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ANGLAIS session 2025

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999 CALLS FOR DOMESTIC ABUSE ON ENGLAND FOOTBALL MATCH DAYS SURGE MASSIVELY, NEW FIGURES SHOW

During a major tournament like the 2024 Euros, the football scene is inescapable. Children rush to fill sticker books, matches are constantly on the television, and office parties are hosted with big screens showing the action. But there are many across the country for whom football is anything but a cause for celebration.

New data released by more than thirty police forces across England following Freedom of Information requests by The Independent revealed staggering figures on domestic abuse-related 999 calls during the UEFA Euros competition. Calls related to domestic abuse surged 13 per cent above daily averages on England match days. [...]

Emma Armstong, a survivor who now runs 12 refuges across Surrey, added: "It makes me feel sad that the whole of England is impacted by football, and the whole of England isn't taking domestic abuse seriously." [...]

A police spokesperson said: "During the month-long tournament, officers carried out proactive visits to those considered to be high-risk domestic violence perpetrators as well as using social media to signpost people to partner agencies who can provide advice and support. Violence against women and girls, which incorporates domestic abuse, continues to be a matter of priority for the force, and throughout the year we provide preventative messages to signpost people to where they can get support." [...]

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) said in August 351 football-related domestic abuse incidents were recorded during this year's Euros. This was an increase from the 193 domestic abuse incidents related to football recorded during the Euros in 2021, it said.

The women's support charity Refuge stressed that while these figures show a rise in calls during a big football tournament, domestic abuse "happens all year round" and football should never be used as an excuse. It is also estimated that less than 24 per cent of domestic abuse crimes are reported to the police. A spokesperson said: "Domestic abuse doesn't happen because the football is on. While these tournaments can aggravate pre-existing behaviours, abuse happens all year round – it is a choice a perpetrator makes, stemming from power and control, from gender inequality, which misogyny and patriarchy help perpetuate."

Police chiefs for domestic abuse and football policing, said: "Collecting data in this area is challenging because we rely on victims disclosing abuse, reporting the link with football where it exists, and accurate information recording across 43 forces. We also know that many victims won't report abuse to the police, so we do not have the full picture of offending."

[...]

Adapted from *The Independent*October 2024
(445 words)

A SQUIRREL HAS MORE RIGHTS THAN A GIRL

The award winning American actress Meryl Streep, who attended an event on the situation facing women and girls in Afghanistan as part of the United Nations general assembly, called the Taliban's draconian restrictions on women's lives a form of "suffocation".

"A squirrel has more rights than a girl in Afghanistan under the current regime» she said to call on the UN to protect Afghan women and restore their rights. «A squirrel has indeed more rights than a girl in Afghanistan today, because, she added, the public parks have been closed to women and girls, a bird may sing in Kabul parks, but a girl or a woman may not in public."

In the three years, since the Taliban have taken control of Afghanistan, women have seen their rights and freedoms systematically stripped away. They have been barred from most forms of paid employment, prevented from walking in public parks and, worst of all, girls have been stopped from going to secondary school or university.

Last month, a new set of "vice and virtue" [...] laws was published. These laws state that women must completely veil their bodies, including their faces, in thick clothing at all times in public to avoid leading men into temptation and vice. Women's voices, also deemed to be potential instruments of vice, will not be allowed to be heard in public under the new restrictions that clearly state that women must not be heard singing or reading aloud, even from inside their houses.

The actress Meryl Streep spoke alongside human rights defenders, who called on the UN [...] to help women and girls in Afghanistan who, according to an Afghan leading women's rights activist, are the victims of a "gender apartheid". [...]

The word apartheid comes from the Afrikaans word that means "apart" and was first used to describe the treatment of black people in South Africa under white minority rule from 1948 to the early 1990s. But then, even though there is a crime of apartheid in international law, it applies only to racial groups, not to gender. A prominent group of Afghan and Iranian women are therefore backing a campaign calling for gender apartheid to be recognised as a crime under international law, especially since it is not just an Afghan issue, but part of the "global fight against extremism".

Meryl Streep's comments have been widely shared on social media by human rights activists, who praise the actress for using her name and fame to amplify the voices of women. They also hope that codifying gender apartheid in the world under international law will be discussed and agreed at the UN general assembly over the coming weeks.

Adapted from *The Guardian* September 2024 (451 words)

ABOUT FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND TREES CUT DOWN AT SITE OF TESLA GIGAFACTORY NEAR BERLIN

The development of a Tesla gigafactory near Berlin has resulted in about 500,000 trees being felled, according to satellite analysis. The building of the German factory has been highly controversial and attracted significant protests, as well as prompting a debate about the trade-offs involved in developing a green economy. Elon Musk, Tesla's owner, has criticised local police for letting off "leftwing protesters".

Satellite images show [...] eight hundred and thirteen acres of forest were cut down at the site between March 2020 and May 2023, according to the environmental intelligence company Kayrros. That is equivalent to approximately five hundred thousand trees.

Since May, climate activists have protested against the planned expansion of the gigafactory, occupying tree houses in a nearby camp. [...] One group set fire to an electricity pylon and stopped the factory's production for a few days in March.

Antoine Halff, the chief analyst at Kayrros, said: "The Tesla factory in Germany has led to quite a bit of cutting down of trees. Of course, it has to be put in perspective, against the benefit of replacing internal combustion engine cars with electric vehicles."

Halff said the lost trees were equivalent to about thirteen thousand tonnes of CO2, the annual amount emitted by two thousand and eighty average internal combustion engine cars in the US. "So that's a fraction of the number of the electric cars that Tesla produces and sells every quarter," he said. "You always have trade-offs, so you need to be aware of what the terms of the trade-off are."

In July, a plan to expand the Tesla plant to double production to 1m cars a year was approved by Brandenburg state's environment ministry. Dozens of environmental incidents have been reported at the site – where millions of battery cells are also produced – including leaks or spills of diesel fuel, paint and aluminium.

Tesla did not respond at the time but later said there had been several incidents on the factory site during construction and since the start of the operations. It said none caused environmental damage and that if necessary, corrective measures were implemented.

Kayrros measures deforestation using optical images from the satellite Sentinel-2, which have a resolution of ten metres and are publicly available. This data is automatically processed but checked for quality by remote-sensing experts.

Kayrros said its deforestation detection tool was being developed to help companies comply with EU deforestation regulations, which from the start of 2025 will ban the import of goods linked to forest destruction. The tool could also be used to independently monitor forests being used as carbon offsets in the voluntary carbon market, the company said.

Adapted from *The Guardian* September 2024 (450 words)

ACCESS TO GUNS WORSENS THE US POLITICAL VIOLENCE CRISIS, EXPERTS SAY

After the second apparent assassination attempt against Donald Trump in two months, gun safety advocates say the episode underlines the perilous political landscape of potentially lethal violence against public officials in a nation where firearms outnumber people.

The incident came two months after a shooter opened fire at a Trump campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, killing one attendee, seriously injuring two others and grazing the ear of the former president.

"Political violence does not represent the values of America and has no place in our democracy. But, yet again, a person armed with hate and an assault weapon attempted to take the former president's life," said John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety. "There is no room for violence of any kind in our country and we must keep firearms out of the hands of people hellbent on tearing apart our political process and our communities."

Kamala Harris, in an interview on Tuesday with members of the National Association of Black Journalists, again denounced what the authorities are investigating as an assassination attempt against her Republican opponent.

Experts say the rising tide of political violence is hardly unique to the US, but it is exceptionally deadly here. "There's a myth that Americans are a uniquely violent people, and we're not," said Garen Wintemute, head of the Violence Prevention Research Program at UC Davis who has studied the association between firearm ownership and political violence for years. "What we have here is a uniquely high rate of fatal assaultive violence, and that's because we have a unique level of access to firearms, which changes the outcome."

According to research conducted by his team, Americans who had bought guns since the disruptions of the Covid pandemic in 2020 or who regularly carry loaded firearms in public expressed higher levels of susceptibility to political violence. A similar but less marked trend was found among owners of assault-style rifles, like the kind often used in mass shootings and in the Pennsylvania attempt on Trump's life.

"There are, on any given day in the United States, thousands of armed people walking the streets who support the idea of political violence and are willing to engage in it," Wintemute said.

When violence is legitimized as a political tool, she said, it risks spiraling out of control, unleashing a threat that looms over public officials of every ideology and at every level, from presidential candidates to lower level judges and election officials.

But if leaders across the political spectrum – including Trump, whose own increasingly menacing rhetoric has contributed to a toxic public atmosphere – forcefully denounced the violence and urged Americans to resolve their differences peacefully, research suggests it could help stem the tide.

Adapted from *The Guardian*September 2024
(458 words)

ADULTS AND TEENS TURN TO 'DUMBPHONES' TO CUT SCREENTIME

Buried in the settings of many smartphones is the option to look up how much on average you are staring at your phone per day. It can bring an uncomfortable realisation, that what was supposed to be a useful piece of technology has become an obsession.

"Social media is built around FOMO (fear of missing out), so I felt like I couldn't get off it," 16-year-old Luke Martin, from Canada, told the BBC. "Instantly I got Instagram and it was a downward spiral."

Luke is not alone.

According to a study by Harvard University, using social networking sites lights up the same part of the brain that is also triggered when taking an addictive substance. This has raised concerns about phone habits among youth. [...]

Some campaigners want age limits to be introduced for smartphone use. Others, like Luke, are choosing to swap their smartphones for much simpler devices, so-called "dumbphones". His new phone only has texts, calls, maps, and a few other limited tools.

"My friends' usage is like four to five hours I think, and that's how much mine used to be before I got this," he said. "Now mine's like 20 minutes a day which is really good because I only use it for what I need it for."

Parents are also turning to dumbphones, not only for their children, but to help themselves be more present for their families. Lizzy Broughton, who has a five-year-old son, recently bought an old-school style Nokia "flip" phone.

"It helped me recalibrate my own habits, I have way more quality time with my son," she explained. She says that when it's time for him to get his own phone, she'll choose a similarly pared-down model. [...]

Sales of dumbphones have been increasing in North America. At Dumbwireless in Los Angeles, store-owner [...] Will Stults caters to customers looking for low-tech devices. "We have a lot of parents looking to get their kid that first phone, and they don't want them drifting off on the internet," he said.

But giving up the smartphone is easier said than done. Mr Stults said some schools require pupils to have certain apps. And it is difficult to hold the line when children see their friends being given expensive smartphones, said Ms Broughton.

"It's going to require a community of parents to actually be like, can we do this differently?" she said. [...]

Meanwhile, Canadian teen Luke says he is planning to stick with his new device, much to the amusement of friends. "They think it's pretty weird but at this point I'm like it doesn't really matter because it's helped me so much," he said.

"It's definitely taken me into a better spot right now."

Adapted from *BBC.com* June 2024 (460 words)

AI CHEATING IS OVERWHELMING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM BUT TEACHERS SHOULDN'T DESPAIR

It's getting close to the beginning of term. Parents are starting to fret about lunch packs, school uniforms and schoolbooks. School leavers who have university places are wondering what freshers' week will be like. And some university professors, especially in the humanities, will be apprehensively pondering how to deal with students who are already more adept users of large language models (LLMs) than they are.

They're right to be concerned. As Ian Bogost, a professor of film and media and computer science at Washington University in St Louis, puts it: "If the first year of AI college ended in a feeling of dismay, the situation has now devolved into absurdism. Teachers struggle to continue teaching even as they wonder whether they are grading students or computers; in the meantime, an endless AI cheating and detection arms race plays out in the background."

Predictably, that arms race is already heating up. The *Wall Street Journal* reported recently that: "OpenAl has a method to reliably detect when someone uses ChatGPT to write an essay or research paper. The company hasn't released it despite widespread concerns about students using artificial intelligence to cheat." This refusal infuriates those sectors of academia that touchingly imagine that there must be a technical fix for the "cheating" problem. Clearly, they haven't read the Association for Computing Machinery's statement on principles for the development of systems to detect generative Al content, which says: "reliably detecting the output of generative Al systems without an embedded watermark is beyond the current state of the art, which is unlikely to change in a projectable timeframe". [...]

LLMs are a burning issue for the humanities in particular because the essay is such a key pedagogical tool for teaching students how to research, think and write. More importantly, perhaps, the essay also plays a central role in how they are graded and assessed. The bad news is that LLMs threaten to make that venerable pedagogy untenable. And that there's no technical fix in sight.

The good news is that the problem isn't insoluble [...] Other pedagogies are available. But they require, if not a change of heart, two changes of mindset.

The first is an acceptance that LLMs – as the distinguished Berkeley psychologist Alison Gopnik puts it – are "cultural technologies", like writing, print, libraries and internet search. In other words, they are tools for human *augmentation*, not replacement.

Second, and more importantly perhaps, is a need to reinforce in students' minds the importance of writing as a *process*. [...]

It forces one to figure out lines of argument that are coherent, choose evidence that is relevant, find sources of information and inspiration that are useful, and – most importantly – learn the craft of expressing yourself in sentences that are readable and clear.

Adapted from *The Guardian*August 2024
(460 words)

AI GIANTS READY TO GRAB ALL YOUR DATA

Data is vital to Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, so firms want the right to take it and governments may let them. [...] According to the Financial Times, a consultation is soon to open that will indeed allow AI companies to scrape content from individuals and organisations unless they explicitly opt out of their data being used. [...]

Even if you're not one of the 200 million people who log on to ChatGPT every day, you will undoubtedly have interacted with an Al system – knowingly or unknowingly. But the two fuels Al needs to constantly replenish sources in order to develop, are energy – which is why Al companies are getting into the business of buying nuclear power plants – and... data.

Data is indeed vital to AI systems whose "knowledge" [...] stems from the data on which it is trained and therefore developed. Studies forecast that large language models such as ChatGPT will run out of training data by 2026, so voracious is its appetite. [...]

This is why they are already trying to push us towards an opt-out approach to copyright, where everything we type, post and share is destined to become AI training data by default unless we say no, rather than an opt-in regime, where each company has to ask us permission to use our data. X has already begun notifying users of a change to its terms and conditions of use that would enable all posts to be used to train Grok, Elon Musk's AI model designed to compete with ChatGPT... And Meta has made a similar change. [...]

The reason why Al companies want an opt-out regime is obvious. If you ask most people if they want anything from the books they write and music they produce, or the posts and photos they share on social networks to be used to train Al, they will say "no!".

As for the reason why the UK government wants to enable such a change to the concept of copyright ownership that has existed for more than 300 years, it is [...] mostly due to the lobbying from big tech companies suggesting that this is a requirement for them to consider the country as a place to invest in. [...]

But then, let's be clear... If the UK's copyright scheme effectively changes, potentially hundreds of AI companies from big tech ones to small research labs, will be allowed to grab every post we make, every book we write, every song we create without requiring us to sign up to every individual service and tell them that no, we don't want them to chew up our data and spit out a poor composite image of us.

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (449 words)

ALL THREATS TO THE SEA COME FROM HUMANS: HOW LAWYERS ARE GEARING UP TO FIGHT FOR THE OCEANS

A few years ago, Anna von Rebay gave up her lucrative job in a corporate law firm specialising in art law to concentrate on her passion for the ocean. "All threats to the sea come from humans, who behave as though nature is nothing more than a resource," says Von Rebay, who works in Germany and Indonesia. "But the ocean can't stand up for itself."

Inspired by a rising wave of lawsuits seeking to hold governments and companies to account for climate action, she set up Ocean Vision Legal, a law firm with a unique remit: to litigate on the ocean's behalf.

"My aim was to motivate people, organisations and states to take legal action to enforce ocean protection," she says.

She is not alone. Last year, the UN Environment Programme [...] said lawsuits challenging government and corporate inaction on the climate breakdown have become an important driver of change. There have been more than 2,500 lawsuits relating to the climate crisis around the world – and many relate to the ocean.

In January, Von Rebay's firm initiated preliminary proceedings against Germany on behalf of Bund, a German conservation NGO, for issuing fishing licences that allow bottom trawling, a destructive fishing practice, in a marine protected area (MPA) of the Dogger Bank. [...]

If the case proceeds, it could set a precedent, with implications for other European countries' licences. [...]

Von Rebay, a surfer, is proactive on the ocean's behalf. Since Iceland decided to resume whaling last month, she has been working on a letter to the Human Rights Council, a UN body, warning that NGOs and others consider allowing whaling to be a potential infringement of the right to a healthy environment. [...] Her firm is also looking into the legal implications of deep-sea mining.

Von Rebay, however, is not the only lawyer exploring litigation as a tool against an industry as yet in its infancy but which could pose one of the greatest threats to the oceans. One of the world's biggest environmental groups, the WWF, announced in May that it is suing the Norwegian government for opening up its seabed for deep-sea mining, claiming that Norway has failed to properly investigate the consequences of such activity.

And there have been other notable successes on behalf of the world's seas. Perhaps the most significant came in May, when nine small island states won a historic climate case, which ruled that all signatories to a treaty known as the United Nations convention on the law of the sea [...] must do more to protect the oceans from the impacts of global heating.

Adapted from *The Guardian*July, 2024
(457 words)

AMAZON SAYS WORKERS MUST BE IN THE OFFICE. THE UK GOVERNMENT DISAGREES

There are two competing views on where desk-based employees work best. Amazon is ordering its staff back to the office five days a week, just as the government is pushing for rights to flexible working – including working from home – to be strengthened. The tech giant says employees will be able to better "invent, collaborate, and be connected". But just as the firm's announcement became news, the UK government was linking flexibility to better performance and a more productive, loval workforce. [...]

But more than four years since the start of the pandemic, what does the evidence tell us about how we work best and is Amazon right to believe people being in the office full time will allow them to collaborate better?

Amazon's fellow tech giant Microsoft studied its employees during the pandemic. It looked at the emails, calendars, instant messages and calls of 61,000 of its employees in the US during the first six months of 2020. The findings were published in Nature Human Behaviour. The study indicated that, during Covid, remote workers tended to collaborate more with networks of colleagues they already had, and that they built fewer "bridges" between different networks. There was also a drop in communication that happened in real time – meetings that would have happened in real life weren't necessarily happening online. Instead, more emails and instant messages were sent. The authors suggested this may make it harder to convey and understand complex information. [...]

Amazon is not alone in telling employees to return to the office full-time. Goldman Sachs, [...] rival US banks JPMorgan and Morgan Stanley have also backed workers returning to the office, whereas some banks in Europe have taken a softer approach. Elon Musk's Tesla also requires employees to be in the office full time, leading to reports of problems finding space for them. Another Musk company, SpaceX, brought in a policy requiring workers to return to the office full-time. [...]

The wellbeing of staff was a key reason one UK business decided to get them back to the office as soon as possible after lockdown restrictions ended, according to one of its directors, Francis Ashcroft. [...] He says "some people were struggling with raised anxiety" and wanted to get back to the office "to be part of a team". [...]

"It brought a realness and a sense of belonging," Mr Ashcroft says, adding that "when it comes to delivering a service, the teamwork was much better in the office".

Despite this experience, an umbrella review of home working that examined a range of other studies concluded that, on the whole, working from home boosts how much workers can get done. [...]

Adapted from *BBC News* September 2024 (447 words)

AMAZON AND GOOGLE MAKE DUELING NUCLEAR INVESTMENTS TO POWER DATA CENTERS WITH CLEAN ENERGY

Amazon on Wednesday said that it was investing in small nuclear reactors, coming just two days after a similar announcement by Google, as both tech giants seek new sources of carbon-free electricity to meet surging demand from data centers and artificial intelligence.

The plans come as the owner of the shuttered Three Mile Island nuclear power plant said last month it plans to restart the reactor so tech giant Microsoft can buy the power to supply its data centers. All three companies have been investing in solar and wind technologies, which make electricity without producing greenhouse gas emissions. Now they say they need to go further in the search for clean electricity to meet both demand and their own commitments to cut emissions.

Nuclear energy is a climate solution in that its reactors don't emit the planet-warming greenhouse gases that come from power plants that burn fossil fuels [...]. The demand for power is surging globally as buildings and vehicles electrify. People used more electricity than ever last year, placing strain on electric grids around the world. Much of the demand also comes from data centers and artificial intelligence. [...]

"Al is driving a significant increase in the amount of data centers and power that are required on the grid," Amazon's vice president of global data centers told The Associated Press, adding: "We view advanced new nuclear capacity as really key and essential."

Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said she's thrilled Amazon is the latest to "BYOP" or "bring your own power" to the buildout of data centers. [...]

The United States aims to reach 100 percent clean electricity by 2035. Granholm said small modular reactors are a "huge piece of how we're going to solve this puzzle," a way to phase out fossil fuel power while responding to the increasing electricity demand from data centers and new factories. [...]

Small modular reactors are a type of nuclear reactor that can generate up to [...] one-third the amount of power of a traditional reactor. Developers say small reactors will be built faster and at a lower cost than large power reactors [...]. They aim to start spinning up electricity in the early 2030s, if the Nuclear Regulatory Commission gives permission to build and operate their designs and the technology succeeds. The reactors are currently under development, with none currently providing power to the electric grid in the U.S. Big investors can help change that, and these announcements could [...] make scaling up this technology truly possible [...].

Both Amazon and Google have committed to using renewable energy to address climate change. By 2030, Google has pledged to meet net-zero emissions [...]. Amazon [...] is also targeting net zero-carbon by 2040.

Adapted from Associated Press News October 2024 (459 words)

AND REPUBLICANS WON'T TALK ABOUT GUNS?

Someone tried to kill Donald Trump. Anyone familiar with the recent history of American gun violence should not be surprised. The AR-15 [...] has been used in recent years to kill scores of people and injure hundreds more in mass shootings in the US. [...]

Republicans could take action to make it harder for people to obtain these weapons, if they wanted to. There's even a precedent for it: In 1994, Democratic President Bill Clinton [...] enacted the Federal Assault Weapons ban, barring certain kinds of semi-automatic weapons [...] along with high-capacity magazines. [...]

Politics around gun ownership became more polarized, and the provision expired without renewal after 2004. Today, introducing another federal ban has become a top priority for several Democrats, following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary [...] in 2012.

Organizations working to reduce gun violence agree with them; polling suggests that a majority of Americans would approve of a ban, too. According to one Fox News poll last year, 61 percent of Americans would support legislation restricting the weapons commonly referred to as assault rifles. [...]

But even after an assassination attempt on the former president this weekend, it's highly unlikely that modern-day Republicans will do anything to try to prevent people from obtaining these guns. [...]

Republicans are assigning the blame to Democrats. [...] Indeed, Senator J.D. Vance (Ohio), now Trump's running mate, wrote on X that Democratic rhetoric "led directly to President Trump's attempted assassination." [...]

The United States has the highest rate of civilian firearm ownership on Earth, with at least 120 guns per 100 people, and hardly any restrictions on their sale or access. The saturation of guns in the United States was created through decades worth of advocacy and lobbying efforts by pro-gun organizations like the National Rifle Association, and it was built by Republican allies in Congress and in the White House, who have staunchly and consistently stood in the way of any legislation that would restrict people from acquiring guns, in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019, and too many other times to mention. [...]

A country with this many guns, and this level of deep polarization, is a nation vulnerable to political violence, just as we experienced this past weekend. As the shootings of Trump, and former Democratic Representative, Gabrielle Giffords make clear, leaders from both parties are at risk of becoming victims because of it.

The dark irony is that you are likely to hear only one party speak directly about the weapons that make leaders so vulnerable to assassination attempts. Time and time again, Republicans have gone out of their way to avoid criticizing the instruments that make this political climate so potentially dangerous. [...]

Adapted from *Vox* June 2024 (454 words)

ARE EMPTY OFFICES THE SOLUTION TO THE UK'S HOUSING CRISIS?

More than 40 million square feet of office space in the UK is vacant, according to the property consultancy JLL. Of this, more than half is in London. To put those numbers into context, that unused space is the equivalent of 30 Buckingham Palaces – or enough space to create, in theory, up to 62,000 new flats. [...]

What's the future for these office blocks? Could they realistically be converted into homes? The issue of dwindling occupancy in offices is not limited to London. After the pandemic all big financial centres have faced similar challenges, from New York to Paris, Tokyo to Sydney. [...]

The trend for working from home has meant offices are getting smaller and clustered in more central locations that are easier to commute to, leaving offices on the fringes of cities deserted. [...] Even Canary Wharf, home to six of the UK's ten tallest buildings, is struggling. In this financial district in east London, which was built from scratch in the early 1990s, almost 16 per cent of offices are vacant. [...]

The areas around the City are now being targeted for redevelopment, with a number of buildings designated for conversion into residential. In 2021 the City of London Corporation, announced plans to create 1,500 homes by 2030. Last month the local authority approved a planning application to transform a 1950s office block, (...) next to the Barbican, into private rental homes. The scheme, dubbed Cornerstone, is the second the developer HUB is doing in the area.

"There's a misconception within our industry that all buildings can be or should be converted into living spaces," says Damien Sharkey, managing director of HUB. "We review between 40 and 50 buildings to find one that would actually work."

Things to watch out for, Sharkey says, are the structural grid of the building, floor-plan depths, floor-to-ceiling heights, ventilation and so on. "But also, crucially, [we consider] the neighbouring context, from sunlight exposure to transport connections, from local amenities to existing residential provision. [...]

"In the case [of Cornerstone] we're adjacent to the Barbican, so we're in an area where there's already homes, people already living there," Sharkey adds. [...]

In 2013 the government introduced an update to permitted development rights (PDR), which allow the change of use of office, storage, light industrial and retail buildings into residential. Since then more than 100,000 homes are estimated to have been created through PDR, although not always to a high standard. [...]

In total, 7,900 homes were created in England from office conversions in 2023, just 3 per cent of the homes delivered during the year, government data shows. [...]

Adapted from *The Times* October 2024 (455 words)

ATTORNEY GENERAL JAMES SUES TIKTOK FOR HARMING CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

New York Attorney General Letitia James and California Attorney General Rob Bonta today co-led a bipartisan coalition of 14 attorneys general in filing lawsuits against the social media platform TikTok for misleading the public about the safety of its platform and harming young people's mental health. The lawsuits, allege that TikTok violated state laws by falsely claiming its platform is safe for young people. In fact, many young users are struggling with poor mental health and body image issues due to the platform's addictive features and are getting injured, hospitalized, or dying because of dangerous TikTok "challenges" that are created and promoted on the platform. [...]

"Young people are struggling with their mental health because of addictive social media platforms like TikTok," said Attorney General James. "TikTok claims that their platform is safe for young people, but that is far from true. In New York and across the country, young people have died or gotten injured doing dangerous TikTok challenges and many more are feeling more sad, anxious, and depressed because of TikTok's addictive features. Today, we are suing TikTok to protect young people and help combat the nationwide youth mental health crisis. Kids and families across the country are desperate for help to address this crisis, and we are doing everything in our power to protect them."

"Our investigation has revealed that TikTok cultivates social media addiction to boost corporate profits. TikTok intentionally targets children because they know kids do not yet have the defenses or capacity to create healthy boundaries around addictive content," said California Attorney General Rob Bonta. "When we look at the youth mental health crisis and the revenue machine TikTok has created, fueled by the time and attention of our young people, it's devastatingly obvious: our children and teens never stood a chance against these social media behemoths." [...]

According to the lawsuits filed by Attorney General James and the bipartisan coalition, TikTok's underlying business model focuses on maximizing young users' time on the platform so the company can boost revenue from selling targeted ads. TikTok uses an addictive content-recommendation system designed to keep minors on the platform as long as possible and as often as possible, despite the dangers of compulsive use.

TikTok uses a variety of addictive features to keep users on its platform longer, which leads to poorer mental health outcomes. Multiple studies have found a link between excessive social media use, poor sleep quality, and poor mental health among young people. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, young people who spend more than three hours per day on social media face double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes, including symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Adapted from New York State Attorney General's Website
October 2024
(453 words)

BANK OF MUM AND DAD: WHY WE ALL NOW LIVE IN AN 'INHERITOCRACY'

You know the Bank of Mum and Dad when you see it: it's your friend who seems broke, but always has a safety net, or who suddenly (but discreetly) acquires the deposit for a home. It's those who stayed with their parents while they saved for a flat, or stuck it out in a profession they were passionate about even though the wages are chronically low. It's those who do not need to consider the financial costs of having children. It's those whose grandparents are covering nursery or university fees, with the Bank of Grandma and Grandad already driving an economic wedge between different cohorts in generations Alpha (born between 2010 and 2024) and Z (born in the late 1990s and early 2000s).

This is the picture we know, but the Bank of Mum and Dad is not just a luxury confined to the 1% – it is also evident in families like mine. I grew up in a working-class household and was the first person in my family to get a degree, but it was the fact my parents had scrimped in the 1980s to purchase properties in London (and allowed me to crash in one throughout my 20s) that has arguably been the true source of opportunities in my life. [...]

But is this really the true story? Or have I just fed you a "working-class done good" tale, because that's how I attempt to justify my own exceedingly privileged position? One academic investigation into the Bank of Mum and Dad found that its beneficiaries tend to frame this considerable financial support not in terms of their own individual privilege, but as evidence of their parents' hard work and upward mobility. Whereas once parents lived vicariously through their children's successes, now it seems their kids live vicariously through their parents' struggles. And there lies the problem.

In recent years, we have rightly widened the conversation about privilege in society. And yet how honest are we about one of the most obvious forces shaping anyone under 45: the presence or absence of a parental safety net? The truth is that we live in an inheritocracy. If you've grown up in the 21st century, your opportunities are increasingly determined by your access to the Bank of Mum and Dad, rather than by what you earn or learn. The economic roots of this story go back to the 1980s, but it accelerated after the 2008 financial crisis, as private wealth soared and wage growth stalled. In the 2020s, rather than a meritocracy – where hard work pays off – we have evolved into an inheritocracy based on family wealth. [...]

Adapted from www.theguardian.com November 2024 (448 words)

BANKSY'S BACK WITH SURPRISE DAILY STREET ART OF ANIMALS ACROSS LONDON

Banksy – whose real identity remains unknown despite more than two decades in the public eye – has been unveiling stencils and installations depicting animals at different spots around the city every day for more than a week, announcing them on Instagram.

The works, all but one of them painted stencils in public spaces, have left his fans and art critics guessing as to their meaning, appearing soon after the worst far-right riots in more than 10 years rocked cities and towns across the United Kingdom. They have once more catapulted the artist back into the center of the country's cultural conversation.

"There's strong evidence over the years that Banksy sees himself as a political artist and has a resonance in political terms in almost everything that he does," says Andrew Renton, a professor of curating at Goldsmiths University of London, one of Britain's most high-profile arts institutions. "And it's kind of interesting, because the works that have appeared in the past week are in many ways not political." [...]

Besides theft, some pieces since their appearance have been defaced by other graffiti artists, moved by local authorities to safer locations or taken down altogether.

"It's kind of illusion magic, and that's what draws you in," says Renton. "It's not high flying, it's not deeply philosophical, it's not hard. The accessibility is what gives him a tool to communicate."

Banksy published photographs of each of the works on his Instagram account, allowing him to reach a much larger global audience – with more than 13 million followers – than was possible when he was spray-painting buildings in Bristol, England, back in the 1990s.

But he has also produced paintings and prints for commercial work, donating much of the money he earns from sales to philanthropic causes that seem to dovetail with the social criticism often reflected in his work, themes that have included U.K. politics, Israel's war in Gaza and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

There is no clear reason or explanation for this animal-focused art series, but some have speculated it could be in reference to the recent riots as an indication that eventually humanity has the power to destroy itself and cities like London could eventually return to nature. Another suggestion, posited by a BBC presenter, is that Banksy cares deeply about the environment, animal welfare and broader ecological issues, so the final image of a gorilla.

The controversial nature of much of Banksy's work not only criticizes public positions or government actions, but also challenges the art market and its participants – often adding to its allure. [...]

Adapted from *NPR* August 2024 (441 words)

BARNES & NOBLE IS MAKING A COME BACK

A massive building in Washington, DC, welcomed back a former occupant this month that had been gone for over a decade. In a move that's perhaps more symbolic than business-minded, Barnes & Noble, America's largest retail bookseller, has reopened the store it vacated in 2013. It's just one of over 60 new locations opening this year as part of an ambitious expansion plan that seemed impossible before CEO James Daunt took over in 2018.

Daunt referred to the return to the Georgetown branch as a "dramatic example of the ongoing revival of brick-and-mortar bookstores." Before Daunt's arrival, Barnes & Noble appeared to be on the same path as most struggling US retailers. Sales had plunged – leading to hundreds of store closings — as consumers continued buying from online retailers like Amazon. But Barnes & Noble changed its business model. [...] It began prioritizing customer preferences over promotions and addressing a community of readers who engage on social media. [...] Daunt's strategy was a gamble, [...] but it has paid off. Barnes & Noble's new model of relying on the judgment of each store's manager has been met with considerable success. [...]

Daunt also credits part of Barnes & Noble's recent success to BookTok, a TikTok subcommunity that emerged in 2020 when influencers introduced new finds and shared book recommendations. The hashtag #BookTok has over 40 million posts and continues to grow, and its influence reaches beyond its digital space, [...] driving foot traffic to stores. Kendra Keeter-Gray, a BookTok content creator with over 100,000 followers, told CNN that she and her friends could spend anywhere between 30 minutes to a few hours [...] in the BookTok section where they trade recommendations and flip through currently trending novels. [...]

Barnes & Noble has also tapped into BookTok's followers by hosting community events, from midnight release parties to costume competitions. "Stores are deciding to do events for their area where we're seeing turnouts of hundreds of people for book releases," Shannon DeVito, head of books at Barnes & Noble, told CNN. "It's really pushed a level of excitement around book releases that frankly hasn't been here since Harry Potter."

But more than that, the rebirth of Barnes & Noble's stores confirms the company's belief that there remains a consumer appetite for physical books. Like most bookstores, Barnes & Noble's main source of revenue is physical books as well as limited editions of books exclusive to the retailer. "There is always something that happens that is supposed to be the harbinger of the death of books, but what we've seen the last four years is completely the opposite," said DeVito. "Our future outlook is really positive, which is not something I could have said a few years ago."

Adapted from *cnn.com* November 2024 (459 words)

BEER CAN ARTWORK ACCIDENTALLY THROWN IN BIN BY STAFF MEMBER AT DUTCH MUSEUM

A Dutch museum has recovered an artwork that looks like two empty beer cans after a staff member accidentally threw it in the rubbish bin thinking it was trash.

The work, entitled *All The Good Times We Spent Together* by French artist Alexandre Lavet, appears on first glance to be two discarded and dented beer tins.

However, a closer look shows they are in fact meticulously hand-painted with acrylics and "required a lot of time and effort to create", according to the museum.

But their artistic value was lost on a mechanic, who saw them displayed in a lift and chucked them in the bin.

Froukje Budding, a spokesperson for the LAM museum in Lisse, western Netherlands, told AFP that artworks are often left in unusual places – hence the display in a lift.

"We try to surprise the visitor all the time," she said.

Curator Elisah van den Bergh returned from a short break and noticed that the cans had vanished. She recovered them from a bin bag just in the nick of time as they were about to be thrown out.

"We have now put the work in a more traditional place on a plinth so it can rest after its adventure," Budding said.

She stressed there were "no hard feelings" towards the mechanic, who had just started at the museum. "He was just doing his job," she said.

The museum's director, said: "Our art encourages visitors to see everyday objects in a new light. By displaying artworks in unexpected places, we amplify this experience and keep visitors on their toes".

"With this in mind, the cans are unlikely to stay on their traditional plinth for long, said Budding. "We need to think hard about a careful place to put them next," she said.

The incident is the latest in a long line of unfortunate things to happen to artworks in galleries and museums. In 2023 a man who said he was hungry ate a banana that had been taped to a wall as part of an installation by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan at a gallery in Seoul. In 2011 an overzealous cleaner in Germany ruined a piece of modern art worth £690,000 after mistaking it for an eyesore that needed a good scrub. The sculpture by the German artist Martin Kippenberger, widely regarded as one of the most talented artists of his generation until his death in 1997, had been on loan to the Ostwall Museum in Dortmund when it fell prey to the cleaner's scouring pad.

Adapted from *The Guardian*October 2024
(445 words)

BEYOND BANKSY: THE OTHER BRITISH STREET ARTISTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

The Bristol-based enigma is making the news again, but he is only part of a thriving UK scene with a long history.

[...] At the bottom of Leonard Street, at a venue called the Dragon Bar, guerrilla artists from across the UK were converging to make fresh work. "It was the hub of what was happening in the British street art scene," recalled Ben Eine, a former barman at the venue and one of the most successful street artists in the world today. "There were people like myself, Banksy, D*Face and other kids doing lots of stuff around there."

Decades on, one of those "kids" – Banksy – is a globally recognised name whose work sells for millions and fills countless newspaper columns. In fact, the anonymous Bristol-based artist is the UK's third most popular artist, after Vincent van Gogh and Leonardo da Vinci. [...]

Analogous with east London's evolution, Banksy's rise to stardom also demonstrates the commercialisation of an industry that once existed in the shadows. [...]

But, regardless of this change, street art still has massive appeal for young people. Inkie, one of the best-known graffiti writers to emerge out of Bristol (alongside Banksy and 3D) said he regularly held workshops for young people "and it's one of the most popular classes. My team recently worked with over 260 kids at Womad festival and they all learned basic calligraphy and spray-can skills," he said.

"Does it still appeal to young people? Yeah, definitely," said Eine. "Street art stems from graffiti, and graffiti is exciting. Spray paint is exciting. Tagging your name on the side of the wall is exciting. Getting chased by the police is exciting.

"You learn how to express yourself, it gives you an identity. Most street artists or graffiti writers have an alter ego that they make famous. Banksy could be a boring, middle-aged man with like two kids, but when he goes out under the mask of Banksy, he's a little bit of a superhero. He puts on his Banksy cape, and off he goes."

There's an additional appeal: painting on walls and shutters offers an opportunity to engage with a community that would feel intimidated by traditional galleries and museums.

"For me, street art is about painting for people," Mr Cenz said, "painting in a more deprived area where people need uplifting."

Eine added: "You just walk down the street and see something and you're like, 'Oh my God, hey Jimmy, look at that.' It's accessible. And I think, generally, getting your face out of your iPhone, opening your eyes and looking around is a healthy thing to do."

Adapted from *The Guardian*August 2024
(445 words)

BILLIONAIRES ARE JOURNALISM'S FALSE SAVIOURS

On Tuesday, the Los Angeles Times announced that it would lay off at least 115 journalists, 20 percent of the newsroom. The cuts would have been larger were it not for the newspaper's union, which fought back and walked out of the office for one day last week in protest. The cuts follow a previous round of layoffs last June, meaning the Times has lost around one-third of its staff in under a year. The same day, Time announced cuts of its own. The Washington Post slashed its newsroom late last year. Journalism's fate was never assured, but now it looks bleaker every year.

Many of these companies had been purchased by billionaires who struck an altruistic pose. At one time, they said they believed in journalism, not the bottom line. When billionaire Patrick Soon-Shiong purchased the Los Angeles Times in 2018, he "knew in my heart of hearts" that "we need to protect the newsroom ... I came in there with an inner belief it's all or nothing," he said in 2021. Jeff Bezos bought the Washington Post in part because it's an "important institution," the New York Times recently noted. [...]

Now altruism has worn thin. Plain business interests are taking over, and media workers are feeling the blow. The implications for them – and the public – are devastating. The situation is revelatory. Media layoffs tell us something about an owner's business prowess, but they also show bigger forces at work. Owners like Soon-Shiong sound noble at first, but ultimately they prioritize profit over the public interest. [...] By cutting jobs in journalism, the ruling class cedes ground to the rabid right-wing media. The prospect of an emboldened right wing and a corresponding reduction in reputable news sources does not trouble them nearly as much as the loss of profit.

There is no morality to that logic, and no interest in the world, for that matter. Media layoffs betray a damning incuriosity among our elite. They're content to rule and fundamentally disinclined to understand or empathize with the people they dominate. In contrast, journalism at its best has the power to illuminate. A good journalist can pull back the layers of the world to show the structure underneath. Wealthy owners don't want the knowledge and they don't want the scrutiny either. They're rather blunt about it, too: Layoffs speak loudly, as do corporate mouthpieces. A spokesperson for the Los Angeles Times said last week that "relying on a benevolent owner to cover expenses, year after year, is not a viable long-term plan." [...]

Journalism doesn't function like a traditional business, nor should it; its objective isn't profit but service. For that reason, most journalists know they can't trust a billionaire's whims.

Adapted from *The New York Magazine*January 2024
(460 words)

BILLIONAIRES WANT TO USE TECH TO ENHANCE OUR ABILITIES

Many prominent people in the tech industry have talked about the increasing convergence between humans and machines in coming decades. For example, Elon Musk has reportedly said he wants humans to merge with Al "to achieve a symbiosis with artificial intelligence".

His company Neuralink aims to facilitate this convergence so that humans won't be "left behind" as technology advances in the future. While people with disabilities would be nearterm recipients of these innovations, some believe technologies like this could be used to enhance abilities in everyone.

These aims are inspired by an idea called transhumanism, the belief that we should use science and technology to radically enhance human capabilities and seek to direct our own evolutionary path. Disease, aging and death are all realities transhumanists wish to end, alongside dramatically increasing our cognitive, emotional and physical capacities.

Transhumanists often advocate for the three "supers" of superintelligence, superlongevity and superhappiness, the last referring to ways of achieving lasting happiness. [...]

This may all sound futuristic and fantastical, but rapid developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and synthetic biology have led some to argue we are on the cusp of creating such possibilities. [...]

In the short term, the promises and the perils are probably overstated. After all, tech companies have a lot to gain by making us think they are on the verge of engineering a divine power that can create utopia or destroy the world. [...]

Al systems are already causing many forms of social and environmental harm. Al companies rarely wish to address these harms though. [...] But if we lack the capacity and determination to address these real world harms, it's hard to believe that we will be able to mitigate larger-scale risks that Al may hypothetically enable. If there really is a threat that Al could pose an existential risk, for example, everyone would shoulder that cost, but the profits would be very much private. [...]

There's also the pressing question of whose future will be transhuman. We currently live in a very unequal world. Transhumanism, if developed in anything like our existing context, is likely to greatly increase inequality, and may have catastrophic consequences for the majority of humans.

Perhaps transhumanism itself is a symptom of the kind of thinking that has created our parlous social reality. It is a narrative that encourages us to hit the gas, expropriate nature even more, keep growing and not look back at the devastation in the rear-view mirror.

If we're really on the verge of creating an enhanced version of humanity, we should start to ask some big questions about what being human should mean, and therefore what an enhancement of humanity should entail. [...]

Adapted from The Conversation January 2024 (449 words)

BREATHING MAY INTRODUCE MICROPLASTICS TO THE BRAIN

Small plastic particles are everywhere: in the soil where our food is grown, in the water we drink and in the air we breathe. They got there from the plastic we throw away, which ends up in landfill sites, rivers and seas. There the plastic waste slowly breaks down, releasing tiny particles called microplastics and even tinier nanoplastics into the environment.

Microplastics are also increasingly being found throughout the human body. We are not sure how they got there, though there are three probable routes. We may ingest microplastics when we eat and drink, or breathe them into our lungs, or absorb them through our skin. Another route has recently been suggested, whereby microplastics get up our noses and from there into our brains.

For a long time, it was thought that the human brain existed in splendid isolation from the rest of the body. The so-called blood-brain barrier, a special layer of cells, protects the brain from all manner of pathogens and harmful substances. However, we now know that the blood-brain barrier can be breached because small plastic particles have been found in the human brain.

New research has suggested that the blood-brain barrier has at least one vulnerable spot where microplastics may be able to get into the brain. This potential entry point was suggested by researchers at the Freie Universität Berlin and the University of São Paulo. It is in the nose, where there are special nerves, the olfactory nerves, that detect smells.

The olfactory nerves run from the inside of the nose, through the skull, and then directly into part of the brain called the olfactory bulb. The researchers suggest that microparticles breathed into the nose may somehow get transported along the olfactory nerves and into the brain. [...]

The new study is just one of many that has reported the presence of small plastic particles in the human body. Most of these studies are about microplastics, which are particles up to five millimetres in size. Very few studies have looked for nanoplastics in the human body. Nanoplastics have been shown to kill cells in animal embryos. This can lead to birth defects in animals if the embryo is exposed to a high dose of nanoparticles.

Fortunately, there is no evidence that humans have suffered any great increase in birth defects in recent years. Maybe the placenta is able to stop microplastics and nanoplastics from reaching the foetus.

We need to know much more about the presence of microplastics – and especially nanoplastics – in the human body. [...] This makes the new Berlin-São Paulo study so interesting. [...] Yet, this leaves us with the question: what potential risks are posed to our health by microplastics and nanoplastics?

Adapted from *The Conversation* September 2024 (453 words)

BRITISH WOMAN, 38, DIES AFTER £7K BRAZILIAN BUTT-LIFT SURGERY IN TURKEY

Hayley Dowell, a British woman from Eastleigh, Hampshire, tragically died after undergoing a Brazilian butt-lift (BBL), tummy tuck, and liposuction at a clinic in Istanbul, Turkey. The surgery, which cost more than £7,000, was part of a package deal that promised to enhance her appearance. However, the procedure ended in complications, and she died in October 2023. The inquest into her death revealed that Hayley's surgeon left the operation halfway through, leaving the anaesthetist to complete the procedure. Her husband, Neil Dowell, who accompanied her on the trip, stated that the clinic had not fully informed his wife about the risks of the surgery. According to him, she had only consented to two of the three operations, but the details of which procedure was not agreed upon have not been disclosed.

Neil Dowell claimed that the clinic failed to outline any risks associated with the surgeries, a statement supported by his wife's mother, Ann Dowell, who stated that Hayley would not have known about the potential dangers of one of the procedures due to her lack of full consent. The surgeon's departure during the operation and the shortening of the procedure's planned six-hour duration raised further concerns for Neil Dowell. He claimed that such actions were unsafe and indicated a lack of professionalism.

The cause of death was identified as an embolism, a blockage in the bloodstream, which can be fatal after surgery. In the wake of his wife's death, Neil Dowell also shared his shock at being asked to sign the consent form after the operation was already completed and Hayley had passed away.

The BHT Clinic, where the surgery took place, promotes itself as having advanced medical technology and ethical standards, claiming to be a world leader in health services. However, it has not provided an official representative or spokesperson for the ongoing inquest. In 2023, Hayley Dowell became one of six British nationals who died in Turkey due to botched medical procedures. Despite the country's appeal to UK residents due to lower costs for cosmetic surgery, health authorities have raised concerns about the safety standards in some Turkish clinics.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office has confirmed that at least 17 Britons have died in Turkey following medical tourism visits since 2019. The inquest into Hayley Dowell's death will continue, and Coroner Nicholas Walker is expected to conduct a thorough investigation into the circumstances surrounding her death. He also hinted at writing a Prevention of Future Deaths report to prevent similar tragedies in the future. The full inquest is scheduled for January 2025.

Adapted from *The Independent* November 2024 (456 words)

CHILDREN AND SMARTPHONES: SETTING SOME LIMITS IS A GOOD IDEA

With the advent of smartphones and smartwatches, human life has moved online. Anyone seeking to curtail young people's participation in the online world is [...] doomed. The social ills blamed on the internet have complex causes that can't be fixed by blocking children's access.

This is a caricature of the tech-positive outlook. In real life, most people recognize that the portable computers we carry around with us make excessive demands on our time and attention. Just as children need support to develop healthy eating habits, they need encouragement to use the internet in moderation. [...] But reluctance to give in to unrealistic "ban them!" [...] can shade into an impression that there is really nothing to be done. Or that if there is, it should be done by parents.

Jonathan Haidt, the American social psychologist, is the most prominent advocate of the opposite view on smartphones. His book The Anxious Generation makes the controversial claim that their use has caused a huge rise in teenage mental illness, particularly among girls, and that collective action is needed to reverse this. His critics say that he oversimplifies the problem. But in recent months, policymakers around the world have appeared increasingly receptive. The Australian government is considering raising the minimum age for social media use from 13 to 16, while officials across Europe are implementing tighter restrictions.

The UK has some of the strictest legislation in the world to protect children online. [...] This year, the government issued guidance encouraging schools to ban the use of phones during lunchtimes as well as lessons. [...] In his review of the NHS in England, Lord Darzi acknowledged that it was "unlikely that the dramatic rise in mental health needs is wholly unconnected from social media". [...]

One academy chain in England has taken matters into its own hands. In its 44 schools, pupils will have their phones taken away during the school day. Peter Kyle, the science secretary, has said he would consider following Australia in banning social media accounts for under-16s. Smartphone use is not the biggest challenge facing schools [...] in the UK. Teacher shortages, child poverty and a funding gap need to be addressed. Against this backdrop, phone bans can be viewed as a gimmick that could even distract from the bigger issue of age limits – any raising of which the tech companies are certain to fight.

But teachers, parents and wider society, have a role in setting boundaries. [...] One cannot dismiss children's worsening mental health [...] or the tragic cases in which online encounters have contributed to young people's deaths. [...] Whistleblowers [...] have shown that social media firms cannot be trusted to put children's safety before profit.

Adapted from *The Guardian* September 2024 (448 words)

CHINA MAKES LOVE AND WAR WITH TAIWAN

China's war games around Taiwan on October 14th broke records for a single-day drill. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) employed 153 aircraft. Taiwan's defence ministry also spotted 26 ships, including a Chinese aircraft-carrier. As if that were not enough, China's coastguard carried out an unprecedented patrol around Taiwan's main island, calling it a "practical action to control Taiwan island in accordance with the law based on the one-China principle".

This was "punishment", said China, "for Lai Ching-te's continuous fabrication of 'Taiwan independence' nonsense". On October 10th Mr Lai, Taiwan's president, gave a speech to mark the local national day. Chinese state media claimed that he provoked the government in Beijing by "indulging in outright secessionist and blatantly provocative remarks". Xinhua, the official news service, noted that instead of referring to China as the "the mainland", which would suggest that China and Taiwan are one country, he referred to it as "China", as if they were separate.

Mr Lai seems to enjoy throwing rhetorical barbs at China. [...] On October 5th he said it was "impossible" for China to be Taiwan's motherland because the modern incarnation of Taiwan was 38 years older than Communist China. But Mr Lai's speech on October 10th was relatively restrained. He made no mention of independence, though he said Taiwan would "resist annexation" or "encroachment upon our sovereignty".

The speech, then, was probably not the main impetus for China's war games. Taiwanese officials say that China was preparing for the drill before Mr Lai spoke on October 10th. [...] The exercises were a follow-up to a two-day drill in May. The PLA said version B aimed to test the ability of its army, navy, air force and rocket force to work together. China did not fire any missiles over Taiwan, but it practised blockading Taiwanese ports and assaulting maritime and ground targets.

It is also practising its messaging. China is eager to shape the narrative around its military activity. Its claim to have been provoked by Mr Lai appeared aimed at giving the exercises an air of legitimacy. Were China to actually move against Taiwan, it would probably blame Taiwanese leaders for upsetting the status quo. China is also trying to paint its dealings with Taiwan as a domestic affair. The inclusion of China's coastguard in the drill seemed like an attempt to reinforce its claim that the waters around Taiwan are actually Chinese.

The coastguard, for its part, sent its own message. It produced an image, shared widely online, of its ships sailing around Taiwan in the shape of a heart, accompanied by the words: "Hi, my sweetheart...Patrolling around you in the shape of love."

Adapted from *The Economist*October 2024
(451 words)

CHINA'S PUSH FOR MORE BABIES

The Chinese government is again trying to insert itself into women's childbearing decisions, knocking on doors and making calls with questions some find downright invasive.

Our reporter visited maternity hospitals and government family planning offices in Beijing to see how women were being prodded to have children.

The first time a government worker encouraged Yumi Yang to have a baby, [...] the worker gave her and her husband free prenatal vitamins, which she chalked up to the government trying to be helpful.

When an official called to ask if she had taken them, and then called again after she did get pregnant to track her progress, Ms. Yang shrugged those questions off as well intentioned, too. But when officials showed up at her door after she had given birth, [...] that was too much. [...]

Faced with a declining population that threatens economic growth, the Chinese government is responding with a time-tested tactic: inserting itself into this most intimate of choices for women, whether or not to have a child.

Officials are not just going door to door to ask women about their plans. They have partnered with universities to develop courses on having a "positive view of marriage and childbearing." At high-profile political gatherings, officials are spreading the message too.

Yumi Yang drew the line at being visited at home by officials asking to take a photograph of her and her baby. [...]

[...] The in-your-face approach makes it harder for women to tune out calls by China's leader, Xi Jinping, to get married and have babies. To some, it is outright invasive; on social media, women have complained about being approached by neighborhood officials, including some who they said called to ask the date of their last menstrual cycle.

Mr. Xi, who has overseen a crackdown on feminist activism, has said that promoting childbirth as a national priority is one step toward ensuring that women "walk with the party." The country's total fertility rate [...] is at 1.0.

The fertility campaign is also a reminder that the Chinese Communist Party has a long history of imposing its will on people's reproductive decisions. For decades starting in the 1970s it enforced a one-child policy, sometimes brutally. Officials fined couples who had unauthorized pregnancies and even forced some women to undergo abortions.

As China's economy developed, the party stepped back somewhat, [...] ruling in 2021 that couples could have three children. [...]Faced with a declining population that threatens economic growth, China has made raising the fertility rate a national priority. [...] But for many women, the government's nagging seemed out of step with their concerns and outdated. It failed to address the high cost of raising children and how they would juggle motherhood alongside their careers and other ambitions. [...]

Adapted from *The New York Times* October 2024 (458 words)

CONCERNS IN INDIA OVER HIGH-PRESSURE CORPORATE JOBS

The death of a young chartered accountant has highlighted a work culture of overworked employees and bullying bosses. For the average Indian, the working week is now longer than ever – totalling almost 47 hours. According to recent labour data, India now has one of the most overworked labour forces in the world, enduring longer hours than in China, Singapore and even Japan, a country renowned for its relentless work culture. On average, Indians work 13 hours longer every week than an employee in Germany.

Almost 90% of those working in India are employed in the informal sector, which is largely unregulated and exploitative. However, concerns have also begun to be raised about the working conditions of those in formal employment, particularly those in India's corporate sector where working practices have remained largely unchanged in decades and critics say pursuit of profit remains king.

In July, Anna Sebastian Perayil, a 26-year-old chartered accountant at the India offices of corporate accounting giant Ernst and Young, died four months after joining. In a letter written in the aftermath, her mother said that the "overwhelming" high-pressure work environment had taken a heavy toll on Perayil and eventually led to her death. "She worked late into the night, even on weekends, with no opportunity to catch her breath," said her mother's letter, which went viral across India. "The relentless demands and the pressure to meet unrealistic expectations are not sustainable, and they cost us the life of a young woman with so much potential." She also noted that no-one from the company had attended her daughter's funeral.

One former Ernst and Young employee, who asked to remain anonymous to protect their job, said that the toxic culture alleged by Peyaril's mother was standard practice at the firm, and came from the very top. "Life is pretty brutal and everyone is overburdened," he said, describing it as the norm to work 12- or 13-hour days, finishing up around 10 pm, and regularly working both days on the weekend. The belittling and degradation of staff was commonplace, he added, with employees viewed as resources rather than human beings. "There is an extreme hierarchy," he said. "Senior managers were known to terrorise junior staff to keep everyone on their toes constantly. They would shout and throw files around and people would often be reduced to tears." [...]

"There's no incentives for big corporates to change their practices because executives know that if one person won't do it or quits, there are thousands of other people who will take their place," he said. "The sole focus is productivity and long hours, with no thought for the wellbeing of employees. It's hard to see that changing anytime soon."

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (453 words)

CONFLICTS OVER WATER

There is historically more cooperation than conflict over international waters. But given the changes brought on by climate change and growing human demands for water, conflicts will become more common unless shared water resources are managed through science-based water diplomacy. That was one of the main messages from a discussion on "Conflicts, Climate and Cooperation" led by eminent scientists briefing the United Nations General Assembly in New York, in February 2023.

There are 300 international water basins which comprise roughly half the earth, in addition to 600 trans boundary aquifers [...] which, altogether, accounted for some 1,800 international water related conflicts between UN Member States over the past 60 years. Nonetheless, two thirds of what nations do over water is cooperate. There is in fact little violence over water problems in the world. [...]

But since freshwater becomes increasingly scarce, tensions are on the rise and the UN will have to address the issue. Indeed «disputes seem to be increasing mostly because water is "emotional," i.e. it is tied to sovereignty, history, power and spiritual life» said Mr. Wolf, Professor of Geography in the College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences at Oregon State University. «Talking about these fundamental values, helps us to understand and it allows us to recognize that water is not just an economic resource, but one that touches on all our ways of being.» he added. He then recommended a monitoring and early warning system as well as preventive actions, such as poverty alleviation and improved environmental and water management.

One of the ways that countries have managed water issues up to now is through commissions and conventions. There are indeed more than 120 river basin commissions around the world. They provide technical expertise and can help with requests such as assessing needs or developing strategies. Despite lacking funds, [...] these commissions and conventions, encourage policy makers, lawyers, diplomats, water agencies, engineers and educators to share ideas and work together to transform the individual practices of each single state in a way that will be forward looking.

Looking forward could mean relating any infrastructure that is to be built to its surrounding ecosystems. For example, the engineers planning to build a dam to produce electricity to help economic development, could forget to control the deforestation upstream that could result in rampant soil erosion that would be a major issue to farmers. [...]

A new generation of water agreements based on independent scientific evidence has to be created. We need greater involvement of academics in policy making, and better communications on water issues. Coming together and creating a platform is a step to move forward to true resilience.

Adapted from the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly
September 2023
(450 words)

COULD CANNABIS BE CLASSIFIED AS MEDICINE?

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) proposed rules earlier this year that would officially give cannabis status as a medication rather than an illegal narcotic. [...] Under the new rules, cannabis would be reclassified as a schedule III drug – meaning that any cannabis based medication would probably require the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) approval and a doctor's prescription. "This will mean it would still be more regulated than alcohol and tobacco, even though it is safer by every metric", says Peter Grinspoon, a Harvard medical school instructor, author of the book "Seeing Through the Smoke". [...]

However this important change would be emblematic because, Grinspoon adds, "the US government is once again admitting that [cannabis] is a medicine even though it's currently very difficult to get permission from the federal government to do research on the actual plant. So rescheduling it as a medicine could make it easier to study the potential of medical cannabis by easing stigma as well as legal restrictions."

"Cannabis isn't magically different from everything else," he also says. "However it's less harmful than opiates, but it still has harms, and if you use it, you should know these possible harms. [...] Cannabis is quite good at alleviating symptoms... We already know, for example, that it helps with chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting. We also know that it helps with pain. What I'm quite interested to know now is whether cannabis can help modify the course of diseases like in the test tubes, where it is very good at killing cancer cells, but it hasn't been shown to cure cancer in humans yet, just in test tubes."

Professor Grant, a psychiatrist and director of the Center for Medical Cannabis Research at the University of California, San Diego, thinks the drug could be especially useful for certain conditions that resist existing treatments. [...] "Neuropathic pain continues to be an important direction, says Grant. It's associated with many conditions including HIV infection, multiple sclerosis and spinal injuries. This pain is difficult to treat, and really impairs quality of life... If you can't sleep at night because of this condition, and the medicines you're taking are not very helpful, that's real bad."

Pr Marcu, author of the book "Cannabis Innovations on cannabis and hemp regulation", says that in order to get FDA approval, cannabis derived drugs would probably need to be either synthetic or extensively refined. The existing FDA-approved medications on the market that are related to cannabis all contain a synthetic version of its main components. [...] Rescheduling cannabis could allow researchers to study the full spectrum of all the compounds provided by the plant, since many of them have not yet been researched much, but show promise." [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian*July 2024
(450 words)

CRYPTO INDUSTRY LOBBIES TRUMP AND HIS ALLIES TO CAPITALIZE ON ELECTION WINS

Cryptocurrency executives are eagerly positioning themselves to capitalize on the political shift following Donald Trump's election victory. After years of facing a tough regulatory environment, the crypto industry is making concerted efforts to influence the incoming administration's policies, particularly in relation to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). The industry hopes that Trump's administration will roll back the SEC's aggressive stance on crypto and implement policies more favorable to their interests.

Top executives from leading crypto companies, such as Coinbase, Ripple, and Circle, are engaging directly with Trump's transition team, aiming to shape key appointments and personnel decisions. A key player in these discussions is Howard Lutnick, a Bitcoin supporter and the head of Cantor Fitzgerald, who has worked closely with Trump's team. His involvement signals a strong push for the crypto industry to have a seat at the table in shaping the future of U.S. crypto policy.

The primary focus for crypto executives is to influence the SEC's leadership. One of the top candidates to head the SEC is Dan Gallagher, a former Robinhood executive, while another prominent name is Chris Giancarlo, a former regulator who has worked as an advisor to crypto firms. Both are seen as more sympathetic to the needs of the crypto industry, a stark contrast to the current SEC chair, Gary Gensler, who has aggressively pursued enforcement actions against crypto companies.

Trump, once a vocal critic of Bitcoin, has now become an advocate for cryptocurrency, promising during his campaign to end the SEC's crackdown. His shift in stance has fueled optimism in the crypto world, particularly given his personal involvement in crypto ventures through his family. The crypto industry is confident that under his leadership, regulatory barriers will be lowered, allowing for greater growth and stability.

In addition to lobbying for personnel changes, the crypto industry has invested heavily in political campaigning. Ahead of the election, super PACs funded by crypto executives spent around \$135 million to support pro-crypto candidates and secure favorable outcomes in over 50 congressional races. This spending is seen as a strategic move to ensure that the next administration's policies align with the interests of the industry.

With Bitcoin reaching new highs, the industry is hoping that political spending will result in a regulatory environment more conducive to growth. However, critics argue that relaxing regulations could increase risks for consumers, and greater scrutiny of the industry is needed to prevent future financial crises. As the crypto sector pushes for these changes, it remains to be seen how the new administration will respond to the calls from an industry that has already transformed the global financial landscape.

Adapted from *The New York Times*, November 2024 (452 words)

DECARCERATION IS THE KEY TO BETTER PRISONS

"Clearly, our prisons are not working." At one level David Gauke, a former Conservative justice secretary, who on October 22nd was appointed by Britain's Labour government to run a sentencing review, was stating the obvious. Britain's prisons are scarred by overcrowding and violence. [...] The number of people behind bars has doubled in the past 30 years; Britain locks up more people than any other country in western Europe. Jails are packed to the rafters, which is why the government this week allowed more prisoners out early on an emergency-release scheme. [...]

Prisons are supposed to protect the public from genuinely dangerous people; that becomes harder when they are overrun. In Britain 37 men were let out by mistake in September in an initial tranche of emergency releases; one is accused of committing a sexual offence the day he was freed. [...] It makes sense to lock up people who commit serious crimes. But disorderly prisons are unlikely to mete out punishment in a proportionate way. They also do little for rehabilitation: 90% of those sent down in Britain are reoffenders. By making criminals worse, bad prisons add to the need for imprisonment.

[...] Building prisons [...] has become more expensive as easy ways to upgrade old sites have been exhausted and local opposition to new ones has mounted. In Britain each new prison place costs around £450,000. As prisons have become grimmer, governments have found them harder to staff. [...]

Only one option leaves societies safer and richer: fewer prisoners. Bluntly, too many people are kept behind bars for too long. In Britain Mr Gauke's review is a step towards recognising that problem, but it is only a step. The real problem is not the diagnosis but what follows: winning public consent for decarceration – hard because "tough" sentencing is often popular – and managing the transition to a less crowded system. An example of what not to do comes from Italy. Rampant overcrowding led the government to release 20,000 prisoners in a couple of months in 2006, unleashing a small crime wave.

Better models are provided by the Netherlands and America. The Dutch prison population fell by 44% in the decade to 2015, helped by investment in community sentencing. Supervising offenders in the community costs around a tenth as much as keeping them behind bars and the reoffending rate is usually lower. [...] In America, the change was sold as a way of saving money.

Rich countries can also lean more on technology. Many early offender-tagging programmes had a deservedly poor reputation, but the latest devices are much better at monitoring offenders' behaviour. People can be fitted with real-time drug or alcohol monitors, or made to stick to strict curfews when they are not at work.

Adapted from *The Economist*October 2024
(460 words)

DISMANTLING GOOGLE IS A TERRIBLE IDEA

In August trustbusters scored their first major victory against big tech in a quarter of a century when a judge in the District of Columbia ruled that Google was a monopolist in online search. Using the power of the default, he argued, Google had blocked rivals and raised prices for its ads beyond free-market rates. On October 8th the Department of Justice is due to file proposed remedies for this abuse of monopoly power. These may include a proposal to dismantle the tech giant – perhaps by hiving off Chrome, its browser, or Android, its operating system for mobile handsets.

This would be foolhardy. It is not at all clear that it would solve the central issue presented in the case. And besides, even though Google has long enjoyed the vast profits associated with its vice-like grip on search, it may not continue to do so. New generative artificial-intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT and Claude, are quickly gaining market share.

Google is the web's most-used search engine, handling about 90% of queries in America. That dominance, the judge ruled, has been cemented through "default search agreements". Open up Safari on an iPhone [...] and type a query into the search bar, and it will be Google that returns the results. For the privilege of doing so Google shares some of the advertising revenue its search engine generates. [...]

[...] The trouble with default search agreements is that they do not just make one option more prominent. They take choice away altogether. Separating Chrome or Android would not fix this problem, as long as Google were still allowed to pay their eventual owners to be the default search engine. So the court should target default arrangements directly. [...] Absent the fat cheque Google pays to be the default, Apple and other deep-pocketed tech firms might focus on building search engines of their own.

An order to force Google to make public some of the technology that enables its search engine to work, such as its index of web pages and search-query logs, could make it easier for rivals to try. The trial revealed that it costs an estimated \$20bn to build a search engine, plus \$3bn-4bn per year in annual research and development. Reducing those costs would let smaller companies compete, too.

Another reason to avoid a remedy as drastic as a breakup is that technology moves far faster than any legal system can. Add in the appeals process and any action against Google is still years away. Yet already there is emerging evidence that Google's grip on search is slackening as generative-Al tools gain ground. [...] ChatGPT is the "go-to search engine" for 8% of Americans. [...]

Adapted from *The Economist* October 2024 (455 words)

DO PEOPLE IN 'BLUE ZONES' ACTUALLY LIVE LONGER?

The concept is simple [...]. There are special regions around the world – called blue zones – where people regularly remain vibrant and active into their 90s and 100s, thanks to a simple set of behaviors that anyone can follow.

It's sensible enough to sound convincing, and ambiguous enough to support a health and longevity empire. In the 20 years since blue zones were first introduced, the Blue Zones brand (now trademarked) has spawned eight books, a Netflix series, product partnerships [...] and a multimillion dollar program [...].

[...] The term "blue zone" was first used in 2004 in an article published in an academic journal about centenarians in Sardinia, Italy. In the paper, the researchers used the color blue to shade portions of a map of the island denoting where people had exceptional longevity. [...]

The idea gained momentum the following year, when National Geographic reporter Dan Buettner used the phrase in a feature story highlighting three regions – Okinawa, Japan; Loma Linda, California; and Sardinia – where research had found people lived longer and more healthily than average.

In the article, Mr. Buettner attributed the longevity and vitality of the regions' citizens to their healthy behaviors. People from these places [...] were more likely to eat a nutritious diet with lots of fruits and vegetables, get plenty of physical activity, prioritize family and community and not smoke cigarettes. Drinking in moderation, not eating too much, managing stress, having a purpose in life, dedication to religion and good genes were other factors mentioned. [...]

The controversy started in 2019, with an academic [...] study, which was updated this year [...], claiming that areas with high numbers of centenarians and supercentenarians (people 110 and older) have something else in common: faulty record keeping. In other words, more people are living past 100 only on paper, not in reality.

The study, conducted by Saul Newman [...] of the Center for Longitudinal Studies at University College London [...] analyzed databases of centenarians and supercentenarians from the United States, France, England, Italy and Japan [...].

"I found that they all came from poor areas that generally [...] had some of the worst life expectancies of their countries," Dr. Newman said. "Every indication was that these high densities of supercentenarians were just down to poverty and fraud."

Dr. Newman [...] said that low literacy rates and poor record keeping resulted in an absence of birth certificates around the beginning of the 20th century. Consequently, many older people may not know how old they are, and without legitimate paperwork, their ages are virtually impossible to verify. In other instances, an older relative may have died but no one registered the death, so it looks like the person keeps getting older — and the family keeps receiving their pension check. [...]

Adapted from *New York Times* October, 2024 (460 words)

DONALD TRUMP ELECTED US PRESIDENT IN STUNNING POLITICAL RESURRECTION

Donald Trump has been elected the 47th president of the United States in a stunning political resurrection that sent shockwaves through America and around the world.

Trump becomes the first convicted criminal to win the White House. At 78 he is also the oldest person ever elected to the office.

The result will sound alarm bells in foreign capitals given Trump's chaotic leadership style and overtures to authoritarians such as Vladimir Putin of Russia and Kim Jong-un of North Korea. He was branded a threat to democracy and even a fascist by his opponent, Vice-President Kamala Harris, and some of his own former White House officials.

Yet the American electorate proved willing to push such concerns aside and hand the nuclear codes to the property developer turned reality TV star for a second time.

Many analysts assumed that his defeat by Joe Biden in 2020 spelled the end of his political career, especially when an angry mob of his supporters – fuelled by his lie that the election was stolen – stormed the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, resulting in his second impeachment.

But while Trump's grip on the Republican party was briefly shaken, it held firm. The thrice-married New Yorker, found liable for sexual abuse, remained an unlikely hero of evangelical Christians and the white working class, and polling suggested that he gained small but significant traction among African American and Latino voters.

Four criminal cases – including a conviction on 34 felony counts over concealing hush-money payments to the adult film performer Stormy Daniels – would have been devastating to any other politician but only appeared to strengthen Trump's standing with his "Make America Great Again" (Maga) base.

Just before the party convention in July he survived an assassination attempt at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, an escape that many allies took as a sign from God.

Trump received a major assist from the world's richest man, the tech entrepreneur Elon Musk, who gave away millions of dollars to voters in swing states who signed a petition tied to his political action committee. Trump's significant victory suggests that his pitch – often crude and rambling, mendacious and racist – still resonated among voters disillusioned with the political establishment.

Trump ran on a now familiar campaign theme of nativist populism that promised the biggest ever deportation of undocumented people, whom he branded as "animals" with "bad genes" who were "poisoning the blood of the country". He complained that the US was "like a garbage can" for the rest of the world.

The former president also cast his criminal indictments as a political attack, vowing "retribution" against perceived enemies and embracing increasingly dystopian rhetoric.

Adapted from *The Guardian*November 2024
(454 words)

DRAKE ACCUSES UNIVERSAL MUSIC OF BOOSTING A KENDRICK LAMAR SONG

Drake's war of words with Kendrick Lamar, through a vicious back-and-forth of diss tracks, generated some of the biggest headlines in rap this year.

And now it has landed in court.

On Monday, lawyers for Drake filed legal papers in New York and Texas accusing the Universal Music Group – the giant record company behind both rappers – of operating an elaborate scheme to promote Lamar's "Not Like Us" at the expense of Drake's music, using bots to drive up clicks on streaming services and payola to influence radio stations.

In a separate filing, lawyers for Drake said they were considering a defamation claim against Universal over Lamar's "Not Like Us," the hit song that represented the climax of Drake and Lamar's rap war.

Both documents were not full legal complaints, but instead preliminary steps to obtain further information, which could lead to lawsuits in the future. The New York filing, described as a petition, named Spotify in addition to Universal; the Texas document added the radio giant iHeartMedia.

Much of Drake's petition in New York focuses on streaming, saying that Universal gave Spotify a reduction from its standard licensing fee for streams of "Not Like Us." But the petition made scant reference to evidence to support the accusations. The document cites a YouTube video featuring an interview with an unnamed man who claims that Lamar's label, Interscope – a division of Universal – "paid him via third parties to use 'bots" to boost the plays of "Not Like Us."

Both documents say that Universal orchestrated a radio payola campaign through third-party promoters. But the Texas petition – filed near the corporate offices of iHeartMedia, the largest radio station owner in the United States – said that Drake "has been unable to confirm whether any iHeartRadio stations were among the stations" that it says Universal paid.

In response to Drake's filing in New York, a spokesman for Universal Music said in a statement: "The suggestion that UMG would do anything to undermine any of its artists is offensive and untrue. We employ the highest ethical practices in our marketing and promotional campaigns. No amount of contrived and absurd legal arguments in this pre-action submission can mask the fact that fans choose the music they want to hear."

The feud between Lamar and Drake exploded through a series of back-and-forth tracks released this spring, which grew increasingly harsh.

Lamar's "Not Like Us," would be the biggest hit in the feud, generating millions of clicks on Spotify around the world, far more than any of Drake's tracks. "Not Like Us" went to No. 1 and was recently nominated for Grammy Awards for both record and song of the year.

Adapted from *New York Times* November 2024 (441 words)

DROP-OFF IN DEMOCRATIC VOTES IGNITES CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON LEFT AND RIGHT

When President-elect Donald J. Trump was announced the winner of this year's presidential contest, the vote tallies suggested a sharp drop in Democratic votes compared to 2020. Some Republicans saw this as evidence of fraud in the 2020 election, claiming that Democrats had fabricated millions of votes, despite repeated confirmation from election officials, audits, and courts that no wrongdoing occurred.

The shortfall also set off doubts on the left. Hundreds of thousands of social media posts urged Vice President Kamala Harris not to concede over fears that millions of votes were "missing," despite federal agencies assuring the public that the election was secure. Though it is unusual for opposing sides to create conspiracy theories from the same material, both Democrats and Republicans have fixated on Democrats' underperformance this year. This online narrative highlights how election fraud claims appeal to partisans facing electoral defeat, with social media amplifying these ideas, despite clear evidence that they lack merit.

Despite election-day complications, Jen Easterly, director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, confirmed there was "no evidence of any malicious activity" that impacted election integrity. As more votes were counted, estimates suggested 157.6 million votes were cast this year, down 700,000 from 2020. The gap between Trump and Harris has continued to narrow as more votes are counted in left-leaning states like California, Washington, and Oregon, which take longer to process mail ballots.

On the right, the conspiracy theory gained traction through conservative commentary. On an election night livestream, Fox News host Tucker Carlson, with millions of views, claimed that the 2020 election had been stolen. "Now I'm totally convinced it was stolen," he said. A far-right post on X, with over three million followers, shared a manipulated chart exaggerating Democratic turnout by manipulating the axis. This post was viewed nearly two million times, contributing to the viral spread of misinformation.

Meanwhile, the left's conspiracy theories centered around interference from Russia or bomb threats at polling sites in swing states. Many left-wing posts echoed the 2020 claims, with some suggesting that large crowd sizes at Harris rallies showed greater Democratic enthusiasm, though experts note crowd sizes are not reliable predictors of election turnout.

The hashtag #DoNotConcedeKamala trended on X, with over 650,000 mentions. In one post, Dean Obeidallah, a SiriusXM host, called for an investigation into potential fraud by Trump and Elon Musk.

Despite these conspiracy theories, fears that they would develop into a larger movement were tempered by Democratic leaders, who widely accepted the results. Harris conceded the race, and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries reaffirmed that Democrats would honor the results and support free and fair elections.

Adapted from *The New York Times*, November 2024 (450 words)

DYSLEXIA CAN ACTUALLY BE AN ADVANTAGE FOR RESEARCHERS

Many people may think of dyslexia as a reading difficulty [...] For years, I thought that too. But as a dyslexic academic [...] wrangling with academic norms, I've realised that dyslexia isn't just a barrier. It's also a unique and undervalued cognitive strength.

There's growing evidence that dyslexic minds bring something crucial to academic spaces. They offer a different way of thinking that sometimes gives them a competitive advantage. Dyslexic thinkers are notably strong in creativity, visual-spatial reasoning [...] and holistic processing [...]. Dyslexic people frequently come up with innovative ideas, forging connections between seemingly unrelated concepts, and tackling problems from unconventional angles.

This creative cognitive style has the potential to not only facilitate breakthroughs in research but also enrich our understanding of complex issues, offering fresh perspectives that can drive meaningful change. My research explores how dyslexic thinking can enrich qualitative research. This [..] research [...] doesn't rely solely on numbers but digs into people's stories, experiences and complexities.

Academia often fails to recognise dyslexics' advantage in this area. Instead, people like myself are squeezed into neurotypical boxes that frankly feel suffocating. Academia is an environment that rewards linear thinking, attention to detail and quick reading and writing skills. It's designed for people who think in straight lines, not loops.

But many dyslexic minds don't work that way. Our strength lies in seeing the bigger picture, connecting seemingly unrelated ideas, and thinking outside the [...] box. Yet, the way academia is structured often marginalises these strengths.

[...] Academia [...] still operates on the medical model of disability. This views dyslexia as a personal deficit that must be "fixed" through accommodations. [...] But the social model of disability argues that people aren't disabled by their conditions but by societal barriers. [...] The problem isn't the way we think, but academia's refusal to adapt to diverse ways of processing information. For example, academia's reliance on written assessments stifles dyslexic strengths like visual-spatial reasoning and creativity. Imagine how much more dynamic research could be if it went further in embracing visual presentations, multimedia formats or collaborative projects.

It's no longer enough for universities to tout diversity initiatives while continuing to enforce structures that work against neurodivergent thinkers. They [...] should actively create environments where neurodiverse people are not just accommodated but celebrated for their unique contributions.

[...] Dyslexia could revolutionise research – particularly in fields requiring creativity and complexity. Isn't research supposed to be about the unique problem-solving approaches and out-of-the-box thinking that dyslexics offer? The world faces complex problems that won't be solved by rigid, linear thinking. Academia needs minds that can [...] offer fresh perspectives. Dyslexic thinkers are already doing this – we just need academia to recognise it.

Adapted from *The Conversation*November 2024
(443 words)

EARLIEST AUTUMN FLOODING IN MEMORY SAY VILLAGERS

Residents of a Cambridgeshire village said they had never known one of the main routes out of it to flood in early autumn. The [...] Earith causeway, alongside the River Great Ouse, is a well-known flood location, but villagers told the BBC it was being closed more often in the year. Long-term residents said flooding was normally an issue in other seasons, with one saying the road closure had a "huge financial and educational impact on families".

The county council has been forced to shut a number of other routes that usually flood in winter, urging people to take precautions in the wet weather.

Stacey Buchanan, 34, has lived in the village, north of Cambridge, for 15 years. She has a 10-year-old daughter she needs to get to school on the other side of the flooded road. "My daughter and I will be cycling through the flooded road, which has a huge safety implication. She goes to the school in the village of Over and I work for the NHS. Call me a bad parent, but she needs an education. I have another child at home who is refusing to go to school because he would face a 90-minute diversion. The time he gets in, he'd have missed a big chunk of the day. I have had enough of living here. I'll be looking to sell-up next year, although the house price will be dropping no doubt because of this situation."

A seventy-year-old [woman], who has lived in Earith for 44 years, said: "The gates were closed over the weekend, and it might be shut here for some time with more rain forecast. It was shut four times last winter, which is unusual. It's normally an issue in winter and spring once or twice a year. Traffic [...] gets gridlocked with diversions. It really does cause havoc locally when it's flooded, which is happening more and now sooner than normal."

Another resident [...] said she would not recommend walking through a closed, flooded road, but she said with the depth of about 30cm [...] she was happy to do so at her own risk, to avoid a big diversion. "I know the area well and when I can't see the grass on the verge I wouldn't do it, but what else can you do? The current is pretty fast too, so it is not really advisable".

[...] The government's flood warnings state that river levels remain high [...]. It has urged people to take care on riverside roads and footpaths and to "not put yourself in unnecessary danger".

Scientists say many extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and intense as a result of climate change.

Adapted from *BBC News, Cambridgeshire*October 2024
(455 words)

EARTH IS BECOMING 'INCREASINGLY UNINHABITABLE,' SCIENTISTS WARN

Earth is becoming "increasingly uninhabitable" as the planet continues to warm due to climate change. A group of 80 researchers from 45 countries is warning this week of global challenges driven by human-made emissions.

Those challenges include surging methane emission levels, continued air pollution, intense heat and humidity, increasing health risks exacerbated by climate extremes, concerns about global climate patterns, threats to biodiversity and the Amazon, impacts to infrastructure, and more.

"This report confirms that the world faces planetary scale challenges... yet it also provides clear pathways and solutions, demonstrating that with urgent, decisive action, we still can avoid unmanageable outcomes," the researchers wrote. [...] They said that climate-warming is increasing natural methane emissions, making cuts to human emissions more urgent. Methane, a powerful greenhouse gas that is emitted during the production of coal, natural gas, and oil, and by the agriculture industry and landfills, is the second-largest contributor to climate warming after carbon dioxide. Methane levels are surging, driven primarily by human activities. [...]

The report said that reductions in air pollution have aided public health in several regions. But, at the same time, changes in the amount of airborne particles in the atmosphere have reduced the cooling effect these particles have on the climate. Some particles can reflect sunlight, helping to cool the atmosphere. "Further reduction of anthropogenic aerosol emissions will reduce health impacts and directly save lives, and is beneficial for climate and the environment," the report said. [...]

This could be Earth's hottest year and increasingly warm and humid weather is making more of the planet unlivable, with 600 million people living outside habitable climatic conditions. With each degree of warming in the future, an estimated 10 percent of Earth's population will join them. [...]

Pregnant women, infants, and unborn children are also facing increased risks from climate extremes, like heat and flooding. Those living in high levels of poverty and "entrenched" gender norms that prevent women from changing practices that could expose them to those conditions are disproportionately affected. [...]

The scientists say critical human infrastructure is also increasingly exposed and vulnerable to hazards, suggesting artificial intelligence could help enhance resilience. Perhaps most worryingly, the scientists highlighted "heightened concerns" about large-scale ocean and atmosphere interactions, including concerns about more extreme and costly climate patterns and the collapse of a critical system of currents that circulates water within the Atlantic Ocean, bringing warm water north and cold water south.

Recently, scientists alerted that the circulation's collapse could be much sooner than previously estimated, with "potentially catastrophic consequences" like widespread droughts, floods, and plummeting temperatures in Europe. "The consequences for global climate, weather patterns, and human well-being would be severe," the report said.

Adapted from *The Independent*October 2024
(454 words)

ELON MUSK IS CAUSING PROBLEMS FOR THE ROYAL SOCIETY

Isaac Newton was a self-interested tyrant. James Watson, a Nobel laureate, spouted racist and sexist notions all his life. These men nevertheless managed to keep hold of one of the British scientific establishment's highest baubles – fellowship of the Royal Society, the oldest scientific academy in the world. The latest member of that club to be accused of unbecoming behaviour is Elon Musk, the richest man in the world and, now, a confidant of President-elect Donald Trump. His continued inclusion – despite what some other scientists have called "anti-scientific" behaviour – has led to a fracas.

The situation came to a head in November 2024 when Dr Bishop, a renowned neuropsychologist at the University of Oxford, announced that she had taken the rare step of resigning from the society in protest at its refusal to oust him.

Mr Musk was elected to the Royal Society in 2018 along with 49 other fellows. Although not a scientist himself, he was honoured for his extensive record of technological innovation: SpaceX, his space-travel company, delivers more material into orbit than any rival, public or private; Tesla, another of his firms, has pioneered the manufacture of electric vehicles.

As transformative as his business endeavours have been, it is his behaviour on X, the social-media company he owns, that troubles Dr Bishop and her sympathisers. "He seems to have moved to a position of being blatantly anti-science," she says, which sits uneasily with the requirement imposed on fellows to uphold high standards in their work and conduct. In her blog post she highlights his "downplaying" of climate change, occasional amplification of vaccination hesitancy, and his persistent attacks on individual scientists. [...]

She is not alone in her concerns. In August a group of 74 fellows, including Dr Bishop, sent a letter to the Royal Society's governing body expressing their hope that Mr Musk would be removed after making what they regarded as inflammatory comments on X about the summer's riots in Britain. The society later informed the signatories that its lawyer had not found Mr Musk to have broken its code of conduct.

For its part the society says it is saddened by Dr Bishop's resignation, but reiterates the need to follow procedure. [...] To Dr Bishop, Mr Musk's political power and social-media reach make this a much more serious affair. But even if others were to follow her lead, a handful of voluntary resignations from among the society's 1,800-odd members may not produce the desired momentum. If the society did expel Mr Musk, it would need to prepare for accusations of political bias and, potentially, a lawsuit. It does not take the most dazzling minds in science to spot those warning signs.

Adapted from *The Economist* November 2024 (445 words)

ELON MUSK'S JOURNEY FROM HUMANITARIAN TO POSTER OF RIGHTWING MEMES

Once, the chief executive of one of the world's largest companies approvingly sharing a fabricated headline published by the leadership of a fascist party would have been news. For Elon Musk, it was just Thursday.

Unusually for Musk, his post, a retweet of the Britain First co-leader Ashlea Simon sharing a fake Telegraph headline about detainment camps in the Falkland Islands for the English rioters, was deleted shortly after being sent. In the 30 minutes it was live on X, the social media site formerly known as Twitter that he bought in 2022, it managed to rack up almost 2m views.

Since the unrest across Britain began last week, Musk's outspoken criticism of the government has surprised many. But it's only the latest example of the billionaire's progression down the radicalisation pathway.

After making his fortune in the dotcom boom, and growing it with his involvement in PayPal, Musk invested in Tesla in 2004, eventually becoming the company's chief executive. For a time, Musk presented himself as one may have expected from a former software executive running an electric vehicle company: he spoke at length about the risk of climate change, while launching and investing in other projects like SpaceX, OpenAl and The Boring Company that could all be sold as matching a general vision of improving humanity's future.

But around 2020, Musk's public profile began to shift. He had always been a fairly engaged user of Twitter, but as the pandemic hit, he became a far more frequent poster and experienced his first brushes with the world of fact-checking: breezy assertions about the danger or length of the pandemic led to calls for his account to be suspended for spreading misinformation.

In his private life, Musk's relationships with his family were in turmoil. His relationship with Claire Boucher, better known as the musician Grimes, began to fall apart in 2021. Boucher, the mother of three of his at least 12 children, eventually ended up in court over custody rights.

According to his biographer, Walter Isaacson, around this period, Musk began sending "right-wing memes and conspiracy theories" to Grimes, who replied: "Is this from 4chan or something? You're actually starting to sound like someone from the far right."

At the same time, his daughter Vivian came out as transgender and changed her name, declaring that she no longer wanted to "be related to my biological father in any way, shape, or form."

Musk himself has cited Vivian as a reason for his political shift, telling the pop psychologist Jordan Peterson that he had "lost [his] son [sic], essentially", and concluding that his son "is dead, killed by the woke mind virus". [...]

Adapted from www.theguardian.com August 2024 (454 words)

EVERYONE WANTS TAYLOR SWIFT'S VOTE. BUT CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENTS ARE COMPLICATED.

There's been a lot of wishful thinking lately about who Taylor Swift might endorse for President. [...] And Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump reposted an Al-generated image of the pop star wearing an Uncle Sam outfit, in which he accepted her seeming endorsement of his campaign. The post appeared on the politician's Truth Social network earlier this week. (He's since denied he knows anything about the images.)

In reality, Swift has not endorsed Trump or any other candidate in this election cycle so far. But other celebrities have already come out in support of Harris and Trump in the run-up to the November election. [...]

Celebrity endorsements are as much a thing in politics as they are in consumer products. "Celebrities draw increased engagement, increased attention, and they increase conversation," said Ashley Spillane, the author of a new study from Harvard's Kennedy School on celebrity engagement in politics — focusing on civic participation. "And no matter the political party or the candidate, there is a real hunger to be affiliated with the celebrities that can do that."

Spillane said her research shows you don't have to be a star as big as Swift to influence voters. "Some of the other folks with a smaller base were having just as significant an impact because they have an incredibly engaged base of support as well," she said.

There's a long history of big names throwing their weight behind White House hopefuls. [...] Frank Sinatra explained his support of future president Ronald Reagan at a fundraising event in Boston in 1979. "Why do I support Governor Reagan?" Sinatra said. "Because I think he's the proper man to be President of the United States. Because it's so screwed up now, we need someone to straighten it out."

But other research tells a different story. For instance, a 2010 report from North Carolina State University found celebrity endorsements by George Clooney and Angelina Jolie did not help political candidates. And having famous people cheerleading for your political campaign isn't foolproof. "It could backfire," said Wharton School of Business professor of neuroscience, psychology, and marketing Michael Platt, the author of a 2023 study on celebrity endorsement. "Maybe it's a celebrity that you don't like or is not aligned with you politically." There's also the potential problem of the celebrity being *too* famous. Platt calls this the "Vampire Effect." "They suck up all our attention, right?" he said. "Which means there's less attention, less processing, that's given to the candidate that you might be endorsing."

The rise of social media and deep-fakes created by artificial intelligence, such as those of Swift falsely appearing to endorse Trump, is also an issue.

Adapted from *NPR* November 2024 (452 words)

FACING SKEPTICISM, ELON MUSK UNVEILS PROTOTYPE FOR DRIVERLESS ROBOTAXI

Tesla Chief Executive Elon Musk presented a lofty vision for the future Thursday night, unveiling prototypes of a self-driving taxi and van that he said would revolutionize travel and claiming the electric car company would put fully autonomous vehicles on the road by next year.

At an event on the Warner Bros. Studios lot in Burbank, Musk rolled out examples of what he dubbed the Cybercab. The futuristic, metallic silver vehicles lacked steering wheels, pedals and rearview mirrors. Invited guests took short rides around the studio's closed roads.

A lot is riding on the Cybercab for Musk, who has been selling unfulfilled promises of autonomous vehicles for years. While Tesla's sales of its signature electric cars stumbled early in 2024, the company has an \$800-billion market capitalization built largely on the expectation that it will be able to overtake competitors to dominate the burgeoning robotaxi market. Whether Tesla is anywhere close to completing its push to develop the technology needed to do so, however, remains an open question. [...]

"Investors have clearly been very excited about this for many years even though Tesla hasn't delivered on it," said Sam Abuelsamid, a transportation analyst at Guidehouse Insights.

"Tesla's valuation is much higher relative to their revenues and their profits and that is almost entirely based on the presumption that they will suddenly start generating mountains of new profits," he said.

Musk also unveiled the Robovan on Thursday night, a self-driving vehicle that can transport goods or up to 20 people. And he topped off his highly-produced event with a demonstration of a humanoid robot named Optimus, several of which performed dance moves for the crowd or served drinks.

The event, which the company called "We, Robot," made clear that Musk has ambitions for the future that go beyond transportation. Speaking to the invite-only crowd and those watching online, he conjured up a world where every family has an Optimus robot capable of doing the grocery shopping, babysitting and watering the plants. The automated labor, he said, would make goods and services less expensive and more accessible.

"It will be an age of abundance, the likes of which almost no one has envisioned," Musk told the crowd.

While some viewed the event as a proof of concept for Musk's robotaxi, others were far more skeptical, saying it was all show and no substance.

"Having a prototype vehicle says nothing about whether a company has developed the hardware and software necessary to safely operate that vehicle without a human driver," said Bryant Walker Smith, an associate professor of law at the University of South Carolina who specializes in emerging transportation technology.

Adapted from Los Angeles Times October 2024 (447 words)

FEDERAL AGENCIES 'AWARE' OF BLACK AMERICANS RECEIVING RACIST TEXTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Communications Commission said Thursday they were each "aware" of racist and alarming text messages being sent to recipients, many of whom are Black college students, in the wake of the presidential election.

"The FBI is aware of the offensive and racist text messages sent to individuals around the country and is in contact with the Justice Department and other federal authorities on the matter," the agency said in a statement on Thursday. The agency recommends that the public report threats of violence to them. [...]

The texts told recipients in varying ways that they were selected for slavery and required to pick cotton at a plantation. One message in particular [...] said: "You have been selected to pick cotton at the nearest plantation. Be ready at 12 pm sharp with your belongings. Our executive slaves will come get you in a brown van. Be prepared to be searched down once you've entered the plantation. You are in plantation group W."

It's unclear who exactly sent the messages or how, but some messages claimed to come from supporters of President-elect Donald Trump, USA Today reported. The messages have been reported in at least Nevada, Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Virginia, New York, California, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

[...]

Margaret Huang, president and CEO of Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit advocacy organization, called the messages "a public spectacle of hatred and racism that makes a mockery of our civil rights history. [...] Hate speech has no place in the South or in our nation. [...] Leaders at all levels must condemn anti-Black racism, in any form, whenever we see it – and we must follow our words with actions that advance racial justice, and build an inclusive democracy where every person feels safe and welcome in their community."

Outside of the FBI and FCC, some non-federal officials have publicly condemned the messages. Representatives for the Virginia attorney general's office and the Washington, D.C., attorney general's office each, respectively, told CNN they are "aware" of the messages and "condemn" them.

New York Attorney General Letitia James told recipients in New York to use the "Civil Rights & Discrimination" complaint form if they receive the "despicable" messages. Clemson University Police Department in South Carolina confirmed in a statement Thursday that [...] "these numbers have been determined to be associated with online spoofing sites. CUPD is actively investigating the matter and working with state partners to identify the source of the messages," the statement continued. "Based on the information available, there is currently no indication of a credible threat to members of the University community."

Adapted from *Huffpost* November 2024 (450 words)

FLAG FOOTBALL RAPIDLY CATCHING ON IN UK

Flag football, a non-contact version of American football, is rapidly gaining popularity in the UK, with participation numbers expected to reach 100,000 by 2026. This growth is driven by an energetic campaign from the NFL, encouraging young people in Britain to try the sport, which offers a less violent alternative to rugby and full-contact American football.

School PE teachers report increased interest, fueled by rising global exposure and concerns over the risk of brain injuries in traditional contact sports. This year, 343 schools entered the UK NFL Flag National Championship, a 78% increase compared to the previous year. Jay Taylor, who founded the Fruit Bats flag football club in London, said, "Flag football has a chance of sticking here, because there is nothing like it." [...]

The sport's profile has been boosted further by its inclusion in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics and the NFL's decision to switch its Pro Bowl match from full contact to flag football. [...] This shift underscores the growing appeal of the sport, which is being embraced by more schools and communities across the UK.

Flag football is played with five to seven players per team, who wear shorts, T-shirts, and trainers instead of full protective gear. Instead of tackling players, defenders pull a flag from the ball carrier's belt. This safer approach addresses growing concerns about brain injuries linked to contact sports. The principles of the game mirror traditional American football, with teams advancing the ball through pre-planned plays while the defense tries to stop them. [...]

The Fruit Bats already have 70 players aged 14 and under. Compared with soccer, which is played by more than 3.3 million children, the chances of success are higher. A significant draw appears to be the NFL's annual invitation to the best school teams to compete in an international tournament in Florida.

The NFL has supported the expansion by offering balls and flag belts, and teams like the Jacksonville Jaguars and Chicago Bears are also promoting the sport in the UK.

Jacob and Leia, both 11, are members of the Little Ealing primary school team that won the national title and are preparing for the NFL Flag World Championships in Florida. "You need to be able to jump high, get into space, and dodge players," said Leia. Jacob added, "You need to really understand what you are doing." [...]

PE teacher Bobby Behzadi noted the wide range of skills needed, from speed to strategic thinking. "It's a game of cat and mouse," he said. "There's a lot of decision-making, and people who might not be the fastest runner can play quarterback."

Adapted from *The Guardian*August 2024
(452 words)

FLORIDA SCHOOLS PULLED HUNDREDS OF BOOKS LAST YEAR

Florida school districts axed about 700 books from school libraries in the 2023-2024 school year, according to a Florida Department of Education list. PEN America, a free speech advocacy group, estimates that over 4,500 books have been removed from Florida school libraries since July 2021. [...]

The book removals follow a law that allows parents or local residents to push for the removal of any book that "depicts or describes sexual content" or is "pornographic." The office of Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has previously said the law "protects children from indoctrination" and gives parents "the ability to object to inappropriate materials."

Florida has been at the forefront of a national clash over how race, history and sexuality can be taught in school. In August, a group of major publishers, authors and parents sued Florida education officials, alleging that the law that allows local residents to limit what books are available in school libraries violates the First Amendment.

Kasey Meehan, a spokesperson for PEN America, told The Washington Post the list proves books are being banned in Florida – which the state's Department of Education has repeatedly denied and calls the "book ban hoax."

"We are concerned that narrow, ideological viewpoints are having an outsized influence to remove access to books that are critical for students in schools," Meehan said. "These books offer students an opportunity to see themselves and also learn and empathize with others."

Sydney Booker, a spokesperson for the state's Department of Education, told The Post that the book removals from school libraries do not constitute a ban.

"There are no books banned in Florida, and sexually explicit materials do not belong in schools," she wrote in a statement. "Once again, far left activists are pushing the book ban hoax on Floridians. The better question is why do these activists continue to fight to expose children to sexually explicit materials."

Books with LGBTQ+ characters, such as "Gender Queer" and "All Boys Aren't Blue," were removed in some districts. Books that feature themes of teenage depression and sexual assault, including "Thirteen Reasons Why" were also removed in some districts.

The graphic novel adaptations of Anne Frank's diary and George Orwell's "1984" were also removed in some districts, as were multiple works by horror writer Stephen King.

One way for books to be removed from school shelves under Florida law: Parents and local residents can read aloud passages from books they seek to challenge at school board meetings, and if the board halts the reading because of explicit content, the school must "discontinue use of the material." [...]

Adapted from *The Washington Post* November 2024 (457 words)

FREE 24-HOUR DIGITAL DETOX

Haunted by a pile of unread books or by your climbing equipment lurking in the cupboard? If you are one of the UK adults who spends on average five hours a day looking at screens rather than participating in pastimes, perhaps it's time to join the offline revolution. Instead of spending those five hours staring at a screen, you could indeed read about 300 pages of a book or walk up Mount Snowdon in Wales. [...]

On Sunday, more than 1,000 people have pledged to take back control of their downtime and go on a 24-hour digital detox. The event is run by the Offline Club, which says its mission is to "swap screen time for real time". Those who have signed up will be invited to a Zoom call on Saturday where they will be given tips and tricks to survive the next day without the internet.

Philip, 33, a manager from Rotterdam, is among those taking part. Between working behind a desk all day and coming home to watch TV and "doomscroll" on social media, he can spend up to 14 hours a day looking at a screen. "I want more face-to-face interaction and more going outside instead of doomscrolling on social media and seeing what other people are doing in their so-called "perfect lives", he said. […]

Grace, 38, a community manager from Barcelona, is also going offline on Sunday. She would like the digital detox to become a recurring event, in the vein of Earth Hour where people are encouraged to give 60 minutes to the planet by turning off non-essential lights. [...] She has already begun making small changes. When she goes to dinner with a friend, her phone does not leave her purse and she is also using an old-fashioned alarm clock instead of relying on her phone to wake her, thus avoiding early morning emails or WhatsApp messages. She hopes to finally read some books, improve her sleep and get into the habit of responding to others less frequently.

The Offline Club held its first "digital detox hangout" in Amsterdam in February. In the months since, the company has already expanded into Paris, Dubai and London. In these clubhouses, phones are locked away and those attending are encouraged to interact with each other. Sunday marks the club's first attempt at a mass mobilization to get people offline.

The founders of the Offline Club, said people have been surprised at how just a few hours offline "made them feel so much less stressed and more connected to themselves and to others" [...] They would like to see phone free spaces in cities and maybe phone free holidays.

Adapted from *The Guardian* September 2024 (450 words)

FREE SCHOOL MEALS SUPPORTING 'CALMER BEHAVIOUR' AMONG LONDON CHILDREN, REPORT FINDS

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan's decision to fund free lunches for every primary school child in London has brought "significant benefits" for the capital's children, parents and schools, an independent report has confirmed. The research, published on Tuesday, found that as well as alleviating cost of living pressures, the policy "appears to be supporting calmer behaviour in the classroom".

The findings were welcomed by the mayor, but they will also raise fresh questions over the future funding of the scheme. The programme provided meals to 287,000 children in its first year, at a cost of £135m. It is currently in its second year, with the cost having risen to £140m. Mr Khan promised in his recent re-election manifesto to "make the provision of universal free school meals permanent, ensuring no child in our state primary schools will go hungry". [...] He launched the scheme in 2023 as a one-year emergency measure to help families with the cost of living, paid for using higher than expected business rate receipts. [...]

The independent report states: "We found the policy had greater benefits for families who were living in poverty or living on low income but more affluent families were also strongly in favour of the policy, as they felt it acted as a leveller at school". It adds however: "School food costs are just one of many costs families face, including increased utilities and housing costs. Families have also noticed other school-related costs continuing to rise. This has diluted the financial effects of the policy for some families."

Looking at the impact on pupils' performance in school, the report says that the policy "appears to be supporting calmer behaviour in the classroom, with school staff reporting afternoon lessons running more smoothly when children have had a hot, healthy meal". Pupils, families and school staff are all said to have "noticed differences related to concentration, engagement and energy levels, which are considered crucial building blocks for learning". [...]

Mr Khan said: "Delivering free school meals has been one of my proudest policies as mayor, and it is hugely encouraging to hear how it is supporting families struggling with the cost of living, improving the health and wellbeing of children, and positively impacting school communities. That's why I have made the historic decision to make free schools meals permanent in London for as long as I am mayor. I will continue to do all I can to support Londoners as we continue to build a fairer and healthier London for everyone."

Adapted from *standard.co.uk* November 2024 (441 words)

'FRIGHTENING' TALIBAN LAW BANS WOMEN FROM SPEAKING IN PUBLIC

New Taliban laws that prohibit women from speaking or showing their faces outside their homes have been condemned by the UN and met with horror by human rights groups.

The Taliban published a host of new "vice and virtue" laws last week, approved by their supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, which state that women must completely veil their bodies – including their faces – in thick clothing at all times in public to avoid leading men into temptation and vice.

Women's voices are also deemed to be potential instruments of vice and so will not be allowed to be heard in public under the new restrictions. Women must also not be heard singing or reading aloud, even from inside their houses. [...]

Men will also be required to cover their bodies from their navels to their knees when they are outside their homes.

From now on, Afghan women are also not allowed to look directly at men they are not related to by blood or marriage, and taxi drivers will be punished if they agree to drive a woman who is without a suitable male escort. [...]

The restrictions have been condemned by Roza Otunbayeva, the special UN's representative for Afghanistan, who has said they extend the "intolerable restrictions" on the rights of women and girls already imposed by the Taliban since they took power in August 2021. "It is a distressing vision for Afghanistan's future, where moral inspectors have discretionary powers to threaten and detain anyone based on broad and sometimes vague lists of infractions," she said in a statement on Sunday. "It extends the already intolerable restrictions on the rights of Afghan women and girls, with even the sound of a female voice outside the home apparently deemed a moral violation." [...]

"The Taliban government does not have any sort of legitimacy and these new edicts designed to further erase and suppress woman are an indication of their hatred towards women," says Fawzia Koofi, an Afghan human rights activist who was the first woman vice-president of the Afghan parliament. [...]

In the three years since seizing power from the US-backed government, the Taliban have imposed what human rights groups are calling a "gender apartheid", excluding women and girls from almost every aspect of public life and denying them access to the justice system.

Prior to the new "vice and virtue" laws, women and girls were already blocked from attending secondary school; banned from almost every form of paid employment; prevented from walking in public parks, attending gyms or beauty salons; and told to comply with a strict dress code.

Earlier this year, the Taliban also announced the reintroduction of the public flogging and stoning of women for adultery.

The Taliban have been approached for comment.

Adapted from *The Guardian*August 2024
(451 words)

FROM 'HIMFLUENCERS' TO TOXIC MASCULINITY: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS SHAPING YOUNG MEN

What does it mean to be a 'real man'? To some, masculinity is defined by stereotypical traits including being physically strong, being the 'breadwinner' of a family, and constantly acting tough. To others, these ideas are toxic and negatively impact society as a whole.

In the age of social media, young men are grappling with manhood and masculinity, and the internet can drive both positive connections and dangerous ideas. According to a new report from Australia's eSafety Commissioner, the internet can be a place of tensions, complexities and possibilities for young men. The research examined the online experiences of young men in Australia aged 16 to 21 years old and explored how they express their identities, explore sexuality, and navigate social connections online. Researchers said ideas about gender can both empower and limit young men, and those who strive to enact masculine stereotypes can end up harming themselves and others. [...]

"There's constant pressure for young men to conform to particular, often narrow and traditional, ideals about manhood," eSafety commissioner Julie Inman Grant said. [...] Young men are facing an online wave of influencing behaviours, including harmful content. [...] The report found Andrew Tate, a social media personality and self-described misogynist, continues to be a key figure in many young men's worlds. [...] Tate creates content based on male empowerment and being an 'alpha male', and promotes stereotypical ideas around gender roles and masculinity.

Dr Zac Seidler, the global director for Men's Health Research at Movember, believes a different approach is needed [...] "Young men have a vacuum of role models, they have a vacuum of connection and belonging ... there is a lack of that type of feeling of 'I belong somewhere' and that's what these voices are offering," he said. "We should, as male progressive voices, be able to find a way to connect with young men in a similar fashion, but they're just addicted to this transgressive, vitriolic narrative."

While social media can negatively impact young men, the eSafety Commisioner's report also identified some benefits. Young men in the research spoke about the positive role that online communities play in their lives, especially in terms of their sense of belonging and acceptance. But online spaces, such as gaming communities, can also be a place of hostility including abuse, racism and homophobia. Many said they had altered their personality or behaviour online to fit in with others.

[...] "Practitioners across education, research, policy, practice and industry should work individually and together to delve deeper into nurturing young men's health and wellbeing, as well as their capacity for compassion, empathy and critical thinking."

Adapted from SBS News June 2024 (440 words)

GOOGLE UNVEILS 'MINDBOGGLING' QUANTUM COMPUTING CHIP

It measures just 4cm squared but it possesses almost inconceivable speed. Google has built a computing chip that takes just five minutes to complete tasks that would take [10 septillion years] for some of the world's fastest conventional computers to complete, [...] a number that far exceeds the age of our known universe and has the scientists behind the latest quantum computing breakthrough reaching for a distinctly non-technical term: "mindboggling".

The new chip, called Willow and made in the California beach town of Santa Barbara, is about the dimensions of an After Eight mint, and could supercharge the creation of new drugs by greatly speeding up the experimental phase of development. Reports of its performance follow a flurry of results since 2021 that suggest we are only about five years away from quantum computing becoming powerful enough to start transforming humankind's capabilities to research and develop new materials from drugs to batteries, one independent UK expert said. Governments around the world are pouring tens of billions of dollars into research. Significantly, Willow is claimed to be far less prone to error than previous versions and could swell the potential of the already fast-developing field of artificial intelligence.

Quantum computing – which harnesses the discovery that matter can exist in multiple states at once – is predicted to have the power to carry out far bigger calculations than previously possible and so hasten the creation of nuclear fusion reactors and accelerate the impact of artificial intelligence, notably in medical science. For example, it could allow MRI scans to be read in atom-level detail, unlocking new caches of data about human bodies and disease for AI to process, Google said. But there are also fears that without guardrails, the technology has the power to crack even the most sophisticated encryption, undermining computer security.

Google Quantum AI is one of numerous groups wrestling with how to harness the computing power of quantum mechanics including Microsoft, Harvard University and Quantinuum, a firm with UK links. A key problem is reducing the fragility of quantum chips as even microscopic material defects, cosmic rays and ionising radiation tend to knock them off course.

"Quantum processors are peeling away at a double exponential rate and will continue to vastly outperform classical computers as we scale up," said [...] the founder of the firm. [He] said that the latest test results, published on Monday in Nature magazine, "cracks a key challenge in quantum error correction that the field has pursued for almost 30 years".

He said the far greater speed of the new chip than classical computers "lends credence to the notion that quantum computation occurs in many parallel universes, in line with the idea that we live in a multiverse". [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian*December 2024
(456 words)

GOOGLE'S GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS ARE SOARING THANKS TO AI

As Google has rushed to incorporate artificial intelligence into its core products, a problem has been brewing behind the scenes: the systems needed to power its AI tools have vastly increased the company's greenhouse gas emissions.

The end result has been that Google's greenhouse gas emissions have soared 48% since 2019, according to the tech giant's annual environment report. The tech giant blamed that growth mainly on "increased data center energy consumption."

Now, Google is calling its goal to reach net-zero emissions by 2030 "extremely ambitious." In other words: a sustainability push by the company – which once included the slogan "don't be evil" in its code of conduct – has gotten more complicated thanks to Al.

Google, like other tech rivals, has gone all-in on investing in AI, which is widely seen as the next major tech revolution that's poised to change how we live, work and consume information. The company has integrated its Gemini generative AI technology into some of its core products and CEO Sundar Pichai has called Google an "AI-first company."

But AI comes with a major downside: the power-hungry data centers that Big Tech companies are currently spending tens of billions of dollars each quarter to expand in order to fuel their AI ambitions.

Illustrating just how much more demanding AI models are than traditional computing systems, the International Energy Agency estimates that a Google search query requires 0.3 watt-hours of electricity on average, while a ChatGPT request typically consumes about 2.9 watt-hours. An October study from Dutch researcher Alex de Vries estimated that the "worstcase scenario" suggests Google's AI systems could eventually consume as much electricity as the country of Ireland each year, assuming a full-scale adoption of AI in their current hardware and software.

"As we further integrate AI into our products, reducing emissions may be challenging due to increasing energy demands and the emissions associated with the expected increases in our technical infrastructure investment," Google said in its report, published Monday.

Google said it expects its total greenhouse gas emissions to continue to rise before falling, as the company seeks to invest in clean energy sources, such as wind and geothermal energy, to power its data centers.

Google is also among companies experimenting with ways to use AI to fight climate change. A 2019 Google DeepMind project trained an AI model on weather forecasts and historical wind turbine data to predict the availability of wind power, helping to increase the value of the renewable energy source for wind farmers.

"We know that scaling AI and using it to accelerate climate action is just as crucial as addressing the environmental impact associated with it," Google said in the report.

Adapted from *CNN*July 2024
(460 words)

HOW HAVE SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS CHANGED THE WAY WE INTERACT?

Social media algorithms, in their commonly known form, are now 15 years old. They were born with Facebook's introduction of ranked, personalised news feeds and have transformed how we interact online.

And like many teenagers, they pose a challenge to grown-ups who hope to curb their excesses. It's not for want of trying. This year alone, governments around the world have attempted to limit the impacts of harmful content and disinformation on social media – effects that are amplified by algorithms. [...]

Algorithms can watch our behaviour and determine what millions of us see when we log on – and, for some, it is algorithms that have disrupted the free exchange of ideas possible on the internet when it was first created.

"In its early days, social media did function as a kind of digital public sphere, with speech flowing freely," Kai Riemer and Sandra Peter, professors at the University of Sydney Business School, tell the BBC. However, "algorithms on social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped the nature of free speech, not necessarily by restricting what can be said, but by determining who gets to see what content", argue Riemer and Peter. [...]

Because contentious posts are more likely to be rewarded by algorithms, there is the possibility that the fringes of political opinion can be overrepresented on social media. Rather than free and open public forums, critics argue that social media instead offers a distorted and sensationalised mirror of public sentiment that exaggerates discord and muffles the views of the majority.

So while social media platforms accuse governments of threatening free speech, is it the case that their own algorithms might also inadvertently pose a threat? "Recommendation engines are not blocking content – instead it is the community guidelines that restrict freedom of speech, according to the platform's preference," Theo Bertram, the former vice president of public policy at TikTok, tells the BBC. [...]

Our era has been labelled "the algorithmic society" – one in which, it could be argued, social media platforms and search engines govern speech in the same way nation states once did. [...]

What, then, is the solution? Could modest tweaks to the algorithms cultivate more inclusive conversations that more closely resemble the ones we have in person? [...]

There are signs that as social media algorithms move towards maturity, their future could not be in the hands of big tech, nor politicians, but with the people. According to a recent survey, just 28% of Americans say they like documenting their life in public online, down from 40% in 2020. People are instead becoming more comfortable in closed-off group chats with trusted friends and relatives; spaces with more accountability and fewer rewards for shocks and provocations. [...]

Adapted from bbc.com October 2024 (440 words)

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA FUELS FEAR OF VIOLENCE

It took about 90 seconds for Rianna [...] to see violence on her X account: a fight [...] that escalated into a full-on brawl with chairs smashed over heads and bodies sprawling.

The "GangHits" account has plenty more clips like that – shootings, beatings, people being run down by cars. It is part of a grim genre of content which is often promoted by algorithms so it pops up in young people's social media feeds unbidden.

Rianna, an [...]18-year-old from Birmingham whom, also uses Instagram and Snapchat, explained: "You get desensitised to it. If it comes up on your story that somebody got stabbed the other day, you don't get as upset about it no more. [...]"

Often the violent content can be closer to home. Iniko [...], 19, gave an example of a gang posting a chase of an enemy [...] on Instagram. "[...] Now everyone has seen him running away and his pride is going to make him want to retaliate," he said. "[...] so next time he leaves the house he wants to prove himself. [...] Sometimes the retaliation is filmed."

Jamil [...], 18, explained [...] "the smallest thing can be escalated on social media." [...] "A fight can happen between two people and they can reach a truce, but because the video's out there on social media and it looks [...] like one is losing, pride is going to be hurt so you might go [...] and get some sort of revenge and let people know, you're not going to mess with me."

It all created anxiety, explained Iniko. "The fearmongering on social media puts you in a fight or flight state so when you leave the house now you are [...] ready to do whatever you need to do ... It's the subliminals – no one's telling you to pick up a knife and commit violence, it's just the more that you see it ..."

Another girl said she had girl friends who started to carry knives because of disputes that happened on Snapchat. [...] "It's not a talking thing anymore" she said. "You just use your weapon and whoever wins, wins. It's a thing of pride."

Is there a solution? Iniko was pessimistic. "People go towards negativity ... [the social media companies] want us to use their app so I don't think they are going to make it any more positive."

[One girl] had heard that Chinese TikTok was more restricted and focused on education, and [...] was interested [...] that the same platform could have a different approach in different countries.

Oshaun [...], had a blunt message to social media companies: "Do better. [...] They need to put limits and restrictions on. They have [...] seen the impact on young people, so now it's your time to do [...] your research, do your fixing."

Adapted from *The Guardian* November 2024 (451 words)

HOW TECH CREATED A 'RECIPE FOR LONELINESS'

Over the summer, Laura Marciano, a researcher at Harvard, interviewed 500 teenagers for a continuing study investigating the link between technology and loneliness. The results were striking.

For several weeks, the teenagers, who were recruited with the help of Instagram influencers, answered a questionnaire three times a day about their social interactions. Each time, more than 50 percent said they had not spoken to anyone in the last hour, either in person or online.

To put it another way, even though the teenagers were on break from school and spending plenty of time on social media apps, most of them were not socializing at all.

Americans now spend more time alone, have fewer close friendships and feel more socially detached from their communities than they did 20 years ago. One in two adults reports experiencing loneliness, the physiological distress that people endure from social isolation. The nation's surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, declared loneliness an epidemic late last year.

Ever since, scholars and psychologists have accelerated research into whether technology is contributing. The rise of smartphones and social networking apps has forever changed social norms around how we communicate. More personable interactions like phone calls have been superseded by text messages. When people broadcast their lives on TikTok and Instagram, they may not be representing themselves in a genuine way.

"It's hard to know who's being real online, and it's hard for people to be themselves online, and that is a recipe for loneliness," Dr. Murthy said in an interview. He concluded that loneliness had become an epidemic after reviewing scientific studies and speaking with college students last year, he said. [...]

The consensus among scholars was clear: While there was little proof that tech directly made people lonely [...], there was a strong correlation between the two, meaning that those who reported feeling lonely might be using tech in unhealthy ways.

The correlation was rooted in three main behaviors:

On social media apps like Instagram, many fell into the trap of comparing themselves with others and feeling that they were lagging behind their peers.

Text messaging, by far the most popular form of digital communication, could be creating a barrier to authentic connection. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, some people who felt lonely also exhibited addictive personalities – in this case, to streaming videos – that kept them indoors. [...]

People with mental health problems may engage in binge-watching as a coping mechanism for stress and other negative emotions, a Yale professor engaged in the review said. There are also obvious consequences to physical health that can harm mental health: being sedentary for too long, losing sleep and not going out to engage with others.

Adapted from *The New York Times* November 2024 (446 words)

ICELAND'S SHORTER WORKING WEEK HAS BEEN A HUGE SUCCESS

[...] Although today women in Iceland have all sorts of jobs, we have yet to reach full equality. But an important step on that journey has been the shortening of the 40-hour working week to 36 hours.

This change started in 2019 in response to campaigning by some of our biggest unions and following the success of trials that involved more than 1% of Iceland's working population. As a result, close on 90% of the country's working population now work shorter hours or have the right to shorten their working week. [...]

So how has it worked here? It had previously been more common for women in Iceland to work part-time so as to be able to juggle family and work commitments. Since 2019, [...] our shorter working week has also made it possible for people (mostly women) who worked 36 hours as a part-time job to have a full-time job working the same hours. [...]

The change has also given many men who were always stuck at work the flexibility to be more involved with their children's daily lives. [...] Tumi, my husband, works in a government office. At first, he chose to work until noon every Friday but soon decided instead to have two full Fridays off each month. [...]

Being a secondary school teacher, this change does not technically apply to me since my job is still deemed to be 40 hours a week. However, only 26 hours a week are spent actually teaching in a classroom. The rest of the time is taken up with meetings, marking and preparing lessons. We have the freedom to organise those non-teaching hours ourselves, so that means that by working a bit longer some days, I am able to take off the Friday afternoons my husband is off too. [...]

Different companies and institutions have different needs and obviously not everyone can close the shop at noon once a week. [...] People have had to rethink how work is planned, which meetings could be shorter, which can be online or which decisions can be taken by email instead. [...]

It has definitely not been simple, and it does not apply to all jobs, but all qualitative and quantitative data indicates that most people who have reduced their hours love it [...]

And contrary to fears that productivity and the provision of services would suffer, nothing could be further from the truth. [...] In Iceland, we have always had the right to do these things without having our pay docked. None of that has changed. [...]

Changes such as this to the way we work may sound impossible but they can be made if people come together and rethink the way work is done. [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (450 words)

IF YOU LET GOOGLE HAVE YOUR DATA, WHY NOT THE NHS?

The government will need to intrude into people's lives more than ever to cope with spiralling demands on the state's finances. In the transition to greener technologies, the need to track who is emitting carbon and where they are doing it will only intensify.

Last week's announcement by the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, that he is employing more people to monitor cars coming into the ultra-low emission zone to make sure they are fined is another example of big brotherism that his counterpart in Manchester, Mister Burnham, decided Mancunians would not allow.

The tracking of Britain's vehicles is a matter for agonising discussions among Whitehall officials, who want to oversee a switch to electric cars, but know that if they are successful much of the £25bn paid each year in fuel tax, and the 20% slice of VAT applied to fuel sales, will be lost.

When electric cars dominate, the chancellor will need to find an alternative source of income, and that may have to come from the satellite surveillance of zero-emission vehicles, and not just in London. If this direction of travel is inevitable, the 7p a litre increase in fuel duty expected in the budget in October could be a last hurrah.

The same imperative applies to the efficient use of public services, which is another troubling subject for civil servants. They want to reform the way services are delivered and welfare is paid against the wishes of large minorities that object to, or want to avoid, state surveillance.

Health secretary Wes Streeting needs everyone to have a smartphone and the NHS app to streamline services that are costly when provided in the analogue world. Streeting is also wrestling with acute staff shortages, and better use of technology will help him overcome that. If UK households offer their information to the NHS in the way they do to Google or others, health service provision could be cheaper and more effective. And the health service could be a testbed for a national ID card that allows for the digitisation of more areas of government, reducing costs and tackling fraud.

Keir Starmer has shied away from a discussion about the impact of digital communications on a population that treasures a (false) sense of liberty from fending off government intrusion. [...] What would help would be a government that made more of an attempt to both promote the state as a worthy and safe recipient of individuals' digital information, and mounted a defence against data intrusion by the private sector. [....] At the moment we are drifting into an era when we allow private sector control while shunning government attempts to navigate a digital future.

Adapted from theguardian.com October 2024 (460 words)

I'M FROM POLAND. WHY DOES EUROPE STILL MAKE ME FEEL LIKE A SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN?

I have always thought of myself as the very model of a modern European. Both sets of my grandparents were diplomats who lived and worked all over Europe and the world, and spoke several languages. My father grew up in Lyon, where he learned to appreciate good food and wine. Even more, he considered western European culture superior to his native Polish. When he taught himself to cook, our family dinners included more French and Italian dishes, such as beef bourguignon, lasagne and chicken marengo [...]

It is little surprise, then, that I grew up with the idea that Europe, in the form of the EU, was the ultimate goal for my country. So, you can imagine my excitement when I was allowed to vote in the June 2003 referendum to decide if Poland should become part of the EU. My country joined the following May – 20 years ago.

A few months after that momentous event, I said goodbye to my friends and family and boarded a Eurolines bus that would take me from my home town to Hamburg in Germany, to take part in the Socrates-Erasmus student programme.

But my excitement waned when I arrived at my destination. Everywhere I went, I heard comments about whether or not the ten new countries were European enough to be included in the EU. Some people were worried about workers from eastern Europe flooding the labour market. When I went to officially register residence at my new student dorm, the civil servant who looked at my papers turned to her colleague and said: "But Poland isn't even in the EU, is it?"

It reminded me of something my father told me while we were driving through Germany when I was a child. "Don't speak Polish here," he said. "They don't like us."

I met my husband while I was in Hamburg, and stayed in Germany. I found myself at a party and listened to a German telling me I was just there to have children and live off welfare. This was, and still is, a common fear – not just among Germans, but in the rest of Western Europe, even though I was a student at the time and fully prepared to enter the job market after graduating [...]

I moved to the Netherlands after having lived in Germany with my husband for three years. Together, we're raising our three children and I work as a freelance writer. But Dutch people have made it clear that they will always see people from countries that formerly found themselves behind the iron curtain as second-rate Europeans.

Adapted from *The Guardian* August 2024 (454 words)

IN THE NETHERLANDS, WE'RE CLOSING OUR EMPTYING PRISONS. WHAT CAN OTHER COUNTRIES LEARN FROM HOW WE DID IT?

The Dutch have seen their prison population decrease by more than forty percent over the past twenty years. At the other end of the spectrum, Britain has the highest rate of incarceration in western Europe, and is struggling with an unprecedented prisons crisis. [...]

First, the declining prison population is not actually the result of recent policies by visionary politicians. Much of it is due to changes in reported crime and the nature of crime. As in many other western countries, the number of violent crimes has significantly dropped in the Netherlands in recent decades.

This does not necessarily mean that there is actually less crime overall, as Dutch criminologist Francis Pakes told me: "There is less conventional, violent crime, like murder. On the other hand, a lot of conventional crime went online and is less visible." And so fewer people end up in jail. [...] According to Pakes, the Dutch are much more aware that a stay in prison does more harm than good. [...] You rarely become a better person during a short stay in jail.

Due to the excesses during the Nazi occupation in the second world war, there is a culture in the Netherlands of not imposing long prison sentences, while many British and American politicians advocate for harsher sentences to present themselves as strong leaders. However, more politicians – often rightwing ones – in the Netherlands are now doing this, too.

[] Dutch judges are much more inclined to give community service or a suspended
sentence in similar cases. Research shows that this is not only cheaper but also reduces the
likelihood of reoffending.

[...] In any case, the Netherlands has at least one hopeful message for other countries: it is not a given that prison populations must always increase. And despite their emptying prisons, the Dutch can still walk the streets safely at night, especially compared with say, Britain, where incidents of crime and concern about crime is higher. Apart from looking at the Netherlands, [one] might also consider the remarkable prison system of Norway. Its prisons are often small and very focused on reintegration. [...]

As a result, [...] it is easier for inmates to integrate than for a person coming from an overcrowded British prison, where they have been locked up for 22 hours a day because the staff couldn't manage otherwise. In such cases, the transition to the outside world can be extremely abrupt. You may see someone reoffend within the first few days after their release. [...] It is clear that the British system has reached its limits and that a new approach is not a luxury.

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (444 words)

IS FRENCH BREAD THE BEST IN THE WORLD?

For many French people, the first experience of being allowed out alone as a child is going to the local bakery. The smell of bread mingles with a sense of newfound freedom as the tip of the baguette, "*le quignon*", is torn off on the way home. This is a romantic story, but it holds some truth about the role that bread and the baker play in France – and it is partly what drew me, an English baker, to the country.

Having worked in Paris and Marseilles, I've since learned that although there is much to admire about the French relationship to bread, it is underpinned by a web of political, social and economic relations that make it not as charming as it may seem from the outside.

For one, the sale of pre-frozen, industrially made bakery goods is on the rise. The Spanish company Europastry, one of the top producers in this growing sector, recently claimed that "in a blind test you can't tell which is which" between their frozen products and the unfrozen, artisan equivalent. In France, frozen pastries and sweet baked goods accounted for a remarkable 24% of all pastries in 2021, higher than Britain and Spain [...] in spite of a raft of rules and legislation meant to safeguard standards.

For example, for a bakery to be called a "boulangerie artisanale", which means that bread is made by an artisan baker, it must have all of its breads made and baked on site – you won't find any factory-made, pre-frozen loaves there. But it gives you no guarantees that the bakers do not use premixes and improvers in their products, which is a fairly common practice.

Indeed most baguettes made in France are made with industrial very white refined flour, which means that all the fiber, fats, mineral content and many of the vitamins are removed altogether. Plenty of research has shown the link between increases in type-2 diabetes, gluten intolerance and gastrointestinal issues and the regular consumption of white, refined flour over more wholemeal alternatives. The long lacto-bacterial fermentation unique to the sourdough process, which helps break down the gluten and makes more of the vitamins and minerals available, are missing from a standard white, yeasted loaf.

[...] Agricultural France has still [...] many small-scale farmers who have continued to cultivate plots of heritage wheat varieties and "population" wheat, offering biodiversity for the land as well as diversity in flavor. Isn't a warm baguette torn and eaten with butter one of life's greatest pleasures? [...] Besides, that bread shows that bakers not only nourish their communities but also provide a tangible link between the people and the land.

Adapted from *The Guardian*October 2024
(451 words)

IS YOUR AIR FRYER SPYING ON YOU? [...]

Air fryers that gather your personal data and audio speakers "stuffed with trackers" are among examples of smart devices engaged in "excessive" surveillance, according to the consumer group Which? The organisation tested three air fryers, increasingly a staple of British kitchens, each of which requested permission to record audio on the user's phone through a connected app.

Smart air fryers allow cooks to schedule their meal to start cooking before they get home. [...] Which? found the app provided by the company Xiaomi connected to trackers for Facebook and a TikTok ad network. The Xiaomi fryer and another by Aigostar sent people's personal data to servers in China, although this was flagged in the privacy notice, the consumer testing body found.

Its tests also examined smartwatches that it said required "risky" phone permissions – in other words giving invasive access to the consumer's phone through location tracking, audio recording and accessing stored files. Which? found digital speakers that were preloaded with trackers for Facebook, Google and a digital marketing company called Urbanairship.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) said the latest consumer tests "show that many products not only fail to meet our expectations for data protection but also consumer expectations".

The ICO, the UK's independent regulator for data protection and information rights law, is drawing up new guidance for manufacturers of smart products to be published in spring 2025. It is due to outline clear expectations for what they need to do to comply with data protection laws and protect people using smart products.

Harry Rose, the editor of Which? magazine, claimed smart tech manufacturers were collecting data with little or no transparency and called for the ICO's code to "be backed by effective enforcement, including against companies that operate abroad".

In a response to Which? Xiaomi said respecting user privacy was among its core values and it adhered to UK data protection laws. "We do not sell any personal information to third parties," it said. "The permission to record audio on Xiaomi Home app is not applicable to Xiaomi smart air fryer which does not operate directly through voice commands and video chat." Aigostar was approached for comment.

A growing number of devices in homes are connected to the internet, including cameraenabled doorbells and smart TVs.

Last Black Friday, the ICO encouraged consumers to check if smart products they planned to buy had a physical switch to prevent the gathering of voice data. It encouraged people to "be picky about who gets your data" and to realise that some of the data sharing that products encouraged during setup was not necessary for the product to work.

Adapted from *The Guardian*November 2024
(443 words)

IT'S GOODBYE TO DISPOSABLE VAPES

There's a certain combination of hedonism and delusion that the disposable vape smoker knows well. You don't vape, not really, and you could quit anytime you'd like. You're only vaping because it's a fun little indulgence, a treat. You tell yourself this while heading to the shop to buy one more, mentally noting: "This will be the last." But as soon as the vape is drained, you're back again.

I loved being trapped in this cycle of self-deception. On the outside, it may have seemed like I was trapped, but inside, there was freedom in setting aside all my other obsessions and psychological compulsions to focus solely on my next hit. Better yet, this craving was so socially acceptable that I could satisfy it anywhere, anytime. [...]

For someone who's never had a vape phase, that might sound like the equivalent of smoking a single cigarette a day. But it's not the same at all: a disposable vape can pack as much nicotine as one or two packets of cigarettes. With my rate of consumption, this little treat cost about £150 a month, and the habit only intensified after I was working from home with no co-workers to witness my habit. [...]

Now, it's been announced that single-use vapes will be banned in England and Wales next summer. It's a smart proactive move by the Labour government. The official reasoning points to curbing youth use and reducing environmental harm. [...]

Nearly 5m single-use vapes were thrown away every week last year, often ending up in landfills. The image is bleak, unnecessary and inescapably grim. So, farewell to disposable vapes, one of the most embarrassingly era-defining trends of the early 2020s.

Defenders of the vape will argue that it's better than smoking, which is true in only a limited sense – we don't actually know the long-term effects of vaping yet. [...] Paediatricians have warned about the effects on young vapers, who report suffering from disrupted sleep and trouble concentrating. [...]

It's clear that disposable vapes have contributed to a culture of self-gratification, [...] with our addiction to social media and digital devices. Together, these habits have created an epidemic of constant pleasure-seeking. In our post-pandemic world, disposable vapes, which notably took off around 2022, offered the ultimate easy "little treat": a quick, legal and socially approved hit. [...]

When I decided to quit last year, my behaviour was so erratic that you might have thought I was withdrawing from something much harder. [...] Without the vape, I was gripped by exhaustion and the conviction that life was pointless. [...] When we hit our vape-free summer next year, it might be an opportunity to rethink what we call "pleasure", and consider more intentional ways of treating ourselves. [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (457 words)

JULIAN ASSANGE MAY BE ON HIS WAY TO FREEDOM BUT THIS IS NOT A CLEAR VICTORY FOR FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

The release of Julian Assange from a UK prison is a victory for him and his supporters worldwide, but not necessarily for the principle of freedom of the press.

Assange is expected to plead guilty to charges under the 1917 Espionage Act, which accuse him of "conspiring to unlawfully obtain and disseminate classified information related to the national defense of the United States." [...] While Assange is set to walk free after a hearing in a US district court, the charges will continue to cast a shadow over journalists reporting on national security matters. Notably, Assange is an Australian citizen, not a US one.

US prosecutors have argued that Assange is not a legitimate journalist but a hacker and activist with his own agenda, claiming he endangered US sources and contacts. [...] This perspective allowed the Espionage Act to be applied without threatening press freedom. However, advocates for press and civil liberties believe that defining Assange's role is irrelevant. The key actions he is accused of – obtaining and disseminating classified information – are central to the work of national security journalists.

WikiLeaks' 2010 publication of classified documents about the Iraq and Afghan wars, leaked by Chelsea Manning, revealed potential human rights abuses by the US military, among other issues. [...] These revelations were published by the Guardian and other outlets based on a strong public interest in exposing these secrets.

When Joe Biden took office in 2021, the administration had the option to drop the charges brought by the Trump administration. Under Barack Obama, the Justice Department had refrained from prosecuting Assange over concerns about press freedom. [...] Despite this, the Biden administration opted to pursue the charges, even though it could have pursued other, less risky options such as a plea deal over a misdemeanor charge of mishandling classified documents.

By all accounts, Biden did not want Assange's extradition, fearing it would be a distraction ahead of the 2024 election. [...] After an appeal from the Australian government, Biden considered dropping the prosecution, but the Justice Department insisted on moving forward with the case. Assange's legal team won the right to appeal his extradition in London, but the Justice Department pressed for the Espionage Act charges.

Jameel Jaffer, executive director of the Knight First Amendment Institute, [...] emphasized that it could have a chilling effect on press freedom worldwide.

"A plea deal would avert the worst-case scenario for press freedom," Jaffer said. "But this deal contemplates that Assange will have served five years in prison for activities that journalists engage in every day. It will cast a long shadow over the most important kinds of journalism."

Adapted from *The Guardian*June 2024
(455 words)

JUST AN HOUR OF WALK[ING] IN MIDDLE-AGE CAN ADD YEARS TO LIFE, STUDY SAYS.

[...] Researchers from Australia looked at the link between physical activity and life expectancy in people in middle-age. The study, published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, found that if this population could be as physically active as the top 25 per cent of the population, they could expect to live an extra five years, on average. "Our findings suggest that [physical activity] provides substantially larger health benefits than previously thought," scientists write. For the least physically active, matching the level of the most active could help them live almost 11 years longer, the estimates suggest.

While it's known that [little] physical activity is linked to a higher risk of diseases like heart disease, stroke, and even premature death, it is unclear to what extent low physical activity levels shorten lifespan. In the new study, scientists created a predictive model to calculate the impact of different levels of increased physical activity on life expectancy. They assessed data on physical activity risk estimates from health tracker data obtained in the National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey of 2003-06 for people aged at least 40. The data also included 2019 population data from the US Census Bureau and deaths recorded in 2017 from the National Centre for Health Statistics.

Scientists found that the physical activity of the most active 25 per cent of Americans over the age of 40 was about 160 minutes of normal-paced walking at 4.8km [...] per hour each day. If all people over 40 years of age in the US matched this level of physical activity every day, researchers say their average lifespan could increase by just over 5 years. This would boost life expectancy at birth to nearly 84 years from 78.6 years in the US, the model estimates. If the least physically active 25 per cent of the population attempted to match the physical activity levels of the top quarter, they would need to clock up an extra 111 minutes of walking at a pace of 4.8 km/hour every day.

[...] However, researchers cautioned that the observational nature of the study can't establish cause and effect. Nevertheless, researchers say increased investment in physical activity and the promotion of living environments fostering exercise can yield large gains in life expectancy at the population level. "Infrastructure measures that encourage active transport, walkable neighbourhoods, as well as green spaces might be promising approaches to increase physical activity and resultant healthy life expectancy at the population level," scientists say.

Adapted from *independent.co.uk* November 2024 (446 words)

KING CHARLES ACKNOWLEDGES 'PAINFUL' PAST AS CALLS FOR SLAVERY REPARATIONS GROW AT COMMONWEALTH SUMMIT

King Charles acknowledged "painful aspects" of Britain's past while sidestepping calls to directly address reparations for slavery at the summit of Commonwealth leaders, saying "none of us can change the past, but we can commit ... to learning its lessons."

Charles was speaking to leaders representing 56 Commonwealth nations at the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Samoa, his first time attending the summit since taking the throne. [...] Charles also addressed the climate crisis, development challenges, and paid tribute to Queen Elizabeth.

Some leaders attending the summit had hoped Charles might issue an apology for Britain's colonial past and engage in discussions about reparatory justice. However, Charles did not directly address the issue. "I understand from listening to people across the Commonwealth how the most painful aspects of our past continue to resonate. It is vital therefore, that we understand our history to guide us to make the right choices in the future," he said.

There have been calls from some African and Caribbean nations for Britain – and other European powers – to pay financial compensation for slavery. The Bahamas' prime minister Philip Davis said, "The time has come to have a real dialogue about how we address these historical wrongs. Reparatory justice is not an easy conversation, but it's an important one." Davis stressed that the horrors of slavery left deep, generational wounds in communities.

On Thursday, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer appeared to open the door to non-financial reparations for the UK's role in the transatlantic enslavement. While Starmer ruled out paying reparations or apologizing for the UK's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, a Downing Street source indicated that the UK could support some forms of reparatory justice, such as restructuring financial institutions and providing debt relief.

In response, Ralph Gonsalves, the prime minister of St Vincent and the Grenadines, stressed the importance of addressing the enduring psychological and socioeconomic impact of slavery. He argued that while enslavers were compensated at abolition, nothing was given to those who had been enslaved and oppressed, a damaging legacy that still plagues Caribbean nations. [...]

Davis emphasized that reparations aren't only about financial compensation but also recognizing the ongoing impact of exploitation. Joshua Setipa from Lesotho suggested that reparations could include climate financing as a non-traditional form of compensation.

In his speech, Charles also paid tribute to Queen Elizabeth, whose commitment to the Commonwealth shaped his own life, and urged action on climate change and development challenges. "Lives, livelihoods, and human rights are at risk across the Commonwealth," he said, calling for action to prevent exacerbating inequalities.

Adapted from *The Guardian*October 2024
(440 words)

LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS

Many people are experimenting with chatbots in the hope that generative artificial intelligence (AI) can improve their daily lives. Scientists, brainy as they are, are several steps ahead. [...] 10% or more of abstracts for papers in scientific journals now appear to be written at least in part by LLMs, "Large Language Models". [...] In fields such as computer science that figure rises to 20%. Among Chinese computer scientists, it is a third.

Some see this enthusiastic adoption as a mistake. They fear that vast quantities of poor-quality papers will [...] boost plagiarism and jam the machinery of scientific publication. [...]

LLMs cannot easily be policed. [...] But scientists find that their use brings real benefits. Research scientists are not just devoted to laboratory work or thinking big thoughts. They face great demands on their time, from writing papers and teaching to filling out grant applications. LLMs help by speeding up the writing of papers, thereby freeing up time for scientists to develop new ideas, collaborate or check for mistakes in their work.

The technology can also help level a playing-field that is tilted towards native English speakers, because many of the prestigious journals are in their tongue. LLMs can help those who do not speak the language well to translate and edit their text. Thanks to LLMs, scientists everywhere should be able to disseminate their findings more easily, and be judged by the brilliance of their ideas and ingeniousness of their research.

[...] But there are worries. Because LLMs make it easier to produce professional-sounding text, they will make it easier to generate bogus scientific papers. *Science* received over 10,000 submissions last year, of which 83% were rejected before peer review. Some of these were probably Al-generated fantasies.

LLMs could also export, through their words, the cultural environment in which they were trained. [...]"Hallucinations" that are obviously wrong to experts, but very believable to everyone else, could also make their way into the texts. And most worrying of all, writing can be an integral part of the research process, by helping researchers clarify and formulate their own ideas.

Trying to restrict the use of LLMs is not the way to deal with these problems. In the future they are rapidly going to become more prevalent and more powerful. They are already embedded in word processors and other software. [...] Researchers [...] say that they see the benefits of generative AI not just for writing papers but for coding and doing administrative tasks. And crucially, their use cannot easily be detected. [...]

Science already has many defences against fabrication and plagiarism. [...] These must become stronger. Peer review will become even more important in a gen-Al world. It must be beefed up accordingly by paying reviewers for the time they sacrifice to scrutinise papers. [...]

Adapted from *The Economist*June 2024
(457 words)

LIBERALS ARE LEFT OUT AS SOCIAL MEDIA TURNS RIGHT

After Donald J. Trump won the election this month, his supporters gravitated to a number of online destinations to celebrate.

Hundreds of thousands of posts congratulating Mr. Trump's victory filled Truth Social, the social platform that the president-elect owns. Speculation about what the new administration would accomplish was rampant on X, which is owned by Elon Musk. Gab, Parler and other right-wing social media sites were flooded with thousands of memes glorifying Mr. Trump.

No similar spaces existed for the left. Meta's Instagram, Threads and Facebook had publicly de-emphasized politics leading up to the election. Mr. Musk had transformed Twitter into X and shifted it to the right. And no other tech platform had gained momentum as a public square for liberals. [...]

If the election underscored anything about the internet, it was how far social media platforms had moved to the right. While Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and other sites continue to be popular gathering places for entertainment and meme-making, political discourse online has increasingly shifted to an array of mostly right-wing sites that have built up their audiences and encouraged largely partisan conversations.

After the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, Facebook and Twitter booted Mr. Trump and his far-right supporters from their platforms. In response, Mr. Trump and his allies flocked to or started their own social media sites that promoted conservative causes.

By the time the mainstream platforms allowed Mr. Trump and other right-wing figures to return, they had increased their online followings and influence. [...]. Inside the Democratic Party, some have discussed the lack of tech platforms available to push their agenda [...]. Some have debated how they squandered years in which they should have built their own answer to Truth Social, the people said.

The online disparity was evident on Nov. 5, when Vice President Kamala Harris and Mr. Trump shared messages on social media urging people to vote. Mr. Trump's posts were more widely shared and liked than those by Ms. Harris and her campaign, according to a New York Times review of social platforms.

On Facebook, Mr. Trump's most popular Election Day post asking voters to stay in line and cast their ballot was liked nearly 160,000 times and shared by more than 15,000 people. Ms. Harris's most popular Facebook post was liked 18,000 times and shared by 1,500 people. [...]

The founder of the Critical Internet Studies Institute, which studies how the internet is used to disrupt democracy, said [...]: "The right was very clear in establishing their media spaces. It was a very savvy and intentional effort by the right to fuse their party and political viewpoints with specific platforms."

Adapted from *The New York Times* November 2024 (456 words)

MACHINE LEARNING PIONEERS WIN NOBEL PRIZE IN PHYSICS

Two researchers who helped lay the foundations for modern artificial intelligence [...] have been awarded the 2024 Nobel prize in physics. Inspired by the workings of the brain, John Hopfield, 91, a US professor emeritus at Princeton University, and Geoffrey Hinton, a British-Canadian professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, built artificial neural networks that store and retrieve memories like the human brain, and learn from information fed into them.

Hinton, 76, who is often called "the godfather of AI", made headlines last year when he quit Google and warned about the dangers of machines outsmarting humans. The scientists' pioneering work began in the 1980s and demonstrated how computer programs that draw on neural networks and statistics could form the basis for an entire field, which paved the way for swift and accurate language translation, facial recognition systems, and the generative AI that underpins chatbots such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude. [...]

In 1982, Hopfield built a neural network that stored images and other information as patterns, mimicking the way memories are stored in the brain. The network was able to recall images when prompted with similar patterns, akin to identifying a song heard only briefly in a noisy bar.

Hinton built on Hopfield's research by incorporating probabilities into a multilayered version of the neural network, leading to a program that could recognise, classify and even generate images after being fed a training set of pictures.

Announced by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in Stockholm, the winners share the 11m Swedish kronor (about £810,000) prize for "foundational discoveries and inventions that enable machine learning with artificial neural networks".

Ellen Moons, the chair of the Nobel Committee for Physics, said: "These artificial neural networks have been used to advance research across physics topics as diverse as particle physics, material science and astrophysics. They have also become part of our daily lives, for instance in facial recognition and language translation." [...]

Hinton quit Google in order to speak freely about his concerns over the possible harms Al could inflict, from spreading misinformation and upending the jobs market to threatening human existence.

Asked how AI might affect the world, Hinton told reporters: "I think it will have a huge influence. [...] But instead of exceeding people in physical strength, it's going to exceed people in intellectual ability."

Having technology that was smarter than humans would be "wonderful in many respects", [...] "But we also have to worry about a number of possible bad consequences, particularly the threat of these things getting out of control," he added. "I am worried that the overall consequence of this might be systems more intelligent than us that eventually take control."

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (459 words)

MAKE AI TOOLS TO REDUCE TEACHER WORKLOADS, TECH COMPANIES URGED

Tech companies are being urged to create better AI tools for reducing teachers' workloads, as ministers announced they would give AI models special access to the Department for Education's (DfE) bank of resources. The education minister Stephen Morgan said the move was "a huge step forward for AI in the classroom", with the government spending £3m to create a "content bank" of official assessments, curriculum guidance and teaching materials

While many teachers say they already use AI to assist them, current AI tools are not trained on material specifically designed or approved for use in England's classrooms. The new content bank will allow developers to train their AI models to generate "accurate, high-quality content" such as workbooks and lesson plans, according to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT).

A further £1m will be awarded to developers in a competition for the best ideas to use the DfE's database in reducing teacher workload. Each winner will build an Al tool to help teachers with feedback and marking tasks by March 2025.

[...]

"This investment will allow us to safely harness the power of tech to make it work for our hard-working teachers, easing the pressures and workload burdens we know are facing the profession and freeing up time, allowing them to focus on face-to-face teaching," Morgan said.

[...]

Pepe Di'lasio, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said Al had the potential to ease the "overwhelming" burden faced by teachers, if concerns about its reliability could be resolved.

"However, it is important to recognise that AI is a tool, and not something that can replace the human expertise and interaction with students that can only be provided by our highly skilled and professional education staff," Di'lasio said.

"The immediate problem is that we are struggling to recruit and retain enough teachers because of the previous government's erosion of pay and conditions over the past decade and a half. This is the issue which needs urgent attention."

Chris Goodall, a teacher and head of digital education at the Bourne Education Trust, said he had been using AI to create classroom material since November 2022, and now helps teachers use it to improve lessons and cut down on administration in 26 schools across the trust.

"I've used AI to quickly generate scaffolded activities, adapt materials for students with special educational needs, and create more engaging lessons that are accessible to all. The time saved allows school staff to focus on what matters most, interacting with students and providing individualised feedback and support," Goodall said.

Adapted from *The Guardian*August 2024
(444 words)

MANY IN GEN Z DITCH COLLEGES FOR TRADE SCHOOLS. MEET THE 'TOOLBELT GENERATION'

Sy Kirby dreaded the thought of going to college after graduating from high school. He says a four-year degree just wasn't on the cards for him or his bank account. [...]

Instead, at the age of 19, Kirby took a job at a local water department in southern Arkansas. He said the position helped him to develop the skills that helped him start his own construction company.

Now at age 32, Kirby finds himself mentoring many of his employees, who also opted to learn a skilled trade rather than shelling out tens of thousands of dollars to pursue a degree that they wouldn't use after graduating.

Kirby says blue-collar work is lucrative and allows him to "call the shots" in his life. But, he says the job also comes with a downside, mainly because of the stigma attached to the industry.

"I think there's a big problem with moms and dads coming home from quote-unquote 'dirty' jobs. Coming home with dirty clothes and sweating. You had a hard day's work and sometimes that's looked down upon," he says.

Kirby is among the growing number of young people who have chosen to swap college for vocational schools that offer paid, on-the-job training.

Lisa Countryman-Quiroz is the CEO of [...] a nonprofit in San Francisco that provides career training for unemployed workers to find jobs, including in skilled trades. She says that [...] "Folks have really prioritized a college education as a path to the middle class and a path to a cushy office job." But, [...] "over the last 10 to 15 years, we are seeing a trend among young people opting out of universities. Just the crushing debt of college is becoming a barrier in and of itself." [...]

The high cost of college isn't the only factor driving many young people toward skilled trades. With the use of artificial intelligence on the rise, many Gen Zers see manual labor as less vulnerable to the emerging technology than white-collar alternatives. They also say vocational schools are a straight path to well-paying jobs.

Nitzan Pelman, [who founded] Climb Hire, a company that helps low-income and overlooked people break into new careers, says increasing salaries and new technologies in fields such as welding, plumbing and machine tooling are giving trade professions a face-lift, making them more appealing to the younger crowd.

"There are a lot of vocational jobs out there that are pretty attractive — HVAC repair and installation, electricians, solar panel installer — there's so much demand for wind turbine installers who, in many cases, make more than \$100,000 a year — so there's a lot of demand for manual labor," she stresses.

Adapted from *NPR*April 2024
(455 words)

MATTEL UNVEILS BLIND BARBIE

In the decades since Barbie debuted in 1959, the doll's plastic perfections have generated criticism for their promotion of unrealistic beauty standards. In response, Mattel has tried to create versions that are more representative of a broader range of people.

On Tuesday, the company released a Barbie designed in partnership with the American Foundation for the Blind. The doll, which comes in a pink box with Braille lettering, has its own special accessories, including a red-and-white cane with a marshmallow roller tip and sunglasses suited for light-sensitive eyes. Its satin blouse and ruffled skirt were selected after Mattel tested them for tactile satisfaction with blind and low-vision children. The doll also has bendable arms for cane use.

Lucy Edwards, a social media influencer and disability activist who lost her sight when she was 17, called the doll "gorgeous" and "glam" in an online video [...].

"I know when I'm picking clothes as a blind woman, I just love to feel my best in different textures, just like Blind Barbie," said Ms. Edwards, a Mattel brand ambassador. Tameka Simmons, a disability activist in Greenville, S.C., took her blind 8-year-old daughter, Evely, to a Target store on Tuesday to pick up one of the dolls.

"As a mom who has a blind child that has faced numerous challenges, this Barbie holds significance for my family," Ms. Simmons said. "We were overwhelmed with excitement when we heard about the doll's release." [...]

The blind doll was released alongside Mattel's first Black Barbie with Down syndrome, which was developed with input from the National Down Syndrome Society. Mattel noted that the doll's palms "include a single line, a characteristic often associated with those with Down syndrome." Some of the hearts on its dress have three arrows that "represent the third 21st chromosome that individuals with Down syndrome have," the company said.

Krista Berger, a senior vice president at Mattel, said the new dolls reinforced the company's "commitment to creating products that represent global belonging and inclusivity."

Both Barbies join the Fashionistas line, which Mattel launched in 2009. It features dolls with different skin tones, body types and disabilities, including a Barbie that uses a wheelchair, a Barbie with vitiligo and a Ken with a prosthetic leg. [...]

Debbie Miller, a spokesperson with the Royal National Institute of Blind People in Britain [said], "The impact of this for me when I was younger would have been incredible. I didn't know anyone else like me, so I felt really, really different, and I wanted to try and hide the fact that I was developing sight loss." She continued, "It would have made me feel more confident to own it and talk to other people about it." [...]

Adapted from *The New York Times* July 2024 (458 words)

MEDICAL TOURISM IS BOOMING

I was on hold to the doctor when I watched an Instagram video where a travel influencer with pink hair documented, "One of the greatest things we've ever done", which turned out to be a "three-day comprehensive medical checkup" in Turkey. [...] The influencer has had so much interest in this post, she's organising group trips. [...]

This year, the medical-tourism industry was valued at \$47bn and is forecast to be worth more than \$111bn in five years' time. Partly this is because of the struggle to get treatment in the UK, or the cost of going private.

Last year a woman who'd gone to Lithuania for a knee replacement rather than lingering on the NHS waiting list told the *Observer*: "The driver here is that people are in pain. This is not medical tourism; it's medical desperation."

Partly it's because of that, partly it's because the countries offering package deals are investing seriously in [tempting] tourists, with tax breaks and glossy influencer ads. Elise Hu, author of *Flawless: Lessons in Looks and Culture from the K-Beauty Capital*, wrote about the Korea Tourism Organisation's introduction of "plastic surgery certificates", for use if surgery renders a tourist's face unrecognisable from their passport photo when returning home.

And this, I guess, is the other reason medical tourism is booming – not just the anxiety that leads people [...] to have three days of serious tests on a healthy body, but the pressure to recapture a younger self, somewhere in a business park in Turkey. Thousands of people are travelling there every year from the UK, and to Mexico, South Korea and Thailand, for hair transplants, cosmetic dentistry and rhinoplasty, operating on pieces of their bodies they have been persuaded, in pursuit of profits, to think of as flawed. They travel not because of the physical agony [...], but with a more generalised desperation, a shameful pain. This despite knowing the potential risks of surgery, and the fact that even a successful operation will not guarantee happiness.

Data compiled by the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (Baaps) revealed the number of people needing hospital treatment in the UK after getting cosmetic surgery abroad, including intensive care and emergency operations, increased by 94% in three years. At least 28 Brits have been on medical tourism trips to Turkey and then subsequently died, since 2019.

The appeal of travelling abroad for surgery is not so different from the appeal, I think, of travelling abroad. That promise of transformation, of returning home from a holiday relaxed and wiser and cured and beautiful. But the risks are greater than just missing a flight, or losing luggage – there's also the risk, in a hundred horrible ways, of losing yourself.

Adapted from *The Guardian*September 2024
(459 words)

METEOROLOGISTS FACE HARASSMENT AND DEATH THREATS AMID HURRICANE DISINFORMATION

A meteorologist based in Washington, D.C., was accused of helping the government cover up manipulating a hurricane. In Houston, a forecaster was repeatedly told to "do research" into the weather's supposed nefarious origins. And a meteorologist for a television station in Lansing, Michigan, said she had received death threats. [...]

Meteorologists' role of delivering lifesaving weather forecasts and explaining climate science sometimes makes them targets for harassment, and this kind of abuse has been happening for years, weather experts said. But amid the conspiracy theories and falsehoods that have spiraled online after Hurricanes Helene and Milton, they say the attacks and threats directed at them have reached new heights.

"We're all talking about how much more it's ramped up," said Marshall Shepherd who is the director of the University of Georgia's Atmospheric Sciences Program and a former president of the American Meteorological Society. There has been "a palpable difference in tone and aggression toward people in my field," he said.

Dr. Shepherd said the scrutiny meteorologists face is sharply amplified during major weather events, and the back-to-back hurricanes, combined with the political climate and second-guessing of weather experts, may have created conditions ripe for abuse.

Helene made landfall as a Category 4 storm on Florida's Gulf Coast in late September, tearing through the Southeast and becoming the deadliest storm to hit the U.S. mainland in nearly two decades. Just two weeks later, Milton rapidly strengthened and struck Florida as a Category 3 storm, resulting in at least 14 deaths, serious flooding and the destruction of scores of homes.

[...] Many of the falsehoods about the hurricanes have been spread by conservatives and supporters of former President Donald J. Trump, including a former Trump administration official and a Republican congresswoman.

Of all the conspiracy theories and disinformation that have circulated, meteorologists say one falsehood that has especially gotten out of hand is the claim that the government is creating or controlling the storms. Forecasters have been harassed for either failing to promote these claims or for disseminating accurate information that counters them.

[...] Dr. Shepherd said that such false claims about outside forces controlling the weather have always existed, recalling how similar assertions emerged during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. "The difference is that they were always out there in 'fringe-world,' but now I've seen them become almost mainstream," he said.

During an interview on CNN as Milton approached Florida, a reporter asked Dr. Shepherd whether the storm was manipulated by people, referring to a person he had just spoken to on the street who had made that claim. "It's stunning that the reporter had to ask that question," Dr. Shepherd said. [...]

Adapted from *New York Times* October, 2024 (447 words)

MIGRANTS DROWNING IN CHANNEL AS CROWDED BOAT 'RIPPED OPEN

Six children and a pregnant woman are among 12 people who died after a boat carrying dozens of asylum seekers to the UK was "ripped open" in one of the worst Channel tragedies since the small boats crisis began. [...]

The French interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, said more than 50 people had been rescued [...] from the "terrible shipwreck" off Cap Gris-Nez. Only 8 of the 70 passengers were wearing lifejackets according to French officials. [...] After the latest fatalities, the Prime Minister is facing calls to open legal routes so that potential refugees are not forced to take such desperate journeys before claiming asylum in the UK. [...]

In the past week more than 2,000 people seeking asylum have arrived in the UK on small boats. [...] Charities have demanded safe routes for asylum seekers from France so that the vast majority of claimants do not have to set foot in a small boat. [...] The number of deaths this year in the Channel was "shockingly high". [...]

Heightened security and policing measures on the French coast have led to increasingly perilous crossings, launching from more dangerous locations and in flimsy, overcrowded vessels.

"In addition to taking action against the criminal gangs themselves, the government must develop a plan to improve and expand safe routes for those seeking safety. People risk their lives out of desperation, fleeing violence and persecution in countries like Afghanistan, Syria and Sudan in search of safety." [...]

Amnesty International UK said: "No amount of 'smash the gangs' policing and government rhetoric is going to stop these disasters [...] if the needs of people exploited by those gangs remain unaddressed." [...]

In 2023, the UK agreed to pay around £476m over three years to the French government to police the sea border. [...] Meanwhile Darmanin has claimed the UK still only "pays a fraction" of what the French government spends on preventing migrant deaths on the Channel".

"We need a migration treaty between the UK and the European Union – because the migrants [...] are people from the heart of Africa who want to go to the UK," he said.

The Channel is one of the world's busiest shipping lanes and currents are strong, making crossing on small boats dangerous. People smugglers typically overload rickety dinghies. [...] Labour has promised to crack down on small boat crossings by "smashing the gangs" of people smugglers. [...] Responding to calls for safe routes, the border security and asylum minister, Angela Eagle, claimed there are already some safe routes available to asylum seekers but "unfortunately, there are ... more people who want to come, than there are safe or legal routes [...] we could ever set up," she said. [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian* September 2024 (453 words)

MORE THAN THREE-QUARTERS OF UK UNIVERSITIES JOIN FOSSIL FUEL PLEDGE, SAY ACTIVISTS

More than three-quarters of UK universities have pledged to exclude fossil fuel companies from their investment portfolios, according to campaigners. The move, which is part of a wider drive to limit investment in fossil fuels, follows years of campaigning by staff and students across the higher education sector.

The student campaign group People & Planet announced on Friday that 115 out of 149 UK universities had publicly committed to divest from fossil fuels – meaning £17.7bn-worth of endowments are now out of reach of the fossil fuel industry.

Laura Clayson, from People & Planet, said it would have been unthinkable a decade ago that so many institutions had formally refused to invest in fossil fuels. People & Planet set up the Fossil Free universities campaign in 2013. As part of its efforts the group has highlighted the "struggles and voices" of communities on the frontline of the climate crisis in an attempt to bring home the real-world impact of investment decisions made by UK universities

Clayson said: "The demand for fossil-free came from frontline communities themselves [...] ... We have a responsibility [...] to highlight their stories of struggle in spaces so often detached from the reality of everyday life on the frontlines."

One of the projects highlighted by the campaign is the proposed East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) – a mega project that would stretch almost 900 miles from the Lake Albert region of Uganda to the coast in Tanzania, and release vast amounts of planet-heating carbon. The pipeline is being built in spite of local opposition, and there are reports that protesters and critics have been met with state violence. Hundreds of student organisers have been involved in the struggle.

Ntambazi Imuran Java, the lead coordinator at the Stop EACOP Uganda campaign, said its members appreciated the efforts of UK students to bring an end to universities' fossil fuel investments. "[This] supports those who have worked tirelessly to stop deadly extraction projects [...]... Regardless of the arrests and violations on the activists, students' activists and communities, we continue to demand for the Uganda authorities to stop the project and instead invest in renewables."

People & Planet said four UK institutions had recently incorporated fossil fuel exclusions into their ethical investment policies, meaning 115 out of 149 UK universities have publicly committed to divest from fossil fuels.

Later this month, the group will unveil its latest university league table that ranks institutions by their ethical and environmental performance. Campaigners say they will then increase pressure on the remaining 34 UK universities yet to go fossil-free.

Adapted from *The Guardian*December 2024
(457 words)

NATIONAL PRIDE FALLS AS BRITAIN 'REDEFINES ITSELF'

National pride has declined sharply over the last decade, possibly because Britain is redefining itself as it becomes more diverse, researchers say.

Fewer Britons feel pride in the country's history, economic achievements and democratic processes compared with 2013, the National Centre for Social Research report found. Results showed that 64 per cent of respondents were proud of Britain's history, down from 86 per cent in 2013 when the survey was last conducted.

Fifty-three per cent professed pride in how Britain's democracy works. This has fallen from 69 per cent, following the Brexit referendum and five Conservative prime ministers. [...]

[The] deputy chief executive at NatCen, said the latest chapter of its British Social Attitudes (BSA) report showed a country redefining itself. She said: "Our latest report finds Britain has become more inclusive in its attitudes towards what it means to be British.

"These research findings show that whilst we are less likely to take pride in British history and are more critical about its politics, there is still a great deal of national pride in the country's cultural and sporting achievements.

This change in attitudes may have been influenced by the increased diversity and shared citizenship within Britain, presenting a portrait of a nation redefining itself."

Last week Sir Keir Starmer, in his first major speech since becoming prime minister, said that the summer riots involving the far right had "exposed the state of our country". They "revealed a deeply unhealthy society", he said, speaking of "the cracks in our foundation laid bare, weakened by a decade of division and decline, infected by a spiral of populism".

The NatCen survey of 1,600 people from England, Scotland and Wales, found that the proportion who think it is important that someone must be born in the UK to be able to describe themselves as "truly British" has fallen from 74 per cent in 2013 to 55 per cent in 2023.

In June, Nigel Farage, now the leader of Reform UK, [was criticised] when he suggested that Rishi Sunak, who had made an early exit from the D-Day 80th anniversary celebrations to resume election campaigning, did not understand "our culture".

Farage said his comments were in relation to Sunak's social class rather than his background as the child of immigrants. Sunak was the UK's first British Asian prime minister.

The BSA report noted that British is not the only national identity in the UK, given that it is a "multinational country". It stated: "Each of the UK's component parts has its own sense of national identity, or in the case of Northern Ireland, contested identities. […]

Adapted from *The Times* September 2024 (449 words)

NEW FILM ABOUT FIRST UPGRADED HUMAN ASKS WHETHER WE SHOULD JUST BECAUSE WE CAN

Neil Harbisson is the world's first officially recognised human cyborg, having had a device installed in his head to enable him to "hear" colours in the early 2000s. He is the subject of the first full-length film by London-based director Carey Born. This thought-provoking work explores the philosophical and ethical questions surrounding human augmentation.

Born without the ability to see any colours, the Catalan-born artist's life took an extraordinary turn when he decided to augment his sensory experience. [...] He had a sensor surgically implanted in the back of his skull, arcing over his hairline like an insect antenna. Via a chip in his head, it translates the light frequencies of colours into sound vibrations, which he experiences through bone conduction, the same process used by whales and dolphins to hear underwater. [...]

Harbisson explains how he came to the idea of augmentation – and it is an augmentation, because he can experience infrared and ultraviolet, which are invisible to the rest of us. His system is also internet-connected so he can perceive the colours in images sent by friends from their phones. [...]

He argues that his superhuman abilities make him more aware of health risks than the rest of us. "If we could all perceive ultraviolet there wouldn't be so many people with skin cancer ... You wouldn't want to lie down and sunbathe if you could hear the terrible noise [it makes]." [...]

The film coaxes the viewer to consider some provocative questions. At what point does technological integration fundamentally alter who we are? Are there ethical boundaries we should consider? Should we be free to create our own senses, and if so, how would we then share experiences? Will such choices become commonplace in the near future?

It is a timely reminder of the societal challenges facing humanity as cyborgism follows the well-trodden path from science fiction to science fact. Cochlear implants, for instance, have been in use since the 70s to help those with hearing impairments. People with diabetes now implant real-time blood sugar monitors, receiving instantaneous readouts via their smartphones. Prosthetics are increasingly enhanced by digital controllers, and the cutting-edge is brain controls.

Elon Musk's Neuralink is in similar territory. It aims to create human-machine interfaces through embedding computer chips in people's brains, recently moving from animal to human trials. Musk has spoken about the potential for visual enhancement, not only including infrared and UV but also radar and eagle vision. (...)

Many will be tempted by the superstrength and super eyesight often portrayed. But particularly in light of recent rapid advances in AI, the key question facing us – and underpinning this film – is, "just because we can, should we?" (...)

Adapted from *The Conversation*September 2024
(455 words)

NEW POWDER THAT CAPTURES CARBON COULD BE 'QUANTUM LEAP' FOR INDUSTRY

An innocuous yellow powder, created in a lab, could be a new way to combat the climate crisis by absorbing carbon from the air.

Just half a pound of the stuff may remove as much carbon dioxide as a tree can, according to early tests. Once the carbon is absorbed by the powder, it can be released into safe storage or be used in industrial processes, like carbonizing drinks.

"This really addresses a major problem in the tech field, and it gives an opportunity now for us to scale it up and start using it," says Omar Yaghi, a chemist at the University of California, Berkeley. It's not the first material to absorb carbon, but "it's a quantum leap ahead [of other compounds] in terms of the durability of the material".

The powder is known as a covalent organic framework, with strong chemical bonds that pull gases out of the air. The material is both durable and porous, and can be used hundreds of times, making it superior to other materials used for carbon capture.

In the lab, Yaghi's team tested the new powder and found that it could successfully absorb and release carbon more than 100 times. It fills up with carbon in about two hours, and then must be heated to release the gas before starting the process over again. It only requires a temperature of about 120F to release the carbon; that makes it an improvement over other methods, which require a much higher temperature.

That feature means places that already produce extra heat – such as factories or power plants – could use it to release the gas and start the cycle again. The material could be incorporated into existing carbon capture systems or future technology.

Still, removing carbon out of the air remains difficult, and as with all early-stage lab-scale studies, the challenge is scaling up the system for pilot studies. The concentration of carbon dioxide, though it is increasing, now stands at about 400 parts per million. That means that any technology to capture the gas from the air requires moving huge volumes of air – and that requires large electricity consumption for running fans.

Some scientists worry that the expectations of direct air capture systems has been overly rosy. A group of scientists from MIT recently wrote a paper analyzing the assumptions of many climate stabilization plans, and pointing to ways that direct air capture may be overly optimistic.

They also point out that a major challenge to using this approach to combat climate change lies in the high cost of materials for creating substances that capture carbon.

Adapted from *The Guardian* November 2024 (452 words)

NEW ZEALAND WILL REVERSE LAW BANNING ALL TOBACCO SALES TO YOUNGER GENERATION

New Zealand's government will reverse one of the world's toughest anti-tobacco laws Tuesday that would have banned the sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products to residents born in 2009 onwards, drawing condemnation from public health experts and anti-tobacco campaigners.

The reversal is part of a governing agenda outlined by the Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's National Party government, which won the country's parliamentary elections last year. [...] The government will stop the law going into effect without seeking any public consultation or debate on the matter.

The so-called "Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Act" was set to go into effect in July and would have banned anyone born after January 1, 2009, from ever buying a cigarette in their lifetime.

The country's Associate Health Minister told reporters that the conservative coalition government was still committed to a goal of ensuring less than 5% of New Zealand's population smokes by 2025, but it intends to take a different approach.

The New Zealand Herald, however, reported that the Health Minister rejected pleas from government health officials to retain parts of the smokefree law. One of the proposals the Health Minister reportedly rejected was raising the tobacco purchase age from 18 to 25.

The tobacco-ban legislation [...] was passed by former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labor Party-led parliament in December 2022. The ambitious plan sought to cut back on the number of outlets selling tobacco products, lower the level of nicotine in cigarettes and other smoking products and fully ban the sale of tobacco products to anyone born on or after January 1, 2009. The final goal would be achieved by raising the legal age for buying tobacco products every year starting in 2027.

After winning national elections in October last year, Luxon's ruling coalition said they plan to scrap the law before it takes effect. Luxon and his ministers argued that lifting the ban would bring in critical tax revenue from cigarette sales and prevent the creation of a black market. According to his government's estimates, repealing the ban would preserve around \$610 million in annual tax revenue.

The new government also questioned studies that showed the law would save the country's healthcare system \$860 million by 2040 and drastically reduce the number of deaths.

The decision to repeal the smokefree law has come under severe criticism from public health advocates in the country. [...] An advocacy group [...] said: "[...] Good governments do not abandon popular and empirically supported smoke-free measures in response to threats that the illicit tobacco market might grow."

Adapted from *Forbes* February 2024 (451 words)

NORWAY'S KON-TIKI MUSEUM RETURNS ARTIFACTS TO CHILE'S REMOTE EASTER ISLAND

Artifacts and human remains taken by a Norwegian explorer and anthropologist in the late 1940s are being returned by a museum in Oslo to Chile's remote territory of Easter Island in the mid-Pacific, the Kon-Tiki Museum said on Wednesday.

In 1947, explorer Thor Heyerdahl sailed on a log raft named Kon-Tiki from Peru to Polynesia in 101 days to prove his theory – that the South Sea Islands were settled by seafarers from South America. He brought 5,600 objects back from Easter Island, also known as Rapa Nui. This is the third time objects taken by him are being returned.

Many [of these] have been stored and displayed at the Kon-Tiki Museum in Oslo, Norway's capital, and some were given back in 1986 and others in 2006. The return has been a collaboration between the museum, Chile and Rapa Nui's local authorities.

"My grandfather would have been proud of what we are about to achieve," said Liv Heyerdahl, head of the museum and the explorer's granddaughter. She told the Norwegian news agency NTB that the objects were brought to Norway "with a promise that they would one day be returned."

Among those that are being returned this time around are human remains called Ivi Tepuna and sculpted stones. A nine-person delegation had traveled to Norway this week to collect the items. Four of them spent the night at the Oslo museum, alongside the remains as part of a ritual ceremony to take back the spirits of the remains. [...] "It is important that those who own the culture are involved in the process," Liv Heyerdahl was quoted as saying by NTB.

"Of course these remains should be returned, and it feels right because they belong to the Rapa Nui." In 2019, an agreement was signed in Santiago, Chile, during a visit by Norway's King Harald. However, the COVID-19 pandemic stopped all activities in 2020, the museum said. Harald met with the Rapa Nui delegation on Tuesday.

A book about Thor Heyerdahl's voyage – he died in 2002 at the age of 87 – has become an international bestseller, and his film of the journey won an Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1951.

Rapa Nui is best known for the hundreds of moai – monolithic human figures carved centuries ago by this remote Pacific island's Rapanui people. [...] Located 3,700 kilometers from South America, Rapa Nui was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995. In 2019, it was officially renamed "Rapa Nui-Easter Island" from its previous name of just Easter Island.

Adapted from www.voanews.com November 2024 (458 words)

OBESITY RATES HAVE INCREASED AMONG CHILDREN, TEENAGERS AND ADULTS

More than one billion people in the world are now living with obesity, a new study published in The Lancet has found. Obesity [...] has become the main form of malnutrition in numerous countries. The prevalence of obesity has risen twice as rapidly among children and adolescents globally compared to adults.

The study analysed the weight and height measurements of millions of people across 200 countries [...] in the last 30 years.

In 2022, the findings pointed to an estimated 879 million adults living with obesity. The number is four and a half times higher than the figures recorded in 1990. For children and adolescents, the estimations indicated that 159 million of them were affected [...], a significant increase from the 31 million recorded thirty years ago.

"It is very worrying that the epidemic of obesity that was evident among adults in much of the world in the 90's is now mirrored in school-aged children and adolescents," Majid Ezzati, a professor at Imperial College London and senior author of the study, said. [...].

He also highlighted that in parallel, undernutrition was still affecting hundreds of millions [...] in the poorest countries. Despite a decreasing prevalence, 347 million adults and 185 million children and adolescents are still affected by undernutrition which is responsible for half the deaths of children under 5," the World Health Organization noted in its statement.

"To successfully tackle both forms of malnutrition it is vital we significantly improve the availability and affordability of healthy, nutritious foods," Ezzati added.

Obesity is a chronic and complex condition that can put people at an increased risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases as well as certain cancers.

"This new study highlights the importance of preventing and managing obesity from early life to adulthood, through diet, physical activity, and adequate care, as needed," said WHO's Director-General.

While the organisation has set global targets to halt the rise of diabetes and obesity by 2025, the increasing prevalence rate means these objectives are unlikely to be met. "Importantly, it requires the cooperation of the private sector, which must be accountable for the health impacts of their products," he said.

Dr Guha Pradeepa, one of the study co-authors also pointed out that global issues such as climate change, supply-chain disruptions as well inflation were also risk factors in this public health crisis. "The knock-on effects of this are insufficient food in some countries and households and shifts to less healthy foods in others. To create a healthier world, we need comprehensive policies to address these challenges," she said.

Adapted from *Euronews*March 2024
(450 words)

PAVEL DUROV AND THE LIMITS OF FREE SPEECH

If any one person embodies both the miracles and maladies of our digital age, it is probably Pavel Durov, the Russia-born founder of the Telegram messaging app who was detained in Paris on Saturday. To his supporters, Durov is a hero for creating a safe space for free speech. To his detractors, he is a villain for abetting criminal activity. [...]

Durov developed Telegram with the explicit goal of evading the intrusions of big government and providing "a social good". [...] To that end, Durov promised to secure all private communications and boasted that he would never hand over any user data to any government. "I regard myself as a tech entrepreneur; not as a politician or philosopher. I'd be happy to see libertarian values spread, but it's not something that I see as my mission," he told me back then.

Nine years later, Telegram has become a remarkable success story, used by more than 900mn people who appreciate its simple, frictionless and seemingly secure services. [...] It has been the service of choice for protest movements in Russia, Belarus, Iran, and Hong Kong. It has provided welcome political oxygen for asphyxiating activists. Remarkably, Telegram is the preferred platform for both Ukrainian and Russian nationalists to wage their propaganda wars, hosting graphic images of the conflict. Ironically, it has also been embraced by French politicians, including President Emmanuel Macron, who viewed its services as a welcome alternative to the dominant Silicon Valley giants. [...]

However, civil society organisations and law enforcement agencies have grown increasingly concerned about the nefarious uses of Telegram, which they argue has become the new "dark web". In particular, the French judicial authorities are investigating the platform for diffusing material about child sexual abuse and enabling criminal networks. Telegram has flatly rejected the charges. "It is absurd to claim that a platform or its owner are responsible for abuse of that platform," the company said.

In so doing, Telegram does not appear to distinguish between the threatening demands of autocratic regimes and legitimate requests of law-enforcement authorities in democratic countries. [...] The service is also less secure than it seems: Telegram does not offer users end-to-end encryption on all their messages by default, as WhatsApp and Signal do. It would be in the interests of both the company, and its users, to clean up its act.

The somewhat infantile stance of libertarian absolutists is that there should be no limits on free speech. But a free society is not just about freedom of expression. It also revolves around the observance of laws and the protection of other precious human rights.

Adapted from *Financial Times*August 2024
(440 words)

'PEOPLE DIDN'T BELIEVE AFRICA COULD BE A SOURCE OF INNOVATION'

Africa has the greatest variety in human genes anywhere on the planet but the world is failing to capitalise on it, according to one of the continent's leading scientists, Prof Kelly Chibale, a man determined to change that. He believes the birthplace of humanity could hold the scientific key to its future.

About 18% of the global population lives in Africa – a proportion set to rise over the next few decades – and it accounts for 20% of the global disease burden. But only 3% of clinical trials take place on the continent, and most of those in just two countries – South Africa and Egypt [...] "If it works in Africa, there's a good chance it'll work somewhere else, because there is such huge genetic diversity," says Chibale, of the University of Cape Town.

Genetic differences affect how drugs are processed by the body [...]. Testing a drug in people with a wider variety of genes, rather than the historic standard of a Caucasian man, means the frequency and amount of a drug given to patients can be better calibrated for everyone before it gets to market. [...]

He says it is important that encouragement for more Africans to get involved comes from people such as him. There is deep mistrust in many communities because of medical abuses under colonial and apartheid regimes. If calls to participate come from non-African outsiders, people will think "you're trying to use us as guinea pigs", he says. "People have been traumatized [...] Who says it, matters." [...]

"Africans have to take a lead in doing these things, because these are problems that affect us more," he says. "The status quo is that innovative medicines are discovered and developed largely in the global north. Then, five to ten years later, those innovative medicines are brought to Africa. It means there is no certainty that those drugs will work in African populations, or fit into the way medicine is practised across the continent, Chibale says. [...]

[...] There are big challenges in conducting scientific research on the continent, Chibale concedes, and a need for African governments to bolster public health research infrastructure and smooth legislative and regulatory pathways. Efforts to increase drug manufacturing on the continent are welcome [...]. There are obvious health benefits for Africa if drugs are better tailored to local people, he says, as well as economic benefits."

And African institutions must step up as partners. "In any kind of partnership, you have to bring something to the table. You cannot just demand. It is not always about money: sometimes you need just the right policies, the right climate for business to flourish, the right climate for research."

Adapted from *The Guardian*October 2024
(458 words)

"PRETTY PRIVILEGE": ATTRACTIVE PEOPLE CONSIDERED MORE TRUSTWORTHY, RESEARCH CONFIRMS

What makes a person beautiful has fascinated artists and scientists for centuries. Beauty is not, as it is often assumed to be, "in the eye of the beholder" – but follows certain predictable rules. Symmetry and proportions play a role, and though culture and norms shape our perception of beauty, researchers observe a consistently striking agreement among people on whom they regard as beautiful. [...]

In today's fiercely competitive job market, the economic advantages of beauty are undeniable. Numerous studies have shown that attractive individuals benefit from a beauty bonus and earn higher salaries on average. Certain high-paying professions are built around beauty (such as show business) but what is more surprising is that for almost any kind of employment, beauty can lead to a positive halo effect. Beautiful individuals are consistently expected to be more intelligent and thought to be better leaders, which influences career trajectories and opportunities.

It is thought individuals perceived as beautiful are also more likely to benefit from people's trust, which makes it easier for them to get promoted or to strike business deals. The idea is that individuals who look better are thought to be healthier or/and to have had more positive social interactions in their past, which might influence their trustworthiness. [...]

Our study started in Paris in October 2019, where we asked a group of 76 volunteers to participate in a short experiment on economic decision-making. [...]

Our results confirm that those people who are considered to be more beautiful by our raters are also believed to be much more trustworthy. This implies that in our abstract economic exchange, beautiful individuals are more likely to benefit from the trust of others. However, when investigating actual behaviour, we see that beautiful individuals are neither more nor less trustworthy than anyone else. [...]

Our results are clear. The beauty bias is there for everyone. Though we might think that those who benefit from good looks can see behind the mask, they are as much influenced by the looks of others upon deciding whom to trust.

The beauty industry is thus right. Investing in beauty really is worth it because it creates real benefits. However, recruiters or managers should guard themselves against being fooled. One way of doing this is to make CVs anonymous and forbid photos in applications. But in many interactions, we see people who we have to decide to trust. Being aware of one's bias is therefore crucial. Our results stress that this bias is very hard to overcome, since even individuals who from their own experience should be aware of beauty's skin-deep value fall prey to it.

Adapted from *The Conversation*May 2024
(444 words)

RAPAMYCIN MAY SLOW AGING. HERE'S ONE WAY THE DRUG WILL BE TESTED

A few years back, Matt Kaeberlein was diagnosed with a frozen shoulder. [...]

His doctor recommended physical therapy, and told him that it may take a year to get better.

Feeling frustrated, he decided to try rapamycin. In recent years, some high-profile longevity scientists have started taking the drug in hopes of fending off age-related health problems. So far, it's untested in people taking it for anti-aging, but rapamycin has been shown to extend the lifespan of mice.

"I decided to try it," Kaeberlein says. It was his "first foray into biohacking," and he was very pleased with what happened next. "Within two weeks, 50% of the pain was gone," he says. And by the end of 10 weeks, he had regained range of motion and the pain was gone. "And it hasn't come back," he says. [...]

Rapamycin was first approved by the FDA for use in transplant patients in the late 1990s. [...] The drug is not approved for pain or anti-aging, but some physicians prescribe rapamycin off-label with the aim of fending off age-related conditions. [...]

But anecdotes are no replacement for science. To figure out the risks and benefits of a drug, research is needed. And that's where a dentist comes in.

Dr. Jonathan An has been granted FDA approval to test rapamycin in patients with gum disease - a common condition that tends to accelerate with age. [...] The study will enroll participants over the age of 50 who have gum disease. They will take the drug, at various doses, intermittently for 8 weeks. Then, An will be able to determine if the drug is safe and effective.

If rapamycin has a beneficial effect he says, it will help demonstrate that it's possible to target the root cause of the disease. "It really comes down to targeting the biology of aging," he says. Dr. An thinks gum disease may be a kind of canary in the coalmine of age-related diseases. For instance, gum disease is linked to a higher risk of heart disease, and maybe dementia, too. [...] Rapamycin is a generic drug, so pharmaceutical companies have little incentive to fund new research. [...]

For now, XPRIZE founder Peter Diamandis, a physician who writes about longevity, says he takes rapamycin. "I do six milligrams every Sunday night, so once a week, for three weeks", he explains. Then he takes a month off. "I believe that rapamycin - in the way I'm utilizing it - is safe and has more upside potential than downside," he says. [...]

His plan is to continue with healthy lifestyle habits while supporting research into interventions and strategies that can help people add more healthy years to their life.

Adapted from *NPR* July 2024 (452 words)

RASHIDA TLAIB ACCUSES SUPERMARKET BRAND OF USING FACIAL RECOGNITION FOR SURGE PRICING

Michigan congresswoman Rashida Tlaib has called on Kroger, one of the biggest supermarket chains in the US to answer questions about its use of electronic shelving labels and facial recognition technology.

The Democrat told CEO Rodney McMullen she was worried about that technology being used discriminately, and was concerned about the potential it could lead to prices rising for essential goods – something that one of America's largest supermarket chains has denied would happen. [...]

Tlaib said it was her understanding that, through a partnership with Microsoft, Kroger was intending to place cameras at its digital displays, using facial recognition to determine the gender and age of the store's customers who are captured on camera and using that information to present them with targeted advertising on the electronic shelving labels.

"Studies have shown that facial recognition technology is flawed and can lead to discrimination in predominantly Black and brown communities," Tlaib said. "The racial biases of facial recognition technology are well-documented and should not be extended into our grocery stores." She said this was concerning given complaints about the rising cost of groceries at big retailers across the country, and that Kroger's electronic tools could be "abused in the pursuit of profit." [...]

But Kroger claimed that its business model was "built on a foundation of lowering prices to attract more customers. To be clear, Kroger does not and has never engaged in 'surge pricing.' Any test of electronic shelf tags is designed to lower prices for more customers where it matters most. To suggest otherwise is not true," the grocer said. [...] They said the company has never used facial recognition in stores, and are not aware of any future plans to do so.

Kroger did not respond to *The Independent's* multiple requests for comment, but a Microsoft spokesperson also denied the use of facial recognition technology. "Kroger is not using Microsoft facial recognition technology, and the current digital price tag technology being used is not the technology we piloted in 2019," they said.

In 2019, Fast Company reported that Kroger was piloting a program called Enhanced Display for Grocery Environment (EDGE) and that it would implement artificial intelligence-powered facial recognition technology in some of its displays. An announcement from Microsoft published at around the same time does not mention facial recognition. [...]

Microsoft posted an article in June of 2018 detailing Kroger EDGE, which it presented as more "environmentally efficient" than paper tags. "EDGE – which stands for Enhanced Display for Grocery Environment – relies on Microsoft Azure to store and process volumes of data generated by customer actions on and around the shelves," Microsoft said. [...]

Adapted from *The Independent*October 2024
(449 words)

REPUBLICAN DEBATE FLARES AHEAD OF KING CHARLES' FIRST VISIT TO AUSTRALIA AS HEAD OF STATE

	[.] Cl	harles	and	Queen	Cam	lla w	ill arrive	in	Australia	on	18	October,	with	stops	in
Sy	/dney	/ and	Canbe	erra c	during tl	neir si	κ-day	visit.								

[...] A letter from King Charles to the Australian Republic Movement (ARM) was publicly reported this week. In the letter, Charles indicated he would not stand in the way if Australia wished to become a republic.

The letter was in response to one sent by the ARM in December 2023, requesting a meeting with the King during his proposed visit to discuss Australia's future relationship with the UK, and asking him to "consider publicly supporting the will of the Australian people and their desires to move to a republic".

In the reply [...], Nathan Ross, assistant private secretary to the King, thanked the group for its "thoughtfulness in writing as you did" and reiterated the King and Queen's "love and affection for Australia and Australians. The King appreciated that you took the time to write and asked me to reply on his behalf," wrote Ross in the letter, seen by the Guardian. "Please be assured that your views on this matter have been noted very carefully. His Majesty, as a constitutional Monarch, acts on the advice of his Ministers, and whether Australia becomes a republic is, therefore, a matter for the Australian public to decide."

Australia held a referendum in 1999 on the issue of becoming a republic, in which 54.9% of the country voted against.

Australia's prime minister, Anthony Albanese, has previously voiced strong support for the country becoming a republic, saying: "Australia should have an Australian as our head of state." When he took power in 2022, he appointed one of his MPs as assistant minister for the republic, signalling his intent to move towards another referendum. However, Albanese recently indicated that a second referendum was not a priority, and the assistant ministry was abolished in July.

Nathan Hansford, co-chair of ARM, said while the group had thought it was "quite unlikely" the King would agree to their request to support their cause – thereby eliminating himself as head of state in Australia – they wanted to have a respectful conversation about Australia's future. "It's up to Australia to decide what they want to do with the head of state. And what better time for us to have a think about that than when the King is here this week."

Hansford said according to research conducted by the group, 8% of Australians are "rusted-on monarchists", 60% of Australians preferred an Australian as head of state and 40% of Australians didn't even realise that Charles was the country's head of state. [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (457 words)

RETHINKING SCREEN TIME

Screen time, at first glance, seems easy to understand: It's simply the time spent on devices with screens such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and TVs. But this basic definition hides the variety within people's digital activities. To truly understand screen time's impact, you need to look closer at specific digital activities and how each affects cognitive function and mental health. [...]

In our research, we divide screen time into four broad categories: educational use, work-related use, social interaction and entertainment.

For education, activities like online classes and reading articles can improve cognitive skills like problem-solving and critical thinking. Digital tools like mobile apps can support learning by boosting motivation, self-regulation and self-control.

But these tools also pose challenges, such as distracting learners and contributing to poorer recall compared with traditional learning methods. For young users, screen-based learning may even have negative impacts on development and their social environment.

Screen time for work, like writing reports or attending virtual meetings, is a central part of modern life. It can improve productivity and enable remote work. However, prolonged screen exposure and multitasking may also lead to stress, anxiety and cognitive fatigue.

Screen use for social connection helps people interact with others through video chats, social media or online communities. These interactions can promote social connectedness and even improve health outcomes such as decreased depressive symptoms and improved glycaemic control for people with chronic conditions. But passive screen use, like endless social media scrolling, can lead to negative experiences such as cyberbullying, social comparison and loneliness [...].

Screen use for entertainment provides relaxation and stress relief. Mindfulness apps or meditation tools, for example, can reduce anxiety and improve emotional regulation. Creative digital activities, like graphic design and music production, can reduce stress and improve mental health. However, too much screen use may reduce well-being by limiting physical activity and time for other rewarding pursuits.

Screen time affects people differently based on factors like mood, social setting, age and family environment. Your emotions before and during screen use can shape your experience. Positive interactions can lift your mood, while loneliness might deepen with certain online activities. [...] The social context of screen use also matters. Watching a movie with family can strengthen bonds, while using screens alone can increase feelings of isolation, especially when it replaces face-to-face interactions. [...]

Understanding screen use requires a more nuanced approach than tracking the amount of time people spend on their screens. Recognizing the different effects of specific digital activities and distinguishing between active and passive use are crucial steps. Using standardized definitions and combining quantitative data with personal insights would provide a fuller picture. [...] For the rest of us, this awareness encourages a balanced digital diet that blends enriching online and offline activities for better well-being.

Adapted from theconversation.com November 2024 (458 words)

REVEALED: THE INTERNATIONAL RACE SCIENCE NETWORK

An international network of race science activists seeking to influence public debate with discredited ideas on race and eugenics has been operating with secret funding from a multi-millionaire US tech entrepreneur. The organisation was formed two years ago as the Human Diversity Foundation. Its members have used podcasts, videos, an online magazine and research papers to seed ideology about the supposed genetic superiority of certain ethnic groups.

The anti-racism campaign Hope Not Hate began investigating after meeting the group's English organiser, a former teacher, at a far-right conference. Undercover footage was shared with the Guardian, which conducted further research alongside Hope Not Hate and reporting partners in Germany. HDF received more than \$1million from Andrew Conru, a Seattle businessman who made his fortune from dating websites, the recordings reveal. After being approached by the Guardian, Conru pulled his support, saying the group appeared to have deviated from its original mission of non-partisan academic research.

While it remains a fringe outfit, HDF is part of a movement to rehabilitate so-called race science as a topic of open debate. Labelled scientific racism by mainsteam academics, it seeks to prove biological differences between races such as higher average IQ or a tendency to commit crime.

Dr Rebecca Sear, the director of the Centre for Culture and Evolution at Brunel University, described it as a dangerous ideology with real-world consequences. « Scientific racism has been used to argue against any policies that attempt to reduce inequalities between racial groups, » she said. It was also deployed to argue for more restrictive immigration policies. In one conversation, HDF's organiser was recorded discussing "remigration" - a euphemism for the mass removal of ethnic minorities. The term has become a buzzword on the hard right. Donald Trump used it last month to describe his own policies in a post on X that has been viewed 56 million times.

In Germany, protestors took to the streets in February after it emerged politicians had attended a remigration conference in Potsdam. Among the delegates was an activist called Erik Ahrens. He has been designated a rightwing extremist by German authorities, who have concluded he poses an extremely high danger, particularly in regard to radicalising young people. This investigation reveals Ahrens spent months working with members of HDF. Ahrens said that he works for the Alternative for Germany party as a consultant.

Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD) is Germany's leading far-right party. Ahrens said he held ambitions to seek political office. "My vision is actually to one day run in Gemany in a Trump-like fashion. It has not been done for 100 years."

Adapted from *The Guardian Weekly*October 2024
(449 words)

SCIENTISTS DISMAYED AS UK MINISTERS CLEAR WAY FOR GENE EDITING OF CROPS - BUT NOT ANIMALS

Ministers are preparing to introduce legislation that will permit the growing of gene-edited crops in England and Wales. But the new legislation will not cover the use of this technology to create farm animals that have increased resistance to disease or lower carbon footprints.

The decision has dismayed some senior scientists, who had expected both uses of gene editing would be given the go-ahead. They fear the decision could hold back the creation of hardier, healthier herds and flocks. Animal welfare groups have welcomed the move, however.

Gene editing involves making slight changes to plant or animal DNA to create new strains or breeds. The technology has been replacing the techniques of genetic modification (GM), which involve the transfer of entire genes from one species to another and has been strictly regulated by the EU. [...]

Prof Helen Sang of the Roslin Institute in Scotland agreed. "With a virulent strain of porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome wiping out pig herds in Spain, African swine fever on the march north through Europe, and bird flu virus [...] the importance of enabling all potential solutions as soon as possible, including precision breeding, cannot be overstated" [...]

However, the decision to indefinitely delay the introduction of gene-edited animals was welcomed by Penny Hawkins, head of the RSPCA's Animals in Science Department. "Every year, about twelve percent of food from animals is wasted. So it is completely unethical to push animal productivity even further when so much is thrown away already," she said.

Hawkins added that there was some argument to support the use of gene editing to create species better able to resist diseases. "However, in most cases, diseases are preventable through good housing, husbandry and care and veterinary surveillance. Directly editing animal genomes should be seen as a last resort," she said. "And what happens if a gene edit proves to be unstable? How will [...] these animals be [...] brought back into conditions where they can be properly monitored?"

Other scientists point out that the UK is one of the world's leaders in the field of gene editing of animal breeds and related technologies. If British researchers are prevented from developing their research then there is a real risk their expertise will wither and the country will lose investment and scientific talent.

"We are creating the opportunities to enhance animal health and welfare, reduce the burden of disease, but we are not creating the opportunity to actually manifest that in the UK – unlike many other countries, such as the US and Brazil," added Hammond. "I can see a situation where we export our knowledge but end up having to import the products created from that knowledge." [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian* November 2024 (456 words)

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO? THE DILEMNA FOR YOUNG NIGERIANS

Nigerian graduate Olotu Olanrewaju is facing a choice between remaining in the country he loves and the possibility of a better life elsewhere. He adores the culture, food, music and family mentality at home, especially how people look out for each other and share common goals. But the 24-year-old electrical engineer feels he is being held back professionally. [...] There is also the feeling that the lack of reliable basic infrastructure - causing things like power cuts - as well as security concerns, corruption and poor governance, all create unnecessary barriers to getting on with life.

Mr Olanrewaju is one of tens of thousands of young, disenchanted Nigerians contemplating the move to join many others overseas. It's a trend known by the Yoruba word "japa" meaning "to escape". [...] The idea of emigrating from Nigeria is not new. Since the 1980s, many middle-class Nigerians have sought economic opportunities abroad, but the scale and urgency now feels different and japa is becoming increasingly popular with Gen Z and millennials. [...]

But leaving is a pricey venture. The rising cost of living, and the depreciation of the currency, the naira, has made an expensive process even harder - but also pushed more people to try to leave. It is far easier for professionals and university graduates who have the skills and qualifications needed to secure well-paying jobs and visas in the West, as well as the finances to start a new life in a country where the cost of living is far higher than at home. As well as those seeking legal routes, many Nigerians try to move abroad without visas, by crossing the Sahara Desert or the Mediterranean Sea. Thousands of people die each year on the journey and those who make it often struggle to find work or somewhere decent to live. [...] There are more than 270,000 Nigerians living in the UK, according to government statistics. It is one of the most popular destinations for japa, [...]

Japa has hit the medical profession especially hard. The Nigerian Medical Association said, in 2022, at least 50 doctors were leaving the country every single week. This has left an already overloaded healthcare system struggling. The government has said it will train more people to fill these gaps and backed a new bill that would require medical graduates to work in Nigeria for a minimum of five years after completing their training. It was fiercely opposed by doctors' unions. A similar directive has also been issued for nurses, to get them to work in the country for at least two years before trying to leave.

Adapted from *BBC*July 2024
(452 words)

SHOULD WE TOLERATE INTOLERANCE?

It is commonly accepted that, to have a fair society that accepts diversity as well as the freedom of speech and opinion that come with it, we must practice tolerance. Tolerance is understood as allowing or accepting the actions, ideas and the people that we disagree with. But then, a complex problem appears to us. If we are to accept all the ideas that we don't agree with, what about the people that do not want to accept the people they disagree with? Should we tolerate these intolerant people? Should we therefore tolerate intolerance?

This is precisely the question that 20th century philosopher Karl Popper raised. In his book, "the Open Society and Its Enemies", he poses the famous "paradox of intolerance". He suggests that "in order to maintain a tolerant society, this society must not tolerate intolerance." He then explains that if we allow unlimited tolerance, intolerance will use this freedom to attack tolerance and destroy it. And since that is not what tolerant people want, intolerance should not be tolerated.

He does state that we should indeed have the right to be intolerant to the people who are not open to dialogue, to the people who wish to impose their intolerant ideas through violence and who may also prevent their followers from listening to rational argument. However, the right to be intolerant does not mean keeping silent or simply censoring intolerant people. Instead, it means fighting them back with reasonable arguments in the hope of making them ready for a debate, and, therefore, making them more tolerant. [...]

John Rawls, another 20th century philosopher, says that we should tolerate intolerance, because, if we don't, the society will itself become intolerant. However, he comes to a similar conclusion as Popper when he says that, in extreme consequences, a tolerant society still has the right to self defense but only when the tolerant people "sincerely and with reason" believe that their own safety and liberty are in danger.

In essence, both philosophers tell us that we should allow intolerance as a right and freedom, just as long as it doesn't go against the right and freedom of tolerant people.

As a conclusion, today, as diversity in opinion is everywhere and the idea of tolerance is more powerful than ever, it is time to reflect upon these positions. And it is even more important to discuss the limits of free speech and, at the same time, the limits of censorship. It is bad to be intolerant, it is bad to hold back freedom of speech? So, where is the middle ground? Where does your right to be intolerant end, and where does my right to fight back end?

Adapted from *Campus-J*September 2024
(450 words)

SMALL AND LETHAL: ADAPTED DRONES CARRYING EXPLOSIVES HUNT CIVILIANS

Sacha Ustenko has survived three attacks by the Russian drones that stalk the streets of Kherson carrying fragmentation grenades to drop on anything that moves. The first, in late July, targeted a parked police car in central Kherson just as Ustenko walked past, throwing him to the ground. The second, in mid August, hit a drinking water tanker as he queued for supplies, killing the driver. Ustenko was concussed, and came round to see a man lying in a pool of blood. The third time, in late September, he heard the drone buzzing above and sprinted for shelter under the branches of a cherry tree. He hoped its leaves would hide him but the grenade tumbled through the canopy and landed barely a metre away. The explosion ripped his left index finger apart. He is left-handed, so at 51 he is learning to write again with his other hand.

Two years into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, civilians living in the front-line city of Kherson are grappling with the new threat from small civilian drones adapted to carry explosives.

On social media, Russian soldiers openly boast that their target is anyone or anything that moves. Since the drones began swarming the city in July, there have been thousands of attacks each month, killing 24 civilians and injuring hundreds more. « The hunt has started » urged one Telegram post above a satellite image of an ordinary van. « Any black minivan must be destroyed no matter where they are going. »

They have dropped grenades on buses and people waiting at bus stops, civilians on bikes and queuing for humanitarian aid, or, like Ustenko, just walking home with shopping. One video, shared by a drone operator, follows two people ambling down a quiet Kherson street oblivious to the drone overhead until it drops a grenade that cuts both down.

The repurposed Mavic drones made in China for photography and videos, are controlled on radio frequencies that Ukraine's anti-drone system cannot block, and are too small, too numerous and fly too low for traditional air defences to pick up. In August there were more than 2,500 attacks, the vast majority of them inside Kherson city, said a spokesman for the Kherson military administration. In September there were more than 2,700.

Between 1 July and 11 October, drones injured more than 400 civilians, including some requiring amputations, the spokesman said. They are driving Kherson citizens out of areas where they had clung on through nine months of occupation after the full-scale Russian invasion of Kherson in February 2022 and another two years of war.

Adapted from *The Guardian Weekly*October 2024
(450 words)

SMARTPHONES AND HELICOPTER PARENTS WORSENING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

[] Zach Rausch, an associate research scientist at New York University [] who
helped social psychologist Jonathan Haidt write <i>The Anxious Generation,</i> told the <i>Washington</i>
Examiner that the book's thesis is that "we've been overprotecting kids in the real world, but
underprotecting them online."

Haidt and Rausch argue that the combination of hyperprotective parenting that began in the 1980s and the rise of smartphones in the 2010s has led to what they call the "Great Rewiring of Childhood." These massive shifts in parenting and technology have altered the childhood and adolescent experience to the degree that they have caused a sizable rise in anxiety, depression, and suicidality in children born after 1995. [...]

[...] Around this period, people of all ages spent less time in one-to-one, embodied, and real-time interaction with one another and shifted toward one-to-many, disembodied, and asynchronous communication, such as likes from strangers on a social media post versus intimate conversations with friends and family.

Children and adolescents are the most vulnerable to the negative effects of technology because of their developing brains and limited mental maturity. At the same time, the cultural shift in the late 20th century of shielding children from difficult situations, which is sometimes called helicopter parenting, or what Haidt and Rausch call "safetyism," prevents children from growing through adversity and challenge.

So, as children increasingly retreat into the virtual world that does not prepare them for adulthood, their experience in the real world is also less fulfilling than in generations past, creating a twofold problem. [...] "Children need certain experiences to grow up and thrive as adults," Rausch said. "It's not just social media that is this problem. It's that it's displacing a lot of this really essential aspect of childhood."

- [...] Haidt and Rausch contend [...] that children grow up by gradually being given greater responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of challenging them to sink or swim on their own. While parental safetyism removed the risks [...] of children being able to solve problems for themselves in the real world, smartphones act as "experience blockers" as well, sucking children's attention and preventing them from developing the skills necessary to interact off-screen.
- [...] Although most schools have policies of no smartphones during class time, Haidt argues that this encourages students to not only hide the use of phones in class but also to spend non class time interacting on their phones rather than in person with other students. Parents similarly face a collective action problem in giving children independence if they're worried that other parents will judge them, perhaps even alleging that they are neglecting their children if they are left unsupervised.

Adapted from *The Washington Examiner*April 2024
(458 words)

SOUTHERN WATER CONSIDERS SHIPPING SUPPLIES FROM NORWEGIAN FJORDS TO UK

Southern Water, one of Britain's largest water companies, is drawing up contingency plans to ship water from Norway to address future supply shortages and droughts. The company, which serves 2.7 million customers in the south-east of England, could import water from Norwegian fjords, delivering up to 45 million litres a day, with costs passed on to customers' bills.

Southern is in discussions with Extreme Drought Resilience Service (EDRS), a UK private company, to arrange water shipments. EDRS supplies water in Tetra Pak-style cartons, shipping containers, or megalitres delivered by sea tanker. The Environment Agency has been in contact with Norwegian regulators to review the plan, which it sees as a result of the company's delayed water supply schemes.

Southern Water stated that tanker shipments would be a "last-resort measure," only used in extreme drought conditions. Tim McMahon, managing director for water, added that other backup options would be prioritized first, such as temporary desalination plants and water-saving agreements with local businesses to maintain water supply. The plan to use tankers, which was first reported by the *Financial Times*, will be reviewed by the Environment Agency through a public consultation. The agency will consider the environmental acceptability of using sea tankers from Norway, especially given the potential impact on local ecosystems.

Southern Water has also pledged to reduce its reliance on extracting water from the River Test and River Itchen in Hampshire. Both rivers are designated as areas of special scientific interest due to their unique ecosystems. The company has committed to using less water from these rivers and building new reservoirs, such as the Havant Thicket reservoir in Hampshire. In light of the climate crisis, water companies are lobbying regulators for permission to raise bills significantly over the next five years to fund necessary infrastructure improvements. However, campaigners argue that consumers have already paid for upgrades that have not yet been implemented.

Greenpeace UK's chief scientist, Doug Parr, criticized Southern Water's plans, stating that decades of neglecting infrastructure have led to costly alternatives like tankering. "Transporting vast quantities of water from Norway will be a carbon-intensive and expensive option," said Parr. "Water companies need to treat potable water as a precious and finite resource." In July, the CEO of Southern Water was awarded a £183,000 bonus despite criticism from Ofwat, the industry regulator, for submitting a business plan that was deemed inadequate and for proposing significant price hikes. Southern Water is majority-owned by the Australian investment firm Macquarie, which took control in 2021 after the company received a £1bn bailout to avoid possible renationalisation.

Adapted from *The Guardian* September 2024 (450 words)

STARMER TO PROMISE 'LIGHT AT THE END OF TUNNEL'

Sir Keir Starmer will warn of a "shared struggle" ahead but say there is "light at the end of the tunnel" for the country, in his first speech to the Labour Party conference as prime minister. The PM will say "tough" decisions need to be taken now to "build a new Britain".

Since winning power, the Labour government has painted a bleak picture of the public finances - but in his speech the PM will seek to present a more positive vision for the future.

[...] In his speech, Sir Keir will promise a future of "national renewal". "The politics of national renewal are collective. They involve a shared struggle," he will say. "A project that says, to everyone, this will be tough in the short term, but in the long term - it's the right thing to do for our country. And we all benefit from that."

Echoing the message his Chancellor [...] gave in her speech on Monday, Sir Keir will say that "if we take tough long-term decisions now" there will be "light at the end of the tunnel". However, he will warn against "easy answers" and offering "false hope".

Sir Keir will also announce new legislation to crack down on welfare fraudsters, which Labour says is expected to save £1.6bn over the next five years. Under the plans, the Department for Work and Pensions will get new powers to investigate suspected benefit fraud and recover debts from individuals who can pay money back but have avoided doing so. Labour said there would be safeguarding measures to protect vulnerable claimants.

Elsewhere in his speech, Sir Keir will commit to reducing net migration by training Britons to fill vacancies in the jobs market rather than allowing employers to rely on overseas labour.

[...] The party has accused the previous Conservative government of leaving a £22bn "black hole" of unfunded spending commitments in the public finances - something the Tories have disputed. Sir Keir will repeat the claim in his speech, saying the Tories have also "decimated public services, leaving communities held together by little more than goodwill". But he will warn the pockets of working people "are not deep" and public services will need "reform" as well as investment. "Just because we all want low taxes and good public services, does not mean that the iron law of properly funding policies can be ignored," he will add.

Labour has repeatedly promised it will not raise taxes on "working people", including VAT, National Insurance and income tax. However, the chancellor has already said she will have to raise some other taxes in October's Budget because of the state of the public finances. [...]

Adapted from *BBC News* September 2024 (454 words)

STARSHIP WILL CHANGE WHAT IS POSSIBLE BEYOND EARTH

In any normal week, the biggest-ever interplanetary probe blasting off to look for signs of life in the depths of an occult ocean would grab the headlines about space. But the launch of *Europa Clipper* on October 14th was eclipsed, spectacularly, by the test flight the previous day of the Starship being developed by SpaceX, a launch provider, satellite-communications supplier and Mars-settlement enabler founded and run by Elon Musk. Seven minutes after take-off a thin, waggling finger of rocket-fire guided the launcher's huge first stage back to its launchpad in Texas [...]

It is tempting to see such success as a culmination. Mr Musk sees it as a start. The Starship system is designed to provide about eight times as much mass to orbit per flight as a Falcon 9, the SpaceX workhorse, and to fly even more often. The company talks about reaching a cadence of more than one launch a day; it says its factories could eventually build 1,000 Starships a year. Mr Musk talks of dropping the cost of shipping a tonne into orbit by at least tenfold.

SpaceX was founded "to revolutionise space technology, with the ultimate goal of enabling people to live on other planets". It is undoubtedly doing the first of those and with this week's success it is better placed to accomplish the second. Mr Musk says that in 2026, the next time the planets are well-aligned for such ventures, SpaceX will send five uncrewed Starships to Mars. Crews will follow perhaps four years later. He hopes before too long to be sending hundreds of Starships and tens of thousands of people at every more or less biennial opportunity. Some of the journeys will have return legs: Starship uses fuel that is in principle fairly easily synthesised on Mars. But his main purpose is settlement. [...] SpaceX looks set to pursue its interplanetary goal until it achieves something like it, or tragedy strikes, or other forces intervene.

As it does so, it will open up the possibility of other previously impossible and conceivably more fruitful enterprises. Starship should allow SpaceX to increase the capacity of its Starlink satellite-communications system beyond anything previously feasible. Other companies plan to use Starship to launch space stations [...]. Astronomers dream of huge space telescopes (even as they fret about Starlink and its like blocking the view of the cosmos from Earth's surface). Tech visionaries look at space's supply of uninterrupted solar energy and wonder if they should be harnessing it to train Als in orbit. Generals think dark thoughts about what might be dropped on whom, and how hard. And competitors in America, China and perhaps elsewhere will vie to replicate and surpass what SpaceX has done.

Adapted from *The Economist* October 2024 (456 words)

STATE LEGISLATION TO PROTECT CHILDREN

Giving a new impulse to efforts to protect children from the negative effects of social media, California Gov. Gavin Newsom has signed landmark legislation to combat the powerful "addictive" strategies tech companies use to keep children online, often for hours on end. The legislation is the second of its kind in the nation, and is similar to a New York law signed earlier this year. [...] The bill will prohibit online platforms from knowingly providing minors with what are called in the industry "addictive feeds" without parental consent. The bill also prohibits social media platforms from sending notifications to minors during school hours and late at night. "Every parent knows the harm social media addiction can inflict on their children" Newsom said in a statement issued over the weekend. "With this bill, California is helping protect children and teenagers from purposely designed features that feed these destructive habits." [...]

The legislation Newsom signed marks a growing effort to rein in the impact of allencompassing technology that has revolutionized ways of communicating and brought significant benefits — but whose harmful effects on children are only now becoming clearer. It is almost certainly the case that few parents, and even fewer children, are aware of the complex, and hugely effective, systems tech companies employ to keep users on their platforms, often for hours on end. Addictive feeds are generated by automated systems known as algorithms and are intended to keep users engaged by suggesting content based on groups, friends, topics or headlines they may have clicked on in the past. Instead, the law would make "chronological feeds" the default setting on social media platforms accessed by children. These feeds are generated only by posts from people they follow, in the order they were uploaded. "Social media companies will no longer have the right to addict our kids to their platforms, sending them harmful and sensational content that our kids don't want and haven't searched for," Governor Newsom said. The legislation follows Newsom's signing in 2022 of a bill that prohibits companies providing online services from using a child's personal information, collecting, selling, profiling a child by default, retaining a child's physical location, or encouraging children to provide personal information. [...]

But the passage of the law underscored the headwinds that efforts to regulate social media can run into. Immediately after its passage in 2022, online businesses, including giants like Amazon, Google, Meta and TikTok, filed a lawsuit to prevent its implementation. It argued that the law violated the First Amendment by restricting free speech and that companies would be limited in their editorial decisions over what content they could put out on their sites. It is not known whether tech companies will similarly challenge the new legislation.

Adapted from *edsource.org* September 2024 (452 words)

THE ALLURE OF ANIME: MORE THAN JUST CARTOONS

[...] For those who haven't quite dipped their toes into the vibrant world of Japanese animation, anime might simply appear as a glossy upgrade to the classic Saturday morning cartoons. Yet, for the digitally-native Generation Z, anime stands as a diverse and complex form of media that traverses an expansive array of genres and themes. From the high-octane escapades of "Naruto" to the deep, existential contemplations of "Neon Genesis Evangelion," anime provides a rich tapestry of narratives that are both a means of escape and a profound commentary on the human condition.

Anime's charm isn't just in its ability to transport viewers to fantastical worlds; it also lies in its unique blend of stunning visuals and compelling storytelling. This medium boldly tackles topics that are often considered taboo in other forms of media, including complex emotional traumas and social issues. It's no wonder then that Gen Z – known for their advocacy for mental health awareness and social justice – finds this form of entertainment resonant and transformative.

Gen Z viewers often see parts of themselves in the characters and stories unfolding on the screen. "Anime characters often struggle with their identities and face societal pressures, just like we do. Watching them overcome their challenges gives us hope and sometimes even a roadmap for our own lives," shared Mia, a 19-year-old college student and avid anime fan.

Furthermore, anime's exploration of sensitive themes such as mental health, identity crises, and ethical dilemmas aligns well with Gen Z's ethos. They are a generation unafraid to delve deep into discussions about mental health and are constantly on the lookout for narratives that reflect their intricate realities. "Anime doesn't shy away from showing characters with real flaws and real issues. It's refreshing to see that on screen because it makes you feel less alone in your struggles," comments Jayden, a 22-year-old graphic designer.

Moreover, anime often embeds its narratives with lessons on resilience, acceptance, and the importance of community, which resonate deeply with young people navigating the complexities of today's world. The visual storytelling not only captures their imagination but also sparks conversations around the themes it portrays.

Anime's allure for Gen Z goes beyond its aesthetic appeal. It is a cultural touchstone that reflects and influences their views on a variety of profound topics. By engaging with anime, Gen Z finds not only a source of entertainment but also a mirror of their personal and societal challenges, making it a crucial part of their cultural landscape. "The way anime deals with complex emotions and social issues makes it a powerful tool for understanding ourselves and the world around us. It's not just entertainment; it's a conversation starter." [...]

Adapted from www.wokewaves.com October 2024 (454 words)

THE BOYS IN OUR LIBERAL SCHOOL ARE DIFFERENT NOW THAT TRUMP HAS WON

When we walked into school on the morning of 6 November, we exchanged quick glances with the other girls in our social circle – looks filled with uncertainty and dread about the future. [...] Access to abortion and contraception, protection of the environment, and the growing hate and violence toward marginalized groups all have the potential to greatly impact our lives. We had conversations about why Trump's victory felt so defeating.

But as we sat down at our desks, we noticed a very different attitude among our male peers. Subtle high-fives were exchanged and remarks about the impending success of the next four years were whispered around. It didn't make much sense. We live in a mostly liberal town in the Hudson Valley where Harris-Walz signs were posted outside of most of our friends' houses. [...] The boys that were the most vocal in their enthusiasm about the election results have progressive parents just like ours.

- [...] Then we started to realize that [...] it was just the beginning of a new wave of male conservatism that was infiltrating our school. Obsession with achieving a more muscular body through excessive exercise and intense dieting fuelled by ridiculous social media campaigns fell far outside the realm of healthy self-care. And the desire to socialize only with other boys stood in stark contrast to the co-ed activities we were accustomed to since childhood.
- [...] Seemingly harmless disrespectful comments with witty undertones toward girls became commonplace, and feelings of traditional male dominance started to sneak back into our friend groups. [...]. It genuinely felt as though they viewed us as unintelligent or even inferior. During science lab our male lab partners read the directions aloud to us, and we had to remind them that we could actually read.
- [...] We believe that this is happening across the country. Young, well-off white boys from liberal families are being tempted by conservatism simply to protect an archaic idea of masculinity that guarantees them inherent power. [...] A shift back toward traditional gender roles is resonating with them now as progression toward female empowerment threatens their self-esteem.

So how do we address this? How do we ensure that young boys practice critical thinking instead of falling victim to Trump's rhetoric and gender stereotypes that we believed had finally been eradicated?

Parents, we urge you to be aware of this growing phenomenon and teach your children about the dangers of calculated political movements designed to further one politician's agenda. Until we do so, it is likely this pattern will continue. [...] And the most dangerous aspect of this is how little it's talked about in mainstream media and how easily it has been overlooked in progressive communities. [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian* November 2024 (453 words)

THE COST OF GOING TO UNI IN THE UK

Going to university can be expensive. With tuition fees at record levels, you'll likely end up having to pay back a lot. [...]

Concerning tuition fees, universities can charge up to a maximum of £9,250 per year. So, for a three-year course, you'll need to apply for a student loan that covers up to £27,750 in tuition fees.

Depending on where you live, in England, Wales or Scotland, you can apply for a student loan from your local «Student Finance», which is a service provided by the Student Loans Company to supply financial support on behalf of the UK Government. The interest rate is linked to inflation [...] but recently, the UK government decided to temporarily limit it at 7.7% for all students and graduates. [...]

However, a student loan works much more like a tax than a loan you need to repay by a fixed date. You'll only start repaying your undergraduate loan once you earn [...] enough money after university. It will then take years to fully repay your loan, and some people might not even repay the loan in full. In other words, paying back your student loan doesn't need to be a financial priority until long after you've graduated.

Nevertheless, the amount you need to plan to pay back will be the total of your tuition fees and the interest rate applied, which may still reach tens of thousands of pounds especially if you also need to take out a maintenance loan which will be added to your student debt and repaid in the same way. You may need this maintenance loan to cover your immediate costs that include rent, food, transport and learning resources such as books. The amount of these costs varies a lot depending on where you're studying. There is no typical figure for how much students spend on maintenance costs. For example, studying in London costs much more than elsewhere, and your spending also depends on how you manage your money. [...] There are also some hidden costs to keep in mind. Depending on what course you're studying, you might need to pay for specialist equipment.

Therefore, when faced with these costs, a lot of students ask themselves whether university is worth the expense. [...] Studies by the Office for National Statistics show graduates earn £11,500 more per year than non-graduates, and the higher you pursue further education, the higher your wages.

So getting a degree can drastically improve your future salary. For this reason, you can think of going to university as an investment in your future.

Adapted from *UNBIASED*April 2024
(444 words)

THE ELITE COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO CAN'T READ BOOKS

Dames has taught Columbia University's great-books course since 1998. He loves the job, but it has changed. Now, his students are overwhelmed by the idea of finishing multiple books a semester. His colleagues have noticed the same problem. Many students no longer arrive at college—even at highly selective, elite colleges—prepared to read books.

This development puzzled Dames until a first-year student came to his office to share how challenging she had found the early assignments. The student told him that, at her public high school, she had never been required to read an entire book. She had been assigned excerpts, poetry, and articles, but never a complete book.

Dames said, he was surprised, not that they don't want to do the reading but that they don't know how. Middle and high schools have stopped asking them to. Twenty years ago classes had no problem engaging in sophisticated discussions of *Pride and Prejudice* one week and *Crime and Punishment* the next. Now, students tell him up front that the reading load feels impossible.

Most professors I spoke with relayed similar experiences. A Princeton historian, said his students arrive with a narrower vocabulary and less understanding of language than they used to have. A literature professor finds his students "shutting down" when confronted with ideas they don't understand; they're less able to persist through a challenging text than they used to be. Students have trouble staying focused on even a sonnet.

The issue is distinct from the problem at community colleges and nonselective universities, where some students arrive with literacy and comprehension deficits that can leave them unable to complete courses. High-achieving students at exclusive schools like Columbia can decode words and sentences. But they struggle to muster the attention or ambition required to finish a substantial text.

Now, many college professors feel they have no choice but to assign less reading and lower their expectations. A literature teacher at Berkeley said they used to assign 200 pages each week but now assign less than half of that. "I don't do the whole *Iliad*. I assign texts about *The Iliad*. I hope some of them will read the whole thing." "It's not like I can say, 'Okay, over the next three weeks, I expect you to read *The Iliad*,' because they're not going to do it."

According to neuroscientists, so-called deep readings – sustained immersion in a text – stimulates valuable mental habits, including critical thinking and self-reflection, in ways that skimming or reading in short bursts does not.

To understand the human condition and to appreciate humankind's greatest achievements, you still need to read *The Iliad* – all of it.

Adapted from *The Atlantic* November 2024 (452 words)

THE EXODUS FROM X TO BLUESKY HAS HAPPENED – THE ERA OF MASS SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IS OVER

Hell is millions of people who would avoid each other if they met in real life, but who are shoved into each other's faces and encouraged to punch each other online, which ends in viral bullying, death threats, children ripping other children to shreds on platforms they are legally not old enough to join.

It's sociability without accountability. It was making us miserably stressed long before Elon Musk bought X. Even then, people stayed for the reasons people stay in toxic relationships – inertia, fear of being lonely, misplaced hope it may get better – and it seemed intrinsic to many working lives. You had to be on X because everyone else was, a circular logic [...]

Bluesky has added 1 million users since the US election. What's the point, the chair of the women and equalities committee asked, in being on a site that's "gone from cat memes [...] to calling people whores just for having a different political opinion"?

Platforms come and go, but this feels different: the final death of the idea that social media could ever be ... a global meeting place for ideas. Now, [...] the future of social media looks increasingly segregated [...] X for the rightwing [...] centrists on Bluesky; people who hate politics on Threads or Instagram; Gen Z on TikTok; boomers on Facebook.

Like most journalists, I'm still listening to different conversations on all of them. But for active posting, I switched to Bluesky... when Musk used the Southport riots to promote the idea of civil war in Britain.

Part of me hates the idea that mass-market platforms are over, if only because I have never stopped believing that breaking out of bubbles, engaging with uncomfortable ideas and trying to understand how other people think matters. But the mistake was to think social media was a shortcut to all that, when online life never truly mirrored real life, even before algorithms skewed it towards the loudest voices and its model worked against understanding.

Bluesky has learned from its predecessors. [...]. It has strong social norms, a culture of blocking rather than feeding attention-seeking trolls. It makes you wonder why we let ourselves be kidded for so long that there was nothing platforms could do. But while it's a nice place to be right now, so was Twitter in 2009. Growth is near impossible to achieve without malignancy creeping in.

[...] Bluesky's more measured, less emotive conversation is also less addictive, the secret to using social media well today is using it less. The moral isn't to stop listening to ideas you find uncomfortable or people who disagree. It's to do it in real life.

Adapted from *The Guardian*November 2024
(457 Words)

THE GUARDIAN VIEW ON PHONES IN CONCERT HALLS: WHAT ENGAGES SOME ENRAGES OTHERS

While some feel that allowing live performances to be photographed or filmed adds to the buzz, others hate it. [...]

The debate was sparked when the tenor Ian Bostridge halted a recital in Birmingham because he was being distracted by people recording him. He later discovered that he was out of line with policy at the Symphony Hall, home to the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), which welcomed its audiences to take photographs and short video clips. [...]

The CBSO is not alone in seeing the mobile phone as a potential asset, both in making a younger and more diverse audience feel at home, and in reeling them in. "Just remember to tag us on your wonderful photos so we can share your evening," says English National Opera, which encourages pictures of curtain calls, though not of performances themselves. Other venues take different lines, with London's Wigmore Hall and Royal Opera House operating a strict no-recording policy, while Manchester's Bridgewater Hall pursues a bespoke approach, consulting musicians, in all but classical concerts.

The problems for performers are clear – not only distraction, as in Bostridge's case, but being caught on the blink, or on a bad day. But even they are not unanimous. The violinist Esther Abrami, who has built large followings on TikTok and YouTube, recently said that tagging felt like the modern equivalent of getting flowers after a performance. [...]

On the audience side, the pro-mobile argument rests substantially on the belief that they are part of the lifestyle of young people, who are allowed to use them at other cultural events. [...] [But in] a decade-long survey of ticketing data, [...] respondents reported that they would on balance be put off by phones in performances, even if they were under 35 and new to the arts.

A cautionary tale of the extremes to which unfettered licence can lead was demonstrated by a report that the Louvre is considering moving the Mona Lisa to its own room to accommodate the hordes of visitors wanting to take selfies in front of it. For years they have made it impossible to enjoy one of the world's most famous paintings.

It is in nobody's interest for classical concerts to become extended selfie sessions, where the right to record trumps the entitlement to listen and watch in real-time. That is the whole point of live performance. But phones are not going away, and the viral energy they generate has a role to play in the marketing strategies of ambitious cultural venues. Finding consensual limits – as many venues have done, for instance, with relaxed performances for people with disabilities – is going to be part of their future. Sometimes, it will involve saying no.

Adapted from *The Guardian*May 2024
(458 words)

THE SCOURGE OF ELECTRIC SCOOTERS

[...] Police Scotland said there were 16 accidents in the 12 months up to March 31 involving e-scooters, which are illegal to ride in a public place in Scotland, including any park or town centre, cycle lanes, footpaths or public roads. It is however permissible to ride them on land which is owned by the rider or on private land with permission from the landowner.

Despite the legal position, e-scooters can be bought legally and have become common in towns and cities across Scotland, sparking concerns about pedestrian safety. Police Scotland has been criticised repeatedly for failing to enforce the law, with riders of all ages openly flouting the ban, and have insisted that they are not a major issue nationally.

The Scottish Conservative deputy justice spokesperson said: "We know that these scooters could cause accidents and put the public at risk, so it is concerning that their use is becoming more widespread. The use of these scooters is illegal and the Scottish National Party must provide our police force with the resources they need to stop these crimes and prevent more accidents."

Unlike in parts of England there are no trial schemes in Scotland, yet youngsters well below driving age are routinely seen riding them in public. Police Scotland said local divisions across Scotland do carry out operations in relation to e-scooters and related anti-social behaviour within communities.

[...] E-scooters are classified as Personal Light Electric Vehicles (PLEVs) so they are treated as motor vehicles and are subject to the same legal requirements as any other motor vehicle, requiring insurance, a valid driving licence, and compliance with various construction and use requirements.

These machines, which can hit up to 30mph – faster if modified – have resulted in a number of injuries. In September, a dad criticised reckless e-scooter riders who left his young son in hospital with cuts and bruises after a high-speed hit and run in Dundee, while in April last year a man was taken to hospital after a crash involving an electric scooter in Edinburgh. In August an electric scooter crash led to two men being hospitalised, with one believed seriously injured, while in July two 15-year-olds were reported in connection with a single vehicle crash. The 15-year-old rider was taken to hospital too.

A Police Scotland spokesperson said: "E-scooters can only be legally used on private land with permission from the landowner. Their illegal use can impact local communities and anyone with concerns should contact us so an appropriate policing response can be provided. We also urge anyone purchasing an e-scooter to be aware of the law and the implications of using one in a public place".

Adapted from *theedinburgreporter.co.uk*May 2024
(452 words)

THE SIDEWALK FRUIT VENDOR WHO SOLD A \$6.2 MILLION BANANA FOR 25 CENTS

At the fruit stand where he works on Manhattan's Upper East Side, Shah Alam sells dozens of bananas a day at 35 cents a piece, or four for a dollar. He does a brisk business in cheap fruit outside Sotheby's auction house; inside, art can sell for millions.

But last Wednesday, Mr. Alam sold a banana that a short time later would be auctioned as part of a work of absurdist art, won by a cryptocurrency entrepreneur for \$5.2 million plus more than \$1 million in auction-house fees.

And when Mr Alam was told the sale price [of his banana], he began to cry. [...]

The banana's journey from fruit stand to artwork began in 2019, when Mr. Cattelan first exhibited the work at Art Basel Miami Beach, the international art fair. The conceptual piece of three editions, titled "Comedian," is an implicit sendup of the absurdity of the art world, in keeping with Mr. Cattelan's puckish oeuvre. It came with a detailed owner's manual on just how to affix the banana with the tape, and permission to refresh it when it rots. (Mr. Cattelan bought the original bananas at a Miami grocery store, he has said in interviews.)

Each edition sold in Miami for between \$120,000 and \$150,000 and spurred unruly crowds: A performance artist at the exhibition ripped one off the wall, peeled the banana and ate it. Mr. Cattelan was delighted by the ensuing debate over what exactly constitutes art, and how it is valued.

By last Wednesday, those questions of five years ago seemed quaint: Bidding for Lot No. 10 — Mr. Alam's banana affixed to a wall with a slash of silver tape — started at \$800,000. Within five minutes, seven bidders drove its price above \$5 million.

The artist was not compensated for the Sotheby's sale, which was on behalf of a collector who has not been named, but he said in an email that he was nonetheless thrilled by the price it commanded.

"Honestly, I feel fantastic," Mr. Cattelan wrote. "The auction has turned what began as a statement in Basel into an even more absurd global spectacle." He added: "In that way, the work becomes self-reflexive: The higher the price, the more it reinforces its original concept."

On X, Mr. Sun crowed about his new art acquisition, and announced he now plans to eat it on Friday. He was honored, he wrote, to be the banana's "proud owner": "I believe this piece will inspire more thought and discussion in the future and will become a part of history."

Adapted from *The New York Times* November 2024 (458 words)

THE WORLD'S MOST FEMINIST CITY: HOW UMEA IN SWEDEN BECAME AN IDYLL FOR WOMEN

The big red puma is the focal point of Umeå. The world's first publicly commissioned statue dedicated to the #MeToo movement depicts a snarling cat atop a steel frame designed to imitate prison bars. Its official title [...] is Listen but everyone just calls it "puman" – the Puma. Since it appeared in the main square in front of the old city hall in 2019, it has become the crowning symbol for this quiet, unassuming place a few hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle, known to some as "the most feminist city in the world".

Umeå (pronounced oo-may-yoh [...]) is famous in Sweden as the home of radical ideas. [...] A Swedish friend tells me that "everyone in Umeå is heavily into punk". This seems to be a sort of code to mean that Umeå is thought of – and thinks of itself – as essentially "cool". Even the website of Visit Umeå, the local tourist board, claims that the city has "the beardiest and most heavily tattooed population in the world". Boringly, this does not refer to the women.

So what makes Umeå such a great place to be a woman? [...] An instant example, close to the puma, down towards the river, is a swinging seat where I feel unusually comfortable. Why? The seat was commissioned as part of a special project that canvassed the views of teenage girls, and is designed with average female height in mind: 165cm, my height. I'm not about to demand that every piece of municipal furniture in the world be created to my precise specifications. But it's nice to experience it for once.

"When the university was founded here [in 1965], it was a time of progressive ideas in Sweden," says Dalén. "Later Umeå became the first [city] in Sweden to have a gender studies professorship [...]. There has always been a strong 'civil society' movement here." A women's studies course first appeared on the university curriculum in 1976. [...] Marie-Louise Rönnmark, who later went on to become mayor of the city, was among the first to champion the idea of this place as "a gender-equal municipality" in the 1990s. [...]

In the early days of Umeå's gender studies work at the university, the primary question was: "Who has the power to plan the city?" The answer until about 50 years ago was, of course, men. "Now the kind of questions we ask are these: Who visits this park? Who uses this bike lane? Who is a part of this dialogue? Who is excluded? Why is that group under-represented in this dialogue? The data that we have — is it gender-segregated? [...]

Adapted from www.theguardian.com October 2024 (453 words)

TOBACCO, ALCOHOL, PROCESSED FOODS AND FOSSIL FUELS 'KILL 2.7M A YEAR IN EUROPE'

[...] In a groundbreaking report, the World Health Organization said powerful industries were driving ill-health and premature death by using "misleading" marketing and interfering in governments' efforts to prevent killer diseases such as cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

The report calculates that tobacco, fossil fuels, ultra-processed foods and alcohol are responsible for over 7,400 deaths every day across Europe's states. The four industries cause an estimated 2.7 million deaths annually in Europe, a quarter of all mortality.

The UN health agency's findings are an unprecedented attack on the damage major corporations' products are inflicting on human health. The report describes how "big industry" uses overt and covert methods to boost their profits by delaying and derailing policies to improve population health.

[...] "Transnational corporations wield significant power over the political and legal contexts to obstruct public interest regulations which could impact their profit margins," the WHO said.

The WHO director for Europe said: "Industry tactics include exploitation of vulnerable people through targeted marketing strategies, misleading consumers, and making false claims about the benefits of their products or their environmental credentials."

Major commercial industries' tactics are undermining measures to reduce smoking, drinking and obesity, which are the biggest causes of avoidable ill-health. Recent research has found that alcohol, tobacco, processed food and beverages plus fossil fuels cause 34% of all deaths globally.

The WHO analysis shows that all European countries are off-track to meet the UN's sustainable development goals of halting the rise in obesity or cutting smoking among those aged 15 and over by 30%. The 53 countries between them consume more alcohol than any other region globally.

Despite the health risks, only a minority of European countries have banned smoking in public places. [...] The WHO estimates that tobacco accounts for 10% of all deaths in Europe. Nearly 600,000 deaths are caused each year by fossil fuels, while alcohol causes more than 400,000 deaths a year. And more than 350,000 people die each year from consuming too much processed meat, sugary drinks and fatty, salty food. [...]

The World Cancer Research Fund urged people to follow a largely plant-based diet more often and limit their drinking. [...] Evidence shows that eating a variety of plant-based foods as well as wholegrains, fruit and pulses, and limiting your consumption of alcohol, are effective ways to reduce people's risk of cancer. [...]

But responding to the study, the director for food safety, research and innovation at FoodDrinkEurope, said: "To connect the consumption of processed foods with the tobacco and fossil fuel industries is irresponsible and outrageously misleading. We all need processed food."

Adapted from *The Guardian* June 2024 (457 words)

TORRENTIAL DUBAI RAIN SPARKS QUESTIONS ABOUT CLOUD SEED-ING

A torrent of rain on Tuesday flooded parts of Dubai, turned streets into rivers and shut down the world's second-busiest airport for a time. [...] Was this disaster caused by the United Arab Emirates' cloud-seeding program?

Officials at the country's National Center of Meteorology have been cited as saying the rain was not caused by cloud seeding. [...] But, even if the program did fly its planes through the sky leading up to the storm, it's exceedingly unlikely the efforts would have produced more rain than was going to fall naturally. These understandable attempts to squeeze more moisture out of clouds have been around for decades, but with little evidence of success. However, that hasn't stopped some countries, including the UAE, China and the US, from trying to modify the weather.

Cloud seeding is a weather modification concept that attempts to draw more rain or snow out of a cloud than would occur naturally. Cloud droplets don't form spontaneously [...] Aircraft fly through existing clouds and inject the tiny particles, like dust, dirt or even silver iodide [...] In any cloud, once enough droplets merge, they become heavy and fall to the Earth as rain or snow. [...]

It's incredibly difficult to determine what – if any – impact cloud seeding has on precipitation. Experimentation and attempts to quantify its effectiveness have been fraught with challenges. "How do you know how much precipitation might actually end up falling from that cloud occurred due to the seeding or without it?" a climate scientist at UCLA told CNN. [...] A 2020 study published in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences, indicated one cloud seeding experiment may have produced up to 10% more precipitation than would have fallen naturally. But skepticism still lingers in the scientific community. [...]

As the climate continues to warm due to human-caused climate change, certain parts of the world are becoming hotter and drier. Cloud seeding could be perceived as a solution to bring more water to areas that need it, but it could also potentially make other areas drier in the process. Water [...] cannot be created or destroyed. It can only be transformed while moving through the closed loop of the water cycle. "It is possible that you're actually stealing water from someone else when you do (cloud seeding)" the scientist said.

The heavy rain that set off unprecedented flooding in the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Iran didn't just appear out of nowhere. It also didn't only affect areas that participate in cloud seeding. [...]

Regardless of whether cloud seeding occurred, the storm was part of an extreme pattern that appeared in forecast models days in advance. Torrential rainfall events like this will become more frequent as the atmosphere continues to warm. [...]

Adapted from *CNN* April 2024 (458 words)

TRAFFIC ON BLUESKY, AN X COMPETITOR, IS UP 500% SINCE THE ELECTION. HOW WILL IT HANDLE THE SURGE?

The day after the presidential election, the social media landscape shook.

On Elon Musk's X, more than 115,000 users deactivated their accounts, the largest-ever mass exit from the platform. At the same time, traffic on Bluesky, a smaller rival to X, began to soar, with daily usage climbing some 500% in the U.S. [...]

"We've been growing by about a million users a day for several days," said Bluesky CEO [...]. "It's proving out the model that we thought would be the right approach to social [media]: Give people the tools to control their experience and they'll have a better time."

Putting more control in the hands of users is what distinguishes Bluesky from X, formerly Twitter, and other rival social media sites.

Rather than having one "master algorithm," Bluesky allows for a more personalized experience. By default, there are three main feeds: One shows accounts you follow, another shows what your friends follow and a "discover" feed surfaces posts linked to your interests.

Bluesky allows users to reach beyond these three by developing their own customized algorithm for, say, just content about cats, or only posts about a sports team or type of music. Because of this customization, she says there are more than 50,000 different Bluesky feeds available. [...]

Since Musk took over Twitter two years ago, the site has collapsed content guardrails, laid off more than 80% of employees and turned the site's verification badges into a pay-to-play system where users can pay to amplify the reach of their posts. In the months leading up to the election, Musk, a major Trump donor, surrogate and now White House advisor, has used the platform to boost his support of the former president and promote right-wing views.

That, in turn, has led to a mass exodus — also dubbed the "X-odus." For many, Bluesky has become a refuge.

While Bluesky's utopian vision may sound appealing to those fed up with how Musk-promoting and partisan X has become, it is still a relatively tiny app, surpassing 20 million users on Tuesday, compared with the hundreds of millions on X and Meta-owned Threads, or the billions of users on Instagram and TikTok. [...]

While Hollywood actors, politicians and some journalists have flocked to Bluesky, overall, it's a relatively small community. It still has a scrappy upstart vibe to it, which fans say is part of its charm. But social media researchers say major problems, like harassment, hate speech and misinformation, tend to flood platforms when any social media site gets large enough.

Adapted from NPR November 2024 (443 words)

TRANS YOUTH IN AMERICA STRUGGLE WITH CRISIS AS ANTI-TRANS POLITICS GAIN TRACTION

The election of Donald Trump has sent transgender youth in America into crisis, with many flooding crisis hotlines as they struggle to cope with the rising anti-transgender rhetoric. During his presidential bid, Trump campaigned on restricting civil rights protections for transgender students and rolling back policies that ensure safe and inclusive environments in schools. One of his most controversial proposals was to strip transgender students of Title IX protections, which govern issues such as bathroom use and pronoun recognition in schools.

Trump's campaign ads, including one that aired over 15,000 times, intensified the fear felt by transgender youth. The ad famously claimed, "Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you," further alienating the transgender and nonbinary community. For one Alabama teen, the ad led to despair and suicidal thoughts, prompting a call to the Rainbow Youth Project's crisis hotline. The group reported receiving over 5,500 calls in just 10 days, a drastic increase from its usual monthly volume of 3,700.

While the teen has found support through counseling, bullying at school has worsened, with peers taunting them over Trump's rhetoric. The emotional toll has been significant, with many LGBTQ+ youth feeling the weight of political ads and discourse on their identities. One mother, Carolyn Fisher, explained how the political climate has exacerbated her child's depression and anxiety.

This crisis has deepened as Trump's rhetoric on transgender issues continued to escalate throughout his campaign. Republican ads pushing anti-transgender views aired over 290,000 times, further driving the divide and fueling fears that transgender rights had gone too far. The Biden administration has worked to expand transgender protections, with a focus on Title IX, but many states have challenged these efforts in court.

Trump's promises to reverse these gains have left many concerned for the future. He has proposed banning gender-affirming healthcare for minors and withdrawing federal funding from schools that promote "gender ideology." His policies could have profound implications for transgender students, especially those already facing high rates of bullying and discrimination.

In response, LGBTQ+ advocates are doubling down on their efforts to provide support through virtual peer groups and online platforms. Still, many transgender youth are considering whether it would be safer to relocate to areas with more supportive environments. Despite these challenges, advocates continue to offer hope. As 18-year-old trans student Eli shared, "You are not alone. We will come out the other side. There are queer adults who have lived long and happy lives, and you will get there too."

Adapted from *The Independent*November 2024
(452 words)

TRUE-CRIME FANS ARE BANDING TOGETHER ONLINE TO TRY TO SOLVE CASES

It is 9AM on a Sunday and Liz is trying to figure out who did it. Specifically: who killed this guy splayed across the floor? In her day job Liz is a massage therapist, but today she is a homicide detective. Wearing blue latex gloves she prods a blood-soaked mannequin by her feet, part of a crime-scene simulation at CrimeCon, a convention for true-crime fans. [...]

At CrimeCon there are panels on topics ranging from sextortion to forensic entomology ('beetles feed on dry remains', 'moths are not predacious') and sessions on famous cold cases. There's merch for sale […] And there are other enthusiasts to befriend. That some 5,000 cheery, normal-seeming people pay \$350 and up to spend their weekend chatting about grisly murders, online predators and what really happened to Kathleen Peterson illustrates the genre's popularity. True crime is booming. In 2022 it accounted for a quarter of top-ranked podcasts on Apple and Spotify, according to the Pew Research Centre, a think-tank. That year a third of people surveyed by YouGov, a pollster, said they consume true-crime content at least once a week. Women are the most avid fans.

The genre is evolving. These days more content is devoted to open cases and wrongful convictions rather than solved crimes, notes Haley Gray, a researcher for several podcasts. The shift stems partly from a perception that the criminal-justice system is not functioning fairly, which was intensified by #MeToo and the death of George Floyd, says David Schmid of the University at Buffalo. The other reason is that such cases present a puzzle to solve. And who doesn't like a puzzle?

For consumers and creators of the stuff, it is gratifying that a genre long considered prurient and exploitative might instead promise justice. Some podcasts have indeed changed the course of investigations. "Serial", which spawned the podcast boom a decade ago, led to the release of Adnan Syed from prison (his conviction, over the murder of his ex-girlfriend in 1999, was reinstated last year and is the subject of an appeal). [...] The Reddit Bureau of Investigation, a forum on that site, has nearly 750,000 members. What such communities lack in the power to issue warrants they make up for in the array and outlandishness of their ideas. This can have nasty consequences.

In 2013 Reddit apologised when its users misidentified suspects behind the Boston Marathon bombing. In 2022 a professor at the university of Idaho sued a TikToker for alleging that she had orchestrated the murder of four students. Victims' families got harassed too. [...] Tricia Griffith, manager of a site called Websleuths, acknowledges that her forums attract a fair number of conspiracists.

Adapted from *The Economist*June 2024
(458 words)

TRUMP'S FIRST TERM MADE HIM THE VILLAIN OF LIBERAL HOLLYWOOD – DON'T BANK ON IT HAPPENING AGAIN

When, in 2016, business tycoon and reality TV star Donald Trump was elected US president for the first time, the reaction in Hollywood was swift and unified. Celebrities both big and small rushed to condemn the Trump presidency; it was an industry-wide barrage of outrage and opprobrium that swelled throughout his four turbulent years in office. Those on the other side of the aisle, meanwhile, were largely anomalies. Supporting Trump might not have quite been career suicide, but to endorse him was to make yourself an outsider in an industry monopolised by liberals, albeit wealthy ones.

Now it's four years since Trump left office, and as the US readies itself for the return of the polarising populist leader, it feels as though the vibe has somewhat shifted. After the election, the Motion Picture Association, a group representing the five major American studios (plus Netflix, MGM and Prime Video), issued a surprisingly chipper statement about "look[ing] forward to working with [the Trump administration]". A few days later, yet more eyebrows were raised due to a revelation by Sebastian Stan who portrayed Trump in the recent film *The Apprentice*. [...] Stan said that he had been invited onto *Variety*'s prestigious Actors on Actors series – a yearly run of interviews in which actors vying for awards sit down and speak to each other – but [he] had ultimately been unable to, due to other actors' publicists refusing to let their clients talk about Trump. "I couldn't find another actor to do it with me, because they were too afraid to go and talk about this movie," he said. [...]

It all signals a worrying change of direction for the coming years. The era of vocal and ubiquitous opposition to Trump – a political impetus sometimes referred to as "Resist liberalism" – may be dead. In the aftermath of the election, Rachel Zegler, a young actor who dazzled as the lead in Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story* and is set to play Snow White in a live-action Disney remake, wrote on social media about the "four years of hatred" a Trump administration would bring, and the "deep, deep sickness" in contemporary America. "May Trump supporters and Trump voters and Trump himself never know peace," she wrote. I don't think it's a stretch to say that back in 2016, this kind of tone was nothing out of the ordinary for a young, progressive actor in Hollywood. This time, though, it was hastily followed by an apology. "I firmly believe that everyone has the right to their opinion, even when it differs from my own," she wrote. "I am committed to contributing positively towards a better tomorrow."

Adapted from *independent.co.uk* November 2024 (454 words)

VLADIMIR PUTIN'S SPIES ARE PLOTTING GLOBAL CHAOS

[] Russia's war in Ukraine has been accompanied by a crescendo of aggression, subversion and meddling elsewhere. In particular, Russian sabotage in Europe has grown dramatically. []
The Kremlin's men have squeezed the West out of several African states. Its hackers, Poland's security services said, have tried to paralyse the country in the political, military, and economic spheres. Russia's propagandists have pumped disinformation around the world. Its armed forces want to put a nuclear weapon in orbit. Russian foreign policy has long dabbled in chaos. Now it seems to aim at little else.
[] Much of Russia's activity has been virtual. In April hackers with ties to the GRU Russia's intelligence-military agency, seem to have manipulated control systems for water plants in America and Poland. [] The GRU's cyber efforts, which had been ongoing since at least 2020, were not just aimed at espionage, but also "reputational harm" by stealing and leaking information and "systematic sabotage" by destroying data, according to America and its allies. []
"What Putin is trying to do is hit us all over the place," argues the former top Russia official in America's National Security Council. She compares the strategy to the Oscar winning film: "Everything Everywhere All at Once". In Africa, for instance, Russia has used mercenaries to supplant French and American influence in the aftermath of coups in Burkina Faso, Maliand Niger.
Russia's meddling in America takes a very different form. In May, America's director of national intelligence called Russia "the most active foreign threat to our elections" above China or Iran. This was not merely about trying to shape America's policy on Ukraine. [] In July American intelligence agencies said that they were "beginning to see Russia target specific voter demographics, promote divisive narratives, and denigrate specific politicians".
These efforts are generally crude and ineffectual. But they are prolific, intense and sometimes innovative. [] Russian propagandists are also experimenting with technology. CopyCop, a network of websites, took legitimate news articles and used ChatGPT, an Almodel, to rewrite them. More than 90 French articles were modified with the prompt: "Please rewrite this article taking a conservative stance against the liberal policies of the Macronadministration in favour of working-class French citizens."
[] Ten years ago the Kremlin worked with America and Europe to counter Iran and North Korea's nuclear programme. Such co-operation is now fanciful. It is as if the Russians no longer feel they have a stake in preserving anything of the post-war international order. This period is more reminiscent of Mao's nihilistic foreign policy during China's Cultural Revolution than of the Soviet Union's cold-war thinking, which included periods of pragmatism and caution.
Adapted from <i>The Economis</i> October 2024 (441 words)

WASHINGTON POST SAYS IT WILL NOT ENDORSE CANDIDATE FOR FIRST TIME IN 30 YEARS

For the first time in over 30 years, the Washington Post announced its editorial board would not endorse a candidate in a presidential election. "We are returning to our roots of not endorsing presidential candidates," said Will Lewis, the newspaper's publisher and CEO, in a statement [...] less than two weeks before the 2024 presidential election.

The Washington Post has endorsed a candidate for almost every election since Jimmy Carter in 1976. Jeff Bezos, the billionaire Amazon owner, bought the Post in 2013. The decision not to endorse has sparked outrage from prominent figures and staff. Marty Baron, former executive editor, called it "cowardice, with democracy as its casualty." Baron added that Donald Trump might "see this as an invitation to further intimidate" Jeff Bezos. Susan Rice, former Biden adviser, labeled the move "hypocritical," referencing the paper's slogan, "Democracy Dies in Darkness."

Pulitzer-winning reporter David Maraniss expressed dismay, saying, "The paper I've loved working at for 47 years is dying in darkness." [...] Robert Kagan, the paper's editor at large, reportedly resigned from the board after the announcement. A senior Post staffer anonymously noted, "The Post's editorial board just won a Pulitzer for defending democracy around the world... How sad is it that we can't do that at home?"

The Washington Post's decision follows a similar one from Patrick Soon-Shiong, the billionaire owner of the Los Angeles Times, who blocked a planned endorsement of Kamala Harris earlier this week. That move led to high-profile resignations and anger among the staff.

Lewis cited past instances where the paper chose not to endorse and stressed that the decision aligns with "independent journalism" that he said the Post is "going back to." He acknowledged readers might see the lack of endorsement as tacit support for one candidate or condemnation of another, but he denied such interpretations, calling it a statement in favor of reader independence. "Our job…is to provide non-partisan news for all Americans," Lewis said, affirming the paper's commitment to independence.

NPR reported that many Post staffers reacted negatively to the news. The Washington Post Guild, representing many staffers, expressed concern, especially so close to the election, stating that an editorial board's role is to "endorse candidates to help guide readers." [...] The Guild also noted that an endorsement for Harris had already been drafted, with reports suggesting Bezos himself decided not to publish it, leading to reader cancellations.

The Columbia Journalism Review confirmed the endorsement draft and reported staff shock when told otherwise. At the Los Angeles Times, several board members resigned in protest, with editor Mariel Garza stating, "In dangerous times, honest people need to stand up. This is how I'm standing up." [...]

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (457 words)

'WE HAVE EMOTIONS TOO': CLIMATE SCIENTISTS RESPOND TO ATTACKS ON OBJECTIVITY

Climate scientists who were mocked and gaslighted after speaking up about their fears for the future said these feelings should not be suppressed in an attempt to reach supposed objectivity. Seeing climate experts' fears and opinions about the climate crisis as irrelevant suggests science is separate from society and ultimately weakens it, they said.

The researchers said they had been subject to ridicule by some scientists after taking part in a large Guardian survey of experts in May, during which they and many others expressed their feelings of extreme fear about future temperature rises and the world's failure to take sufficient action. They said they had been told they were not qualified to take part in this broad discussion of the climate crisis, were spreading doom and were not impartial.

However, the researchers said that embracing their emotions was necessary to do good science and was a spur to working towards better ways of tackling the climate crisis and the rapidly increasing damage being done to the world.

The three experts have published a comment article in the journal *Nature Climate Change*. They said that, at a point when the climate crisis has already arrived and the key questions are how to limit and survive it, their aim in speaking out was to start a discussion about how climate experts across all disciplines can best communicate the urgency needed with the public.

Pretending to be a "robot" is bad science, said Dr Maharaj, an author of the *Nature* article [...] The ideal of objectivity in science has long been criticised by philosophers of science, who argue that it is impossible to attain and not necessarily desirable in any case. "If you don't acknowledge your emotions, then where are you going to get that impetus to do better as a scientist?" Maharaj said.

Prof Schipper from the University of Bonn, [another] author of the article, said expressing their fears also guards against the normalisation of the impacts of the climate crisis, from heatwave deaths to people left homeless by floods to falling polar bear populations. "When we're calling out and saying we're really worried, we're upset, it should remind people that these things are not OK."

The third author of the Nature article was Prof Pecl, from the University of Tasmania, Australia. She said tracking the destruction of the Great Barrier Reef over 30 years had left her tearful at times, but that the feelings of fear fuelled her to work harder. "We experience distress when faced with impacts of climate change because we care, because we love the natural world and because we want to do what we can to minimise pain and suffering of fellow humans."

Adapted from *theguardian.com* October 2024 (458 words)

'WE'RE IN A NEW ERA': THE 21ST-CENTURY SPACE RACE TAKES OFF

If the 20th-century space race was about political power, this century's will be about money. [...] Space flight is having a renaissance moment [...] and, for the first time, with private companies rather than governments leading the charge.

A series of recent milestone missions, not least the increasingly successful test flights of the largest rocket ever made and the first privately built probe to land on the lunar surface, have embedded a growing idea that humans are entering what has been termed the "third space age". [...]

Humanity's first space explorer, the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, orbited around the globe in April 1961. A year later, US President John F Kennedy gave his famous "we choose to go to the moon" speech, promising to get an American man on the lunar surface by the end of the decade [...].

The end of the cold war in 1989 brought a brief moment of global optimism, leading to the second, more collaborative space age. The International Space Station was assembled over 13 years and, since [...], people of multiple nationalities have been living in space constantly, working together on experiments in the orbiting laboratory. However, [...] Nasa's space shuttle programme [...] was eventually disbanded [...], in large part because the US government did not want to keep bankrolling its high costs.

Yet those high costs have now been driven down by private businesses entering the scene, often as government contractors. In the past few years, some of these businesses have started to make money, although not from headline-grabbing reasons such as space tourism but mostly for sending up communication satellites [...]. Many estimates suggest the global space industry could generate revenues of more than \$1tn within the next two decades. [...]

Elon Musk's SpaceX has been at the forefront of this movement [...] with its reusable rockets. The company's largest system, called Starship and still in development, has been marketed as an interplanetary explorer. Musk says he built it so that humans can colonise Mars. [...]

Scientists are nervous about both the politicisation and the commercialisation of space, especially with talk of future "mining" operations on the pristine, untouched moon. Advocates of space exploration, however, point to advancements made so far. The CT scan, a critical medical device that can identify tumours, traces its origins to pre-Apollo mission research; astronauts on the space station have been using the unique microgravity environment to better understand diseases such as Alzheimer's.

For economists, the third space age creates an unprecedented situation – one that could upend the very foundations of the market system. "In economics, we assume that resources are limited; land is limited; natural resources are limited," a space economist said. "With space, it allows us to change that."

Adapted from theguardian.com May 2024 (458 words)

WEALTHY MILLENIALS AND GEN Z ARE REDEFINING PHILANTHROPY

Wealthy donors under the age of 43 are more likely to volunteer, fundraise and act as mentors for charitable causes rather than just give money, according to a new survey from Bank of America Private Bank. [...]

Rather than simply writing checks to causes they care about, the next generation of givers wants to be deeply involved in trying to fix the biggest social and environmental problems.

"They view themselves as holistic social change agents," said Mrs. Bailey, [...] philanthropic strategy executive at Bank of America Private Bank. [...]

Both younger and older multi-millionaires are highly charitable. [...] Yet their reasons for giving and their methods vary widely by age. Donors under the age of 43 are slightly more likely to volunteer and are twice as likely to help raise charitable donations from friends or peers rather than just giving directly. They're more than four times as likely to act as mentors.

[...] Those over the age of 44 were more than twice as likely to give due to "obligation" than younger donors. Those under 43 were more likely to cite self-education and the influence of their social circle as drivers of their philanthropy.

Some of the differences between generations may be rooted in life cycles and wealth. The younger wealthy are still building their fortunes and inheriting their wealth, so they're more likely to give their time and help fundraise. [...]

"You can think of philanthropy as the five T's – time, talent, treasure, testimony and ties," Bailey said. "The older generation is focused on the treasure (giving funds). The younger generations are leaning into the other four."

The young wealthy also support different causes. They're twice as likely to support efforts related to homelessness, social justice, climate change and the advancement of women and girls. Philanthropists over 44 were far more likely to support religious organizations, the arts and military charities. [...]

Bailey said the next generation wants to talk about philanthropy as part of an initial discussion with a wealth advisor — even before talking about their investment plan. [...]

Advisors to the young rich also need to be generous with their praise. Younger donors are more than three times more likely to gauge the success of their philanthropic efforts by public recognition, according to the survey. Nearly half say they are likely to associate their names with their philanthropic efforts, while more than two-thirds of older donors give anonymously.

"Praise them, celebrate them, give them visibility," she said. Just don't call them "philanthropists."

A report [...] found that 80% of young donors want to be seen as "givers," while 63% also like the terms "advocate" or "changemaker." Only 27% accepted the label of "philanthropist."

Adapted from *CNBC.com*October 2024
(455 words)

WHAT IS "DYNAMIC PRICING" FOR CONCERT TICKETS?

When tickets for Green Day's 2025 Australian tour went on sale, fans joined a queue – a ritual that has been practised for decades on footpaths, on phones, and now online. But as Green Day fans reached the purchase point, the price varied. For some, a seated ticket rose as high as \$500. A week earlier, tickets to the Oasis reunion tour in the United Kingdom – arguably the hottest ticket in the world – rose by hundreds of pounds while on sale.

Ticketmaster calls this "In Demand" pricing. It's an instance of what is more broadly known as dynamic pricing. Dynamic pricing is well established in tourism and air travel. In these markets, supply is fixed – the number of hotel rooms and plane seats – but demand has peaks and troughs. Prices are adjusted to maximise profit and to shape consumer behaviour.

However, there are significant differences when it comes to music concert tickets.

Consumers see accommodation and transport prices up front, before committing to a "queue". When it comes to the current practice for live music dynamic pricing, costs aren't seen until they reach the front of the queue. There, consumers are presented with two numbers: a price and a timer counting down. And unlike accommodation and transport services, each concert by a major touring artist (let alone Oasis) is a much more limited commodity.

In 1964, Australians paid up to \$4 (\$60 in today's terms) to see the world's hottest act, The Beatles.

The relative price of concert tickets has changed with the economic and cultural role of live music. For decades, concerts were primarily a way to promote record sales, with physical albums being the main source of revenue. Since the digital de-valuing of recorded music, live performance has become increasingly essential for the industry. So ticket prices have risen, and with them the drive for everyone involved to get their cut. [...]

Shared group experiences are becoming increasingly rare in our atomised, algorithm-driven world. Concerts contribute to social cohesion and build communities that otherwise would have less opportunities to meet.

If such experiences become prohibitively expensive, many will be excluded from one of the sweetest fruits of the social contract. Rather than "market value", this would essentially amount to a failure of policy. [...]

The use of dynamic pricing for Green Day tickets imports a new twist into the Australian music market, and fans are understandably upset. [...] Will dynamic pricing stick – or will it force attention to the structural issues in our live music sector? With today's news that Dua Lipa tickets will also be subject to the practice, it seems that we may be stuck with it. For now.

Adapted from *The Conversation*September 2024
(458 words)

WHAT, EXACTLY, IS 'MODERATE DRINKING'?

Over the past several years, there has been a rise in alcohol-related deaths and a steady wave of news about the health risks of drinking. Calls for people to drink in moderation have become more urgent. But what, exactly, does that mean?

"Tongue in cheek, people have defined it as not drinking more than your doctor," said [...] a scientist at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research.

More officially, in the United States, moderate drinking is defined as one drink or less per day for women and two drinks or less per day for men. But other countries define moderate drinking, also called low-risk drinking, differently, and recent research around alcohol's health harms has raised questions about current guidelines.

Experts used to think that low or moderate amounts of alcohol were good for you. That assumption was based on research showing that people who drank in moderation lived longer than those who abstained or drank excessively. The longevity benefit disappeared around two drinks a day for women and three drinks a day for men [...].

But many researchers now think that those conclusions were based on data analyses that had all kinds of methodological problems [...].

For example, one issue was that many people who abstained from alcohol did so because they had existing health problems, while people who drank moderately were more likely to have healthy lifestyle habits. It created really what was an illusion of health benefits with low to moderate amounts of drinking [...].

A new method for establishing risk looks just at deaths from conditions directly related to alcohol, such as liver cirrhosis, alcohol poisoning, pancreatitis and certain types of cancer. "It's much less biased and confounding if you just focus on alcohol-caused conditions," one expert said.

Using this method, experts have found that low-risk drinking entails less alcohol than what many nations, including the United States, currently advise. But the precise level at which alcohol consumption starts to harm health, and what is considered an acceptable level of risk, is still up for debate.

A few countries have adjusted their recommendations. Australia and France now advise that both sexes consume no more than 10 drinks per week. (That's down from two a day for men and women in Australia and three a day for men, and two for women, in France.) Canada's latest guidelines [...] are more stringent: Low-risk drinking is defined as no more than two drinks total per week, regardless of sex.

For the most recent American guidelines, issued in 2020, an advisory committee [...] recommended that men and women consume no more than one drink per day. That guidance incorporated the latest research that there was no amount of alcohol that benefited health [...] but these guidelines have not been officially adopted.

Adapted from *New York Times* October 2024 (460 words)

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)

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.

Adapted from *The Guardian* September 2024 (458 words)

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. [...]

Adapted from *The Conversation*October 2024
(456 words)

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 Al 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)

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.

Adapted from *The Conversation*October 2023
(445 words)

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".

Adapted from *NPR*April 2024
(446 words)

"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-guz-zling 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)

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."

Adapted from *The Wall Street Journal*October 2024
(460 words)

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.

Adapted from CNBC September 2024 (450 words)

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.

Adapted from *The Conversation-UK*October 2024
(447 words)

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* November 2024 (450 words)

YOUNG ADULTS ARE HOLDING OFF ON MOVING OUT OF THEIR PARENTS' HOUSE

Approximately 1 in 3 U.S. adults aged 18 to 34 live in their parents' home, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. The pandemic caused more young adults to return home or remain living with their parents into their late 20s and 30s [...]

Pre-pandemic, the most recent surge in the share of 18- to 34-year-olds living with their parents occurred between 2005 and 2015. [...]

"Those were the times coming during the Great Recession and coming out of the Great Recession, and there were a lot of media narratives at the time about millennials eating too much avocado toast to live on their own," said Joanne Hsu, a research associate professor at the University of Michigan. [...]

"What we found was that part of the reason we see this escalation of young adults not leaving the nest or returning to the nest is this idea that it was harder and harder for them to weather shocks," Hsu said. Economic shocks are significant and unexpected events that disrupt financial stability and markets, which then affect households' income, employment and debt levels. [...]

More than half of Gen Z adults say they don't make enough money to live the life they want due to the high cost of living, according to a 2024 survey from Bank of America. [...]

Victoria Franklin, 27, moved back to her mom's house in the summer of 2019 after graduating from college to search for a job in business administration. "I ended up bartending and waitressing until October 2019, where I got my first offer," Franklin said. "So, it did take a little bit longer than I expected." She found a job in her field in New York City, which required a two-hour commute from her mother's home on the Jersey Shore.

"I thought, you know, in six months or so, I'll move into the city, be closer to the job," Franklin said. "And the pandemic threw a wrench in those plans." Franklin decided to continue living at her mom's house after switching to a fully remote job in fall 2023.

"My mentality is why rent and give my money to someone else when I can start to own?" Franklin said. [...] She's saving between 40% and 50% of her income, with "a big chunk" allocated toward a down payment on a house.

While living with parents can provide personal financial benefits, experts say this trend can negatively affect the economy. [...] "What is really good for an individual person or an individual family is not necessarily good for the entire macro economy," Hsu said. "One of the big boosts to consumer spending is when people form households." [...]

Adapted from *CNBC.com* November 2024 (457 words)

YOUNG BRITISH WOMEN STRUGGLE MORE THAN MEN TO PROGRESS AT WORK

Young women are struggling to rise above a "sticky floor" at work amid a gulf in financial confidence between them and young men that leaves one in four clinging to jobs they don't enjoy, research suggests.

British women aged 18 to 30 are worrying more about money, are more likely to feel their financial situation is getting worse, and more likely to be unable to afford food or other essentials than young men of the same age, according to a survey of about 5,000 young people, [...] despite progress in closing the pay gap for older women and more women breaking through glass ceilings at work, said Claire Reindorp, the chief executive of Young Women's Trust, which carried out the study. [...] She said: "The problem for young women is the sticky floor. At a young age, they get sorted into retail, care, hospitality and into low pay and they can't get out of it."

Young women are also more likely to have taken on new debt in the last 12 months than young men and save less, the research [...] found. [...] 41% of young women said their financial situation has worsened over the last 12 months, compared with 27% of young men.

[...] She cited "a significant degree of misogyny out there" with the trust's surveys of human resources decision-makers revealing some won't hire women because of the "risk of their fertility" and some who believe women are "less suitable to senior management jobs".
[...]

Pippa Rawlinson, 27, a single mother living in Bournemouth, said her legal career had been held back as a result of systems that did not provide sufficient, affordable childcare to allow her to compete for work on a level playing field with men, who could often work longer hours as they didn't have children to look after. [...]

"You're up against other trainees for a very limited number of newly qualified positions," she said. "And if you are somebody that does get in at 9am and leaves at 5.50pm because you have to pick your child up, and there's other people who are in at 8am and they're not leaving till 7pm and they're billing higher than you are, it's a no-brainer in that respect. That responsibility for childcare does fall on women disproportionately. I'm not saying that men are not affected, but statistically, it impacts women far more." [...]

She said the overall system was sexist. "It is essential that we have access to affordable childcare with good hours. Options are few and far between. They really restrict young women's ability to work. We want to work. I love my job. I love the career I'm in."

Adapted from *The Guardian* October 2024 (459 words)

YOUNG PEOPLE AT WORK

While numerous research studies are deconstructing stereotypes about new generations' relationship to work, the corporate world seems baffled as to how to manage its youngest employees.

For several years now, they've attracted all kinds of criticism: Their bosses call them unfaithful, individualistic, defiant of authority, obsessed with their work-life balance, too quick to quit. The Generation Z – born in the late 1990s and 2000s – are joining a job market that is now favorable to them and creating challenges for companies' human resources departments. How many symposiums, scientific studies, reports, press articles and books have tackled the hot topic of young people at work? [...]

"What is Gen Z's relationship with the corporate world?" the latest survey conducted by the IPSOS polling institute highlighted the gap between both sides' expectations. Its Director General spoke about a misunderstanding between business leaders and young people aged 18 to 28. The figures speak volumes: 86% of business leaders believe that Generation Z is really different from the generation before it, 70% say that it's difficult to identify what their career aspirations are. Better, or worse still, a third of the bosses surveyed believe that these young employees are damaging work organization.

This misunderstanding is all the more important given that, due to demographics and longer careers, up to four generations can now coexist in the same workplace. The head of a small company specializing in industrial cleaning, believes that what they expect from work is markedly different: Senior employees are very attached to the notion of working hours, while younger people are clearly asking for greater flexibility, remote working, flexible working hours, etc. The boundary between private and professional life is also allegedly more porous for young people: They talk quite easily about their private life or family commitments at work...Above all, he feels that work is for the younger generations no longer more than one piece in their life puzzle, whereas it remains central to that of their elders. Faced with this perceived evolution, companies must learn to be more flexible in the way they manage teams, by being pragmatic and intelligent so as not to miss out on talent, but without compromising on their strategy and direction. A new survey published last month, put it another way: For young people work remains an essential pillar in terms of identity, but only after friends and family. [...]

But some work psychologists are irritated by this generational interpretation of the changing relationship to work. In their view, the perceptions of companies' old hands and managers are built on stereotypes towards young people. This reductive thinking is a way of avoiding asking the real questions about how to improve working conditions, combating psychosocial risks, job insecurity and so on.

Adapted from *The Conversation*June 2024
(453 words)

YOUNG WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE BEING 'BLOCKED' FROM CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, STUDY FINDS

Young people from working-class backgrounds are being blocked from entering the creative industries, which remain elitist and inaccessible, according to research.

A report from the Sutton Trust found stark overrepresentation in the arts for those from the most affluent backgrounds, which it defines as those from "upper middle-class backgrounds". About 7% of people educated in the UK attend private fee-paying schools. However, 43% of Britain's best-selling classical musicians and 35% of Bafta-nominated actors are alumni of private schools.

Additionally, more than half of classical musicians have attended an arts specialist university or conservatoire, and one in four attended the Royal Academy of Music for undergraduate study. These institutions are dominated by students from the most affluent backgrounds. Twelve per cent of classical musicians attended Oxford or Cambridge.

[...] However, pop stars appear to better reflect the educational backgrounds of the UK population, with only 8% privately educated and 20% university-educated, both close to the national averages.

The report said: "There are clear class inequalities in creative higher education and the creative workforce, with high-profile creative figures in fields like television more likely to have attended private school and university than the population overall ..." [...]

The Trust called for a range of measures to improve access to the arts. These included introducing an "arts premium" so schools could pay for arts opportunities such as music lessons, and ensuring that conservatoires and creative arts institutions that received state funding were banned from charging for auditions. [...] The Trust, which champions social mobility from birth to the workplace, added that the wider value of creative degrees should be taken into account when making funding and policy decisions for the higher education sector. It said measuring the quality of creative degree programmes on graduate earnings alone did not take into account the nature of the sector, with its prevalence of freelance work and unpaid internships. [...]

Nick Harrison, the chief executive of the trust, said: "It's a tragedy that young people from working-class backgrounds are the least likely to study creative arts degrees, or break into the creative professions. These sectors bear the hallmarks of being elitist – those from upper middle-class backgrounds, and the privately educated are significantly over-represented." Harrison said Britain's creative sector was admired around the world, but no young person "should be held back from reaching their full potential, or from pursuing their interests and dream career, due to their socioeconomic background".

He said it was "essential that action is taken to ensure access to high quality creative education in schools, and to tackle financial barriers to accessing creative courses and workplace opportunities".

Adapted from *The Guardian*November 2024
(437 words)