

Texte 120

WHY BLACK FRIDAY SALES GROW MORE ANNOYING EVERY YEAR

When is Black Friday? The obvious answer is a literal one. It is the day after Thanksgiving, an American holiday when families gather to gorge on turkey and pumpkin pie. Yet Black Friday is not simply a date, it is also an idea. The day traditionally marked the beginning of the festive shopping season, when people would start to stock up on Christmas presents. Today, it is the time of year during which everything goes on sale. And pinpointing when this begins is a much more difficult endeavour. [...This year], the earliest Black Friday discount offered by a retailer came in early October. [...]

Retailers have an incentive to offer discounts early, ahead of rivals, since doing so just might snag them an extra few sales. Some customers might enjoy this long window during which they can peruse discounted goods. But [...] there is an advantage for buyers when they are able to see all offers at once. And anecdotally, at least, the prolonged approach to Black Friday quickly becomes exhausting. Rather than a short frenzy, fuelled by leftover turkey sandwiches and pie, the discount season feels like a never-ending barrage of targeted advertisements and email reminders.

The expansion of Black Friday is not necessarily to the advantage of retailers either. Although there is a benefit to kickstarting a sale before your competitor does, offering discounts six weeks early doubtless means that retailers are giving up full-price purchases. [...] Even if the majority of consumers and retailers might prefer that holiday sales start on Black Friday and last for a short period, the equilibrium cannot hold.

[This can be compared to job markets for doctors and lawyers...]. Although judges in the most prestigious courts were more than happy to wait to see who was the most talented student at Harvard University before offering them a clerkship, there was a strong incentive for judges in slightly less prestigious courts to make earlier offers to top students. This forced the most prestigious courts to respond. As a consequence, offers crept earlier and earlier. They also “exploded”. For early offers to work they had to expire. Mr Roth recounted the tale of a student in 2005 who boarded a flight from one interview to another. By the time he landed the offer had been pulled. The flight was just 35 minutes long.

When it comes to clerkships, judges have managed to establish rules about how offers ought to be made, which has helped reduce the scale of the problem. Alas, no such solution is possible for retailers — clubbing together to decide how best to sell things would understandably be frowned upon by competition regulators. By 2035 Black Friday might, therefore, be a summertime affair.

Adapted from *The Economist*

November 2024

(451 words)

Texte 121

WHY BOTHER GOING ON HOLIDAY?

I haven't been on holiday this summer. I derive an unusual satisfaction from working when others aren't and I don't like change, or strange pillows. A summer holiday just doesn't appeal. Is that weird? It feels as if the climate crisis is killing the notion of summer as something to look forward to. Holiday hotspots are losing their lustre, with some islands stricken with catastrophic drought.

Getting there is horrible, too. Train travel should be bliss, but privatisation and other people have put an end to that. Cars mean having to navigate tailbacks and your navigation app redirects you along a dirt track. Airports are canonical purgatory and aeroplanes are an insanitary hell. After a couple of hours of any travel, I am ready to move into a self-dug burrow and live off lichen. Then, when you get to your destination, the local people would rather you hadn't. Overtourism makes their lives hell and renders the experience travellers are seeking impossible.

Mostly, I don't have to go on summer holidays because other people do and social media lets me go with them. I have been vacationing vicariously this year and I think I like it better. I am spared the agony of choosing my own singular, expensive holiday, and instead dip into other people's for nothing – a stress-free, colour-saturated and endlessly stimulating parade of infinity pools, dolphins and local delicacies.

I know that TikTok in particular is contributing to the problem of overtourism, sending hundreds of people to block the street outside some overwhelmed sandwich vendor, harass wildlife or degrade a beauty spot, but it doesn't make me want to go to these places. The secondhand experience provides sufficient gratification without the infected mosquito bites. I don't even crave most of what I see: "That looks *disgusting*," I sometimes find myself whispering, pleasurably, as I watch a TikToker eating a beef bourguignon croissant burger in the street.

I have vicariously experienced my sons' holidays. I love seeing their generation taking flight, living their best holiday lives after their wings were so comprehensively clipped by Covid. Admittedly, I was unable to stop myself providing heavily hyperlinked lists of suggestions for their destinations, then had to bite my tongue when they were ignored. What do you mean you went to Paris and didn't get to the Place des Vosges? You didn't try *any* of the 18 bakeries I suggested?

But vacation voyeurs can't be choosers and maybe it is good that September is here, because I think it may be time to step back. My thumbs ache from all the listless scrolling under grey Yorkshire skies. I haven't gone further than a drop-off at Manchester airport. Maybe I need a break.

Texte 122

WHY CLIMATE ACTIVISTS KEEP TARGETING ART GALLERIES

Two Just Stop Oil activists were recently jailed for throwing soup at one of Vincent van Gogh's Sunflowers paintings at London's National Gallery back in 2022. Some commentators suggested these were overly harsh sentences for a nonviolent protest, while others felt such sentences were appropriate and an important deterrent.

We study activism and its impact. In our latest research [...], we wanted to know what makes this form of protest so unpopular with the general public, and why climate activists have continued to return to galleries despite, or even because of, the resulting social outrage. [...]

One common theme we found is that such protests are widely criticised because of their supposed irrationality. [...] However, we should consider the logic offered by the activists themselves. The video of the action shows one of them asking: "What is worth more – art or life? Is [art] worth more than food, more than justice?" [...]

The question of which is worth more – art or life – only warrants interest because the value of life is being compared to objects that are considered to be the most valuable products of human culture. [...]

Throwing soup at paintings is extremely unpopular. We recently commissioned a poll in which people were asked about different forms of climate protest. Throwing food at paintings was considered the least justifiable of these protests – less justifiable than sabotaging pipelines, damaging private jets or breaking windows at companies financing oil exploration. The extreme unpopularity of throwing soup at Sunflowers virtually guaranteed that it would have an audience of millions. Although commentators worried that such an unpopular action would turn people away from the cause, there is no evidence for such an impact. The public may hate the messengers and their actions, but they're nevertheless exposed to the message.

Indeed, we suspect the reason activists target art is directly related to why it is so unpopular. In academic psychology, terror management theory suggests that damaging revered cultural symbols threatens the psychological defences we rely on to mitigate existential fears.

Think of how memorials are built to soldiers who die in war, and the way any threat to desecrate such memorials is met with strong condemnation.

Masterpieces like Sunflowers offer a similar sense of immortality and permanence. In a way, its preservation means our culture will live on after our own demise. This explains why the apparent destruction of art provokes such a strong backlash, and why activists use the spectacle to draw parallels between cultural and environmental preservation. [...]

These protests trigger a powerful desire for punishment and condemnation. But society would benefit from a sincere attempt to understand the rationale and motivations of those activists who seem to go beyond the normal bounds of protest. [...]

Texte 123

WHY ENGINEERS SHOULD STUDY PHILOSOPHY

The ability to ask the right questions so as to understand the *why* before you start working on the *how* is an increasingly critical skill, especially in the age of programming computers and Artificial Intelligence, AI.

Coding is one of the things AI does better than humans. [...] However, code created by an AI can be semantically correct but may be useless [...] if it is not based on “the developer’s right questions”. [...]

Therefore, to get the most out of AI, a developer has to master reasoning, logic, and critical thinking, which are skills developed through philosophical training. The question “Can you code?” thus becomes “Can you get the best code out of your AI by asking the right questions?”

Indeed, AI developers must keep in mind that using AI suggests a fundamental change in the way we acquire knowledge.

In a way, it offers a parallel to the invention of printing which democratized information.

Before the mass production of printed books, if you wanted to learn about mathematics, for example, you likely had to have physical access to a mathematician or to an expensive hand-copied text. Printed books made that barrier much lower, and the internet reduced it to virtually zero. Still, a barrier remains which is the knowledge gap between the author and the reader.

You can indeed have access to any paper or book in the world, but they are of little use if you can’t understand them. [...]

For example, if you wanted to study the mathematical concept of limits in calculus, you could find a textbook or an internet connection aimed at high school or college students, but you may not have the knowledge to understand them. An AI model developed from the “right questions”, on the other hand, could provide personalized instruction tailored to your level of understanding and learning style. [...]

But to be able to develop such AI models, the engineers themselves need to have enough knowledge and, most importantly, they need to have a clear mental model around a problem. They have to be able to break it down into steps that are teachable, and, above all, they have to debate a stubborn AI. These are the skills that will make a great engineer in the future, and likely the same consideration applies to many other job categories.

In fact, we don’t want to lose the ability to open the engine-hood and get, when needed, our hands dirty to fix things that an AI may have missed. In other words, we do need to be able to analyze what an AI has created. Focusing on our critical thinking abilities is what will allow us to be more human, less computer.

Adapted from *Harvard Business Review*

September 2024

(450 words)

Texte 124

WHY MIGHT PEOPLE BELIEVE IN HUMAN-MADE HURRICANES?

Hurricane Milton slammed into the west coast of Florida on October 9, becoming the second powerful hurricane to hit the state in just two weeks. While most people turned to meteorologists for explanations, a minority remained sceptical, proposing that the hurricanes were engineered, that Florida's weather was being manipulated, or even that it was targeted at Republican voters.

These ideas aren't new. Conspiracy theories often emerge in the wake of natural disasters. Investigating these theories is especially crucial as extreme weather events are projected to become more severe and frequent.

Conspiracy theories explain important events by attributing them to the secret actions of a small, powerful group. Yet, if we take a step back, something striking becomes apparent. If conspiracy theories explain events as the actions of a small group, then conspiracy theories should only apply to events where such a group's influence is plausible. For example, faking the moon landing would have required Nasa to create an elaborate set, costumes, actors, and maintain secrecy. While unlikely, it is conceivable because humans *can* design sets, make costumes, and act. However, climate-based conspiracy theories don't fit this mould as easily. Unlike movie sets or staged events, humans don't control the climate in the same direct way. While we can seed individual clouds to encourage rain, for instance, a whole hurricane is simply far too big and too powerful for human technology to have any impact, making climate conspiracy theories less plausible.

People have a fundamental need to feel safe and secure in their environment. If climate change is real, it poses an existential threat, leading some to reject it in favour of conspiracy theories that preserve their sense of safety. Additionally, individuals desire a sense of control and agency over their environment. When faced with the uncontrollable nature of climate change, people often embrace conspiracy theories to regain that sense of control.

The first psychological study of this kind looked at a major tornado outbreak in the US midwest in 2019. Researchers found that people more affected by the outbreak were more likely to believe the tornadoes were controlled by the government. [...]

It might seem intuitive that if you don't believe in something, you won't act as though it were true. Thus, if you don't believe that climate change is true you are not going to act as if it is. [...]

Yet, there are reasons to be hopeful that certain interventions that foster analytical thinking or a critical mindset can reduce conspiracy beliefs. For example, exposing people to scientific reasoning that challenged the assumptions behind COVID-19 conspiracies significantly reduced their belief in those conspiracy theories.

Texte 125

WORLD FACES ‘DEATHLY SILENCE’ OF NATURE AS WILDLIFE DISAPPEARS, WARN EXPERTS

Sounds of the natural world are rapidly falling silent and will become “acoustic fossils” without urgent action to halt environmental destruction, international experts have warned. As technology develops, sound has become an increasingly important way of measuring the health and biodiversity of ecosystems: our forests, soils and oceans all produce their own acoustic signatures. Scientists who use ecoacoustics to measure habitats and species say that quiet is falling across thousands of habitats, as the planet witnesses extraordinary losses in the density and variety of species. Disappearing or losing volume along with them are many familiar sounds: the morning calls of birds, rustle of mammals through undergrowth and summer hum of insects. [...]

“The changes are profound. And they are happening everywhere,” said US soundscape recordist Bernie Krause, who has taken more than 5,000 hours of recordings from seven continents over the past 55 years. He estimates that 70% of his archive is from habitats that no longer exist. [...]

The shift in ecosystem sound is happening in the air, the forests, the soil, and even under the water. During the cold war, the US navy used underwater surveillance systems to track Soviet submarines – and found they struggled to do so near coral reefs due to all the sounds reefs produced. [...]

“Whenever we went to a healthy reef it blew our minds – the cacophony of sounds we heard,” said [UK Professor Steve] Simpson, who has been monitoring coral reefs using hydrophones for more than 20 years. “A healthy reef was a carnival of sound.”

[B]ut 2015 and 2016 brought significant bleaching events, which resulted in 80% mortality of corals. [...]

The result of these bleaching events is a “deathly silence”, said Simpson. “We swam around those reefs crying into our masks.” [...]

As the sophistication of microphones has increased, scientists are using them to monitor life that would not usually be audible to human ears. Marcus Maeder, an acoustic ecologist and sound artist from Switzerland, has been investigating the noises trees make under stress, pushing a microphone into the bark of a tree to listen to the living tissue. Stress sounds like pulses come from within the cavity, he said. [...]

For many researchers, disappearing soundscapes are a source of grief as well as of scientific interest. “It’s a sad thing to be doing, but it’s also helping me tell a story about the beauty of nature,” said [US Professor Bryan] Pijanowski. “As a scientist I have trouble explaining what biodiversity is, but if I play a recording and say what I’m talking about – these are the voices of this place. We can either work to preserve it or not”

Texte 126

“WORLD LEADERS HAVE A CHANCE TO RAISE TAXES FOR RICH PEOPLE LIKE ME, ABIGAIL DISNEY”

The need to tax rich people like me, Abigail Disney, has never been so dire. Extreme wealth concentration in the hands of a few oligarchs is a threat to democracy [...]. Meanwhile, we are cooking our planet and irreversibly damaging our biosphere.

Last summer was the hottest on record, and we're also seeing historic wildfires, biblical floods, devastating droughts and rising sea temperatures. It is only right that the funds to mitigate further damage and develop green energy systems come from those most able to pay – and who, by the way, are the ones disproportionately driving it with their jet-setting, gas-guzzling lifestyles. [...]

At the recent [...] Brazil meeting in February this year, economists and G20 finance leaders suggested instituting a global minimum tax on the world's billionaires, who are now more abundant in number (2,781) and in wealth (\$14.2tn) than ever before. This follows [...] recommendations and requests from economists and communities all over the world, including a proposal for a 2% tax on billionaires from the EU Tax Observatory in its [...] report last year.

Also, finance ministers from both Brazil and France came out publicly in support of this idea. [...] For nearly two decades, I have been calling on the US to raise my and other wealthy Americans' taxes. In that time, however, the global economy has become increasingly interconnected, which has made it easier than ever for the ultra-wealthy to move their capital to avoid paying taxes. The result is that billionaires now get away with paying lower tax rates than all other income groups. [...] G20 countries have no option but to work together if they want to institute minimum standards for taxing the rich, [...] which will undoubtedly be complex, but not impossible. [...]

There is another tangible and immediate threat posed by extreme wealth concentration. As inequality has spiralled out of control, millions of economically disadvantaged people around the world are turning their backs on democracy [...] to attack democratic institutions [...] as we saw with the January 6 Capitol attack [...]

So what is getting in the way? [...] Between 2017 and 2022, public polls [...] indicated strong public backing for reducing inequality and raising taxes on the rich. A 2023 survey found that even millionaires in G20 countries are supportive of raising taxes. [...] We are making progress. But the work has just begun.

If a millionaire like me from one of the most famous families on Earth wants wealthy people to pay more taxes, there is no reason or excuse for the G20 to ignore our pleas.

Adapted from *The Guardian*

April 2024

(448 words)

Texte 127

WORLDWIDE EFFORTS TO REVERSE THE BABY SHORTAGE ARE FALLING FLAT

Imagine if having children came with [...] cheap loans, a subsidized minivan and a lifetime exemption from income taxes.

Would people have more kids? The answer, it seems, is no.

These are among the benefits—along with cheap child care, extra vacation and free fertility treatments—that have been distributed to parents in different parts of Europe, a region at the forefront of the worldwide baby shortage. Europe’s overall population shrank during the pandemic and is on track to contract by about 40 million by 2050, according to United Nations statistics.

Birthrates have been falling across the developed world since the 1960s. But the decline hit Europe harder and faster than demographers expected. [...]

Europe [...] has been pushing back against the demographic tide with lavish parental benefits for a generation. Yet falling fertility has persisted among nearly all age groups, incomes and education levels. Those who have many children often say they would have them even without the benefits. Those who don’t say the benefits don’t make enough of a difference.

Two European countries devote more resources to families than almost any other nation: Hungary and Norway. [...] Both countries spend more than 3% of GDP on their different approaches to promoting families – more than the amount they spend on their militaries, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Despite their programs, they have fertility rates of 1.5 and 1.4 children for every woman, respectively – far below the replacement rate of 2.1, the level needed to keep the population steady. [...]

Pronatalism is a key plank of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s broader populist agenda.

[...] Orbán portrays having children inside what he has called a “traditional” family model as a national duty, as well as an alternative to immigration for growing the population. The benefits for child-rearing in Hungary are reserved for married, heterosexual, middle-class couples. [...]

Norway has been incentivizing births for decades with generous parental leave and subsidized child care. New parents in Norway can share nearly a year of fully paid leave [...].

More than three months are reserved for fathers to encourage more equal caregiving. [...]

Norway doesn’t restrict benefits for unmarried parents or same-sex couples. [...]

Demographers suggest the reluctance to have kids is a fundamental cultural shift rather than a purely financial one.

“I used to say to myself, I’m too young. I have to finish my bachelor’s degree. I have to find a partner. Then suddenly I woke up and I was 28 years old, married, with a car, a house and a flexible job and there were no more excuses,” said one Norwegian woman. “Even though there are now no practical barriers, I realized that I don’t want children.”

Texte 128

X BLOCKED IN BRAZIL

[...] Brazil's federal Supreme Court justices voted unanimously to uphold orders suspending the use of Elon Musk's social network X nationwide. [...] The court's top justice, Alexandre de Moraes, had issued the controversial suspension orders late Friday after warning that Musk and X had 24 hours to appoint a legal representative for their business in Brazil or face "penalty of suspension of activities."

X had earlier defied court requests to take down accounts or posts that it said violated Brazil's laws on political misinformation and hate speech online.

The court also froze the financial assets of another Musk-led business, satellite internet service Starlink, in Brazil to ensure his social network would pay its fines.

Brazil's telecoms regulator Anatel instructed internet service providers including Starlink to block access to X in the country until it complies with the court orders. However, Brazil-based UOL reported, Starlink has informed the regulator it does not intend to comply with the orders, and now faces the possibility of Brazil revoking its licenses to operate there.

Brazil's suspension of X was in effect by early Saturday, making the app and website mostly inaccessible to users in the country, a major non-NATO ally to the U.S. with a highly online population.

Musk and his companies have said they view de Moraes' actions as "illegal," and the court's orders as having been issued without due process. The tech billionaire has been ramping up insults and calls to impeach de Moraes throughout the week. Musk escalated his rhetoric over the Labor Day weekend in the U.S.

He called for ending U.S. foreign aid to Brazil, adding that "there will be reciprocal confiscation of assets of those who support the current regime in Brazil to pay for their illegal actions," without providing any evidence to support his statement.

On Monday, Musk called de Moraes a "criminal" and wrote in another post on X, "Unless the Brazilian government returns the illegally seized property of X and SpaceX, we will seek reciprocal seizure of government assets too."

The Associated Press reported the blocking of X in Brazil had "divided users and politicians over the legitimacy of the ban," and that many Brazilians "had difficulty and doubts over navigating other social media in its absence." However, some social media users in Brazil are moving to other social networks. Bluesky on Aug. 30 disclosed "new all-time-highs for activity" from users in Brazil. [...]

Musk has billed himself as a free speech proponent, but his track record is inconsistent.

While he has resisted orders to remove accounts or content from authorities in Brazil and Australia, under his management, X has removed content critical of ruling parties in Turkey and India.

Texte 129

YOUTUBE IS LIMITING RECOMMENDATIONS OF WEIGHT AND FITNESS VIDEOS TO TEENAGERS

YouTube is restricting teenagers' exposure to fitness and weight-related videos to protect their wellbeing. This means that the platform's algorithm will no longer make repeated recommendations of content that focuses on achieving specific fitness levels or body weights, or extols particular physical features. This could include gym routines that involve pursuing a certain look, and videos that idealise beauty features. [...]

But these changes do not stop teens searching for and viewing such content in the first place – and may not be enough to make a meaningful change.

Social media platforms are a fundamental part of youth culture. They hold the power to shape perceptions about appearance, health, fitness and lifestyle. Their vast repository of appearance-related videos can place great pressure on young people, bombarding them with all kinds of content that promotes unrealistic and often unachievable body standards.

Research has found that exposure to appearance-related content on social media is linked to increased body dissatisfaction and increased engagement in more restrictive eating behaviour. Such content can be difficult to escape when algorithms are built to keep pushing it on users, even if young people are actively seeking more positive, less damaging content. [...]

Body dissatisfaction among teens is linked to depression, anxiety and eating disorders.

Teenagers are at a critical developmental period where they are highly susceptible to social influences, so the content that they are exposed to on social media can heavily affect how they view themselves.

The rise of social media fitness and beauty influencers and all the videos about strict exercise routines, “what I eat in a day” videos and beauty routines has gone hand in hand.

Teenagers feel pressure to conform to the body ideals portrayed in this content, but these “ideals” are often practically unattainable for most to achieve. In reality, influencers often use a range of filters in their pictures and videos. These digitally altered images create a distorted view of appearance, contributing to increased body dissatisfaction for teenagers. [...]

If we give teenagers the knowledge and understanding about the way algorithms can affect what they see, and the risks associated with this, then they can feel a sense of empowerment and autonomy around their own safe social media use. [...]

YouTube, along with other platforms, could take a more active role in promoting body diversity. This could include elevating videos that challenge traditional beauty standards.

If we are to protect teenagers from poor body image and build greater online resilience, then it will require not only stricter algorithmic regulations: Media literacy, education and a cultural shift toward a body positive movement is needed.

Texte 130

YOU'VE HEARD OF GENTLE PARENTING. NOW THERE'S 'GENTLE PARTNERING'

Could some gentle parenting techniques change your marriage for the better? “Gentle parenting” has been a hot topic in parenting circles for a few years now. Broadly speaking, “gentle parents” try to better understand the feelings and motivations behind their child’s challenging behavior, instead of rushing to correct said behavior. Proponents of the parenting philosophy believe that children can learn to manage their emotions and understand consequences if they feel safe and connected to their parents. [...]

Though it’s not without its critics, parents who practice gentle parenting report that it has changed their relationship with their children for the better. Given the positive effects, some parents have started to wonder, could these techniques work for my marriage? After all, isn’t empathy and perspective-taking the cornerstone of quality adult communication as well? Saba Harouni Lurie, a marriage and family therapist in Los Angeles, has seen “gentle parents” adopt this strategy in their marriages recently. “No one in my practice is explicitly saying, “I’m using gentle parenting practices in my adult relationship,” but I have worked with several adults who, after learning about gentle parenting, began thinking more critically about how they engage with their partners and people beyond their kids,” she said.

Is it a tad condescending to use techniques made for children on your partner? In a Reddit post, a person admitted that they were feeling a little guilty: “Am I the jerk for secretly using gentle parenting methods on my partners?” the person asked. Jennifer Chappell Marsh, a couples’ therapist in San Diego, agrees that applying gentle parenting to relationships might sound like trying to baby-proof your marriage, but it has a lot of benefits, especially in heated moments. “Adult brains can go offline and become dysregulated just like a child’s so the effective gentle parenting communication techniques translate well in relationships. [...]

Cate Kulcsar, the co-host of The Happiest Girls Podcast, has been with her husband for eight years, and says gentle parenting techniques – namely, leading with empathy and understanding – have translated well to her marriage. “Obviously I am not his parent and do not want nor feel the need to parent him, but just like when I am trying to decipher why my daughter is behaving a certain way, the same strategies can apply when attempting to understand my partner,” she said.

So, if she needs to constructively criticize, she uses the popular compliment sandwich approach. “Similar to how we parent, I try to give my husband a compliment, followed by something that I do not like, followed by a suggestion with what I would like him to do instead,” Kulcsar said. “It’s never an attack, always a conversation.” [...]

Adapted from *huffpost.com*

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