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A global farm grab: from the many to the few

Editorial, Tue 24 Nov 2020, *The Guardian*

(480 words)

In a collection of agrarian essays entitled *The Art of the Commonplace*, the American farmer, essayist and poet Wendell Berry wrote that “the care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.”

From his farm in Kentucky, Mr Berry has spent decades railing against the expansion, homogenisation and industrialisation of American farms. Rapacious economic imperatives, he argues, are leading to the gradual but inexorable destruction of the land. The ethos of stewardship has been replaced by a remote form of ownership that views fields, rivers and forests solely through the lens of extraction. Local smallholders who, as he puts it, inhabited the land “on its terms, not ours”, have either been forced out or co-opted.

As a major study published on Tuesday makes clear, such concerns are now of pressing global relevance. Research led by the International Land Coalition has estimated that a tiny 1% of the world’s 600m or so farms operate 70% of its crop fields, ranches and orchards. A concentration of ownership in recent decades, combined with the rise of indirect control through contract farming, has reduced vast swathes of territory to mere assets on a distant company balance sheet.

Smallholders, family farms and indigenous communities have been chivvied, bullied and bribed into retreating to ever smaller patches of land, or abandoning it altogether. More than 80% of the smallholdings in the world now comprise less than two hectares (five acres) and lie outside global food chains. In Brazil, where the often violent dispossession of traditional Amazonian communities has made international headlines, 1,833 cases of conflict related to land and water were recorded last year.

The territory freed up is being remorselessly pillaged in the short-term interests of corporate agribusiness and opaque western investment funds. Many investors work on 10-year cycles, maximising returns at significant environmental cost, before moving on to pastures new. Monocultures and over intensive methods have led to the accelerating decline of soil quality, depletion of water resources and deforestation. Those responsible for this environmental vandalism, which puts cheap food on our tables, are seldom held to account.

Over the course of generations, on every continent, communities have learned how to cherish, cultivate and preserve the richness of their land. As the world faces an environmental emergency, a logic of short-term accumulation has led to the loss of this expertise. If the global direction of travel is to be reversed, governments must demand greater transparency on landholdings and explicit commitments to existing principles of sustainable investment. But most importantly, a way should be sought to reassert the rights and virtues of smallholders and family farmers. As one of the report’s authors says: “It’s not just about return on investment; it’s about culture, identity and leaving something for the next generation.”

All eyes are on the Facebook oversight board as its decision on Trump's account looms

Oliver Darcey, 23 April 2021, *CNN Business*

(513 words)

Anticipation is building for the Facebook Oversight Board's looming decision on whether to keep or reverse a ban on former President Trump's account. The board has said the decision will be announced "in the coming weeks." And Axios added fuel to the speculation Thursday when it published a story about how world leaders are bracing for the announcement.

"This is going to be a global moment," NYU journalism professor Jay Rosen commented. Indeed, Axios' Sara Fischer and Jonathan Swan pointed out, "the decision will set a historic precedent for how the tech giant treats accounts of world leaders, and could be a litmus test for the board's power."

And yet, amid the high level of interest and the suspense, neither Facebook nor the Oversight Board are commenting. I checked in with both parties about the forthcoming decision and mum is the word.

The decision from the Facebook Oversight Board could, first and foremost, serve as the biggest demonstration of the board's power and independence. There are quite a few critics who are skeptical that the board is truly independent from Facebook. And there have also been concerns from critics about whether Facebook will abide by the board's recommendations. If the board were to buck Facebook and issue a decision that rebukes that of Facebook's, it would be quite the moment and could solidify the board's power or reveal it to be what some critics have suggested.

In addition to not knowing when the actual decision will come down or what it will be, there are still several other unanswered questions. If the board does reinstate Trump, how soon might we see his account reactivated? Could Facebook agree to follow such a recommendation, but not allow him on back until some more time has passed since the insurrection? Could Trump's profile be reactivated, but in a more limited fashion? Might Facebook implement additional restrictions on the account? And will the decision be less clear than simply saying whether Facebook should allow him back or not? Could the board make a decision in a more grey area that could be left open to interpretation?

Donie O'Sullivan adds: "Trump is no longer an elected official or a declared candidate, so if he were to be allowed back on Facebook, he would be subject to the company's fact-checks where he was not before. So you could potentially — again, if you were to be permitted back on the site — expect a lot of friction between Facebook and Trump as they label his posts false or misleading. What would be quite interesting is if Trump were to decide to declare 2024 candidacy early just to get around Facebook's fact-checking rules..."

"As the tech world waits to see whether Facebook kicks Donald Trump out for good or lets him back in, lawmakers are following along, seeing the case as a milestone in the fraught relationship between Big Tech and free speech," Caleb Ecarma writes.

Amazon's dominance: we have to make different choices

Editorial, Fri 16 Oct 2020, *The Guardian*

(482 words)

It was hard to miss the fact that Amazon Prime had a sale this week. Newspapers and magazines covered the event as a celebration of consumption. This on top of a coronavirus pandemic that has accelerated the collapse of already struggling bricks-and-mortar retailers.

It is not surprising that so many of us shop with Amazon. The prices seem low. Purchases arrive promptly. But an examination of this gift horse's mouth also raises serious concerns. Even before the pandemic Amazon's aggressive pricing strategies made it difficult for smaller companies to compete. This is exacerbated by the fact that the company does not pay enough back to the state. In 2019 corporation tax was £14.5m at Amazon's UK logistics company, where revenue was £2.9bn. At its main UK retail and IT-services business, revenue was £13.7bn but there what profits are declared and what corporation tax is paid are unknowns.

Locally, meanwhile, Amazon – without shops on the high street – pays less in business rates than a number of traditional competitors. The discrepancy can be stark, with Tesco a case in point. A Commons committee inquiry last year found that while various well-known names paid business rates at 1.5%-6% of turnover, Amazon paid 0.7%

It is an intolerable situation that a company that depends on the public services run by the state does not pay an appropriate level of taxes. To add insult to injury, this week it was reported that while the new digital services tax excludes Amazon's earnings from products it sells directly, the services tax is being passed on by Amazon to small traders using the site.

Amazon has been one of the rare companies to take on new workers during the pandemic, but its employment practices need close scrutiny. A comprehensive new report published by the Trades Union Congress describes 10-hour working days, with 300 items picked and packed each hour, and workers penalised or even sacked for not keeping up. It describes a culture of fear, and notes that ambulances have been called to Amazon warehouses in Britain 600 times in three years.

Drivers are thought to deliver 200 parcels a day; they are also self-employed, meaning Amazon is not liable if anything goes wrong. This pressure has only increased with Covid-19, and reports have emerged of inadequate social distancing and a lack of PPE. By contrast Jeff Bezos, the founder and chief executive of Amazon, saw his wealth increase by \$74bn this year. This is wrong on so many levels.

Amazon's dominance means it already has too much sway in many marketplaces. This is a matter of political choice. We have to make different choices. The bigger Amazon becomes, the more it will be able to manipulate the tax, data, employment and consumer regulatory frameworks to its advantage. Governments must ensure fair levels of scrutiny, taxation and competition and let Amazon be in the spotlight for all the right reasons.

Apple's new devices target markets led by smaller rivals

Jack Nicas, 20 April 2021, *New York Times*

(501 words)

Apple unveiled a series of new products on Tuesday that showed how it continues to center its marketing pitch on consumer privacy, at the potential expense of other companies, while muscling into markets pioneered by much smaller competitors.

In an hourlong infomercial that was streamed from its Silicon Valley headquarters, Apple showed off a new high-end iPad and an iMac desktop computer based on new computer processors that Apple now makes itself. The company also said it was redesigning its podcast app, which competes with companies like Spotify, to enable creators to charge for their shows. And it revealed the AirTag, a \$29 disc that attaches to key rings or wallets so they can be found if lost.

But after its product show, Apple made other news that could have far more significant, industrywide implications. The company said in a news release that it planned to release highly anticipated iPhone software next week with a privacy feature that worries digital-advertising companies, most notably Facebook.

The feature will require apps to get explicit permission from users before tracking them across other apps. As a result, when opening many apps next week, owners of iPhones will see pop-up windows that ask them whether to allow that tracking. Companies that rely on digital advertising are expected to gather less data about users as people decline that tracking.

Apple and Facebook have been locked in a war of words over the change, with Facebook arguing that it will hurt the digital advertising that helps fund free internet services. Apple has said it is merely giving consumers the right to choose whether to be tracked.

Companies like Facebook often rely on details about users and their online behavior to show them advertising that is intended to be tailored to their interests. If Apple's changes strip the companies of that information, advertisers could be less willing to spend money with them.

On Tuesday, Apple's AirTag immediately drew criticism from Tile, a company that for years has made similar devices for finding lost items. "We welcome competition, as long as it is fair competition," said CJ Prober, Tile's chief executive. "Unfortunately, given Apple's well-documented history of using its platform advantage to unfairly limit competition for its products, we're skeptical."

Tile has accused Apple of anticompetitive practices since Apple began working on a competing product. Last year, Tile's general counsel testified to Congress that, shortly after reports that Apple was working on similar gadgets surfaced, Apple pulled Tile's devices from its stores and made it more difficult for them to work with iPhones.

Tile's general counsel, along with executives from Apple, Google, Spotify and the dating company Match Group, is set to testify on Wednesday at a Senate hearing on Apple's and Google's market power and control over mobile apps. "We think it is entirely appropriate for Congress to take a closer look at Apple's business practices," Mr. Prober said.

Bitcoin rise could leave carbon footprint the size of London's

Alex Hern, Wed 10 Mar 2021, *The Guardian*

(524 words)

The surge in bitcoin's price since the start of 2021 could result in the cryptocurrency having a carbon footprint the same as that of London, according to research. Alex de Vries, a Dutch economist, created the Bitcoin Energy Consumption Index, one of the first systematic attempts to estimate the energy use of the bitcoin network. By late 2017 he estimated the network used 30 terawatt hours (TWh) a year, the same as the whole of the Republic of Ireland. Now De Vries estimates the network uses more than twice – and possibly three times – as much energy: between 78TWh and 101TWh, or about the same as Norway.

New bitcoins are created by “mining” coins, which is done by using computers to carry out complex calculations. The more bitcoins there are, the longer it takes to mine new coin, and the more electricity is used in the process. Roughly 60% of the costs of bitcoin mining is the price of the electricity used, de Vries estimates. The more money miners get per bitcoin, the more they will be able to spend on mining it.

However, energy use often lags behind swings in currency due to the time it takes for bitcoin miners to acquire new hardware. De Vries writes that energy use is likely to increase substantially in the short term as a result of the currency's recent price rises, as new and established miners invest in more hardware. By January this year the price of a bitcoin had reached \$42,000. At this rate, miners would earn just over \$15bn annually.

“With 60% of this income going to pay for electricity, at a price of \$0.05 per kWh [kilowatt hour], the total network could consume up to 184TWh per year,” estimates De Vries. That energy use is about the same as the 200TWh consumed by every datacentre for every other digital industry globally. The size of bitcoin's electrical footprint means the carbon emissions are substantial.

The paper cites an assumption of 480-500g of carbon dioxide produced for every kWh consumed. “A total energy consumption of 184TWh would result in a carbon footprint of 90.2m metric tons of CO₂,” De Vries writes in the journal *Joule*, “which is roughly comparable to the carbon emissions produced by the metropolitan area of London.”

As well as the carbon emissions of the bitcoin network, De Vries highlights other impacts of the protocol's growth. As well as consuming electricity, for instance, bitcoin miners need access to powerful computers, preferably including specialist chips created for mining. To produce 1m such computers, the largest provider, Bitmain, would have to use a month's capacity of one of only two chip fabricators in the world capable of producing such high-power silicon – potentially crowding out demand from other sectors such as AI, transportation and home electronics.

In order to limit the growing footprint of the sector, De Vries suggests lawmakers could follow the lead of regions that have put pressure on bitcoin miners, such as Québec in Canada, where a law on new mining operations has been imposed, or Iran, which decided to confiscate mining equipment as the country suffered from outages blamed on cryptocurrency mining.

Case launched against TikTok over collection of children's data

Haroon Siddique, Wed 21 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(490 words)

A former children's commissioner for England has launched a "landmark case" against the video-sharing app TikTok, alleging that it illegally collects the personal information of its child users. Anne Longfield, who held the commissioner post between March 2015 and February this year, has lodged a claim in the high court on behalf of millions of children in the UK and the European Economic Area who have used TikTok since 25 March 2018. She alleges the app is breaching UK and EU children's data protection law and aims to stop it processing the information of millions of children, make it delete all such existing data and pay compensation she believes could run into billions of pounds.

Despite a minimum age requirement of 13, Ofcom found last year that 42% of UK eight to 12-year-olds used TikTok. As with other social media companies such as Facebook, there have long been concerns about data collection and the UK's Information Commissioner's Office is investigating TikTok's handling of children's personal information. Longfield said: "We're not trying to say that it's not fun. Families like it. It's been something that's been really important over lockdown, it's helped people keep in touch, they've had lots of enjoyment. But my view is that the price to pay for that shouldn't be there – for their personal information to be illegally collected en masse, and passed on to others, most probably for financial gain, without them even knowing about it.

"And the excessive nature of that collection is something which drove us to [challenge] TikTok rather than others. It's the fact that, for this [age] group of children it is the app of choice but also it's the kind of information they're collecting – it can't possibly be appropriate for a video app, especially exact location, and probably face recognition as well."

The legal claim alleges that TikTok takes children's personal information without sufficient warning, transparency or the necessary consent required by law, and without parents and children knowing what is being done with their private information. Longfield believes more than 3.5 million children in the UK alone could have been affected. Longfield, who is bringing the case as a representative action for those who claim to have suffered harm, said TikTok's business model with respect to personal data was "disproportionate", adding: "Kids can't give consent." She believed the case could be a landmark in establishing a framework for social media companies' responsibilities towards children and families.

In February last year, ByteDance, the Chinese company legally domiciled in the Cayman Islands that owns TikTok, was fined a record £4.2m (\$5.7m) in the US for illegally collecting personal information from children under 13. Tom Southwell, a partner at Scott + Scott, which is acting for Longfield, said: "TikTok and ByteDance's advertising revenue is built on the personal information of its users, including children. Profiting from this information without fulfilling its legal obligations, and its moral duty to protect children online, is unacceptable."

Commercial banking

April 10th, 2021, *The Economist*

(503 words)

Commercial banking was once said to be governed by the three-six-three rule: pay depositors a 3% interest rate, charge borrowers 6% and always be on the golf course by 3pm. That world is long gone.

Nowadays, with interest rates stuck on the floor, the spread between deposit and loan rates has shrunk. Rather than teeing off at 3pm, bankers are more likely to be stuck behind their desks trying to think of new ways of turning a profit. In an era of ultra-low interest rates the traditional business model looks much less attractive to investors, as NatWest, a large British bank, has found while trying to sell the Irish operations of its subsidiary, Ulster Bank.

NatWest Group, following a strategic review, has been trying to offload its Irish operations for six months. While there has been interest in the loan book from private equity firms, no-one wants to take on the branch network and deposits. In February NatWest announced that the branches would be closed, and the Ulster Bank's Irish business would be wound down over the coming years. As a private equity boss says, in the past "you would buy a deposit business because it was a source of cheap funding, but today you can get even cheaper funding from markets without the hassle of running bank branches."

Banking used to be about what is technically known as maturity transformation—borrowing for short periods and lending for longer ones. The classic example would be a bank borrowing in the form of small deposits from savers that are repayable on demand and lending in the form of a 25-year mortgage. But that model relies on a decent spread—or net interest margin—between short term and long-term borrowing costs.

Thirteen years of low interest rates have pushed the margin for British banks down from over 3% in 2007 to closer 2% by 2019, effectively making the core business of banking about a third less profitable. Over the past year the banks have been flooded with deposits from households and firms, but lending opportunities have dried up, putting further pressure on their profits.

With their core business in the doldrums, and likely to stay there, the banks have been trying to generate new sources of profit. Lloyds, another big bank, is considering expanding into the property business, leasing homes directly to tenants. All the banks are talking up the potential to cross-sell other, more profitable, financial products—such as insurance, wealth planning and asset management—to their customer base.

The alternative to selling Britons new stuff is charging them more for services that they are used to getting for nothing. While legislation dating to 2015 guarantees access to a free bank account, such an account does not have to come with all the bells and whistles it does now.

A banker argues that "it's one thing to provide people with a deposit account for free if that deposit is funding profitable activity elsewhere, but it's another if it's not. We aren't running a charity".

Could nanotourism be the answer to sustainable travel?

The Independent, 8 February 2021

(525 words)

Even before we were fighting a pandemic, we knew that global tourism accounts for 8 per cent of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions. We knew that between overtourism and climate change, we were literally sinking Venice, driving up rental prices in Barcelona, and drinking Santorini out of fresh water. And, if we're honest, we knew that showing up to Amsterdam or Madrid or Berlin for a weekend to stay in an Airbnb, take a beer bike crawl and throw up on public transport, all without learning a word of the local language, were not particularly worthy pursuits.

The term tourist is increasingly used pejoratively, to imply a shallow interest in cultures or environments. No one wants to be a tourist any more, but prefers to be a traveller, passenger, guest, wrote Ljubljana-based architects Aljosa Dekleva and Tina Gregorič, who coined the term nanotourism in 2014. They define it on nanotourism.org as a constructed term describing a creative critique to the current environmental, social and economic downsides of conventional tourism, as a participatory, locally oriented, bottom-up alternative.

A nanotourist becomes part of the local community rather than using a destination as the setting of a generic holiday. He cites agrotourism as an existing example. Visitors can participate in a harvest as workers, while the farmers learn different perspectives on their trade. Other projects include taking a lesser-travelled route to reach the Incan ruins of Moray in Cusco, Peru, to combat overtourism, and working with locals to study traditional methods of salt production and find innovative new ways of producing this "white gold" in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Ultimately, Travnik says, the key characteristic of nanotourism is that of an exchange between the visitors and the host, which is different to that of simple observation and mere consumption within the model of mass tourism. You don't need to travel a long distance to achieve this exchange either. Some of the most effective ways to be a nanotourist are by engaging in your street, on your block, and in your city a travel environment which the pandemic has reintroduced many of us to.

In London alone, there are various projects tapping into the nanotourism spirit. David Pearl founded Street Wisdom as a way to bring the tools of mindfulness into everyday life and community. Local volunteer guides take participants down a few streets in the capital, asking them to attune their senses to the world around them and ask a question about their life. Then, they spend an hour wandering the streets with the question in mind, and share insights with the group afterwards. Instead of flying across the world to an ashram, it's a way to connect with the wisdom that lives everywhere. Pearl calls it enlightenment urban tourism.

It may be a while before we can explore the possibilities of nanotourism on an international break. But, until then, we can hone our skills as responsible travellers right here in the UK, finding opportunities on our doorstep to seek out local, meaningful experiences and discover a whole new perspective on the familiar.

Facebook faces antitrust allegations over deals for Instagram and WhatsApp

Gabrielle Canon, Tue 8 Dec 2020, *The Guardian*

(488 words)

Facebook is expecting significant new legal challenges, as the US Federal Trade Commission and a coalition of attorney generals from up to 40 states are preparing antitrust suits. Although the specific charges in both cases remain unclear, the antitrust allegations are expected to center on the tech giant's acquisition of two big apps: a \$1bn deal to buy the photo-sharing app Instagram in 2012, and the \$19bn purchase of the global messaging service WhatsApp in 2014. Together, the buys brought the top four social media companies worldwide under Facebook's control. The purchases would constitute antitrust violations if Facebook believed the companies were viable competitors.

At the time of its acquisition, Instagram had 30 million users, and, even though it was growing rapidly, it wasn't yet making money. WhatsApp boasted more than 450 million monthly active users when it was acquired. "WhatsApp is on a path to connect 1 billion people," Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, said in a statement at the time. The FTC cleared Facebook for the acquisitions when they occurred, and the company is hoping to leverage those approvals in mounting a defense. Facebook executives have also argued their company has helped the apps grow. But Facebook has come under greater scrutiny since the deals were done, and the FTC launched a new investigation into the potential antitrust violations in 2019.

The FTC investigation will build on findings from a separate study conducted by the US House judiciary subcommittee, which released millions of files that appeared to show that Facebook executives, including Zuckerberg, were concerned the apps could become competition, before aggressively pursuing them.

In one 2012 email, made public through the House investigation, Zuckerberg highlighted how Instagram had an edge on mobile, an area where Facebook was falling behind. In another, the CEO said Instagram could hurt Facebook even if it did not become huge. "The businesses are nascent but the networks are established, the brands are already meaningful and if they grow to a large scale they could be disruptive to us," Zuckerberg wrote. Instagram's co-founder also fretted that his company might be targeted for destruction by Zuckerberg if he refused the deal.

Facebook's possible legal challenges come as a growing number of US lawmakers are arguing that companies including Amazon, Google, Facebook and Apple have amassed too much power and should be reined in. These companies "wield their dominance in ways that erode entrepreneurship, degrade Americans' privacy online, and undermine the vibrancy of the free and diverse press", the House judiciary committee concluded in its nearly 500-page report. "The result is less innovation, fewer choices for consumers, and a weakened democracy."

President-elect Joe Biden, too, has been critical of the tech companies. "Many technology giants and their executives have not only abused their power, but misled the American people, damaged our democracy and evaded any form of responsibility," a Biden spokesman, Matt Hill, told the *New York Times*. "That ends with a President Biden."

How the world embraced consumerism

Kerryn Higgs, 21 January 2021, *BBC News*

(519 words)

The notion of human beings as consumers first took shape before World War One, but became commonplace in America in the 1920s. Consumption is now frequently seen as our principal role in the world.

People, of course, have always “consumed” the necessities of life – food, shelter, clothing – and have always had to work to get them or have others work for them, but there was little economic motive for increased consumption among the mass of people before the 20th Century.

Quite the reverse: frugality and thrift were more appropriate to situations where survival rations were not guaranteed. Attempts to promote new fashions, harness the “propulsive power of envy,” and boost sales multiplied in Britain in the late 18th Century. Here began the “slow unleashing of the acquisitive instincts,” write historians Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J H Plumb in their influential book on the commercialisation of 18th-Century England, when the pursuit of opulence and display first extended beyond the very rich.

But, while poorer people might have acquired a very few useful household items – a skillet, perhaps, or an iron pot – the sumptuous clothing, furniture, and pottery of the era were still confined to a very small population.

In late 19th-Century Britain a variety of foods became accessible to the average person, who would previously have lived on bread and potatoes – consumption beyond mere subsistence. This improvement in food variety did not extend durable items to the mass of people, however. The proliferating shops and department stores of that period served only a restricted population of urban middle-class people in Europe, but the display of tempting products in shops in daily public view was greatly extended – and display was a key element in the fostering of fashion and envy.

In the US at the turn of the century, existing shops were rapidly extended through the 1890s, mail-order shopping surged, and the new century saw massive multi-storey department stores covering millions of acres of selling space. Retailing was already passing decisively from small shopkeepers to corporate giants who had access to investment bankers and drew on assembly-line production of commodities, powered by fossil fuels. The traditional objective of making products for their self-evident usefulness was displaced by the goal of profit and the need for a machinery of enticement.

“The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratisation of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society,” Significantly, it was individual desire that was democratised, rather than wealth or political and economic power.

The capitalist system, dependent on a logic of never-ending growth from its earliest inception, confronted the plenty it created in its home states, especially the US, as a threat to its very existence. It would not do if people were content because they felt they had enough. However, over the course of the 20th Century, capitalism preserved its momentum by moulding the ordinary person into a consumer with an unquenchable thirst for its “wonderful stuff”.

Netflix's dominance starts to slow as rivals gain

Edmund Lee, 20 April 2021, *New York Times*

(505 words)

Netflix still rules the streaming universe. As of the end of March, it had 207.6 million total paying subscribers, with about 67 million in the United States, the company noted in an earnings report on Tuesday. But its main competitors — Disney+, HBO Max, Paramount+ and AppleTV+, as well as the old-guard streamers Amazon Prime Video and Hulu — have cut into Netflix's share of viewers' attention.

The global demand for original Netflix programs, like "Bridgerton," the much buzzed-about romance series from the super-producer Shonda Rhimes, has started to drop relative to similar offerings from newcomers, according to the data firm Parrot Analytics, which has developed a metric to rate not only the number of viewers for given shows, but their likelihood of attracting subscribers to a streaming service.

In its latest rankings, Parrot reported that Netflix's share of total demand — a measure of the popularity of its shows — was slightly above 50 percent for the first three months of the year, compared with 54 percent a year ago and 65 percent in the first quarter of 2019.

In other words, competitors have started eating into Netflix's dominance.

That showed up in the numbers. For the first quarter of 2021, Netflix reported the addition of four million new customers, below the six million it had forecast. The company expects to add only one million new customers for this current quarter ending in June.

Netflix shares plummeted about 10 percent in after-hours trading on Tuesday, after the earnings announcement.

The company doesn't think the newer competitors were the issue. "Are we sure it's not competition? Because obviously there's a lot of new competition," Reed Hastings, the company's co-chief executive along with Ted Sarandos, said on the earnings call after the report. "It's intensely competitive, but it always has been. We've been competing with Amazon Prime for 13 years, with Hulu for 14 years." He added: "So there's no real change that we can detect in the competitive environment."

Netflix pulled back on productions during the pandemic, which has now rippled into its release schedule. The company didn't have any big returning series in the period.

Netflix also raised prices in October, increasing its standard plan by a dollar to \$14 a month. It added an extra \$2 to its premium tier, which now costs \$18. The company typically increases its fees about every 18 months. It is also trying to clamp down on password sharing, long a common practice.

Last year, in the same period, just as the pandemic was underway, the company added a record 15.7 million subscribers.

As much of the world went into lockdown, people turned to screens to while away the hours. Netflix recorded a jump in new sign-ups, leading to a record year of nearly 37 million additional customers. The company is unlikely to repeat that performance for 2021 as restaurants, stores, theaters and sports stadiums start opening up to full capacity across the country.

Paul McCartney and Kate Bush lead call for change to music streaming payments

Ben Beaumont-Thomas, Tue 20 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(500 words)

British musicians including Paul McCartney, Kate Bush and Chris Martin have signed an open letter calling on Boris Johnson to enforce changes to the economic model of streaming. “For too long, streaming platforms, record labels and other internet giants have exploited performers and creators without rewarding them fairly. We must put the value of music back where it belongs – in the hands of music makers,” begins the letter to the prime minister – signed by 156 artists.

Their proposal centres on a suggested change in wording to the 1988 Copyright Act to bring royalty payments more in line with how those in radio are paid, while acknowledging the very different on-demand nature of streaming. The change in the law, the signatories argue, would mean that streaming companies would have to make “equitable remuneration” to artists via a rights collection company, a method already enshrined in British law for music played on the radio.

UK radio stations purchase a licence from a rights collection company, which then uses that revenue to distribute royalties to songwriters and performers based on how often their songs are played. With streaming, revenue from users is pooled by each streaming company, such as Spotify or Apple Music. Royalty payments are distributed by each company to the rights holder – usually a record label, who take their own share depending on their deal with the artist – according to the number of plays and other undisclosed formulas. The royalty rates are set by each company.

The signatories complain that the level of agency afforded to streaming companies needs to change, and a UK regulator also be brought in. Horace Trubridge, head of the Musicians’ Union, which is backing the letter with a petition campaign, said British law “simply hasn’t kept up with the pace of technological change. Listeners would be horrified to learn how little artists and musicians earn from streaming when they pay their subscriptions.” As well as streaming companies being targeted for more revenue to be shared with songwriters and performers, Crispin Hunt, chair of the songwriter organisation Ivors Academy took aim at record companies, calling them “marketing firms. Without manufacturing and distribution costs, their extraordinary profits ought to be shared more equitably with creators.”

Amid wider calls for more transparency and change in the sector, Apple Music messaged artists last week to state that they paid an average of one US cent per stream. However, Spotify and its rivals often oppose efforts to increase their royalty payments, and any definition of “equitable remuneration” in the UK, even if brought into law, is likely to be highly contested.

After a 2017 US ruling that ordered the percentage of revenue paid to songwriters rise from 10.5% to 15.1%, Spotify, Google, Amazon and Pandora opposed the ruling in a statement that the US National Music Publishers Association called “shameful”. The companies scored a partial win in August 2020, with a court finding fault in the methodology used to calculate the new rates, requiring them to be recalculated. The case continues.

The business of mobility

April 17th, 2021, *The Economist*

(496 words)

In the decades after the second world war carmakers were the undisputed champions of the personal-transport economy. Competition and economies of scale made cars affordable to millions of motorists in industrialised countries. In the 1980s and 1990s the likes of General Motors (GM) and Toyota boasted some of the world's richest market capitalisations. When it came to getting around town, nothing beat the automobile.

Today the picture looks different. Of the five most valuable firms in the moving-people-around business only two, Toyota of Japan and Volkswagen of Germany, are established carmakers. Ahead of everyone by a country mile is Tesla, an American company that has disrupted the car industry by turning electric vehicles from an unsightly curiosity (remember the g-wiz?) into a serious challenger to the internal combustion engine. Rounding off the top five are not carmakers at all but Uber, an American ride-hailing giant worth over \$100bn, and Didi Chuxing, a Chinese one that on April 10th was reported to have filed confidentially to go public in New York and hopes for a similar valuation.

After being slow to react to the threat from Tesla, legacy carmakers are—just about—getting to grips with electrification. Now another disruption lurks around the corner. Changing habits and technology are forcing car companies to rethink how their products are sold, used and owned. In a sign of the times, the boss of Volkswagen, Herbert Diess, concedes that “ownership is not necessarily what you want. You want a car when you need a car.”

Competitors are elbowing in; Didi is expected to be the star turn at the Shanghai Motor Show later this month. The private car is not obsolete. But the future business of “mobility”—as the industry has rebranded getting from A to B—will involve much more besides.

The market could be enormous. In 2019, ahead of its flotation, Uber put it at \$5.7trn. Consultancies' estimates are more subdued and vary considerably. But all point to rich potential. IHS Markit reckons that what it calls “new transport” will be worth \$400bn in revenues by 2030. KPMG puts the figure at \$1trn.

Individually owned cars will remain a big part of the new ecosystem. They are still the world's preferred means of transport. For every ten miles travelled Americans use the car for eight, Europeans for seven and Chinese for six. Even in Europe, which is friendlier to public transport than America or China, only one in six miles was travelled on buses, trains and coaches in 2017.

The automobile's appeal endures on the outskirts of cities and beyond. Nearly 90% of car miles in America are driven in the suburbs, small towns and rural locations, where a private car is often the only choice.

Instead, it is in the city centres where a revolution beckons. There the classic ownership model is endangered, new modes of transport are emerging and competition is building from upstart mobility providers that connect customers with a mesh of different services.

The creative experiences indulging our nostalgia for planes

Mark Johnson, 22 April 2021, *BBC News*

(492 words)

Karyn Thomas hasn't set foot outside Australia since October 2019, but she has chased the vivid green glow of the Southern Lights through the skies just north of Antarctica. That's because the avid traveller was on the first-ever Aurora Australis flight earlier this month, organised by the company Chimu Adventures, which chartered a Qantas Dreamliner for an adventure that began and ended at Sydney Airport.

"Arriving at the airport late in the afternoon with bags packed was very exciting," says Thomas, a keen photographer. "Getting on the plane you had the pillow, the blankets and the snack packs, so it did bring back memories of international travel and the excitement. Everyone felt like they were going somewhere special – the same as going overseas."

Australia's borders have been closed for more than a year because of the pandemic (this week it opened a travel 'bubble' with New Zealand), so the 10-hour trip offered the kind of plane adventure that is otherwise inaccessible at the moment. It's one of several such experiences that have become popular over the past year. When Qantas offered a seven-hour 'flight to nowhere' in October out of Sydney that flew passengers over the Outback and Great Barrier Reef, seats reportedly sold out in fewer than 10 minutes. Other airlines have launched pop-up restaurants inside jumbo jets, tours of crew training facilities and at-home delivery of in-flight meals – all of which have become hot-ticket items even as the airline industry deals with its worst-ever crisis.

In a year of travel restrictions and cancelled plans, these kinds of aviation-related experiences seem to have become a proxy for the freedoms and frivolities of our pre-pandemic lives. And for the airlines, these new creative endeavours have helped keep brands in the public eye – and remind some of us of the excitement of flying at a time when we feel more grounded than ever.

Niche plane experiences actually pre-date the pandemic. In 2017, Tokyo-based entertainment company First Airlines began offering faux flights in which visitors entered a mock plane, settled into a fake first-class seat and used VR goggles to journey around the world while enjoying "in-flight" meals. Bookings were reportedly up 50% last year, but there's now competition from real airlines that have branched out in imaginative ways.

Like Qantas, Royal Brunei Airlines and Taiwan's EVA Air have offered 'flights to nowhere'. Singapore Airlines initially planned one, too, but dropped the idea amid criticism over its environmental impact. It then launched a pop-up restaurant on A380 double-decker superjumbos parked at Changi Airport, which ran for two weekends in October with meals costing up to S\$600 (\$450, £325).

While we're grounded, a big-ticket experience on a plane or even a compact meal served in an aluminium tray has proved to be a rewarding way for some people to scratch the travel itch – or indulge in a little escapism.

This company is selling mystery bags of food to combat restaurant waste

Alexis Benveniste, 22 April 2021, *CNN Business*

(502 words)

Food waste is a major contributor to the climate crisis. That's why one company, Too Good To Go, is hoping its mystery food bags can be part of the solution.

Uneaten food usually ends up in landfills and produces methane, a powerful greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming. An estimated 30% to 40% of the US food supply is wasted, according to the US Department of Agriculture. New York City alone generates close to half a million tons of food waste per year — enough to fill up more than 100 subway cars per day — according to the city's official website.

A group of engineering, tech and law entrepreneurs in Copenhagen founded Too Good To Go in 2016 to connect customers hungry for discounted grub with restaurants that have extra food. The company says it has more than 36 million global users and nearly 87,000 restaurant partners worldwide.

The catch: you get what you get. Customers can place an order at a restaurant on the app — usually between \$4 and \$6 — and pick up a mystery bag of food at the location. The goods can include anything left over (and not eaten) from that day. Items vary by restaurant — you could wind up with bagels and pastries or a full-blown fajita bowl. “I’ve been surprised by places,” Alex Bush, a 28-year-old Too Good To Go user in New York, told CNN Business. “I reached outside my comfort zone and have fallen in love with it,” he added.

Too Good To Go launched in Manhattan and Brooklyn in September, with 200 restaurant location partners. It has expanded to more than 1,100 New York locations in all five boroughs. The company now has a presence in Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, and several cities in New Jersey. In January, the company raised \$31 million to expand to more US locations.

While mystery bags alone won’t solve the food waste problem, the business sets an example for other companies, showing that solutions for the issue don't need to be complicated. The app gives restaurants flexibility, so if a location has surplus food available for pickup only on Mondays and Tuesdays, the owners can put that in the system.

Every Too Good To Go partner has access to a dashboard that outlines their individual impact made by selling food that would otherwise be tossed. Stats on the platform’s dashboard include the number of meals the specific restaurant saved and the amount of carbon dioxide that is not emitted as a result.

“Fighting food waste is a problem I think we’re always going to be battling,” Brandon Issa, regional manager at New York-based grocery store Brooklyn Fare, told CNN Business. Brooklyn Fare started partnering with Too Good To Go in September 2020, when the platform officially went live in New York City. “This is just one step closer to getting to where we need to be,” he said.

Topshop changed the fashion industry, but now it too has been left behind

Anna Cafolla, 9 Jan 2021, *The Guardian*

(514 words)

When I was growing up in Belfast the mid-00s, the recently opened Victoria Square shopping centre offered a trifecta of coolness to teenage girls: Topshop, Urban Outfitters and Hollister. While each store had its own appeal, the barometer of desire swung most often towards Topshop. Whether in Belfast's Victoria Square, the Trafford Centre in Manchester or a concession in a regional department store, Topshop was, for many young women, a beacon of aspiration.

If you lived outside a major city, a pilgrimage into town wasn't complete without a visit to Topshop. The brand's flagship store on London's Oxford Street was the teenage girl equivalent of Lourdes, with three sprawling floors of clothes, shoes and accessories, a cavernous basement housing the brand's premium Boutique range, and a curated selection of vintage clothing. Any visit was a multi-sensory experience: the labyrinth of mirrored escalators were always packed with bewildered tourists as the sound of pummelling house music from a resident DJ permeated the building.

But after a 27-year tenure on London's main shopping drag, the company's flagship has now been put up for sale. Topshop's parent company, the Arcadia Group, has gone into administration and a buyer is being sought for the brand. Last year was tumultuous for high street staples as social distancing measures meant a reduction in the sales of clothing and an overall shift to online retail. The demise of his retail empire is a tragic blow for the 13,000 employees across the group whose jobs are at risk.

The sale of Topshop is also a symptom of our changing relationship with fashion. Founded in 1964, Topshop's zenith was arguably during the past two decades, when the chain brought the catwalk to the high street.. But the advent of social media and blogging made catwalk trends more accessible, and Topshop was well placed to meet them.

The brand established itself as a high-street contender in the world of high fashion, and was one of the first chains to launch its own runway shows, with celebrities and models dotting front rows. It pioneered high-end collaborations with designers and celebrities such as Kate Moss.

But the trend cycle that Topshop once stoked continued to pick up speed, and more dexterous competitors started to meet the demand for increasingly faster fashion. Brands such as Boohoo, PrettyLittleThing and Misguided had rapid production rates and even more cut-price offerings – these retailers could sell “going out-out” dresses, once a Topshop staple, for under £5.

In many ways, Topshop has been the victim of its own success. The fashion playing field it once helped to level has evolved; the business model it once pioneered now seems old-fashioned alongside social media-savvy competitors that don't even have brick and mortar stores.

But it wasn't just the voracious appetite for fast fashion that led to Topshop's demise. As its key demographic grew older – with more disposable income and an eye on quality – they graduated to new offerings, such as the H&M group's Cos. These brands emphasise higher-quality fabrics and boutique-style stores.

We need to create a global standard to protect and share data — before it's too late

Yan Carrière-Swallow and Vikram Haksar, 29 March 2021, *CNN Business*

(515 words)

Humanity has never been so comprehensively recorded. Smartwatches capture our pulse in real time for a distant artificial intelligence (AI) to ponder the risks of heart disease. Bluetooth and GPS keep track of whether some of us shop at gourmet stores and linger in the candy aisle. Our likes and browsing hours on social media are harvested to predict our credit risk. Our search queries on shopping platforms are run through natural language processors to generate uniquely targeted ads whose unseen tethers subtly remold our tastes and habits.

The generation and collection of data on individual human beings has become a big part of the modern economy. And it generates enormous value. Big data and AI analytics are used in productivity-enhancing research and development. They can strengthen financial inclusion.

During the pandemic, data on real-time movements of entire populations have informed policymakers about the impact of lockdowns. Contact tracing apps have notified individuals who have been in potentially dangerous proximity to people infected with Covid-19.

But just as data have helped us monitor, adapt and respond to Covid-19, the pandemic has brought into focus two fundamental problems with how information flows in the global economy. First, the data economy is opaque and doesn't always respect individual privacy. Second, data are kept in private silos, reducing its value as a public good to society.

The data generated by our smart devices are essentially a private good held by Big Tech companies that dominate social media, online sales and search tools. Given how valuable these data are, it is not surprising that companies tend to keep them to themselves. As more data beget better analysis, which in turn attracts more usage, more data and more profits, these swollen data war chests fortify their platform networks and potentially stifle competition.

This “finders keepers” model tends to lead to too much data being collected, but the data are also insufficiently utilized exactly when they could be most helpful, kept in private silos while public needs remain unmet.

Data sharing can support the development of new technologies, including in the life sciences. Consider how epidemiological research can benefit from scaling up big data analytics. A single researcher analyzing the experience of patients in their home country may be a good start, but it cannot rival the work of many researchers working together and drawing on the experience of many more patients from around the world — the key to the success of a number of cross-border collaborations.

How can data be made more of a public good? Commercial interests and incentives for innovation must be balanced with the need to build public trust through protection of privacy and integrity.

Clarifying the rules of the data economy is a good place to start. Significant advances have resulted, for example, from the 2018 implementation in Europe of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which clarified a number of rights and obligations governing the data economy.

Welcome to the YOLO Economy

Kevin Roose, 21 April 2021, New York Times

(506 words)

Something strange is happening to the exhausted, type-A millennial workers of America. After a year spent hunched over their MacBooks, enduring back-to-back Zooms in between sourdough loaves and Peloton rides, they are flipping the carefully arranged chessboards of their lives and deciding to risk it all.

Some are abandoning cushy and stable jobs to start a new business, turn a side hustle into a full-time gig or finally work on that screenplay. Others are scoffing at their bosses' return-to-office mandates and threatening to quit unless they're allowed to work wherever and whenever they want.

They are emboldened by rising vaccination rates and a recovering job market. Their bank accounts, fattened by a year of stay-at-home savings and soaring asset prices, have increased their risk appetites. And while some of them are just changing jobs, others are stepping off the career treadmill altogether.

If this movement has a rallying cry, it's "YOLO" — "you only live once," an acronym popularized by the rapper Drake a decade ago and deployed by cheerful risk-takers ever since. The term is a meme among stock traders on Reddit, who use it when making irresponsible bets that sometimes pay off anyway. (This year's GameStop trade was the archetypal YOLO.) More broadly, it has come to characterize the attitude that has captured a certain type of bored office worker in recent months.

To be clear: The pandemic is not over, and millions of Americans are still grieving the loss of jobs and loved ones. Not everyone can afford to throw caution to the wind. But for a growing number of people with financial cushions and in-demand skills, the dread and anxiety of the past year are giving way to a new kind of professional fearlessness.

I started hearing these stories this year when several acquaintances announced that they were quitting prestigious and high-paying jobs to pursue risky passion projects. Since then, a trickle of LinkedIn updates has turned into a torrent. I tweeted about it, and dozens of stories poured into my inboxes, all variations on the same basic theme: the pandemic changed my priorities, and I realized I didn't have to live like this.

Brett Williams, 33, a lawyer in Orlando, Fla., had his YOLO epiphany during a Zoom mediation in February. "I realized I was sitting at my kitchen counter 10 hours a day feeling miserable," he said. "I just thought: 'What do I have to lose? We could all die tomorrow.'"

So he quit, leaving behind a partner position and a big-firm salary to take a job at a small firm run by his next-door neighbor, and to spend more time with his wife and dog.

Not every burned-out worker will quit, of course. For some, an extended vacation or a more flexible workweek might quell their wanderlust. And some workers might find that returning to an office helps restore balance in their lives.

But for many of those who can afford it, adventure is in the air.

Why it will be years before robot butlers take over your household chores

By Dalvin Brown, 23 March 2021, *Washington Post* online

(501 words)

What tasks would you have a home robot do for you if you could? Cook dinner. Do the dishes. Fold the laundry. Likely, other ordinary chores. Now how much would you be willing to pay for that? Probably not much — or at least not nearly what it would cost to produce such a life-changing device. There lies the crux of the issue.

For at least a decade, robotics firms have flexed their ability to create machines that can complete various practical household tasks. Last month, Boston Dynamics showed its Spot robot dog picking up clothing. Miso Robotic's Flippy has been flipping burgers for years. Other start-ups have demoed laundry-folding machines. The list goes on.

But how likely is it that you'll ever be able to own a true robotic butler? Robots are indeed getting more complex. As AI continues to advance, it allows machines to figure out more complex problems and reliably chat with humans. Still, robotics and AI firms say you'll have to wait quite some time before you're able to own anything remotely similar to Rosey the Robot from *The Jetsons*.

In fact, companies are having a hard time commercializing anything more complex than a Roomba — which has been vacuuming houses for 20 years. "We've been talking about home robots coming for a long time, and all we have so far is the vacuum cleaner," said Jeff Burnstein, president of the Association for Advancing Automation. "You see demos, but taking it from a demo to something that actually works, then something you can afford, that's the issue right now."

Right now, robots are doing well in factories where there's plenty of space, no small kids around and employees wearing protective gear. They're really good at completing a single repetitive task, like screwing on a wheel.

But imagine introducing machinery with legs and lifting capabilities into your home where things can and do go wrong. What if it falls on someone, or a software update causes it to go haywire? It's funny on *The Jetsons*, but it wouldn't be so comical if your grandmother were on the receiving end. That's a significant challenge. The biggest problem is safety, according to Marc Raibert, former CEO, and now chairman of Boston Dynamics, a robotics pioneer responsible for agile, animal like robots.

Also, today's mobile robots for factories can cost twice as much as an average new car. Take the robotic dog Spot, for example. It runs for about \$75,000 without the arm attachment that makes it useful for transporting things. A humanoid robotic butler capable of autonomously completing a variety of tasks today could easily cost 10 times as much. And robotics experts say people on the market for such a thing wouldn't be willing to pay more than a few thousand dollars.

"I do think we'll find uses for home robots in the next eight to 10 years," Raibert said. "Someone will pioneer a lower-cost mechanism that does a useful set of things. I do believe it; it's just not tomorrow."

POLITICS
&
ENVIRONMENT

Amid Biden climate push, a question looms: is America's word good?

Lisa Friedman, 19 April 2021, *New York Times*

(484 words)

President Biden faces a fundamental question as he convenes heads of state this week in a virtual summit to declare that the United States is ready to reclaim a leadership role in the fight against climate change: Is America's word still any good?

The question is dogging Mr. Biden as he tries to reassert the American role in other parts of the world stage after four years of Donald J. Trump's America First isolationism. Trading partners wonder how long a thaw on multilateral economic accords might last. Overtures to the trans-Atlantic alliance must overcome four years of Mr. Trump's NATO bashing.

And on Friday, China likened the United States' desire to rejoin the Paris Agreement global warming accord that Mr. Trump abandoned to a naughty child trying to sneak back into school after cutting class.

Perhaps nowhere is the skepticism about U.S. credibility as consequential as on the issue of climate change.

"If America fails to lead the world on addressing the climate crisis, we won't have much of a world left," Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken warned on Monday in a speech that kicked off a weeklong climate push that culminates in the virtual Earth Day summit meeting Thursday and Friday.

The need for American leadership is enormous, a point Mr. Blinken emphasized in his address at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation Headquarters in Annapolis, Md., on the central place global warming would take in U.S. foreign policy.

And despite a four-year absence from the climate fight, Mr. Blinken said America would not shy from throwing its weight around in order to make sure other countries do more to cut their emissions. With other countries producing more than 80 percent of climate-warming pollution, he said, the United States has a duty to do so.

"Our diplomats will challenge the practices of countries whose action, or inaction, is setting us back," Mr. Blinken said. "When countries continue to rely on coal for a significant amount of their energy, or invest in new coal factories, or allow for massive deforestation, they will hear from the United States and our partners about how harmful these actions are."

Some countries already are pushing back. "The U.S. chose to come and go as it likes with regard to the Paris Agreement," Zhao Lijian, the spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, said Friday in pointed remarks ahead of the summit. "Its return is by no means a glorious comeback but rather the student playing truant getting back to class."

The meetings ended with an agreement to jointly cooperate on the climate crisis, but no promises of new targets. Mr. Zhao later told journalists that despite pushing China to do more, the United States "has offered nothing on how it plans to make up for the lost four years."

Biden is poised to transform how America treats industry. He must follow through

Robert Reich, Sun 18 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(497 words)

When industrial policy was debated, in the 1980s, critics did not want government “picking winners”. But times have changed. Devastating climate change, a deadly pandemic and the rise of China as a technological powerhouse require an active government pushing the private sector to achieve public purposes. The dirty little secret is that the US already has an industrial policy that’s focused on increasing profits with industry-specific subsidies, tax loopholes and credits, bailouts and tariffs. The practical choice isn’t whether to have an industrial policy but whether it meets society’s needs or those of politically powerful industries.

Consider energy. The fossil fuel industry has accumulated “billions of dollars in subsidies, loopholes and special foreign tax credits”, in Biden’s words. He wants to eliminate these and shift to non-carbon energy by strengthening the nation’s electrical grid, creating a new “clean electricity standard” that will force utilities to end carbon emissions by 2035 and providing research support and tax credits for clean energy. Biden intends to shift away from gas-powered cars entirely and invest \$174bn in companies making electric vehicles. He’ll also create 500,000 new charging stations. This also makes sense. Notwithstanding the success of Tesla, which received \$2.44bn in government subsidies before becoming profitable, the switch to electric vehicles still needs help.

Internet service providers have been subsidized by the states and the federal government and federal regulators have allowed them to consolidate into a few giants. But they’ve dragged their feet on upgrading copper networks with fiber, some 30 million Americans still lack access to high-speed broadband, and the US has among the world’s highest prices for internet service. Biden intends to invest \$100bn to extend high-speed broadband coverage. He also threatens to “hold providers accountable” for their sky-high prices – suggesting either price controls or antitrust enforcement.

The pharmaceutical industry exemplifies the old industrial policy at its worst. Big pharma’s basic research has been subsidized through the National Institutes of Health. The industry has stopped Americans from buying drugs from abroad. Yet Americans pay among the highest drug prices in the world. Biden intends to invest an additional \$30bn to reduce the risk of future pandemics – replenishing the national stockpile of vaccines and therapeutics, accelerating the timeline for drug development and boosting domestic production of pharmaceutical ingredients currently made overseas. That’s a good start but he must insist on a more basic and long-overdue quid pro quo from big pharma: allow government to use its bargaining power to restrain drug prices.

Biden’s restructuring of the American economy is necessary. America’s old industrial policy was stifling innovation and gouging taxpayers and consumers. The challenges ahead demand a very different economy. But Biden’s new industrial policy must avoid capture by the industries that dominated the old. He needs to be clear about its aims and the expected response from the private sector, and to reframe the debate so it’s not whether government should “pick winners” but what kind industrial policy will help the US and much of the world win.

Biden wants to create millions of clean-energy jobs. China and Europe are way ahead of him.

Jeanne Whalen, 11 February 2021, *Washington Post*

(515 words)

As the Biden administration promises to jump-start the clean-energy economy, it faces an uphill climb: The United States has fallen behind Asia and Europe in the race to produce the central technology — the high-tech batteries that power electric cars and store solar and wind energy.

China dominates battery production today, with 93 “gigafactories” that manufacture lithium-ion battery cells, vs. only four in the United States, according to Benchmark Mineral Intelligence, a prominent data provider. If current trends continue, China is projected to have 140 gigafactories by 2030, while Europe will have 17 and the United States, just 10.

That would leave the United States dependent on China and other trading partners for much of its battery supply, a risky proposition not just for the auto industry but for the military, which is planning to electrify more of its vehicles and gear. It would also mean missing out on much of the jobs boom the sector is expected to bring.

“This could be a game changer when it comes to jobs, but we have to find a way to ensure we keep the technology in the U.S. and incentivize companies to produce it in the U.S.,” said Venkat Srinivasan, a top battery expert at Argonne National Laboratory in Lemont, Ill.

That will happen, say U.S. companies and clean-energy supporters, only if the federal government helps coordinate and finance an aggressive push to boost domestic manufacturing of batteries and their raw materials, as governments in China, South Korea and Europe are doing.

The calls are part of a renewed embrace of industrial policy to help the United States keep its technological edge in an increasingly competitive global economy. Backers of federal action say that without it, the United States risks losing out on another major technology boom — as it did with solar panels and 5G mobile network equipment.

Thanks to its federally funded universities and national labs, the United States has some of the best early-stage battery research in the world. It also has Tesla, an electric-car leader with big plans for domestic battery production. But other countries are doing far more to support their battery industries and ensure that production jobs stay local.

China is bolstering its battery and electric-vehicle companies with tens of billions of dollars of state support, including research and development funding, subsidies for manufacturers and financing for battery-charging stations. It has also driven demand by subsidizing consumer purchases of electric vehicles, and by making buyers of gasoline-fueled cars wait much longer for a license plate.

The European Union is also closely involved in supporting its battery sector, having established a European Battery Alliance in 2017 that set sweeping goals for manufacturing, charging infrastructure and electric-car uptake. Germany is requiring all gas stations to offer electric-car charging. And last month, the European Commission said it would spend \$3.5 billion to subsidize Tesla, BMW and other companies to produce more batteries in Europe and help cut imports from China.

Bottom trawling is destroying our oceans

The Independent, 17 April 2021

(508 words)

Bottom trawling is the practice of dropping fishing nets with heavy weights onto the ocean floor. New research in the journal *Nature*, conducted by 26 marine biologists and climate experts, has revealed that the carbon emissions released from ancient sea-bed stores into ocean waters from bottom trawling fisheries reach a billion tonnes every year – 47.7 million tonnes of which comes from trawling in UK waters.

The worst offenders, with the largest carbon emissions due to bottom trawling, are China, Russia, Italy and the UK. In Britain, bottom trawling emits the equivalent of 13 per cent of UK total terrestrial emissions, based on the emissions total of 350 million tonnes in 2019. UK emissions for agriculture, in comparison, including all livestock and crops in the UK, were 5.7 million tonnes of Co₂ in the same year. The implications of this explosive new research is dire for the bottom trawling industry. The addition of 47.7 million tonnes to the carbon footprint of fish, potentially moves it from a relatively low carbon food source to an extremely high one.

The Netflix documentary *Seaspiracy* revealed that the nets used for bottom trawling can be so huge that they can accommodate up to 13 jumbo-jets and the metal-weights dragged along the seafloor can weigh up to five tonnes. They scoop up everything in their path, turning teeming ocean-floor sea-forests into dead mud sea-deserts. Also exposed was how harmful the global industrial fishing is to ocean wildlife, a large amount of which is “by-catch” – species caught unintentionally by trawlers. Estimates of killed by-catch average 10 per cent globally, but can be as high as 55 per cent for shrimp trawling.

Nature’s research estimated that an area of 1.9 million square miles is bottom trawled each year – that’s 230 times the size of Wales. The recovery of the seafloor eco-systems can take anything from years to decades, if they are not disturbed again during their recovery. Bottom trawling creates almost the same amount of emissions as the aviation industry, which produced 918 tonnes of Co₂ emissions in 2019.

Oceans absorb up to a third of global carbon emissions, increasing their carbon content could damage their future ability to act as a crucial sink to prevent even faster global warming. Increased carbon content could also potentially speed up ocean acidification, which is another major crisis facing ocean food chains, and could wipe out some zoo-plankton populations. The Marine Stewardship Council revealed in January that 98 per cent of the supposedly “protected” UK Marine Protected Areas had been bottom trawled in the previous five years.

The *Nature* study said a ban on bottom trawling of marine-protected areas would not only protect their rich carbon stores but could increase the amount of wild fish that could be sustainably hunted. We cannot afford for our governments to ignore the urgent decisions needed to protect the planet, the authorities must confront the industrial emitters, and as consumers, we should avoid industrially harvested or fish-farmed fish.

Break up of the UK

April 17th, 2021, *The Economist*

(515 words)

The United Kingdom was not born in glory. The English conquest of Ireland in the 17th century was brutal, motivated by fear of invasion and facilitated by the superiority of Cromwell's army. The English takeover of Scotland in the 18th century was more pragmatic, born out of Scottish bankruptcy after an ill-fated American investment and English worries about France.

But the resulting union was more than the sum of its parts: it gave birth to an intellectual and scientific revolution, centred on Edinburgh as well as London; an industrial revolution which grew out of that, enriching Glasgow as well as Manchester and Liverpool; an empire built as much by Scots as Englishmen; and a military power which helped save the world from fascism.

That union is now weaker than at any point in living memory. The causes are many, but Brexit is the most important. Political leaders in London, Edinburgh and Belfast have put their country at risk by the way they have managed Britain's departure from the European Union.

Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, has done it carelessly, by putting party above country and espousing a hard Brexit. The Scots never wanted to leave the EU and are inclined to seek a future outside the UK. In the past year opinion polls have shifted from a small majority backing the union—broadly the pattern since a referendum rejecting independence in 2014—to a small majority backing departure.

Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister and leader of the Scottish National Party, has done it determinedly, by exploiting Scots' dislike of the Brexit settlement. The ills of fishermen unable to sell their catches are blamed on Westminster. Polls suggest that, in the Scottish elections in May, the SNP will gain an overall majority in a system designed to avoid it.

Arlene Foster, first minister of Northern Ireland and head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), has done it stupidly, by rejecting the softer Brexit proposed by Theresa May, Mr Johnson's predecessor. That would have avoided the vexed issue of how and where to create a border with the EU. Neither Brussels, nor Dublin nor London was prepared to create a hard border on the island of Ireland, so Mr Johnson created one instead in the Irish Sea, between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, weakening the union which the DUP exists to defend.

That helps explain a week of rioting earlier this month. Resentments fester and, as the 100th anniversary of Irish independence nears, reunification has never looked closer.

If the Scots, Northern Irish or even the Welsh choose to go their own way, they should be allowed to do so—but only once it is clearly their settled will. Breaking up a country should never be done lightly, because it is a painful process—politically, economically and emotionally. Though it seems inconceivable that the citizens of today's UK would start murdering each other, that is exactly what they did during the Northern Irish Troubles that ended less than a quarter of a century ago.

Brexit and Northern Ireland

April 10th, 2021, *The Economist*

(518 words)

AS SURELY as spring follows winter, warmer weather brings rioting to Northern Ireland. It comes in two varieties. What is known locally as recreational rioting is localised and not too violent. Serious street disorder, of the sort seen during the past week, usually involves politics.

Since Good Friday, mobs have taken control of streets in loyalist areas of Belfast and Londonderry on most nights. Such eruptions often last only a few days. Even if that happens, the disorder will leave a lasting mark on some lives. A policewoman's leg was broken in two places while taking an alleged rioter into custody, and scores of her colleagues suffered head wounds, leg injuries or burns after being attacked with masonry, metal rods, fireworks, manhole covers and petrol bombs.

There will be consequences for some of the culprits, too—criminal records for young people, some of whom police say were no more than 12 years old, who are at the front of the riot, often being urged on by older paramilitary bosses at the rear.

But even if the violence subsides for now, it is worrying, for the terms of Brexit have made the province's politics particularly combustible. Since Boris Johnson's deal with the European Union created a border in the Irish Sea in January, unionists have raged against a frontier which symbolically and economically separates Northern Ireland from Britain. Seeing no political route to removing what they hate, some loyalists think violence may make Mr Johnson and the EU reconsider.

Mr Johnson is quite happy to fudge the issue, but the EU insists that a hard border is needed not just to prevent goods from leaking from Britain into the EU, but also to preserve peace—even though it appears to be doing the opposite. Moving checks on goods to the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland would not be a solution, for a border there would present a target to dissident republicans.

Brexit is not the only catalyst for the violence. The trigger was a decision on March 30th by the public prosecutor not to bring charges against republican leaders present at an IRA funeral in June. About 2,000 people, including the entire Sinn Féin leadership, attended the event at a time when the province's devolved government said only ten mourners should be at funerals. Prosecutors said they could not bring charges because the legislation was poorly drafted. The police, they said, knew that 400 people had gathered for a wake before the funeral, and that Sinn Féin's leadership would be attending the funeral. Unionist leaders have called on Simon Byrne, chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to resign.

This is a bad time for a rift between unionists and police. The season for loyalist marches is approaching, and in recent days bands flanked by masked men have marched through Portadown, Ballymena and Markethill. There was no violence, but the organisers had not asked for permission from the Parades Commission and were thus breaking the law. This is an unusual and sinister development, at a dangerous moment.

British Prime Ministership

February 27th, 2021, *The Economist*

(513 words)

When he was prime minister of the world's most powerful country in 1902-05, Arthur Balfour spent as much time as he could on his 180,000-acre Scottish estate. The days were for golf on his private course. The evenings were for dinner, after-dinner games and his other great addiction, serious conversation (despite his Bertie Wooster persona, Balfour was a distinguished philosopher). The one thing that didn't get a look-in was politics, to which his "mind did not naturally turn", as he confessed to his sister. He did not read newspapers on the ground that "nothing matters very much and most things don't matter at all."

Autres temps, autres mœurs. These days prime ministers spend every waking hour trying to master events, only to be broken by them in the end. The careers of the last six prime ministers have all ended in tears, visibly so in the case of Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May. "I don't know why anyone would want the job," the Queen apparently remarked to Boris Johnson when appointing him.

Why has Balfour's easy chair become so uncomfortable? One possible explanation is that all top jobs are heading in the same direction thanks to hyper-fast change and hyperactive media. Yet Angela Merkel has weathered 15 years in office, and both Donald Trump and Barack Obama had plenty of time for golf. Another is that it's a matter of individual incompetence. Yet the same problems keep cropping up regardless of who is in Downing Street. In "The British Prime Minister in an Age of Upheaval", Mark Garnett of Lancaster University offers a more plausible argument: that the Prime Ministership is now "dysfunctional"—indeed, that it is the dysfunctional heart of an increasingly dysfunctional system.

British Prime Ministers have to perform a wider range of jobs than almost any other world leaders. They are heads of government, party bosses, fund-raisers, parliamentary performers, foreign envoys, grief counsellors, local MPs who can be ejected by their constituents and, now, plague-fighters. No prime minister can do all these jobs well, and all are bound to fail hopelessly at some—witness Mrs May's empathy-free visit to the smouldering ruins of Grenfell Tower and Mr Johnson's tardy initial response to the pandemic. The weekly Prime Minister's Questions, although not the only regular grilling a nation's leader faces, is almost certainly the world's most testing. Tony Blair described the ordeal as "the most nerve-racking, discombobulating, nail-biting, bowel-moving, terror-inspiring, courage-draining experience in my prime ministerial life".

Successive Prime Ministers have had tendency to concentrate power in Downing Street. Both Lady Thatcher and Mr Blair, for instance, took over foreign policy because they regarded the Foreign Office as too friendly to foreigners and education policy because they regarded the Department of Education as too friendly to teachers. This contrasts sharply with the 1960s, when much of the energy in government came from the departments. Roy Jenkins, for instance, as Home Secretary, liberalised the law on abortion and homosexuality without either inspiration or interference from Harold Wilson. Today all ideas come from Number 10.

Chicago's recycling rate? Bottom of the bin. That must change — now.

By Editorial Board, 19 April 2021, *Chicago Tribune* online

(481 words)

One way cities can tout their commitment to going green is to consistently post robust recycling rates. Seattle recycles 60% of its trash. Los Angeles tops that with a 76% recycling rate. And at the very top of the heap: San Francisco, with an astounding 80% of its trash recycled. And where's Chicago? At the bottom of the bin.

The latest figures from the Department of Streets and Sanitation put the city's overall recycling rate at 8.8%, one of the worst rates in the country. That's pretty much where the rate has been over the last several years. Rahm Emanuel wasn't able to make a dent into Chicago's recycling blues, and neither has Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

Now Lightfoot's trying a new tack. The city just jettisoned its biggest recycling contractor, Waste Management Inc., North America's largest waste hauler. A 2018 Better Government Association investigation found that blue bins serviced by Waste Management crews were 20 times more likely to be labeled as contaminated with non-recyclables than bins serviced by other collection crews.

That meant that Waste Management got paid by the city for labeling the bins as contaminated. Maybe a conscientious recycler accidentally put plastic bags or Styrofoam into the bin, which are no-nos. But those mistakes allowed Waste Management to be paid a second time when collection crews took the contents of those bins to a Waste Management landfill due to the compromised contents, the BGA found. The city was paying the garbage hauler twice, which means taxpayers were paying twice. Waste Management denied any financial motive in labeling bins as contaminated.

The new contract, with the recycling firm LRS, requires the company to pick up recyclables from bins with less than 50% contamination, and to face fines from \$25 to \$250 for missed pickups. If Streets and Sanitation did its job and enforced the city's recycling law, it's a fair bet that Chicago's level of recycling would markedly improve.

Streets and Sanitation acknowledged that it wasn't even focusing on higher-density apartment buildings and businesses in recent years, instead turning its attention to the city's blue cart recycling program for residential buildings with one to four units. It would also be good to look at best practices in other major cities, and of course, there's another simple remedy: enforce the laws you've got on the books.

Of course, nothing gets recycled if Chicagoans don't make the effort to separate out recyclables before its time to take out the trash. It's not a big ask. It takes just a few seconds to empty and rinse bottles, jars and aluminum cans, to empty and recap milk cartons and to flatten cardboard boxes. It's on all of Chicago — government, businesses, residents — to remedy the scarlet letter the city has worn for far too long. It's about time that Chicago becomes one of the best, rather than one of the worst, recyclers in America.

Climate claims myth-busted: are any airlines really ‘green’?

The Independent, 23 March 2021

(522 words)

Before the pandemic hit, back when you could whizz over to the Med for thirty quid, thousands of climate-conscious travellers took a no-fly pledge. Spurred on by evidence that the climate emergency is a terrifying reality, from wildfires in California to drought in Australia, the movement soon swept into the consciousness of a panicked aviation industry. As Ed Bastian, CEO of Delta Air Lines, pointed out at an investor day in 2019: “Environmental stewardship is the existential threat to our future ability to grow.”

This defensive stance hits the nail on the head when it comes to aviation’s climate conundrum. Accounting for 2.4 per cent of global CO₂ emissions (9 per cent in the UK), even if airlines attempt to make flying less carbon-intensive, the industry’s growth outweighs its progress. In the five years before 2020, carbon emissions from aviation shot up 32 per cent, and yet still only 5 per cent of the world’s population flies.

Rather than offering a solution, the grounding of planes during Covid-19 has demonstrated the extent of the problem. To meet the Paris Agreement’s 1.5C warming limit, we need to cut emissions in line with 2020’s reduction every year. Meanwhile, having tracked previous events that disrupted air travel, such as Sars and 9/11, experts expect aviation to be back to pre-pandemic levels within two years.

So, is there such a thing as sustainable flying? A common sustainability claim is that using newer and more fuel-efficient aircraft lowers emissions. According to Airbus, CO₂ emissions from aircraft built today are 80 per cent lower than those in the 1970s, and Boeing claims that its 787 Dreamliner uses 20 per cent less fuel per passenger than the older planes it replaces. Consequently, some airlines are replacing older with newer fleets, including JetBlue, Jetstar and Qantas. The picture becomes murkier for shorter European routes where the highest fuel use (by Iberia) is three times higher than the lowest (Jet2.com). Both airlines use a similar mix of aircraft in their fleets.

Until we have an alternative to fossil fuels, flying will remain the most carbon-intensive thing we can do as individuals. As Harold Goodwin of the Responsible Tourism Partnership points out: “The problem is not flying; it is the dirty fuel planes burn.”

Several renewable approaches are being tried and tested: hydrogen fuel, hybrid electric, fully electric, and sustainable aviation fuels (SAF). SAF are biofuels and have the advantage of working in existing aircraft, but often come with a biodiversity cost due to the scale of produce needed to create them. Overcoming these obstacles requires considerable investment, which could be raised much quicker via tax, legislation and collaboration. In the UK each household subsidises the air-travel industry by over £240 per year, regardless of individual flying habits. Air passenger duty does raise some funds via tax but only a tiny proportion. Responsible Travel has been campaigning for a green flying duty for several years. Justin Francis says: “The biggest problem for an industry in crisis is finding the funding to rapidly accelerate R&D in renewable aviation.”

Climate crisis: UK halfway to net zero due to dip in emissions caused by coronavirus

The Independent, 18 March 2021

(516 words)

A dip in emissions due to the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic means the UK is temporarily halfway towards reducing its output of greenhouse gases from 1990 levels by 2050, new analysis has found. Greenhouse gas emissions in 2020 were 51 per cent below 1990 levels, following a record 11 per cent fall in emissions since 2019, according to research by climate science website Carbon Brief. But emissions are likely to rise again as the UK economy reopens following the current lockdown.

In 1990 the UK emitted 794 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent. Under the UK's legally binding target to reach net-zero by 2050, the country must cut its emissions by at least 100 per cent of the pollution it put into the atmosphere in 1990. So with the reductions forced by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, after 30 years the UK is halfway to its goal and has another 30 years to reach it.

One of the key ways the UK has cut its emissions is through a rapid move away from coal power in favour of greater levels of renewable power sources. In 1990 coal was still used to provide two-thirds of electricity, and oil power still made up 10 per cent of generation making the power sector the largest contributor to the nation's emissions. In 1990, renewable sources of energy made up just 2 per cent of the mix, almost exclusively from hydropower.

Alongside the abandonment of coal as a power source, the industrial economic landscape has changed to become much less carbon-intensive over the last three decades. But despite these long term reductions, the big fall in emissions last year were "largely one-off and unique to the coronavirus pandemic, with lockdowns persisting through much of the year in the UK", the analysis found.

The UK now faces a challenge in reaching net zero over the next 30 years. Slow progress has been made in reforming home and office heating systems, which largely run on gas and contribute a fifth of the country's emissions. And "almost no progress" has been made in transport, which by 2019 was responsible for over a quarter of the country's emissions and remains the single largest contributor.

Dr Simon Evans, the deputy editor at Carbon Brief, told *The Independent*: "Getting off coal power has happened almost invisibly. But the next phase of net-zero will be much more personal. It's about the oil in peoples' cars, the gas heating their homes, the food they eat and the landscapes they live in.

It is an opportunity to create new green jobs and cleaner places to live and work, but there's some tricky politics too."

The analysis notes that the progress would not have been as fast if international aviation and shipping emissions were included in the total - though changes to how emissions are measured are on the horizon. However, the updated emissions measurements still won't include UK consumption of goods produced abroad.

Concerns over climate finance for poorer nations as White House summit begins

Fiona Harvey, Thu 22 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(511 words)

Developing countries are increasingly concerned that their need for financial assistance to cope with the climate crisis will go unmet, as leaders of the world's biggest economies meet for a virtual White House summit on the climate. World leaders will discuss ways of fulfilling the 2015 Paris climate agreement, and to encourage leading economies to bring forward plans for cutting greenhouse gas emissions in the next decade.

Such plans will be crucial to limiting global heating to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, in line with scientific advice. But alongside these pledges, developing countries are seeking strong new commitments on another crucial area: climate finance, the flow of money from public and private sector sources in the rich world to help the poor world reduce emissions and cope with the intensifying impacts of extreme weather. Poor countries were promised \$100bn a year in climate finance from 2020, more than a decade ago at the troubled Copenhagen climate summit in 2009. But that longstanding commitment, repeated in the landmark 2015 Paris agreement, was not met last year.

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant rich countries are facing rising financial pressures, as countries struggle to recover from the health impacts and lockdowns. But for poor countries, the situation is yet more dire: their economies have been battered by the global Covid recession, at the same time as they have lost large amounts of the remittances sent home by their citizens working abroad that many rely on, and they face mounting debt as the cost of finance has increased. This leaves some of the most vulnerable countries without the means to cope with the intensifying impacts of climate breakdown, let alone invest in a low-carbon future.

The US has made some key pledges on climate finance ahead of the summit, but they fall short of what developing countries have been hoping for. Biden has asked Congress to approve \$2.5bn in overseas climate finance, including \$1.2bn for the Green Climate Fund.

However, this only restores some of what was lost under Donald Trump. Barack Obama had pledged \$3bn to the Green Climate Fund, of which only \$1bn was paid before Trump took office and suspended further payments.

A senior Biden administration official stressed that private sector sources would have to take on an increasing role in climate finance: "It's very clear that finance is a core part of the solution. Not only public finance but private financial institutions have to come to the table. We will bring both sides to the table, and hear from states and national agendas, and the private sector."

Boris Johnson, prime minister of the UK, will address the White House summit in a plea to world leaders to make Cop26 a success. However, Johnson faces a particular issue with credibility at Cop26, because of his government's own actions: the decision to slash overseas aid, from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5%, from this year. Major figures in climate diplomacy have told *the Guardian* they are increasingly concerned about its impact, and said it created serious problems for the UK in winning over developing nations.

Covid recovery must not be driven by fossil fuels, says Ed Miliband

The Independent, 22 April 2021

(525 words)

The world's recovery from Covid-19 must not be driven by further fossil fuel expansion at a critical moment in the fight to limit global warming, Ed Miliband has warned. Writing for *The Independent*, the shadow business secretary said that Britain had to take the lead on the climate crisis on the world stage ahead of the key Cop26 summit in Glasgow in November, but added the UK was instead falling behind other countries.

Today *The Independent* launches a campaign for Britain to take greater action on the climate crisis as it tries to lead the world ahead of Cop26. Stop Fuelling the Climate Crisis will highlight areas in which the UK is still supporting fossil fuels, including through its refusal to rule out oil and gas drilling in the North Sea and its support for gas mega-projects abroad, despite Boris Johnson's pledge to end overseas fossil fuel investment. A key report released this week warned that global CO₂ emissions are set for a near-record surge in 2021 as demand for coal – the dirtiest of all fossil fuels – bounces back in the second year of the pandemic.

Greenhouse gas emissions have risen inexorably since the industrial revolution and the global economic recovery is set to be powered by a surge in fossil fuel demand, said Mr Miliband. The government is planning a green stimulus far smaller than those in the US, France and Germany. For the jobs we need in this country and as Cop26 hosts, it is an appalling dereliction of duty."

His call came as world leaders convened for a crucial Earth Day summit, where Boris Johnson joined Joe Biden and other world leaders in urging more immediate action for taming greenhouse gas emissions. The virtual event saw the confirmation of new climate pledges from the US, UK, Canada and Japan – among other countries.

The summit is a key "stepping stone" on the road to Cop26, a separate round of climate talks to be held in Glasgow later this year. Leading the way on a green recovery is one of five areas that the UK must improve upon as it gears up to host Cop26, Mr Miliband said. He said other areas include: setting a more ambitious near-term target for slashing emissions; providing more support and debt relief for developing countries grappling with the climate crisis; demanding more climate action from companies and ending support for new fossil fuel development.

We need to reckon with the source of our emissions: fossil fuel supply, he said. Mr Miliband backed a letter, released on the eve of Earth Day from 101 Nobel laureates including the Dalai Lama, which calls for an end to further fossil fuel expansion across the world. That requires urgent investment in renewables and clear plans for a fair transition to them for people and places, he added.

The Glasgow talks will be a key moment for getting countries on track for limiting global warming to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, the aspirational target set by the Paris Agreement five years ago.

David Cameron and the Greensill affair

April 17th, 2021, *The Economist*

(522 words)

When someone claims to have found a new way to make money out of an old idea, it usually pays to treat them with suspicion. Greensill Capital, a now-failed finance company, lent firms money secured against their invoices. This type of finance existed in ancient Mesopotamia. Lex Greensill, the business's founder, updated it with some shiny new technology and what an early backer calls "homespun stories of growing up on a farm and seeing how late payments hurt his father".

Britain's government greeted the charming Mr Greensill not with suspicion, but with a job in 10 Downing Street and a contract with the National Health Service (NHS). He was aided by the equally charming David Cameron, now embroiled in a lobbying scandal that will scotch any hope of restoring a reputation ruined by Brexit. Boris Johnson has now announced an inquiry into the government's links with Greensill, led by Nigel Boardman, a corporate lawyer.

Supply-chain finance is a simple solution to a common business problem: long payment terms. A retailer, for example, will want goods from its wholesalers upfront but may delay paying their invoices for weeks. Greensill, and firms like it, offer an alternative to waiting. They pay the money at once, for a small charge, and then cash in the invoices when they fall due. Greensill took the model a step further by bundling up its loans to firms as bonds for sale to yield-hungry investors.

This year questions were raised about the creditworthiness of some of the companies issuing the invoices on which Greensill's bonds were secured. That prompted Credit Suisse, a bank, to freeze funds linked to the firm. Companies that relied on liquidity provided by Greensill, such as Liberty Steel, a large British-based manufacturer, now face a financing gap.

The affair has revealed some unflattering quirks of the British state. One is a permeability to outside interests. Hardest to explain is how Bill Crothers, formerly the government's chief procurement officer, was allowed to work part-time for Greensill while still holding his government post.

Mr Cameron's role exposes the weakness of Britain's lobbying rules. He stood to make millions if the firm succeeded. He bombarded ministers and civil servants with messages, asking them to tweak the rules to allow Greensill to benefit from government-backed lending schemes for stricken companies. To the Treasury's credit, the rules were not changed. As Mr Cameron was employed by the firm, rather than a third-party lobbyist, such messages were not subject to the disclosure rules put in place by his government.

Mr Boardman's report, due by the end of June, is not expected to pull punches. "He's a hard-edged lawyer who understands finance and has no incentive to go easy on anybody," says one former colleague. Mr Johnson and Mr Cameron have been rivals since they were at Eton together and the affair has yielded a striking volume of leaked material.

Mr Johnson may hope the inquiry bolsters him while embarrassing his predecessor. Some Tories fear this is a dangerous move, and the government may get damaged in the fallout.

Donald Trump's post-presidency may be filled with legal woes

Lloyd Green, Wed 20 Jan 2021, *The Guardian*

(485 words)

Donald Trump has departed Washington DC in greater legal jeopardy than when he arrived. Despite the president's pronouncement that he possesses the "absolute right to PARDON" himself, he flinched. When Trump delivered scores of late-night pardons with just hours to go in the job, his name and those of his family members were not on the list, not even Ivanka.

Instead, the former television reality show host stands to star in another drama of his own making, but this time as a possible criminal defendant. From New York to Atlanta – and parts in between – federal and state prosecutors may be lining up for their shot at the twice-impeached president.

In case anyone forgot, the US attorneys' office for the southern district of New York previously treated Trump aka "Individual-1" as un-indicted co-conspirator in Michael Cohen's case. As a result, the confirmation hearings of Joe Biden's pick for attorney general, Merrick Garland, will certainly be interesting.

Already, prosecutors in Manhattan have the Orange Don and his crew in their cross-hairs. According to court filings and published reports, Cyrus Vance Jr, Manhattan's district attorney, is investigating the truthfulness of the Trump Organization's financial reporting and the company's relationship with Deutsche Bank.

It is not for nothing that Trump again appealed to the US Supreme Court to quash a subpoena issued to his accountants for eight years of tax returns. Trump previously lost a similar bid last summer.

Back in July, Chief Justice John Roberts derailed Trump's efforts to shroud his tax filings from Vance's office. "No citizen, not even the president, is categorically above the common duty to produce evidence when called upon in a criminal proceeding", wrote Roberts. For good measure, Brett Kavanaugh, the infamous Trump appointee added: "In our system of government, as this court has often stated, no one is above the law."

There is little reason to believe that Trump's latest gambit will be any more successful than what came before it, especially as he will no longer be president. A reminder, the same justices repeatedly rejected his efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

When Trump lands in Mar-a-Lago just hours from now, his claims of immunity will be ready to wither. Justice department guidelines would no longer preclude the "sovereign district of New York" from re-examining Trump's role in Cohen's hush-money payments in the waning days of Trump's 2016 run to Stormy Daniels, an adult film star, and Karen McDougal, a Playboy model. Former presidents receive less prosecutorial deference.

In addition, Trump's recent bouts of wrath have given lawyers in Washington and Georgia plenty to ponder. Local authorities in the Peach state are weighing a criminal investigation into his failed efforts to browbeat Brad Raffensperger, the state's secretary of state, into submission. Trump telling Raffensperger to "find" 11,779 more votes and interfering with election certification may have been a step too far.

Drought in California

By Peter Gleick, April 16th, 2021, *The LA Times*

(498 words)

California is suffering from severe drought again. This winter produced water conditions far below normal for the second year in a row, the eighth year in the last 10, the 14th year in the last 20. Los Angeles has had 39% of normal precipitation; San Diego, only 30%; San Francisco, 37%; Sacramento, less than 40%. The snowpack is meager — less than half of normal — and falling fast as spring temperatures warm up. The state's largest reservoirs are hovering around 50% to 60% of their normal capacity, or less, for this time of year, almost exactly where they were when Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency in January 2014. The California Department of Water Resources announced that it expected to deliver only 5% of requested supplies to municipal and agricultural users on the State Water Project, down from the initial allocation of 10% announced in December. Allocations of water from the federal Central Valley Project are just as low. Major reservoirs on the Colorado River have fallen to critically low levels.

But so far in 2021 our officials have been strangely silent.

Longtime California residents understand drought. The state has increasingly suffered severe droughts in the last few decades because of the effects of climate change. When asked to take action, Californians step up. During the last severe drought, Gov. Brown asked urban residents to cut their water use by 20% and then, as the drought worsened, by 25%. And we did, for the most part, as information was provided by water agencies and the media on how to save water; rebates were offered for more efficient toilets, showerheads and appliances; and programs to eliminate lawns and cut outdoor watering were rolled out. Most water agencies reported declines in water use in line with the emergency request.

The good news is that, while water use has risen slightly since that drought, many of the savings achieved have persisted, both because of permanent removal of lawns and inefficient appliances and because of changes in behavior. It's even better news that there is more that can and should be done in the face of this new drought.

The drought is also a reminder that the vast majority of water consumed in California goes to the agricultural sector. The amount of land with water-hungry crops that has been brought into production is far greater than what can be irrigated with reliable available water. Therefore the agricultural sector must plan for cutting back water use during drought and where groundwater has been subject to severe overdraft. And though more farmers are shifting to water-efficient irrigation technology such as precision drip and real-time soil moisture monitoring, greater efforts are needed to grow more food with less water.

It's time for our water agencies and our political leaders to step up, acknowledge the severity of the problem and offer solutions that will continue to push California on the path to more efficient water use in the face of shortages that are not going away.

Electric cars: greener roads are good

Editorial, Fri 22 Jan 2021, *The Guardian*

(485 words)

The prospect of a cleaner motor vehicle fleet is drawing closer. In November, the UK government announced that a ban on new petrol and diesel car sales would be brought forward to 2030. Advances in battery technology mean the tipping point at which electric vehicles become cheaper than other types, without subsidies, could come within five years. Fast-charging electric car batteries are on the horizon, with five-minute “fill up” times in sight.

This is good news for the climate, with transport emissions one of the biggest obstacles to meeting reductions targets, nationally and globally. Also welcome for the UK is the announcement by Nissan that in future it will source 62 kilowatt-hour batteries for its popular Leaf model from the factory next door to its Sunderland car plant, instead of importing them from the US.

On vehicle emissions, there is some way to go. While last year saw a 43% rise in electric car sales, they made up just 4.2% of the total. So far, Norway is the only country where they are the most popular cars. SUVs have been the second largest cause of rising global emissions over the previous decade – and worryingly their sales continue to rise in Britain. Much work remains to be done to stop people choosing vehicles that are making the world’s biggest problem worse. The joy in Sunderland ought to be tempered by the fact that Nissan will continue making its SUV Qashqai there. The benefits for the workforce should blind no one to the environmental risks.

Plans to limit emissions from heavy goods vehicles are also needed. Last month the Committee on Climate Change recommended a ban on diesel HGVs by 2040, which it said was necessary if the UK is to meet the target of net zero by 2050. With the freight industry facing severe disruption because of Brexit, new environmental goals are likely to meet resistance.

But with electric vehicles responsible for around 30% less carbon dioxide than fossil-fuel-powered cars in the UK (in France, where the electricity supply is cleaner, the figure is nearer 70%), the path to a greener transport future is becoming clearer. As with solar and wind energy, prices are falling faster than expected, and battery technology is an important part of the green investment strategy that should follow the pandemic. The phasing out of cobalt in newer batteries is also encouraging, given the ethical and labour issues connected with mining the mineral in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Electric cars do not obviate the need for other affordable transport options, or for big reductions in overall road traffic, especially in cities. Battery disposal is a problem, as is the use of coal power in some manufacturing. But since cars are part of life, it is good that they are getting greener.

English nationalism

March 20th, 2021, *The Economist*

(494 words)

English nationalism is the most disruptive force in British politics. Brexit would have been impossible without it. The clash between Scottish and English nationalism may well break up the country. It's also the most perplexing. The distinction between "English" and "British" has always been hazy, and now the very meaning of "Englishness" is changing before our eyes.

Its current transformation makes the nationalism on display in England perhaps the newest in the world, as well as the oldest. Historians argue that England already had a sense of national identity under the Anglo-Saxons, a millennium before the Germans and the Italians. Yet today's English nationalism is a very different beast from the classic variety that George Orwell celebrated in "England, Your England" in 1941.

Classic English nationalism was more cultural than political. Aside from the explosive problem of Ireland, Britain was an integrated country divided by class, whose constituent parts moved in mysterious harmony at election time. Today British politics is being deconstructed by competing national identities. In 2015, for the first time in the country's history, and twice thereafter, four different parties topped the polls in the state's four different territories. Classic English nationalism, moderate and self-deprecating, regarded flag-waving rallies as embarrassing. Today's nationalism is radical and angry; flags are everywhere.

Given its importance, this new force has been subjected to remarkably little scholarly analysis. Too many academics, snug in their class-based certainties, dismissed it as a compound of racism and bigotry and waited for it to disappear. *Englishness*, a new book by Ailsa Henderson and Richard Wyn Jones, is an admirable exception as well as a scholarly testimony to the union's strengths: Ms Henderson teaches at Edinburgh University and Mr Wyn Jones at Cardiff. The nine big quantitative surveys of *Englishness* they have conducted since 2011 demonstrate that the number of people who describe themselves as exclusively or mainly English rather than British is growing, and that the idea of "Britishness"—once the glue that held the kingdom together—is splintering. Londoners use it to signal their cosmopolitanism; Scots to signal their unionism.

Scottish nationalism and Euroscepticism gave birth to new English nationalism. From the English perspective, the Scots have always had a good deal from the union: they get higher public spending and more MPs per head. But instead of showing gratitude for the cash, they demanded political power. Nigel Farage, former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, said what many Tories were thinking: that "the Scottish tail" was wagging the "English dog" and that the Scots were "getting our money" while "being horrible to us".

The 2014 Scottish referendum stoked English grievances without satisfying the Scots, and the 2015 election turned a growing political division between the two into a chasm. The Tories played relentlessly on the fear that Labour couldn't govern without the support of the Scots Nats. Labour, which had dominated Scottish politics for decades, was wiped out north of the border, and the nationalists entrenched in power.

Forests are our home: how indigenous land defenders are fighting the climate crisis

The Independent, 25 March 2021

(524 words)

Indigenous leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean protect around an eighth of all of the carbon stored by tropical rainforests across the world. That is one of the findings of a UN review published on Thursday, which draws on more than 300 scientific studies that examine the role that indigenous peoples play in protecting forests across the region. Tropical forests are a vital carbon store – and their ongoing destruction accounts for around 8 per cent of all human-caused CO₂ emissions. The review highlights that, across almost every country in Latin America and the Caribbean, rates of deforestation are lower on land where the rights of indigenous peoples are protected than in areas where they are not. One research paper included in the review found that, between 2000 and 2012, deforestation rates outside protected indigenous territories were 2.8 times higher than in protected areas in Bolivia, 2.5 times higher in Brazil and two times higher in Colombia. But indigenous peoples continue to face threats to their way of life, the report says. It cites research finding that 232 indigenous community leaders were killed in the Amazon basin region between 2015 and the first half of 2019 as a result of “disputes over land and natural resources”.

Indigenous groups in Latin America are also increasingly feeling the impacts of the climate crisis. Cecilia Rivas is the leader of the Kariña indigenous people, who live in the Imataca Forest Reserve – Venezuela’s largest tropical forest. “Forests are our home,” she tells *The Independent*. “We respect them because they give us everything we need – food, shelter and medicine. “The Kariña do not take from nature more than we need in order to live from day to day.

We are the ones who must take care of the forests because we understand the jungle.” Despite being a protected area, the Imataca Forest Reserve faces ongoing threats from illegal logging and mining operations, she says. “The private companies left the forest destroyed, they turned it into ‘Rastrojos’ – sites where machines destroy all the trees and leave them abandoned, where nothing can regenerate itself anymore.”

Dr Cunningham is a co-author of the scientific review examining the role that indigenous peoples play in protecting tropical forests. The report comes at a very important moment when the world is looking to emerge from the pandemic in a sustainable way, and to really accomplish its climate change goals, she says. The report lays out concrete recommendations for how governments and NGOs can support indigenous peoples and therefore reduce deforestation, she says. They must] recognise indigenous peoples collective rights over territories, recognise their traditional knowledge and support their traditional ways in which they have managed the forest and offer compensation for the ecosystem services provided by indigenous peoples. The fact that [this report] documents what indigenous peoples have been saying and shows that it’s not something we’re inventing, it’s something that has been documented in more than 300 scientific papers and maybe we will have more opportunities than before.”

Four steps this Earth Day to avert environmental catastrophe

Simon Lewis, 22 April 2021, *The Guardian*

(495 words)

Today is Earth Day, which should provide us with an opportunity to pause and confront the awful predicament humanity faces. We eat microplastics, breathe pollution and watch other life-forms decline to extinction. We face intersecting poverty, health, climate and biodiversity crises. Our global predicament is that consumption by the wealthy is driving us towards planetary disaster, yet billions live in poverty and need to consume more to live well. In this cycle, any version of “success” only hastens catastrophe.

Here are four policies that work together to maximise people’s welfare and freedoms, drive essential technological innovation, and allow society to operate within Earth’s limits. At their heart is human dignity coupled with breaking the dynamic of ever-greater production and consumption. Together they could quickly reorient the doomsday machine that is today’s global economy.

The first policy is universal basic income (UBI) whereby a financial payment is made to every citizen, unconditionally, at a level above their subsistence needs. UBI is needed to break the link between work and consumption. Critically, there is a constant awareness that we all need to be ever more productive at work, otherwise someone else will take our job.

The second policy framework is what I call universal shared services. Many countries have some of these, from healthcare to education. These are the services everyone needs and their delivery has society-wide effects. Core are health, education, energy, housing and leisure services. Providing these universally lowers financial costs due to economies of scale, and can substantially lower environmental costs. Such universal services make societies more equal and drive them towards more sustainability if two further policies are enacted.

The third policy tackles the climate emergency via legally binding ever-declining carbon budgets. This framework exists in the UK, following the 2008 Climate Change Act. The government must reduce UK carbon emissions to within a carbon budget. These five-year budgets decline to a zero allocation by 2050.

The fourth policy uses the same declining budget principle, but tackles material use rather than energy generation. Similarly, declining “plastic use budgets” can set society on a pathway to eliminating plastic pollution. The same principle can tackle metal use to limit the damage from mining. A budget for the total amount of land used to produce the food a country consumes can limit the footprint of agriculture, central to halting biodiversity loss. As with carbon emissions, scientists can now track the production and use of plastic, metal and food. Scientific monitoring and new “declining budget” policies could keep material use within Earth’s limits.

These four policy goals together would drive people’s welfare up and our environmental impacts down. They are not new, nor are they very radical. We already, for example, assure incomes for pensioners in many countries, healthcare is universal in a number of countries, and declining carbon budgets are being used to help drive today’s energy transition.

George W. Bush: Immigration is a defining asset of the United States

By George W Bush, 16 April 2021, *Washington Post* online

(491 words)

Next week, I'm proud to publish a book of a new collection of my paintings, entitled *Out of Many, One*. I set out to accomplish two things: to share some portraits of immigrants, each with a remarkable story I try to tell, and to humanize the debate on immigration and reform. I hope that these faces, and the stories that accompany them, serve as a reminder that immigration isn't just a part of our heritage. New Americans are just as much a force for good now, with their energy, idealism and love of country, as they have always been.

I write about a champion runner who barely survived ethnic violence in East Africa, and who told me, "America has given me everything I dreamed of as a boy." I share the story of a young man from France who followed his dream to become an American soldier, and went on to earn the Medal of Honor. And readers may recognize two distinguished citizens who fled prewar Europe as children, and who each became U.S. secretary of state.

The backgrounds are varied, but readers won't have to search hard for a common theme. It's gratitude. So many immigrants are filled with appreciation, a spirit nicely summed up by a Cuban American friend who said: "If I live for a hundred years, I could never repay what this country has done for me."

The help and respect historically accorded to new arrivals is one reason so many people still aspire and wait to become Americans. So how is it that in a country more generous to new arrivals than any other, immigration policy is the source of so much rancor and ill will?

Out of Many, One is not a brief for any specific set of policies, which I leave to the political leaders of today. However, the book does set forth principles for reform that can restore the people's confidence in an immigration system that serves both our values and our interests.

One place to start is DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). Americans who favor a path to citizenship for those brought here as children, known as "dreamers," are not advocating open borders. They just recognize that young men and women who grew up in the United States, and who never knew any other place as home, are fundamentally American.

Another opportunity for agreement is the border. I have long said that we can be both a lawful and a welcoming nation at the same time. We cannot rely on enforcement alone to prevent the untenable and so often heartbreaking scenes that come with large-scale migration. We also need a modernized asylum system that provides humanitarian support and appropriate legal channels for refugees to pursue their cases in a timely manner.

Bipartisan reform is possible. We will again see immigration for what it is: not a problem and source of discord, but a great and defining asset of the United States.

Green-collared jobs aren't going to create themselves – the government needs a clear plan

The Independent, Rhian Kelly, 14 April 2021

(522 words)

The post-pandemic world presents a huge opportunity. We have a once in a lifetime chance to reset the economy and unlock hundreds of thousands of skilled and purpose-led jobs in the coming years. The need couldn't be clearer. The government's ten-point plan calls for 250,000 jobs to deliver on climate goals, while National Grid research identifies 400,000 jobs across the UK's energy sector to reach net-zero by 2050.

But what is meant by green jobs? Is it more 'greenwashing' or another fad marketing idea? I see green jobs as those that will help sectors transition to low-carbon models and contribute to environmental goals. In the energy sector, for example, this will range from civil, mechanical and electrical engineers, to data analysts, machine learning experts and skilled tradespeople.

New roles linked to electric vehicles, hydrogen and carbon capture technology will also emerge. Opportunities will open up around the country, and will require a diverse mix of skills, from scientists and engineers, to communications professionals and data specialists. It will be these green jobs that really help us get to net-zero and reduce carbon emissions.

Getting the right people and skills in place is no small task and that has been reflected in the scale of government ambition in this space – from the ten-point plan to the energy white paper, through the creation of the Green Jobs Taskforce and most recently in the Industrial Decarbonisation Strategy, which outlined new intent for addressing the skills deficit. Investment in recruitment, retention and retraining, and collaboration between government, at all levels, trade unions and business, will be critical. From a talent pipeline perspective, there is a big focus on engaging young people to inspire them to study STEM subjects or look at opportunities in the energy sector.

If we look at the current workforce, more needs to be done to map out where we can repurpose skills. Training on the job is crucial to support the transition but also re-focus skillsets towards net-zero roles. Critical to all of this is funding – financial backing is needed to enable employers to support this form of training. One option that could have a significant impact would be to reform the Apprentice Levy, allowing greater flexibility for businesses to direct unspent money raised via the levy. That could include a modular up-skilling approach.

The scale of the skills deficit cannot be ignored. Progress will stall and vital climate goals will be missed if the UK is unable to harness the talent we need to get us to achieve our climate goals. We need to see a shift from talking about tackling the green skills gap to actively building the capabilities the country needs. From inspiring and motivating the next generation, to make it simple and easy for experienced workers to retrain and reskill, we need to see a serious uptake of the Green Jobs Taskforce recommendations, a revamp of the Apprentice Levy and increased engagement with teachers, parents and students as a bare minimum this year.

How bad is bitcoin for the environment really?

The Independent, 19 March 2021

(496 words)

In little over a decade, bitcoin has risen from a fringe technology popular with cryptographers, to the world's ninth most valuable asset by market cap. The cryptocurrency's dramatic ascent has created millionaires, reimagined money, and launched a multi-billion dollar industry inspired by its revolutionary decentralised technology. But it has also brought with it some unwanted side effects.

The computing power required to support bitcoin's underlying network now requires nearly as much energy as the entire country of Argentina, leading to criticism about its environmental footprint. Analysis by the University of Cambridge suggests the bitcoin network uses more than 121 terawatt-hours (TWh) annually, which would rank it in the top 30 electricity consumers worldwide if it were a country.

The energy demands have been fuelled by the surging price of bitcoin in recent months, which has seen it rise from below \$5,000 (£3,600) last March to close to \$50,000 today. The amount of energy bitcoin's network consumes did not rise to serious prominence until 2017, when a major price rally drastically pushed up its energy needs to the level of a small country.

"Bitcoin's carbon footprint will get exponentially worse because the more its price rises, the more competition there is for the currency and thus the more energy it consumes."

Bitcoin's environmental impact is exacerbated by the fact that a majority of miners are based in China, where over two thirds of power is from coal. The mining process required to generate new units of the cryptocurrency involves solving complex but arbitrary mathematical equations, which currently requires vast amounts of computer processing power. Bitcoin miners therefore gravitate to where electricity is cheapest, meaning the fundamental issue is not with bitcoin but with a lack of cheap renewable energy production. Fortunately, there are solutions being put in place, with some eco-friendly mining facilities already operating at a massive scale.

"In its current status, the infrastructure that supports the bitcoin protocol cannot be sustained, but the beauty of the protocol is that the incentive structure will force miners to adopt the cheapest form of electricity, which in the near future will be renewable energy," Don Wyper, COO of DigitalMint, tells *The Independent*.

Alternative cryptocurrencies have also sought to solve bitcoin's current environmental issues by altering the underpinning technology in order for it to require less power. One of these is Cardano, which Hoskinson claims is 4 million times more energy efficient than bitcoin thanks to its 'Proof-of-Stake' blockchain that validates transactions based on how many coins are held by a network participant rather than the amount of computational processing power they possess.

If bitcoin's transition to renewable energy sources does not happen quickly, Hoskinson is among several experts who predict that investors and consumers will look to other cryptocurrencies that are less environmentally damaging. Bitcoin can do incredible good in the world. It is a technological asset. But other cryptocurrencies use less energy.

In the US, Joe Biden is backing the unions. Britain can only look on in envy

Martin Kettle, Wed 7 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(517 words)

Last week, Joe Biden unveiled a \$2tn infrastructure renewal plan whose boldness and scale caught the attention of the world. He began his launch speech in Pittsburgh with a particularly striking affirmation. “I’m a union guy,” the president said. “I support unions. Unions built the middle class. It’s about time they start to get a piece of the action.” Biden’s American Jobs Plan consists of many more substantial things than this warm rhetorical embrace of America’s trade unions. The package involves massive federal investment in transport, housing, green jobs, electric cars, social care and much else besides. And Biden has vowed to reverse much of Donald Trump’s 2017 tax cuts on companies and the wealthy in order to pay for it.

But the warm words about unions are important too. Unions were not incidental to the US jobs plan. They were integral to it. Biden promised the plan would create as many as 18 million new jobs over four years. They would, he promised, be “good-paying jobs [...] jobs that you can raise a family on, and ensure free and fair choice to organise and bargain collectively.” A new law protecting union rights is part of the package. The proportion of US workers in unions is only around 11%. So Biden was not bowing to irresistible pressure when he delivered his speech in pro-union language. Instead, he was placing a bet on economic security and respect as winning issues. He was betting that the dignity of work and workplace that unions provide, at their best, remains an essential part of a productive labour market, even in the gig economy era.

Contrast this with our own country. Britain remains significantly more unionised today than the US, 24% compared with America’s 11%. Yet it is hard – indeed inconceivable – to imagine any British politician, let alone a prime minister, announcing a post-Covid recovery programme with the words: “I support unions.” Britain is the poorer for that absence. Some of this transatlantic disjunction can be explained by temperamental and ideological differences between individual political leaders. But a deeper part of the answer lies in enduring contrasts, across Europe as well as Britain and America, between the evolution of the different countries’ union movements and political parties. Here is where Britain’s comparative weakness now lies.

Emergence from the pandemic ought to be a fertile moment for Britain to be given the same kind of leadership that Biden is offering America. There is increasing concern here about job losses after the furlough ends, new post-Covid workplace issues, the rise and rise of the online giants and real wage decline for the many, plus several legal cases and disputes in the gig economy, of which a Deliveroo strike is the latest.

Imagine, post-pandemic, if a British political leader was to make the world of dignified work the backbone of an ethical appeal for a national fair deal crossing economic class and geographic divides. It could even happen under the Conservatives. Indeed, it almost did so under Theresa May, when she began highlighting the failures of management and the case for employee empowerment in 2017.

Industrial fishing is affecting marine ecosystems, and the communities that depend on them

The Independent, 19 April 2021

(475 words)

This part of the Indian Ocean is an empty expanse – days can pass without sighting other vessels. We are here to document how the industrial food production system is effecting this unique region. The first ships we come across are known as longliners, a type of commercial fishing vessel, where a “long line” – sometimes up to 100km long – is laid with incremental baited hooks placed in estuaries off its length. Longliners are efficient killing machines. Along with their target catch of tuna, they bring in a high number of already threatened sharks as “bycatch”. Approximately 35 per cent of longline catch is non-target species.

Sharks are a species vulnerable to overfishing because they can take between 10-15 years to reach maturity and may bear just one pup a year. As top predators, they play an important role in maintaining the balance of the ecosystem, taking out larger predatory fish and allowing herbivore fish species to maintain a balance between macroalgae and corals.

This region is also frequented by European purse seiners, especially from France and Spain, who use Fish Aggregation Devices (FADs) to attract schools of fish, which are then encircled with nets up to 2km long and 200m deep. The use of FADs in the region has become so widespread that scientists claim they are changing the entire ecosystem – by, for example, changing marine-life migratory patterns. FADs catch the largest share of yellowfin tuna. As a predator, like sharks, they also assist in maintaining a balanced ocean ecosystem. Unfortunately, purse-seiners catch juvenile tuna – tuna caught too young to reproduce – meaning that yellowfin tuna is in a critical state.

Scientists warn that the population could collapse as early as 2024, unless catch is reduced by at least 20 per cent. Despite calls from retailers such as the Global Tuna Alliance, alongside conservationists, fisheries associations, and more ambitious proposals from Indian Ocean coastal states, the European fishing industry is blocking agreements to reduce catch – and during the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission’s last meeting, destructive fisheries were allowed to go on unchecked.

The actions of a few powerful fishing nations and companies are impoverishing coastal communities that are dependent on small-scale fishing for their survival: as a financial lifeline and to meet nutritional needs. This way of life is quickly becoming non-viable in the many regions where industrial fishing out at sea has drastically reduced fish numbers. Fishermen need to travel further out – sometimes hundreds of kilometres on tiny boats – for less catch, sold at a lower cost. Well-managed fisheries are also critical to food security. It may be true that those in the West can influence change through our purchasing power, should enough people get on board with reducing fish intake. But many in the world rely on fishing for their economic and nutritional survival, and those least responsible for ocean destruction are often most impacted.

Internal migration in UK

February 11th, 2021, *The Economist*

(499 words)

In the early 1990s Tennent, a Scottish brewer, ran a television advert designed to play on the homesickness of migrant workers in London; yearning for the pubs of the homeland, enduring crowded Tube trains, argumentative Cockneys and foreigners as the song “Caledonia” plays in the background.

Many young Scots at the time emigrated to the rest of the United Kingdom in search of work or excitement. In 1987, the peak year of emigration, 65,000 people—one in every 78 Scots—left for England, Northern Ireland or Wales. But the flow has slowed, as have the other streams that carry people between the four nations.

Unlike America, Britain has not experienced an overall decline in internal migration. Before covid-19 struck, movement between most of the UK’s 12 regions (nine of which are English) was growing, as the economy and the housing market recovered from the financial crisis. Two exceptions stick out, however. Northern Ireland and Scotland, which anyway send the smallest proportions of their residents to other parts of Britain, are holding onto even more of them. In 2018-19 Scotland lost just one in 146 people.

Patterns of study have a lot to do with this. In the 1994-95 academic year 6.2% of Scots studying full-time for a first degree attended English universities, and 2.8% of English students were in Scotland. In 2019-20 the proportions had fallen to 4.4% and 1.6%. The proportion of Northern Irish students studying in Scotland has dropped even more sharply, from 14.5% to 8.1%.

Jim Shannon, a Democratic Unionist Party MP, suggests that some Northern Irish people might have been put off by Scotland’s burgeoning independence movement; nobody is hotter for the union than an Ulster Protestant. But the widening gap in tuition fees is probably more important. Northern Irish students pay £4,395 a year to study in their own country, while Scots generally pay nothing if they stay in Scotland. Both are liable for £9,250 a year if they study elsewhere.

The demographic effect in Scotland was not an accident: the Scottish National Party cut tuition fees partly in order to discourage students from leaving.

In one way, the growing insularity of Northern Ireland and Scotland is a good sign. It reflects the success of their major cities, which ought to recover when Britain gets on top of covid-19. But it might hurt them in the end. Scotland in particular is about to experience a nasty demographic crunch: the country has 382,000 25- to 29-year-olds but only 282,000 15- to 19-year-olds. Westminster will not allow Edinburgh to run its own immigration policy.

The lack of mixing is also a bad omen for the United Kingdom. Many English are already ambivalent about the union—a recent poll for the Sunday Times found less than half would mind if Scotland left, and less than a third would be upset by Irish reunification. The more the nations grow apart, the less they are likely to care.

Is Scotland heading for a Catalonia-style constitutional meltdown?

Adam Forrest, Sun 18 Apr 2021, *The Independent*

(503 words)

Since the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence – the one in which the Queen was said to have “purred” with satisfaction as the UK remained intact – Britain’s age of chaos has seen three general elections, the Brexit wars and the Covid crisis. Nicola Sturgeon and her Scottish National Party team are hoping to make 2021 another year of high drama and upheaval. The SNP leader is pushing for a second referendum on Scottish independence – promising to hold a “legal” vote on a breakaway if a majority of pro-independence MSPs are returned to the Holyrood parliament at next month’s election.

It raises the possibility of a “wildcat” referendum. The last time we witnessed one of those was in Catalonia in 2017, when the Spanish government launched an ugly crackdown and separatist leaders were forced into exile. No one wants or expects a repeat of the violence seen in Catalonia. But a similarly dramatic political impasse – a constitutional crisis involving court battles and street protests – now looms just over the horizon.

Most polls during the Scottish election campaign have put the SNP on course to win a narrow majority. She is widely expected to demand the UK government grants a section 30 order (a provision in the Scotland Act of 1998) so the Scottish government can legally hold another referendum; the same process which saw then-prime minister David Cameron agree to the first referendum in 2014.

However, Johnson has made clear he believes referenda on Scottish independence should be “once in a generation” events – suggesting that 40 years between votes was a “good sort of gap”. But the PM knows that refusal to grant a section 30 order will prompt carefully orchestrated outrage from Sturgeon.

The SNP leader’s plan B will be to pass an independence referendum bill in the Scottish parliament to hold a vote without consent from Downing Street. This would likely start a legal challenge from Johnson’s government. Sturgeon and the SNP will hope Johnson’s refusal to grant a referendum increases poll support for independence up towards 60 per cent. Confident of sufficient backing among Scots, she could decide to stage a “consultative” or “advisory” independence vote without consent from Downing Street.

This would take us into unprecedented, Catalonia-type territory. Scottish Conservative party leader Douglas Ross has already pledged to “boycott” any “wildcat” referendum Sturgeon could decide to stage without UK government consent. “That wildcat scenario – I don’t think you can say it definitely won’t happen,” says Andy Maciver, the Scottish Tories’ former media chief. “But it would be a failure by both governments if it got that point.”

Dr Casanas-Adam – who is from Catalonia and knows the political situation there well – doesn’t think we will see a repeat of the scenes from 2017, when Spanish police forces seized ballot boxes and arrested campaigners to prevent the referendum staged by separatist leaders. She adds: “I think Nicola Sturgeon will want to secure a process that would be recognised by everyone. It becomes hard to go back once you go down a certain path.”

Joe Biden faces major test building US credibility at climate summit

Oliver Milman, 21 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(513 words)

Joe Biden's desire to re-establish US leadership on the climate crisis will face a severe test this week at a summit the president hopes will rebuild American credibility and kickstart a spluttering international effort to stave off the effects of global heating. Biden has invited 40 world leaders to a two-day virtual gathering starting on Earth Day, Thursday, as the opening salvo in negotiations leading to crunch United Nations talks in Scotland later this year. Scientists say the world is severely lagging in tackling the climate crisis and its heatwaves, storms and floods, with planet-heating emissions set to roar back following a dip due to coronavirus shutdowns.

Much will hinge upon cooperation between China, the world's worst producer of planet-heating emissions, and the US, historically the worst polluter. On Saturday, John Kerry, Biden's climate envoy, struck an agreement in Shanghai to urgently address what Kerry called the "beyond catastrophic" consequences of allowing temperatures to spiral upwards. The compact is broadly seen as encouraging but comes amid US-China tensions on issues including human rights and trade. The US also faces a deficit in credibility after the presidency of Donald Trump, which saw the country leave the Paris climate accords and dismantle environmental protections.

Biden has returned the US to the Paris agreement but a spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry said the move was "by no means a glorious comeback but rather the student playing truant getting back to class". The US is suffering from a "credibility gap" due to years of oscillating policy, according to Josh Busby, an expert in climate governance at University of Texas-Austin. "The US return to climate diplomacy may be taken seriously so long as the Biden administration can keep its climate policy agenda alive," he said.

The centerpiece of Biden's summit will be the unveiling of the new US emissions reduction target, which may be the only significant new pledge at the event. The goal is expected to be at least a 50% cut by 2030, based on 2005 levels, a target broadly backed by environment groups as well as the UN secretary general, António Guterres, who has said 2021 "must be the year for action" to avoid an "abyss" of climate disaster.

Joanna Lewis, a specialist in Chinese energy policy at Georgetown University, said the US-China climate commitment was an "encouraging step", including language that suggests China could make deeper emissions cuts than previously promised. "It's important that Biden puts an ambitious target on the table but it's equally important that he implements legislation to meet those targets," she said. "Barack Obama set goals but wasn't able to do the meaningful legislation, unlike, for example, the UK."

A White House official said that the summit would "up the ante on climate ambition" and would include sessions on topics ranging from building climate resiliency, clean energy innovation and the role of oceans and forests in the climate crisis. "In short, America is back and we are rallying the world to join us," the official said. "This is a decisive decade and people should not mistake the urgency."

Joe Biden is now president, but Trump has changed the US for a generation

Martin Kettle, 20 Jan 2021, *The Guardian*

(525 words)

Donald Trump departed today from the American presidency as he arrived four years ago: vain, cruel and telling lies, without any vestige of grace or magnanimity.

There was no acknowledgment of, still less apology for, his deranged delinquency in the face of Covid, or of his election defeat – failures that made the nervy, locked-down inauguration of Joe Biden inevitable. But Trump leaves having changed America.

Biden did his best today. He had been absolutely the right candidate to defeat Trump at the polls. He calmly outsmarted the incumbent through the campaign; his appointments have been good; and there is no one in American politics better placed to begin the healing of wounds that ran through everything he said at the inauguration.

The address by Biden on Capitol Hill did not mention Trump by name, but it was saturated in his blowhard predecessor's divisive legacy. The riot of 6 January hung over the occasion, the speech and even the images. The speech struck necessary and reassuring notes of realism, humility, hope and consistency. It was wholly unTrumpian. But Biden cannot remake America by trying to lead it back to a better yesterday. That would fail.

To describe it as a presidential inauguration without parallel is to risk a lack of historical awareness on the one hand or journalistic hyperbole on the other. America, its institutions and values have survived civil war before, as well as assassination. America will probably survive the horrors of Trump's corrupt tenure, which Biden called "this uncivil war". But survival may no longer be enough in an America that has been led too close to the brink of a deeper conflict by a wanton leader, abetted by a weak-willed party, an elite of morally supine tech companies and the lie machines of Rupert and Lachlan Murdoch.

Yet it is also true that Trump is not a one-off. Consider this: "American politics has often been an arena for angry minds. In recent years we have seen angry minds at work mainly among extreme rightwingers... But behind this I believe there is a style of mind that is far from new and that is not necessarily right wing. I call it the paranoid style because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind."

Each one of those words could have been written this week. In fact, the historian Richard Hofstadter wrote them six decades ago, after the failed 1964 presidential bid of the rightwing Republican Barry Goldwater. Hofstadter drew the argument not only from the delusions of the 1960s, but from a line of conspiracy theories that stretched right back to the French Revolution in the 1790s and forward to McCarthyism in the 1950s – and beyond.

This tells us a few things that need to be remembered in the light of the Biden inauguration. The first is that the battle to extend and bolster democratic values needs to be as sleepless as the tradition of those who oppose them. While America sometimes echoes and influences the politics of other nations, it is also extremely different. The United States follows its own distinct path. Trump has turbocharged that. This is the America that Biden now leads.

Low-traffic neighbourhoods: streets ahead

Editorial, Mon 16 Nov 2020, *The Guardian*

(524 words)

Some good can come of even the worst disaster. Amid all the suffering and difficulty of the pandemic, environmentally minded people spied a chance. Could the enforced immobility of life under Covid-19, the rediscovery of neighbourhood shops, parks and walks brought about by the closure of workplaces and schools, lead to a longer-term adjustment – a new car/life balance?

For decades, green thinkers and politicians have advocated for a less automobile-centric culture. Transport policy unites two big themes of environmental politics: the idea that many people need to be reconnected with local geographies, both physical and human; and opposition to pollution. This means greenhouse gases, of course, but also particulate matter and noise. An altered transport hierarchy, it has long been argued, is beneficial to health, since more walking and cycling means less obesity, respiratory illness and heart disease; reduced road traffic also means fewer injuries and deaths caused by collisions.

The need for cuts in air pollution and carbon emissions combined with the practical urgency of the situation earlier this year, in which public transport use had to be reduced without increasing congestion, made walking and cycling the only good option. Policymakers saw this: the UK government provided £250m in emergency active travel funding; the Welsh and Scottish governments £15.4m and £10m respectively.

Several months later, there is widespread agreement that the creation of dozens of new low-traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Edinburgh has produced some toxic politics along with quieter, safer streets. Planters placed on roads to block through traffic have been moved and damaged. Campaigners have been threatened. In several London boroughs, the strength of the reaction has led councils to retreat or consider retreating.

New research suggests such decisions are mistaken. The idea that middle-class residents are the main beneficiaries of LTNs is revealed to be a myth, since about 90% of people from all demographic groups live on the kinds of residential streets where they are in place. Meanwhile, the announcement of funding from a south London NHS trust to support schemes in its area shows how significant health experts believe these beneficial effects are. This is not to deny the negative effects that LTNs can have, in displacing some traffic from quieter streets on to already busy ones. But since LTNs are a “nudge” policy, intended to steer behaviour change rather than apply a sudden brake, you have to wait and see: traffic does not evaporate, or bicycles materialise, overnight.

Change is difficult, and no set of arrangements suits everyone. Objectors have a right to protest. But the health and climate emergencies cannot be ignored. Car owners must not mistake comfort or convenience for a right to drive. Partly due to satnav systems, traffic on residential streets has increased hugely in recent years. Across Europe, cities have moved to reclaim their streets for uses other than driving. In recent months the UK has done some catching up. Councils should hold their nerve and talk to people as well as listen: the case for cutting car use is overwhelming.

Not gonna lie

March 18th, 2021, *The Economist*

(512 words)

Donald Trump's presidency kicked off with a lie about the size of the crowd at his inauguration and degenerated into a four-year extravaganza of flim-flam. After he lost to Joe Biden, he and his supporters disseminated the biggest lie in the history of modern American politics: that he had won the election, only to have it stolen. The propaganda campaign culminated in a violent assault on the Capitol and Mr Trump's second impeachment. At his trial Republicans argued that, regardless of whether Mr Trump's claims were lies, as long as he did not call for violence he had a constitutional right to make them.

Under current law, they were probably right. The Supreme Court was long ambivalent as to whether falsehoods are protected by the free-speech guarantee of the First Amendment to America's constitution. But in 2012, in *United States v Alvarez*, the court for the first time held that freedom of speech covers not just truth, opinion and mistakes but barefaced lies. The defendant had boasted of playing hockey for the Detroit Red Wings and winning the Congressional Medal of Honour. The second lie violated the Stolen Valour Act, which barred false claims of receiving military decorations. But the court struck down the law, worried that if Congress could stop people making one type of statement, it could stop them making any.

Cass Sunstein, a law professor, finds the Alvarez ruling absurd. He thinks the court was right that falsehoods should normally enjoy First Amendment protection, since no one wants the government investigating everyday fibs. But freedom of speech, like all rights, has limits: in one famous formulation, no one has a right to shout "Fire!" in a crowded theatre. There are laws against incitement, fraud, false advertising and defamation.

What is wrong with saying things that are not true? In some cases, nothing. The Kantian view is that lying is wrong on principle, whereas J.S. Mill takes a utilitarian stance that it is bad when it hurts people. This leaves room for white lies. One reason falsehoods should normally be considered protected speech is that officials are not sufficiently well-informed to second-guess citizens as to whether a given lie is beneficial. They also cannot reliably tell whether someone is lying or merely deluded. Most important, punishing falsehoods would deter others from voicing their opinions, or even their imprecise memories.

Established laws against some kinds of false speech exist. In America incitement requires a link to an imminent crime. Fraud and defamation need proof that offenders knew or should have known their claims were false, and that someone was harmed.

One area where the law is perhaps too narrow is defamation. The current standard was set in 1964 in which a police commissioner in Alabama sued *The New York Times* over an advertisement placed by civil-rights activists that had minor inaccuracies. Awarding damages for mere mistakes would impoverish debate, the court ruled. That comported with an older doctrine which holds that "the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the marketplace of ideas".

Plastics: reducing bag use is not enough

Editorial, Fri 4 Sep 2020, *The Guardian*

(521 words)

From shocking footage of an albatross chick killed by a plastic toothpick to images of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, there is no shortage of evidence of the harm and ugliness caused by plastic. Public awareness of the problem has grown rapidly over recent years in many countries, and led to new legislation. But while environmental organisations work hard to highlight links between the plastics and oil industries – and while pollution of the oceans and failures by the waste and recycling industry have become key themes for campaigners – the issue of plastics is still not widely enough recognised as a consequence of our dependence on fossil fuels.

Reports of plans by the oil industry to expand the supply of virgin plastics by a quarter over five years, while putting pressure on countries such as Kenya to lift restrictions on their use, show how urgently this needs to change. Plastics are not a byproduct of the fossil fuel industry. They are a product of it.

Reduce, reuse and recycle has long been anti-waste activists' slogan, and it still serves a purpose. Encouraging people to stop consuming stuff they don't need, to pass unwanted objects on, and recycle rubbish rather than send it to landfill are all worthwhile goals. The trouble is that it isn't working. Currently, about 8m tonnes of plastic end up in the ocean every year, with the latest research suggesting that this quantity could triple in 20 years. A new approach is required that retains a strong emphasis on personal and collective responsibility, while sharply increasing pressure on politicians and businesses.

Efforts to limit plastics production will have to be international if they are to be effective. Kenya has been a world leader in anti-plastics legislation. Reports that US lobbyists are targeting it as a possible hub for the supply of American-made chemicals and plastics to the rest of Africa, are alarming to say the least.

And while no one knows what the long-term effects will be, on humans or other species, the sheer quantity of the waste and the already documented impact on wildlife mean that plastic pollution must be dealt with as part of the wider environmental emergency. Energy companies must no more be allowed to flood the oceans with polyethylene than they should be allowed to pump the atmosphere full of greenhouse gases.

As with carbon emissions, national targets will form a vital part of any global framework. So far, the UK government's efforts to restrict plastic waste have been half-hearted. And while it is good news that mandatory charges for plastic bags are to be rolled out to smaller shops and doubled to 10p, this step in the right direction is still too small. The bolder moves made by retailers offer some encouragement. But as with energy, it is systemic change that is needed, rather than private gestures, however worthwhile and well-intentioned. The world is drowning in plastic packaging, and signs point to the problem getting worse. Time is running out to do something about it.

Post-Brexit relationship with EU

March 27th, 2021, *The Economist*

(510 words)

Since becoming prime minister in July 2019, Boris Johnson has often referred to EU countries as “our friends and partners”. Many of his fans believed that, once Brexit was done, a more co-operative relationship between the two would be possible. Even those who criticised Mr Johnson’s December trade deal for its thinness hoped closer collaboration on issues ranging from the environment to foreign policy would allow Britain and the EU to build on it. Yet three months on, the relationship seems scratchier than ever.

The year began badly with bigger barriers to trade than many exporters had expected. Covid-19 and stockpiling in the run-up to Brexit make the figures harder to analyse. But in January goods exports to the EU were down by over 40% from December, whereas they rose marginally to non-EU markets. For fish and shellfish, exports fell by a massive 83%; for food and drink, by 75%. Services exports are also likely to have dived.

Covid-19 vaccine wars now cast another shadow. For much of 2020 the story was of Britain’s slower response than the EU’s to the pandemic. This year it has turned into one of British nimbleness in rolling out vaccines, against the EU’s woeful sluggishness. Indeed, many Brexiteers trumpet this as proof that they were right to want to leave the bloc.

The government has been careful not to crow over its success with vaccines, and has shown restraint in the face of the EU’s vaccine nationalism. France’s Emmanuel Macron cast doubt on the effectiveness of the vaccine produced by AstraZeneca, an Anglo-Swedish firm, and a groundless scare over blood clots, which encouraged vaccine resistance, led many European countries briefly to suspend its use.

At the same time, EU leaders complained about AstraZeneca’s failure to deliver contracted doses. The European Commission is now taking powers to control vaccine exports, including to Britain; though on March 24th the two sides issued a joint statement saying they were working together to create a “win-win situation”.

Differences over vaccines may be resolved more easily than those over Northern Ireland. Under the Northern Ireland protocol that is included in Britain’s withdrawal treaty with the EU, the province remains in effect part of the European single market and customs union. This necessarily entails border and customs controls for goods moving between the province and the rest of the United Kingdom. The resulting obstacles have hindered trade between the two, notably of anything that falls under the regulations covering food, drink and plants, and are threatening the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to Northern Ireland.

Inevitably, in the wake of Brexit, there are other niggles. The European Parliament is deferring its ratification of the December trade deal. Britain is refusing to accord full diplomatic status to the EU’s ambassador in London.

Still, most Britons want to get on with their big neighbour. A poll this week by Ipsos mori for the Brussels-based EU-UK forum found 78% of respondents in favour of close relations. However, only 41% expect them. The attitudes of both sides do not give much ground for hope.

Priti Patel v Facebook is the latest in a 30-year fight over encryption

Alex Hern, Mon 19 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(493 words)

Priti Patel has stepped up an international campaign to force Facebook to reverse its plans to merge its messaging apps and encrypt all communications between users, arguing such plans make it harder to safeguard children. But despite the intensity of the home secretary's call for action, there's little progress in the encryption wars.

"We cannot allow a situation where law enforcement's ability to tackle abhorrent criminal acts and protect victims is severely hampered," Patel told an event organised by the NSPCC children's charity on Monday afternoon. "Simply removing accounts from platforms is nowhere near enough." Her comments are the latest push in a fight that goes back almost 30 years. The broad issue is the same as ever: governments and law enforcement are worried about what is being said on communications platforms they cannot easily monitor, while technology companies argue that the nature of encryption means they have to provide privacy for everyone or no one.

This time, though, the territory is slightly different. Facebook's decision in 2020 to begin merging its various messaging platforms has added a sense of urgency. The move, which started when Messenger and Instagram merged in August, will eventually put those two platforms and WhatsApp all on the same network, with all chats being encrypted between them. In a statement, Facebook said: "Child exploitation has no place on our platforms and Facebook will continue to lead the industry in developing new ways to prevent, detect and respond to abuse. End-to-end encryption is already the leading security technology used by many services to keep people safe from hackers and criminals. Its full rollout on our messaging services is a long term project and we are building strong safety measures into our plans."

And NSPCC wants the conversation to be more successful if it avoids the same mistakes that its predecessor made. "We are aiming for a reconciliation reset that can balance the privacy and safety needs of all users," Andy Burrows says. What that settlement would look like is unclear. The government has not repeated last decade's calls to push for a law-enforcement-only backdoor into encrypted messaging apps, after such a demand was roundly rejected by an industry as technologically impossible. (The nature of end-to-end encryption, which prevents anyone but the sender and recipient from reading communications, is such that any backdoor would work not just for police but for anyone else who discovered it, from hackers to foreign intelligence agencies.)

Instead, the UK government and others have focused on their goals, rather than demanding specific methods to achieve them. "During my own recent discussions with my counterparts in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, we were absolutely united and calling upon the industry to ensure that services are safe by design," Patel said. "Companies themselves should do more, and can do more, to endorse and transparently implement the CFAA voluntary principles on child sexual abuse," she added, referring to the new set of guidelines published last year by the five countries calling for better protection of children online.

Solar power in Britain

February 18th, 2021, *The Economist*

(508 words)

Last autumn, a woman in Freckenham, a pretty Suffolk village, accepted a bid for her house from a London couple who had looked around it. After researching Sunnica Energy Farm, a proposed solar farm of 2,700 acres—the size of over a thousand football pitches—the couple came down for another visit and stopped off at the pub, where the farm was the main topic of conversation. They backed out. The following week, as she was preparing for another viewing, the estate agent rang to say the prospective purchasers had arrived in Freckenham, but after seeing a high street plastered with “Say No to Sunnica” posters, had kept on driving.

A solar boom started in 2010 and came to an abrupt end in 2015 when subsidies were cut. Now solar is growing again. In 2020 there was 13.4gw in the development pipeline, the capacity installed in the past decade. The falling cost of solar technology, set to drop by another 27% by 2030, is one reason. Most councils have declared a climate emergency, and want to promote renewable energy.

Some big energy consumers, such as Budweiser and Anglian Water, are building solar farms to prove their green credentials.

Economies of scale mean that massive farms make sense. Cleve Hill Solar Park, a 350mw site spread across 900 acres in Kent, was approved in May 2020. It is the first to be classified as a “nationally significant infrastructure project”. Three more applications for super-sized projects are pending—Sunnica’s, one for 1,000 acres in Essex and one for 558 acres in Lincolnshire. Matt Hazell, co-founder of PS Renewables, an investor in Sunnica, reckons there could be another ten in England within the next decade.

England’s energetic NIMBYs have been out in force. Polling by No Sunnica, a protest group, found that 98% of Freckenham’s residents are against the plan. They do not deny that climate change is a problem, but dislike projects that will take up so much land. Their concerns range from biodiversity loss and worries about where they will walk their dogs to fears that batteries might go up in flames.

Developers say that solar farms, which produce no pollution and need little maintenance, are the perfect neighbours. But for Neil Beedie, who is protesting against a proposed 200-acre solar farm at Derry Hill in Wiltshire, that is part of the problem. He would prefer a nuclear power station, which would at least bring jobs to the area. Solar farms, once installed, create little work for locals. Damage is often monitored by drones, and engineers dispatched from miles away by distant office workers.

The government sees boosting solar power as one of the ways of meeting its commitment to carbon neutrality. But some Tories are unhappy with the consequences of that commitment. Matt Hancock and Lucy Frazer, two ministers in whose constituencies Sunnica Energy Farms wants to build, have come out against the development. Meanwhile the government is getting support from unusual quarters. One of the few local supporters of the Derry Hill proposal is an Extinction Rebellion activist.

The environmental costs of fast fashion

The Independent, 7 January 2021

(496 words)

Water pollution, toxic chemical use and textile waste: fast fashion comes at a huge cost to the environment.

It's tough to love our clothes and keep wearing them for longer when we are faced with a tempting array of newness on offer in the shops. But before you head out into the January sales for those irresistible deals, spare a thought for the impact of fast fashion on the environment.

Fast fashion focuses on speed and low costs in order to deliver frequent new collections inspired by catwalk looks or celebrity styles. But it is particularly bad for the environment, as pressure to reduce cost and the time it takes to get a product from design to shop floor means that environmental corners are more likely to be cut. Criticisms of fast fashion include its negative environmental impact, water pollution, the use of toxic chemicals and increasing levels of textile waste.

Textile dyeing is the second largest polluter of clean water globally, after agriculture. Greenpeace's recent Detox campaign has been instrumental in pressuring fashion brands to take action to remove toxic chemicals from their supply chains, after it tested a number of brands' products and confirmed the presence of hazardous chemicals. Many of these are banned or strictly regulated in various countries because they are toxic, bio-accumulative (meaning the substance builds up in an organism faster than the organism can excrete or metabolise it), disruptive to hormones and carcinogenic.

Polyester is the most popular fabric used for fashion. But when polyester garments are washed in domestic washing machines, they shed microfibres that add to the increasing levels of plastic in our oceans. These microfibres are minute and can easily pass through sewage and wastewater treatment plants into our waterways, but because they do not biodegrade, they represent a serious threat to aquatic life. Small creatures such as plankton eat the microfibres, which then make their way up the food chain to fish and shellfish eaten by humans.

The international expansion of fast fashion retailers exacerbates the problem on a global scale. Wardrobes in developed nations are saturated, so in order to sell more products, retailers must tempt shoppers with constant newness and convince them the items they already have are no longer fashionable. Increasing disposable income levels over recent generations means there is less need to "make do and mend", as it's often cheaper and more convenient to buy new than have an item repaired.

So, can consumers reduce the environmental cost of fast fashion when out shopping? Choosing an eco-friendly fabric is complex as there are pros and cons to all fibre types. Garments which are labelled as being made from natural fibres are not necessarily better than synthetic, as fibre choice is only one part of a complex picture. Fibres still have to be spun, knitted or woven, dyed, finished, sewn and transported – all of which have different environmental impacts.

The psychology of procrastinating on climate change

The Independent, 26 February 2021

(499 words)

Research by YouGov published in 2019 found that just 27 per cent of Brits ranked the environment among the top three issues facing the country, with Brexit coming top (67 per cent) and health second (32 per cent). In the US and Japan, cyberattacks from other countries were seen as the biggest cause for concern. Why, though? 2020 tied for the hottest year on record. The previous year, 33 people died in the Australian bushfires, which also killed or harmed over three billion animals. The destruction of natural habitats is poised to cause more and more pandemics.

According to a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), if we don't meet the aims of the Paris Agreement and keep global warming to a maximum of 1.5 degrees, 10 million more people will lose their homes to rising seas. What is it about the demise of humanity as a result of the climate crisis that, somehow, doesn't sufficiently frighten us?

It's not that we're actually not scared, Caroline Hickman, a psychotherapist and social work teaching fellow at the University of Bath, tells *The Independent*. In fact, she says those who believe in climate change – but just aren't feeling the fear – are likely being defended by an automatic response in their brain. “When we face a threat, it triggers a defense against the anxiety that that threat will generate in us,” she explains. “It happens automatically, and it happens outside of awareness, unconsciously. And then we go into a defensive mode of fundamentally fight, flight or freeze.”

The other threats and pressures that already exist elsewhere in your life are also a factor, says Megan Kennedy-Woodard, climate coaching psychologist and co-director of Climate Psychologists. Socio-economics, culture and education are all important factors to consider when observing how people engage with ecological issues.

We are dealing with a variety of audiences who are receiving information about climate change, she says. For some, there are simply other issues that require urgent action, like where is my child's next meal going to come from? or will we make rent this month?

While recognising the reality of the threat we face is key to taking action, the psychologist notes that, at a certain point, climate anxiety can become “too big” to allow us to act usefully.

We really want people to strike the balance between their mental well-being and committed sustainable action, she explains. There is a saying, when eating an elephant, take one bite at a time, and this is the mentality we need.”

Being the right degree of scared is a tricky balance. Tackling climate apathy is a non-negotiable requirement but, if we allow ourselves to constantly feel the high-adrenaline type of fear we'd experience, for example, while witnessing a crime, we may end up being little use in the fight against climate change.

Two more attacks prompt calls for gun control, however nothing is likely to change

Leo Cendrowicz, March 24, 2021, *iNews.co.uk*

(481 words)

It felt like Groundhog Day this week in the US, with the same miserable events playing out after yet another mass shooting. Ten people were killed Monday when a gunman opened fire at a grocery store in Boulder, Colorado. It came less than a week after a gunman opened fire at massage spas in the Atlanta area, murdering eight people. Yet after both atrocities, any attempts to change gun laws to stop more mass shooting were, well, shot down by the gun lobby and their fiercely loyal supporters in Congress.

On Tuesday, President Joe Biden called for an assault weapons ban and other gun control measures, saying the Colorado shooting should jolt Washington and the nation into action. In sombre remarks from the White House State Dining Room, he said he would do everything in his power to keep Americans safe and pushed a pair of House-passed gun reforms, including a universal background checks measure and an assault weapons ban.

However, opponents began their pre-emptive strikes within hours of shooting. Campaign spots were released by the likes of Colorado House Republican Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene from Georgia warning about Democrats trying to take guns away from law-abiding citizens.

Senator John Neely Kennedy from Louisiana bizarrely compared gun control to drink driving laws, and said the issue was more about “idiot control”.

Texas Senator Ted Cruz even accused Democrats of “ridiculous theatre” for calling for universal background checks, claiming without evidence that gun control does not lessen crime, “it makes it worse.”

This routine has become almost ritualistic in its repetitiveness. If anything, the protest by gun interests has become even louder as the shootings have become more frequent. And it shows how hard changing the law will be.

The main reason for this is the National Rifle Association (NRA), the group founded in 1871 by two US Civil War veterans as a recreational group designed to “promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis”.

It is now one of the most powerful political lobbies in Washington, spending roughly \$250m per year, far more than all the country’s gun control advocacy groups put together. And it is in lockstep with Republicans: a shorthand for anyone’s conservative credentials is how much the NRA ranks their support for Second Amendment rights to own a gun.

This means that while Democrats say they are pushing toward a vote on expanded gun control measures, prospects for any major changes are dim in the 50-50 Senate – where 60 votes are needed for any legislative change.

A large majority of Americans – 88 per cent – back background checks for private gun sales, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center poll. But despite this, the uniquely American phenomenon of mass shootings is likely to remain grimly repetitive.

Wealthy must acknowledge their “climate privilege”, says scientist

The Independent, 23 March 2021

(510 words)

The world’s wealthiest people must acknowledge their “climate privilege” and take action to reduce the size of their carbon footprints, a scientist has urged. Since the start of the fossil fuel era, poorer nations have contributed the least to the climate crisis yet stand to bear the brunt of its impacts, says Prof Kimberly Nicholas, a sustainability scientist from Lund University in Sweden. Climate inequality also exists within rich countries, she says, with poorer and minority communities often facing the largest climate impacts despite causing fewer emissions.

In a new book, Prof Nicholas argues that the top consumers in wealthy countries must acknowledge their role in driving the climate crisis – and their ability to make decisions to reduce their emissions. Prof Nicholas told *The Independent*: “It is very unfair that the people who have done the least to cause the problem – who are young or poor or marginalised in some way – are already feeling the most severe impacts. And that’s a trend that will continue to be magnified as warming worsens.

But I think the other side of the coin is confronting my own privilege and recognising the responsibility that comes with that.”

Her newly released book, *Under the Sky We Make*, notes that the US and Europe have together produced nearly half of all the carbon that has been released into the atmosphere since the start of the industrial era in the 1800s. The UK was the world’s largest carbon emitter on an annual basis until the turn of 20th century, when the US took over as the biggest polluter. China, the world’s annual largest emitter, did not take the top spot until 2006.

Western leaders who throw up their hands and proclaim, it doesn’t matter what we do, look at China! remind me of someone eating nearly all the cake, then blaming its disappearance on the person reaching for their first piece, Prof Nicholas writes in her book.

She also points to research by Oxfam which found that the poorest 50 per cent of US households produce around eight tonnes of CO₂ per person each year, while the richest 10 per cent emit an average of 50 tonnes. In 2017, Prof Nicholas co-authored a study that outlined “high-impact actions” individuals in wealthy countries could take to reduce their carbon footprints. Among these actions are living car-free, avoiding air travel and sticking to a plant-based diet. Such actions could have a much larger effect on an individual’s carbon footprint than commonly promoted environmental strategies such as recycling, the study noted. She added that more action from wealthy individuals must be coupled with systemic change from businesses and governments if the world is to meet its climate goals.

“For me a big takeaway is just how incredibly critical this decade is. We just happen to be alive at what seems to me as the most critical moment for humanity. That is a huge responsibility and also an opportunity.”

Why climate change is a feminist issue

The Independent, 12 March 2021

(520 words)

The climate emergency feels – by definition – like something that should be a universal experience, a unifying threat to the home that we all share. But, like almost all other crises, we might all be floating in the same sea of uncertainty but we are certainly not in the same boat. Just as with coronavirus, which disproportionately impacts black, Asian and minority ethnic communities (and has hit women harder economically than men), the climate crisis poses more urgent problems for some people than for others.

In 2021, as we get ever closer to the Paris Agreement deadline of 2050 for a climate-neutral world, we can already see that women, particularly women of colour, are experiencing the climate emergency's worst effects. And for some, this half-century point will come too late.

In much of the global north, climate change isn't yet impacting everyone's day-to-day lives in a way that inspires sufficient urgency. Although we are seeing more localised events like historic flooding and freak storms in places like Texas, the situation is much worse in many other regions where the climate emergency is already affecting people's livelihoods. Figures from the United Nations (UN) suggest that 80 per cent of people displaced by climate change worldwide are women. According to a review of 130 studies by the Global Gender and Climate Alliance in 2016, women are more likely to suffer food insecurity as a result of the climate crisis. Following extreme weather events, women are also more likely to experience mental illness and partner violence.

Professor Nitya Rao of the University of East Anglia (UEA) researches gender equality in parts of Africa and Asia which have already been severely affected by climate change. She says in many of the rural areas where she conducts research, in countries like Nepal and India, droughts and floods can decimate crops and make the outcomes of agricultural labour unpredictable. The climate crisis means that these sorts of unusual weather events are becoming more common - increasing the likelihood of this change in working status.

In order to reduce overall risk to the household's income, men, who have access to a wider range of jobs, will often migrate to other areas - particularly urban areas away from land-based incomes - with women staying to care for children and continue agricultural work. When this work isn't fruitful, women often end up having to take on multiple jobs, says Rao. This change in circumstance means women are under pressure: "Especially at the time when men are absent, they may send money once a month, or once in two months, or three months. In the meantime, women will have to manage – so they end up working much harder."

Links between gender inequality and the impacts of the climate crisis aren't always immediately obvious to those whose day-to-day lives haven't yet been upturned by global warming. But to prevent gender disparities further deepening, an understanding of climate change and its complex relationship to human power structures is key.

Why John Oliver is right, plastic recycling is a broken system and what we should do about it

The Independent, 22 March 2021

(521 words)

John Oliver tackled the failure that is plastic recycling during Sunday's episode of Last Week Tonight, pointing out that the United States recycles less than 9 per cent of items but "the plastics industry has managed to convince us all that it's our fault".

Plastic production is booming with more than half of all plastic ever made created within the last two decades. Vast amounts of plastic aren't recycled for reasons including its complex mix of resins; contamination or difficulty in sorting; or the simple fact it's cheaper to make virgin plastic. The pollution ends up in landfill, is incinerated or shipped overseas to less wealthy nations. In 2018 China said it would no longer accept large volumes of plastic waste. And while 180 nations signed an agreement last year to set limits on plastic pollution being shipped to poorer countries, The New York Times reported that US exports remained much the same and that scrap plastic exports actually increased.

Additionally, an estimated 10 million tons of plastic ends up in the ocean annually - the equivalent of a garbage truck every minute. This plastic breaks down into tiny pieces called microplastics, of less than 0.2 inches (5mm), which endanger marine life and birds who often mistake them for food. Microplastics have invaded all corners of the planet, from Antarctic sea ice to Arctic snow. The small pieces travel through the food system, making their way to our dinner plates. By one estimate, a person eats more than 40lb of plastic during a lifetime.

But Oliver pointed out that despite spending millions of dollars in ad campaigns that highlighted consumers' responsibility for recycling, the plastics industry was aware that large-scale recycling would not work. He noted that "our personal behavior is not the main culprit here, despite what the plastics industry has spent decades and millions of dollars trying to convince us". (One industry executive told NPR that campaigns to encourage recycling helped to sell more plastic.) Oliver claimed that the recycling movement is "often bankrolled by companies that wanted to drill home the message that it is your responsibility to deal with the environmental impact of their products.

And honestly, it wasn't all that difficult for them to convince us that all their waste is recyclable, because we so badly want to believe it, he said. This idea has been dubbed fishcycling by the industry. Oliver added: it is obvious that meaningful change is only going to come from being able to force this very powerful industry to do things that it has shown for half a century it has absolutely no interest in doing. We have to make them change."

Last year a federal bill, titled the Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act, was introduced in Congress to reduce unnecessary plastic and "reform a broken waste management system". The issue is only growing more urgent. By 2050, global plastic production is expected to triple, and make up 20 per cent of all oil consumption.

SOCIETY
WORK
EDUCATION
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Aerial surveillance in USA

April 17th, 2021, *The Economist*

(507 words)

It was just one of more than 2,000 murders in 2009 in Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican city across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas: someone shot in an alley, no witnesses. Seen from above, though, a fuller story emerged. Four cars converged on the area—two for protection, one each to carry the shooter to and from the scene—and, after the murder, several people gave fruitless chase. The people were indistinct dots, and the cars just rolling lozenges, but drone footage showed where the shooter came from and, more important for police, where he went after the crime.

The notion of putting cameras on orbiting drones to catch malefactors was born on the battlefields of Iraq, where American armed forces wanted to nab people leaving bombs on roadsides. Ross McNutt, a former air-force engineer, founded Persistent Surveillance Systems (PSS) to offer the same service to American cities (and others, such as Juárez) struggling with high murder rates.

PSS drones flew over parts of Baltimore, most recently in May-October 2020. St Louis, among America's most violent cities, also considered but is poised to reject PSS's services, which raise difficult questions about how much surveillance Americans are willing to tolerate in exchange for the promise of safer streets.

Putting eyes in the sky gives overworked officers extra visibility, literally, into their own city, and makes them less reliant on help from witnesses, who for a variety of reasons are often reluctant to come forward. That is especially important in a city such as St Louis, which last year recorded a record 262 murders. Police solved just over one in three of them.

By comparison, London, with around 30 times as many people, reported 126 killings last year; nationally, American police forces solve more than three in five killings. Mr McNutt contends that PSS also has a deterrent effect: if people know they might be under surveillance, they will be less likely to commit crimes.

Yet many Americans are uneasy about being put under surveillance, despite having been suspected of committing no crimes. Baltimore first used PSS drones for eight months in 2016, but kept the programme secret until a report from Bloomberg Businessweek revealed its existence. The backlash was severe. The experiment ended, but in its aftermath Mr McNutt conducted extensive public outreach—involving as many as 80 community meetings, according to Benjamin Snyder, a professor of sociology at Williams College who was embedded with PSS.

In May 2020, Baltimore sent the drones aloft again for six months, this time after informing the public. One month afterwards, a survey taken by the University of Baltimore, in which most respondents came from high-crime neighbourhoods, found majority support for the programme.

A study from the RAND Corporation, a think-tank, concluded that PSS-derived evidence may have helped police solve multiple serious crimes in the city last year. And Mr McNutt notes that violent crime declined in Baltimore last year compared with 2019, for which he naturally credits his company.

Anyone with an iPhone can now make deepfakes. We aren't ready for what happens next.

By Geoffrey Fowler, 25 March 2021, *Washington Post* online

(477 words)

I've made George Washington sing disco and Marilyn Monroe blow me a kiss. With just a photo and an iPhone app, I can create a video of any face saying, or singing, whatever I want. And now so can you. The technology to create "deepfakes" — videos of people doing things that never really happened — has arrived on smartphones. It's simple, fun ... and also troubling.

The past few months have brought advances in this controversial technology that I knew were coming, but am still shocked to see. A few years ago, deepfake videos — named after the "deep learning" artificial intelligence used to generate faces — required a Hollywood studio or at least a crazy powerful computer. Then around 2020 came apps, like one called Reface, that let you map your own face onto a clip of a celebrity.

Now with a single source photo and zero technical expertise, an iPhone app called Avatarify lets you actually control the face of another person like a puppet. Using your phone's selfie camera, whatever you do with your own face happens on theirs. Avatarify doesn't make videos as sophisticated as pro fakes of Tom Cruise that have been flying on social network TikTok — but it has been downloaded more than 6 million times since February alone.

And MyHeritage, a genealogy website, lets anyone use deepfake tech to bring old still photos to life. Upload a shot of a long-lost relative or friend, and it produces a remarkably convincing short video of them looking around and smiling. Even the little wrinkles around the eyes look real. They call it "Deep Nostalgia" and have reanimated more than 65 million photos of people in the past four weeks. These deepfakes may not fool everyone, but it's still a cultural tipping point we aren't ready for. Forget laws to keep fakes from running amok, we hardly even have social norms for this stuff.

All three of the latest free services say they're mostly being used for positive purposes: satire, entertainment and historical re-creations. "It's all very cute when we do this with grandpa's pictures," says Michigan State University responsible-AI professor Anjana Susarla. "But you can take anyone's picture from social media and make manipulated images of them. That's what's concerning."

Last month, a digitally altered video showing Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the US House of Representatives, appearing to slur drunkenly through a speech was widely shared on Facebook and YouTube. The video was quickly debunked, but not before it had been viewed millions of times.

"There's potential harm to the viewer. There's harm to the subject of the thing. And then there's a broader harm to society in undermining trust," says Deborah Johnson, emeritus professor of applied ethics at the University of Virginia.

It's probably not realistic to think deepfake tech could be successfully banned. One 2019 effort in Congress to forbid some uses of the technology faltered. And at the risk of sounding obvious: we don't want to lose sight of what's real. Deepfakes are also a form of deception we're using on ourselves.

Are American values ruining European football?

James Montague, 20 April 2021, *New York Times*

(518 words)

When the announcement came late on Sunday that 12 of Europe's wealthiest soccer clubs were forming a lucrative breakaway Super League, the first person I thought of was Terry Crouppen, a personal-injury lawyer from Missouri who was also a huge fan of the St. Louis Rams.

To understand what this Missourian has to do with what is probably the most consequential development in soccer in 50 years, you first need to understand how different the business of European soccer is from the business of American football.

In American sports leagues, the norm is cartel-like structures, where owners control franchises and share revenue along the way. Sports franchises have been moving to different cities to maximize earnings — and tax breaks — with increasing regularity since the 1980s. It is a common practice and a highly profitable arrangement. But it is utterly alien to how soccer operates. Or at least, it has been.

Soccer clubs have traditionally been seen as community assets, rooted in a town or neighborhood. If there was an owner, he tended to be a local businessman done good, but owners were considered merely custodians of the club by the fan base. Teams almost never leave their city.

And absolutely central to almost every soccer league on earth is the idea of promotion and relegation, in effect a pyramid of leagues in which good performance over a season will move you up a league, bad performance down. It produces a meritocracy of sorts — a flawed one, but one that has kept even the biggest teams on their toes. Promotion and relegation are in European soccer's DNA but don't exist in U.S. sports. It's too big a risk to an owner's investment. Why plow money into a team when one bad season could cause you to lose your seat at the top table?

And then the European Super League was announced. The news that Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal, Tottenham, Barcelona, Real Madrid, Atletico Madrid, Juventus, Inter and AC Milan had cooked up a deal to effectively abandon the Champions League and replace it with a virtually closed, N.F.L.-style structure was met with almost unanimous fury across Europe. So much fury, in fact, that within 48 hours the entire scheme seemed to be collapsing under the weight of almost universally bad publicity.

But whatever happens, the Super League plan has proved to most fans that a cabal of superrich soccer club owners were willing to throw away a century of tradition to line their own pockets. This wasn't that surprising. Over the past two decades, European soccer has been taken over by billionaires — superrich owners from home and abroad. But Sunday's announcement was a move made in America.

A piece of advice for the 12 owners who have signed up for the European Super League: "Just because it's legal and you're rich enough to do it — that doesn't make it right." The world's 12 richest teams were about to blow up soccer because they were rich enough to do it. They will be back.

British families took bigger hit to income during Covid pandemic than Europeans

Michael Savage, Sun 18 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(513 words)

British households were plunged into the Covid pandemic with lower savings, more debt and weaker welfare support than their French and German counterparts, according to analysis revealing how inequality increased the impact of the UK crisis. High levels of income inequality also weakened the financial resilience of poorer households as the pandemic hit, despite similar levels of average income with our European neighbours.

The typical working-age income level in the UK is £29,437 and £29,350 in France. However, the poorest fifth of working-age households in the UK are 20% poorer than their French counterparts, while the richest fifth are 17% richer in Britain.

The structure of Britain's economy and income inequality is seen by some as a reason for the heavy impact the pandemic has had on the UK. Some public health officials continue to warn that incidences of the virus remain higher in areas with many people in low-paid work and where they cannot work from home. There have been warnings that it could become a "disease of the poor" in some areas.

High employment levels in the UK helped household finances in the run-up to the pandemic last year, with a 75% employment rate – broadly similar to that in Germany and far higher than the 66% record in France. However, the typical hourly rate paid in the UK (£11.20) was much lower than in Germany (£12.33) and France (£13.89). It was partly driven by low self-employed earnings, raising further concerns about the extent of the gig economy in Britain.

Levels of UK welfare support were found to be poor in comparison with other large European nations, underlining the importance of protecting jobs through the government's emergency furlough scheme. For example, a single adult who had been out of work for two months, having previously earned two-thirds of the average wage, would see their benefit income total just 17% of their previous earnings. The same person would see a benefit replacement rate of 59% in Germany and 64% in France. The gap is closed when housing-related benefits are included, with the UK's benefit replacement rate rising to 46%, compared with 59% in Germany and 68% in France. Household savings before the pandemic were lower in the UK than in France and Germany. Two-thirds of low-income households in Britain have savings that amount to less than one month's disposable income. The figure in France and Germany is 56%.

Overall, the study found that the combination of lower incomes at the bottom level of British earners, comparatively low levels of private savings, and a less generous social security safety net meant that UK households were "particularly exposed to economic shocks – such as the Covid-19 crisis that countries across the world have experienced over the past 12 months."

He added: "High levels of inequality in the UK mean our low-income families are poorer, have fewer savings and are more likely to have financial debt. And although UK households have more housing wealth and are more likely to work than households in France, the level of support available if they lose their jobs is far weaker."

California passes Prop 22 in a major victory for Uber and Lyft

Kari Paul and Julia Carrie Wong, Wed 4 Nov 2020, *The Guardian*

(word 506)

Uber and Lyft have won a major victory in their battle to continue classifying drivers as contractors, not employees, following the passage of a ballot measure that exempts them from a California labor law. On Tuesday, voters in California passed Proposition 22, the most expensive ballot-measure campaign in state history, which came to symbolize a bitter struggle over the future of the gig economy. Roughly 58% of ballots were cast in favor. The measure was backed by some of Silicon Valley's most powerful tech companies, including Uber, Lyft, Instacart and DoorDash, which spent upwards of \$200m on the efforts.

The companies claimed that AB5, a labor law passed in 2019 that changes the way companies classify employees, would drastically change how they do business. Uber and Lyft even threatened to pull out of California after a court order to comply with AB5 in August. Drivers and labor groups opposed Prop 22, saying it would allow companies to sidestep their obligations to provide benefits and standard minimum wages to their workers even as they make billions.

The Yes on Prop 22 campaign declared victory late on Tuesday, calling it "a win for drivers across California". Gig Workers Rising, one of several California groups that organizes app-based workers and opposed the initiative, called the victory "a loss for our democracy that could open the door to other attempts by corps to write their own laws". Nicole Moore, a driver and organizer with Rideshare Drivers United, said: "We were outspent 20:1. We were outgunned. But we haven't gotten this far because it was easy. We are fighters. And we punch above our weight. We stand strong when we stand together. We will fight – in the courts, in Sacramento and in the streets."

After the passage of Prop 22, workers at gig economy firms will continue to be classified as contractors, without access to employee rights such as minimum wage, unemployment benefits, and health insurance. The proposition carves out an exemption from AB5 for some driving and delivery apps. Uber and Lyft previously claimed their drivers were contractors and by classifying them as such they were in accordance with AB5. The law disagreed, as the state attorney general and two different courts ordered Uber to comply with AB5.

When Lyft went public in 2019, it was valued at \$22bn and had 1.9 million drivers working through its app. Uber was valued at \$82bn ahead of its initial public offering in May 2019 and had 3.9 million drivers. The companies fought tooth and nail to save their business model from the legislation, spending millions to plaster California with advertisements in support of the ballot measure for the last several months.

Under Prop 22, Uber and Lyft have conceded to supplying workers with some forms of benefits, though the protections will not be as extensive as they would have under AB5. Drivers will now get vouchers to access subsidized health insurance and guaranteed hourly earnings. The companies will also implement new safety measures including more frequent background checks of drivers.

Chauvin guilty verdict a landmark moment in US criminal justice history

Oliver Laughland, Tue 20 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(522 words)

The trial saw 44 witnesses and 15 days of testimony. And, in the end, less than a day to decide that Derek Chauvin, the white former Minneapolis police officer, was guilty of murdering George Floyd. It is a landmark moment not just in the history of US policing and criminal justice, but around the world. George Floyd's death came to embody the struggle for racial justice and equality in so many ways they are impossible to condense: from forceful calls for police reform in Minneapolis and new legislation in Washington, to a reckoning on the history of British imperialism in the UK and a resurgence in activism over Indigenous deaths in custody in Australia.

The evidence had always been clear. But despite the numerous exhibits displayed at trial, it was that single cell phone video, shot by a teenage girl who wept on the stand as she described witnessing George Floyd die, that continues to most vividly depict the details of Derek Chauvin's crimes. Floyd calls for his mother. He tells the officers who pin his body to the pavement for nine minutes and 29 seconds that he cannot breathe. And still Chauvin presses his knee into Floyd's neck, his hands in his pockets and sunglasses perched on his head, a use of fatal force that continued for minutes after officers could no longer feel his pulse.

Securing a conviction in the rare instances that officer-involved fatalities make it to criminal trial has always been an uphill battle for prosecutors. But from the moment the trial of Derek Chauvin began, it was clear that these proceedings were different from many that had come before. A number of senior officers from the Minneapolis police department, including the chief of police, Medaria Arradondo, took testified to decry Chauvin's actions on 25 May last year. The testimony was both damning and unprecedented. "To continue to apply that level of force to a person prone out, handcuffed behind their back – that in no way, shape or form is anything that is by policy," said Arradondo.

It also sets a precedent for other officer-involved fatalities that make it to trial: an expectation that police who are criminally charged over use of force may face testimony from their former superiors. However, for all the weight this verdict carries, there are many things it is not. It does not mark the end of disproportionate deadly force against African American men in the US. Just one week ago, 20-year-old Daunte Wright was shot dead by police during a traffic stop less than 10 miles from the courthouse where Chauvin stood trial.

Following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, Barack Obama's taskforce on 21st-century policing published a detailed report and produced a set of 59 recommendations. Many were pragmatic, but among the most perceptive remains a key and, as yet unrealized, suggestion for a cultural paradigm shift in US policing. From that of a "warrior" mindset to that of a "guardian". With such a decentralization of power in US law enforcement, it is hard to see how such a big change is possible to realize immediately.

Covid and civil liberties: keeping a close watch on government

Editorial, Wed 10 March 2021, *The Guardian*

(487 words)

Almost a year ago, with the full impact of the pandemic becoming evident, the human rights barrister Adam Wagner warned that it might lead to a suspension of human rights as a kind of “peacetime nicety”. This would be a mistake, he argued: the human rights system was developed precisely as a set of checks and balances, because societies tend to turn to illiberal measures in times of crisis.

Many of the restrictions adopted by governments over the last 12 months – which would previously have seemed extraordinary and draconian – have been necessary. As Mr Wagner noted, responding to Covid means balancing rights, including, of course, the right to life. Yet the decisions that states make can no longer be regarded as emergency measures; leaders and the public now understand that we are in this for the long haul.

It is also evident that some governments have gone much too far. A new report from the Civil Liberties Union for Europe, based in Germany, suggests that the pandemic has played an important part in weakening democracy across the continent, not only due to the curtailment of freedoms, but also through the use of fast track procedures for new laws, limiting oversight. In Eastern Europe – notably in Hungary, Poland and Slovenia – it has provided cover for power grabs, used as a pretext for further eroding democratic standards.

The danger is threefold: that governments assert more authority over our behaviour, that citizens are too distracted or tired to notice, and that our very sense of what controls over daily life are reasonable or unreasonable has shifted. It is in this context, perhaps, that alarming new provisions on protest in the portmanteau police, crime, sentencing and courts bill have received little attention. They give police new powers to tackle non-violent protests that have a “significant disruptive effect on the public or on access to parliament” – including setting conditions on the duration of protests, maximum noise levels and locations. As the Good Law Project noted: “The very purpose of the right to protest is to enable people to register their profound unhappiness or strength of feeling in a way which compels the state to respond. To legislate so that right cannot have any impact is to legislate it out of meaningful existence.”

The bill will also increase the maximum penalty for criminal damage of a memorial from three months to 10 years. What looks like a hysterical overreaction to a non-phenomenon is in reality a cynical nod to those fomenting a culture war.

Meanwhile, as the pandemic continues, we are faced with new challenges, such as whether and how proof of vaccination might be stored, shared or demanded. Difficult decisions must be made with proper time and scrutiny. Our choices now will have longer-term implications for the boundaries between the state and the individual.

The damage Covid has done to our lives should not be compounded by unnecessary damage to our freedoms.

Covid has pushed pop culture into nostalgia. It's time for something new

Mark Sinker, Sun 10 Jan 2021, *The Guardian*

(509 words)

A decade ago it was fashionable to be concerned that the future was on hold. Where were the flying cars and gleaming cities we had been promised? People worried that culture was increasingly trapped in its own past, awash with reissues and remakes. In contrast to most of the 20th century, very little in the world of music or cinema felt radically new. We seemed to have lost the will even to imagine any challenging way forward.

But this wasn't because the future had stopped. Technology was simply delivering it in a shape that seemed undramatic. We have come to think of the instant availability of nearly everything as an inevitability, yet what streaming platforms such as Spotify offer, with YouTube as vast, scrappy backup, is historically remarkable. And of course it feels liberating. But aren't there downsides to a centralised omni-archive? And, post-pandemic, where might pop culture – all culture – end up? Will it still be recycling the past, or will we once more be assailed with styles, sounds and visions hitherto undreamed of?

One problem is that revenue streams have cratered for individual artists: even before Covid, uselessly tiny slices of the royalty pie were all most creators received. We saw musicians falling back, when they could, on all year-tours, reunions and album recreations (until the year of the pandemic, when live performance also vanished). The market for the new remains grim. The pandemic may be beaten back, but a great cultural die-off threatens, targeting not just musicians but standups, actors, poets and more.

But if the arts are struggling, they've also never been in such demand. Mental comfort has mattered greatly of late, the safest past always the more soothing option. And so we spent 2020 joining LP listening parties or streaming old classics late into the night. As the algorithms clatter they can now and then nudge you into the more unexpected reaches of the familiar. But algorithmic curation is also so very limiting: each new pass through the already popular nudges you back towards the safely mainstream.

The culture industry is pretty happy with this as the status quo. In a glut*, all prices fall – and the cultural past is a glut that can't run out. It's paid for, it's easy to harvest, and the streaming machines can feed off it forever. Its size fills out the attention space and its solid hum reduces novelty to a sterile squeak.

Once upon a time, self-respecting avant garde artists, such as those within dada and punk, could just walk away from consensus practice, the better to plot to one day overthrow it (maybe). But refusing to cooperate with the culture industry, as musician-activist Terre Thaemlitz has long urged, can risk artists being wiped completely from its platforms and, therefore, from memory.

So what should those who want to break away from the past do? One option is for them to self-fund via subscription, to become the curators and bosses of their own individual sound-empires, via Bandcamp, Patreon, and more.

*a glut: overabundance, excess

Dirty laundry is something we can all identify with: How a mother-daughter standoff went viral

The Independent, 29 December 2020

(508 words)

It started with a dirty sock on the bathroom floor – an ordinary sight at Xep Campbell’s home. It then turned into a hilarious mother-daughter endeavour that reached thousands of people across the world. Campbell’s 10-year-old daughter, Kestrel, leaves random clothes lying around from time to time, and most often, Campbell – slightly annoyed – tosses them in the washing basket. This time, though, she didn’t, curious to see if Kestrel would eventually pick up the solo sock.

I just decided to see how long it would stay there without my intervention, says Campbell, adding that the sock remained on the white-tiled bathroom floor, untouched, for an entire week. Then Campbell, 45, opted to extend her parenting experiment. She put the sock on display literally. She turned the soiled sock into an art exhibit of sorts. First, she created a small museum label, complete with a black border and bold title, which she taped to the wall above the sock.

She gave the display a name: “The Forgotten Sock”. “I thought, oh, that will be funny, and she will roll her eyes at me and pick up the sock,” Campbell says. Rather than reacting with a giggle (or an eye roll) and throwing the neglected sock in the laundry basket, Kestrel decided to play along. She positioned the sock on a wooden pedestal she made last year, a contribution she says elevated the exhibit. Campbell says the display needed an audience. So they placed barn animals around the sock, and even erected a mysterious monolith – a nod to the structures that have popped up (and subsequently disappeared) in recent weeks around the world.

Many people urged Campbell to capitalise on the story in some way (some suggested she write a book), but she declined. Instead, she updated the original Facebook post and wrote, “If this moved you or made you giggle in a way that felt really good and that you want to give something back, a donation to this amazing organisation called Jumping Mouse Children’s Centre would mean a lot to me.” Again, to her surprise, hundreds of people made donations to the local charity in honour of the spontaneous Forgotten Sock exhibit.

We got 75 donations in three hours. This has never happened for us, says Whitney Friddle, the development manager at the organisation, which provides expressive mental health therapy to children who wouldn’t otherwise have access to support. In less than a week, nearly \$10,000 was raised, from donors in 11 countries.

Donations have been coming in from everywhere, all over the country and all over the world. And all of them have these lovely notes: in honour of the Forgotten Sock, in honour of this mother and daughter bond, in honour of the joy this brought me today, Friddle says. The unexpected surge of funds is especially meaningful to Jumping Mouse Children’s Centre during the pandemic.

Europe proposes strict rules for Artificial Intelligence

Adam Satariano, 21 April 2021, *New York Times*

(486 words)

The European Union unveiled strict regulations on Wednesday to govern the use of artificial intelligence, a first-of-its-kind policy that outlines how companies and governments can use a technology seen as one of the most significant, but ethically fraught, scientific breakthroughs in recent memory.

The draft rules would set limits around the use of artificial intelligence in a range of activities, from self-driving cars to hiring decisions, bank lending, school enrollment selections and the scoring of exams. It would also cover the use of artificial intelligence by law enforcement and court systems — areas considered “high risk” because they could threaten people’s safety or fundamental rights.

Some uses would be banned altogether, including live facial recognition in public spaces, though there would be several exemptions for national security and other purposes.

The 108-page policy is an attempt to regulate an emerging technology before it becomes mainstream. The rules have far-reaching implications for major technology companies that have poured resources into developing artificial intelligence, including Amazon, Google, Facebook and Microsoft, but also scores of other companies that use the software to develop medicine, underwrite insurance policies and judge credit worthiness. Governments have used versions of the technology in criminal justice and the allocation of public services like income support.

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But Europe is no longer alone in pushing for tougher oversight. The largest technology companies are now facing a broader reckoning from governments around the world, each with its own political and policy motivations, to crimp the industry’s power.

Even if the pandemic abates, FitXR thinks home fitness is the future

By Dalvin Brown, 16 April 2021, *The Washington Post* online

(500 words)

More than a year into the pandemic, indoor fitness classes remain risky. While vaccine adoption, capacity limits, mask requirements and enhanced cleaning may make the activity safer, you can't get around the fact that people are exhaling rapidly in enclosed spaces, potentially spewing respiratory droplets all over the place.

The situation partially explains the accelerated adoption of at-home fitness tech, where digital leaderboards on mirrors and virtual high-fives on stationary bikes provide a proxy for actual group workouts. Digital fitness startup FitXR wants to push the boundaries further with a VR workout class designed to more closely feel like real life.

Imagine wearing a VR headset, and being transported into a glitzy wellness club with a sunroof and funky lighting. The class starts and you rapidly throw punches at virtual objects hurled your way to a synchronized tempo. Your heart rate climbs. The sweat is real. And you can see other people in your peripheral vision doing the same thing, only it's their avatars.

That's what the next level of FitXR is all about. On Thursday, the London-based company rolled out a slew of updates to its app on Facebook's Oculus headsets to make boxing and dancing in VR more engaging. The startup, formally BoxVR, says it wants to become the "virtual fitness destination" of the future, and unlocking new features might be one step toward getting it there. "Anyone who's attended a great group class knows that exercising with others, synchronously to the music in a nightclub environment with an instructor, is a powerfully motivating experience," said Sam Cole, cofounder at FitXR. "Our entire vision is about delivering a virtual fitness club, and, and therefore providing people with the most fun way to workout at home."

FitXR also added multiplayer mode, a highly-requested feature designed to allow people to talk to each other virtually as if they're in an actual fitness class. Multiplayer allows up to seven members to exercise in a virtual room together in real-time. I tried it out, and it's entertaining to experience. There's still room for growth, however. All you see is your friend's digital head and fists in the corner of your eye while you focus on burning calories.

VR workouts aren't for everyone. You need a \$299 Oculus headset, cheap by virtual reality headset standards but still expensive if you aren't convinced it's worth it.

FitXR and other fitness apps got a big boost amid the ongoing coronavirus health crisis as gyms temporarily shuttered or curbed offerings while more people spent more time at home. Facebook says FitXR was one of the top non-gaming apps on Oculus and has one of the highest retention rates.

It's unclear how prepared the world is to continue to work out at home, and how many more people will welcome sweating with a VR headset covering half their face. But with many spending big bucks for on-demand spinning classes and high-tech gym equipment, the trend seems poised to outlast the pandemic.

Everyone should pay the taxes they owe. Could there be bipartisan agreement on this?

By Editorial Board, 16 April 2021, *Washington Post* online

(481 words)

There was a rare note of bipartisanship at a Senate Finance Committee hearing April 13, as Republican ranking member Mike Crapo (Idaho) expressed agreement with Democratic chairman Ron Wyden's determination to close the huge federal "tax gap" — that is, the difference between what taxpayers legally owe the government and what they pay. The gap is estimated at \$441 billion per year in the 2011-2013 period, the most recent for which official data exists. (Late payments and amounts recovered by enforcement reduce that gross figure by \$60 billion per year.) The annual amount has almost certainly grown since then, due, in part, to the proliferation of cryptocurrencies, which barely existed in 2013 but now have an aggregate global value approaching \$2 trillion. The Internal Revenue Service commissioner, Charles Rettig, told Mr. Wyden (Ore.) that he would not be surprised if the gross tax gap has reached \$1 trillion a year.

That eye-popping amount would have offset about a third of the fiscal 2020 federal budget deficit — and would entirely wipe out the \$905 billion shortfall that the Congressional Budget Office projects for fiscal 2024. To be sure, those are hypotheses, not realistic goals, for two reasons. First, even a very aggressive federal tax-compliance effort could not eliminate all of the tax gap. Second, Mr. Rettig's guesstimate is just that — and may overstate the case. The most substantial published academic assessment, a 2019 paper by former treasury secretary Lawrence H. Summers and University of Pennsylvania finance expert Natasha Sarin, projected a \$750 billion yearly average tax gap between 2020 and 2029, and predicted that about \$115 billion of it could be recouped annually through enhanced enforcement.

The bottom line, though, is clear: The tax gap is real, it is large, and it disproportionately reflects taxes owed, but not paid, by relatively well-to-do people. (The IRS has the help of employers in collecting taxes on ordinary wage-earners, via their W-2 forms.) One area for reform — that probably would not require legislation — would be for the IRS to see whether it can generate tax gap data in a more timely manner; an update on the 2011-2013 figures will not be available until 2022. Meaningful progress in collection, however, will require more resources and, as Mr. Rettig told the hearing, modernized legal and regulatory authorities.

Along with Ms. Sarin's recruitment to a key Treasury Department policy position, and the Biden administration's request for a 10.4 percent IRS spending increase, the recent Senate hearing is the latest welcome sign that tax compliance will receive the emphasis and the funding it needs, after years of neglect in part due to Republican-supported budget cuts. If Mr. Crapo's remark represents a shift in his party's long-standing hostility to the IRS, it could portend a stronger agency. GOP recognition that it's not responsible to favor both lower tax rates for top earners and weak enforcement of them would be as constructive as it is overdue.

Facebook accused of not removing hate speech in complaint under Australia's racial discrimination laws

Josh Taylor, Wed 21 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(475 words)

Facebook is facing a complaint under Australia's Racial Discrimination Act that the company is not doing enough to moderate against hate speech. The Australian Muslim Advocacy Network (Aman) announced on Wednesday it had lodged a complaint under sections nine and 18(c) of the act with the Australian Human Rights Commission over what the group says is Facebook's failure to rein in hateful speech on its platform.

The complaint alleges Facebook allows pages that state they are "anti-Islam" and host hateful content about Middle Eastern, African, South Asian and Asian people. Guardian Australia understands the organisation had been in discussions with Facebook about its policy for a year, and the source of frustration that led to the complaint from the organisation was the need to report violating content themselves, rather than Facebook proactively removing it.

"Our concern is that Facebook only takes action when the community does the heavy lifting in documenting the violations and is prepared to escalate through media," Aman adviser Rita Jabri-Markwell said in a statement. "Our community has experienced many attacks on mosques, as well as on individuals and families living their lives. "But it is not only Muslims who are affected. Research has clearly shown anti-Muslim populist movements online have been the main force behind the growth in rightwing extremism."

Facebook's hate speech policy bans attacks on people based on protected characteristics – such as religion, race, gender or sexuality – but allows attacks and criticisms of ideas about those protected characteristics, so pages criticising religion are allowed.

"We do not allow hate speech on Facebook and regularly work with experts, non-profits and stakeholders to help make sure Facebook is a safe place for everyone, recognising anti-Muslim rhetoric can take different forms," a Facebook spokesperson said. "We have invested in AI technologies to take down hate speech, and we proactively detect 97% of what we remove."

Facebook said in its last community standards enforcement report that in 2020, the company increased the amount of content removal on hate speech by 400%, with 97.1% of hate speech content removed automatically without it being reported by users. Most recently, Facebook allows all pages and profiles to turn off comments on posts – however, that is up to the administrator of the page or profile to decide.

Once a complaint is lodged with the Australian Human Rights Commission, the president of the commission can investigate the complaint and seek to resolve it through conciliation. If the complaint is not resolved it can be taken to the federal court. Conservative politicians have fought for nearly a decade to repeal parts or all of section 18(c) of the act, which makes unlawful any act that offends, insults, humiliates or intimidates someone because of their race. *The News Corp* columnist Andrew Bolt was found to have breached the act in 2011, when he wrote a controversial article about Aboriginal people.

Facebook and Donald Trump

April 17th, 2021, *The Economist*

(522 words)

Since January, Donald Trump has been missing from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, after his online posts about the Capitol riot in Washington, DC, caused the firms to suspend his accounts for inciting violence. For many Americans, the sound of silence is welcome. Without the megaphone of social media, Mr Trump is muted. Facebook has not just blocked his account but is scrubbing other users' content that features his voice.

The ban raises questions about free speech and online platforms' power. Even Senator Bernie Sanders, no Trump fan, confesses to feeling uncomfortable that the ex-president has been silenced by a "handful of high-tech people". YouTube's boss, Susan Wojcicki, has said the video firm will lift its suspension only "when we determine that the risk of violence has decreased". Twitter will not relent, full-stop.

Facebook is taking a different approach. Mark Zuckerberg, its boss, made the call to suspend Mr Trump's account. But whether to reverse that will be decided this month by 19 experts on the firm's Oversight Board (OB), in effect its "Supreme Court". The board's decision will be a high-profile test of whether a middle ground between unfettered corporate autonomy and government regulation can be an effective tool in tackling thorny decisions on content.

Mr Zuckerberg floated the idea of the board in 2018, and its first slate of members was announced last year. It is meant to be an independent body that can render binding decisions on the social-media giant and suggest policy tweaks. Facebook has put \$130m into a trust to fund it for at least six years. Board members are a global bevy of brainiacs: ten are academics, five work in non-profits and think-tanks, two hail from journalism, one from politics and one is a Nobel peace laureate. "All the members have free speech as part of their core values," says Ronaldo Lemos, a Brazilian lawyer who is an OB member.

After posts are removed, users of Facebook and its sister social network Instagram can appeal to the OB; this has happened some 300,000 times. The board sifts through appeals to choose cases, which it has 90 days to adjudicate. Facebook itself can also refer cases directly to the OB, as it did with Mr Trump. A computer randomly assigns each case to a five-member panel. Board members are part-time, but the OB employs 40 staff, who help with case selection and research, rather like Supreme Court clerks.

Just as interested parties in Supreme Court cases can submit briefs, people can submit comments to the board. So far it has taken up 12 cases and received 10,000 comments, 9,800 of them related to the Trump ban.

When the panel reaches a conclusion, the majority of the board has to approve the decision, which is then written up and made public. It does not take into account the laws of any specific country but weighs Facebook's "community standards" and "values" with international human-rights law. It can also coax Facebook to make changes to its policies. Some of Facebook's tweaks to handling anti-vax content were a response to the board's criticisms.

Facebook tries to pre-empt regulation by squeezing anti-vaxxers

February 11th, 2021, *The Economist*

(482 words)

On February 8th Facebook announced that it was taking another stand on what could not appear on its platform: falsehoods about vaccinations. The company will now remove posts and block groups that claim vaccines make people ill or cause autism; previously the company had only demoted such claims, giving them less prominence in users' feeds and in search results.

Facebook and other internet companies have been under pressure by politicians and the press to do more to police anti-vax content since 2019, when measles outbreaks in New York prompted a flurry of nonsense. Covid-19 has given the subject new urgency and attention.

In America social-media platforms are not only tools for spreading misinformation but also for co-ordination. The anti-vax campaigners who briefly halted immunisations at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles used a Facebook page to organise, says Allison Winnike, boss of the Immunisation Partnership, a non-profit that raises awareness of vaccinations.

Campaigners are also employing social media to push anti-vax bills in many American states, says Joe Smyser, who runs Public Good Projects, a non-profit focused on public health. For example, one proposed bill circulating in Kentucky tries to eliminate all vaccine requirements for employees. Another aims to create a pre-emptive opt-out in case covid-19 vaccinations are ever required.

Just how much Facebook will actually curb vaccine misinformation is an open question. Showing users truthful content in their feeds and searches will help, but removing problematic content could also drive users to other platforms. After Facebook and Twitter cracked down on accounts promoting QAnon conspiracies, those users just went elsewhere, says Renee DiResta of the Stanford Internet Observatory. "Social-media companies run the risk of turning what should be something that could be easily addressed with a label into forbidden knowledge," she says.

Nor is everyone comfortable with Facebook's employees, contractors, Oversight Board and the 80 external firms that do various degrees of fact-checking suggesting what should be erased. "Censoring speech and pretending you can make it go away is really problematic," says Matt Perault, a former director of public policy at Facebook who now runs Duke University's Centre on Science and Technology Policy.

The decision to combat anti-vax propaganda may have as much to do with Facebook's own public-relations problems as its desire to cleanse its platform of life-threatening fabrications. In Washington, Democratic leaders are putting the squeeze on platforms to do more to police content. In January three Democratic senators, including Amy Klobuchar, sent a letter to internet companies demanding action to combat vaccine misinformation.

Facebook may be reading today's political mood correctly, since Democrats control the House, Senate and White House. But its actions risk further alienating conservatives who are concerned about the censorship of free speech, and revive discussion about antitrust enforcement among the many politicians who worry about the dominance of big tech.

Fears of police exodus after officers spend year picking up pieces of rushed Covid laws

The Independent, 21 March 2021

(511 words)

Police have been left to “pick up the pieces” of hastily written and badly communicated laws through a year of the coronavirus pandemic, officers have said amid warnings of a looming exodus when restrictions ease. Senior figures said that serious concerns, including the potential for miscarriages of justice, were highlighted as far back as last April but were not properly addressed.

They accuse the government of failing to properly consult on changes to coronavirus laws, introducing them too quickly for police to immediately enforce, confusing the public with gaps between guidance and law and over exaggerating how strictly restrictions would be policed.

There are fears of an “exodus from policing” after the end of the pandemic, with many officers saying they are “sick and tired” of juggling the competing demands of coronavirus laws and normal crime. Rank-and-file police officers were not told of the first national lockdown before it was announced by Boris Johnson on 23 March 2020.

The prime minister told the public that if they did not follow unprecedented rules, “the police will have the powers to enforce them”, but laws underpinning restrictions did not come into force for another three days and have since changed more than 60 times in England alone. A recent survey by the Police Federation, which represents more than 130,000 officers in England and Wales, found that only one in ten thought that Covid-19 laws were “clear”.

Brian Booth, chair of the Police Federation’s West Yorkshire branch, said Officers have had enough, they are sick and tired of this, and as soon as the job market reopens I think you’ll see quite an exodus from policing. He said he felt there was no way to police some requirements, such as bans on gatherings in private homes and gardens, when coronavirus laws did not create a power of entry.

Ken Marsh, chair of the Metropolitan Police Federation, said: “The laws have been changed 67 times in the last 12 months. At times we were given less than 24 hours to disseminate them, act on them and understand them. “We were then vilified if we got it wrong, we were abused and harassed by the public, and then we got given another law.”

Analysis of figures released from a Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) review show almost a third of the 1,420 charges so far brought under coronavirus laws in England and Wales were wrong and had to be withdrawn or quashed. Lawyers fear that a substantial proportion of the 70,000 or so fines issued in the same period were also unlawful, but that most people will have paid up rather than appear in court.

Harriet Harman, chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, commented the result has been that individuals have been prosecuted and fines have been issued for behaviour that was entirely lawful, the Labour MP added. More needs to be done to protect innocent citizens from being wrongly criminalised and penalised.”

Food banks: put them out of business

Editorial, Tue 10 Nov 2020, *The Guardian*

(497 words)

The latest grim batch of employment figures, released on Tuesday by the Office for National Statistics, confirms the scale of the cumulative economic misery unleashed by Covid-19. From July to September, a record 314,000 people lost their jobs, as the government's furlough scheme became less generous and employers felt the squeeze. That was an increase of 181,000 on the previous quarter, also a record. Early estimates suggest a further cull of 33,000 employees in October.

The predicament of those out of work is deepened by a vertiginous drop in vacancies, as businesses retrench and look to tough out the second wave of the pandemic. Adverts for jobs paying the minimum wage are attracting hundreds of desperate applicants.

Against this bleak backdrop, the local food bank has become the most vital institution in many people's lives. In October, the Guardian followed the work of the Welcome Centre food bank in Huddersfield, which during the month gave almost 30,000 meals to people in need. An unprecedented number were first-time visitors, casualties of a turn of events that saw them fall straight through the supposed safety net provided by welfare benefits.

There were stories of precarity and vulnerability that were exacerbated by the pandemic but, in many cases, predated it. The cost of repairing a broken fridge or a cancelled shift had turned lives upside down, sparking a cycle of debt. The notorious lag in payments to new universal credit applicants has prompted the Welcome Centre to develop a five-week food pack to keep people going. A family of six had struggled in June when one parent lost their job, and again this autumn when their partner contracted Covid. Many users are embarrassed and bewildered to be there.

The ongoing work of volunteers in food banks such as these, and the generous contributions from individuals and businesses that keep them going, are filling a gap where the state should be. During the October school half-term, when donations provided the free school meals that the government had refused to fund, Marcus Rashford tweeted: "Selflessness, kindness, togetherness, this is the England I know." But the fifth-largest economy in the world should not be relying on volunteers and charity to save people from destitution.

At the weekend, as the world focused on events in America, Boris Johnson U-turned for a second time on free school meals, bowing to Mr Rashford's demands for greater food support for the poor throughout the winter and during holidays. Such concessions are welcome, but seem to come about only as a result of intense pressure and lobbying. Many struggling families will not be eligible for the new support and will continue to require places like the Welcome Centre. A change of mindset is required, or, more accurately, a change of heart. The state has a moral duty to ensure that admirable organisations like this do not need to exist.

Foreign students in Britain

April 10th, 2021, *The Economist*

(491 words)

Last year Ann, a Chinese student who likes to use an English name, decided to plough ahead with her plan to study at Sheffield University, despite uncertainty about the spread of covid-19. When her postgraduate course started in September she dialled into lessons from her home in Shandong province; in January she came to Britain, even though she knew that would mean weathering a lockdown.

Because her course only lasts a year she wants to be in a position to get out and about as soon as restrictions are loosened. She says she is not too worried about the virus, having bagged a vaccine in China before she flew out.

That foreigners still seem enthusiastic about studying in Britain has come as a big relief to universities. Last spring vice-chancellors warned that tens of thousands of international students would choose not to enrol because of the pandemic. The University and College Union forecast that the number starting new courses could fall by half. Because most international students pay vastly higher tuition fees than British ones, a slump risked poking huge holes in universities' finances. Citing the risk of bankruptcies, Universities UK (UUK), a lobby group, tried and failed to convince the government to offer the sector a bail-out worth about £2bn.

The data available so far suggests that things are turning out better than foreseen. In December UCAS, a body that processes university applications, reported that the number of foreigners given places on undergraduate courses last autumn had risen by nearly 11% compared with the previous year.

There is less information about postgraduates, who make up more than half of foreign students and who are thought to be more likely to have put their study plans on hold. Vivienne Stern of UUK thinks it is possible that when all the sums are done the total number of enrolled foreigners could be similar to the number recorded before covid-19 hit.

Some universities will still see shortfalls, and because many foreign students are studying remotely they are spending less than normal on accommodation and other living costs. But given the grisly expectations, says Ms Stern, recruitment has gone "ridiculously" well.

In part Britain has benefited from the misfortunes of competitors. A survey published in November found that the number of foreigners starting new courses at American universities had fallen more than 40%. Their number had been trending downwards throughout Donald Trump's presidency. His rhetoric last spring and summer, when many foreign students were finalising their travel plans, did not persuade them that America would get infections under control.

Australia, another popular destination, has not been able to say when border controls that presently prevent students from entering the country might be relaxed. Figures released in January showed that the total number of foreign students enrolled at its universities had decreased nearly 20% from their peak a few months prior to the pandemic.

‘Four years of propaganda’: Trump social media bans come too late, experts say

Kari Paul, Fri 8 Jan 2021, *The Guardian*

(494 words)

In the 24 hours since the US Capitol in Washington was seized by a Trump-supporting mob disputing the results of the 2020 election, American social media companies have barred the president from their platforms for spreading lies and inciting the crowd. Facebook, Snapchat and Twitch suspended Donald Trump indefinitely. Twitter locked his account temporarily. Multiple platforms removed his messages.

Those actions, coming just days before the end of Trump’s presidency, are too little, too late, according to misinformation experts and civil rights experts who have long warned about the rise of misinformation and violent rightwing rhetoric on social media sites and Trump’s role in fueling it.

Over the past decade, tech platforms have been reluctant to moderate Trump’s posts, even as he repeatedly violated hate speech regulations. Before winning the presidency, Trump used Twitter to amplify his racist campaign asserting, falsely, that Barack Obama was not born in the US. As president, he shared racist videos targeting Muslims on Twitter and posted on Facebook in favor of banning Muslims from entering the US, a clear violation of the platform’s policies against hate speech. He retweeted to his tens of millions of followers a video of one of his supporters shouting “white power!” in 2020 June. He appeared to encourage violence against Black Lives Matter protests in a message shared to multiple platforms that included the phrase “when the looting starts, the shooting starts”.

Trump’s lies and rhetoric found an eager audience online – one that won’t disappear when his administration ends. Experts warn the platforms will continue to be used to organize and perpetuate violence. They point, for example, to Facebook and YouTube’s failure to curb the proliferation of dangerous conspiracy theory movements like QAnon, a baseless belief that a secret cabal is controlling the government and trafficking children and that Trump is heroically stopping it. By the time the company banned QAnon-themed groups, pages and accounts in October, hundreds of related pages and groups had amassed more than 3 million followers and members.

In the absence of any meaningful regulation, tech companies have had little incentive to regulate their massively profitable platforms, curb the spread of lies that produce engagement and moderate the president. That’s why experts say things have to change. In 2020, Republicans and Democrats amplified calls to regulate big tech. The events this week underscore that the reckoning over big tech must include measures aimed at addressing the risks posed by leaders lying and promoting violence on their platforms.

“The violence that we witnessed today in our nation’s capital is a direct response to the misinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech that have been allowed to spread on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc,” said Jim Steyer, who runs Common Sense Media. “Social media platforms must be held accountable for their complicity in the destruction of our democracy,”, arguing that in absence of meaningful enforcement from social media, Congress must pass better legislation to address hate speech on these platforms.

Hackers said they could steal a Tesla Model X in minutes

By Faiz Siddiqui, 23 November 2020, *The Washington Post* online

(480 words)

San Francisco — Tesla's Internet-connected cars can receive new features and safety updates over the air, one of the key conveniences of the fully electric fleet. But the cars' connectedness can pose a risk, too, security researchers say.

Case in point: Belgian researchers found they could hack and steal a Tesla Model X SUV in a matter of minutes through a Bluetooth-connected key fob. They said that forced Tesla to push out a fix.

It was the latest security experiment from the COSIC, a research group of Imec and the University of Leuven in Belgium, which had previously found a similar vulnerability with Tesla's Model S luxury sedan, where a key fob was also to blame.

The researchers said they were able to break into the SUV, which starts at \$80,000, using a few hundred dollars' worth of equipment. Researchers noted that process took about 90 seconds. The researchers, who informed the company of their findings on Aug. 17, said Tesla is rolling out an update intended to address the issue. An over-the-air software update is being pushed to the key fobs, they said, which will better lock them down. Wired was first to report on the vulnerability. Tesla did not respond to a request for comment.

Lennert Wouters, a PhD student at the COSIC research group, said in an email that the problem is not necessarily unique to Tesla. "This system was developed in-house by Tesla, so this exact vulnerability most likely only applies to the Tesla Model X," he wrote. "However, other keyfobs which have an insecure firmware update mechanism could also be vulnerable to a similar attack."

Among the key vulnerabilities, Wouters noted: the lack of "cryptographic signatures" in the firmware update process, meaning a key fob has no secure way of certifying whether an update is legitimate; and an insecure pairing protocol that allowed a new, modified key fob to be paired to a Model X. Equipment to break into the car included a \$35 Raspberry Pi computer, a modified key fob and a salvaged Tesla Model X control unit bought off eBay. Researchers used the spare control unit to get key fobs within several meters to advertise themselves as "connectable." After that, they pushed out a software update to the key fobs that would "acquire a valid unlock message" so they could unlock the car later, Wouters said. They noted that the software in Tesla's key fobs could be updated without an additional layer of security that would verify its authenticity.

"As this update mechanism was not properly secured, we were able to wirelessly compromise a key fob and take full control over it," Wouters said in a news release. "Subsequently we could obtain valid unlock messages to unlock the car later on."

The Model X hacking technique isn't Wouters' first time exposing vulnerabilities in Tesla's keyless entry systems. More unique for Tesla, Wouters points out, is that unlike many other automakers it has the ability to push out OTA software patches rather than requiring that drivers bring their key fobs to a dealer to be updated or replaced, offering Tesla owners a lifeline to fix the problem.

If you care about privacy, it's time to try a new web browser

By Brian X Chen, 31 March 2021, *The New York Times*

(475 words)

Most of us use web browsers out of habit. If you surf the web with Microsoft Edge, that may be because you use Windows. If you use Safari, that's probably because you are an Apple customer. If you are a Chrome user, that could be because you have a Google phone or laptop, or you downloaded the Google browser on your personal device after using it on computers at school or work.

In other words, we turn to the browsers that are readily available and familiar. It's easy to fall into browser inertia because these apps are all fast, capable and serve the same purpose: visiting a website.

So if the differences are minimal, why bother looking for something else? Because there is another type of internet navigator called a private browser. This kind of browser, from less-known brands like DuckDuckGo and Brave, has emerged over the last three years. What stands out is that they minimize the data gathered about us by blocking the technologies used to track us.

We have also reached an inflection point in digital privacy. The online advertising industry is on the brink of ceasing to use web cookies, pieces of code planted in browsers that follow us from site to site and help target us with ads. Google, whose Chrome browser is the world's most popular, has been trying to develop a new way to target us with ads without the cookie. Let's not wait for that. You can decide now that you don't want to be tracked. Unlike mainstream web browsers, private browsers come in many forms that serve different purposes. The most popular options are DuckDuckGo, Brave and Firefox Focus.

What is a private browser? It's important to know what private browsers do, and what they don't. Private browsers generally incorporate web technologies that have been around for years: They rely on something called private mode, also known as incognito mode, which is a browsing session that does not record a history of the websites you have visited.

Private browsers also use tracker blockers, which can often be downloaded as an add-on for a browser. The blockers depend on a list of known trackers that grab information about your identity. Whenever you load a website, the software then detects those trackers and restricts them from following you from site to site. Privacy-focused browsers typically turn private mode on by default, or automatically purge browsing history when you quit the browser.

In the end, you probably would be happy using any of the private browsers. For me, Brave won by a hair. My favorite websites loaded flawlessly, and I enjoyed the clean look of ad-free sites, along with the flexibility of opting in to see ads whenever I felt like it. "If everybody used Brave, it would wipe out the tracking-based ad economy," he said. Count me in.

Inside the ‘digital cleanse’ companies taking on cancel culture

Jemima Kelly, 21 April 2021, *The Financial Times*

(495 words)

Gary Lineker is describing his three rules of Twitter usage. “I never tweet when I’ve had a drink. I never tweet if I’m angry... And the third one is that when I do a tweet, I read it back to myself and if I have even a one per cent doubt about it then I won’t post it. Unless I think it’s really funny and then I might.”

The former footballer, broadcaster and prolific Twitter user’s caution is symptomatic of a new digital culture in which one bad tweet can get you fired. In the febrile world of social-media activism, our professional, private and even romantic profiles are now routinely combed for crumbs of controversial content. This is a world in which everyone – from actors and television personalities to politicians, CEOs and ordinary citizens – can be “cancelled” overnight.

We live in unforgiving times. Once any kind of hastily thought-out idea, embarrassing photo or drunken attempt at humour has been committed to the internet, it becomes part of an indelible record of our lives. Recent weeks have seen a host of cancellations, or attempted ones.

The longtime host of television show *The Bachelorette* has stepped aside after he refused to condemn the college behaviour of a contestant on sister show *The Bachelor*. Condé Nast’s decision to appoint 27-year-old Alexi McCammond as the new editor-in-chief of *Teen Vogue* was thwarted when staffers revisited a series of anti-Asian and homophobic tweets McCammond had posted on Twitter as a 17-year-old student. In the face of fierce opposition, McCammond’s past actions were considered too great an obstacle to the transition, and the publishing house has since announced that the pair have made a joint decision “to part ways”.

Our online reputations have never been quite so important. Whether we’re considering giving someone a job, investing in their business, letting them rent out our home or even going on a date, the first thing most of us do these days is a spot of what you might call online due diligence. We Google them, we carry out an image search, we look them up on YouTube and we seek them out on social media. We want to make sure we’re not hiring a sex offender to look after our kids, investing in a serial con artist’s business or going on a date with a psychopath (or someone a lot less appealing than their curated online profile might suggest).

However, before we all rush out to create a “cancel-proof” digital presence, maybe we should also consider becoming a less censorious society that allows for people making mistakes. If we don’t, we might end up with a world in which only the most compliant and banal people – those who have never dared to deviate from the consensus – or those who have been wealthy enough to afford the most deep-dive online-cleansing services, are vaulted into positions of real power.

Just Eat to offer 1,500 Liverpool couriers minimum hourly rate and sick pay

Sarah Butler, Wed 21 Apr 2021, *The Guardian*

(524 words)

Just Eat is to offer 1,500 takeaway couriers in Liverpool minimum pay, sick pay and holiday pay by the end of the year as it shifts away from using independent contractors. The food delivery group, which recently began building its own courier network in the UK alongside putting customers in touch with takeaways that carry out their own delivery, said it would expand a worker model for couriers that it was already operating in London and Birmingham, where 2,000 riders had signed up.

The latest expansion comes after the Just Eat boss, Jitse Groen, said he wanted to end gig-working across Europe at his company. Like rivals including Deliveroo, most of the takeaways delivered via Just Eat are transported by self-employed contractors without guaranteed pay or paid sick leave. Some are under direct contracts and some work via courier firms.

The group's new model stops short of giving riders full benefits enjoyed by employees, but as "workers" – employed via the independent Randstad agency which Just Eat's parent company uses across Europe – they are entitled to more than the legal minimum in hourly pay, pension contributions and benefits including holiday pay and sick pay.

Riders also work set shifts, are provided with e-bikes or e-mopeds, which are maintained by the company, and will have the option to operate from a central hub, where they can pick up equipment and take breaks. They can no longer work for several other apps at the same time as delivering for Just Eat.

Andrew Kenny, the UK managing director of Just Eat, said: "We recognise our responsibility to provide couriers with the best possible opportunities and we're delighted that almost 2,000 jobs have already been created as part of our worker model. We've reached this milestone significantly ahead of schedule and following a positive response in London and Birmingham, we're excited to roll this out to Liverpool, creating 1,500 more roles this year.

The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain said Just Eat's new model was "a step in the right direction but still not where it should be to offer a sustainable job that people can build a life around". Alex Marshall, the president of the union said riders were paid little more than the legal minimum wage per hour. He added that gig-economy riders working for the likes of the courier firm Stuart, which had been previously delivering takeaways ordered via Just Eat in many UK cities, were not being offered first choice of the new roles. Just Eat said that its new worker roles were "open to anyone that wants to apply to them and [current] riders are not discouraged from applying".

Gig economy companies are having to consider change after Uber was forced to pay its UK private hire drivers minimum wage and holiday pay when the UK Supreme Court backed a 2016 employment tribunal ruling that its drivers should be classed as workers. The takeaway courier business Deliveroo's stock market debut was hit by concerns about the employment status of its workers after it emerged that the company had set aside £112m to cover potential legal costs relating to efforts to improve their rights.

Local apps reduce food waste in LA

By Dakota Kim, April 15th, 2021, *The LA Times*

(503 words)

Although food insecurity has increased during the pandemic, the United States remains a country that can't seem to deal with high rates of food waste. The U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2010 estimated that 30% to 40% of the consumer food supply, around 133 billion pounds and \$161 billion of food, is wasted every year.

In 2015, the agency set a goal with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to reduce nationwide food waste by 50% by 2030, and the EPA has created the Excess Food Opportunities Map to help users divert their food waste from landfills to food banks, anaerobic digestion sites and composting sites.

On a hyperlocal level, apps and online groups are popping up that share the goal of getting food to those who need it most. That need shows no signs of abating. Although the U.S. economy added 916,000 jobs in March and the unemployment rate dropped to 6% from 6.2% percent in February, officials estimate it will take months — or years — to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Bat Vardeh, the Los Angeles-based founder of the 530-member Facebook group Foraging and Mushroom Hunting Women of SoCal, says she has seen an increase in food changing hands since the pandemic began.

“With so many unemployed and struggling to make ends meet right now, I’ve noticed an uptick in our group of foraging, trading and giving,” said Vardeh, who facilitates donations to the Valley Food Bank by contacting Glendale and Claremont fruit tree owners who support gleaners. “Resourcefulness has become a means of survival for Angelenos, because you have to be resourceful if you’re going to survive on unemployment.”

For many who have had to cook meals at home over the last year, a gift of prepared foods is sometimes more helpful than produce. Meredith Klein, a private chef living in Santa Monica, was catering for a tech company when the pandemic began. Company officials, with no events in need of catering, asked Klein if they could continue to pay her to donate prepared foods to those in need in her community. Klein offered to prepare and deliver hot meals via her Ask, Borrow, Give — Santa Monica Facebook group, and she received many takers for dishes such as dal makhani; tomato and white bean soup; and Thai red curry sweet potato soup.

“A lot of people I have gifted food to live alone, and they’ve been eating their own cooking for months or weeks on end, so just to have a break in cooking is a real gift for them,” Klein said. “It’s not sustainable for us to all be cooking every night, every meal, and we’re wired to each other to prepare food communally and eat food communally. It’s interesting at this time when we’re so distanced from one another that we’re actually using food more as a medium for connection, and this is not something that’s going to go away after the pandemic.”

Marijuana by the numbers as 420, the unofficial High Holiday, turns 50

By Robert Channick, 10 April 2021, *The Chicago Tribune* online

(484 words)

Tuesday is 4/20, which is just a date for many, but for the growing and increasingly mainstreamed cannabis culture, is something akin to a national holiday.

Born of teenage stoner lore, 4:20 p.m. was allegedly the weekly meeting time for a group of five California high school students nicknamed the Waldos, who in 1971 would gather to smoke pot and search for the holy grail of weed — a flourishing crop supposedly left untended in the forest.

While alternate origin theories abound, former San Rafael High School students Steve Capper, Mark Gravich, Larry Schwartz, Jeff Noel and Dave Reddix have told their story in multiple reports since the 420 term first surfaced in *High Times* magazine in 1991. Somehow it stuck, and the five have been anointed grandfathers of the international phenomenon.

Over the years, 420 has become slang for getting high, a time of the day to partake and a date on the calendar to celebrate all things weed. As legalization sweeps across the country and cannabis goes corporate, the grassroots event has turned into a marketing opportunity for billion-dollar, publicly traded marijuana companies to commercialize.

Here's a look at how cannabis stacks up in Illinois and the U.S. circa April 20, 2021 — 50 years after the de facto high holiday took root. Recreational marijuana use is now legal in 17 states and Washington D.C., with New Mexico, Virginia and New York the most recent to approve it.

In 1996, California became the first state to approve the use of medical marijuana through Proposition 215. Colorado and Washington were the first states to approve recreational marijuana sales in 2012, opening the floodgates to a broader retail industry.

Illinois legalized recreational marijuana use on Jan. 1, 2020. As more states legalize recreational weed, 91% of U.S. adults say marijuana should be legal in some form, including 60% that approve of recreational use, according to a Pew Research study published Friday. One in 4 Americans used cannabis in some form during the past 12 months, according to a YouGov study released Monday that was commissioned by Chicago-based cannabis firm Cresco.

Nearly one-fourth of cannabis users said they tried it for the first time within the past year, according to the YouGov study. Midwestern cannabis users consume more edibles and beverages than other regions of the country, the study showed. More than 4 in 10 cannabis users believe 420 should be recognized as a national holiday, according to the YouGov study.

An April report by cannabis research firm Headset projects legal U.S. weed sales to hit \$28.3 billion in 2022, up from \$22.8 billion this year, a 24% gain. Marijuana sales in Illinois have soared since the state legalized recreational use, reaching \$1.03 billion last year. That included \$669 million in recreational weed sales and more than \$366 million in medical sales, according to the Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, which regulates dispensaries in the state.

‘My students are struggling’: joint pain, migraines, vision impairment and mental health are impacting student wellness during remote learning.

By Christen A. Johnson, 23 October 2020, *The Washington Post* online

(497 words)

During the middle of an at-home school day, Sameka Gates’ 11-year-old daughter, Kylee, suddenly broke down and started to cry while in class. Gates, who is a teacher, hurried to her middle schooler, turned off the camera, and went into full-blown mom mode. “We just sat there, and I was like, ‘What’s going on?’” recalled Gates. “And she said, ‘It’s so much. I just don’t know.’”

Between exacerbated screen time, limited physical and social connection with friends and a reading disability, remote learning had taken its toll on Kylee. Remote learning has been a challenging adjustment for many students, teachers and parents since the COVID-19 pandemic started in March. But for students who are spending an inordinate amount of time in front of screens to learn, on top of managing the general anxieties that come with being an adolescent, overall wellness — whether mental, emotional or physical — has, in some cases, been negatively impacted.

According to a recent nationwide study on teacher and student wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic, 46% of teachers reported encountering student mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, academic stress, trauma and grief. Teachers also noted their students’ concerns for their external surroundings, such as food and housing insecurity, and fears that loved ones would be harmed or contract COVID-19, the study said. Physical issues from prolonged desk-sitting are also ailing some students.

Charity Freeman, a computer science teacher at Lane Tech College Prep pauses the curriculum to check in on how her students are processing the climate around them. The most recent prompt in Freeman’s classroom culture day was: “How are you adjusting to remote learning?” “The responses that I got were absolutely heartbreaking,” said Freeman. “That was when I learned that my students were struggling.”

Her high school students reported battles with depression, anxiety and myriad physical ailments from sitting in front of a computer screen all day, like joint pain, headaches and vision impairment. “Their (concerns) are very much just as tangible, just as real, but they have definitely deeper consequences because they’re older and they’re closer to the other side of the four walls of high school,” said Freeman. “I have so many students that are legitimately afraid to start the college application process,” she said. “Having social workers, counselors, psychologists, (and) nurses visibly accessible to students — and teachers — in whatever way possible are going to make a positive difference.”

A month after the emotional breakdown, Gates and Kylee are in a better groove. Gates feels the breaking point was necessary for her to better assess and adjust to her daughter’s needs. She said, “I think we had to have that breaking point in order to figure out what’s working, what’s not working, and how can we fix it so that we’re not stressed out all the time.”

Pandemic got you down? Psychologists suggest time travel — sort of.

By Galadriel Watson, 19 April 2021, *The Washington Post* online

(486 words)

Dear [insert your name]. Living through the pandemic wasn't fun, but you got through it. Now, two years later, your children are flourishing, your relationship is blooming — and what a great vacation you recently had! You've learned to cherish outings with friends and never take a visit with family for granted. After bouncing around a bit, your career has hit its "new normal" stride. Sure, there have been ups and downs. Adjusting has been slow. But ultimately, you and your loved ones are good. I promise. From, your future self.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could peek into the future to reassure ourselves? That's not actually possible, but there is a psychological technique for regulating emotions that employs this idea. It's called "temporal distancing," and you can think of it as mental time travel. If the concept sounds familiar, it's a bit like reminding yourself of the ancient adage "this, too, shall pass."

Right now, you may find many things upsetting: you might be Zoomed out, missing your friends or mourning lost loved ones. "You're really in the moment," says Anne Wilson, a psychology professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario. "You're living whatever's negative and distressing."

Temporal distancing is a way to "step outside of the unpleasant, immersed moment," she says. To do this, imagine yourself in a later moment in time. A year from now, for example, we probably won't still be living through the pandemic. By then, it will be mostly behind us, though much about society will have changed, and you'll have a different perspective about it than you do now. "Thinking about ways things can get better — and that things will change, you will grow, you will learn from something that's even unpleasant — can often give you a sense of optimism and hope," Wilson says. Temporal distancing can also be used for non-pandemic issues. If you find yourself in a predicament such as failing an exam or fighting with a friend, give it a try.

The instructions? "It's very simple," she says. Imagine yourself being in the future and looking back on today. How will this future self feel about the current distress you're going through? Will you still be upset? Or will you have moved on? How have things changed? What lessons have you learned? Have your hopes for the future come true?

"In many cases, part of what their future self was doing was writing a supportive letter to the present," Wilson says, with thoughts such as, You can do this, or, You're going to get through this. "In the same way that we can benefit from encouragement from a friend, we can also benefit from self-talk encouragement."

Of course, writing one letter to yourself isn't going to improve your mood for the course of an entire pandemic. But "if you need a boost, it's something you can do to get yourself out of the moment," Wilson says.

Prince William calls for spirit of invention to save Earth from climate crisis

The Independent, 22 April 2021

(485 words)

Prince William and the judges of the Earthshot Prize have called on the world to harness the “spirit of invention” that led to the development of Covid-19 vaccines to help save the planet from the climate crisis. In a letter to the editor of *The Times*, the awards’ judges, including the Duke of Cambridge, Sir David Attenborough, Queen Rania of Jordan and actress Cate Blanchett, urged the public to recognise and combat climate change.

“This Earth Day, as the Leaders Summit on Climate kicks off the countdown to November’s COP26 climate conference in the UK, we must be inspired by the ingenuity and determination of the past year,” the group said. “We must transform our relationship with our planet, learning from those already living in harmony with nature and recognising that we all have a part to play. “As people worldwide queue for their vaccinations, now is the time to harness that spirit of invention and give the Earth a shot too.

”William launched the project with his Royal Foundation in October last year, with prizes to recognise solutions, ideas and technologies that “repair the planet”. The Earthshot Prize takes its inspiration from the Apollo moon landings, nicknamed Moonshot, and features five categories which organisers say, if achieved by 2030, would improve life for all.

Every year from 2021 until the end of the decade, winners in the five categories will each receive £1m after being picked by a judging panel of William and other prominent figures. A panel of experts will support the judging process, making recommendations to the Earthshot Prize Council, with the first awards ceremony in London next year. The Duke and Sir David hope that the project will become the Nobel Prize of the environmental world.

The letter came as US president Joe Biden warned world leaders that the next 10 years were the “decisive decade” to avoid the worst effects of the climate crisis. Mr Biden announced a new target to achieve a 50-52 per cent reduction in US emissions from 2005 levels by 2030, as he hosted a two-day virtual summit including leaders from the UK, China, Brazil, Russia and India.

COP26 president Alok Sharma welcomed the new announcements of climate action on Thursday but warned more work was needed to limit global warming to 1.5C. “With today’s announcements from the US, from Canada, from Japan, every G7 country now has an NDC [nationally determined contribution] that puts them on a path to net zero by 2050,” Mr Sharma told the summit. “This is a significant step towards keeping 1.5 degrees within reach, from a group of countries who have a responsibility to lead.” However, he noted that the global community had not yet done enough to meet the targets set by the Paris Agreement.

“We all know that the next decade will be make or break for planet Earth. And the warning lights are flashing bright red,” Mr Sharma added.

Researchers design an AI-powered backpack for the visually impaired

By Dalvin Brown, 25 March 2021, *The Washington Post* online

(497 words)

For people who are visually impaired, one of the biggest challenges is navigating public spaces. Several tech solutions have emerged in recent years, vying to make the situation more manageable, such as smart glasses to identify everyday objects and connected canes that tell people when they're approaching a curb.

Among the latest iterations of next-generation assistive accessories is a backpack powered by Intel's artificial intelligence software. It's designed to audibly alert wearers when they're approaching possibly hazardous situations like crosswalks or strangers. The backpack, which has yet to be named, was revealed Wednesday but could face years of development before a consumer-ready version is launched. Still, the product offers a glimpse at what a future could look like as progress in AI and machine learning increasingly help people with vision issues better perceive their environments and, therefore, live more independently.

The backpack was created by researchers at the University of Georgia, who took existing computer vision techniques and combined them into a system that seeks to replace the need for a cane or guide dog. Irony was really the driving force behind the idea, according to Jagadish K. Mahendran, the lead researcher at the University of Georgia who also specializes in computer vision for robots.

"I met with my visually impaired friend, and she was describing problems to me that she faces daily. And I was struck: for the past few years, I've been teaching robots how to see things while there are people who cannot see things and need help," Mahendran said. There's nothing outwardly special about the backpack's design: It looks like an ordinary gray knapsack with a small computer, such as a laptop, inside. A match-box-sized GPS unit is affixed to the outside.

In a demonstration video, the user also wears a vest with tiny holes to conceal an embedded AI camera. When connected to the computer, the 4K camera captures depth and color information used to help people avoid things like hanging branches. The camera can also be embedded in a fanny pack or other waist-worn pouches. The spatial camera, built by the computer vision company Luxonis, can read signs, detect crosswalks and see coming changes in elevation.

Bluetooth earphones allow the user to communicate with the system and vice versa. So the wearer can ask out loud for location information, and the system will tell them where they are. If the camera spots a threat like an incoming pedestrian, it can tell the wearer. It's too soon to know how much such a device would cost consumers, but several start-ups and organizations are working to solve the same issues, and the tech doesn't come cheap. "We want this solution to be inclusive and as transparent as possible," Mahendran said. "Our main motto is to increase the involvement of visually impaired people in their daily activities and reduce their dependency on others."

Sorry, European Super League, but in soccer globalism vs. populism, guess who wins?

By Henry Olsen, 20 April 2021, *The Washington Post* online

(493 words)

The announcement on Monday that most of the richest soccer clubs in Europe planned to create a new “European Super League” may have seemed irrelevant to many Americans. The debacle of the league’s apparent implosion on Tuesday may have seemed equally irrelevant. But this fiasco is actually the perfect template through which to view the ongoing debate between liberal globalism and national populism. As of Tuesday, it looked like populism won.

One must first understand the difference between European soccer and American sports. In America, sports teams are the property of their owners, who are granted monopolies over certain territories and permanent spots in a league. In reality, they own not teams but shares of the league, which they can use as they want. They can even move their teams to other locations.

In Europe, however, clubs are entirely independent of any particular league. Clubs are assigned to leagues within each country based on skill and can be moved between leagues depending on how well or poorly they perform. Each year, the bottom few teams in a league of higher skill go down one level — they are “relegated” — while the top few teams of the league move up one level — they are “promoted.” Legendary teams such as England’s Aston Villa or Germany’s Hamburger SV can go down while small-town teams such as England’s Bournemouth or Germany’s Paderborn can go up.

European soccer clubs are also rooted in neighborhoods and communities rather than cities. They are often the descendants of sporting clubs that served local factory workers as outlets for them to blow off some steam. Germany’s Bayer Leverkusen, for example, began with workers of the world-famous Bayer. Even today, fans must become dues-paying members of the club to buy tickets. History ties European teams to a specific set of people much more closely than any U.S. arrangement (other than the NFL’s Green Bay Packers, which is the only major U.S. sports team owned by the fans rather than a rich person or corporation).

This system means that fans believe the clubs are “theirs” in a way that most U.S. fans do not. Owners are often seen as “trustees” of the club and owe some duty to the fan base — especially to the dues-paying fan base. Think of European clubs as a workplace with an informal union and the heavy hand of government sitting ominously in the background.

The rich owners of the proposed European league wanted to do away with this. They wanted to set up an American-style league with no promotion or relegation, and they wanted to be able to sell their television rights without sharing the proceeds with the lower-skilled leagues.

The logic of liberal global capitalism dictates that the European Super League should have prevailed, but its apparent collapse was probably inevitable. The “rights” of capital always ultimately rely on the consent of the people to allow them to take root. When democracy and capitalism battle, democracy — populism — always triumphs.

That interview

March 8th, 2021, *The Economist*

(520 words)

The British monarchy's record of absorbing outsiders is patchy. In recent times, it has had one outstanding success (Kate Middleton, Prince William's wife), several modest successes (including Sophie Rhys-Jones, Prince Edward's wife), a few questionable results (among them Sarah Ferguson, Prince Andrew's ex-wife) and two stunning failures (Diana Spencer, the late Princess of Wales, and Meghan Markle). On March 7th the world was treated to dramatic evidence of the latest disaster, in the form of an interview which Prince Harry and Ms Markle gave to Oprah Winfrey, America's most famous talk-show host.

The revelations in the interview were in part familiar. The loneliness of which the duchess spoke, and the lack of support from within the "firm", echoed Princess Diana's experience. A new factor, and a particularly explosive one, was race. The duchess, herself mixed-race, said that when she was pregnant with her son Archie, her husband had told her there were "conversations about how dark his skin might be", and she implied that the issue was connected to decisions about her son's title and security for the family. Both declined to say who had raised the issue, though Ms Winfrey later said Prince Harry had told her it was neither the Queen nor Prince Philip.

The couple's evident closeness during the interview underlined another big difference between their situation and Princess Diana's. They are together, having left the country. The painful consequences of Prince Harry's decision to move to America for his relationship with his family also came out in the interview: for a while, the prince said, his father stopped taking his calls.

The palace issued a neutral, conciliatory response: "the issues raised, particularly of race, are concerning...they will be addressed by the family privately." But it included a carefully worded phrase casting doubt on the notion that the couple's account was the objective truth: "some recollections," it said, "may vary." And somebody had launched what looked like a pre-emptive strike.

After the interview was recorded, but before it went out, a complaint made against the duchess in 2018 by a senior member of staff was leaked to the Times. Jason Knauf, at the time press secretary to both princes, wrote to Simon Case, then Prince William's private secretary and now head of the civil service, saying that she had "bullied two PAs out of the household", and was bullying a third. The timing of the leak of a complaint from two and a half years ago suggests that a point was being made: when a relationship breaks down, there tends to be fault on both sides.

The fundamental problem is clear. Being a royal is about serving an institution. It does not work for those who crave individual attention. The job requires self-effacement, at which the Queen, who has not said a single interesting thing in public in her 70 years on the throne, has excelled. That's not because she is a boring person, but because she understands the demands of the job. The Duchess of Cambridge, aka Ms Middleton, is, similarly, brilliantly bland. The Duchess of Sussex is not.

The right to protest

March 20th, 2021, *The Economist*

(499 words)

From the government's point of view, the timing could not have been worse. On March 13th, hundreds of people gathered on Clapham Common in London to mourn Sarah Everard, a marketing executive, whose murder—for which a serving police officer has been charged—sparked an outpouring of anger and solidarity among women. The Metropolitan Police, which had declined to give the vigil's organisers a permit on the grounds that it would breach lockdown rules, swooped in and arrested four people.

On March 16th, Parliament voted on the government's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts bill—a rag-bag of measures which includes a clampdown on the right to protest in England and Wales. The government had hoped the bill would slide through Parliament unobserved, but the timing turned it into the centre of a controversy. As MPs debated the bill hundreds of protesters blocked Westminster Bridge to traffic.

The curbs on protest are aimed at movements which the government, dominated by social conservatives, abhors. Priti Patel, the Home Secretary, has described Extinction Rebellion (XR) as “eco-crusaders turned criminals” and protests organised by Black Lives Matter (BLM) as “dreadful”.

The government reckons that the Public Order Act 1986, drawn up in the era of trade-union marches, is ill-equipped to deal with these movements' tactics. At present protests can be restricted only if they are likely to cause serious damage to property or disruption to communities. XR and BLM have a talent for spectacle. BLM's supporters have removed and defaced statues. XR's members climb on top of Tube trains and occupy bridges; music often forms part of their demonstrations.

If the bill is enacted, the maximum penalty for causing less than £5,000 worth of damage to a statue will rise from three months in jail to ten years. Protests can be restricted if the noise they create may be grounds for restricting them if it has a “relevant impact” on, or they cause “serious unease” to people nearby. Protests by a single person can be subject to restrictions.

Critics maintain that the rules amount to the silencing of protest. “If Priti Patel was heading up homeland security in the US in 1963, Martin Luther King would be whispering his ‘I Have A Dream’ speech in a parking lot outside DC, rather than relaying it to millions in front of the Lincoln Memorial,” says Raj Chada, a lawyer who specialises in protest law.

Many MPs have defended freedom of speech, particularly that of right-leaning academics in left-wing universities. Yet they are more ambivalent about freedom of assembly—and so are their voters. A YouGov poll found that 43% of Britons thought the Clapham vigil should not have gone ahead; 40% thought it should have.

Among Tory voters the figures were 61% to 28%. “The problem is our Conservative coalition now includes a lot of working people,” says a Tory MP. “It's not that they are fascists; it's just that they are not putting up with this nonsense, and then that gets reflected in the policies.”

Two-thirds of anti-vaxx social media content linked to just 12 people

Rhiannon Williams, March 24 2021, *iNews.co.uk*

(497 words)

Around two-third of anti-vaccine content circulated on Facebook and Twitter can be traced back to just 12 prominent individuals, a new report has found.

The Centre for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) and Anti-Vax Watch alliance analysed anti-vaxxer content that had been shared or posted more than 812,000 times on the social media platforms between 1 February and 16 March. Up to 65 per cent of the content was attributable to 12 people, including noted anti-vaxx campaigner Robert F Kennedy Jr, son of former US attorney general Robert Kennedy.

Joseph Mercola, an alternative medicine entrepreneur with more than 3.6m followers across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram who has been warned by the US Food and Drug Administration to stop selling supplements that claimed to treat Covid-19, was identified as the most prominent spreader of anti-vaxx disinformation in the sample.

Ty and Charlene Bollinger, anti-vaxxer entrepreneurs who have promoted the false theory that Bill Gates plans to inject humans with microchips in Covid-19 vaccines, mask-sceptic physician Sherri Tenpenny and conspiracy theorist and influencer Rizza Islam also appear on the list.

Of the 12 most prominent anti-vaxx spreaders, dubbed the 'disinformation dozen', nine are still active on all three Facebook, Instagram and Twitter platforms, while just three have been prevented from using one of the three, the CCDH claimed.

Analysis of anti-vaxx content posted to Facebook more than 689,000 times over the past two months found that 73 per cent of circulated content can be traced back to the disinformation dozen, while around 17 per cent of 120,000 anti-vaxx tweets could be attributed to the same people.

The CCDH is calling on social media platforms to remove the most prominent known anti-vaxxers from their sites to dramatically reduce the amount of disinformation being produced and circulated. "Disinformation has become a direct threat to public health," said Imran Ahmed, chief executive of CCDH. "In the midst of a global pandemic, the anti-vaccine industry has executed a targeted campaign to mislead the public about the safety of the Covid-19 vaccines. Social media is enabling anti-vaxxers to recruit millions of people and indoctrinate them with fear and doubt. If Big Tech companies don't act now, the pandemic will be prolonged, and more lives will be lost."

A Twitter spokesperson said: "Everyone is subject to the rules as outlined in our Covid-19 misinformation policy. As previously stated, we will not take action on every tweet that contains incomplete or disputed information about COVID-19. In order for content related to Covid-19 to be labelled or removed under this policy, it must: advance a claim of fact, expressed in definitive terms; be demonstrably false or misleading, based on widely available, authoritative sources; and be likely to impact public safety or cause serious harm.

"Since introducing our Covid-19 guidance last year, we have removed more than 22,400 Tweets and challenged 11.7 million accounts worldwide."

Uber's workers benefit from a Supreme Court decision

March 20th, 2021, *The Economist*

(523 words)

When the Supreme Court ruled last month that Uber drivers were workers employed by the firm rather than self-employed contractors, nobody knew how the company would react. In California, faced with a similar decision, it fought tooth and nail, and in effect got the judgment reversed through a ballot initiative. In Britain, many had expected it to ignore the court's ruling on the ground that it applied only to a small group of workers, and to conditions that no longer prevailed.

Instead, Uber made a handbrake turn, announcing on March 16th that its 70,000 drivers will be paid at least the minimum wage, get a pension and receive holiday pay. The Economist understands that the company will contact current and former drivers to offer them cash payments in lieu of holiday pay for the time they have worked for the firm.

The dispute reflects the messy nature of British employment rules. "Employees" gain access to the full gamut of employment-law protections; "workers" get some protections but can be dismissed at will; the self-employed are taxed more lightly but receive few legal rights. Clarifying definitions has relied on case law and usually boils down to arguments about the degree of control exercised by employers. It's a slow business: the case that ended up in the Supreme Court started five years ago in an employment tribunal.

The gig economy has driven a rise in self-employment. While many workers welcome the flexibility, others would prefer the protections that come with traditional employment, but cannot get them. The government commissioned a review of the framework by Matthew Taylor, which was published in 2017 but its call to strengthen workers' rights was ignored.

Mr Taylor, who calls the lack of progress "deeply disappointing", reckons that the government understands that change is needed but does not want to be seen to be increasing burdens on business. The Treasury, with its eyes on the revenues that could be raised by taxing the self-employed at similar rates to employees, has supported reform, but a modest attempt to equalise the tax burden in 2017 prompted fierce resistance from Tory MPs.

Now it looks as though a combination of the judiciary and the market may improve conditions in the gig economy. Uber's new package for drivers goes beyond what many campaigners had expected. The firm hopes that its retrospective, across-the-board decision will not only see off potential new litigation but also make it a more attractive employer than rivals such as Bolt and Ola ahead of what is set to be a busy summer as the economy reopens. More legal skirmishing lies ahead over the definitions of what time should be counted for calculating minimum-wage payments. But Uber is seeking to turn a legal defeat into a strategic opportunity.

The Supreme Court ruling will encourage people in other sectors ranging from social care to construction to argue that they too are workers. That will take time, though others may follow where Uber has led. A firm that prides itself on having disrupted urban transport may now disrupt the gig economy.

UK's children are a 'post-war generation' because of the 'shocks' of Covid-19, Children's Commissioner says

Will Hazell, March 22, 2021, *iNews.co.uk*

(487 words)

The UK's young people will be a "post-war generation" because of the "shocks" they have experienced from the Covid-19 pandemic, the new Children's Commissioner for England has said. Dame Rachel de Souza also said that adults should emulate those who built the NHS after the Second World War by setting out a new settlement to "repay children for the sacrifices they have made" over the last year.

Dame Rachel took over as children's commissioner at the beginning of this month, having previously run the Inspiration Trust – a chain of 14 academy schools in the East of England.

Speaking to headteachers at the annual conference of the Association of School and College Leaders, she likened the pandemic to a war in terms of the number of lives lost and its far-reaching effects.

"In terms of economic, cultural and social shocks, even in terms of deaths, this is very much a post-war generation," she said.

With more than 126,000 people in the UK so far having died with the coronavirus, the pandemic has already claimed the lives of almost three times the 43,000 who were killed in the Blitz.

Last week, Dame Rachel launched a 'Childhood Commission' which she has said is inspired by the Beveridge Report – the landmark 1942 report which helped found the NHS and the welfare state after the Second World War.

It was a theme she returned to during her speech on Monday. "I think we need to look at the way they came out of the Second World War, how we made improvements to people's life chances, how we came out with renewed optimism. We need to grab that same spirit of hope we saw then and be optimistic," she said.

"The adults that came of age in the forties did find answers, in the Beveridge Report, which created a blueprint for social security and a welfare system and for our NHS, and the Education Act of 1944 [which introduced] education for all to 15. This is our big moment to do the same." To "repay children for the sacrifices they have made" during the pandemic, she said the country had to set its ambition "so much higher than simply returning to the old normal." I believe that the Covid crisis gives us the same chances as the post-war generation had to look at what's going wrong for many children in our country and to put it right."

A number of people have drawn parallels between the pandemic and the Second World War. Earlier this month Geoff Barton, the general secretary of ASCL, said that young people might "look back" on the pandemic "like the evacuees at the end of the Second World War thinking 'that's an extraordinary experience, I'm glad to have lived through it'."

During her speech, Dame Rachel declared that the reopening of schools in England had been a "success", with schools confounding naysayers who had predicted it would be "bumpy".

Urban insecurity: build a feminist city

Editorial Tue 16 Mar 2021, *The Guardian*

(486 words)

The design of our cities and towns must make women's wellbeing and safety a priority

The way our cities and towns look and work reflects political priorities. In mid-19th century Paris, when Baron Haussmann was seeking public money for building his boulevards, he told the government that wide, open avenues would make it harder to riot and build barricades. In an age of urban insurrections at the heart of the French capital, that quickly opened up the public purse.

Following the killing of Sarah Everard, a different kind of revolution should be uppermost in our politicians' minds. As an avalanche of female testimony over recent days has underlined, our public spaces do not sufficiently prioritise the wellbeing and safety of women. In a 2019 talk entitled *The Feminist City*, Dr Ellie Cosgrave, associate professor of urban innovation at University College London, said: "It is the multiple and constant threats that young women experience that tell us that the city is not a place where they belong." The death of Ms Everard must be a watershed moment in generating the public will to change that reality.

Fundamental to this task is an acceptance by men that they must do more to mitigate a climate of insecurity. In an interview on Tuesday, Dr Cosgrave called for a national movement to train "active bystanders" in how to intervene where harassment is taking place. As she and campaigners such as Caroline Criado Perez have argued, women must also play an equal part in designing the infrastructure that shapes everyday life. A chronic gender imbalance among urban planners has meant that certain problems are simply not seen, still less understood. From a lack of access to safe female toilets to overcrowded transport systems, which make women more vulnerable to hidden assault, unnecessary anxiety has been built into the lives of half the population.

In this context, the government's belated commitment to fund better street lighting is welcome. Switching off street lights across Britain was an irresponsible way to save public money, as should have been acknowledged years ago. There were certainly sufficient warnings to that effect from women. But far more needs to be done to recalibrate urban priorities to foreground female concerns.

The underfunding and degradation of civic spaces, such as parks, sends an insidious message of community neglect, turning areas into threatening no-go zones. Underpasses and other hidden spaces, such as isolated parking areas, create situations of vulnerability. Possibilities of natural surveillance – external visibility – should be factored into all urban architecture, street planning and landscaping. Decisions should take women's security and wellbeing into account as a matter of course. For this to happen, Britain needs to promote and train more female urban planners and civil engineers.

All being well, the public spaces of Britain will soon come alive again, as lockdown and social restrictions are phased out. Women must be given a far greater say in their future configuration.

US saw estimated 4,000 extra murders in 2020 amid surge in daily gun violence

Lois Beckett, Wed 24 Mar 2021, *The Guardian*

(words 523)

For exactly a year during the pandemic, the United States did not see a single high-profile public mass shooting. But a surge in daily gun violence contributed to an estimated 4,000 additional murders throughout 2020, in what experts warn will probably be the worst single-year increase in murders on record.

There were only two public shootings in 2020 that primarily targeted strangers, were not related to other crimes and killed at least four victims – one standard definition researchers use to classify “mass shootings”. That’s the lowest annual count of high-profile mass shootings in America in nearly a quarter-century, according to Jillian Peterson, the founder of the Violence Project, which tracks these mass shootings going back to 1966. At the same time, the number of people murdered in everyday violence last year increased. Early estimates suggest the US may have seen at least 4,000 more murders last year than in 2019, and potentially as many as 5,000 more, according to projections based on FBI data.

In response to two high-profile mass shootings in the past week, one targeting shoppers at a grocery store in Colorado and another Asian women at spas in Georgia, Joe Biden called on lawmakers to pass a renewed ban on military-style assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, and to expand background checks on gun sales, part of a renewed national debate over strengthening gun control laws. But in Philadelphia, where the number of gun homicides was 40% higher in 2020 than it was in 2019 and with at least 103 people killed so far this year

Pastor Carl Day said an assault-weapon ban would not do much for the communities most burdened by gun violence. “The point is being missed for the most part. You can take away high-capacity magazines, but a legal clip can kill eight people,” Day, a gun violence prevention organizer in Philadelphia said. “It’s not just about creating tougher gun laws, it’s about where we’re investing our money. You have to enrich and equip communities with what they need.”

The full reasons for last year’s sharp increase in community gun violence are still far from clear. Gun violence interrupters and clinicians point to the loss of vital in-person interactions between prevention workers and those most at risk of being on either side of a gun. Lawmakers and activists have also pointed to the rising levels of unemployment and financial and personal instability related to the pandemic, as well as the surge in gun sales, with Americans buying an estimated 17m guns through September 2020. An increase in gun purchases during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic was linked to a nearly 8% increase in shooting injuries in the US between March and May.

Asher, the crime analyst*, said he was skeptical of claims that there was any simple causal connection between the protests over police violence that started after George Floyd’s killing in late May and the spike in murders in the early summer, noting that there was “no relationship between the places that had the most protests, or the places that had the most violent protests, and changes in violence. It was literally everywhere.”

* *Jeff Asher is a crime analyst based in New Orleans and co-founder of AH Datalytics.*

The Guardian view on violence against women: without safety, there can be no equality

Editorial, Thurs 11 March 2021, *The Guardian*

(523 words)

The last day or so has seen an outpouring of grief and anger over the disappearance of Sarah Everard, who vanished last week as she walked home in Clapham, south London. A serving Metropolitan police officer has now been arrested on suspicion of her kidnapping and murder.

The case has sparked a potent reaction. For many women, it has tapped into far broader concerns about the abuse and violence they face. Six women and a little girl have been reported as killed since Sarah Everard went missing, noted Jess Phillips, Labour's shadow minister for domestic violence. Harassment and assault by men are anything but rare.

It is more than 40 years since the first Reclaim the Night march, which was prompted by the Yorkshire Ripper murders and the police response, telling women to stay at home after dark. Now a Reclaim These Streets vigil is to be held in Clapham on Saturday. Women are exhausted. The frustration and rage vented on social media and in parliament is the product of a society where it is normal for women to live in fear.

This week, a survey for UN Women UK found that almost all young women in the UK – 97% of 18- to 24-year-olds – have been sexually harassed; almost none reported it. Almost every woman has tales of encounters ranging from verbal abuse to physical assaults – often dating back to her childhood. While women of all ages are at risk of violence, girls and young women appear especially vulnerable to male violence in public places. Women spend their lives planning routes, clenching keys and readying themselves to run.

Yet women cannot keep themselves safe by staying at home: on average, two a week in England and Wales are killed by abusive partners or ex-partners – and the numbers are feared to have risen since the pandemic began. As new realms open up, women's freedoms are curtailed there too. Online threats and harassment are rife. There is real cause for concern that extreme online content is spilling over into offline life.

We teach girls to shrink their lives, while doing too little to educate boys and men not only to respect women, but also to challenge those who do not do so.

Sexual harassment may come at one end of the spectrum of male threat, but it creates a climate in which women feel unsafe and predatory men are emboldened. The government should consider a street harassment law like that introduced in France. But its priority must be turning around the dismal record on tackling violence.

Rape prosecutions have dropped every year since 2016-17 – more than halving in that time – and are now at a record annual low. The number of domestic abuse prosecutions fell by almost a quarter in the last three months of 2019. Slashed funding has closed refuges across the country. Years of work have delivered precious victories. This week, the House of Lords backed amendments to the domestic abuse bill that create statutory defences for women driven to offend. Much more still needs to be done.

Wearable electronic skin could monitor your health

Hazel Pfeifer, 22 April 2021, *CNN News*

(509 words)

Doctors may be just a few years away from tracking your vital signs via electronic skin worn on the body.

Researchers in Japan say they have developed an ultra-thin, lightweight e-skin that is stuck to the chest area using water spray and can be worn for a week at a time.

The technology was developed by Takao Someya, a professor at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Engineering. It has yet to undergo clinical trials, but Someya says he has started working with partners to develop manufacturing processes.

Made from a flexible material — polyvinyl alcohol — with a layer of gold, the e-skin is a wearable sensor that can pick up signals such as heartbeat and electrical impulses from muscle movement.

A small wireless transmitter strapped to the chest will send heartbeat data to a nearby smartphone or laptop, or to the cloud, allowing a doctor to monitor it remotely. “E-skin is the next generation of wearables,” Someya tells CNN Business. “Today’s mainstream wearables are in the form of smart watches and glasses, which are bulky. In contrast, e-skin is thin, lightweight, stretchable and durable.”

His latest e-skin was designed with Japan’s rapidly aging population in mind. For remote health care to be most effective, Someya says it is important to monitor older people's health for long periods with high precision. Because of its durability, he says the e-skin is a powerful tool for monitoring chronic diseases like diabetes, as well as heart failure. It may also help detect early signs of illness.

Someya is also developing an LED display, in partnership with Dai Nippon Printing (DNPCF), to be worn on the back of the user’s hand. Designed for older people or those with who have difficulty using a smartphone, it will show heartbeat data transmitted by the e-skin in the form of large and easily understood graphics. It can also display simple emojis — including a heart and a rainbow — sent by friends and relatives from a smartphone, to help older people feel connected to their loved ones.

The e-skin market was worth an estimated \$4.5 billion in 2019, according to a report by Grand View Research. Because e-skin is highly flexible, sometimes with the ability to repair itself, it has the potential for use in robotics, prosthetics and health care.

Someya and his team started developing e-skin for robots in the early 2000s. And other research from their lab is being developed for the marketplace through two spin-off companies — Signtle, for medical applications, and Xenoma, for smart clothing.

Xenoma has integrated e-skin into pajamas that can monitor temperature in bed, and sportswear for fitness monitoring.

5G will have a “tremendous impact” on wearable technologies, including e-skin, by increasing the amount of data that can be transmitted wirelessly at high speed, giving users access to their health information in real-time. “The ultimate goal of e-skin is to monitor all the different types of human information easily, anywhere and anytime, without disturbing daily activities,” Someya says.

Why swearing is a sign of intelligence, helps manage pain and more

Sandee LaMonte, 21 April 2021, *CNN News*

(502 words)

Polite society considers swearing to be a vulgar sign of low intelligence and education, for why would one rely on rude language when blessed with a rich vocabulary?

That perception, as it turns out, is full of, uh ... baloney. In fact, swearing may be a sign of verbal superiority, studies have shown, and may provide other possible rewards as well. "The advantages of swearing are many," said Timothy Jay, professor emeritus of psychology at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, who has studied swearing for more than 40 years.

"The benefits of swearing have just emerged in the last two decades, as a result of a lot of research on brain and emotion, along with much better technology to study brain anatomy," Jay said.

Well-educated people with plenty of words at their disposal, a 2015 study found, were better at coming up with curse words than those who were less verbally fluent.

Participants were asked to list as many words that start with F, A or S in one minute. Another minute was devoted to coming up with curse words that start with those three letters. The study found those who came up with the most F, A and S words also produced the most swear words.

That's a sign of intelligence "to the degree that language is correlated with intelligence," said Jay, who authored the study. "People that are good at language are good at generating a swearing vocabulary."

Swearing can also be associated with social intelligence, Jay added. "Having the strategies to know where and when it's appropriate to swear, and when it's not," Jay said, "is a social cognitive skill like picking the right clothes for the right occasion. That's a pretty sophisticated social tool."

Science has also found a positive link between profanity and honesty. People who cursed lied less on an interpersonal level, and had higher levels of integrity overall, a series of three studies published in 2017 found.

"When you're honestly expressing your emotions with powerful words, then you're going to come across as more honest," said Jay, who was not involved in the studies.

While a higher rate of profanity use was associated with more honesty, the study authors cautioned that "the findings should not be interpreted to mean that the more a person uses profanity, the less likely he or she would engage in more serious unethical or immoral behaviors."

Profanity improves pain tolerance: want to push through that workout? Go ahead and drop an F-bomb. People on bikes who swore while pedaling against resistance had more power and strength than people who used "neutral" words.

Does that mean that we should curse whenever we feel like it, regardless of our environment or the feelings of others? Of course not. But at least you can cut yourself some slack the next time you inadvertently let an F-bomb slip.

After all, you're just being human.

Zacharias not Zeppelin: Germany to scrap Nazi-era phonetic table

Kate Connolly, Thu 3 Dec 2020, *The Guardian*

(503 words)

Germany is to scrap its phonetic spelling table introduced by the Nazis 86 years ago and temporarily replace it with the version the regime abolished because it was “too Jewish”.

The table, in which codewords are assigned to each letter of the alphabet to aid communication and avoid confusion, particularly in radio transmissions and telephone calls, originated in the late 19th century. In 1934 it was adapted by the Nazis who cleansed it of all its Jewish names as part of the regime’s drive to reject all Jews from German life.

“Samuel” was replaced by “Siegfried” to represent the letter S, “Zacharias” became “Zeppelin” for Z, and “David” was switched to “Dora”. The preference was for Nordic names to replace Jewish ones, and where no suitable ones could be found, such as N (originally “Nathan”), an object or placename, such as “Nordpol” (North Pole), was chosen instead.

The international equivalent is the Nato phonetic alphabet. While that uses the words Alpha, Bravo, Charlie etc to help make spelling out words easier, the German equivalent uses Anton, Berta, Cäsar.

Michael Blume, the ombudsman for antisemitism in the state of Baden-Württemberg – a post recently introduced in 13 states across the country to tackle growing attacks against Jews in Germany – has been leading a quiet campaign to get rid of the Nazi version of the system. The fact it had stayed in place for so long, he said, was proof in itself of a “deep-seated antisemitic and racist mindset” in Germany.

“Just in that one name change, Nathan to Nordpol, which we still use today, you can see how deeply into our language and our thinking this Nazi idea has seeped, with no one really questioning it,” he told the broadcaster Deutschlandfunk.

While some words were officially changed back in the late 1940s – Siegfried was switched back to Samuel, for example – the Nazi version has remained the dominant one that most people have continued to use. Blume has advocated switching back to the pre-1934 version, the so-called Weimar table. It will probably only be in use until autumn 2022, by which time an updated version is expected that will probably rely on city names. But Blume insisted the switch in itself was “an important symbolic gesture. My intention is that we don’t just simply continue to automatically use the version introduced by the National Socialists which erased the Jewish names,” he said.

The president of the Central Council of Jews, Josef Schuster, said he welcomed Blume’s initiative and it was “high time we freed ourselves from the language of the Nazis and its relics.”

As news of the imminent change spread on social media, many commentators said they had not been aware of the Nazi authorship of the codewords, which are known and commonly used unquestioningly in daily life by most people in Germany, and seen as a practical method for spelling out names over the telephone. Their use in military and aviation communication is limited, as those fields tend to use the international phonetic table.