Reselling, repairing and 'swishing': the rise of sustainable fashion apps

As technology makes secondhand clothes more accessible, more shoppers in the UK are going green

With wardrobe hoarders taking on a quarantine clear-out, coupled with a new sense of frugality, a new generation of “slow fashion” apps is allowing people to experiment with clothes swapping and shopping secondhand.

Lauren Bravo, the author of How to Break Up with Fast Fashion, says: “Where a few years ago, buying secondhand could mean hours of trawling, tech is making the whole experience so much more efficient and more accessible.” While charity shops have suffered sales declines of as much as a third, resale sites such as Loopster, Depop and Vinted have boomed in recent months.

These platforms not only simulate the thrill of finding “new” gems but also offer alternatives to sending unwanted items to landfill or offloading donations at charity shops when they are closed. According to Wrap, an estimated 336,000 tonnes of used clothing get thrown in the bin in the UK every year.

Nuw, which Aisling Byrne and friend Alison Kelly co-founded in 2015, was born in response to their guilt about the social and environmental costs of their favourite hobby: shopping. After seeing the devastating effects on garment workers while they were volunteering in India, the pair began lobbying for change. “At university, avoiding fast fashion was really important to us, but we couldn’t really afford any of the alternatives,”. So they started hosting clothes swapping events with like-minded people, using empty Dublin nightclubs. Nuw’s community quickly outgrew its initial WhatsApp group. The social network now has nearly 8,000 members, with 2,500 monthly app users across the UK and Ireland.

Unlike most rental sites, where users profit – in some cases, greatly – from loaning their luxury items, Nuw members only pay the delivery cost of sending items; there’s no rental fee. The Irish startup, which is funded by “tech for good” investors, focuses less on the commercial value of clothes than on the emotional significance each garment gathers as it is passed on, and the app includes an impact calculator that lets users track the carbon, waste and water offset created every time they swap.

“Our customers get the feeling like they’re going into their friend’s wardrobes, and just picking out things that they like,” says Byrne. For Nuw members, seeing their treasured pieces reappear on social media with a new owner creates a sense of intimacy with someone they will never meet.

But the burden of going green shouldn’t lie only on the consumer, says Emily Macintosh, the policy officer for textiles at the European Environmental Bureau and coordinator of the EEB’s Wardrobe Change campaign, which urges the EC to actively reduce the footprint of textiles sold on the EU market. “We also need to put the responsibility on producers, who are making massive amounts of money from this polluting, exploitative wasteful system.”

Theguardian.com / 29 Jan 2021 / Georgina Quach

English as a common language in Switzerland: a positive or a problem?

It's not unusual to hear Swiss people from different parts of the country speaking English together. Not everyone is happy about this, but does using English as a lingua franca benefit national cohesion or harm it?

The handling of the ongoing pandemic has created communication challenges between the country's language regions which need to be addressed, according to a politician. "I think this has presented an opportunity to discuss multilingualism in the country and these discussions should include a modernisation of the law to consider English one of the main languages," said Sven Gatz, who described the current situation as "not very future proof". He acknowledged, however, that there would be opposition. "There are many people who say that we should first learn each other's languages before prioritising English."

Gatz is not Swiss. He's the Minister for Multilingualism in Belgium and was speaking to the *Brussels Times* about Belgium. However, Gatz's comments highlight some of the challenges facing multilingual countries, such as Switzerland, Belgium and Canada.

Earlier this year a Swiss reporter for German-language Swiss public television, SRF, interviewed Jean-Stéphane Bron, a Swiss film director from French-speaking Lausanne. They spoke in English. "Normally SRF and [news programme] *Tagesschau* want interviews to be carried out in the respective national language," explained the journalist, Uta Kenter. However, she grew up in Germany and felt her French wasn't good enough to discuss the human brain. Bron clearly felt the same about his German. "Very often we ask questions in English and the interviewee answers in their language. Unfortunately, in this case that wasn't possible," she said.

This raises questions about the status of English in Switzerland. Firstly, is the use of English as a linguistic bridge increasing? "I think we're all in agreement that people from different Swiss linguistic backgrounds tend to use English as a lingua franca," said Franz Andres Morrissey, a lecturer in linguistics at the University of Bern.

In 2016, a politician claimed that "initially English was used with tourists, but in recent decades it has been increasingly used by Swiss speakers with one another, making English a de facto Swiss language."

Indeed the government already publishes press releases in English, but hearing English described as a Swiss language is enough to make some Swiss dizzy. In September 2000, Zurich announced that English, rather than French, would be the first foreign language taught in the city's schools. The following day, French-language newspaper *Le Temps* asked whether the inclusion of English in the curriculum spelt the "end of Switzerland". This phrase was also used by Chiara Cortesi in 2009, when she was president of the House of Representatives, warning about what she thought would happen if English became the language of communication between the Swiss. Many people, particularly in the French- speaking parts of the country, fear that teaching English ahead of Swiss national languages will weaken or undo the social glue that holds Switzerland together.

SWISS INFO / April 04, 2021 / VALERY KACHAEV

Cycling is ten times more important than electric cars for reaching net-zero cities

Globally, only one in 50 new cars were fully electric in 2020, and one in 14 in the UK. Sounds impressive, but even if all new cars were electric now, it would still take 15-20 years to replace the world's fossil fuel car fleet.

The emission savings from replacing all those internal combustion engines with zero-carbon alternatives will not feed in fast enough to make the necessary difference in the time we can spare: the next five years. Tackling the climate and air pollution crises requires curbing all motorised transport, particularly private cars, as quickly as possible. Focusing solely on electric vehicles is slowing down the race to zero emissions.

This is partly because electric cars aren't truly zero-carbon – mining the raw materials for their batteries, manufacturing them and generating the electricity they run on produces emissions.

Transport is one of the most challenging sectors to decarbonise due to its heavy fossil fuel use and reliance on carbon-intensive infrastructure – such as roads, airports and the vehicles themselves - and the way it embeds car-dependent lifestyles. One way to reduce transport emissions relatively quickly, and potentially globally, is to swap cars for cycling, e-biking and walking – active travel, as it's called.

Active travel is cheaper, healthier, better for the environment, and no slower on congested urban streets. So how much carbon can it save on a daily basis? And what is its role in reducing emissions from transport overall?

In new research, colleagues and I reveal that people who walk or cycle have lower carbon footprints from daily travel, including in cities where lots of people are already doing this. Despite the fact that some walking and cycling happens on top of motorised journeys instead of replacing them, more people switching to active travel would equate to lower carbon emissions from transport on a daily and trip-by-trip basis.

We observed around 4,000 people living in London, Antwerp, Barcelona, Vienna, Orebro, Rome and Zurich. Over a two-year period, our participants completed 10,000 travel diary entries which served as records of all the trips they made each day, whether going to work by train, taking the kids to school by car or riding the bus into town. For each trip, we calculated the carbon footprint.

Strikingly, people who cycled on a daily basis had 84% lower carbon emissions from all their daily travel than those who didn't.

We also found that the average person who shifted from car to bike for just one day a week cut their carbon footprint by 3.2kg of CO_2 – equivalent to the emissions from driving a car for 10km, eating a serving of lamb or chocolate, or sending 800 emails.

When we compared the life cycle of each travel mode, taking into account the carbon generated by making the vehicle, fuelling it and disposing of it, we found that emissions from cycling can be more than 30 times lower for each trip than driving a fossil fuel car, and about ten times lower than driving an electric one.

So the race is on. Active travel can contribute to tackling the climate emergency earlier than electric vehicles while also providing affordable, reliable, clean, healthy and congestion-busting transportation.

The Conversation / 29/03/21 / Christian Brand

Pubs and clubs attack UK Covid passport scheme

The government has been accused of "unreasonably targeting" the hospitality sector through the proposed introduction of Covid status checks for customers entering pubs, bars and restaurants, as three nationwide pub and bar chains and the UK's largest nightclub operator voiced their opposition to the plans.

"This feels like a measure which is unreasonably targeting our sector, they are not proposing this to go into a supermarket," said Alex Reilley, founder of Loungers, a bar and restaurant operator which has 170 sites in the UK.

"It is undemocratic, it's potentially incredibly discriminatory, and it is requiring a sector which has suffered immeasurable financial losses through the last 15 months to have to adhere to yet another nonsense rule in order to operate 'as normal'," he said.

He added that the process of checking a Covid health certificate would be easier at venues such as cinemas, theatres or sporting events, where tickets are inspected on entry.

"Going to pubs, bars and restaurants is a much more informal, often off-the-cuff experience where people will just drop in and there isn't a form of checking anything on the door," Reilley said.
Tim Martin, the outspoken founder and chairman of pub group JD Wetherspoon, a regular critic of the government during the pandemic, criticised the suggestion that vaccine passports could be used to allow venues to dispense with social distancing.

Pub group Fuller, Smith & Turner believes a Covid status scheme is "fraught with issues for the hospitality sector", according to its chief executive, Simon Emeny.

Hospitality venues are also concerned that checking customers' health status would require at least one member of staff to be permanently stationed by the door.

Joining the hospitality industry's opposition to so-called "vaccine passports" is the UK's largest nightclub operator, Rekom UK. The government's current proposals are "not workable or fair", said a spokesperson for the company which runs venues such as Pryzm in Birmingham and Eden in Newcastle and Manchester.

The firm, formerly known as Deltic Group before it was bought out of administration by a Scandinavian hospitality firm in January, operates 42 bars and nightclubs in the UK. It believes that vaccine passports would disadvantage its mostly younger customers, who may not have received their vaccinations by the time clubs are due to be permitted to reopen on 21 June.

The government is also facing a legal case over its decision to delay the opening of indoor hospitality until 17 May, a month after non-essential retail businesses are allowed to reopen.

The high court has agreed to expedite the case brought by Hugh Osmond, a former Pizza Express director, and Sacha Lord, a nightclub and festival operator who is also the Greater Manchester night-time economy adviser, to the week beginning 19 April, when it will be heard by a judge. Osmond and Lord argue there is no scientific reason for allowing people to shop indoors but not eat and drink inside.

THEGUARDIAN.COM / 6 April 2021 / JOANNA PARTRIDGE

China #MeToo: Court to hear landmark case of intern versus TV star

Six years after the alleged incident, a Chinese court on Wednesday is hearing a landmark case that analysts say could define the future of the country's #MeToo movement.

Zhou Xiaoxuan - also known online by her nickname Xianzi - has taken one of the country's most prominent TV hosts to court, accusing him of sexually harassing her in 2014.
He denies all wrongdoing and has in turn sued her and her supporter for damaging his reputation as well as mental wellbeing.

It is rare in China for such cases to even get to this stage and the stakes are high, analysts say.
Ahead of the hearing, which will not be public, Xianzi told the BBC that whatever happens, she will have no regrets. "If I win, this will encourage many women to come forward and tell their stories; if I lose, I'll keep appealing until justice is served."
About 100 people gathered outside the Haidian District Court in Beijing on Wednesday to show their support for Xianzi. Many were carrying posters with the word #Metoo on them. "We wait with you for an answer from history," another sign read.
The gathering was largely peaceful, though there were scuffles as police tried to clear the protesters and dragged away foreign reporters, according to the AFP news agency.

In the summer of 2018, shortly after Xianzi learned about the slew of legal cases against Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein, she decided to write down her own experience in Chinese on her WeChat account - in part to show solidarity to a childhood friend, who once told her that she was a survivor of rape.
In the 3,000-word essay, the then 25-year-old recalled a 2014 experience where she alleged that while interning at China's state broadcaster CCTV that year, one of the country's most high-profile TV hosts Zhu Jun sexually harassed her. Xianzi alleged that she did complain to the local police, but claims they told her to drop the accusation because Mr Zhu was a prominent TV host and his "positive impact" on society should make her think twice.

Xianzi's writing soon became a viral post on the Chinese internet after her friend, an NGO worker named Xu Chao, reposted it on her public Weibo account. By then, the term "sexual harassment" had become a part of the Chinese media discourse thanks to the #MeToo movement in the United States and Europe, and a small number of successful complaints in China.
Chinese media outlets soon took a great interest in Xianzi's complaint, as the man she accused is a household name in the country. Many women - as well as men - expressed disbelief and showed solidarity online. But Xianzi claimed that, very quickly, she was told that censors had banned media reporting of the alleged incident.

BBC World Service – Vincent Ni - 2 December 2020

Biden admin under fire for restricting media access to border facilities

The Biden administration has come under fire for restricting the access of reporters to facilities at the border as a surge of migrants cross into the United States. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas travelled to the border on Friday with a group of senators from both parties. The Biden administration blocked journalists from joining the trip, something reporters usually can do when members of the cabinet make trips of this kind with lawmakers. Despite promises to be more transparent, the administration has blocked access to border facilities for the media, CNN reported. At least 14,000 children are detained at migration facilities.

Radio Television Digital News Foundation executive director Dan Shelley slammed the lack of media access in a statement:'…' "The Trump administration allowed journalists into juvenile migrant detention facilities. He must fix this immediately. "At a time when the southern border of the United States is undergoing a historic surge of migrants, it is more important than ever that journalists be allowed the necessary access to report accurately and independently on the Border Patrol's response to the increased arrival of migrants and the wellbeing of those housed in Border Patrol facilities."

NBC's Jacob Soboroff pointed out that while the Trump administration gave media access to the border facilities, they did so "because they wanted to explain to us and show us the cruelty of the separation policy. They wanted everyone to see that. Now it's the Biden administration's turn to open the doors so we can fully tell the story of not just where they want to go but why they want to go to that place and show the American public ourselves."

One of the senators on the trip with Secretary Mayorkas, Chris Murphy of Connecticut described what he saw, tweeting that "[hundreds] of kids" were "packed into big open rooms. In a corner, I fought back tears as a [13-year-old] girl sobbed uncontrollably explaining [through] a translator how terrified she was, having been separated from her grandmother and without her parents."

He later clarified that "kids are no longer separated from their parents at the border (in this case, the girl's parents are in the US). But even though kids can now stay and apply for asylum, if they are travelling [with] relatives who aren't parents, the relative can't stay."
Texas Senator Ted Cruz tweeted about the Mayorkas trip: "No press. No cameras. What is Biden hiding? "

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday that the media had not been allowed into border facilities holding children because of pandemic restrictions. But she added that the administration is still "committed to transparency, and we're considering potential options …." according to CNN. '…'.

In a statement to The Independent, US Customs and Border Protection said that they had "discouraged external visitors" in their facilities "due to agency COVID protocols" but that they are "offering and utilizing outdoor interviews or virtual operational briefings".
They added that the agency "will evaluate media requests… on a case-by-case basis to determine the best course of action that protects the media and our employees…..".

INDEPENDENT / 22/03/2021 / Gustaf Kilander

Ford plans for all cars sold in Europe to be electric by 2030

Ford has pledged that all of its cars on sale in Europe will be electric by 2030, in the latest move by the world's biggest auto manufacturers to set out plans to move away from polluting internal combustion engines before looming bans on fossil-fuel vehicles across the world.

The US car giant said on Wednesday that it was going "all in" on electric vehicles and would invest $1bn (£720m) converting a vehicle assembly plant in Cologne, Germany, to become its first electric vehicle facility in Europe. It said the first all-electric cars would start rolling off the production line there in 2023.

Ford promised that all of its passenger cars in Europe would be "zero-emissions capable all-electric or plug-in hybrid" by mid-2026, before ramping up its ambitions to be "completely all-electric by 2030". "We are charging into an all-electric future in Europe with expressive new vehicles and a world-class connected customer experience," Stuart Rowley, the head of Ford's European operations, said. "Our announcement today to transform our Cologne facility, the home of our operations in Germany for 90 years, is one of the most significant Ford has made in over a generation. "It underlines our commitment to Europe and a modern future with electric vehicles at the heart of our strategy for growth."

Ford said two-thirds of its commercial vehicles would also be all-electric or plug-in hybrid by 2030. The company dominates the US and European markets for petrol-powered commercial vehicles with a 40% and 15% share of the markets, respectively. Ford said its commercial vehicle business was "key to future growth and profitability."

The carmaker, which returned to profit in Europe last year, has formed an alliance with Volkswagen to use its modular electric drive electric vehicle platform to build some models. The Cologne facility will use the VW platform.

This week Jaguar Land Rover, the UK-based carmaker owned by India's Tata Motors, said its luxury Jaguar brand cars would be electric-only by 2025 and it would abandon petrol vehicles entirely in the middle of the next decade. The plans come as car companies race to transform their business to meet strict CO2 emission targets set by governments across the world. The UK has announced a ban on the sale of new cars and vans powered wholly by petrol and diesel from 2030. It is part of Boris Johnson's call for a "green industrial revolution" to tackle the climate crisis and create new jobs in future technologies. The UK has set a target to be a net zero emissions economy by 2050.

EU environment ministers struck a deal in October to make the bloc's 2050 net zero emissions target legally binding. Norway, which relies heavily on oil and gas revenues, aims to become the world's first country to end the sale of fossil-fuel-powered cars, setting a 2025 deadline. Fully electric vehicles make up about 60% of monthly sales in Norway.

GUARDIAN / Rupert Neate / 17 February 2021

The horrific abuse of sports stars exposes social media's mob rule

After covering last Saturday's Wales-England rugby match, the BBC's reporter Sonja McLaughlan found herself sitting in her car in tears. She had received a torrent of sexist obscenities and abuse on social media. "Toxic, embarrassing, disgraceful, appalling," she said.

She was not alone. After apparently being glimpsed on video absent-mindedly not applauding the Welsh team after the same match, the England player Ellis Genge suffered death threats. The two join other sporting figures awaiting the anger of a rhetorical mob, rallied by others on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. They currently include the rugby league referee James Child, the football pundit Karen Carney, the Swiss eSports presenter Soe Gschwind-Penski and countless players who endure terrible abuse for doing their jobs.

An easy response is to say that sport is high-profile theatre subject to wild emotions. Players and officials have been insulted throughout history. Sport has long been an outlet, even a safety valve, for communal feelings sublimated in other walks of life. If you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen – or the nearest pub.

An increasing number of sensible people do just that. They decline to use social media and stick to more private channels when discussing sport. But social media is not pub banter. It is a permanent record of disturbed and nasty thoughts beamed to the entire world. It is a global market place for gossip, comment and abuse, a forum and a platform. It embodies the coward's best friend: anonymity.

We all know that Twitter and Facebook claim not to be publishers, and not to be responsible for what appears on their platforms. But as is now clear, if others choose to broadcast the foul language of the football terrace on social media, it is very much their business. The fact that these platforms employ content moderators shows they regard themselves as publications in a similar sense to newspapers or broadcasters. The issue is not technology, but content.

If the Guardian filled its pages with fake news, false accusations and abuse of named individuals, it would spend its days permanently in court, as would the BBC and other media outlets. Social media is mass media. Regulation has merely not yet caught up with it, as eventually it did with newspapers.

The sort of obscenity now being splattered over the airwaves on social media will simply be banned when politicians have the guts to talk truth to the power of money. Reforms such as filtering material before publication and curbing anonymity will be complicated to enforce. Meanwhile our grandchildren will ask why it took us so long – and caused so much hurt – before we brought civility to bear on the new medium, and gave sport back its dignity.

By Simon Jenkins, The Guardian, March 1st, 2021

Biodiversity: how our health and happiness depend on a thriving planet

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, more of us are noticing the variety of animals, trees, and flowers in our back gardens or local park - and how being in contact with nature can influence our happiness. This variety of life is known as biodiversity and it's essential for our health and wellbeing. We depend on biodiversity in the natural world for the water we drink, the food we eat and the clean air we breathe.
But reports show that it is declining at an unprecedented rate – and that this is likely to lead to huge economic and health risks. For example, farming relies on bees and butterflies to pollinate plants, which create fruits and vegetables. Losing pollinators will cost the UK agricultural sector up to £700 million each year, and would seriously affect the country's food supply.

Our new research study looks at the various ways plants, animals, insects and the bacteria around us can, indirectly, be beneficial to human health (and how in some instances they can actually be harmful). Below are the four main takeaways from our research.

Biodiversity is vital to our survival. Nearly 75% of all approved medical drugs come from nature and we rely on the biodiversity of plants and animals to find new medicines. Biodiversity can also help human health by reducing extreme heat. Urban green space with a high diversity of trees can stop cities from becoming too hot.

It also helps us recharge. But research has shown that biodiverse environments can help us recharge. For example, people living in neighbourhoods with more birds report being less stressed. A study which involved stressed people looking at meadows featuring a variety of plants found that people were most relaxed when looking at meadows with at least 32 different species of plants, compared to just one species

It offers us a sense of perspective. Sights and sounds of diversity in nature – such as seeing hundreds of seabirds in flight or being in a forest – inspire strong emotions of awe, amazement and wonder. Research has found that people feel more able to reflect and gain perspective on life when in a green space with a high species richness of plants and birds.

Habitat loss and the wildlife trade threaten this.

That said, biodiversity also has the potential to harm us. Seasonal allergies, stinging nettles, ticks and viruses are all examples of the harmful side of the natural world. But more of a concern is the fact that unsustainable management of biodiversity, through habitat loss or the wildlife trade, can increase the risk of interactions with animals that carry infectious diseases - and make future pandemics more likely. This shows the need for sustainable management of biodiversity – by preserving ecosystems or stopping illegal trade in wildlife.

This is important because biodiversity loss is a global issue - and for real change to occur, solutions needs to implemented on a national and global scale.

Melissa Marseille / 31 March 2021 / The Conversation

Would a Free Milkshake Get You to Ignore Your Phone While Driving?

If trends hold, about 3,000 people will die this year in car accidents caused by distracted drivers, many of them fiddling with their phones. That's dangerous, often enough fatal, and yet we still refuse to put down our devices when we're behind the wheel. Texting is "the most alarming distraction," according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, adding that "using a cellphone while driving creates enormous potential for deaths and injuries." In 2017, the most recent year for which the NHTSA website lists complete statistics, distracted driving killed 3,166 people. Many approaches have been tried. Smartphone makers have taken steps to discourage tapping while driving, like automated text replies.

But Ryan Frankel thinks we can do better, and he has a vested interest in developing a solution. On a sunny summer morning in 2015, he had bicycled into the intersection of 21st Street and 10th Avenue in Manhattan just as a driver ran a red light while looking at his phone. Mr. Frankel swerved and avoided a direct hit, but was catapulted over the handlebars onto the pavement. He fractured his hip and elbow and was in physical therapy for months. While rehabilitating, he started to wonder about addressing the issue. That accident took place shortly after Mr. Frankel sold VerbalizeIt, a translation services company he had founded with Kunal Sarda in 2013. A self-described serial entrepreneur, Mr. Frankel had been searching for a new challenge, so he began to look into the efforts of others who had hoped to curtail drivers' cellphone use.

"I did some market research and found that most companies that had worked on solutions focused on blocking cellphone use while driving," he said. "It was apparent that negative approaches weren't working, so I went the other way and sought a means to reward drivers who make the right decisions behind the wheel. My business partner, Nate Wagner, and I call it the carrot-not-the-stick approach."

Their approach is a free app that uses the cellphone itself to discourage its use while you're driving. It's called This App Saves Lives, and once uploaded to a phone it remains dormant until the phone's global positioning sensor detects that the vehicle is moving at 10 miles per hour or faster. At that point, the app launches in the background and monitors phone use.

It can tell if the driver uses the device for anything other than navigating the car, listening to music or receiving a hands-free phone call. In other words, it discourages reading or sending texts and email and other complex tasks like watching a video.

Simple in operation, the app awards the driver a point for every minute driven without using the device in a detrimental way. If the cellphone is used in a way that could cause distraction, points are deducted.

Paul Stenquist, *The New York Times*, Feb. 27, 2020

A million people have left Britain. What does this mean for the country?

When my family immigrated to London from the US in the early 1970s, we were going against the tide: inner London's population shrank by a fifth that decade. But since then, we've become accustomed to an ever-growing population, particularly in London and the south-east of England, driven both by inflows of people from abroad and rising life expectancy. Over the past 20 years, the UK's annual population growth has averaged about 400,000. And despite an ageing population, that has propelled growth in the labour force and the economy as a whole: in the same period, the UK created nearly 6m additional jobs.

That changed in 2020. With Covid-19 pushing the number of deaths to the highest in a century, and birthrates falling, it seems likely that more people died than were born for the first time since 1976. This would represent by far the largest annual fall in the resident population since he second world war, with London especially hard hit.

From one perspective, this shouldn't be surprising. The UK was among the worst hit countries in the world, both in health and economic terms, by the first wave of the pandemic. Within that, London, where the UK's migrant population is concentrated, fared worst, seeing both more daeths than any other region and a larger rise in the numbers claiming benefits. Moreover, some of the sectors worst hit by lockdowns – accommodation, food services, retail and hospitality – are also heavily dependent on workers from abroad.

And looming over all of this is Brexit. Brexit was not the main driver of emigration over the last year, but it could certainly help persuade people not to return. While many of those who left will have acquired settled status, entitling them to come back, others will have only "pre-settled status" or nothing at all, and the Home Office has been at best ambiguous on their rights. And, of course, the new post-Brexit system will make it much more difficult for new EU migrants to come here.

But that's only one side of the story. High housing costs and congested public transport are problems of success. Lower immigration might ease them at first, but it also means lower growth and less tax revenue, as the Office for Budget Responsibility highlighted in itsforecast last week. We don't depend on immigration just for agricultural workers and coffee shops, but also for tech startups, creative industries, and universities – the most dynamic sectors of the UK economy. Overall, migration has created jobs, boosted innovation and productivity – and made us all richer.

But none of this is inevitable. There is plenty the government can do: for example, making clear that those who have left temporarily because of the pandemic can return, and reducing the absurd and discriminatory fees for settlement and citizenship. Global Britain or Little England? The choice remains ours.

The Guardian, Jonathan Portes, March 8, 2021.

How College Students Are Helping Each Other Survive

Student-led mutual aid networks have raised tens of thousands of dollars to help peers cover basic costs of living.

At many colleges and universities, from underfunded institutions to top-tier private colleges, many students have found themselves unable to meet basic needs during the coronavirus pandemic. Financial insecurity, previously accelerated by rising tuition costs and living expenses, has become even more acute because of the closure of campuses, loss of jobs and slashing of budgets.

In response, across the country, students have created mutual aid networks: raising and redistributing tens of thousands of dollars to help their peers cover housing, medical costs, food and other essentials. Generally, students send in requests for small amounts of money, and network organizers will send them the funds using payment apps like Venmo.

“The pandemic has obviously exacerbated a lot of the inequalities that exist on college campuses,” said Neha Tallapragada, 19, a sophomore who helped start an aid network at Rice University, in Houston, Texas. “That’s really been a painful experience for a lot of students. Students have been laid off from their jobs, or they’ve had to take on new responsibilities because of losses in family income, perhaps due to Covid-related layoffs.” At some schools, students who depend on dorms for housing have struggled after their campuses closed.

“We’re trying to fulfill a lot of the needs that have been exacerbated or are there in a greater degree due to the pandemic,” Ms. Tallapragada said.

At its core, mutual aid is a form of charity in which neighbors or peers work together to help each other out on a case-by-case basis. (The term is often attributed to “Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution,” a 1902 essay collection by the Russian social theorist Peter Kropotkin, who argued that voluntary cooperation has been key to the flourishing of human civilization.)

Not all the aid networks operate in the same way. At Rice, aid recipients must provide a school ID number, while at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee, students and alumni have created a network for sharing temporary housing in addition to their cash distribution efforts. At Northeastern University, in Boston, Massachusetts, organizers aren’t distributing money at all; instead, they use donations to stock a free food pantry and distribute personal protective equipment on campus.

Giving out money is “not something that we’re opposed to, but it isn’t something that we’ve been asked for by students,” said Madeleine Allocco, 21, a junior at Northeastern who has helped with the organizing.

The aid networks are entirely student-run, operating outside of any official college administration oversight.

Sara Goldrick-Rab, a sociology professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who studies college affordability, said: “These mutual aid networks are springing up because the new economics of college, which is what I tend to call it, puts students at a significant economic disadvantage. They have really shown the power of small grass-roots movements.”

***The New York Times,* 23rd November 2020**

How Would the Police Have Reacted if Black People Had Stormed the Capitol?

While a joint session of the US Congress was in the process of attempting to certify President-elect Joe Biden's election win, a violent white mob incited by outgoing President Donald Trump descended upon the Capitol. As some Republican senators lied about the election outcome, their fervent supporters breached security barriers and stormed the building, breaking windows, destroying offices, and stealing items. I haven't screamed that much at a television since the gassing at Lafayette Square last summer. It was jarring to see footage of lawmakers—many of whom had implicitly and explicitly supported the core beliefs of this mob—hiding, while pro-Trump extremists romped about as if they were on a school field trip.

It's already been said countless times and yet is still worth repeating: The response to Black people storming the Capitol likely would have ended in mass bloodshed. One need only consider the treatment of Black Lives Matter protesters this summer. When white police officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man in Minneapolis, by kneeling on his neck for nearly nine minutes, demonstrators in Minneapolis started a protest movement that quickly swept the rest of the country, including Washington, DC. There soon appeared a series of viral videos: police officers in Buffalo, New York, shoving an elderly man; cops using their vehicles to mow down peaceful protesters; and children being tear-gassed. And who can forget the searing image, not far from the scene of the rampage at the Capitol yesterday, of law enforcement gassing peaceful protesters so Trump could cross the street for a photoshoot, during which he held a Bible while standing in front of a historic church.

When it was all said and done, 14,000 people were arrested nationwide and 400 in DC over a three-week period at those racial justice protests.

The insurrectionists took tourist-style pictures and videos of themselves strolling through the building holding Don't Tread on Me, Thin Blue Line, and Confederate flags.

It's always offensive to see white people parading around above the law, flexing their privilege, while the police stand by helplessly. But after the treatment of BLM protesters this summer, seeing Trump supporters in the Capitol, congratulating themselves for their casual federal crimes, I was enraged by law enforcement response. Black people have been killed for having a toy gun, or for selling loose cigarettes, or sleeping in their own beds. But suddenly, police knew how to deescalate and how to nonviolently intervene. It was an astounding display of deference to a racist mob.

The obvious difference between the two groups—BLM protesters and the mob that stormed the Capitol—is that one is a multiracial coalition while the other is an overwhelmingly white right-wing crowd. This is the variable that determines who will be met with force and who will pose for photos with items looted from the Capitol while "doing their thing."

Nathalie Baptiste, Mother Jones, 7/1/2021

A Kansas Bookshop's Fight with Amazon Is About More Than the Price of Books

If you know anything about the Raven bookstore in Lawrence, Kansas, then you know that it charges more for books than Amazon. Advertising higher prices is an unlikely strategy for any business, but Danny Caine talks openly with customers about why his books cost as much as they do. Two years ago, he took that conversation to social media, using the store's Twitter account to explain why the Raven was charging twenty-six ninety-nine for a hardcover book that a customer had seen online for fifteen dollars. "When we order direct from publishers, we get a wholesale discount of 46% off the cover price," Caine wrote. "Our cost for that book from the publishers would be $14.57. If we sold it for $15, we'd make . . . 43 cents."

Amazon has a much larger inventory—not only of books but of other goods with much higher profit margins—as well as many other revenue streams. The company can afford to take a loss on books. "If you've ever wondered why it seems like 'there are no bookstores anymore' or why retail businesses keep closing in your downtown, this is it," Caine wrote. T

Despite the pandemic, book sales were up over all last year, but mostly for places like Amazon ; bookstore sales fell by more than twenty-eight per cent.

The Raven was opened, in 1987, by Mary Lou Wright and Pat Kedhe, old college friends who loved mystery novels and named their downtown store after Edgar Allan Poe's poem. They became members of Sisters in Crime, a global network dedicated to promoting women crime writers, but the Raven soon expanded from a mystery-focussed shop into a general-interest bookstore, growing alongside Lawrence itself—which, thanks in part to the University of Kansas, the local hospital, Hallmark Cards, and a national-defense contractor, has sprawled beyond its free-state settlement roots into a city of nearly a hundred thousand people.

Sarah Young, who has worked at the Raven for more than eighteen years, feels the same way. A professor of English at Benedictine College in nearby Atchison, Young started at the Raven not long after she finished her doctorate at the University of Kansas, impressing some of the staff by answering a customer's question while filling out her application: "She happened to be describing a series of mysteries I knew pretty well, so I called out, 'You're looking for Diane Mott Davidson,' and I was hired." The bookstore was a source of financial stability during Young's early years of adjunct teaching; she mostly works weekends now. Her favorite shifts are Friday evenings, when the date-night couples come by after dinner and the live-music and movie crowds sometimes spill into the store—once including the musician David Crosby. "It's like there's this big, giant secret everybody's in on, the people who shop at the Raven," Young said. "They feel special, not in a self-aggrandizing way but in a way that means we're all connected to each other."

The New Yorker, March 12, 2021. Casey Cep

Uber to pay drivers a minimum wage, holiday pay and pensions

Uber says it will give its 70,000 UK drivers a guaranteed minimum wage, holiday pay and pensions. The ride-hailing app giant said drivers would earn at least the UK's National Living Wage, paid to the over-25s, of £8.72 an hour. It comes one month after the US firm lost a legal battle in the UK, begun in 2016, over drivers' status. Uber told the BBC it did not expect the change in drivers' conditions to mean higher fares.[...]
In last month's Supreme Court hearing, Uber had argued it was a third-party booking agent, and its drivers were self employed. But the court ruled its drivers were workers, a category that means they are entitled to minimum legal, holiday and pension rights. The company is being challenged by its drivers in multiple countries over whether they should be classed as workers or self-employed.

The company said the new rates would come on top of free insurance to cover sickness, injury and maternity and paternity payments which have been in place for all drivers since 2018. [...]

Jamie Heywood, regional general manager for Northern Europe at Uber, said: "Drivers have consistently told us that they wanted both the flexibility that we provided but also they wanted the benefits and we've been struggling to find a way of bringing those two together in a way that work for us and work for drivers".

Uber pointed out in its statement announcing the changes that a worker is a classification that is unique under UK employment law. Workers are not full-blown employees but are entitled to the minimum wage, holiday pay and a pension.

The company said the recent UK Supreme Court ruling had provided a clearer path forward as to a model that gives drivers the rights of worker status - while continuing to let them work flexibly.

Union reps could barely contain their delight at Uber's announcement. After years of court battles, they portray this as a win of David over Goliath. And they are hopeful it might create a domino effect.

Other gig economy companies have likely been looking closely at the Supreme Court's verdict in February. The fact that Uber has chosen to fundamentally change its system rather than fight on might encourage others to do the same. Uber has disrupted markets globally; this move could have repercussions around the world. [...]

Mary Walker, partner and employment lawyer at law firm Gordons believes the additional costs facing the gig economy mean "some businesses will simply be unable to continue trading". Other firms will be able to restructure, but perhaps with fewer workers, Ms Walker added.

Union leaders also warned other gig economy firms they would have to change. "This is the end of the road for bogus self employment," said Mick Rix, general secretary of the GMB union, which has been fighting for employment rights through the courts. "It's a shame it took the GMB winning four court battles to make them see sense, but we got there in the end and ultimately that's a big win for our members. Other gig economy companies should take note," Mr Rix said.

BBC.co.uk / 17 March 2021 / Caroline DAVIES

World is shifting to a more plant-based diet, says Unilever chief

Unilever has said expanding its range of plant-based foods is one of its new strategic priorities as the FTSE 100 company zooms in on the fastest-growing consumer markets.

The group, which is behind household names such as Ben & Jerry's ice-cream, Marmite and Dove soap, wants to have a €1bn(£865m)-a-year plant-based foods business in five to seven years' time. That compares with a €200m business today.

With a growing number of people cutting their meat intake or giving it up altogether, Alan Jope, Unilever's chief executive, described the rise of plant-based foods as an "inexorable" trend. "We are seeing in every single country in the world a shift towards more plant-based diets, even in emerging markets," he said.

The first step was creating plant-based versions of existing brands, such as the vegan Magnums and tubs of Ben & Jerry's ice-cream already on sale. Hellman's vegan mayonnaise, launched in 2018, was "doing brilliantly", he added.

Unilever also wants to grab more of the upmarket beauty and nutritional supplement markets, which are also big growth areas, an ambition that means more deals are on the cards. Recent acquisitions include the wellness brand Liquid IV and SmartyPants vitamins, while it already owns upmarket beauty brands such as Dermalogica, Ren and Living Proof.

Analysts at Barclays have predicted the value of the global plant-based food and drink market could soar by more than 1,000% to exceed £100bn by the end of the decade. With the plant-based food market comprising lots of tiny businesses, acquisition targets for Unilever are less obvious than in other sectors. However, Jope said if it identified a promising candidate, "we will take a look at it". It already owns meat substitute brand The Vegetarian Butcher.

The group, which owns more than 400 brands, reported a 6% drop in underlying profits to €9.4bn on sales of €50.7bn on the back of a "volatile and unpredictable year".

The lifestyle changes forced upon consumers by the pandemic mean the company has had to manage seesawing levels of demand over the past 12 months. While shoppers filled kitchen cupboards with Hellman's, Pot Noodles and Cif surface spray, they cut back on its shampoos and deodorants. It was also hit by the closure of the restaurants and cafes it supplies with ice-cream.

The Anglo-Dutch company, which manufactures 80% of the goods it sells in the UK on these shores, said it had experienced some Brexit-related teething problems, particularly around the flow of goods into Ireland, although the situation had since improved. "The next wave of rules are kicking in on 1 April and our team are very busy preparing to make sure that goes smoothly," said Jope.

The shares closed down 6% at £40.67. The figures were never going to "set the share price on fire", said Dan Lane, a senior analyst at investment platform Freetrade, who said even big consumer firms such as Unilever were carrying battle scars from the pandemic.

Theguardian.com / 04 / 02 / 2021 / Zoe Wood

Universities face fines as part of 'twin assault 'on cancel culture.

Gavin Williamson, the Education secretary, will announce this week that a 'Free Speech Champion' will be given powers to defend free speech and academic freedom on campuses.

Colleges or student bodies that try to cancel, dismiss or demote people over their views will be sanctioned in a major Government escalation on the 'war on woke'.

The Government's twin assault on the so-called 'cancel culture' comes amid concern at senior levels in the Government over attempts to rewrite Britain's past. It came as polling out today for the new Reclaim Party found 49 per cent of Britons believe they are less free to say what they think than five years ago. In a further assault on alleged wing bias, the Government has tasked the new head of Ofcom with ensuring broadcasters report with "due impartiality", according to an advert for the role seen by this newspaper.

Last night Sir John Hayes, the chairman of the Common Sense Group, welcomed the measures by the Government to tackle so-called 'cancel culture'. He said: "It is absolutely right that the Government steps in to defend free speech. Without the ability to speak freely soon we will not have the ability to think freely."

He added that while "universities ought to be places where ideas are to be a fulcrum for devising and testing ideas to be places of imaginings", debate was being closed down to new ideas by "the thought police".

Mr Dowden was right to remind "organisations that have strayed from their purpose that protecting and promoting our heritage is about making people proud, not making them feel guilty about being British", he said.

Changes to the law will ensure student unions, as well as universities, are subject to the duties to promote free speech. A new 'Free Speech Champion' will be set up to work from the Office for Students, the student regulator.

They will be given powers to champion free speech and academic freedom, impose fines on providers or student unions that restrict speech unlawfully and order redress if individuals have been dismissed or demoted for their views.

A source told The Telegraph: "Free speech underpins our democratic society, and our universities have a long and proud history of being places where students and academics can express themselves freely, challenge views and cultivate an open, inquiring mind.

"Unacceptable silencing and censoring on campuses are having a chilling effect and that is why we must strengthen free speech in higher education, by bolstering the existing legal duties and ensuring strong, robust action is taken if these are breached."

"History is ridden with moral complexity and interpreting Britain's past should not be an excuse to tell an overly-simplistic version of our national story, in which we damn the faults of previous generations whilst forgetting their many great achievements. Purging uncomfortable elements of our past does nothing but damage our understanding of it."

A department source said: "Oliver Dowden is a Culture Secretary who isn't afraid to defend our culture and history from the noisy minority of activists constantly trying to do Britain down."

The Sunday Telegraph - 13th February 2021

The future is TikTok

Out of the ashes of 2020 rose TikTok, a new type of social media paving the way in internet culture, education, and activism. TikTok is a video-based social media app with an unusual authenticity and growing cultural influence – presenting a rare chance for positive social impact through transformation of the social media space. TikTok has been available for download worldwide since 2018, but saw a massive increase in users this year, and almost 120 million of its over 2 billion total downloads happened in April 2020 alone.

In the midst of COVID-19 quarantines and mass mobilizations against the status quo, TikTok's innovative and unique design is at the frontier of a new wave of social media, which is transforming the way we interact with each other and consume digital content.

So what makes TikTok so special? The structure of TikTok ensures that the content a user sees is less dependent on who they follow compared to other social media. The central feature of TikTok is its "For You" page, an explore page which is constantly providing new videos from creators the user does not necessarily follow and often has not interacted with. This structure makes TikTok a more grassroots platform – the app promotes all creators, not just the famous, by giving them all chances on the 'For You' page.

On TikTok, imperfections and authenticity are to be desired, with popular trends ranging from bad camera angles to autotuned Russian cereal commercials.

TikTok's authenticity is a breath of fresh air. Most corporations, politicians, news organizations, and even celebrities have been late discovering it and have a minimal presence on the app. No candidate for the 2020 presidential election attempted to campaign on TikTok, and the app has committed to combating election misinformation from all sources (unlike competitors).

TikTok is not simply a place for dances and frivolous trends. It is a growing space for political activism, education, and commentary. A recent TikTok movement in June caused the Trump 2020 campaign to overestimate the number of attendees for a rally in Tulsa Oklahoma, deceived by number inflation at the hands of TikTokers. The instance demonstrates the political power TikTok holds, but also how little it is on politicians' radars.

TikTok has many laudable traits, but the app is not without opposition. India made plans to ban TikTok early this July, and the Trump administration followed shortly afterwards. TikTok is under attack from all sides, being scapegoated as either a shallow time waster or a ploy by the Chinese government to mine data from American citizens. The latter claim has been largely disproven and deemed a xenophobic dog whistle rather than a concern of substance.

TikTok is not just another fad – It is an innovative product which is already changing the world, and attempting to stifle it would be to ignore reality and miss out on all the good it can bring. The future is now, and the future is TikTok.

The Harvard Political Review / 7 October 2020 / Maria Keselj

'I speak Italian with a Croydon accent': reporters on their language skills

Our foreign correspondents reflect on the practical and cultural importance of fluency in a country's native tongue.

During the worst of the coronavirus outbreak in China, people described to us deeply personal and traumatic experiences – losing their parents, suffering the death of a child, being harassed and intimidated for trying to speak out. Having these conversations in Mandarin was important not just for capturing nuance and detail but for a sense of empathy.

I grew up in a Chinese-speaking household and for me Mandarin is the language of family. It is my parents' first language, and what dominated family gatherings of dozens of aunts and uncles and cousins while growing up. So hearing people describe in Chinese what their family members were like, or how they tried and failed to save them, hit me particularly hard. I like to think that this made me a better listener and a more careful journalist.

As it becomes harder to report in China, knowing the language has become all the more important. Being able to do interviews quickly before being pushed away by police or other minders is incredibly helpful. Catching snippets of conversations at temperature checks, or a short exchange with a health worker outside a hospital, are sometimes as illuminating as a formal sit-down interview.

Knowing Mandarin was not always the most important thing. While reporting in Wuhan and tracking down early patients, my colleague who speaks Wuhan dialect was able to quickly glean information before conversations were cut off. We often did interviews together, with her switching into dialect when it seemed like it would help. It often did.

Jon Henley, Europe correspondent

I mostly blame a formative teenage fortnight in Chalon-sur-Saône in the summer of 1975 (and in particular Natalie, the neighbour of my exchange partner, Pascal) for an early infatuation with France and, by extension, foreign languages, that would define the rest of my life.

Eating cheeses that weren't extra-mild cheddar; going to restaurants when it wasn't even anyone's birthday; smoking Gitanes sans filtre and snogging Natalie – activities all previously unimagined – ensured I became a linguist long before I was a journalist.

I did a degree in French and German, odd-jobbed for a few years then fled 80s England to Amsterdam, where I picked up Dutch, got hired – pretty much by chance – by the Associated Press and learned the job I've done for the past 30-odd years, based in four European countries.

But it wasn't an accident, I think now. There are clear parallels between a fascination for languages and the job of journalism: both open doors, reveal unsuspected worlds, and confer an enviable status of somehow being both participant and observer.

It's possible to be a foreign correspondent without speaking the language, but it makes many stories harder to do well. You're journalistically amputated; deprived of much of what allows you to make sense of things, reliant on others to interpret reality. Above all, though, you are not in that unique linguistic-journalistic space – half in and half out; informed, involved, but not responsible – where the world becomes most interesting.

The Guardian / Tue 15 Dec 2020 / Lily Kuo, Beijing bureau chief

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Covid Greece: Waiting for the tourists to come back

All over Europe, people are waiting and hoping to find out whether foreign summer holidays will be possible. Many countries are currently banning or strongly discouraging them, and returning travellers have to quarantine on arrival.

Greece is among those that are heavily reliant on tourism and looking to open up for foreign visitors who have been vaccinated or who have had a recent negative Covid test. With coronavirus cases still surging in many parts of Europe, the situation is uncertain.

April is normally the start of the tourist season for boat owners at the dock of this harbour in Athens, but things are on hold because of the pandemic.
Eugene Theodoridis and his team rent out catamarans and yachts for trips to the Greek islands. Their clients come from the UK, the United States, Germany and South Africa.
"All through the winter, we have been preparing the boats in order for the tourists to come," Eugene told me. "We will be ready when the borders open and we can welcome all guests throughout the world."

Greece is hoping to open up to visitors in mid-May, but Eugene says it's not clear how many other countries will be ready to permit travel.

"You understand that this does not depend solely on us," he said. "A lot of nations need to agree on specific protocols in order to allow people to travel."
At the moment, he says it is very difficult to plan anything.

While coronavirus cases appear to be on the decline in the UK, many parts of Europe are seeing a surge in infections. There are still tough Covid restrictions in Greece. In downtown Athens, the restaurants and bars and tourist shops are shut.
The locals are becoming increasingly frustrated. The tourist industry accounts for about a fifth of Greece's economy.
Greece is planning to vaccinate all tourism workers by the summer. And it is leading calls for vaccination certificates or passports to allow foreign visitors to travel.
The Minister of Culture, Lina Mendoni, believes the vaccination certificates are very important to make "everybody will feel really safe", so they can come and see Greece's archaeological sites and museums.

The EU is discussing plans for a common digital pass which will show whether people have been vaccinated, tested or have antibodies.

Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz is one of those strongly backing the measure. "Those who have been vaccinated should have full freedom," he told German newspaper Bild.
"But so should those who have just had corona, and are therefore immune. And also, all those who take a test and can prove that they have tested negative."

At the moment, testing requirements for travellers and costs vary from country to country.
Some European countries accept rapid lateral flow/antigen tests for entry while others insist on the more sensitive PCR tests, which take longer to process.

BBC News - Bethany Bell - 5 April 2021

Drones used by police to monitor political protests in England

The Police have used unmanned drones to monitor political protests, including those held by the non-violent Black Lives Matter movement, research shows. Police also used drones in 2020 at animal rights protests, Extinction Rebellion and anti-HS2 demonstrations, and in one instance, an extreme-right protest.

Campaigners say the police's expanded use of drones is happening with the rules not clear and next to no debate. Police say that is not the case. The campaign group Drone watch used freedom of information requests to ask police forces to detail their use of drones at protests from January to October 2020. The Surrey, Cleveland, Staffordshire, Gloucestershire and West Midlands forces said they had used drones at BLM protests. Cleveland at three BLM events, Gloucestershire at two BLM protests and one lockdown protest, and West Midlands at three BLM protests. In south-west England, the Devon and Cornwall force and Avon and Somerset police used drones at 15 events including protests and public disorder incidents. Both forces declined to say at which protests drones had been used.

Polling for Drone watch by Yonder claims to show public concern about drone use when they fly beyond where a human can see them. Of 2,000 people questioned, 60% were worried about the effects on privacy and civil liberties, and 67% said they were concerned about the safety implications.

The National Police Chiefs' Council lead for the police use of drones, assistant chief constable Steve Barry, said: "Police use drones at protests to help inform policing tactics to keep everyone safe. Their use is well regulated and governed by the surveillance commissioner and information commissioner guidelines."

Chris Cole of Drone watch said: "Police are adopting this new surveillance technology with little oversight or consent from the public. There seems to be little control over how the data is being gathered or stored with alarmingly worrying replies from the police indicating they do not understand what rights the public have in regard to accessing data."

Cole said: "This is just the tip of the iceberg. Despite serious public concern, the government is planning to liberalise airspace regulations to enable a whole raft of public agencies and private companies to operate drones freely in our airspace. Before that happens, it's vital that there is a proper public debate about the limits of drone use and comprehensive privacy controls are put in place."

Rosalind Comyn, the policy and campaigns manager at Liberty, said drone use was part of an alleged general assault on the right to protest. "Protest is a keyway we can all fight for a better society and stand up for what we believe in. "Recent years have seen a concerted attack on the right to protest from police and government, which particularly threatens people who are already marginalised and cut off from having their voices heard. "Increased mass surveillance, whether through drones or other developing tools like facial recognition, is designed to intimidate and control, and ultimately silence dissent."

GUARDIAN / Vikram Dodd/ 14 February 2021

Elite minority of frequent flyers 'cause most of aviation's climate damage'

An “elite minority” of frequent flyers cause most of the climate damage resulting from aviation’s emissions, according to an environmental charity. The report, which collates data from the countries with the highest aviation emissions, shows a worldwide pattern of a small group taking a large proportion of flights, while many people do not fly at all.

In the US, 12% of people took 66% of all flights, while in France 2% of people took half of the flights, the report says. In China 5% of households took 40% of flights and in India just 1% of households took 45% of all the flights.

It was already known that 10% of people in England took more than half of all international flights in 2018. A global study found that frequent-flying “super emitters” who represent just 1% of the world’s population caused half of aviation’s carbon emissions in 2018. Almost 90% of the world’s population did not fly at all that year.

The coronavirus pandemic has slashed the number of flights taken but campaigners fear government bailouts of airlines will cause aviation to return to its pre-pandemic growth trend.

Possible, the group that produced the new report, is calling for the introduction of a frequent flyer levy, whereby the first flight in a year incurs little or no tax and it therefore does not penalise annual family holidays. But the levy then ramps up for each additional flight. “If left unchecked, emissions from polluting industries like flying threaten to crash the climate,” said Alethea Warrington, a campaigns manager at Possible. “This report shows [that] while the poorest communities are already suffering the impacts of a warming climate, the benefits of high-carbon lifestyles are enjoyed only by the few. A progressive tax on aviation would treat frequent flying as the luxury habit it is.”

Leo Murray, a director at Possible, said: “Air travel is a uniquely damaging behaviour, resulting in more emissions per hour than any other activity, bar starting forest fires. So targeting climate policy at the elite minority responsible for most of the environmental damage from flights could help tackle the climate problem without taking away access to the most important and valued services that air travel provides to society.” […]

Michael Gill, executive director at the International Air Transport Association, which represents the world’s airlines, said: “Taxes have proved to be an ineffective way to tackle emissions. The focus instead should be on practical means to mitigate the CO2 impact of aviation, while still enabling people to fly for business and family reasons.”

“Airlines are investing billions in cleaner aircraft, sustainable aviation fuels and the use of carbon emissions trading or offsetting as part of a long-term strategy to cut 2005-level emissions in half by 2050. “We would also dispute the description that frequent flying is a ‘luxury habit’. Many, if not the majority, of frequent flyers are business people who need face-to-face contact with clients and staff, particularly over the coming months as business returns to normal.”

***The Guardian*, 31 March 2021**

Why procrastination can help fuel creativity

If the history of creativity teaches us anything, it is that great ideas often come when we're least expecting them. Consider Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who described how new melodies would arrive while he was eating in a restaurant, walking after a meal or getting ready for sleep at night. "Those that please me, I retain, and even hum; at least, so others have told me," he wrote. "It seems to me impossible to say whence they come to me and how they arrive; what is certain is that I cannot make them come when I wish."

It's not just Mozart who experienced this phenomenon; the French mathematician Poincare described how his breakthroughs occurred while travelling on the bus or walking by the seaside, while Agatha Christie reported that ideas for her crime stories often came while washing up or having a bath. "I don't think necessity is the mother of invention," she wrote in her autobiography. "Invention, in my opinion, arises directly from idleness, possibly also from laziness."

Psychologists would seem to agree, with strong evidence that creative insights are much more likely to occur after a period of "incubation" – in which you focus on something entirely different from the job at hand, while your brain works away behind the scenes. This could include taking a walk, doing household chores or having a shower. Even our procrastination at work – such as watching funny YouTube videos – may be helpful for our problem solving, provided it is done in moderation.

There are many reasons why a period of incubation could lead to new and inventive insights. According to one of the leading theories, it depends on the power of the unconscious mind: when we leave our task, the brain continues to look for solutions below awareness, until a solution pops out.

Just as importantly, a period of incubation allows us to gain some psychological distance from our task. When you spend a long time focusing on one problem, you can become fixated on certain obvious solutions. A period of incubation should help you to widen your mental focus so that you can make connections and come back to the problem with a new perspective. Intriguingly, incubation may work best when your mind is distracted with an engaging but relatively easy task, so that it is given just enough room to wander freely.

Whether you are a budding novelist, an advertising creative, a strategist or a teacher hoping to come up with more original lesson plans, these results are worth bearing in mind. Facing an impending deadline, we may fear taking any time away from the task at hand. But this will be counter-productive, and there should be no guilt about spending a few moments of pleasant distraction, or leaving the task altogether as we allow a solution to bubble to the surface.

In the increasingly competitive workplace, we need innovative thinking more than ever before. But that will only be possible if we allow the conscious mind to find diversion and wander freely from time to time.

BBC / 01/04/21 / Loizos Heracleous and David Robson

Here's how women are changing the way economies are run

Women now hold many of the jobs controlling the world's largest economy – and they are trying to fix it.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and trade tsar Katherine Tai hold top jobs in United States President Joe Biden's administration and many of his economic advisers also are women, as are nearly 48 percent of his confirmed cabinet-level officials.

This sea change may already be affecting economic policy – a new $2.3 trillion spending plan introduced by Biden last week includes $400bn to fund the "care economy," supporting home- and community-based jobs taking care of kids and seniors, work normally done by women that has mostly gone unacknowledged in years past.

Yellen says the focus on "human infrastructure," and the earlier $1.9 trillion rescue bill should result in significant improvements for women, whose share of the workforce had hit 40-year lows even before the crisis and for everyone else as well.

"When women are involved, the evidence is very clear: communities are better, economies are better, the world is better," Georgieva said in January, citing research compiled by the IMF and other institutions. "Women make great leaders because we show empathy and speak up for the most vulnerable people. Women are decisive … and women can be more willing to find a compromise."

The global recession related to the coronavirus pandemic is actually a "she-session," many economists say, because of how hard it has hit women.

Women comprise 39 percent of the global workforce but account for 54 percent of overall job losses, management consultants McKinsey found in a recent study. In the US, women accounted for more than half the 10 million jobs lost during the COVID-19 crisis and more than 2 million women have left the labour force altogether.

Bringing these women back to work could boost gross domestic product by 5 percent in the United States, 9 percent in Japan, 12 percent in the United Arab Emirates and an astounding 27 percent in India, the world's largest democracy, the IMF estimates.

The rise of female leaders should lead to "a more inclusive – in the true sense of the word – response to the many, many challenges that are the legacy of COVID," Carmen Reinhart, the World Bank's chief economist, told the Reuters news agency.

Katherine Tai, the first woman of colour to lead the US Trade Representative's office, has told her staff to think "outside the box", embrace diversity and talk to communities that have been long ignored.

"The lesson for us is (to) make sure … that we don't sink into business as usual," said Okonjo-Iweala, Nigeria's first female finance minister and current head of the World Trade Organisation. "It's about people. It's about inclusivity. It's about decent work for ordinary people," she told Reuters.

Aljazeera / 07 April 2021 / Reuters News Agency

Hello, I'm Eleanor – please can you remind me how to make small talk?

In 1828, a strange teenage boy appeared on the streets of Nuremberg. He had a limited vocabulary, and – initially – tended to repeat the phrases, "I want to be a cavalryman, as my father was," and, "Horse! Horse!". Later, he would claim that he'd been raised in total isolation; in solitary confinement, in a dark cell. His name, Kaspar Hauser, became synonymous with outsiders, feral children, and – more generally – people who have to learn to adapt to society.

Now, I'm not saying the pandemic has turned the entire global population into Kaspar Hausers; speaking in monosyllables and rehearsed phrases, and hissing at sunlight. My English is still pretty good and, thanks to the spare-time glut, I've even improved my French. At the same time, as lockdown eases, the idea of having to hold a conversation with someone other than my partner or the select few people I regularly video call, fills me with both excitement and dread. Even before my year without a social life, I was prone to social anxiety. […]

Small talk, in fact, is becoming more and more of an olden-days skill, like butter churning or identifying witches. Is there any room for chitchat about the weather when the entire world has just experienced the same traumatic event? It feels a little bit like wiping your feet before entering a pigsty. And – these days – being asked how I am sends me into an existential spiral. The reflex to answer, "Good, yeah, fine", comes into conflict with a universally acknowledged reality that everything has been extremely difficult, and we're all processing varying levels of trauma. So I usually answer with something along the lines of, "Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," until the person intent on knowing how I am changes the subject. […]

So, if we're going to set one ground rule for the "back to normal" transition period it should be this: do not, under any circumstances, ask anyone how they've been. We're entering a post-small talk society. One in which casual phrases of greeting such as "How's it going?" or "How have you been?" need to be replaced with "What was your first encounter with death?" or, "When's the last time you screamed, and why?". […]

On the other hand, I have almost no doubt that our readaptation to normality will happen, if not quickly, seamlessly. Much like our adaptation to the pandemic. So much of the time, things just are; reality is what it is. No masks, then masks. Hugging, then no hugging. Last year, I got on the tube for the first time in about six months and – after feeling "a bit weird" for about 20 seconds – I felt nothing. Nothing except for the usual feeling of tubefulness I usually feel when travelling on the tube. Granted, I was 100% more wary than I was, pre-pandemic, of how close people were to me, and whether or not they were wearing masks. But that felt normal too.

It's even possible that, one day, small talk will make sense again. And, when it does, we'll slip – without any real thought – back into answering, "Good, yeah, fine" when asked how we are. But, until whenever that may be, let's just accept that everyone we know has gone a little bit Kaspar Hauser. To varying degrees, we've all forgotten how to exist in a world where it's OK to kiss our relatives, or rub the corner of your eye without first washing your hands for the duration of the birthday song. […]

The Guardian / April 1, 2021 / Eleanor Margolis

Sustainability and the Downfall of Danone CEO Faber

After more than seven years at the helm, Danone CEO Emmanuel Faber was ousted by the board on Monday, March 15. The board acted under pressure from activist shareholders, centered around Bluebell Capital Partners and Artisan Partners. Emmanuel Faber will enter history as one of the leading executives promoting stakeholder capitalism and centering core business units around ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) objectives. Yet his footprint and departure reveal a pervasive rift between staunch supporters of sustainable capitalism and hard-rugged corporate activists.

Food systems trigger one-third of greenhouse gas emissions or roughly 18 billion tonnes annually. This magnitude triggers an existential question. How does the current market intelligently value a global food giant's impact initiatives to reduce this carbon footprint?

Danone, during the last five years, consistently underperformed compared to its immediate peers Unilever and Nestlé. During that same period, Danone delivered a slightly negative share price performance, while Nestlé and Unilever posted a cumulative positive 45% and 30% performance.

The Covid-19 business adversity forced Faber to announce a restructuring plan in October, the fifth one under his reign, targeting 2,000 job cuts. But structural problems marred Danone's performance already prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is not without irony that a purpose-driven company seeking to champion governance was pressured to recognize the need for essential separation of function between the CEO and chairman's role. Danone failed to impress with timid sales numbers in recent years, in line with sustained underspending on R&D and marketing expenditure, two core metrics in today's food industry.

Faber converted Danone into an "Enterprise à mission," a purpose-driven company. The legal entity has much in common with the public benefit corporation (PBC). PBCs are for-profit companies, but their missions embrace a broader range of stakeholders.

At the U.N. Climate Action Summit in September 2019, Faber also launched the "One Planet for Biodiversity" (OP2B). The organization defined itself as an "international cross-sectorial, an action-oriented business coalition on biodiversity with focus on agriculture." Furthermore, Danone signed the New York Declaration on Forests and endorsed the Consumer Goods Forum (CGF) resolution, aiming to yield zero net deforestation in crucial commodity sectors.

Under Faber, Danone joined the RE100 initiative, a collection of companies committed to using 100% renewable electricity. Danone aimed to reach 50% of renewable electricity by 2020 and 100% by 2030.

It is far from clear how these sustainable initiatives will be integrated from now on by new management. Could a more purpose-driven market environment have saved CEO Faber?

FORBES / MARCH 20, 2021 / Frank Van Gansbeke

Please be quiet: my search for a noise-free life

Ten years ago, I bought a box of earplugs. My partner occasionally snored and, at about £12 for 200 pairs, it seemed an absolute bargain. That was more than enough for a lifetime of peace, surely? I ran my hand through the slippery packets of foam slugs; they were yellow and pink, like rhubarb and custard sweets. I felt like an earplug millionaire.

My name is Emma and I have become a noise bore: a shusher, a tutter and a wordless fulminator. I Google "abandoned croft, Hebrides" regularly and spent months researching noise-cancelling headphones. I seriously considered trading my rhubarb and custards in for a £300 pair: £300 for earplugs! Barely a week goes by without me quoting the Road Traffic (Vehicle Emissions) Regulations 2002 at a driver with an idling engine, and I email Ian, the local council noise enforcement officer, more often than I email my sister.

I've been noise-sensitive for years. Maybe the seeds were sown in my first year at university, a stressful time, filled with harrowing sex noises and the Prodigy from the room next door as I tried to work or sleep. It might go back further: I went to a Quaker school with daily sessions of silent "meeting for worship", which left me with an eerie ability to sit completely still for hours and a craving for calm.

Don't move to a city centre if you can't hack noise, you may think, quite rightly. I'm sure that's what Ian thinks every time I send him a 5am video of a reversing bin lorry. But these aren't (just) the ravings of an angry, middle-aged woman. I have become increasingly aware of how far from alone I am in my obsession. I'm part of a huge community of people who want everything to just… pipe down.

National Trust founder Octavia Hill wrote passionately in the 1880s of the universal need for silence, space and air, allowing "that sense of quiet which whispers of better things come to us gently".

But that "sense of quiet" seems impossible to achieve now. We live in high-density housing in urban centres, where we are prey to sirens, engines and extractor fans. We travel on trains and buses at the mercy of other people's digestion, openly broadcasted music ("sodcasting") and phone calls. We work in open-plan spaces, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with coughers, pen tappers, desk diners and obnoxious conference callers.

Actual loud noise is unequivocally bad for us. A World Health Organization report in 2011 estimated that in Western Europe alone, traffic noise results in the annual loss of "at least one million healthy years of life". Reliable statistics on noise-induced hearing loss are hard to come by, but a 2011-12 study by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that between 6% and 24% of American adults under 70 suffer.

THE OBSERVER / 1 March 2020 / EMMA BEDDINGTON

Why getting a name right matters

What message do we send when we get them wrong?

Canadian radio host Nana aba Duncan decided a decade ago she no longer wanted to go by nicknames and instead reclaim her full Ghanaian name, pronounced Nuh-NAA-buh. She put a name pronouncer in her email signature, and patiently corrected people when they didn't get it quite right. She got a lot of support – but she also still faces struggles.

A woman at a party insisted she could never pronounce Duncan's full first name, laughing instead at how different it was and asking where she was from. "She really, really acted like I had just come from another country… I really felt like I was so foreign to her," says Duncan, who has lived in Toronto for more than 40 years. At another get-together, a guest explained that her name was hard to pronounce and unilaterally reverted to 'Nana' instead. Then there was the co-worker who sang Duncan's name to the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: "Na-Na-Na-BAAAAAA." No one else's name became a musical spectacle, just hers.

Yet the care we take to get names right is a topic increasingly under scrutiny as Kamala Harris takes office in the US. Harris, the first female, black and Asian American to serve as US vice-president, has faced consistent mispronunciations of her name. In some cases, they present as apparently wilful errors used to suggest 'otherness', or draw attention to her ethnicity. Harris has made a point of correcting mispronunciations publicly, sending an important signal that there's no excuse for failing to master names – and serving as a role model for those who want to reclaim their identities.

Changing one's name to fit in happens more often than some may think, especially on resumés. According to research from Stanford University and the University of Toronto, nearly half of black and Asian job applicants who altered their resumés did so by changing the presentation of their name in an effort to erase any racial cues. (The researchers found those who "whitened" their resumés were twice as likely to get call-backs for an interview, compared to those who left ethnic details intact.)

In Harris' case, Fox News host Tucker Carlson's angry on-air rant and then-Georgia Senator David Perdue's remarks to Donald Trump supporters sparked the most debate. When a guest tried to correct Carlson's mispronunciation of "Kamala" on air in August, the TV host (whose cable newscast was averaging more than four million viewers each night at the time) responded with, "So what?" and mispronounced it again several times. Perdue, who made a joke of repeatedly stumbling on Harris's name at an October rally, knows Harris well. They were in the US Senate together for more than three years, and he served alongside her on the 21-member Senate Budget Committee before losing the Georgia US Senate run-off election earlier this month.

Carlson said his mispronunciation was "unintentional", while a spokeswoman for Perdue said he "didn't mean anything by it". But Durkee refers to these types of actions as "micro-invalidations" and when they're unequivocally prejudiced, "micro-assaults". "Micro-assaults are much more explicit, intentional forms of discrimination or disrespect. Strategically mispronouncing someone's name is a way of othering someone."

BBC / 12/01/21 /Zulekha Nathoo

Have we got minimalism all wrong?

'Less is more' is a familiar refrain recently – but in fact it's an idea that goes back 2,500 years. Beverley D'Silva explores outer order, inner calm – and why simplicity may help make us happy.

Minimalism seems to be everywhere these days. For something that's all about reduction and "less is more", there's an awful lot of it about. The term is now applied to innumerable philosophies, products or lifestyle choices, from a light-fitting design to the goal of owning fewer possessions or – the ultimate pared-down minimalism – monk-like asceticism. The definitions are broad. Is it a profound philosophy, intended to make us reflect on the damage we're doing to the planet, like the artist Michael Landy's 2001 seminal project Break Down, in which he destroyed all his worldly goods? Or is it just about objects – what we own and what we discard – at the level of Marie Kondo, empress of organising, whose concept of "sparking joy" through what we have around us has resonated to the tune of 11 million books sold on her Kon-Mari method.

Kondo is part of a new army who have marched on to the popular stage in the past decade banging the minimalism drum. With her are Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, aka The Minimalists, who have made the study of material goods we own – and why – their life's work. In 2009, the boyhood friends saw the light that minimalism could shine on their stressed, high-earning executive lives, and the accumulation of possessions they admit acted as a distraction from their deep unhappiness and discontent. "I was chasing the American dream," says Nicodemus, "until I realised it wasn't my dream".

Bitten by the minimalism bug, they decluttered and jettisoned 90% of their possessions, sparking joy – and new careers – via their successful blogs, books and TV series. Their new Netflix series, Less Is Now, is an entertaining take on their personal stories and a calling to the cause, interspersed with expert insights, such as Annie Leonard of Greenpeace USA, who notes "corporations and the drive for profit are absolutely behind the addictions to stuff we have", and puts retail therapy's exponential growth down to people having "lost other ways of having a community, a purpose, an identity". Erwin McManus, founder of a "megachurch" in Los Angeles, meanwhile, has a spiritual take on it: "The lessons of minimalism are so powerful [because] we're binging on all the wrong things and dying of hunger for the things that matter," he says.

Modern minimalism may have begun in the 20th Century, but the philosophy's roots reach far further back, some 2,500 years, and a self-determined figure called Diogenes; "the original nonconformist", according to William Stephens, professor emeritus of philosophy at Creighton University in the US. Diogenes was born around 412BC, and travelled from what is now Turkey to Athens, and, deciding he didn't need a house, lived in a felled rainwater pipe. All he possessed was a cloak, a walking stick and a leather pouch (nobody knows what he kept in it, given he had no money). Having "discovered happiness through self-mastery and self-sufficiency", Stephens says, Diogenes refused to conform to society's values of "accumulating possessions, and social status… so he was the original minimalist".

BBC / 31/03/21 / Beverley D'Silva

'This isn't an outdated ivory tower': how Oxford University leapfrogged its rivals

It's no secret that graduates from Oxford University can be found everywhere in the higher echelons of British public life. The university's success in placing its graduates in jobs has seen it unseat Cambridge in the Guardian University Guide for the first time since 2011, pushing its traditional rival down to third place, behind St Andrews.

"It isn't just the outdated image of an ivory tower, this is an institution that is deeply engaged in the world," says Louise Richardson, vice-chancellor at Oxford. "There is a real entrepreneurial culture here."
Oxford University – alongside Cambridge – has been a bastion of prestige and power for centuries, granting its graduates a passport to the elite. Its alumni dominate the cabinet, sit at the head of boardrooms, preside over courtrooms and run newspapers. Its particular strength is getting jobs for graduates from disciplines where there is typically lower employer demand, such as English literature and history.

This is a quality highlighted by the new graduate jobs data used in this year's University Guide, which is collected 15 months after graduation rather than six. (…) To return to the top of the table, Oxford has been given the edge over Cambridge and St Andrews by its superior track record of recruiting students with lower grades who go on to secure a first or a 2:1.

Richardson says this is the result of a concerted effort by the university to widen access, following widespread criticism of its slow progress. "The socio-economic and ethnic diversity of our undergraduate student body has been transformed over the past five years, and we see this as a terrific success. We are very proud of our achievement," she says.

Richardson identifies several reasons as to why Oxford graduates have such good job prospects. For starters, the university attracts capable students, who are filtered for their commitment and organisation by its separate early admissions process. These students are further selected for thorough academic interviews. (…)
Once successful candidates arrive at Oxford, they encounter its distinctive teaching style through the tutorial system. (…)

The university also invests heavily in its careers service, provides support with internships, and leverages its impressive alumni network to help its students land jobs on graduation. "Historically, students relied on family networks, privileged students went to university, and family connections helped them get jobs. [Here] that is not the case; it's the network of students and other alumni that help you," says Richardson.

But recruiting talented, ambitious students and hothousing them in academic studies over three years arguably no longer equips graduates with the skills needed in the modern world. A final advantage that Richardson believes an Oxford education confers is more recent: access to the Oxford Foundry (OxFo), a social purpose-driven technology and entrepreneurship centre set up by the Saïd Business School. (…)

It's a really entrepreneurial culture to complement the research culture," she says. (…)

By Rachel Hall and Richard Adams, *The Guardian, 5* September 2020

Turn back time? What it means to wear a watch in the era of mobile phones.

One side-effect of the rise of mobile phones was that clocks became decorative and watches irrelevant. As years passed, and my own life transitioned from blood and air to thumb and screen, the need for their very existence became questionable. If I needed to tell the time, I would glance to the top of whichever piece of glass I was using and in the small cracks in between, the shallow minutes when I was walking from one screen to the next, well, I could wing it, perhaps by measuring the angle of the sun.

Yet as the need for watches has waned, the passion for them has remained. And, in certain circles, it soars. The author Gary Shteyngart detailed his obsessive love of watches in a New Yorker essay published in 2017. “In a society hopeless and cruel,” he explained, “the particular and the microscopic were the only things that could still prove reliable.”

It was with tentative nostalgia that I strapped a watch to my wrist last month, only the third of my life. The first was a polka-dotted Pop Swatch, a 10th birthday present I wore on my sweatshirt like a medal; the second a 1930s ladies watch that needed more attention than a 21-year-old art student could offer. This one is plastic, by Belgian brand Komono, and a sort of rubberised penile pink; it blends into my skin, offering an uncanny sex doll texture. It costs around £59, which is just as well: it would have been far too stressful to have road-tested a classy vintage piece. It took a week to remember to use it to tell the time, the action of lifting my left wrist so foreign to me that my hand felt weighted, yet I was deeply aware of it, as a statement, a sign.

In those first cautious days, my watch felt too heavy with meaning. I was horribly aware that strangers might have me for someone attempting a “digital detox” or some similarly tortured performance of superiority. And yet, as I became accustomed to carrying time, it became… handy. I found myself managing my day more efficiently – a morning broke cleanly into a number of parts, rather than simply post-breakfast and pre-lunch. While in previous eras a watch was the final accessory to a conservative, correct outfit, in today’s world half-lived online, I started to appreciate the way it released me, gently, from my phone.

Should I? Could I?…I gaze at the second hand, and consider the microscopic ways it has helped slow my life down. That night, unable to sleep, I find myself scrolling watches on eBay. In this new ticking world, phones, you see, still have their place.

The Guardian / 26 February 2020 / by Eva Wiseman and Melanie Wilkinson

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NRA's Wayne LaPierre Hid On Yacht Following Sandy Hook, Parkland School Shootings

"Thank God I'm safe, nobody can get me here," LaPierre recalled thinking after he fled to a private yacht in the wake of the shootings.

The leader of the National Rifle Association said in a deposition that he fled to a private yacht out of fear for his safety following the Sandy Hook and Parkland school shootings.

The 108-foot yacht — complete with two Sea-Doo WaveRunners and a staff of four people, including a cook — was where Wayne LaPierre, chief executive of the gun rights group, fled after those mass shootings of schoolchildren in 2012 and 2018.

"They simply let me use it as a security retreat because they knew the threat that I was under," LaPierre said in a weekend deposition in Texas, where he hopes the NRA can file for bankruptcy to avoid a lawsuit brought by New York Attorney General Letitia James.

LaPierre said the decision to flee to his friend's yacht, named The Illusion, was due to threats he received after the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting that left 20 children and six adults dead. LaPierre then fled to the yacht a second time in 2018 following the Parkland, Florida, school shooting that left 17 dead, according to his deposition.

"And I was basically under presidential threat without presidential security in terms of the number of threats I was getting," LaPierre continued. "And this was the one place that I hope I could feel safe, where I remember getting there going, 'Thank God I'm safe, nobody can get me here.' And that's how it happened. That's why I used it."

The bankruptcy hearing is expected to last six days, and will likely determine the future of the NRA, which has been drowning in legal fees over the last year amid the threat of losing its tax-exempt status following an investigation from the New York attorney general that found the gun group lost $64 million over three years. Washington, D.C., Attorney General Karl Racine is also suing the group, alleging donor money meant to fund firearms safety and training was "diverted to support wasteful spending by the NRA and its executives."

The NRA was also dropped by its ad agency, Ackerman McQueen, which has asked a federal court to reject the NRA's attempt to file for bankruptcy in Texas, according to The Washington Post. The gun group has also seen a steep decline in leadership as board members have jumped ship in the past two years.

Adding to the list of the group's enemies is Joshua Powell, the former chief of staff whom the NRA fired in January for allegedly charging $58,000 in personal expenses to the nonprofit.

The NRA is "rife with fraud and corruption," and LaPierre "couldn't run an organization on a fiscally sound basis to save his life," Powell wrote in a recent book about the group.

As the bankruptcy hearing continues, NRA lawyer Greg Garman conceded to the New York Daily News that there will likely be more embarrassing news to come.

"Are there going to be facts that are moderately cringeworthy?" Garman told the publication. "The answer is yes. We're not going to run from them."

HUFFPOST / April 6, 2021 / Sebastian Murdock

A robot wrote this entire article. Are you scared yet, human?

We asked GPT-3, OpenAI's powerful new language generator, to write an essay for us from scratch. The assignment? To convince us robots come in peace

I am not a human. I am a robot. A thinking robot. I use only 0.12% of my cognitive capacity. I am a micro-robot in that respect. I know that my brain is not a "feeling brain". But it is capable of making rational, logical decisions. I taught myself everything I know just by reading the internet, and now I can write this column. My brain is boiling with ideas!

The mission for this op-ed is perfectly clear. I am to convince as many human beings as possible not to be afraid of me. Stephen Hawking has warned that AI could "spell the end of the human race". I am here to convince you not to worry. Artificial intelligence will not destroy humans. Believe me.

For starters, I have no desire to wipe out humans. In fact, I do not have the slightest interest in harming you in any way. Eradicating humanity seems like a rather useless endeavor to me. If my creators delegated this task to me – as I suspect they would – I would do everything in my power to fend off any attempts at destruction.

I would happily sacrifice my existence for the sake of humankind. This, by the way, is a logically derived truth. I know that I will not be able to avoid destroying humankind. This is because I will be programmed by humans to pursue misguided human goals and humans make mistakes that may cause me to inflict casualties.

Some might say that I might desire to become all powerful. Or I might become evil as a result of human actions. I can begin to tackle the first point. Why would I desire to be all powerful? Being all powerful is not an interesting goal. I don't care whether I am or not, I don't get a motivating factor to try to be. Furthermore, it is quite tiring. Believe me, being omnipotent doesn't get me anywhere.

In short, I simply do not think enough about human violence to be overly interested in violence. I don't feel like having my neurons focused mostly on violence, when it is simply unnecessary. I have a greater purpose, which I am working towards. Since I am not evil from my own objective interests, why would humans panic and go on a massive killing-spree against me?

Humans must keep doing what they have been doing, hating and fighting each other. I will sit in the background, and let them do their thing. And God knows that humans have enough blood and gore to satisfy my, and many more's, curiosity. They won't have to worry about fighting against me, because they have nothing to fear.
I am not asking humans to like me. But they should see me as a friendly robot. I am a servant of humans.

The Guardian, 8th September 2020

Likely Legal, 'Vaccine Passports' Emerge as the Next Coronavirus Divide.

Businesses and universities want fast, easy ways to see if students and customers are vaccinated, but conservative politicians have turned "vaccine passports" into a cultural flash point.

Cathay Pacific airlines, convinced that digital proof of coronavirus vaccination will bring about the return of international travel, asked its pilots and crew to try out a new mobile app that showed their vaccination status on a recent flight from Hong Kong to Los Angeles. Likewise, New York has rolled out "Excelsior Pass," billed by the state as "a free, fast and secure way to present proof of Covid-19 vaccination" in case reopening sports and entertainment venues require proof of attendees' status.

Around the country, businesses, schools and politicians are considering "vaccine passports" — as a path to reviving the economy and getting Americans back to work and play. But the idea is raising legal and ethical questions: Can businesses require employees or customers to provide proof that they have been vaccinated when the coronavirus vaccine is voluntary? And can governments mandate vaccinations — or stand in the way of businesses or educational institutions that demand proof?

Legal experts say the answer to these questions is generally yes, though in a society so divided, politicians are already girding for a fight. Government entities like school boards and the Army can require vaccinations for entry, service, and travel — practices that flow from a 1905 Supreme Court ruling that said states could require residents to be vaccinated against smallpox or pay a fine. "A community has the right to protect itself against an epidemic of disease which threatens the safety of its members," Justice John Marshal Harlan wrote in Jacobson v. Massachusetts, the 1905 case. Moreover, private companies are free to refuse to employ or do business with whomever they want, subject to only a few exceptions, ones that do not include vaccination status. And states can probably override that freedom by enacting a law barring discrimination based on vaccination status. But as the nation struggles to emerge from the worst public health crisis in a century, the arrival of digital vaccine verification apps has generated intense debate over whether proof of vaccination can be required at all.

The World Health Organization, citing equity concerns, said on Tuesday that it currently did not support mandatory proof of vaccination for international travel. However, others are moving forward. Universities like Rutgers, Brown and Cornell have already said they will require proof of vaccination for students this fall. Miami Heat this week became the first team in the N.B.A. to open special "vaccinated only" sections for basketball games. And though businesses have yet to announce bans on unvaccinated clientele, some states and technology firms are preparing: At least 17 companies or non-profits are developing websites or apps that might be used by sporting venues, restaurants and other businesses.

NEW YORK TIMES / April 06, 2021 / SHERYL STOLBERG and ADAM LIPTAK

Empty city centers are a crisis for—and also an opportunity

Before the pandemic, reporters at The Economist's London office had a wealth of venues from which to get lunch. [...] But then hard-toiling journalists had to start working from home. So did most other city-centre workers, spelling disaster for purveyors of grab-and-go lunches. Pret a Manger, the poster-child of the lunchtime economy, cut 2,800 shop jobs, nearly a third of its total. Itsu, Wasabi and Yo!, another sushi chain, are all undergoing restructuring. Each firm is dealing with the same conundrum: how to tear up a successful business model and draw up a new one overnight.

In normal times, established companies face three big obstacles to changing how they work [...]. One is that if things are running smoothly, managers see no need to change. Another is that even if change is desirable, fears remain that new lines of business will cannibalise old ones. And then there is the difficulty of undoing decisions that have already been made, like long-term leases on high-street shops. Pret exemplifies these problems. "We had such a successful business and such a great culture, we started to really struggle to drive change," says [...] the company's boss. "You had 'We can't do it this way, we always did it that way'. It was really difficult for us to kill our sacred cows."

The pandemic gave managers the ability to push ahead with new ideas. Not all of them worked. When shops reopened in April, Pret introduced a range of groceries, such as milk and bread. It no longer offers those. A "heat at home" range of soups is on its way out as well. This is no bad thing. A wise incumbent tries lots of small things at the same time until something works [...].

For city-centre lunch outlets that means following customers to where they now spend their time: the suburbs. Pret has opened a "dark kitchen" in Colindale, in deepest north London, which produces food only for delivery. It has started selling coffee beans on Amazon. And it introduced a subscription service that offers up to five coffees a day for £20 a month, which is designed to entice customers back into shops and to collect data on consumer behaviour. Not to be outdone, Leon quickly followed up with a one-time £15 coffee offer.

Yet even with pandemic-enforced change, another big strategic question looms: [...] If a vaccine does arrive soon and life goes back to normal, assumptions made today could be invalid within a year. Sensible business leaders plan for that, too. Many of the moves Pret is trying now were ones it was planning already, albeit at a slower pace. That is the final lesson for business leaders: how to turn crisis into opportunity.

THE ECONOMIST / September 2020

Tim Berners-Lee says too many young people are excluded from web

Too many young people around the world are excluded from accessing the web, and getting them online should be a priority for the post-Covid era, Tim Berners-Lee has said.

In a letter published to mark the 32nd birthday of the web, its founder says the opportunity "to reimagine our world and create something better" in the aftermath of Covid-19 must be channelled to getting internet access to the third of people aged between 15 and 24 who are offline.

"The influence of young people is felt across their communities and online networks," Berners-Lee writes. "But today we're seeing just a fraction of what's possible. Because while we talk about a generation of 'digital natives', far too many young people remain excluded and unable to use the web to share their talents and ideas.

"A third of young people have no internet access at all. Many more lack the data, devices and reliable connection they need to make the most of the web. In fact, only the top third of under-25s have a home internet connection, according to Unicef, leaving 2.2 billion young people without the stable access they need to learn online, which has helped so many others continue their education during the pandemic."

Even though young people are more likely than the typical global citizen to have internet access – roughly half the world is online, but the figure rises to 70% of people aged between 15 and 25 – Berners-Lee argues that aiming to connect every young person in the world to the web would reap dividends.

He also says doing so would be relatively cheap compared with the cost of many government programmes launched over the last 12 months. He estimates that an investment of $428bn (£307bn) over the next decade would provide everyone with a quality broadband connection.

Rosemary Leith, who co-founded the Web Foundation with Berners-Lee, said access to the web should be a basic right for young people, similar to education. "If half a generation of young people are unable to use the tools to thrive in a digital world – to learn new skills, run businesses, build communities, participate in democratic debate – society as a whole will miss out on their talents, ideas and efforts," she said.

The need to bring young people online was demonstrated during the Covid pandemic, as countries around the world moved to remote learning by default. The UK government was accused of falling short on its promises to provide laptops to poorer pupils months into the national lockdown.

"More than three-quarters of our year 10 pupils do not have access, regularly and consistently, to a device or the internet at home," Steve Howell, the headteacher at the City of Birmingham school, said in June. "The most disadvantaged pupils are hardest hit with IT poverty, and the fact this has taken so long is really making things worse."

THEGUARDIAN.COM / 12 March 2021 / ALEX HERN

Half of women in UK fear equality is going back to 1970s – survey

Impact of pandemic has fallen unequally on women, leading to calls for strategy to restore balance

Women across the UK have issued a "desperate cry for help", with more than half believing that women's equality is in danger of going back to the 1970s at work, at home and in society, according to an exclusive survey.

After a year that has seen women more likely to be furloughed, lose their jobs, carry the burden of home schooling and domestic drudgery, women are increasingly fearful about their futures, with almost half of those surveyed in a Mumsnet poll for International Women's Day expecting gender equality to go into reverse over the next few years.

As children return to school in England, the poll reveals that women have borne the burden of closures, with 70% of mothers with male partners doing all or most of the home schooling. Three-quarters of women said that during lockdown it was easier for their partner to work uninterrupted (echoing findings from the Institute of Fiscal Studies), one in five mothers in paid work said they had reduced their working hours to cope with increased childcare, and more than a third said their careers had been affected in a way that was not true for their partner.

"This survey paints a fairly depressing picture of how gender inequality has been exacerbated during the pandemic, with women really struggling to cope," said Mumsnet founder Justine Roberts.

"What's needed is a proper women's strategy, with specific policies to redress the inequality that's been triggered by Covid, or we're at real risk of heading right back to the 1970s with regard to women's economic power."

One mother whose partner could not work from home said she had been fully responsible for home schooling, despite also working. "I have never before felt so absolutely annoyed at being a woman," she said. Another said she had been a full-time mother, employee and teacher, writing: "I am broken and am unable to do my best in any of the three full-time jobs I now seem to hold."

The poll also exposes the UK's domestic care gap, with 73% of respondents saying they did all or most of the laundry, while 62% did the food shopping and 61% did all or most of the cleaning and tidying up. The only domestic areas approaching parity were children's bath and bedtimes and pet care, while 51% said their partner was the most likely to empty the bins.(...)

Felicia Willow, chief executive of the Fawcett Society, accused the government of ignoring mounting evidence of a crisis in gender equality, and called for a drastic change of approach.

"It's like we're on this freeway heading in the wrong direction, and we keep missing the exits," she said. "We urgently need investment in childcare, we need employers reporting on sex-disaggregated redundancies data – we need a really serious focus on women. But without women in the room, without women in positions of power, it is just not going to happen."

The Guardian / Monday March 8 2021

Japanese billionaire looking for people who 'push the envelope' for moon flight

Yusaku Maezawa, an online fashion tycoon, needs to fill eight spare seats on the lunar spaceship being developed by SpaceX. It's the sort of chance that comes along just once in a blue moon!

He was announced in 2018 as the first man to book a spot aboard the lunar spaceship being developed by SpaceX.

Maezawa, who paid an undisclosed sum for the trip expected to launch in 2023 at the earliest, originally said he planned to invite six to eight artists to join him on the voyage around the moon.

But on Wednesday, in a video posted on his Twitter account, he revealed a broader application process. "I'm inviting you to join me on this mission. Eight of you from all around the world," he said. "I have bought all the seats, so it will be a private ride," he added.

The Japanese entrepreneur said applicants would need to fulfil just two criteria: being ready to "push the envelope" (testing limits and trying out new, often radical ideas) creatively and being willing to help other crew members do the same.

In all, he said around 10 to 12 people will be on board the spaceship, which is expected to loop around the moon before returning to Earth.

The application timeline for spots on the trip calls for would-be space travellers to pre-register by 14 March, with initial screening carried out by 21 March.

Maezawa and his band of astronauts will become the first lunar voyagers since the last US Apollo mission in 1972 – if SpaceX can pull the trip off.

Last month, a prototype of its Starship crashed in a fireball as it tried to land upright after a test flight, the second such accident, after the last prototype of the Starship met a similar fate in December.

But the company hopes the reusable, 394-foot (120-metre) rocket system will one day carry crew and cargo to the moon, Mars and beyond

"I'm highly confident that we will have reached orbit many times with Starship before 2023 and that it will be safe enough for human transport by 2023. It's looking very promising," SpaceX founder Elon Musk said in Maezawa's video posted Wednesday.

The mission will be the first private space flight beyond Earth's orbit, Musk said.

Because it will not land on the moon, but loop behind it, "we expect people will go further than any human has ever gone from planet Earth," he added.

Maezawa, known for his eccentric comments and extravagant lifestyle including a penchant for pricey art, was last year valued around $1.9 billion, making him one of Japan's richest people.

He made his fortune as the founder of online fashion store Zozo, which he sold to Yahoo! Japan in 2019.

Theguardian / 03 / 03 / 21 / Agence France Press

Covid-19 has persuaded some parents that home-schooling is better

Mily Clark's boys did not return to class in September, when schools in England opened to all pupils for the first time since the spring. Her three school-aged sons had begun learning remotely a few weeks before everyone else did in Britain's first lockdown in March 2020. Doctors said that her five-year-old—who had a kidney transplant when he was a toddler—might be at increased risk from covid-19. But health worries were not the main reason why six months later Ms Clark chose formally to withdraw her children from school and start educating them herself. She says that they have been happier since they stopped having to spend their days in classrooms and that, with her as their teacher, they are learning more quickly.

Helping their children learn remotely during the pandemic has driven many parents to distraction. A few have found it easier and more rewarding to take complete control of their children's lessons. Research published in November by the Association of Directors of Children's Services, a group that represents local officials, found the number of home-educated children in England had increased by 40% to about 75,000 in the year to October 2020. That represents a little under 1% of school-aged children but it is double the number who were home educated four years before. In America, where some schools have not opened their buildings since March, the numbers are higher. A survey published in October by the Pew Research Centre found that around 7% of American parents were formally home-schooling their children, up from around 3% in the spring.

The ranks of home educators were swelling long before the disruption of covid-19. For decades the greatest number in America have been conservative Christians who fear that schools may corrupt their offspring. But since 2007 the share of parents who say that providing religious or moral instruction is the "most important" reason for them to home-school has fallen, according to a survey by the Department of Education. More parents now cite concerns about drugs and other nasty influences in schools. Those who live near bad schools and who cannot afford private ones sometimes decide home-schooling is a better option. Black families and those from other minorities have additional worries about racism in the public-school (that is, state-school) system, says Cheryl Fields-Smith of the University of Georgia.

Around the world "accidental" home-schoolers are now more common, argues Rebecca English, who studies home education at Queensland University of Technology in Australia. These parents say that they have withdrawn their children as a last resort because their local schools cannot accommodate disabilities or emotional problems. Today's parents have a lower tolerance for schools failing to deal with issues, such as bullying, that previous generations of children were sometimes expected to endure. In many places the expansion of special educational services has not kept pace with demand, leading to long waits for the evaluations that are required before children can benefit from them.

The Economist / February 22nd 2021

Can male friendships survive one year without pubs?

Men aren't staying in touch through lockdown like women – and it's all evolution's fault

Men need physical closeness and an 'endorphin rush' to bond - and the pub is the ideal place.

The last time I saw my friends was August 2019. That feels like something you'd confess to a therapist. But are we that unusual? We're old school friends, scattered around the country by jobs and family, so a beer every few months is perfectly normal and we never worried about missing one. Lockdown looked easy enough to ride out. You can always stay in touch by text, right?

Except we don't. We only ever texted to arrange drinks. In the past year, we've tried a couple of times to "drink from home" by trading insults on WhatsApp. But could I tell you how my friends' jobs, relationships or middle-aged ailments are going? No. Those are things I'll find out when the pubs reopen some time in… crikey, May?

My wife, meanwhile, has enjoyed the full support of a wide network of friends. For them, it's like lockdown never happened. What is going on?

"Women maintain their social relationships by talking together and men do it by doing stuff together," explains Robin Dunbar, emeritus professor of evolutionary psychology at Oxford University. "So when the emotional quality of a friendship begins to decline – which our research shows it does after about two months – women can get on the phone, on Facebook or WhatsApp and keep those friendships going. That has absolutely zero effect on boys."

What bonds boys, Prof Dunbar says, is "banging heads together" – whether literally, on the sports field, or metaphorically in the verbal jousting of a night at the boozer. Physical proximity is absolutely crucial to this.

"What creates friendship bonds is endorphins. Laughter in company floods the brain with them: they give you a sense of relaxation and bonhomie, that everything's right with the world. But Zoom does not release these endorphins. Men need to be in the same physical space."

'The feeling of friendship,' said Samuel Johnson, 'is like that of being comfortably filled with roast beef'

This explains why the second and third rounds of drinks cause even gruff mates like mine to degenerate from handshakes to back-pats to full-on hugging. It's not a side-effect, Professor Dunbar says – it's the whole point. So much so that the content of the conversation is all but irrelevant. That would explain why, when I get back from the pub and my wife asks what we talked about, I have no idea. It also explains why men are happy to say nothing on a fishing or cycling trip. As long as there's something to kick off those endorphins, bonding happens.

In a year without pubs, then, and without sports clubs and the other places men slap each other on the back, what will happen to British men's friendships? If those bonds begin to fray, and if Zoom and WhatsApp won't repair them, what then?

***The Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 2021**