across Germany by gluing themselves to autobahns and junctions.

Such protests seem more effective at tainting the Greens by association than at raising climate awareness. They have also, indirectly, helped the AfD: tellingly, two-thirds of its current supporters, according to a recent survey, say they would vote for the far-right group not because they share its views, but out of “disappointment with other parties”. This does not, however, mean the AfD is now considered a normal party like any other. In another poll, 57% of Germans said they cannot imagine ever voting for them.

(608 words)

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/06/08/costly-climate-rules-are-turning-germans-away-from-the-greens>

How affirmative action works in practice



Legacy admissions and athletes also get a big boost

In a typical year Harvard, a \$53bn endowment with a university attached, receives nearly four times as many candidates with perfect grade-point averages as it has places available. It distinguishes between these well-qualified candidates using four criteria: academic achievement, extra-curricular activities, personal qualities and athletic abilities. Admissions officers also need to keep that endowment growing, which means admitting the children of alumni and of big donors. And they strive to create a racially diverse class. The process is opaque but goes by a soothing name: holistic admissions.

Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), a non-profit organisation, which is a plaintiff in both of the affirmative action cases before the Supreme Court, argues that 51% of Harvard's class should be Asian-American if academics alone (test scores and grades) were the sole consideration. Harvard's first-year students for 2021-22 were 53% white and 24% Asian, an increase from previous years but a far cry from 51%. The organisation alleges that Harvard and the University of North Carolina (unc) are discriminating against Asian-Americans.

The court has in the past ruled that race could be considered among other admissions criteria, on the grounds that everyone on campus benefits from a diverse student body. This is what Harvard and UNC say they are doing without discriminating against Asian-Americans, an argument supported by an analysis commissioned by Harvard and written by David Card, a Nobel prize-winning economist.

In addition to considering an applicant's facility with a lacrosse stick or épée, under holistic admissions universities may take into account what kind of high school a student has come from, looking at factors such as the number of advanced courses offered, average SAT scores, class size and crime levels in the surrounding neighbourhood. Whether the prospective student has ties to the college can matter, too. It helps if a family member has attended the college, is employed there or has donated money to it. Many colleges also consider a student's ability to pay the fees. (...)

Race may therefore not be the only factor working against Asian-Americans. Legacy students (those with a family member who attended the college) are three to five times more likely to be admitted to highly selective colleges, according to a Harvard study of 30 institutions. A primary legacy—having a parent who attended the institution as an undergraduate—boosts the chances of admission up to 15 times.

Harvard reported that 16% of its class that will graduate in 2025 has at least one parent who attended Harvard. This tends to benefit white students: 19% of white, 15% of Asian, 9% of Hispanic and 6% of black students were legacies. Peter Arcidiacono, an economist at Duke University and expert witness for SFFA, found that when legacy preferences are removed, the number of white admissions falls by about 4%, while the number of black, Hispanic and Asian ones increases by 4-5%.

Other non-academic factors also come into play. Athletes are four times more likely than non-athletes to be admitted to elite private institutions. In Mr Arcidiacono's study of Harvard, removing athletic preferences decreased white admissions by 6% and increased the number of Hispanic and Asian students by 7-9%. Children of faculty and staff are also given special consideration. Mr Arcidiacono found that over 43% of white students at Harvard were athletes, legacies, children of faculty or staff, or were the subject of special interest by deans and directors, compared with less than 16% among black, Hispanic and Asian students. Nearly 75% of these white students would have been rejected if they had been treated as white students without status. That's hardly a meritocracy. But, hey, it's holistic.

(598 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2022/11/03/how-affirmative-action-works-in-practice>

Indian startups join the space race



Private rocketeers reach for the sky

The flight, a 90km sub-orbital jaunt, was over in minutes. But for India the rocket launched by Skyroot Aerospace on November 18th, the first by a private company in the country, was a moonshot. Numerous other flights in the coming months will signal an industry ready for take-off. Satellites built by two Indian companies are set to be sent into space on November 26th, carried on a rocket launched by India's space agency. The one made by Pixxel, a Bangalore-based startup, is intended to be the first of dozens that will provide detailed images of Earth. Two manufactured by Dhruva Space from Hyderabad will serve to demonstrate to potential customers that it can make, deploy and operate satellites successfully. A second private rocket launch by Agnikul Cosmos is set for December.

India's involvement in space is not new. Rockets were first sent up in the early 1960s, satellite launches began in 1975 and a probe went to the moon in 2008. A reputation for low-cost space research was cemented in 2013 when another probe was dispatched to Mars for less than the budget of a Hollywood film about a doomed space mission released around the same time. But India is no superpower. Revenues from the space economy are currently estimated to be nearly \$10bn a year, only around 2% of the global total.

The surge in activity will push India up the rankings. It is a consequence of a change in government policy in 2020. Before then private firms could only operate as suppliers to the government-run Indian Space Research Organisation (isro). That body will now provide research, technology, facilities and even experienced former employees to private companies (half a dozen worked on the Skyroot launch). A new agency, in-space, has been created to orchestrate the transition.

This has resulted in a cascade of applications from eager participants; 68 firms hope to manufacture payloads, another 30 intend to make rockets and components, and 57 more want to develop ground stations or exploit space-derived data, from monitoring steel production to locating shoals of fish at sea.

It is not only Indian firms that hope to benefit. Some of the world's largest companies, including well-known names in big tech, are poised to take advantage of Indian expertise in software and data analysis along with low costs. Skyroot believes it will be able to deliver basic payloads at the same price as the likes of SpaceX and for custom jobs at half the going rate charged elsewhere by using new manufacturing processes. Agnikul hopes to dispense with conventional launch sites, replacing them with cheaper mobile pads.

Investors seem convinced. While most Indian startups are suffering the same waning of enthusiasm and funding hitting the rest of the world, space ventures are the exception. In November gic, Singapore's sovereign-wealth fund, invested \$50m in Skyroot; Agnikul raised \$20m and Dhruva says it recently doubled its pre-existing investment. More money and new entrants are on the way, says Pawan Goenka, who retired in 2021 from the leadership of Mahindra & Mahindra, an industrial conglomerate, and now leads in-space. India was late to the space-business party, but now it seems ready to blast into orbit.

(530 words)

<https://www.economist.com/business/2022/11/24/indian-startups-join-the-space-race>

Iran's protesters are painting for freedom



Ingenious graffiti artists are changing the visual landscape

At first they tried performance art. Across Iran, young women and men crouched down, heads hanging in submission, arms cuffed to trees or lampposts. When the police began rounding them up, protesters padlocked mannequins bent double to street signs. In sports matches players adopted similar poses when they scored, re-enacting the fate of Khoda Nour, a protester the mullahs' men tied to a flagpole without food or drink, a glass of water placed before him, just out of reach.

Then they switched from theatre to visual art. Two months after the death of a Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, arrested for showing her hair beneath her mandatory veil, protest art is changing cityscapes. Stencils of Amini and other women killed in the uprising plaster walls, rivalling the state's ubiquitous murals glorifying martyrdom. Public fountains spew red dye, prompting the authorities to drain them. Stickers cover old street signs with new names. Ekbatan, a western suburb of Tehran, the capital, has been dubbed Arman after a young man shot dead in the protests. Demonstrators brandish the black flag of Islam mockingly cut into slivers like wavy hair. Girls in middle-class north Tehran sport a new style of handbag, with red splashes mimicking bullet wounds.

Graffiti artists have to work fast; some have been shot dead. "It's hard to create when the workspace is so hostile," explains one of them. It takes seconds to spray-paint stencils and tie paper leaves with fallen protesters' names to trees.

Iconoclasm is often quickest. Red paint spilt from rooftops streaks through the portraits of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that routinely cover the sides of housing blocks. Fading images of the regime's founder, Ruhollah Khomeini, bleed from the eyes (see above). Traffic noise is changing too. Drivers honk horns to the rhythm of "Death to the Dictator", as women wave veils out of car windows.

Many artists retreat online for safety. Some fashion medieval images of armies with spears surrounding a woman waving her headscarf. Others go for pop art, showing scissors cutting the Mona Lisa's hair.

Still, they are struggling to coin a logo for their revolt that spans Iran's ethnic, religious, economic and gender divisions. Some recycle the visuals of the revolution of 1979, with Soviet-style clenched fists and broken chains. Some female artists worry about men trying to intrude on their realm. "They say we're all part of the patriarchy," complains a male artist, struggling to circulate one of his posters.

(408 words)

<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/11/17/irans-protesters-are-painting-for-freedom>

A £4m scheme to bring Latin into British state schools begins



A subject seen as being for “posh white boys” tries to extend its reach

Evelyn Waugh, a novelist, valued his classical education. Not because it enabled him to understand ancient languages: Waugh could remember no Greek, write no Latin and enjoyed reading neither. But it did enable him to excel in a more important exercise: spotting and judging those who knew less than he. Such people (“most Americans and most women”) betrayed their deprivation with sentences of “inexcusable vulgarity”. “I do not,” he wrote, “regret my superficial classical studies.”

Latin occupies an odd place in English curriculums. One part proper subject, two parts smug social shibboleth, to have chanted “amo, amas, amat” in a Latin class has long implied membership of another kind of class altogether. The decline and almost fall of Latin in state schools in the 20th century did not diminish its social cachet, because numbers in fee-paying independent schools remained high. In 2020 eight times more pupils sat Latin GCSE at Eton, a posh school, than in the entirety of Northumberland. Waugh considered Latin the mark of a gentleman. Mary Beard, a professor of classics at Cambridge University, puts it more briskly: it gets seen as a subject for “posh white boys”.

This harms it—a bit—and helps it—a lot. Posh white boys tend to do quite well for themselves. A famous example recently left Downing Street; as he left, Boris Johnson mumbled that he was like Cincinnatus, a reference to a retiring Roman that both alarmed classicists (Cincinnatus returned as a dictator) and appealed to them (they got the joke).

Classicists may lament the passing of the subject’s golden age, but it declined for good reasons. A Britain alternately warmed by the white heat of technology and chilled by fear of the cold war had to prioritise science over dead languages. In 1960 Oxford and Cambridge dropped Latin O-Level as an entry requirement. Good thing too, says Professor Beard: not to have changed would have been “bloody stupid”.

Changes continue to be made. Cambridge University has just introduced a four-year classics degree for those who have studied no Latin at school. And while he was in office Mr Johnson tried to make the subject more accessible via the Latin Excellence Programme, a £4m (\$4.6m) scheme to bring it to 40 state schools.

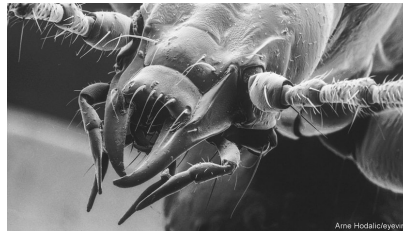
Which is why, on a rainy Monday in September, in Pimlico Academy in London, children sit in a lesson that would have felt familiar to Waugh. The verb “esse” is chanted; etymologies are discussed; the word “conjugate” is used fearlessly. Its pupils would have felt less familiar to him, however: almost half of pupils in the school are on free school meals; 15% have English as an additional language; many are even female.

Employers and universities still like to see Latin, explains Ian Patterson, the academic head at Pimlico: there is a “prestige attached to it”. The pupils like it too: shouting “sum, es, est”, they think, is fun. But Latin is about more than verbs: it makes them feel clever too, says one pupil, as “not lots of people learn it.” Waugh could hardly have put it better himself.

(511 words)

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2022/10/06/a-ps4m-scheme-to-bring-latin-into-british-state-schools-begins>

On the troubles of naming species



What do you do when a name becomes problematic?

Beige, blind and distinctly underwhelming, Hitler cowers in the remote caves of Slovenia. This is not the Führer, but a tiny carabid beetle, named *Anophthalmus Hitleri*, or “eyeless Hitler”, by Oskar Scheibel, a German entomologist, in 1937. The translucent bug (pictured) has little to fear in its natural habitat, except Nazi memorabilia enthusiasts who collect it illegally. The beetle fetches over £1,000 on the black market. Even in death the bug is pillaged—the Bavarian State Collection of Zoology had almost all of its *A. Hitleri* specimens stolen. “It’s an innocent insect,” says Mirjana Rokсандić, an anthropologist at the University of Winnipeg in Canada. “Why not end this illegal trade by changing its name?”

Scientists have, for decades, called for *Anophthalmus Hitleri* to be renamed something less offensive. But zoological nomenclature abides by a code of priority to the first taxonomist to describe a species. Whether it’s *Nannaria swiftae* (Taylor Swift’s millipede) or *Leninia stellans* (Lenin’s six-metre ichthyosaur), once a name is given it must stick.

As the statues of history’s antagonists fall and their portraits and names are removed from the world’s great buildings, researchers are wondering whether or not the names should nevertheless live on in the world of taxonomy. Academics such as Dr Rokсандić are calling to erase names that honour colonial figures, and in some cases to restore indigenous ones.

Species have a precise two-part scientific name (often Latin, but they can be any language) that is understandable across the world. *Homo sapiens* or *Canis lupus*, in which the “sapiens” and “lupus” are the species epithets and “Homo” and “Canis” the genus, are recorded throughout history in a way that is fixed and easy to follow. These rules were formalised by Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, in 1753. The International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN) enforces the rules today. Thomas Pape, ICZN’s president, says his organisation serves the “stability and universality” of nomenclature, which involves “mandating scientific naming rules but not ethical arguments”. On the Hitleri beetle, Dr Pape says: “It was not offensive when it was proposed, and it may not be offensive 100 years from now.”

This rigid stance also applies to naming humans. In 2021 Dr Rokсандić suggested renaming an ancient human species found in Zambia, *Homo rhodesiensis*, to *Homo bodoensis*. Writing in *Evolutionary Anthropology*, Dr Rokсандić has urged taxonomists to drop the “rhodesiensis” that was associated with the colonial state of Rhodesia and its human-rights abuses.

“One option would be to informally change its vernacular name,” says Patrice Bouchard, vice-president of the ICZN. There is precedent for this—the Entomological Society of America decided in recent years that it would no longer use the common name for *Lymantria dispar*, “gypsy moth”, because it was deemed derogatory to the Romani people. (...)

Sergei Mosyakin, director of the Institute of Botany at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, suggests taxonomic histories “cannot be undone” and “shall not be erased”. Many problems could be avoided, he thinks, if researchers stopped naming species after people “quite unconnected with natural science”. This perhaps goes too far, since the thrill of having a new species named after famous people probably generates some interest in what might otherwise be ignored by the public. But perhaps taxonomists could think again about names that are political, out of touch or just plain offensive.

(551 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2022/09/21/on-the-troubles-of-naming-species>

An argument is being waged over research on children's language



Some academics feel that such studies display “deficit ideology”

The findings of a recent study from the Bofill Foundation, an education think-tank in Barcelona, were both obvious and surprising. It showed that children whose parents read with them had a clear advantage over those whose parents did not—a learning gap equivalent to about half a year's schooling. That is the obvious part: if you read to your children it helps them read, too. But researchers also found that, contrary to popular opinion, supervising children's homework is not particularly helpful. More useful is setting a regular place and time for them to do their studies.

What is most startling is how many academics reject such research in principle. A cadre of academic linguists argues that studies into children's learning often exhibit a “deficit ideology”. Paul Gorski, the founder of the Equity Literacy Institute and a populariser of the term, summarised the idea as “a worldview that explains and justifies outcome inequalities—standardised test scores or levels of educational attainment, for example—by pointing to supposed deficiencies within disenfranchised individuals and communities.”

In short, deficit ideology gives credence to the idea that poor people are poor because they are doing something wrong. Often, Mr Gorski said, the blame is placed on parents and supposed inadequacies “in the rearing and home lives of low-income students”. He and other critics argue that such academic research ignores the structural factors which make advancement difficult.

The critics have a point: because of prejudice, students can be unfairly thought deficient. Studies have shown that teachers may have different perceptions of their pupils' academic aptitude based on their race; some may unconsciously mark down work by black pupils. Other factors that should be irrelevant, such as accents, can make teachers think pupils are less able than they actually are. (...)

Critics of deficit ideology are further backed up by the fact that research may be misinterpreted by a simplistic press. Journalists should beware of describing academic findings as though they are irrefutable or suggesting that tentative correlations are magic solutions. (...)

Despite all this, it is still worth researching into children's learning. One reason is that it is better to know what early interventions might work than to remain in ignorance. The remedy for poorly controlled studies that do not account for pre-existing disadvantages is better research and robust debate, not to dismiss all work on what behaviour might help children develop their language skills merely because such work constitutes a deficit ideology. By all means research inequality and its causes, but also research things that might help fix it.

Every study worth its paper and ink controls for factors such as parents' levels of education and income—and these controls depend on an acknowledgment of the same inequalities that academics contest. For example, the Bofill Foundation's report found that socioeconomic status predicted an advantage in school performance, although the gain was not quite as much as that predicted by reading with children, irrespective of social class.

Research is a vital tool for identifying ways in which all parents, rich or poor, can support their offspring's learning—such as a regular homework routine. For some parents, its findings may be difficult to put into practice: many understand the importance of reading, but are unable to afford books and live far from a library. Yet even then, studies can help on an institutional level. Gathering evidence about early education can lead policymakers to help by introducing better policies for babies, children and their parents.

(572 words)

<https://www.economist.com/culture/2022/11/03/an-argument-is-being-waged-over-research-on-childrens-language>

What Carmel, Indiana, can teach America about urbanism



Growth is popular, if it is well planned

(...) Since Mr Brainard became mayor [in 1995] Carmel's population has almost tripled, to over 100,000 people. A few decades ago it had only a small central "historic district". Now it has an actual "downtown" full of apartments, restaurants and shops, as well as a fancy music auditorium and two theatres. (...) Visitors on foot do not have to cross enormous expanses of tarmac to get anywhere.

5 A majority of Americans now live in suburbs. But while their residents are changing much like America, becoming more diverse, older and with a wider range of incomes, many of the suburbs themselves have barely changed in decades. Most new housing in America is built either in brand new tracts at the edge of big cities or in apartments in the centre. With the right policies, however, America's suburbs could produce plenty more housing (...). They have more land, are close to jobs, and already have infrastructure in place. Carmel offers
10 lessons on how to achieve that. It is also a case study of the enormous power a single mayor can have to create change, if he or she can sell it.

The key to Mr Brainard's power was not only the realisation that many people like to live in more walkable neighbourhoods but also that providing them can save the city money. Low-density suburbs cost a lot to
15 maintain: when houses are further apart they need longer roads and sewage lines, and the bin men have to travel further between each one. A single mile of road can cost \$15m to build, and must be maintained. A new block of flats, by contrast, adds far less to a city's expenses, and yet their residents still pay property taxes. Even terraced houses cost a lot less.

In the past 20 years Carmel has taken advantage of this using "tax increment financing". To illustrate how this works, Mr Brainard points to an ageing strip mall which the city has purchased. Its nine acres of land, most of
20 which is used for parking and is empty much of the time, currently generates around \$61,000 in tax revenue each year. The city is working with a developer who will rebuild it with five-storey apartments and shops, with parking underground. This costs a lot upfront (the city has to subsidise the parking to get the developers on board) but Mr Brainard reckons that when it is finished it will generate \$3m per year in property taxes. Even after servicing the loan, that will leave a hefty chunk behind for the city. "Sprawl kills cities," he says.

25 Unlike suburbs in places such as New Jersey or outside Washington, Carmel is densifying without the benefits of a decent regional public-transport system. That requires hiding the cars underground. But it also brings in one of Mr Brainard's other innovations, the roundabout. The city now has 145 of them, far more than any other American city. Because they slow down cars and make "T-Bone" collisions less likely, roundabouts are safer. The city's traffic-death rate is a fifth of the rate nationwide. But because cars do not get stuck at lights,
30 roundabouts also increase capacity. That allows the city to grow without needing to widen its roads. In a few places it has even narrowed them. It has shrunk one that goes through the centre from five lanes to just two. Now the city sells t-shirts boasting about its roundabouts. (...)

(569 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2022/09/29/what-carmel-indiana-can-teach-america-about-urbanism>

The world's most pointless rocket has been launched at last



America will return to the Moon. But it will not be cheap

The world's largest rocket got there in the end. NASA, America's space agency, has been trying to fly the Space Launch System (SLS) since August 29th, but technical problems (and later a hurricane) have meant repeated delays. However, on November 16th, at a little before two o'clock in the morning, Florida time, it actually managed to blast off. This nocturnal launch, dictated by the vagaries of celestial mechanics, gave rocket-watchers a rare treat, as the vehicle's white-hot exhaust lit up the countryside for miles around.

The SLS's destination (or, rather, the destination of Orion, the capsule it carries) is the Moon—almost, for it will not land. This version of Orion is uncrewed. But others will, if all goes to plan, return astronauts to the lunar surface half a century after the end of the Apollo programme. That project, called Artemis, after Apollo's twin sister (who was the Ancient Greek goddess of the Moon, and thus, in any case, a more appropriate moniker than Apollo, the god of the Sun), will use the SLS as its launch vehicle. But Artemis 1, as the mission which has just begun is formally dubbed, will restrict itself to dropping off a few hitchhikers in the form of so-called cubesats that will carry out scientific studies of variable worth, and then making some complicated loops around the Moon before returning home on December 11th.

If all goes to plan, it will be followed by a crewed flypast of the Moon in 2024 and a landing in 2025. But few think that schedule will be met. Delay is the sls's middle name. Its first launch was once supposed to happen in 2016. If America does return to the Moon, the end of the decade looks more realistic.

Delay is not the only source of grumbling. Much of the sls, including the boosters strapped to its side and the orange fuel tank that makes up its body, consists of tweaked, recycled parts from the Space Shuttle, which made its final flight in 2011. The official reason for using technology from the 1980s is that it is tried-and-tested. But politicians are also keen to preserve existing, well-paid manufacturing jobs. This may help account for why, despite being built from well-understood technology, the sls has cost \$23bn to develop so far, and each launch is projected to cost \$2bn.

Cheaper alternatives exist. NASA already relies on SpaceX's reusable Falcon-9 rocket to ferry astronauts to the International Space Station. And SpaceX is working on its own giant rocket, Starship. If this goes to plan it might cost as little as \$10m per launch. Starship's first orbital flight will happen soon. If that works, Starship will swiftly make the sls look pretty pointless.

That is unlikely to stop more launches. When Jim Bridenstine, then NASA's boss, suggested in 2019 that SpaceX's existing Falcon Heavy rocket might offer a cheaper, quicker route back to the Moon, he was slapped down by pro-sls politicians. America will return to the Moon. But it will not be cheap.

(503 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2022/11/16/the-worlds-most-pointless-rocket-has-been-launched-at-last>

How to bring scents to the metaverse



VR enthusiasts turn their attentions to an evocative, but neglected, sense

It was one of those many inventions that never quite took off. In 1960, audiences watching the film “Scent of Mystery” got to experience the wonders of “Smell-O-Vision”. Mounted under the cinema seats, the system pumped out 30 different scents—from salty ocean breezes to whiffs of wine—at crucial moments in the plot. The system had its quirks. Those in the balcony complained that the smells reached them too late. Others found the scents to be too faint, or else irritatingly persistent. More novel than effective, Smell-O-Vision never really took root in Hollywood.

These days the cutting-edge of entertainment is video games and virtual reality, not films. Several groups are trying to bring scents to virtual worlds. In one paper published this week in *Nature Communications*, Xinge Yu at City University of Hong Kong and Yuhang Li at Beihang University describe two wearable “olfaction interfaces”. The first is the size of a plaster, and is affixed to the skin, like a fake moustache, under the user’s nose. The second, more capable version is a flexible face mask.

Both rely on heating tiny tiles of paraffin wax that have been impregnated with various liquid perfumes. The smaller version of the system uses two such tiles; the bigger one has nine. The researchers claim that they can generate a scent, such as mint or green tea, in as little as 1.44 seconds. The nine generators on the mask can combine to produce hundreds of possible odours.

Drs Li and Yu have been beaten to market by OVR, a startup based in Vermont. Its headset uses a system of refillable cartridges, each of which can make thousands of scents. The firm’s newest product, the “ION3”, will be released later this year, and can be tied into existing game-creation tools with minimal fuss.

Getting smells right could make virtual worlds more compelling. Odours are famously evocative. The part of the brain that processes them connects directly to parts associated with emotions and memory. But the science is tricky. Unlike colour or sound, where wavelengths and frequencies combine in predictable ways, smell is not so straightforward. Altering a single chemical bond can shift a scent from sweet to rancid. Whether smelly VR will do better than smelly films remains to be seen. But perhaps one day users will be able to stop, swipe and smell the virtual roses.

(392 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2023/05/10/how-to-bring-scents-to-the-metaverse>

The sportswear giants are running into hurdles



Misbehaving rappers are not the only problem

Following a series of anti-Semitic outbursts in October, Kanye West, a rapper and fashion entrepreneur (who insists on being called Ye), bragged that Adidas would never get rid of him. Within days, the German sportswear giant proved him wrong, ending a lucrative seven-year relationship. Mr West's line of Yeezy sneakers added €1.5bn (\$1.5bn) to Adidas's revenues in 2021, or 12% of its entire shoe business. After the announcement, the company's share price fell to lows unseen since 2016. On November 9th Adidas cut its profit forecast for the fourth time this year. The previous day it had named a new chief executive, Bjorn Gulden, to clean up the mess.

Mr Gulden, who had helped turn round Adidas's German arch-rival, Puma, will have to deal with more than just misbehaving pop stars. Much like the rest of the global sportswear industry, which earns revenues of \$300bn a year, Adidas is battling post-pandemic supply-chain glitches, inflation-fuelled cost increases and an economic slowdown in its biggest markets. Even the football World Cup, which kicks off on November 20th in Qatar, is unlikely to offer the usual sales boost, as many shoppers pinch pennies.

Sportswear firms' most immediate problem concerns their inventories. As quarantined consumers snapped up hoodies and tracksuit bottoms, the companies ramped up production of athleisure wear. In June last year Nike, the industry's American heavyweight, confidently forecast annual revenue growth of 10% or so until 2025 and sales that year of \$50bn. Instead, the firm is slashing prices to dump unsold stock. It now expects revenues to grow by 5% or so a year.

A longer-term problem is managing the move away from sports and towards fashion. Besides making the companies vulnerable to the whims of mercurial pop stars, this has exposed them to competition at both the fashionable end of the market, where luxury labels are peddling trainers, and at the sporting end, where rookie firms offer innovative products that appeal to buyers' evolving sensibilities about both athletic performance and matters like the environment. On Running, a Swiss brand in which Roger Federer, a tennis legend, owns a stake, makes its footwear from beans and has launched a subscription service to replace and recycle well-worn kicks. In March Lululemon Athletica, an athleisure label, launched its first footwear collection. HOKA claims to have reinvented the running shoe with its signature chunky cushioning.

Still, the contest in the fashion market looks like more of a struggle for companies that made their names on the field rather than on the catwalk, notes John Kernan of Cowen, an investment bank. Some are already returning to their sporting roots. Puma's success under Mr Gulden, a former professional footballer in his native Norway, has a lot to do with focusing on kit for underserved sports, such as cricket and motor racing. Adidas will be hoping for similarly fancy footwear.

(473 words)

<https://www.economist.com/business/2022/11/10/the-sportswear-giants-are-running-into-hurdles>

Why super-strict classrooms are in vogue in Britain



An instructive visit to the Michaela school in north London

To understand how discipline is changing in British schools, go to Michaela Community School in north London. Among the first things you see are vast bright billboards. Whereas other schools coax pupils, cosset them with congratulations and avoid marking in red pen lest they sear young souls, Michaela has no truck with such softness. “I am the MASTER of my fate”, reads one billboard, in unrepentantly large capitals. “Work HARD Be KIND”, reads another. “Especially”, barks a third, “when it is DIFFICULT”.

And pupils at Michaela do work. HARD. As breathless news reports relate, they listen attentively in lessons; walk in silence in corridors; chant poetry in the lunch hall—and ace exams. Almost a quarter of its pupils are on free school meals, yet almost three-quarters of its A-Levels (exams usually taken at 18) were graded A or A*. It is rated “outstanding” by Ofsted, a state inspectorate, and its most recent Progress 8 score (a nerdy educational tool used to measure the value added by a school) is not just the best in the country but, according to Tom Bennett, a former teacher who is the government’s behaviour tsar, “the best that there’s ever been. It is extraordinary.”

Michaela, which opened in 2014, is also extraordinarily contentious—because it, its exam-acing children and its charismatic head teacher, Katharine Birbalsingh, are at the centre of an argument over how strict discipline should be in British classrooms. The debate is bitter, has deep roots and is itself strikingly undisciplined: Ms Birbalsingh, an outspoken figure who stepped down as chair of the government’s social-mobility commission this month, has received death threats.

One reason this debate is so bitter is that classroom politics in Britain are intimately tied up with class politics. Once, education in Britain was scrupulously egalitarian in its disciplinary methods, with the children of princes and paupers alike beaten till they bled (“the agony”, wrote Roald Dahl, was “unbelievable”). Then, in the 1960s, grammar schools closed, new comprehensive schools opened and the stern old ways were comprehensively rejected by many.

At this time a comfortable Rousseauian consensus was growing, which held that children were eager sunbeams who really wanted to learn and that teachers merely had to assist them. Strict discipline, silence and chalk were out; games, group work and good vibes were in. Which, says Mr Bennett, is a pity, as the Rousseauian ideal is “rubbish. You can have dancing bears and holograms... but if kids don’t want to learn they’ll tell you to get stuffed.”

Left-wing sociologists rejoiced at this turn (I have no interest, wrote one, in seeing “school as a launching pad for educational sputniks”). Traditionalists went into a moral panic. But the old methods weren’t rejected by private schools. Pay enough money and you could continue to have your child caned until 1999. Private schools were seen to stand for odd uniforms, antiquated methods and excellent results; state schools conjured up an image of progressive methods and poor results. The fact that this was a gross over-simplification was irrelevant. For a time, a sign outside Michaela’s premises read: “Private School Ethos—No Fees”.

(515 words)

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/01/16/why-super-strict-classrooms-are-in-vogue-in-britain>

The UN takes on corporate greenwashing



Will companies—and governments—listen?

Readers looking for thrills rarely turn to official reports written by groups of worthies. At first glance, one from a body soporifically named the UN High-Level Expert Group on the Net-Zero Emissions Commitments of Non-State Entities might be expected to cure insomnia. The team of experts, led by Catherine McKenna, a former Canadian minister, has spent the past seven months poring over the proliferating climate commitments of banks and big businesses, as well as cities and regions.

Yawn? Not a bit of it. The group's conclusions, presented to the UN Secretary General on November 8th at the annual climate summit taking place in Egypt, made both CEOs and activists sit up. In her opening letter, the refreshingly direct Ms McKenna set the tone: "It's time to draw a red line around greenwashing."

Many companies are making bold promises to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases to zero. According to Accenture, a consultancy, around one-third of the world's 2,000 biggest firms by revenue now have publicly stated net-zero goals. Of those, however, 93% have no chance of achieving their targets without doing much more than they are at the moment. Few businesses lay out credible investment plans or specify milestones against which progress can be judged.

In order to curb such "dishonest climate accounting", the report urges companies to make public disclosures of their progress towards decarbonisation using verified and comparable data. It implores regulators to make these disclosures mandatory. In addition, the authors say, firms should not claim to be net-zero while investing in new fossil-fuel supplies (which puts many investment funds in a bind) nor rely on reporting the intensity of emissions (per unit of output) rather than their absolute volume. And organisations making green claims must not simultaneously lobby against climate policies.

All very bracing, and perfectly sensible. Will business take it to heart? The UN has no authority to enforce any of the recommendations. The idea that increased scrutiny will inevitably lead to better behaviour remains untested. It is all too easy to imagine that it might instead lead to what you might call green-hushing. A survey of some 1,200 big firms in 12 countries by South Pole, a climate consultancy, found that a quarter have set themselves stringent emission-reduction targets but do not intend to publicise them. Some companies are staying quiet to avoid attracting the ire of conservative politicians in places such as Texas, who decry "woke" corporations. Others, particularly in progressive redoubts like Europe, fear activist ire for not meeting targets quickly enough.

Many state entities are not helping—and not only because they shy away from policies with bite, such as carbon taxes. The day after Ms McKenna set out her red lines, the American government launched a new scheme to spur large companies in rich countries to purchase carbon credits from developing countries that expand their renewable-power-generation capacity. In theory, this could bring much-needed capital to the urgent task of scaling up clean energy in emerging markets. In practice, worries Chris Cote of MSCI, a research firm, it will be hard to tell if a given project would have been financed even without inducements from deep-pocketed multinationals. Without proper oversight, that could mean more greenwash, not less.

(534 words)

<https://www.economist.com/business/2022/11/10/the-un-takes-on-corporate-greenwashing>

War and subsidies have turbocharged the green transition



They may have knocked as much as ten years off the timeline

To many activists, Lutzerath, an abandoned hamlet in Germany, symbolises the nightmare of the global energy crisis. For months campaigners blocked the site's demolition after Robert Habeck, the country's energy minister, allowed a utility firm to mine for lignite—the dirtiest form of coal—under its graffitied houses. As a giant excavator swallowed its way closer, hundreds of police, unfazed by the pyrotechnics propelled at them, dragged protesters from their stations. Now the village is empty; its last buildings gone. Only bits of lutz (cables and roads) are left for the bucket-wheeled machine to gobble up.

In their panic to keep the lights on, politicians across Europe and Asia are reopening coal mines, keeping polluting power plants alive and signing deals to import liquefied natural gas (LNG). State-owned oil giants, such as the uae's adnoc and Saudi Aramco, are setting aside hundreds of billions of dollars to boost output, at the same time as private energy firms mint enormous profits. Many governments are encouraging consumption of these dirty fuels by subsidising energy use, to help citizens get through the winter.

Yet the reality is that the return of brown fuels is a subplot in a much grander story. By making coal, gas and oil scarcer and dearer—prices remain well above long-run averages, despite recent falls—Russia's invasion of Ukraine has given renewable power, which is mostly generated domestically, a significant strategic and economic edge. Indeed, even as Mr Habeck endorsed coal-mining last year, the Green politician set out plans to expand solar and wind energy, including in Lutzerath's gusty Rhineland. All over the world officials are raising renewables targets and setting aside huge sums to bankroll a buildout.

This complexity makes it difficult to discern whether the tumult in energy markets has aided or impeded the green transition. To assess the overall picture, The Economist has looked at a range of factors, including fossil-fuel consumption, energy efficiency and renewables deployment. Our findings suggest that the crunch caused by the war in Ukraine may, in fact, have fast-tracked the transition by an astonishing five to ten years.

As the battle at Lutzerath suggests, the main reason for alarm is that the world is burning more coal these days. Before the war, it seemed as if appetite for the fuel, having peaked in 2013, was in secular decline. Last year, however, consumption grew by 1.2%, surpassing 8bn tonnes for the first time in history. Sky-high gas prices have pushed utility firms in Europe and parts of Asia, notably Japan and South Korea, to use much more of the stuff. Politicians have prolonged the life of coal-fired plants, reopened closed ones and lifted production caps. This has led to a scramble for supply—one which has been exacerbated by Europe's ban on Russian imports. In China and India production jumped by 8% and 11% respectively in 2022, pushing world output to a record high.

The International Energy Agency (IEA), an official forecaster, predicts that coal demand will remain high until 2025 (though it cautions that soothsaying is particularly difficult in current market conditions). Europe will receive less gas from Russia, and global lng supply is likely to stay tight, meaning coal will remain the bloc's fallback option. (...)

(531 words)

<https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2023/02/13/war-and-subsidies-have-turbocharged-the-green-transition>

British museums and galleries are dealing with the past, clumsily



What to do (and not do) with shrunken heads and Napoleon's toothbrush

Forget Cézanne at Tate Modern. Forget Lucian Freud at the National Gallery. If you want to see something on a gallery wall that is really, as arty sorts say, challenging, head to the Wellcome Collection on Euston Road in London. On the white wall of this minimalist space you will find a similarly minimalist exhibit of six small holes; three above and three below. There's no label, though, and it's not quite clear at first what they are.

5 It is clear what they are not. They are emphatically not part of the Wellcome Collection's Medicine Man exhibition. Until late last year, this comprised an eccentric display of medical oddments—a glass eye; false legs; Tunisian amulets; Napoleon's toothbrush—acquired by the Collection's equally eccentric philanthropic founder, Henry Wellcome. At the end of 2022 the Collection announced that the exhibition “perpetuates a version of medical history that is based on racist, sexist and ableist theories” and shut it two days later. Napoleon's transgressive toothbrush vanished; racists and ableists everywhere were doubtless chastened. (...)

In one sense, mutilating a collection is a curator's job. Museums are famously icebergs; most of their collections are not on show. It is the job of the curator to cut bits out and put others in. What they cut and what they keep will change over time, as it should. What feels much less right is when it is not art or interest but ideology that is shaping choices.

15 The job of history is not, as Hilary Mantel once said, to issue “report cards” to the past. The sanctimonious word soup being spread over museum and gallery walls is not necessarily wrong in its conclusions—which are often spot-on. But it is wrong in its aim, which is to tell people what to think. And that is exactly what history should not do. One of the most mocked history books of the 20th century was “Our Island Story”, which was parodied in “1066 and All That” for its habit of briskly dismissing moments in history as “A Good Thing” or a “A Bad Thing”. In contrast, Mantel's own “Wolf Hall” took Thomas Cromwell, one of history's most infamous villains, and made him, if not a hero, then at least someone you rooted for. You thought again. You thought at all.

25 It is the job of history—and therefore of galleries and museums—to make you think. To make you wonder, of any moment in the past: what was the right thing to do? What was the wrong one? Happily, the Wellcome Collection has a temporary exhibit of its own that does just that. Just head over to where Medicine Man used to be. You might have trouble finding it: labels have been stuck over the name in the lifts; in the newly reprinted maps it has already, Soviet-like, vanished. But look carefully and you can still find those six holes on the wall. As you look, it slowly becomes clear what they are: they mark where the sign for the Medicine Man exhibition used to hang. And that does make you think.

(510 words)

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/01/11/british-museums-and-galleries-are-dealing-with-the-past-clumsily>

The moratorium on repaying student loans in America was a bad idea



How bad is now becoming clearer

Milton Friedman used to joke that nothing is so permanent as a temporary government programme. So it nearly was with America's moratorium on student-loan payments. The debt-relief scheme—which suspended payments, interest charges and collections on more than \$1trn in federal student loans—was passed by Congress in the early days of the pandemic. Although meant to expire after just six months, it proved popular with voters and was extended eight times, despite a price tag of \$5bn a month. Now the programme may at last be ending for good. The debt-ceiling deal negotiated by President Joe Biden and the House speaker, Kevin McCarthy, would resume student-loan payments on August 30th, without the possibility of an extension.

Has the student-debt-relief scheme left borrowers better off? The Biden administration has called the payment freeze a “critical lifeline” that helped borrowers pay for basic necessities while preventing millions of delinquencies and defaults. Media reports and surveys suggest that the pause allowed young people to make ends meet, pay down debt and build up savings. Early evidence seemed to bolster this view. An analysis published in March 2022 by researchers at the California Policy Lab, a group based at the University of California, found that the payment freeze lowered monthly bills, boosted credit scores and pushed some borrowers to increase their payments on mortgages, car loans and other outstanding debts.

But a new paper by economists at the University of Chicago suggests that the pause in student-loan payments caused borrowers to rack up more debt, not less. Using data from TransUnion, a credit-reporting firm, the researchers compared the personal finances of students whose loans were frozen in 2020 because they borrowed directly from the United States Treasury with those of students who borrowed from private banks and were therefore ineligible for the moratorium.

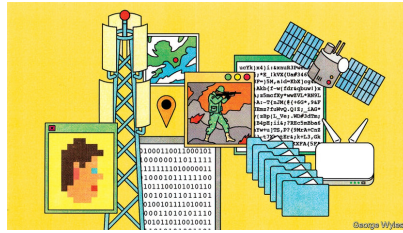
They found that the payment freeze reduced delinquency rates on student loans and boosted credit scores, but did not affect delinquencies on other debts. Nor did the policy reduce loan balances—in fact, it did the opposite. By the end of 2022 beneficiaries of the moratorium accumulated an additional \$2,500 in student-loan debt and an additional \$2,000 in credit-card, mortgage and car-loan debt, boosting total household indebtedness by 8%.

Jefferies, an investment bank, reckons that the return of student-loan payments, which are around \$200 a month for the typical borrower, will weigh on consumer spending and push up delinquency rates. For those borrowers who took advantage of the student-debt moratorium, and accumulated additional debt over the past three years, the financial pressure could be especially acute. Back in April 2022 Mr Biden warned that the resumption of student-loan payments could lead to “significant economic hardship” for millions of borrowers. Little did he know that his own policies would be partly to blame.

(459 words)

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/06/01/the-moratorium-on-repaying-student-loans-in-america-was-a-bad-idea>

Proving a photo is fake is one thing. Proving it isn't is another



But, for the reporting of war crimes, it matters

That truth is the first casualty of war is an old aphorism. One recent instance is the proliferation of images and videos of things that did not happen, in wars such as those currently going on in Ukraine and Syria. Some of these are outright fakes. Others are manipulated versions of honestly recorded material. Last year a doctored video appeared of Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, apparently telling Ukrainian soldiers to surrender.

5 The proliferation of such fakes has, though, led to a second, more subtle approach to lying with images. This is to use their ubiquity to cast doubt on the veracity of inconvenient pictures that are real.

10 Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine last year, for example, the Associated Press released a video of doctors failing to revive a young girl who had been hit in the shelling of Mariupol. The footage soon appeared on Russian television with the word "fake" stamped on it. Since it is hard to prove a negative (ie, that material has not been doctored), such evidence may thus be challenged, possibly even in court, and allegations of crimes based on that evidence may, as a result, not stick.

15 Ways to establish the authenticity of digital imagery would therefore be valuable. And one is now available. "Glass-to-glass" warning systems create special software "ecosystems" within which pictures and video can be taken, stored and transmitted in a way that alerts viewers to alterations, no matter when and where those changes are introduced in an image's journey from lens to screen. A plate of hash

20 One such system has been developed by eyeWitness to Atrocities, a charity based in London. The app at its core does two things. First, when a photo or video is taken by a phone fitted with that app, it records the time and location of the event, as reported by hard-to-deny electronic witnesses such as GPS satellites and nearby mobile-phone towers and Wi-Fi networks. This is known as the controlled capture of metadata, and is more secure than collecting such metadata from the phone itself, because a phone's time and location settings can be changed.

25 Second, the app reads the image's entire digital sequence (the zeros and ones which represent it) and uses a standard mathematical formula to calculate an alphanumeric value, known as a hash, unique to that picture. All this done, it then puts the metadata and the hash into a file called a proof bundle that is separate from the image and sends an encrypted copy of the image and its proof bundle to a special server.

Wendy Betts, director of eyeWitness to Atrocities, describes this server as a digital evidence locker.

(441 words)

<https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2023/01/09/proving-a-photo-is-fake-is-one-thing-proving-it-isnt-is-another>