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Subscriber slump may be bad news for Netflix, but better for the planet
John Naughton

In the early 1930s, when Claud Cockburn worked on the Times, the subeditors had a competition to see who could compose the dullest headline. Cockburn claimed that he won with “Small earthquake in Chile. Not many dead”. Alas, subsequent factcheckers have failed to unearth such a headline in the archives, but it came to mind last week when Netflix announced, in a quarterly earnings report, that for the first time in a decade it had lost subscribers – 200,000 of them, to be exact. In North America, it had lost 640,000 and suffered additional losses in every other region except for Asia-Pacific area, where it added a million.

This didn’t seem very interesting to this columnist, especially as it included the period when Netflix had pulled out of Russia, where it had 700,000 subscribers, which to my mind meant that the reported loss would have been a gain of half a million had Putin not invaded Ukraine.

Still, the negative 200,000 figure seemed to spook Wall Street. Netflix’s stock price collapsed by nearly 40% in two days, taking more than $50bn off the company’s market value in the blink of an eye. This was a shock because just over a month ago – on 8 March, to be precise – the company’s chief financial officer was telling a conference organised by Morgan Stanley that the company was on a growth track that “pretty quickly gets us to a business that’s over a half a billion members”. But now suddenly that rosy picture has faded; the outlook has turned pessimistic and Netflix is forecasting that it will lose another 2 million subscribers over the next three months.

So what happened? Why has a golden goose suddenly turned into a turkey? Possible explanations include the thought that maybe Netflix’s precipitous growth was a blip caused by the pandemic lockdown. In that case, it’s rather like, say, Zoom or Peloton, other erstwhile beneficiaries of Covid.

Another plausible hypothesis is that it’s driven by consumer reaction to the new post-Covid reality of raging inflation and an impending cost-of-living crisis. This is supported by the discovery that it’s not just Netflix that’s affected; other streaming services are too. In the UK, for example, the number of subscribers to streaming video services such as Amazon Prime and Disney+ – as well as Netflix – fell in the first quarter of the year. According to one report, the number of UK homes with at least one paid-for subscription to a streaming service fell by 215,000 in the first three months, ending a decade of almost uninterrupted growth in the popularity of such services. And as households pull back on their addiction to binge-watching opportunities, there’s a gloomy feeling in the industry that they will fall back on the devils they know – Netflix and Amazon Prime – rather than the newcomers Disney+ and Apple.

The recent proliferation of video streaming services was celebrated by salivating media evangelists, who saw it as a wondrous proliferation of consumer choice. Sadly, most of these enthusiasts seem never to have read any history. In particular, they have clearly never heard of Herbert Simon, a brilliant economist who won a Nobel prize in 1978 and who presciently observed in 1971 that “in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.”

Let’s do some sums. Of the 24 hours in the day, we spend about eight of them sleeping, eight working and two or three doing other things such as cooking, shopping etc. That leaves something like five hours that are available for other activities – exercise, email, social media, web browsing, video games, reading, hobbies, going to the cinema, shouting at the TV news and so on. Those five hours, which also define the zone where the world’s couch-potatoes hang out, are what the operators of streaming services are aiming to colonise. The downturn in streaming services may be a signal that this is a tighter marketplace than tech entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and media companies fondly imagine.

Which on the whole would represent a benefit for humanity. Evolution didn’t design human bodies for slumping on settees and being a couch potato doesn’t do much for one’s mental health. And less streaming might also be good for the planet. A Carbon Trust study estimated in 2020 that the carbon emissions from one hour of online video were 56g of CO_2 per device. Multiply that by the 200,000 subscribers that Netflix has lost and you get an idea of what the environmental benefit of less streaming might be. In every cloud, there’s a silver lining.

The Observer, 30 April 2022

Amazon workers at New York warehouse vote to unionize

The Associated Press

Amazon warehouse workers in the Staten Island borough of New York City voted to unionize on Friday, marking the first successful U.S. organizing effort in the retail giant's history and handing an unexpected win to a nascent group that fuelled the union drive.

Warehouse workers cast 2,654 votes — or about 55 per cent — in favour of a union, giving the fledgling Amazon Labour Union enough support to pull off a victory. According to the National Labour Relations Board, which is overseeing the process, 2,131 workers — or 45 per cent — rejected the union bid. The 67 ballots that were challenged by either Amazon or the ALU were not enough to sway the outcome. Federal labour officials said the results of the count won't be verified until they process any objections — due by April 8 — that both parties may file.

The victory was an uphill battle for the independent group, made up of former and current workers who lacked official backing from an established union and were out-gunned by the deep-pocketed retail giant. Despite obstacles, organizers believed their grassroots approach was more relatable to workers and could help them overcome where established unions have failed in the past. They were right.

Chris Smalls, a fired Amazon employee who has been leading the ALU in its fight on Staten Island, bounded out of the NLRB building in Brooklyn on Friday with other union organizers, pumping their fists and jumping, chanting "ALU." They uncorked a bottle of Champagne, and Smalls hailed the victory as a call to arms for other Amazon workers across the sprawling company. "I hope that everybody's paying attention now because a lot of people doubted us," he said. Smalls hopes the success in New York will embolden workers at other facilities to launch their own organizing campaigns. Even his group will soon shift their attention to a neighbouring Amazon warehouse on Staten Island, where a separate union election is scheduled to be held in late April. Organizers believe Friday's win is going to make it easier for them to win there, too.

Amazon posted a statement on its company website Friday saying that it was evaluating its options following the election. "We're disappointed with the outcome of the election in Staten Island because we believe having a direct relationship with the company is best for our employees," the post said. "We're evaluating our options, including filing objections based on the inappropriate and undue influence by the NLRB that we and others (including the National Retail Federation and U.S. Chamber of Commerce) witnessed in this election." The company did not elaborate but it signaled it might challenge the election based on a lawsuit filed in March by the NLRB, which sought to force Amazon to reinstate a fired employee who was involved in the union drive.

Mark Cohen, director of retail studies at Columbia University, said he doesn't see how workers will benefit from a unionized Amazon facility and called the overall push to unionize companies misguided. He said that Amazon is a "highly disciplined and regimented" business willing to pay premium wages and good benefits, but it also demands tremendous output from its workers who work 10-hour shifts. "Amazon is not going to change their culture because there is now a union in their midst," Cohen said. ""They might be forced to let people work eight hours but those people will make less money."

The successful union effort on Staten Island stood in contrast to the one launched in Bessemer, Ala., by the more established Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. Workers at an Amazon warehouse there appeared to have rejected a union bid but outstanding challenged ballots could change the outcome. The votes were 993-to-875 against the union. A hearing to review 416 challenged ballots is expected to begin in the next few days. The union campaigns come at a time of widespread labour unrest at many corporations. Workers at more than 140 Starbucks locations around the country, for instance, have requested union elections and several of them have already been successful.

But Amazon has long been considered a top prize for the labour movement given the company's massive size and impact. The results in Staten Island reverberated all the way to the White House. "The president was glad to see workers ensure their voices are heard with respect to important workplace decisions," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at Friday's briefing about the vote. "He believes firmly that every worker in every state must have a free and fair choice to join a union and the right to bargain collectively with their employer."

CBC News, 01 April 2022

Why Biden should deliver a European history lesson during the State of the Union

James Hohmann

The Defense Department warned earlier this month that, because young people play so many video games, recruits are more prone to injuries during basic training. The sedentary lifestyle of the 18-to-29-year-old "Nintendo Generation" is cause for concern, but the bigger danger to national security is this cohort's world view.

Many young people have an unfortunate perspective derived from coming of age amid national humiliations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In school, they've learned more about the United States' shortcomings than about her triumphs and the nation's indispensability as a global force for good. The crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exposed that blind spot.

It isn't the Pentagon's place to point this out. But President Biden has a golden opportunity during his State of the Union address Tuesday night to educate younger generations about why they should care about what's happening in Europe. The Cold War generation better understands the stakes, but they're becoming a smaller share of the electorate each year. Most Americans cannot pinpoint Ukraine on a map. In a CBS-YouGov poll, 61 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds thought the United States should "stay out" of the conflict altogether while an identical 61 percent of senior citizens said the United States should "support Ukraine."

Several surveys show troubling correlations between age and support for American leadership. A Post-ABC poll, in the field this past week during the invasion, found that only 35 percent of 18-to-39-year-olds in this country would support sanctions on Russia if they lead to higher energy prices, compared with 70 percent of seniors. The same poll found that 55 percent of 18- to 39-year-olds say Russia is unfriendly but not an enemy — compared with 21 percent of those over age 65. A 39-year-old was born in 1983. A 29-year-old was born in 1993. Ballots will be cast in November by voters who were born three years after the 9/11 attacks.

This is bigger than Ukraine. Think about the alarming number of young people who identify as socialist — oblivious to the repeated failures of socialism. When the Harvard Kennedy School's Institute of Politics surveyed 18- to 29-year-olds this past fall, a bare 51-percent majority agreed that the United States is the leader of the free world. The same number said we should be.

These numbers illustrate why this moment calls for more than a reaffirmation of the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the NATO charter. It might feel like a waste of time to the 79-year-old Biden because he understands so intuitively. In a speech on Thursday, he declared that friend and foe alike should harbor no doubts that "the United States will defend every inch of NATO territory with the full force of American power."

That was reassuring, but he needs to explain to the biggest domestic audience he'll have all year why he's deploying additional U.S. troops to Germany, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania. It's not enough to use buzzwords such as "territorial integrity." The greatest threat to European security since World War II calls for more than box-checking. It's worth describing to Americans who might not remember, or never learned, why we joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949. The alliance formed the year after Czechoslovakia fell to the communists and the Soviets blockaded Berlin. The Truman administration countered with an 11-month airlift, the Marshall Plan for economic stabilization and NATO for security assistance.

Beyond deterring Soviet aggression, Washington hoped NATO would make future wars on the continent less likely by integrating defense networks and discouraging the revival of militaristic nationalism. After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, welcoming former members of the Warsaw Pact made strategic sense for similar reasons. Russian President Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine, which isn't a member, validates the importance of the alliance.

Biden doesn't need to be exhaustive. He doesn't need to detour into how a revanchist Russia is violating commitments under the Budapest Memorandum and the Minsk agreements. But he should justify why keeping so many troops in Europe is vital to the cause of human freedom and plainly in our national interest.

It's prudent to be cautious about drawing World War II analogies, but it's proper to recount the carnage that followed America's turning inward during the 1930s. Born during the Battle of Stalingrad, Biden was part of a generation that grew up with the specter of nuclear annihilation and learned from the folly of "America First" isolationism. He is well positioned to tutor a country at risk of collectively forgetting the hard lessons of history.

Biden's ode to NATO ought not sound partisan. This is no occasion for dunking on ex-president Donald Trump, who called the alliance "obsolete" in 2017. This is a night when lawmakers should wear blue and yellow to show solidarity with Ukraine. A strong ovation from both sides of the aisle for NATO might show 18- to -29-year-olds that the United States takes her alliances seriously. Young people in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan would also take heart.

The Washington Post, 28 February 2022

Brazil at work: Black and held back

Ivana Davidovic

"I felt my career was limited by my skin tone. I would hear that I didn't match the profile. Or that I wouldn't be someone they would promote," recalls Luana Genot, who does not have the fondest of memories of trying to break into the communications industry in Brazil. But instead of just getting angry, she decided to do something about it: she is now the executive director of the Identities of Brazil Institute, an NGO which helps companies change their culture around black staff.

However, Ms Genot's professional start in life was very different. She started modelling when she was a teenager living in Rio, and her career in fashion took her all across the globe. The work might have appeared glamorous from the outside, but she felt held back because of the colour of her skin, as clients often could not imagine someone like her representing their brands. When she quit modelling and returned home, she encountered the same roadblocks. More than 50% percent of the country's 208m people define themselves as black or "pardo", a category in the Brazilian census which describes people of mixed race. However, data from 2016 show that black people only occupy around 6% of managerial positions and get paid an average 44% less overall.

"Here there is this racial democracy myth where everyone, regardless of their skin tone, can be welcomed. And that's fake," Ms Genot says. "The message for me was that this paradise doesn't exist. We need to build it." Which is exactly what she is trying to do with her Institute - helping Brazilian companies be more "actively anti-racist", as she calls it. She sees how much companies benefit from attracting and keeping black talent that would not view a corporate job as a possibility. "This is not a favour for black people. Companies need those black heads to think about products and services that cater for the Brazilian majority."

Things have started to change in recent years. State institutions and public universities have established quotas for black workers and students. But for one person, quotas are not enough to make a difference. Just over a year ago, Luiza Trajano, the Brazilian billionaire owner of the country's largest retailer Magazine Luiza, decided to open its coveted management trainee scheme to black applicants only.

Ms Trajano, who is white, started working in her family's a small gift shop, which opened back in 1957. She took the reins of the business in 1991 and turned it into a retail behemoth, selling everything from moisturisers to MacBooks. She says that concerns about her own unconscious bias made her come up with this plan. And she felt she needed to do something about it. When she drilled into the figures, she discovered that 52% of the people working for Magazine Luiza were black, but at management level, they were only 16%. Every year Magazine Luiza would reserve a few spaces on the management trainee programme for black people, but they just would not get any applicants. But, when they changed tack and opened it exclusively to black people, 21,000 applied for 20 positions. They also made sure that new trainees were paid the same as their white counterparts.

Attempts to improve the recruitment and promotion of black staff are just one side of the coin. Access to education can be difficult for many black youngsters. Alabe Nujara, who now works for the Guetto Institute NGO in São Paulo, was one of the people behind a successful campaign to introduce quotas for disadvantaged students at federal institutions. When, in 2009, he became the first from his family to go to university, he did not see anyone there who looked like him. But, despite being a successful student and campaigner, Mr Nujara found it very challenging being a black man trying to forge a career in public relations. When he landed a job with a French company, he said that people were constantly surprised he was black when they eventually met him in person. The assumption from phone calls and emails was that someone in his position, fluent in French and English, must be white.

This anecdotal evidence is echoed in research done by Graziella Moraes Silva, a Brazilian professor of sociology and anthropology. She researched the experiences of black professionals in Brazil and found that, for many, the first time they actually felt good about being black in their careers was in the US. "Which shows you something about the type of recognition that those people were not getting in Brazil," she says. Prof Moraes Silva says that Brazil - the last American nation to abolish slavery in 1888 - has sought to project the image of a country of mixed descent, where the colour of a person's skin does not count.

For Luana Genot, there is genuine belief that the kind of change she is working towards is achievable in her lifetime. "In 50 years, I want to go around companies and see more black professionals as managers, as directors. I don't want to be needed any more."

BBC News, 6 April 2022

More Carwashes Go the Extra Mile

Mike Jordan

Atlanta -- Just a few blocks west of Interstate 75, the words Auto Spa Bistro are written in ornate gold letters at the top of a small building on 14th Street in midtown Atlanta. Out front there is a wide parking lot where staff are cleaning soapy and shiny cars. It is obviously a carwash, but walking through Auto Spa Bistro's lounge doors might make you forget that detail.

Past the walls of purple plush and faux alligator club chairs, there is a bar where guests can order margaritas, a bottle of SweetWater 420 local beer, premium bourbon, gin and other adult beverages. Depending on the time of day you can order omelets like "The Beamer" with gulf shrimp, mozzarella, tomatoes and spinach, or lunch and dinner options ranging from an assortment of fresh salads to even bourbon-glazed lamb chops. Sometimes, guests can enjoy puffs of cooled smoke from rented hookahs under golden chandeliers.

"A lot of people came in dropping vehicles off, then would go to dinner, to Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts or Waffle House. And I was like, it'd be cool to have something housed in one building to extend their stay and increase average tickets," said Lemont Bradley, owner of Auto Spa Bistro, who came up with the idea to provide amenities after his first carwash business closed 20 years ago.

Mr. Bradley says he is getting creative with amenities and services to make his carwash more like a club. Others are doing it to entice interest from investors, particularly since carwash chain Mister Car Wash raised more than $560 million in a June 2021 initial public offering.

At Clean Ride Auto Spa in Sioux Falls, S.D., customers can enjoy a freshly brewed cup of locally roasted coffee inside the Clean Bean, its coffee shop. Some aren't even purchasing a car service; they just pull up for a caramel macchiato or chai, fresh-baked breakfast sandwiches and pastries such as the popular white chocolate raspberry scone, says Clean Ride's administrator, Heather Dorhout. Clean Ride car-cleaning and detailing packages range from $12 to $450. It also has a dog spa: self-serve pet-washing stations, which come with post-wash "pup cups" filled with doggy snacks and whipped cream.

Clean Ride opened in February 2020. Ms. Dorhout says the carwashing services equate to around 90% of revenue, but the additional amenities are fun ways of setting Clean Ride apart from competitors, particularly for the customers who she says like to "spill their stories" on friendly baristas while they await their freshly cleaned vehicles. "Eventually we'd love to grow that side of the business," Ms. Dorhout says of the Clean Bean and the Dog Spa. "We've done catering events recently, but right now it's more to help with the experience and customer service."

According to a March report from Grand View Research, the carwash market is expected to reach $38.61 billion by 2030, at a compound annual growth rate of 3.1%. Eric Wulf, chief executive of Chicago-based trade group International Carwash Association, says the mixed-model carwash business has high potential for success. Large carwash owners are likely going to focus on creating a scalable subscription-based business. The resulting market bifurcation would then motivate more independent entrepreneurs to launch unique models.

The mixed model is something Mr. Wulf has seen in many forms, particularly overseas. He says one of the most unique carwash operations he has seen is in Zurich, where one carwash occasionally has a dance club on the second floor where visitors dance while they wait. The carwash restaurant model isn't for everyone, said Mr. Wulf. The risks include spending a lot of money to build something that simply doesn't bring in more customers. There is also the risk that a private-equity-backed group builds a subscription model next to your business.

Setting up a carwash is much more expensive than it was decades ago due to technology advancements and rising real-estate prices. Mr. Wulf said it is part of the reason owners are turning to private-equity groups for investment. About 15 years ago, he estimates it was around $2.5 million to set up an express exterior carwash. Now he puts that figure at $7 million.

Mr. Bradley is banking on a loyal customer base and celebrity clients to keep Auto Spa Bistro in business. Former NBA star Shaquille O'Neal is a member of the company's franchising advisory board, for example. Mr. Bradley has already started with a new concept called Eco Car Spa just a mile south of Auto Spa Bistro. The "waterless" carwash uses biodegradable products and offers services that range from $15 for an outside-only wash to $500 for a full detailing. Mr. Bradley is pairing the environmentally friendly carwash with a healthier food menu that includes quinoa and kale salads with berry vinaigrette "I'm not rushing it; I want to make sure we will be successful in their territories and we'll be able to conquer new territory," he said.

The Wall Street Journal, 27 April 2022

Danone chief defends staying in Russia as he sets out global strategy

Leila Abboud

Head of French group rules out major disposals and says company has 'a responsibility to the people we feed'

Danone's chief executive has defended continuing to operate in Russia despite a western corporate exodus and ruled out selling any of the group's three main global businesses as he set out his strategy for the first time. At an investor conference in Evian on Tuesday, Antoine de Saint-Affrique unveiled his multiyear turnround plan for the French maker of dairy and plant-based milks, baby formula and bottled water. It includes a significant cut to profit margins from this year to free cash to invest in product innovation and advertising as it strives to reignite revenue growth after years of underperformance.

On top of the turnround effort, Danone faces a hit to its business from the war in Ukraine and its fallout in Russia where economic sanctions have begun to bite. Bernstein analysts reckon the company earns about 6 per cent of its €24bn in annual revenue in Russia, making it the most exposed of Europe's large consumer groups.

Asked whether staying in Russia would risk damaging Danone's reputation, de Saint-Affrique told the Financial Times: "It is very easy to get drawn into black-and-white thinking and demagogic positions, but in the end our reputation is about our behaviour." He added: "We have a responsibility to the people we feed, the farmers who provide us with milk, and the tens of thousands of people who depend on us."

Danone has about 8,000 employees across more than a dozen production sites in Russia, where most of its revenues come from dairy and yoghurt sales and its most popular brand is a local one called Prostokvashino. Danone said on Sunday it would not commit new investment to Russia, and that it would continue to monitor how the situation evolves. Similar pledges on investment have been announced by fellow European consumer groups Carlsberg and Henkel, and none have pulled out of Russia to date.

Analysts say de Saint-Affrique, who took over in September, will be judged on whether his strategy can actually boost growth across Danone's three businesses. Previous boss Emmanuel Faber was ousted after a boardroom power struggle triggered in part by his failure to deliver on a 2015 pledge to achieve 5 per cent annual organic sales growth by 2020. That metric, which is closely tracked by investors, had improved only slightly, from 2.1 per cent in 2016 to 2.6 per cent in 2019.

The pandemic made the task harder by denting sales of bottled water while pushing up costs from transport to raw materials, and Danone still has not returned to 2019 sales levels. Last year, organic sales growth rebounded to 3.4 per cent, after declining 1.5 per cent in 2020. Instead of big asset sales, de Saint-Affrique has opted for a more methodical approach. "I don't see a need to fundamentally reshape the portfolio, but we will manage it much more actively than in the past," he said, adding that the aim would be for portfolio rotation of about 10 per cent of net sales. He admitted that about a quarter of the business was "underperforming" and needed to be fixed quickly. "And if we are not capable of doing that, then all options will be on the table to find other ways of creating value," he said.

The refusal to consider major disposals may disappoint some investors who had hoped for a bolder strategy, such as offloading its bottled water business that includes the Evian and Volvic brands. It is Danone's smallest and has lower margins than other categories.

Danone also set out new financial targets that have recurring operating margins falling to 12 per cent this year — its lowest level since 2002 and down from 15 per cent before the pandemic. Organic sales growth will come in between 3 and 5 per cent this year, largely led by price increases to offset inflationary pressures.

For 2023 and 2024, Danone said it would aim to deliver the same organic growth, while increasing its recurring operating profit faster than net sales. No target was given on recurring operating margin. The shares were largely flat in morning trading on Tuesday amid a 2 per cent rise for the French blue-chip Cac 40 index. Bruno Monteyne, analyst at Bernstein, called it a "modest but sensible start", while Martin Deboo of Jefferies said the medium-term targets "feel ill-defined". De Saint-Affrique said: "This plan is a renewal of the company and reset of our culture and as well as of our financial targets and execution."

Financial Times, 8 March 2022

Naming Elon Musk person of the year is Time's 'worst choice ever', say critics

Martin Ferrer

Time magazine's decision to make Tesla billionaire Elon Musk its person of the year for 2021 has been criticised because of his attitude to tax, opposition to unions and playing down the dangers of Covid.

Musk, who is also the founder and chief executive of space exploration company SpaceX, recently passed Amazon founder Jeff Bezos as the world's wealthiest person as the rising price of Tesla shares pushed his net worth to around $300bn (£227bn).

Describing him as a "clown, genius, edgelord, visionary, industrialist, showman", Time cited the breadth of Musk's endeavours, from his founding of SpaceX in 2002, to his hand in the creation of the alternative energy company SolarCity in addition to Tesla, the most valuable car company in the world. The magazine emphasised that its annual acknowledgement was not an award, but rather, "recognition of the person who had the most influence on the events of the year, for good or for ill". The award has previously been bestowed to popes, Ebola healthcare workers and Greta Thunberg but also Hitler and Stalin, who received it twice. In 1982, it went to "The Computer".

But the accolade drew sharp criticism in the US, where Musk is a controversial figure because of his attitude to tax, opposing a "billionaires tax" floated by some. He, along with other prominent super-wealthy people, paid only small tax rates relative to the significant increase in his total wealth between 2014 and 2018 according to a Propublica investigation this year, with Musk paying a "real" rate of 3.27%. While legal, the rates expose the failures of America's tax laws to levy increases in wealth derived from assets in the way wages – the prime source of income for most Americans – are taxed.

Senator Elizabeth Warren tweeted that the Time decision highlighted the need for the tax code to be reformed "so the person of the year will actually pay taxes and stop freeloading off everyone else".

Robert Reich, who served as labour secretary in the Clinton administration, said the announcement was a good time to remind people that he "illegally threatened to take away stock options if employees unionised", an apparent reference to a 2019 National Labour Relations Board finding regarding a tweet in which Musk wrote: "Why pay union dues & give up stock options for nothing?" Musk also earned controversy in 2020 by playing down the dangers of Covid in a series of tweets and initially kept his northern California factory open despite a local "shelter-in-place" order, before later halting production. The author Kurt Eichenwald said it was the "worst choice ever"

Time magazine also noted the sway Musk holds over an army of loyal followers (and investors) on social media, where he skewers the powerful and also regulators attempting to keep in check an executive that is far from traditional. Using his 66 million followers on Twitter, he offers outlandish advice to the world and drives even his own followers and investors mad by shaking markets. He was sued by stock market regulators for tweeting in 2018 about taking Tesla private, and they alleged in correspondence to Tesla this year that two further tweets were not pre-approved by the company's lawyers, as required by a court settlement in the earlier case. Though it became profitable only in recent years, Tesla is by far the world's most valuable car company, at one point this year crossing the $1tn market capitalisation threshold. Traditional heavyweights such as Ford and General Motors combined are worth less than $200bn.

Musk said last month that SpaceX would attempt to launch its futuristic, bullet-shaped Starship to orbit in January. Nasa has contracted SpaceX to use Starship to deliver astronauts to the lunar surface as early as 2025. Musk said he plans to use the reusable ships to eventually land people on Mars. Time highlighted Musk's recent admission on Twitter that half his tweets were "made on a porcelain throne". In its profile of the provocative boss, Time went on to chronicle one of those toilet tweet storms in detail before concluding: "This is the man who aspires to save our planet and get us a new one to inhabit."

The choice was questioned on Twitter, by users who suggested other figures might be more worthy of recognition this year. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were Time magazine's person – or persons – of the year for 2020.

The Guardian, 14 December 2021

GameStop's stock is on fire once again and here's why

Jaclyn Diaz

GameStop's stock continues to baffle market experts.

Investors in GameStop are back on board a volatile roller coaster more than a year after the so-called "meme stock" phenomenon nabbed headlines in early 2021. While GameStop's recent highs are not nearly as close to the surge last year (when its stock hovered around $400 a share at one point), experts have said the company's stock price far exceeds what the retailer is actually worth.

"It's hard to make this argument that the price is worth more than $80," said Kevin Mullally, an assistant professor of finance in the College of Business at the University of Central Florida.

On Wednesday, GameStop opened at $175. Since March 1, GameStop's stock has yo-yoed between $78 and $189. On Tuesday, shares dropped 5.1%, resulting in the New York Stock Exchange halting trading of the stock briefly. These developments have many people wondering why GameStop's stock continues to perform beyond expectations.

GameStop is a brick-and-mortar retail shop founded in 1984 where customers buy, sell and trade video games and other gaming accessories. "GameStop as a business, if we separate it from the stock itself, was a dying business in a sense," Mullally told NPR. "About a year ago, they saw the price of the stock at around $20 was overvalued," and started shorting the stock, Mullally said. Shorting means investors are betting against the company and will profit if the value of the asset falls.

Last year, amateur day traders banded together to push the video game retailer's stock price higher. The traders, organized largely through internet communities on Reddit, sought to fuel a short squeeze on the video game retailer and trigger major losses for hedge funds. Melvin Capital and Citron were two of the funds caught in the squeeze, forcing them to buy more GameStop stock to cover their losses, which ended up driving the stock price even higher.

Jaime Rogozinski, the founder of WallStreetBets, a Reddit forum, told All Things Considered last year that, "it's the democratization of financial markets" that is "giving a voice to the people that didn't previously have one." Mullally didn't expect the fanfare over GameStop to last nearly as long as it has. "My prediction was that this couldn't persist because eventually people were going to lose money. Eventually this would have to end," Mullally said. "So far I have been proven wrong." That's largely due to the support of online communities. "Anytime this dips under $100, people come back in and prop it up," he added.

Part of this bump in price is likely thanks to GameStop chairman Ryan Cohen purchasing shares in the company, said Christopher Kardatzke, the co-founder and chief technology officer of Quiver Quantitative Inc., an alternative data company for retail investors. Last week, Cohen purchased 100,000 shares of the video game retailer — bringing his ownership to 11.9%, CNBC reported. He purchased these shares through his investment company, RC Ventures

A move like this "is seen as an indicator of the insider sentiment of their own company. It's a valuable metric," Kardatzke told NPR. "This likely caused more people to have more confidence in investing in GameStop." Traders closely monitoring GameStop have no doubt witnessed the volatility of the stock itself, he said. "When you see price movement in a stock like GameStop it generates a lot of discussion and gets a lot of people interested in what it's going to do next," Kardatzke said.

Mullally noted that it likely all comes down to supply and demand. The more interest GameStop stock generates, the more demand some traders seem to have for it, he said. Mullally admits he remains baffled by the interest in a stock that he views as not especially valuable. "GameStop as a company is not doing anything productive," he said. "But it's like people buying pet rocks or Beanie Babies. Those things are fundamentally worthless. It's strange and I don't understand it. But there are a lot of strange things that people buy and I don't understand."

NPR, 30 March 2022

There are Solutions to the Food Crisis. But Ploughing Up Britain isn't One of Them

George Monbio

Should we plough up Britain? Many people seem to think so. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, food prices were rocketing. Now they have reached an all-time record. The National Farmers' Union of Scotland has called for Scotland's feeble environmental measures – paying farmers to plant hedges, cover crops and introduce beetle banks – to be rescinded, so that food production can be maximised. Others insist that rewilding is a luxury we can no longer afford. It is true that the world now faces a major food crisis. Climate breakdown has begun to bite. Heat domes and droughts in North America and storms and floods in Europe and China last year damaged harvests and drove up prices. By February, the cost of food was 20% higher than a year earlier.

Meanwhile, Ukraine and Russia produce nearly 30% of the world's wheat exports, 15% of the maize (corn) and 75% of the sunflower oil. Altogether, they generate about 12% of the calories traded internationally. Ukrainian farmers are desperately short of fuel and fertiliser. Much of the labour force is now fighting the Russian army or has been forced to flee. Anything Ukraine manages to produce will be consumed at home. Anyway, the ports are blockaded. Russia might ban grain exports, as it did in 2010, helping to cause a major price spike in 2011. This threat has prompted other countries – Hungary, Turkey, Argentina and China – to restrict their own exports.

The war could raise global food prices by a further 20% this year, and that's assuming no further climate or pandemic disasters. Every increment ensures that more people go hungry. The Middle East and north Africa are highly reliant on Ukrainian and Russian grain. Almost 40% of Yemen's wheat is grown in Russia and Ukraine. Already, millions there are close to starvation. Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, relies on the warring countries for roughly 70% of its imports.

So does this mean we should plough our own furrow? About one-third of the UK's agricultural land is "croppable", and almost all of it is in use. The call to plant more land is similar to the call by rightwing Tory MPs to resume fracking: the environmental damage would greatly outweigh the tiny increment of production. As for rewilding, most advocates argue it should take place on a large scale only on unproductive land. There are vast areas in the uplands of Britain that produce remarkably little: the National Food Strategy reports that in England 20% of the farmland produces just 3% of our calories. The ratio is likely to be even starker in Wales and Scotland. If this land were rewilded, the contribution it would make to preventing climate and ecological breakdown, both of which severely threaten global food supply, would probably be far greater than the contribution it makes to feeding us directly. Rewilding is not a luxury we can't afford. It's an ecological necessity.

So, is there something meaningful we could do? Yes: ensure that our scarce arable land is used to feed people rather than to fuel cars or power stations. Despite the global food crisis that has been developing now for seven years, the UK and other European countries have cheerfully been diverting some of their best arable land from food to fuel production. Between 2019 and 2021, farmers in England raised the area of land used to make biogas by an astonishing 19%. Now 120,000 hectares (300,000 acres) is ploughed to grow maize and hybrid rye for biogas, which is marketed, misleadingly, as a green alternative to fossil gas. The reopening of a bioethanol plant in Hull that will turn wheat into fuel for cars is likely to take another 130,000 hectares out of food production.

Between them, these energy crops demand 9% of the land used to grow cereals in England. This is an astonishingly destructive and inefficient business. About 450 hectares of land is needed to feed a biogas plant with a capacity of one megawatt. By contrast, a megawatt of wind turbine capacity requires only one-third of a hectare. When you include the impacts of soil erosion, for which maize in particular is notorious, the climate costs are likely to be worse than those of fossil gas. This good land would make a far greater contribution to food production than it can to energy production. Needless to say, the National Farmers' Union of Scotland, so keen to grub up hedges and beetle banks to grow more food, has for years been encouraging its members to produce crops for biogas plants, which inevitably means reducing the amount of food they grow.

If we were serious about reducing the pressure on global food supply, we would also switch to a plant-based diet. Were everyone to do so, the agricultural land needed to feed the world would decline by 75%. Even though our direct consumption of grain would rise, the total arable area would fall by 19%, because animals would no longer need to be fed on crops.

Food security and food nationalism are by no means the same thing, and in some cases polar opposites. But our global food system is fragile and highly vulnerable to shocks. It requires complete transformation, of the kind I propose in Regenesis, published in May. Ploughing the few small corners where wildlife persists is not the answer.

The Guardian, 16 March 2022

I know why the Queen does not use a wheelchair

Melanie Reid

Poor Queen. If there is one thing worse than losing your mobility, it is people who think they know more about it than you do telling you how to handle it. The royals learn to endure unwanted advice about their bodies, their clothes and their behaviour; that goes with the job. But this is different.

When your body betrays you, after a lifetime of good health, it is physically and mentally cruel. There is inevitable frustration, a sense of loss and great pain. But above all there's the realisation that it's your body. You're the one that has to live in it, and you – only you – have the right to decide what to do with it.

Up went the cry "use a wheelchair" after the Queen missed the Commonwealth Day event because of concerns over her comfort and mobility difficulties. And while these people were genuinely trying to be helpful, it made me shudder, because it felt like a nation throwing granny in a chair regardless and trundling her off to a big family event because they were determined that she should be there.

But be there for whom? Her or them? If I've learnt anything, it's that there's nothing quite as limited as the imagination of the able-bodied. They're well intentioned, but they don't get it. They tend to think they can solve every problem by manhandling disabled people as if they were part of a military logistics challenge. Very few grasp what it feels like to be on the receiving end.

Beware, as I have said before, the tyranny of those who tell you how to live. It is bad enough being disabled without being told how to do it. Many of us, daily, choose the peace of resting at home over the exhausting hurly-burly of going out in order to please others.

Nobody knows why Buckingham Palace has ruled out a wheelchair at forthcoming events, or whether rumours of screens being used to block the cameras are true. Perhaps the Queen, most respected of world figures, simply prefers not to seen looking excessively frail.

She belongs to the steely, stoical generation, so familiar to many of us through our parents, that sees a wheelchair as "giving in" – a phrase that in itself is arcane. I understand why elderly people who can still stand and shuffle continue to do so, fuelled by inner resolve. A chair represents a tipping point; prison; dependency; the beginning of the end; being at the mercy of others. And our instincts aren't wrong.

Like it or not, this is the symbolism a wheelchair retains, even in an age when so much is done to normalise difference. In a chair you feel stigma, loss of power and dignity. I speak what I have lived. Notwithstanding decades of discrimination legislation, a wheelchair brings with it a crashing loss of authority. It sends a message of dependency and decline; the sensation of being pushed, physically manoeuvred, is really horrid. To be brutally honest, deep down people still regard those in wheelchairs as second-class citizens, ripe for ignoring or patronising.

I wish it were different. But in the human psyche there's a primitive bias against people who've lost mobility: people sigh inwardly when they see someone in a chair approaching, because it means hassle. It's an attitude I still actively have to suppress in myself – and I'm in one of the damn things. Is this prejudice fading? Yes, but very slowly.

Some have hailed a PR coup for the wheelchair community if the Queen would only join in. Even better if she could use one openly and boldly – a waggish Times reader suggested a nobility scooter. Imagine, several people have said wistfully, how it would help lower stigma to have someone so famous in a chair, demonstrating that you can still be who you always were, only now on wheels.

Again, people are projecting their wishes onto the Queen for selfish reasons. This isn't an opportunity for awareness-raising, or even the nonsensical suggestion – made by some – that she's sending the wrong messages by not embracing a chair. This is about a 95-year-old woman who is making private choices about her own body. She's way ahead of us. She's said to have future-proofed Craigowan Lodge, at Balmoral, with a nice roomy lift. Whatever she wants to do is right. Let her be.

The Times, 26 March 2022

China tries to limit the economic blow of Shanghai's COVID lockdown

Joe McDonald

As millions of people in Shanghai line up for mass coronavirus testing, local authorities are promising tax refunds for shopkeepers in the locked-down metropolis and to keep the world's busiest port functioning to limit disruption to industry and trade. This week's shutdown of most activity in China's most populous city to contain a COVID-19 outbreak jolted global financial markets that already were on edge about Russia's war on Ukraine, higher U.S. interest rates and a Chinese economic slowdown.

On Wednesday, the Chinese government reported 8,825 new infections nationwide, including 7,196 in people with no symptoms. That included 5,987 cases in Shanghai, only 329 of which exhibited symptoms. China's case numbers in its latest infection surge are low compared with other major countries. But the ruling Communist Party is enforcing a "zero-tolerance" strategy aimed at isolating every infected person. Some 9.1 million of Shanghai's 26 million people had undergone virus testing by Wednesday, according to health officials. They said "preventive disinfection" of apartment compounds, office buildings and shopping malls would be carried out. Shanghai recorded more than 20,000 cases by Monday in its latest outbreak, according to state media.

The government is trying to fine-tune its strategy in order to rein in job losses and other costs to the world's second-largest economy. Shanghai officials announced tax refunds, cuts in rent and low-cost loans for small businesses, promising in a statement Tuesday to "stabilize jobs" and "optimize the business environment." The Shanghai port stayed open, and managers made extra efforts to ensure vessels "can call normally," state TV reported. The port serves the Yangtze River Delta, one of the world's busiest manufacturing regions, with thousands of makers of smartphone and auto components, appliances and other goods. Operations at Shanghai airports and train stations were normal, according to the Paper online news outlet. Bus service into and out of the city was suspended earlier. Visitors are required to show a negative coronavirus test.

Abroad, the biggest potential impact on China's Asian neighbors and the rest of the world is likely to come from developments that chill demand in the world's most populous consumer market, economists said. China is the biggest export market for all of its neighbors, including Japan and South Korea. Chinese economic growth already was forecast to decline from last year's 8.1% because of a government campaign to cut corporate debt and other challenges unrelated to the pandemic. The ruling party's official target is 5.5%, but forecasters say even that looks hard to reach and will require stimulus spending.

"China is the biggest single consumer of practically everything. It matters outside China," said Rob Carnell, chief Asia economist for ING. "If China's consumption is getting knocked down by COVID, it is going to be something that filters down the supply chain and affects countries in the region." Officials are trying to defend China's role in global manufacturing supply lines by making sure goods get to customers, said Louis Kuijs, chief Asia-Pacific economist for S&P Global Ratings. He noted that after previous shutdowns, factories caught up with orders by working overtime. "The impact on supply chains is not as big as many outside observers fear," Kuijs said. "These restrictions tend to have a larger impact on spending and the demand side in China."

General Motors and Volkswagen said their factories in Shanghai were operating normally. GM said in an email it was carrying out "contingency plans on a global basis" with suppliers to reduce COVID-related uncertainties. Elsewhere, a total of 2,957 new coronavirus cases were reported in Jilin province in the northeast, including 1,032 with no symptoms. Access to the cities of Changchun and Jilin in that province has been suspended. BMW Group said its factories in Changchun suspended production March 24 following an outbreak.

In Shanghai, thousands of stock traders and other finance employees were sleeping in their offices to avoid contact with outsiders, the Daily Economic News reported. It said the Shanghai Stock Exchange was functioning normally with a reduced staff in a "closed office." Nearby, the riverfront Bund, Shanghai's most famous neighborhood, was quiet and empty of its usual crowds of pedestrians. Most restaurants were allowed only to serve diners who ordered via mobile phone and waited outside to collect meals.

A bigger threat to industry and trade looms if anti-disease restrictions disrupt activity at the Shanghai port. It handles the equivalent of 140,000 cargo containers a day. "If the port is closed, there would be even more dislocation, but it's not like everything is fine now," said Carnell. "It's just yet another thing we wouldn't need." Last year, a one-month slowdown at another major port, Yantian in Shenzhen, caused a backlog of thousands of shipping containers and sent shockwaves through global supply chains.

The Los Angeles Times, 30 March 2022

The Ancient Icelandic Word 'Sprakkar' Means Outstanding Women.

Eliza Reid

One of the most vivid snapshots of my early years in Iceland is from an unusually mundane location: a board meeting at the male-dominated software startup where I worked in Reykjavík in 2003. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary to those (mostly men) in attendance. But to me -- a 20-something immigrant from Canada -- it wasn't that the board's chair was running the meeting while her young daughter nursed at her breast, but rather the unremarked banality of it all: no one batted an eye at this.

Other moments over the nearly two decades since have gradually revealed to me a society where women are treated on par with men, or, at least, the intention to do so exists. Many are glimpses from my own life: My husband took several months of paternity leave from his job as a historian (before he was elected Icelandic president) after the births of each of our four children. Our daughter has my surname and not her father's. My 40-something friend just had her first child with the help of an anonymous sperm donor and will face no stigma for raising her boy alone. My trans friend Ugla can go to the swimming pool with me and not be forced to use the changing room that doesn't represent their true gender. And while I serve in the immensely rewarding and unofficial, voluntary position of first lady, I continue to work, including running an annual writers' retreat I co-founded.

These are varyingly commonplace snippets of a country that has topped the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index for the past dozen years. It's probably also not a coincidence Iceland is also the world's most peaceful country, one of its happiest, and its population boasts one of the world's longest life expectancies. Sometimes a fawning international press describes us as a "gender paradise," though those of us who live here are quick to add the word "but" to that statement. Iceland is not a gender paradise. Only one company listed on the Icelandic Stock Exchange is run by a woman.

Women of foreign origin face additional prejudice, discrimination, and isolation. And the entire country is being taken to the European Court of Human Rights by a group of women who believe their rights were violated by the treatment they received after they brought accusations of gender-based violence to the police.

I am often asked if there is a blueprint other countries can follow on how to achieve the level of equality we have in Iceland. It's not that simple. We have had strong female role models, including the world's first democratically-elected female head of state, and the world's first openly gay head of government. We are also a tiny country, with a population smaller than that of many cities, so we need to make sure everyone is chipping in.

The push for gender equality in Iceland has been decades in the making. The difference individuals can make was especially highlighted during the legendary "Women's Day Off" in October 1975, during which 90% of Iceland's women took the day off, not showing up to their paying jobs, and refusing to take part in unpaid labor in the home. Predictably, the country shut down, and the day galvanized the nation. Regular "Women's Day Off" events are still held to protest the ongoing wage inequality between the sexes.

There are policies and laws that help to facilitate this march toward parity: government-paid parental leave for both parents; heavily subsidized childcare; gender quotas for the boards of publicly traded companies; a law that states companies must prove they are paying equal pay for equal work. They show we have passed the tipping point of arguing whether trying to attain gender equality is a worthy goal and are now debating how to achieve it. Yet policies can only take us so far. As individuals, we all have a part to play. Gender equality is not a "women's issue" that elected officials are tasked with achieving. It does not pit one gender against another. Gender equality is a human rights issue and working to improve it benefits everyone. As individuals, we can do a lot, from pursuing jobs we want even if our gender is underrepresented there, to consuming media, literature, music, art, and sport with a lens for diversity and inclusion.

We must remain vigilant. Change doesn't only come from the all-too-often glacial pace of legislative adjustments and public opinion shifts; it comes from stringing together many infinitesimal moments of progress. The little things matter; in tiny Iceland, we know this lesson well. We can all be role models, whether that's in our families, communities, workplaces, educational institutions, or places of worship. It's up to us to use our voices, and to help amplify the voices of others who need to be heard. The ancient Icelandic word "sprakkar" means outstanding or extraordinary women. Yet the word is not exclusive to people who understand that language. There are "sprakkar" all around us. On this International Women's Day, I encourage you to recognize them, to elevate them, to amplify their voices, and to remember the influence we can all have in creating a more equitable world for everyone.

CNN Opinion, 08 March 2022

The Myth of the Great Resignation

Paul Krugman

All of the evidence suggests that right now, it's unusually easy for U.S. workers to find jobs and unusually hard for employers to find workers. The odd thing is that we have a very tight labor market, even though the number of employees is still about a million and a half below prepandemic levels and even further below the prepandemic trend:

For some time, many people, myself included, have been telling a story about this situation that goes by the name of the Great Resignation. That tale goes like this: The Covid pandemic caused many Americans to reconsider whether they really wanted or needed to keep working. Fear of infection or lack of child care kept some workers home, where they discovered that the financial rewards of their jobs weren't enough to compensate for the costs of commuting and the unpleasantness of their work environment. Older workers, forced into unemployment, decided that they might as well take early retirement. And so on.

Well, when my information changes, I change my mind -- a line often but dubiously attributed to John Maynard Keynes, but whatever. And the past few months of data have pretty much destroyed the Great Resignation narrative.

Have large numbers of Americans dropped out of the labor force -- that is, they are neither working nor actively seeking work? To answer this question, you need to look at age-adjusted data; falling labor force participation because a growing number of Americans are over 65 isn't meaningful in this context. So economists often look at the labor force participation of Americans in their prime working years: 25 to 54. And guess what? This participation rate has surged recently. It's still slightly below its level on the eve of the pandemic, but it's back to 2019 levels, which hardly looks like a Great Resignation:

What about early retirement? If a lot of that was happening, we'd expect to see reduced labor force participation among older workers, 55 to 64. But they've come rapidly back into the labor force:

A few months ago, it still seemed reasonable to talk about a Great Resignation. At this point, however, there's basically nothing there. It's true that an unusually high number of workers have been quitting their jobs, but they have been leaving for other, presumably better jobs, rather than leaving the work force. As the labor economist Arindrajit Dube says, it's more a Great Reshuffling than a Great Resignation.

Yet if workers have for the most part come back to the labor force, how do we explain the seeming paradox with which I began this newsletter? How can labor markets be so tight when payroll employment is still well below the prepandemic trend?

I'm sure that labor economists are scrambling to figure this out properly, but a quick look at the evidence suggests a couple of factors that many people telling the Great Resignation narrative -- again, myself included -- missed.

First, as the economist Dean Baker has been pointing out, the most commonly cited measures of employment don't count the self-employed, and self-employment is up by a lot, around 600,000 more workers than the average in 2019. Some of this self-employment may be fictitious -- gig workers who are employees in all but name but work for companies that classify them as independent contractors to avoid regulation. But it also does seem as if part of the Great Reshuffling has involved Americans concluding that they could improve their lives by starting their own businesses.

Second, a point that receives far less attention than it should is the decline of immigration since Donald Trump came to office, which turned into a plunge with the coming of the pandemic: Many immigrants are working age and highly motivated; their absence means that we shouldn't have expected employment to maintain its old trend.

Does the declining plausibility of the Great Resignation narrative have any policy implications?

Well, I don't like saying this, but it does seem to reinforce the case for higher interest rates. Until recently, it was fairly common for monetary doves to argue that we weren't really at full employment, because there were many potential workers still sitting on the sidelines. That's now a hard case to make; the U.S. economy now looks overheated by just about every measure, which means that it needs to be cooled off a bit.

The other implication is that if we want to revive U.S. economic vitality, we really should try to re-establish our nation's historic role as a destination for ambitious immigrants. But that's not a policy idea likely to get much traction, given the American right's anti-immigrant hysteria.

Anyway, you should know that all of those stories about how Americans are no longer willing to work seem to have evaporated. The Great Resignation now looks like a Great Misunderstanding.

The New York Times, 10 April 2022

Bridgerton: South Asian faces on TV 'makes me happy'

Paige Neal-Holder and Steffan Powell

Hit period drama Bridgerton returns for a second series - with two of its lead characters portrayed by actresses of South Asian heritage. Young actors from the same background tell BBC News why on-screen representation is so important to them.

"If you've not seen yourself on screen before, why would you ever want to go for that role?" Laraib Waheed tells us. She wants to make a living in musical theatre one day, but for now she's sitting in the kitchen of her student house - taking a break from her training to chat. The lack of South Asian actors in prominent television roles, she says, makes people like her worry their dream career is "not realistic". But the 19-year-old is optimistic that things are beginning to change.

"I think it's quite ground-breaking," says the student. "You've suddenly got representation from not one, but two South Asian women and it's a period drama which traditionally you'd only see white cast members in."

Some critics have described the show as shallow, preposterous and cliché ridden, but the diversity of its cast was widely praised and audiences lapped it up in their millions. Bridgerton has adopted a variation of colour-blind casting, where a person's skin colour plays no part in the decision to give them a role. Show boss Chris Van Dusen describes it as colour-conscious casting, with freedom to give people from diverse backgrounds a role but where a character's race can still play a part in their story.

Television critic Ellen E Jones tells us that seeing such a variety of ethnic backgrounds on screen is a positive step, especially since "period drama is such a massive part of the British film and TV industry, and if you exclude people of colour you're excluding them from a lot of the industry".

"The consequences of that is you've had generations of black and brown actors who are British being forced to go to America to find interesting roles like Idris Elba, Riz Ahmed and Thandiwe Newton have done," she says.

Giving actors access to a historically white-only world is a good thing, Ellen says, but she adds: "It doesn't solve the issues of race and racism as it doesn't engage with those subjects at all.

"People want to escape into a fantasy and that's what Bridgerton does, and importantly it offers that to people of colour as well as to white people and I think that is important. If you understand it in those terms, it is to be celebrated, but it's not about racism or race, it's not challenging any of those very embedded notions in our society.

However, having prominent roles in series like Bridgerton is more than just inspiration for aspiring performers. It may also carry a message to the broader South Asian community in the UK as well.

Laraib is aware that "in the South Asian community it's typical to be pushed towards academic degrees, for example being a doctor, an engineer or a dentist and if you aren't one of these things it's not accepted. A lot of my family members don't know I'm an actor and it sounds ridiculous because I am. But if the South Asian community as a whole sees two main characters representing us, it reinforces the idea that it's possible [to have a successful career in acting]."

Charithra Chandran, who plays Edwina Sharma in the new series of Bridgerton, told the Radio Times the show has changed attitudes towards diverse casting, but there is a pressure that comes with it.

"Minorities are often alluded to as being there to tick boxes, to fill a quota. I cannot tell you how unbelievably invalidating that is. It penetrates our minds and makes us feel like we're not worthy of success," the actress said.

"I had people at university tell me, 'You only got the lead in that show because they needed to have a person of colour in it'. It makes you doubt everything. When you are a minority you invariably feel the weight of representing your entire community. That's not imposed by anyone - but it's something I feel."

BBC.com, 22 March 2022

The Taliban stopped her mother's education. Now they're taking hers too

Charlie Faulkner and Najibullah Lalzoy

Karishma had been waiting for months to return to school but this week she was sent home by Taliban officials at the gate It was the day that Karishma had been waiting for and, during the 30-minute walk from her home to school in central Kabul, her excitement grew.

First the coronavirus had put the 17-year-old's studies on hold and, when it looked as if an easing in the pandemic would allow her back into the classroom in September, the Taliban banned girls from attending school once more — a ban that was finally due to be lifted last week.

Her excitement was short-lived. The moment Karishma arrived at school on Wednesday morning she learnt that the new Taliban was just like the old version and that it had reneged on its months' long promise to allow girls back into high school. "I had awoken at 6.30am because I was so excited," Karishma said. "I had prepared my clothes, telling my mum that I was worried about the flower design on my abaya in case it was deemed inappropriate, and packed my bag with my schoolbooks. I was eager to get back into my classroom."

Karishma had planned every aspect of her first day. Her brother accompanied her, as the family were worried she may face issues with the new authorities as a girl walking alone without a male relative, but when she reached the school gates she was met by Taliban members who asked her which grade she was in. "When I said I was in grade 2, they told me to go home. I couldn't believe it," she said.

Teaching staff had only learnt of the Taliban's decision that morning and some had already started lessons.

The ministry of education, under the control of the Taliban again after it swept back into power last August, had made the right noises, publishing a statement urging "all students" to return to school days earlier. The Taliban banned education for girls when it was last in power between 1996 and 2001 and performed its feared U-turn on the matter this week, claiming that the matter of uniforms had not been appropriately addressed.

Since she was a young girl, Karishma has had ambitions of becoming a journalist. "It's a job that teaches you about the world and can take you to many different places," she said. Now she does not believe that she will ever accomplish that dream — or go anywhere.

"I've lost all hope that I'll be allowed back to school," she said.

It is painful for her mother, who asked not to be named. "We are returning to how things were during the Taliban's previous rule," she said. "I had just started my university degree and had to stop when the Taliban took control in 1996. I was never able to complete it. They don't have any logic: the Prophet Muhammad said seeking knowledge is a right for men and women."

Since the Taliban came to power this time, they have stipulated that female doctors and teachers should treat and teach women and girls. However, men and women have been allowed to return to universities, albeit with new restrictions and they must be segregated, so the decision to continue to deprive girls of a high school education has left many confused and pessimistic about the country's future.

Many Afghans were already wanting to leave at a time of economic turmoil and fear over the new leadership. This latest act has pushed others towards the same conclusion: that there is no future here for the younger generation and the only option is to leave Afghanistan.

United States officials yesterday cancelled planned meetings in Doha with their Taliban counterparts over the group's refusal to allow girls to return to secondary school. "Their decision was a deeply disappointing and inexplicable reversal of commitments to the Afghan people, first and foremost, and also to the international community," the US state department said.

The Times, 25 March 2022

The real way to read an atlas

Stephanie Inverso

Consider the humble atlas: a relic of the past, a mirror of the society that made it.

Atlases are meant to be read with wonder, the way I thumbed through the Rand McNally atlas I received for my ninth birthday. (What made my parents think a world atlas would make a great gift for a 9-year-old, I'm not sure.) I spent nights poring over the pages with a flashlight, trying to pronounce the most exotic-sounding names — Vladivostok, Phnom Penh — savoring the unfamiliar way they felt in my mouth. I dreamed of a day when these names would represent memories for me rather than places I could only imagine. That atlas sparked the love affair with maps that led me to become a scholar of Renaissance cartography.

The Boston Public Library's Leventhal Map & Education Center holds a stunning array of historical atlases, such as a rare nautical atlas from about 1620 showing the eastern coast of America. This, like other early atlases, was never intended to be used solely as a reference work. Rather, cartographers imagined the genre as something between novels and self-help books.

Two Flemish cartographers are credited with inventing the atlas in the late 1500s: Gerard Mercator, whose 1595 “Atlas” gave the name to the genre, and his dear friend Abraham Ortelius, who had published a similar work 20 years earlier.

Mercator and Ortelius themselves explained how to read their groundbreaking map books. The introduction to the English translation of Mercator's Atlas argues that “the curious Readers” who listen “with such great admiration and give such earnest attention” to fabulous stories of distant lands and peoples will surely love the book they are about to read.

Atlas readers on a journey of “eye travel” — as Mercator called it — “shall straight away behold the special gifts and peculiar excellence of every Country, and observe a wonderful variety therein, which are very delightful to the mind.” Mercator designed his atlas to lead the reader on an armchair journey around the world.

Atlases also reminded their readers of the world's immensity and, in turn, of the insignificance of our quotidian preoccupations.

The map of the world with which Abraham Ortelius opened his atlas bears this quotation from Cicero: “For what can seem of moment in human affairs for him who keeps all eternity before his eyes and knows the scale of the universal world?”

In other, less gentle words: Our problems are inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. For Ortelius, this realization did not simply give one some perspective on life, it also played an important role in spiritual development. Maps and atlases, he argued, keep us humble before God.

One could argue that GPS has rendered atlases obsolete. However, atlases are not just reference works to be consulted when needed. They are stories. They remind us of the world's vastness and beauty. In the Renaissance way of thinking, atlases draw us closer to the divine. Modern readers may not feel so dramatic an effect, but reading an atlas can still be an act of personal development.

Atlases are as humbling and inspiring now as they were more than 400 years ago.

The Boston Globe, 29 April 2022

It's Time to End the 'Spring Forward' and 'Fall Back' Tired Tradition

Edward J. Markey and Marco Rubio

This weekend, Americans will change their clocks and lose an hour of sleep, all because of a senseless and outdated government policy. Changing between daylight saving time and standard time isn't just an inconvenience to people everywhere — it has real repercussions for Americans' health, economy and public safety.

We can't always get bipartisan agreement in Congress these days, but here's one thing we can agree on: we could all use a bit more sunshine. That's why we're working together in the US Senate to make sure we end the practice of "spring forward" and "fall back" by making daylight saving time permanent.

As US senators, we have seen the strong public support among Americans for making daylight saving time permanent. Already, 20 of the 48 states that observe the time change have passed proposals for year-round daylight. The states of Massachusetts and Florida, which we represent, have already expressed support for switching to permanent daylight saving time.

The adoption of daylight saving time in the United States through the Calder Act, also known as the Standard Time Act of 1918, was preceded by adoption of daylight saving time in Europe during World War I and first conceived as a way to conserve energy during wartime. It's time we update it. But our states can't do it without enacting federal legislation. That's why we've introduced the Sunshine Protection Act, which would amend the legislation which created time zones, the time change and how time zones are determined, to make brighter days a reality year-round.

Here's why you should count yourself in:

The effects of darker afternoons on our mental and physical health can be serious. The biannual transition of "spring forward" and "fall back" disrupts circadian sleeping patterns, causing confusion, sleep disturbances and even an elevated risk to heart health.

The rate of heart attacks spikes by 24% in the days following "spring forward" in March, according to a 2014 study from the University of Michigan. Another study, published in 2016, found stroke rates may also increase by eight percent. Year-round daylight saving time could also decrease the likelihood of fatal car accidents, which jump six percent in the days following the time change, according to a 2020 study from the University of Colorado

Stolen evening sunlight can also negatively impact mental health. A Danish study found hospitals see an 11% uptick in patients with symptoms of depression immediately following the switch from sunnier daylight saving time to the darker standard time in the fall. By making our days brighter year-round, we can also permanently speed up the clock on seasonal depression triggered by the dark days of winter.

Furthermore, extra sunshine in the evenings can give our economy a boost, with consumer spending up 3.5% when we have more daylight in the evenings, according to the same study in Denmark. And beyond the statistics, there's the simple truth that we all like more sunshine. Evening daylight hours mean more of the day to enjoy after work and allows our kids more time to play after school.

It's really straightforward: Cutting back on the sun during the fall and winter is a drain on the American people and does little to nothing to help them. It's time we retire this tired tradition. Tell your senators to lighten up and back our Sunshine Protection Act.

CNN Opinion, 13 March 2022

Enough streaming already?

Chris Woodyard

LOS ANGELES – Thanks to Netflix and CNN, the entertainment industry has just received a master class into what works and what doesn't when it comes to streaming.

Lesson One: Just creating a streaming channel, even one with a well-known name, is no guarantee of success. Viewers are showing their limits when it comes to paying for multiple services.

Lesson Two: The streaming market will continue to grow, but with so many players at this point, some will struggle to find a place with viewers.

Lesson Three: Content is still king. To succeed, a content channel needs to retain subscribers with original talked-about, exclusive shows, movies or specials, backed by a deep reserve of older, popular content that can be aired again and again to tide viewers over between hits.

"While consumers have been willing to add 'just one more' streaming service in the past, they are less willing to do so today," said Brett Sappington, vice president with media insights firm Interpret. "There are so many competitors available, each with strong content libraries."

Like many of life's teachings, these lessons came the hard way in two big developments this week.

Netflix reported its first drop in global subscribers in a decade. The streaming service lost 200,000 subscribers for the first quarter instead of gaining the 2.5 million predicted. The company blamed rampant password sharing, but investors sent the stock plummeting more than 35% on fears that the giant's days of unlimited growth are running headlong into the reality of pressure from streaming competitors.

CNN Worldwide, meanwhile, pulled the plug on its CNN+ streaming services only three weeks into its start, apparently unenthusiastic about the initial response. Though it has invested heavily in the startup, CNN has new corporate ownership. Discovery acquired it as part of WarnerMedia and it is expected to move back toward stronger news programming and away from pundit-driven content.

In the case of Netflix, former Hollywood Reporter editor Alex Ben Block said its disclosure shows that rivals are finally able to apply pressure to what had been a juggernaut.

"When it was the only game in town, everyone signed up," he said. Now, "a lot of competitors are dividing up the same pie. I expected at some point the magic would evaporate."

Though streaming competitors Disney, CBS and Paramount are formidable, he cautions of making too much of Netflix's troubles. Netflix has more than 220 million subscribers worldwide, he said. Plus, streaming remains the future of entertainment – a "fundamental change in the way content is distributed."

While Netflix has massive reserves of that content, CNN was launching CNN+ with little to distinguish it from its regular basic cable programming. Think Anderson Cooper and Fareed Zaharia with a mix of some of its special films and recent series involving food and travel.

"The incremental content for CNN+ wasn't ultimately compelling enough to drive paid use and meeting WarnerMedia's standard of success," Sappington said.

Still, even though there is a multiplicity of streamers, Sappington believes there is room for more if they can offer content that's high quality and compelling.

"Future streaming competitors could include those with sports content, providers of short-form or live-streaming content or streaming services that are growing overseas that haven't yet entered the U.S. market," he said.

USA Today, 26 April 2022

Meta 'hired political strategists to smear TikTok'

Callum Jones

The owner of Facebook and Instagram has been accused of hiring a top advisory firm to turn public opinion against TikTok.

External consultants recruited by Meta Platforms discussed how they could create headlines like "from dances to danger" about the rival social network, according to The Washington Post, which obtained leaked emails.

TikTok said it was "deeply concerned" by the report. Meta said all platforms should face scrutiny.

Targeted Victory, a Republican consultancy based in Arlington, Virginia, is said to have been working to present TikTok, the video app owned by a Chinese company, as a threat. In one email, a director at Targeted Victory told staff that the firm needed to "get the message out that while Meta is the current punching bag, TikTok is the real threat? especially as a foreign-owned app is #1 in sharing data that young teens are using".

California-based Meta is the world's largest social media group. It also owns WhatsApp, the messaging service. The group has faced a torrent of criticism in recent years as critics argued its platforms had harmed children, stoked division and threatened democracy. It has a market value of $625 billion and 3.59 billion monthly users.

TikTok, which claims more than 1 billion monthly users, is one of Meta's biggest competitors. The platform was founded in 2016 and is owned by Byte- Dance, the Chinese tech group.

Its growth as a service used by millions of young people around the world has raised concerns around data privacy and online child safety.

Staff at Targeted Victory have been encouraged to use the rapid rise of TikTok to deflect some of the privacy and antitrust concerns around Meta, The Washington Post reported. It cited one email in which an employee was quoted seeking "local examples of bad TikTok trends/stories" that could be highlighted by the media. "Dream would be to get stories with headlines like 'From dances to danger: how TikTok has become the most harmful social media space for kids'," they reportedly wrote.

TikTok claimed it was subject to a campaign based on activity that has not been seen on its platform. "We are deeply concerned that the stoking of local media reports on alleged trends that have not been found on the platform could cause real-world harm," a spokeswoman for the business said.

Targeted Victory did not respond to a request for comment. Meta said: "We believe all platforms, including TikTok, should face a level of scrutiny consistent with their growing success."

After an initial bounce, shares in Meta closed down 0.9 per cent, or $2.01, at $227.85 in New York last night.

Meta has halted plans for a giant data centre using 1,380 gigawatt hours of energy a year, as much as a city, after Dutch MPs urged the government to stop the project.

The scale of the planned 410-acre complex of servers at Zeewolde, to house content and allow video streaming, threatened Dutch climate change targets. Meta suspended the project after the Dutch parliament voted against it.

Tom Zonneveld of the Leefbaar Zeewolde protest party, which doubled its seats in municipal elections due to hostility to the data centre, hailed the decision as a victory. "We are happy," he said. "It is of course a postponement and not a cancellation but it is another step in the right direction."

The Times, 31 March 2022

Changing social media instead of society

Suzette Hackney

Elon Musk's pending purchase of Twitter has Americans either anxious or celebrating – and filling timelines with millions of fraught tweets about the billionaire's $44 billion offer.

"Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated," Musk tweeted Monday to his nearly 87 million followers.

There are so many questions:

How will Twitter evolve as a privately held company?

Will Donald Trump be allowed back on the platform?

Is Black Twitter dead?

What does this mean for moderation?

Does Musk even know what free speech means? (Probably not.)

We should all take a minute to breathe. This silly purchase likely won't affect the little corners of our Twitter worlds. It certainly won't solve world hunger (more on that later). And the deal is far from done. Agencies such as the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission will likely need to sign off, as well as Twitter stockholders. It could take months.

Being rich isn't my ministry so maybe I have no idea what I'm talking about. But I don't understand how a man with enough money to literally help change the fabric of American society decides to spend it on a platform that isn't even that popular.

According to a 2021 Pew Research Center social media study, only 23% of U.S. adults use Twitter. Sure, that's still millions of people, but the platform's use has been in steady decline. Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, Snapchat and LinkedIn all have bigger platforms.

Users could be navigating to the next big "it" platform before Musk finalizes this latest business venture.

Musk is philanthropic, at least on paper. Last November, he donated more than 5 million shares of Tesla stock, worth $5.7 billion, to an undisclosed charity. Some have questioned whether the donation was made so Musk could avoid capital gains tax. Through the Musk Foundation, Musk has shared his fortune, including a donation of $100 million to fund competition for developing technologies to remove carbon dioxide from the air.

Yet I watch philanthropists like Mackenzie Scott, who has donated at least $12 billion since 2020 to nearly 1,300 organizations and nonprofits that focus on issues like affordable housing, food security, public health, education equity, job training, racial justice and gender equality.

Listen, I like Twitter. I am in control of who I follow, and I appreciate the many news organizations and journalists who use the platform to share their work. It gives me a manageable window into the world. From there I can decide whether to engage further.

It would just be nice if Musk decided to get on board with humanitarian efforts and spend more money on something meaningful, let's say this country's blights of homelessness and poverty. Instead, he bought Twitter.

Oh, and I guess I should start following Musk. Maybe.

USA Today, 28 April 2022

Brainless Bigotry in Boston

Bret Stephens

Historical parallels often spring to mind when it comes to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the brutality and megalomania of Vladimir Putin, many are reminded of Adolf Hitler. In the soaring rhetoric and heroic defiance of Volodymyr Zelensky, others hear echoes of Winston Churchill. In the moral outrage but relatively cautious policies of Joe Biden, there's a touch of George -- Wouldn't Be Prudent -- H.W. Bush.

And in Wednesday's decision by the Boston Athletic Association to prohibit runners from Russia and Belarus from competing in this year's Boston Marathon, we recall the words of Otter, one of the frat house characters from "National Lampoon's Animal House": "I think this situation absolutely requires a really futile and stupid gesture be done on somebody's part."

In announcing its decision -- which applies to residents of both countries but not to Russians or Belarusians living abroad -- the president of the B.A.A. explained in a news release that "we believe that running is a global sport, and as such, we must do what we can to show our support to the people of Ukraine." In an email, the association told me that a total of 63 athletes will be removed from the marathon and a five-kilometer race that precedes it.

Superficially, the decision is of a piece with other recent cancellations of Russian performers: the removal of Valery Gergiev as chief conductor of the Munich Philharmonic for refusing to denounce the invasion of Ukraine; the nixing of the planned summer performances at London's Royal Opera House of the Bolshoi Ballet, which has long been an arm of the Russian state; the Met's cancellation of the soprano Anna Netrebko for her past association with Putin (though she subsequently did issue a statement denouncing the war).

One can debate the merits of these decisions, and there's always a slippery slope when it comes to making cultural choices based on political considerations. If we're going to ban Russian artists and athletes for the invasion of Ukraine, why not their Chinese counterparts for Beijing's depredations in Xinjiang? Why shouldn't other countries do the same thing to American musicians and athletes the next time an American president deploys forces to some place where they hadn't been invited?

But however you come down on these questions, at least there's the argument that Gergiev, Netrebko and the Bolshoi are associated with the Kremlin's power structure. What about those 63 runners who just want to complete a famously challenging 26.2- mile course? I asked the B.A.A. what responsibility the banned athletes have for the policies of their government. No reply. I also asked whether exceptions would be made for runners who made public statements denouncing the invasion of Ukraine. No reply on this, either.

The questions must be difficult to answer because it's hard to think of any justification for the B.A.A.'s indiscriminate discrimination. So let's help them think this one through.

First point: Thousands of Russians have, in recent weeks, courageously risked imprisonment by publicly protesting the war. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians took to the streets to denounce electoral fraud in the August 2020 elections, only to be met by a "reign of terror" from the government of Aleksandr Lukashenko. Clearly, not all Russians and Belarusians support their leaders -- a point the B.A.A. should seek to honor, not ignore.

Second point: To reduce citizens of a state to an identity with the politics of their government is not just a gross moral simplification. It's also a gift to people like Putin and Lukashenko, who want nothing more than to have people believing that they alone speak for all their people, and that their policies are universally supported. It should be possible for Russians and Belarusians to be both proud of their countries and ashamed of their governments.

Third point: In recent years, Putin has gone out of his way to castigate Woke Western culture for being censorious and repressive, not to mention hypocritical. "They're now engaging in the cancel culture, even removing Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Rachmaninoff from posters," he complained last month. What the B.A.A. has done only validates the allegation.

Fourth point: Americans are supposed to believe in openness, competition and fair play. We're also supposed to believe that democratic societies never shine brighter than when they uphold these principles in the face of adversaries who flout them. It would be nice to see the B.A.A. celebrate those ideals.

In "Animal House," Otter defends his fellow Deltas by insisting, "You can't hold a whole fraternity responsible for the behavior of a few sick, perverted individuals." On this point, at least, let's give Otter his due: You also don't hold entire societies responsible for the behavior of their despotic leaders. The B.A.A. should think this one over and let the Russians and Belarusians compete under their countries' flags for the hope of what their countries might someday become, free from the yoke of their present leaders.

The New York Times, 11 April 2022

Covid robbed Kyoto of foreign tourists – now it is not sure it wants them back

Justin McCurry

Until a couple of years ago, negotiating the hill leading to one of Kyoto's most popular temples would have tested the patience of a Buddhist saint. The arrival of yet another coachload of sightseers would send pedestrians fleeing to narrow paths already clogged with meandering visitors on their way to Kiyomizu-dera.

That was before Covid-19. Today, the cacophony of English and Chinese, and a smattering of other European and Asian languages, has been replaced by the chatter of Japanese children on school excursions. Shops selling souvenirs and wagashi sweets are almost empty, their unoccupied staff perhaps reminiscing about more lucrative times. Two years into the pandemic, some of the ancient capital's residents admit that they have learned to embrace life without foreign visitors, who were once welcomed for the money they ploughed into the local economy and resented for their cultural faux pas and, in some cases, staggering bad manners.

The global boom in Japanese pop culture and cuisine, a weaker yen and fading memories of the March 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima turned the country into a tourism success story. In 2019, a record 31 million people visited from overseas – an estimated 8 million of them including Kyoto in their itinerary.

Buoyed up by its successful bid to host the 2020 summer Olympics, the government set an ambitious target – to which it continues to cling – of 60 million overseas visitors by the end of this decade. But after two years of the toughest borders restrictions in the world, Japan's tourist boom feels as if it belongs to a different age.

By last year, the gains of the previous decade had been wiped out, first by the arrival of the coronavirus, then by new waves that forced the government to abandon plans for a gradual opening up to tourists and other people from overseas. Just 245,900 foreign visitors arrived in Japan in 2021, according to the tourism agency, a drop of 99.2% from pre-pandemic levels.

"It feels very different now," said the owner of an ice-cream shop near Kiyomizu temple. "There used to be lots of foreign tourists, but now it's almost empty."

Despite the loss of revenue, Kyoto residents are divided over the eventual return of significant numbers of overseas visitors. It wasn't long ago that the city was at the centre of a backlash against "tourism pollution". Signs were erected in the Gion district warning visitors against trespassing and – a common complaint – pestering passing geiko and maiko entertainers for selfies as they walked to their evening teahouse appointments.

Traffic clogged popular sightseeing spots, while locals struggled to find space on buses crammed with tourists and their luggage. Restaurateurs railed against tourists who made group reservations but failed to turn up. For now, Kyoto's tourist economy is dependent on domestic visitors, whose presence ebbs and flows in lockstep with measures to contain the latest wave of coronavirus infections.

Mari Samejima is among the local businesspeople who are eager for the return of the bakugai – explosive buying – unleashed by free-spending parties of Chinese tourists who descended on Kyoto before the pandemic.

"They spent a lot of money here," said Samejima, who runs a gift shop. "I understand why some people are hesitant about a return to those days – and I have my own doubts – but I'd prefer to see foreign tourists again."

The number of customers at Yoshinobu Yoshida's shop, which sells Kyô sensu folding fans, has slumped by as much as 60% over the past two years. "I don't know what we'll do if it carries on like this," said Yoshida, whose shop has stood on the same spot near Kiyomizu for a century. "If I'm honest, I can't see it returning to normal for another few years."

With the Omicron surge yet to reach its peak, and Japan's government showing little enthusiasm for lifting its travel ban, few expect foreign tourists to return to Kyoto soon. And when they do, the numbers are expected to be a fraction of those before the pandemic. That may not be a bad thing, according to Tomoko Nagatsuka, who remembers hearing more Chinese than Japanese being spoken in her cafe, where weary tourists recharge with green tea and traditional sweets.

"Kyoto isn't a particularly big city, so too many foreign tourists put pressure on things like public transport," she said. "They were great for business, but it was difficult to live a normal life with so many of them milling around. Part of me really wants them back, but another part of me loves the peace and quiet."

The Guardian, 2 Feb 2022

Finding Joy Is as Good as Gold in a Grim World

Andrea Petersen

Liz Horvath was feeling excited and optimistic last month. Covid cases were declining and life was returning to some sort of pre-pandemic normal. Then the invasion of Ukraine happened. "It's like a whole other type of crushing sadness," says Ms. Horvath, 24, who works in education in the suburbs of Philadelphia. "There's some guilt about even trying to take time to do things that I enjoy when there's so much pain and suffering in the world."

It can be tough to be happy -- and might even feel unseemly to be so -- when people are dying and fleeing for their lives. But psychologists say it is exactly times like these that it's most important to cultivate moments of joy and fulfillment. Positive emotions have many benefits for physical and mental health and help us get through the hard times, says Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology and faculty director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

There are strategies to help you create these moments of joy. Mental-health professionals recommend activities such as taking a walk outside in nature, doing something helpful for someone else and scheduling time to do things that make you happy. It isn't selfish or frivolous to seek happiness, says Lynn Bufka, a clinical psychologist and associate chief, practice transformation at the American Psychological Association. "It doesn't diminish someone else's pain for us to feel happy or good about something," she says. Instead, feelings of joy and happiness make us feel more connected to other people and can give us the energy and perspective to help others, she says.

Americans are certainly stressed out. A March 2022 survey commissioned by the American Psychological Association found that 87% of adults said rising prices are a significant source of stress, and 80% cited the invasion of Ukraine. More people rated these as stressors than any other issue the poll has covered during its 15-year history. About three-quarters of survey participants said they are overwhelmed by the number of crises facing the world now, according to the poll, which involved more than 2,000 adults. Meanwhile, in a February poll, 58% said the pandemic is a daily stressor. Positive emotions are directly linked to better health. In scientific studies, so-called positive affect is associated with longer life, stronger immune function, lower blood pressure and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, among other benefits, according to a paper published in 2019 in the Annual Review of Psychology. The paper's authors define positive affect as "the experience of pleasurable emotions such as happiness, joy, excitement, enthusiasm, calm and contentment."

Regularly doing activities that you enjoy is important for mental health, too, says Natalie Christine Dattilo, a clinical psychologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. She notes that scheduling pleasurable activities is a key component of behavioral activation, an effective treatment for depression. "We have to practice feeling good in order to feel good in the future. It's kind of like a muscle," Dr. Dattilo says. She advises people to be mindful of how much time they're spending exposing themselves to negative or stressful information and balance it with positive experiences.

Dr. Bufka recommends getting outside. Scientific studies have found that spending time in nature is linked to decreased anxiety and greater feelings of well-being. Berkeley's Dr. Keltner advises people to take an "awe walk," where you focus your attention on the trees and sky around you. "You stop thinking about all of your self-focused strivings and worries," he says. Or spend a few minutes thinking about what you're grateful for, which research has linked to better sleep and greater happiness.

Plan an activity or experience that you think will bring you joy regularly; every day is ideal, Dr. Dattilo says. Schedule it for a specific time. Put it into your Google calendar, like you would an important meeting. One of the most powerful ways to bring ourselves joy is to do something helpful for someone else, notes Dr. Dattilo. When Cathy Dunsby was feeling sad and overwhelmed by the war in Ukraine, she bought a Ukrainian flag, attended a local vigil in support of Ukraine and donated to several GoFundMe efforts to bring money and supplies to refugees from the war. "Every single story is heartbreaking. There's no way not to be impacted by it," says Ms. Dunsby, a 53-year-old mother of four children ages 14 to 23 in Easton, Conn. Ms. Dunsby is also making an effort to connect with friends and is busy planning a summer trip to Europe for her family. Finding joy in these activities, she says, makes her better able to meet the needs of her family.

The Wall Street Journal, 21 March 2022

France's Center Holds -- for Now

William A. Galston

As French President Emmanuel Macron won an unexpectedly comfortable re-election over Marine Le Pen, leaders throughout the West breathed sighs of relief. But a closer look at the results reveals reasons for concern, and raises an intriguing question: Can what Mr. Macron has done -- create a new party of the center and lead it to victory -- happen elsewhere, even in the U.S.?

The French presidential election of 2012 was the last traditional contest between center-left Socialists, the heirs of Francois Mitterrand, and center-right Republicans, the heirs of Charles de Gaulle. Francois Hollande, the Socialist, won 28.6% of the vote in the first round, followed by the Republican Nicolas Sarkozy with 27.2%. Taken together, these parties of the center commanded a sizable majority of the electorate. Marine Le Pen's far-right National Front received 17.9%, and Jean-Luc Melenchon, the leader of the far-left, 11.1%, combining for only 29%.

In contrast, the 2022 French election marked the collapse of the traditional center parties. The Republicans received only 4.8% in the first round, and the Socialists did even worse at 1.7%. While these parties withered, the fringe flourished. With 22% of the vote, Mr. Melenchon doubled his 2012 vote share, while far-right candidates Ms. Le Pen and Eric Zemmour together garnered more than 30%. Mr. Macron, who began the latest transformation of French politics by assembling a new party of the center in 2017, managed 27.9% in the first round, up modestly from five years earlier.

In sum, the center's share of the first-round popular vote declined from 55.8% in 2012 to 34.4% in 2022, while the extremes rose from 29% to 52.2%. Mr. Macron's victory concealed the weakening of France's center and rising support for its fringes. If the French president stumbles in his second term, his country's political system will be left with no popular centrist party, and the door could open to the extremist forces he has managed to keep at bay.

Although there are many differences between the presidents of France and the U.S., there is one key similarity: Like Emmanuel Macron, Joe Biden was elected to revitalize the center of his country's politics. But unlike Mr. Macron, Mr. Biden didn't understand why the electorate made him president. As a result, he has lost the confidence of 1 in 5 Americans who voted for him less than two years ago.

The recently released Harvard-Harris poll reveals the magnitude of -- and reasons for -- the president's decline. In 2020, Mr. Biden received majority support from key groups of swing voters, including independents, moderates, suburbanites, and Hispanics. Since then, approval for his performance as president in each of these key groups has fallen sharply to a level incompatible with his re-election. As the poll shows, majorities of these groups (and many others) reject his approach to key issues such as crime, immigration, public schools and energy.

More than three-quarters of American voters support bills that would significantly expand federal funding for public safety and help communities hire 100,000 additional police officers. More than 60% want the Keystone pipeline to be completed and become operational as part of a broader plan to increase energy supplies and slow the transition from fossil fuels. Eighty percent of Americans (including 77% of Democrats) think that Title 42 Covid border restrictions should be extended, not scrapped, and 68% believe that the Biden administration's immigration policies encourage illegal immigration. Six in 10 Americans believe that new state laws restricting gender education in public schools make sense and that the left's attack on them is overblown.

Mr. Biden fares no better on the economy. Americans overwhelmingly identify inflation as their most important concern, and they blame the administration, not Vladimir Putin, for rising prices at the pump and in grocery stores. Only 20% think that their personal financial situation has improved under this president, while 48% say it is getting worse. As of now, only 37% of Americans want Mr. Biden to run for re-election, and policy failures are just part of the reason. More than 6 in 10 Americans have concluded that he is simply too old to do so, a total that includes 60% of moderates, 68% of independents, 69% of suburban dwellers, and 73% of Hispanics.

At the same time, only 45% of Americans want Donald Trump to run again, and a race between Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump in 2024 could feature the least popular combatants ever seen in a U.S. presidential contest. This could open the door for something we have not seen since Ross Perot in 1992 -- a serious insurgency from the center. In the Harvard-Harris poll, 58% of respondents said they would be willing to consider a "moderate independent" as an alternative to unappealing major-party candidates. Unlike in France, this strategy has never succeeded in the U.S. But serious elected officials in both parties are beginning to wonder whether they should follow the trail Mr. Macron has blazed.

The Wall Street Journal, 27 April 2022

Women who refused to let gender roles get in their way

Renée Graham

In Hollywood, it's colloquially known as the “Water Bottle Tour.” That's when promising writers are summoned for hours of meet-and-greets with big-name producers and executives to pitch their ideas and their talents. With each meeting comes another bottle of water. Making her well-hydrated rounds in 2013, Tracy Dawson, a Toronto comedy writer, hoped to land her first American gig. She was asked by a studio executive, a woman, which new TV shows piqued her interest. But Dawson was told that none of the programs she mentioned would be available to her.

The executive said the shows that appealed to Dawson had “no female needs,” Dawson recalled when we spoke last week. “She didn't say the words 'There are jobs open, but not open to you,' but that's what she was saying. That happened. Someone said that to me. I could not believe it.” That experience — plus the stubborn stench of the 2016 presidential election outcome — sparked Dawson's first book, “Let Me Be Frank: A Book About Women Who Dressed Like Men to Do Sh*t They Weren't Supposed to Do,” which will be published this week.

An alum of the famed Second City improvisational comedy troupe, Dawson wrote a script about a woman who disguises herself as a man to get work as a comedy writer. She scrapped that project but didn't abandon her idea to tell the stories of women who defied arbitrary gender rules, even when that required pretending to be men. To be clear, this isn't a book about gender identity. Nor did Dawson want to write a traditional history book.

“My whole thing is I have to laugh so I don't cry personally,” she said. “My background is comedy, and it's a way to help the medicine go down. I wanted an entertaining book. I want people to read it and hopefully go, “Wow, holy [expletive], and be laughing, but also to feel anger.”

Of the book's 21 essays, the story of Ellen Craft is the most harrowing. Bearing the fair skin of the enslaver who raped her mother, Craft could pass for white. That aided an extraordinary plan she devised with her husband in 1848. Cutting her hair and donning men's clothing, Craft disguised herself as a white plantation owner while her husband assumed the role of an enslaved valet. They traveled by train and ship from bondage in Georgia to freedom in Philadelphia.

Craft is “an absolute inspiration,” Dawson said. But she writes that while every woman in the book “may be a badass, not every woman is a hero.” Enter Christian Caddell. As fears about witches swept Europe in the 1600s, men known as witch prickers used gruesome methods to identify those suspected of witchcraft. Though many of those tortured or executed were women, Caddell assumed a new persona — John Dickson, a witch pricker in Scotland.

“That would have been a terrifying time in history to be a woman, so here she is passing as a man,” Dawson said. “Is it ambition? Is it money? Or is there part of this that's like, 'If I'm the witch pricker, I'm not going to be thought of as a witch and you can't torture and kill me.'”

Not every woman in the book dressed like a man to reach an otherwise unobtainable goal. Sometimes all it took was a name change. In 1967, Kathrine Switzer became the first woman to officially run in the Boston Marathon by registering as “K.V. Switzer.” She finished the race despite a marathon official's attempt to remove her number and push her off the course.

I interviewed Dawson a day after the leak of a Supreme Court draft majority opinion overruling Roe v. Wade. Dawson was still trying to process what it would mean to have nearly 50 years of fundamental reproductive rights stripped away by the high court's conservative justices, most of them men. “Even though we all might have seen this coming, and we saw a lot of signs . . . it creates this craziness. It's like gaslighting,” Dawson said. “They're not only not getting how incredible [women] are, but they're saying we're less than fully human if we need to be controlled in this way by the big daddies of the world.”

“Let Me Be Frank” reiterates that being female has often meant circumventing those self-appointed big daddies to become doctors, journalists, entrepreneurs, even pirates. Laws traditionally written by white men for white men leave few options for everyone else. Dawson's book is a loving tribute to those who did whatever they could to show that women unbound by gender roles can survive and thrive.

The Boston Globe, 8 May 2022

With Friends Like Putin, Xi May Lose Europe

Joseph C. Sternberg

What was Olaf Scholz doing in Tokyo last week? The visit will be clanging alarm bells in Beijing as China anxiously tracks the fallout from Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The newish German chancellor's trip to Japan to discuss economic and strategic cooperation is a sign of a major change under way in Berlin. The clue is the destination Mr. Scholz skipped: Beijing. Mr. Scholz's predecessor, Angela Merkel, visited China the way Chicagoans vote -- early and often. Her first jaunt to Beijing came six months after she took office, and she visited China twice as often as Japan during her 16 years in office. That Mr. Scholz shows signs of bucking this trend is significant.

It's more fallout from the Ukraine war. Germany's shock at Vladimir Putin's invasion is both sincere and wrenching. The economic element is twofold. The old maxim of Wandel durch Handel -- change through trade -- which was almost by default Ms. Merkel's only foreign-policy strategy, suddenly has fallen into bad repute. Cultivating closer economic ties with Mr. Putin's Russia didn't dissuade the autocrat from his imperialism. And now that Wandel has failed, the closely entwined business relationships created by all that Handel are proving devilishly hard to disentangle.

In this climate, thoughts have quickly turned to China, long Germany's other object of change through trade. Beijing has helped sharpen this negative focus, perhaps most notably with Xi Jinping's early-February pledge of "no limits" friendship with Mr. Putin. Europeans are frustrated with Mr. Xi's unwillingness or inability to broker a peace in Ukraine. The autocratic invasion of Ukraine also raises worries about an autocratic invasion of Taiwan, a prospect Europe previously discounted. And Mr. Xi's economy-killing zero-Covid policies undermine the business case for foreign investors. Thanks to foolish policy errors in Beijing, the country will miss this year's annual economic-growth target by a wide margin.

The result is a new German skepticism of China that's playing itself out along three dimensions. Businesses are growing anxious. This is not precisely new, after it became clear in recent years that Mr. Xi would not continue the reform-and-market-opening path of his predecessors. But of late the drumbeat of German businesses rethinking China has grown more insistent.

A survey by the Munich-based Ifo Institute think tank conducted in February found that 45% of German manufacturers said they planned to reduce imports from China, and 55% of retailers. "Foreign companies are hitting the pause button," Joerg Wuttke of the EU Chamber of Commerce in China said in a recent interview, regarding business nerves about potential parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan. The comment hit a particular nerve in his native Germany.

Within the political and policy class, too, a China rethink is under way. Lawmakers in the national parliament last week passed a resolution calling on Mr. Scholz to accelerate heavy-weapons deliveries to Kyiv. Somewhat surprisingly, China got a paragraph of its own, in which legislators demanded Mr. Scholz threaten to impose sanctions on Beijing if China obstructs Western sanctions on Russia or supplies Russia with weapons. The resolution was nonbinding, but Mr. Scholz said he interprets it as a mandate. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in March inaugurated a foreign-policy review. China featured prominently in her speech although not always by name: Europe must be aware that "vulnerability in the 21st century can also consist in authoritarian states investing billions of euros in European motorways, roads, power grids and ports," she warned in a barely veiled shot at Beijing.

A special mention here goes to Ms. Merkel's center-right Christian Democratic party, now in the opposition, which is quickly and not-so-discreetly running away from her Wandel durch Handel legacy. In a national-security outline released Monday, the CDU leadership calls for a "revision and reassessment" of Germany's economic approach. "Germany needs a new globalization strategy that focuses more on growth opportunities in the European Union, the U.S. and Africa, and reassesses dependence on other countries," the party elders write, and no prize for guessing which "other countries" they have in mind.

The broader public debate is accelerating. "Could Germany afford to bid the China market farewell?" the business-minded newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine asked in March. The answer, with a few caveats, was yes. This is part of a rapidly expanding genre in which commentators, reporters and assorted others pick over various aspects of the Germany-China economic relationship, whether the auto industry or imports of raw materials or any of a variety of other questions, searching for ways Germany can improve its economic security.

Whether Germany's new skepticism of China sticks will be a major political, economic and strategic question of the next decade. A likely outcome is not a total divorce, but rather the adoption in Berlin of a less enthusiastic, more hard-nosed attitude toward China. That will still be a far cry from what Mr. Xi probably thought he'd get when he signed his friendship pact with Mr. Putin three months ago.

The Wall Street Journal, 6 May 2022

Jamie Oliver is Veering into Cultural Appropriation.

Anna Sulan Masing

Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's recent Sunday Times interview in which he said he has "teams of cultural appropriation specialists" to make sure he doesn't get into hot water over his recipes, has caused a stir -- as the topic of cultural appropriation always does. The public reaction was swift. We saw the usual, tired responses throwing around the word "woke," as if it is an army of people flying a woke banner, hellbent on destruction. There was an all-caps Twitter post about "HOW SICKENING THAT WE HAVE TO DO THIS IN OUR COUNTRY." This was tempered with amusement elsewhere that a grown man, an expert in his field, would need to be monitored for being a bit insensitive. And that he required not one, but teams, plural, to stop him from calling a recipe Empire Chicken (like in 2012).

Jamie Oliver is two things: a person, but also a business. What is pervasive though, and probably the key to why his comments got such a huge response, is this idea that he is an individual that is doing it all. Who is Jamie Oliver? The man, the myth, the well-oiled machine of a cookbook and recipe empire. I have a few of his books and find them useful -- reliable recipes (tried by a team of recipe testers), enticing photos (created by a team of photographers and stylists), easy to navigate instructions (honed by a team of designers and editors).

There are 29 different types of chocolate cakes, 214 ways to cook eggs and 51 roast chicken recipes on his website alone. Even a deep love for Sunday lunch could not come up with that many variations without some help. And so, like any business that creates content, there will be editors, fact-checkers and researchers. These teams of "cultural appropriation specialists" are just another editorial team. The Jamie Oliver empire is run by many.

The concept that he has a team of cultural advisers seems a natural evolution of simply growing up. I am sure that Oliver, like most people, doesn't want to upset people, and when faced with criticism has tried to find ways to address the situation. But this isn't just about having a specialist advisory team -- it is about the topic of cultural appropriation. In 2018, Oliver was criticized for a recipe called "punchy jerk rice," when jerk marinade is specific to meat. And in 2014, he faced backlash over his "jollof rice" recipe which contained many elements not found in the dish. Indeed, author Reni Eddo-Lodge tweeted that: "Jamie Oliver's jollof rice hurts my soul." In these cases, Oliver is both appropriating dishes, and inaccurately conveying their essence.

The issue central to cultural appropriation is power. Therefore, no matter how many people Oliver is surrounded by, he is always going to be veering into the arena of cultural appropriation. He can, as can anyone, cook whatever cuisine he wants to. He can do this with respect, with research and with correct accreditation (which in the recipe world includes naming a dish correctly). But when someone is making money, or gaining recognition and kudos, off the back of something that is not their own -- and therefore off others' work, histories, talents, techniques, culture -- that is an appropriation. The teams that Oliver has, to watch out for cultural faux pas, are presumably non-White. In which case the responsibility of a White chef's professional conduct is left to the shoulders of brown and Black people; an appropriation of knowledge, albeit one that is attached to a salary or consultancy fee.

Cultural appropriation is also about the multiplicity of stories. There are many Italian chefs winning global awards and talking about their grandmother's handmade pasta/ragu/bread made in their kitchen/country house/dining room table, that we don't think a twist on a lasagna recipe is in any way authentic. And we will still pay good money to eat at a fancy Italian restaurant, even if our non-Italian mothers make an excellent carbonara. We know that there are many, many ways to cook, eat and be Italian.

We don't have many stories from award-winning Jamaican chefs telling us the personal and familial variations of jerk, and the labor of love and the heartbreaking history of these recipes. We do have 11 recipes on Oliver's website with "jerk" in the title. Therefore, bearing in mind the size of his readership, the predominant story of jerk (one of escaped enslaved people and Indigenous knowledge) is told to a wide audience by one Jamie Oliver, as a list of ingredients and a method to put them together. Recipes devoid of context.

The path that Yotam Ottolenghi is on seems a possible road to take. He openly co-authors books and has a diverse group of chefs that have benefited from their collaborations with him and are now seeing successes on their own -- Goh Helen, Ixta Belfrage, to name a few. Maybe this is what Jamie Oliver is looking to achieve with his new show, give exposure to new voices in cooking. But until his brand is not all about the lovable lad, the boy-done-good -- the individual -- there is no room to truly share space, and all we are left with is faceless teams on hand to explain that "Empire Chicken" is a truly terrible idea.

CNN Opinion, 27 January 2022

The Bloody Secret Behind Lab-Grown Meat

Tom Philpott

Lab meat—flesh grown in massive tanks instead of in the bodies of sentient animals—offers the promise of having our steak and eating it guilt-free, too. No vast amounts of water-polluting chemicals to grow feed crops; no low-paid, oft-injured slaughterhouse workers; no climate-warming gases from cow burps or manure lagoons, and no billions of animals slaughtered each year to satisfy our carnivory.

Once a staple only of science fiction, the stuff is poised to land on your dinner plate this year, at least according to boosters of the cultivated-meat industry (to use its preferred name). In Singapore—the only nation to approve lab meat for sale—you can already go to the JW Marriott South Beach hotel and order steamed chicken dumplings made with "real meat without slaughter" in the form of chicken cells grown by a US-based company called Eat Just. And other cell-meat startups vow to bring product to market in 2022, pending regulatory approval.

Yet several obstacles hold back a new era of widely available animal-free burgers, nuggets, and carnitas. The biggest involves something much less appetizing than chicken dumplings: the blood of unborn cow fetuses, extracted from their mothers after slaughter. The use of fetal bovine serum (FBS) in labs isn't new. Scientists have had the ability to biopsy animal cells and keep them alive outside the body since the 1950s. These test-tube cells need food to flourish, and researchers found that fetal bovine serum provided the special sauce—the right combination of hormones to make cells hum. In the 1980s, FBS technology gave rise to tissue engineering—growing cells in vitro to replace small amounts of damaged or diseased tissue in people. Extending the same techniques into a new realm, today's cell-based meat companies have relied largely on FBS to develop their products.

But a substance that works great for medical purposes (it's also widely used in vaccine development) creates two huge problems for an industry seeking to mass-produce slaughter-free meat. The first is expense. FBS sells for upward of $1,000 per liter—a major reason why, to break even on expenses, companies would have to sell their cultured meat for about $200,000 per pound, a 2020 analysis from University of California, Davis, researchers found. That's why companies like the one conducting product demos in Singapore aren't breaking even; they're losing money. The other big problem is optics: You can't market your product as "slaughter-free," let alone vegan, when you used a slaughterhouse byproduct to grow it. (Although Eat Just does just that with its Singapore chicken, which is made with a "very low level of bovine serum," a spokesperson told Mother Jones.)

As a result, cultivated-meat companies are scrambling to find FSB substitutes. Such a "serum-free" growth medium exists, reports the Good Food Institute, a think tank that supports conventional-meat replacements. Trouble is, it currently costs nearly $400 per liter—still way too high to be commercially competitive. "A whole new supply chain would need to form" to provide cheap serum-free growth media to lab-meat companies, says Christina Agapakis, a synthetic biologist who serves as creative director at Ginkgo Bioworks, a biotech firm. "And a lot of innovation in the biological manufacturing space will need to happen to make that possible."

All of which means there's some fine print on industry claims that lab meat will be on the market within the year: Even boosters don't expect to see price-competitive cultured meat until 2030, while other analysts conclude that the FBS-replacement problem, plus other gaping challenges—like perfecting machines that can grow cells at industrial scale—means the stuff will likely never be economical.

So don't hold your breath. If lab-meat startup execs are lucky, however, funders will be patient. In 2020 and the first half of 2021, investors poured more than $600 million into the space. Celebrity moguls Bill Gates, Richard Branson, Kimbal Musk, Sergey Brin, Peter Thiel, and John Mackey have all pitched in. And the gusher continues. In February, a startup called Wildtype—intent on creating cell-based salmon—announced a $100 million infusion from investors including Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert Downey, Jr.

Maybe such deep-pocketed friends will float the industry long enough to work out the problems posed by replacing fetal bovine serum. In the meantime, the very real ecological and social catastrophes created by the mass production of livestock fester—and "slaughter-free" chicken specials in Singapore aren't up to the task of slowing them down.

Mother Jones, 23 March 2022

Markets have fallen because the era of free money is coming to an end

Leaders

Tighter money means financial volatility and economic uncertainty

After the interest-rate cuts and hectic central-bank bond-buying of early 2020, investors came to believe that central-bank stimulus would pretty much last forever. Today, however, as investors come to terms with the end of the era of free money, financial markets are in spasms. Markets now expect interest rates to increase four times in 2022 as the Fed fights the inflation that has lifted growth in the consumer-price index to 7%, a level barely imaginable a year ago. On January 26th the Fed confirmed that it would end its bond-buying programme and signalled that it would probably raise rates soon.

This hawkish shift is the most important among many to have taken place in the world's central banks in recent months. But it has only recently begun to bite in asset markets. After reaching a vertiginous high of nearly 40 times cyclically adjusted earnings at the turn of the year, the S&P 500 index of stocks has fallen by 9% in January (markets in Europe and Asia have fallen too, though by less). Markets' intraday volatility has been just as striking, reflecting investors' struggle to digest the consequences of tighter money.

One is the repricing of long-dated assets. As interest rates collapsed during the pandemic, the value of securities with pay-offs stretching far into the future soared. Shares of technology firms like Zoom and Netflix, already sent higher by the switch to remote work and at-home entertainment, looked even more desirable as the return on bonds all but vanished. Their rise propelled the American stock market. Lately, however, long-term real interest rates have surged in anticipation of monetary tightening, causing a reversal of fortune. The turnaround has been dramatic for the most speculative stocks and novel instruments such as cryptocurrencies.

The effect of higher rates on the real economy is slower-burning and harder to anticipate. Ultra-cheap money let companies raise vast amounts of capital in 2021, a boom that will not be repeated. Homebuyers have assumed big mortgages as house prices have soared. Distressed firms have taken advantage of government-backed loans. Government debt-to-GDP ratios have ballooned, because of large, sustained deficits in the rich world and a collapse in growth in many emerging economies.

High indebtedness makes the world economy more sensitive to changes in monetary policy. Central banks must raise rates enough to quell inflation but not so much that they tip economies into recession as interest burdens rise. Households have stronger balance-sheets than you might expect given the depth of the recent recession, but their health depends in part on asset prices staying high. And if tighter money at the Fed causes turmoil in emerging markets, the consequences could rebound on America's economy.

As they aim for a narrow landing strip, central banks also face high winds, because of the risk of war in Ukraine and uncertainties associated with the pandemic. Economists are struggling to forecast how many people who left the workforce in 2020 will eventually return—and the more that do, the less the chance that a damaging wage-price spiral will take hold.

They are also grappling with doubts over when consumers will shift their spending back to services, easing the upward pressure on goods prices caused by bunged-up supply chains. Economic data have become harder to interpret. If retail sales fall, for example, does it reflect economic weakening, or a welcome return to normal patterns of consumption?

The uncertainty about the global economy's strength and its ability to withstand higher rates, combined with central banks' twitchy trigger-fingers as they worry about inflation, means that markets are entering a new phase. During much of the pandemic, cheap money drove asset prices to astonishing highs even as the world economy was in the dumps. Today they are tightly bound to its fate.

The Economist, 13 January 2022

A letter to that man who emailed to correct my grammar

Damon Young

I'm better at this than you are at everything you do.

So, we'll get back to that sentence soon! But before we do, I want you and everyone else reading this to realize how difficult it was for me to type that out. Writers love to talk about how hard and humbling the experience of writing is. Which is true sometimes, sure. But sometimes our desire to tell people how hard it is surpasses how hard it really is. Sometimes we just need hugs.

Part of the experience of being humbled is the performance of humility. We ain't supposed to acknowledge, publicly at least, how good we might be at what we do. Other people can do that for us, but even then our response to it must be to graciously demur. ("You've won 17 National Book Awards, how does it feel?" "Like a 5-year-old scribbling in the dark.")

But while the nature of performance suggests inauthenticity, that humility comes from a real place. I think I'm good enough at what I do, sure. But I'm forever awed by the writers who make me feel like what I do is just typing. You can't not be awestruck if you're good at this, because you know what greatness looks like. And I ain't talking about ghosts like Baldwin and Morrison either, but contemporaries, and even friends of mine. I'm most stunned by the writers, like Raven Leilani, Cole Arthur Riley, Doreen St. Félix and Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, who are so preternaturally gifted and so young that my calling them peers feels like one of them lies you wish were true. Like I'm in a H&M fitting room trying to smuggle my 43-year-old thigh into an extra skinny pant leg.

Anyway, I just wanted to give you some context for why it was so hard for me to tell you, in front of everyone, that I'm better at this than you are at anything you do. (And I'm not even that good!)

Now, let me explain why I know I'm right about you.

In your email, you declared that my use of the word "ain't" was a "really poor choice," corrected my use of "them" and demanded that I don't try to sound like I'm "still in the street." If you were better at this than I am, you would know, as I do, that the rules of grammar are mostly suggestions. Guardrails to help us corral and curate the mess in our heads into something cohesive. And, to quote Jason Reynolds, what happens within that space is a form of alchemy. "Once you realize that magic isn't for the magician, but that it's for me and everybody else, it changes the way you connect to it. Once I realized that I could do that, that I could learn sort of new combinations, I could learn new sort of spells with these 26 letters, I was good to go."

You would also know - if you were better at this than I am - that sentences are music. And that both sentences and music are math. Equations. Beats separated by pauses. Microbursts of energy clustered and cut and culled to find balance. You would know that sometimes "ain't" just fits in a way that "isn't" or "is not" does not. Same with "them" instead of "those." You would know that even the choice of "does not" at the end of the above sentence instead of "doesn't" was intentional, because of the repetitious rhythm of "does not" existing immediately after "is not." You would know that short phrases lead to shorter sentences, which punch in a way that longer ones sometimes can't. Like this just did. You would know that "ain't" ain't a signifier of being "still in the street." You would know that "still in the street" ain't do what you think it did. You would know that writing a thing like that just proves you're a living anachronism. But not in a romantic way, like a streetcar or a Ferris wheel. But like cigarette smoke indoors.

And you would've known, as I knew after reading your email, that the act of writing that to me proved that I'm better at this than you are at anything you do, too. Because if you were actually good at something worth mentioning, you wouldn't have had the time, the bandwidth, the audacity, to write that to me. Because you would've had the perspective when you're actually good at something.

I'm reminded now of the time when 10-year-old me watched a minute or so of a Pittsburgh Penguins game while channel surfing. I don't know jack about hockey. But after watching Mario Lemieux handle the puck for 15 seconds, I knew that he was great at it. That's all I needed to see. Because talent always speaks the same language. Skill always speaks the same language. Pretension does too. Anti-Blackness does too.

You are so easy to read, fam. This was fun to write. But I feel bad for you now. Because I wish you had better sentences.

The Washington Post, 1 May 2022

As the Ocean Industrial Revolution Gains Pace the Need for Protection is Urgent

Douglas J McCauley

The ocean is often seen as the last wild frontier: a vast and empty blue wilderness where waves, whales and albatrosses rule. This is no longer true. Unnoticed by many, a new industrial revolution is unfolding in our seas. The last several decades have seen exponential growth in new marine industries. This includes expansion of offshore oil and gas, but also exponential growth of offshore renewables, such as wind and tidal energy.

Aquaculture, or farming underwater, is one of the world's fastest growing food sectors. Fishing occurs across more than half of our ocean. More than 1m km of undersea data cables crisscross the high seas. And our ocean highways carry about 1,600% more cargo on ships than they did in the 1980s.

New industries are also lining up to join this booming ocean economy: companies are jockeying to start ocean mining in the Pacific; new experimental fisheries are targeting deep ocean life previously thought impossible to catch; and geoengineering ventures are looking to operate in the ocean.

The onset of this marine industrial revolution puts into context the urgency of a new UN treaty being finalised this week that will dictate the future of the single biggest piece of our ocean and our planet: the high seas. Encompassing all waters 200 nautical miles beyond nations' shorelines, the high seas cover two-thirds of the ocean. Uniquely, this vast expanse belongs to us all.

Unfortunately, sharing hasn't worked out well. Fishery resources are monopolised by a few wealthy actors. Approximately 97% of the trackable industrial fishing on the high seas is controlled by wealthy nations, with 86% of this fishing attributable to just five countries. Some of our most lucrative and nutritionally important high seas fish populations are in decline.

Biodiversity on the high seas is ecologically important, diverse, unique – but also fragile and increasingly threatened by the explosion in marine industry. Many great whale species have been driven to the brink of extinction by lethal interactions with the fishing and shipping industries as well as the legacy of whaling. Even ocean snails have been declared endangered due to the risks posed by deep-sea mining. One high seas region in the Pacific deserving of protection hosts an ancient undersea mountain chain whose peaks rise up from the deep where they are adorned with crowns of golden corals, some more than 4,000 years old, and flanked by schools of jewel-like endemic fish species found nowhere else on Earth. This same area is threatened by bottom trawling and ocean mining.

The UN treaty being negotiated in New York provides hope for creating new tools to more intelligently plan out this explosive growth in the "blue economy" and reverse at least some of these negative trends. One historic element of the treaty would be the opportunity to set up high seas marine protected areas.

Nations from around the world have already joined scientists to back a commitment to protect 30% of our ocean by 2030. Unfortunately, we are terribly behind. At best, 8% of the world's oceans are protected. To get to 30%, and to make such a system ecologically representative, we will need to establish high seas protected areas. The treaty is also an opportunity to promote climate resilience. Networks of high seas protected areas could serve as stepping stones for climate stressed species attempting to escape ocean warming.

Today, a mosaic of more than 20 organisations hold different slivers of responsibility for our increasingly busy high seas. A lot slips through the cracks. In our rapidly and haphazardly developing oceans, it is as if we created departments of sanitation, roadworks and water but never quite got around to electing a mayor to bring it all together.

As the marine industrial revolution advances and our ocean grow busier, solutions for high seas management slip further away. Inaction means industry will decide the fate of the high seas for the world, instead of the other way around.

The ocean provides about half of the world's oxygen, nutrition for billions or people and trillions of dollars in jobs and revenue – it is our fate, as much as anything else, that is being decided by this treaty.

The Guardian, 15 March 2022

For Many, the Optimal Workweek Is One or Two Days in the Office

Katherine Bindley

For months, managers have called three days in the office a week a hybrid-work ideal that both gives employees flexibility and packs in enough face time to cement company culture. For some, the three-day plan is morphing into two.

Nicholas Bloom, a Stanford University economist who studies remote work, says about a dozen firms are paring down in-office schedules from three days a week to two. Other firms are abandoning a full return to the office altogether. "The combination of having been almost two years out of the office and the labor market becoming incredibly tight, now firms realize that three-two, rather than being seen as generous and appealing, is average at best," he says. Mr. Bloom is a paid consultant for some of the companies and declined to name which ones were inverting their schedules so workers could do more from home.

Many companies, including JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Amazon.com Inc., had more ambitious plans to return to work a year ago and have had to reconsider them in light of the continuing pandemic, the hot labor market and employee preferences for flexible schedules and locations.

In a monthly survey of worker preferences that Mr. Bloom conducts with Steven J. Davis of the University of Chicago and Jose Maria Barrero of Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico, the gap between what workers prefer and what their companies are planning has begun to shrink, but a divide remains. Prof. Davis says that several executives he's spoken with who tried to get employees to come back to the office four or five days a week failed. "There was a lot of complaining and a lot of quitting," he says.

More new survey data last week shows that full-time workers have more work-related stress and anxiety than their hybrid and remote counterparts. Overall satisfaction with their workplace declined by 1.6 times as much for those working five days in the office compared with the other groups, according to the report from Future Forum, a consortium funded by Slack Technologies Inc., Boston Consulting Group and MillerKnoll.

The survey of more than 10,800 knowledge workers across about 20 industries including financial services, consumer goods and technology, comes as companies have been calling workers back to their desks at a higher rate than at any other time during the pandemic. The discontent reflected in the data among those working in the office every day highlights risks that companies take by giving priority to face time and in-office culture over worker preferences for flexibility coming out of the pandemic, says Brian Elliott, executive leader of Future Forum. "We were kind of shocked that it was as bad as it was," he says. "It's going to impact people's tendency to resign."

Of the workers surveyed, about 5,000 are based in the U.S. The share of those workers who are now back in the office five days a week rose from 29% in the last quarter of 2021 to 35% in the first quarter of this year. Workers with little to no ability to set their own hours were more than 2 1/2 times as likely to look for a new job in the coming year as those who have some say in when they work, according to the survey.

At the marketing-and-sales software firm HubSpot Inc., maximizing employee choice when it comes to work styles has helped with recruiting new hires and retaining people, says Katie Burke, the company's chief people officer. "We're not messing with anything that relates to people's work preferences," she says. "I cannot overstate the degree to which it's been a competitive advantage."

HubSpot allows employees to pick whether they want to be designated as working at home, the office or a flex arrangement. The office designation is for people who come in three days a week, not five. Flex employees come in one or two days or fewer. The in-office days are considered guidelines as opposed to requirements. This year, 51% of employees are in the work-from-home category, 35% are considered flex, and 14% are in-office. HubSpot's head count has increased to more than 5,900 workers, up from about 3,400 in early 2020, Ms. Burke says.

Many companies remain heavily committed to offices, but some of the biggest proponents of in-person work have reconsidered their approaches to office returns. Amazon originally suggested its workers be in the office at least three days a week, with four weeks of remote work built in. The company later revised its policy from three office days each week to allowing individual teams to decide how much time is needed at the office. A year ago, JPMorgan Chief Executive Jamie Dimon said that people don't like commuting. "So what?" he said. "We want people back at work." He softened his stance in an early April letter to shareholders in which he said that in the future, half the firm's employees will spend some or all their time working remotely.

The Wall Street Journal, 25 April 2022

‘Politics over safety’: the pro-gun laws giving Americans easier access to firearms

Edward Helmore

America’s relationship with guns will probably never be peaceful, but as new pro-gun laws spread across the country some fear it could soon be legal in as many as 25 US states to carry a concealed gun without a permit. To gun control advocates and law enforcement it’s a dangerous new development in America’s enduring, historic and highly politicized infatuation with personal firearms. To gun ownership supporters, it’s a rational response to threats to the second amendment that force law-abiding citizens to undergo police fingerprinting and background checks.

Over the past month, Georgia, Ohio and Indiana have moved to abolish requirements for a background check and license to carry a handgun in public. Last year, six states – Arkansas, Iowa, Montana, Tennessee, Texas and Utah – enacted permit-less carry measures. Many others are expected to follow as gun rights groups – often politically conservative – push similar plans. Called “constitutional carry” or “permitless carry”, permit repeals are a totem in red states offering Republican candidates facing primary season and November elections an opportunity to burnish far-right credentials.

But the bills have been criticized by police and gun control advocates, who argue that removing permits poses a safety risk to citizens and law enforcement officers. “There’s a reason law enforcement officers overwhelmingly oppose permitless carry: it makes their jobs harder and puts their lives – and the lives of the people they’re sworn to protect – on the line,” said Shannon Watts, founder of Moms Demand Action. “When states dismantle permitting systems and gut gun safety laws, gun violence goes up. Gun lobby-backed politicians are shamefully putting primary politics over public safety, and the consequences will be even more devastation for their constituents and the law enforcement officers they pretend they support.”

But the momentum toward permitless is unmistakable, as new laws give millions of Americans increasingly unfettered access to firearms even as gun violence rises across the country. Texas went permitless in June when governor Greg Abbott, National Rifle Association boss Wayne LaPierre, and others gathered at the Alamo for a bill signing. “Government is coming to take your guns,” Abbott warned. “Texas will not let that happen.” In Alabama, where legislation dropping legal penalties for carrying concealed firearms without a permit passed in the lower house on a 65-37 vote, the Alabama Sheriff’s Association and others complained that removing the permit requirement would also deprive police departments of revenue from permit purchases, typically about $75. In Georgia, the Republican governor, Brian Kemp, also facing election this year, has argued that residents should have their rights protected – and be able to protect themselves and their families amid a spike in violent crime. Others in the party have cited civil unrest seen in a few 2020 protests over racial injustice in Atlanta.

David Yarmane, author of Concealed Carry Revolution: Liberalizing the Right to Bear Arms in America, said recent state-level gun liberalization follows a long trend. “From the early 1800s to the 1980s, the concealed carry of firearms was restricted because people thought nothing good comes of people carrying guns hidden on their person.” The shift toward unlimited or “permitless carry” started in Vermont followed by Alaska and Arizona. “It’s really picked up steam in the last decade with the progression of the idea to make it easier for people to carry concealed firearms without restrictions,” said Yamane, but he cautions that “permitless carry” does not mean there’s no background check – only if you have a legal right to bear a firearm can you carry concealed in public. “It’s not throwing out all restrictions. You still can’t carry in federal buildings or on school property, and you still need to pass a criminal background check,” he said.

To Josh Horwitz, executive director of the Coalition To Stop Gun Violence, the legislation necessarily means that the more guns in public, the more dangerous it is for people. “The data shows that the relaxation of permitless carry laws has led to more gun violence and there’s no evidence of any protective factor. And remember every data point we look at is someone deceased.” According to the CDC, more Americans died of gun-related injuries in 2020 than in any other year on record – 45,222. That figure includes a record number of gun murders and gun suicides, which make up 54% of the total. Despite the increase in fatalities, the rate of gun deaths remains below the levels of previous years. The figures do not necessarily do justice to the politics of the issue, in part because the effect of loosened gun laws are not immediately apparent, but the momentum is clear.

And the political context, says Horwitz, is unmistakable. “These laws are a signal from Republican legislatures to say, ‘I’m Trumpian, I’m as far-right as I can go.’ There was a time when many people in the Republican party were supportive of gun rights but they wanted them regulated. That’s gone out the window.”

The Guardian, 29 March 2022

A Victory for Vuitton

Vanessa Friedman

Brigitte Macron continues to champion Louis Vuitton.

Emmanuel Macron's victory in the French presidential election on Sunday was not just a victory for the young president's vision of France and its role in the world, or centrism versus the far-right wing, though it was both of those things.

It was also a victory for fashion, especially high fashion, and the role it plays in reflecting French culture and heritage to the world.

If in doubt, simply consider the election night outfit of Brigitte Macron: a custom-made cropped Louis Vuitton navy jacket with silver military detailing and matching pants, perfectly coordinated with her husband's navy suit. It was a choice that reflected the couple's united front as well as the ideological battleground the election had become. And it acted as a subtle signal from an administration with a bent toward big business and the free market that those relations will continue to flourish in its second term.

Luxury, after all, has been cozying up to Mr. Macron since his first run for president, in 2017, and Louis Vuitton has been Mrs. Macron's brand of choice since she became first lady. Though she has worn other French labels, including Balmain (whose designer, Olivier Rousteing, posted a statement on Instagram lauding Mr. Macron's re-election) and Alexandre Vauthier, none have been as regularly represented in her public wardrobe as Louis Vuitton. She has worn Vuitton during many of her most performative moments -- those times certain to be preserved visually for history, when she serves as a representative of not just herself or her spouse, but the country writ large.

She wore Vuitton to her husband's first inauguration in 2017 (a baby blue miniskirt suit with another military-inspired jacket). Vuitton to Bastille Day celebrations in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. And Vuitton to state dinners at home and abroad, including the 2018 state dinner hosted by President Donald Trump in the Macrons' honor. Just how many times Mrs. Macron has chosen Vuitton can be tracked on the Instagram account devoted to her style, @thebrigittestyle.

Though previous first ladies of France similarly associated themselves with classic French brands, with Carla Bruni-Sarkozy often wearing Dior and Hermès, and Bernadette Chirac wearing Chanel, and though the Macrons have supported French fashion broadly, hosting designers at two dinners in the Élysée Palace during Paris Fashion Week, Mrs. Macron is the first to work so closely with Louis Vuitton.

It is an alliance of political and business power that has served both sides very well. Fashion, after all, is part of the bedrock of the French economy and its patrimony, and Louis Vuitton plays a very specific role in both. The industry accounts for one million jobs in the country, 2.7 percent of its gross domestic product and 150 billion euros (about $160 billion) in direct sales, according to the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, the industry's governing body. And within French fashion, Louis Vuitton -- currently celebrating the bicentennial of its namesake founder -- is a tentpole brand, and the engine of LVMH, the world's largest luxury group. As it happens, LVMH is owned and run by Bernard Arnault, the third-richest man in the world and a vocal Macron supporter.

Louis Vuitton is also the name on one of the newer museums in Paris, the Fondation Louis Vuitton, opened in 2014, built by Mr. Arnault, designed by Frank Gehry and designated as a "gift" to the city of Paris that will transfer to municipal ownership around 2070. In late 2021, Mr. Macron helped inaugurate the Fondation exhibition of the Morozov Collection, the first time that major Russian collection was seen in Europe. (Though the loan required President Vladimir V. Putin's sign-off, LVMH has declared its support for all those affected by "the tragic situation in Ukraine.") Also last year, Mr. Macron posed with Mr. Arnault at the opening of the renovated Samaritaine department store, likewise owned by LVMH, saying its reopening was a metaphor for the reopening of Paris after Covid-19 isolation.

It's a relationship that has not been without symbolic risks, given the associations with elitism, wealth and class implicit in the very term "luxury." During the yellow vest protests of 2018 against rising fuel prices, many gilded boutiques on shopping thoroughfares like the Faubourg Saint-Honoré were targeted as examples of what was seen as Mr. Macron's Marie Antoinette-like remove -- a criticism that was revived by Mr. Macron's opponents during the recent campaign. (Marine Le Pen was almost resolutely unbranded in her run for office.) In choosing Vuitton again for her election night celebration, Mrs. Macron seems to be suggesting that her husband will be doubling down on this particular special relationship. Even though when it comes to that subject, she's saying nary a word.

The New York Times, 28 April 2022

Adjust Your Brain for Inflation

Julia Carpenter

Inflation turns money into a foreign language.

The rising cost of gas, food and hundreds of other things is pushing Americans to rethink how they read every price tag. Whether in the produce aisle or the used-car lot, our definition of cheap or expensive has changed, researchers on consumer psychology say.

With the annual inflation rate reaching a four-decade high of 8.5% in March, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans have had to adjust budgets and spending priorities. Financial advisers say this recalibration can't be a one-time effort. Knowing exactly what you are willing to pay for something and examining what is a necessity should be a constant effort.

"There's no going back to the way things were," said Scott Rick, associate professor of marketing at the University of Michigan, who studies financial decision making. "You have to update and roll with it."

The sudden inability to know how to read price tags is especially disorienting to those under age 40, who have never experienced anything like today's inflation rate. Understanding how we think about prices can help us adapt to inflation, Mr. Rick said.

What we judge to be a good, or fair, price is influenced by our individual background, income and our mental transaction histories, Mr. Rick said. The prices we pay over and over again like gas or rent are better defined than more occasional purchases, which is why politicians so often trip up when asked to recall the price of a gallon of milk, or older people are still anchored to the prices they paid in younger days.

Inflation moves faster than our mind is sometimes willing to adapt. Our understanding of price tags is disproportionately shaped by the items that make up our daily budget. Researchers found that when it comes to gauging inflation expectations, shoppers typically look at the usual items they buy. This small number of items are the ones we use as "mental benchmarks," said David Wessel, director of the Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy at the Brookings Institution. This process is known as anchoring.

For some people, that benchmark might be the price at the gas pump or how much they pay for a dozen eggs. Others find themselves adjusting their understanding of prices when they spot a price change in their monthly utility bill or their usual coffee order, "and they totally extrapolate that to the economy at large," Mr. Wessel said.

Ida Byrd-Hill, a 55-year-old founder and chief executive officer of a cybersecurity reskilling firm in Detroit, said she has noticed price creeps affecting the usual latitude she affords herself in her everyday budget. She said she considered her Netflix subscription her individual inflation marker. When the price increased by $5, she had to make a difficult decision and cut the expense.

"I look at my budget, and I budget to the penny," she said. "I'm eagle-eyed to price changes because I have that budget."

With prices so fluid, Mr. Wessel recommends people research prices online or talk to friends and peers about what they've been paying for a certain item. The legwork "really pays off for big-ticket items," Mr. Wessel said. Without doing this work, people are more likely to accept the first price that comes along, he said.

Farrell Goldman, a 45-year-old enforcement supervisor in New York, said he used to consider $1,800 for rent a very reasonable price to pay. Now that he is looking to move for the first time in years, he has noticed rents have skyrocketed. He might have once recoiled at the priciness of some of the places he's browsing, but he said now he's trying to accept that these higher rents are here to stay, and his $1,800 benchmark is no longer the norm.

"No one likes reaching into their pocket for more money, but now, I'd be willing to do it," he said.

Our once-stable vocabulary of "cheap" and "expensive" has probably changed for good, and we need to learn to speak this new language, Mr. Rick said.

"It's like getting over a breakup," he said. "Shake off these memories as best you can and readjust your eyes."

The Wall Street Journal, 13 April 2022

Black women discover their 'village' in Mexico

Keturah Kendrick

We've all asked ourselves: Is the grass really greener on the other side?

The expatriation of Black Americans to other countries has largely been reported as a response to racism in the U.S. However, Katrina Sunnei Samasa, leader of Black Americans Living Abroad, has seen members leave the U.S. for quality of life, job opportunities, entrepreneurial dreams, and more affordable health care.

"Those who decide to move long term rarely do so because of one issue," Samasa says.

Evita Robinson, founder of the Nomadness Travel Tribe, agrees. Her network of Black travelers boasts 20,000 members who've visited regions all over the world – 19% of the community have also chosen to expatriate. "Tribe members," made up largely of Black women, have expatriated "because they want to live out loud … right now," Robinson says.

Kiwi Bold and Kimberly West are two such women.

"I was in and out of Playa del Carmen (Mexico) for years," Bold says. "There was a huge House music party here every year so I'd hop on the plane with the rest of Atlanta."

Eight years ago, Bold decided that her yearly excursions to Mexico could be more than a few days of dancing. In her forties at the time and having had successful careers as a professional dancer and personal chef, she began to think about how she wanted to spend her fifties, how far she wanted her money to go, how much she still wanted to dance regularly and live a comfortable, etc. She wanted a simpler life. Bold has called Playa del Carmen home ever since. At 56, she's also extensively traveled the Yucatn Peninsula, living in the small town of Chicxulub Pueblo.

"I was the only Black American my neighbors ever met," Bold said between chuckles.

Bold chose Mexico because she was fascinated with its rich, complex history. It was always her intent to live in the local community. So, she set up home in Colosio, a neighborhood where she is one of few foreigners for at least 20 blocks.

"I wanted to be a part of the culture. To have a community," she said.

Bold has contributed to the Colosio community by teaching the kids and their parents English. A single woman, her Mexican aunties and nieces look out for her. If leaving for the night or taking a trip, Bold lets them know where she's going and when she's expected to return. They come knocking on her door the moment she's supposed to be on the other side of it.

Like Bold, Kimberly West, 53, also had a multifaceted career. She'd owned a restaurant and a farm, worked in corporate America and transitioned into her own business as an information technology consultant. Four years ago, West needed a new adventure. An easier lifestyle with access to fresh foods and close proximity to water. She chose Playa del Carmen.

On any given week, West can be found connecting with her husband and her stepsons in his Atlanta home or hers in Mexico. She also meets up regularly with the thriving Black expat community in Playa.

Since West's relocation, weekly Soca dance parties have grown in popularity. Her circle of friends also has been known to belt out their favorite '90s classics during karaoke night at Club Social. If not dining at Rockas, a popular Jamaican restaurant, West invites her tribe over to her place where she grills up a few lamb chops.

While they enjoy their lives in Mexico, West and Bold are open to relocating to any country that allows them the privilege of rest, comfort and community. "I want an intentional village," Bold explains. "Where we all fully believe that without each other, we don't exist." That village doesn't have to be in Mexico or the U.S. Being open to adventure guarantees the journey to their "forever country" will be just as joyous as their path to Playa.

USA Today, 21 April 2022

UK charity shops go online to plug Covid spending gap

Joanna Partridge

Number of items sold via internet surges by 151% between February and July

Charity shops, the stalwart of many British high streets, are turning to selling online as they try to plug the large gap in funding caused by the Covid pandemic.

The number of items sold online by charities soared by 151% in the six months between February and July, according to data from Shopiago, which is behind a web-based platform that enables charities to enter e-commerce.

The majority of online charity shop sales during the period took place on eBay, where charities usually do not pay fees and can reach a wider audience.

Pet supplies, baby products and sports memorabilia were some of the top sellers online for charity shops during the spring and summer, according to Shopiago.

The British Red Cross, Sue Ryder, Barnardo's and the British Heart Foundation were among those putting donations received in their stores up for sale online.

"Charities across the country are increasingly understanding that online can significantly support in-store revenue. In fact, online sales have provided a funding lifeline for many charities during the pandemic, when their high street shops have shut and fundraising events haven't happened," said Thom Bryan, the head of product at Shopiago.

High street charity shops took a financial hit from lengthy closures during successive lockdowns, leading them to look for new ways to advertise their goods to a wider range of consumers, not just those who visit their local stores.

The average store lost more than £33,000 in income during the early 2021 lockdown, according to data from the Charity Retail Association (CRA), which represents about 400 charities running thousands of shops.

In a normal year, charity shops take £1.4bn in revenue, which results in about £330m in profit for parent charities.

Charities benefited from a surge in donations after their shops reopened in the spring, as consumers dropped off bags of belongings they had sorted out during lockdown, but also had to contend with a slight drop-off in volunteers as a result of the pandemic.

The CRA said shoppers were not always aware that they could support charities by purchasing items online as well as in-store.

"Bricks and mortar shops will always be the lifeblood of the charity retail sector, not only for sales, but for collecting donations, and finding the treasures that fetch good prices online," said Jonathan Mail, the head of public affairs at the CRA.

He recommended consumers visit www.charityretail.org.uk/find-an-e-shop to see where they can buy items online or in-store.

"Now people using our 'find an online shop' tool can choose whether to stay home and shop or head out to a store in person – either way, supporting your favourite charities is more important than ever," Mail said.

Charities are also hoping to benefit from greater interest among consumers in recycling and reusing items, as well as shoppers' desire to hunt out bargains during tough economic times.

The Guardian, 12 August 2021

Thunberg condemns ‘racist’ decision to allow UK firm to mine on Sami land

David Crouch

Environmental campaigner Greta Thunberg denounced as “racist” and “colonial” the decision by the Swedish government on Tuesday to allow a British company to dig an open-cast iron ore mine on land belonging to the indigenous Sami people.

Beowulf Mining, headquartered in London, has fought for nearly a decade to win approval for the mine, but has consistently faced stiff opposition from Sami and environmentalists.

The Gállok site, 45km from the town of Jokkmokk in Swedish Sápmi, commonly known as Lapland, has become a symbol of the tension between business and government on one hand, and the protected status of Sami culture.

Announcing the decision on Tuesday, the business minister, Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson, said the mine was in the public interest. He stressed that permission came with a number of “far-reaching conditions” to minimise the impact on reindeer husbandry, compliance with which was essential. These include commitments to arrange transport for migrating animals, compensate reindeer herders and restore the land after exploitation.

But critics of the mine responded furiously. “Sweden today confirmed its shortsighted, racist, colonial and nature-hostile approach,” Thunberg, who is Swedish, posted on Twitter. “Sweden pretends to be a leader for environment and human rights, but at home they violate indigenous rights and continue waging a war on nature. The world will remember this.”

Amnesty International Sweden said it “deeply regretted” the decision, noting concerted opposition to the mine from the Sami parliament, UN experts, Unesco, the Church of Sweden, the Swedish environmental protection agency, Sweden’s national heritage board and others.

Märta Stenevi, spokesperson for Sweden’s Green party, said on Twitter that the decision to give the go-ahead for the Gállok mine was a “tragedy for Sami rights, nature and future generations … Short-term economic gain is now put before Sami rights, animals and nature. Incredible.”

Beowulf’s share price had been on a sharp upward trajectory since December when the Swedish Greens, who have opposed the plans, left the governing coalition. Thorwaldsson declared that his party “loved mines” and hoped to open more.

However, the share price fell sharply following claims by a Swedish newspaper earlier this month that Beowulf lacked the necessary funds to develop the mine and had links to an offshore tax haven. The company strongly denied the claims, while its chairman dismissed them as biased.

Welcoming the government’s decision, the Beowulf chief executive, Kurt Budge, said in a statement: “Beowulf’s ambition is to build the most sustainable mine possible. …The company remains committed to working constructively – and in good faith – with all stakeholders and engaging in meaningful dialogue.”

The Sami parliament, the representative body for people of indigenous heritage in Sweden, says the mine will destroy grazing areas and cut off the only viable migratory route for reindeer followed by the Jåhkågasska Sami community, who move westerly with their animals to the high hills of the Laponian area on the Norwegian border for the animals to calve during the spring.

However, the promise of hundreds of new jobs created by the mine has divided the local community in Jokkmokk, who fear economic decline and a continuing exodus of people from the area.

The Guardian, 22 March 2022

TikTok made me read it

Áine Toner

Who knew that a video-sharing app could boost the art of reading across the world? With the rise of #BookTok, TikTok users are maximising their engagement on the app while getting a new read or two at the same time. In sharing favourite books, they're finding their online tribe while encouraging others to pick up a physical book or an eReader and sharing their love for literature in all its genres.

Search the hashtag on TikTok and you'll be met with all content relating to books, writing, reading and well, everything in between. The community, that loves sharing reviews, writing tips and, on occasions, plot re-enactments, has been established since early 2020 but the advent of lockdown that March really saw the group develop. Staying at home had its highlights for bookworms, evidently.

Book publishers, once dedicated to book store charts, actively celebrate the medium for introducing readers to texts they may have otherwise been unfamiliar.

So what's popular? Unsurprisingly, young adult fiction and fantasy reads are page turners, with some popular books worthy of their own hashtags think Sarah J Maas' A Court of Thorns (#ACOTAR) and Roses and A Court of Mist and Fury (#ACOMAF), now New York Times bestsellers, Six of Crows (#sixofcrows) by Leigh Bardugo and The Cruel Prince (#thecruelprince) by Holly Black.

Not only is TikTok a good place for readers, writers are an important part of the community, particularly as they offer invaluable advice for those wishing to write their own novel. This blurring of lines between reader and writer goes a long way to banishing thoughts often held that reading is boring, or that authors don't take their audience in mind when crafting a work of literature.

Make no mistake, appearing on the app can do wonders for any novel, whether it's a new release or not. Adam Silvera's 2017 They Both Die at the End has benefited significantly from the BookTok effect. Many TikTokers have filmed themselves before and after reading (spoiler: there are tears) and, given the interest, Silvera saw his book reach the coveted number one spot in teen fiction in March 2021.

Colleen Hoover's 2016 romance It Ends With Us entered the bestseller charts in 2021 thanks in part to her TikTok account and reviews from fans. Some have dubbed this an online Cinderella story. Other works sprinkled with BookTok fairy dust include Taylor Jenkins Reid's The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo (gets my vote, it is excellent), Delia Owens' Where The Crawdads Sing and Madeline Miller's The Song of Achilles, the latter of which was published a decade ago.

This initiative though not new, people have clearly been promoting books for centuries is helping to change the direction of the publishing industry.

It's a good sign; books that maybe didn't get the requisite recommendations when first published may see a surge in interest if they find their way onto the app.

What works just as much as supporting a particular book are the very real, short but affecting responses from readers. It's visceral; TikTok bookworms are not afraid to be swept away by the emotion of a novel, not worried how they'll look if tears are ruining make-up or there's been a bit of ugly crying. You can appreciate others' curiosity being piqued.

What makes this particular book cause another to have such a physical reaction, one that they're not embarrassed to relay to the world?

It's not just books published in the last 10 or 20 years that are making literary waves online. Thanks to BookTok's interest in Jane Austen's classic text Pride and Prejudice, sales of the novel have soared. In February 2022, it was ranked 162 on Barnes and Noble's sales list. Which is not bad for a novel that was first published in 1813.

Belfast Telegraph, 7 May 2022

UK resettlement scheme for Ukrainians is a 'disgrace', says Briton in Lviv

Audrey Allegretti

The UK's resettlement scheme for those fleeing Ukraine has been called a "disgrace" by a Briton who said few in the country knew about its existence. Andrew Murray, a technology worker from north-east Scotland, said ministers' claims about the success of the visa programme that is meant to allow charities, businesses or companies to sponsor a refugee "does not match the reality on the ground". The rhetoric stops at the border of Ukraine and does not penetrate where it's needed," he said.

Speaking from Lviv, Murray said Ukrainians were "very grateful" for all the military equipment supplied by Britain to help fend off Russian forces. But he added: "They're under no illusion that the UK has made it artificially difficult to seek sanctuary there," calling the scheme a "disgrace".

Murray arrived in Ukraine earlier this week, with bundles of papers he drew up containing information about how those wanting to flee to the UK could navigate the process. He hoped to distribute the documents to charities and aid agencies, but said he realised "that's a cottage industry trying to address an industrial scale problem". After going to Lviv city hall and meeting officials on the council, he said he realised they had never heard of the UK's "homes for Ukraine" programme.

After initially restricting entry to only allow Ukrainians with close family members living in the UK to join them, ministers this month backtracked and set up a visa sponsorship system. More than 100,000 Britons signed up to host a refugee fleeing the Russian invasion. But the UK government has said it will not match people offering to open their doors with a person or family in need of shelter.

Murray said he could not put into words the heart-rending devastation he had witnessed, seeing hundreds of displaced Ukrainians from the besieged city of Mariupol arrive parched, starving and in need of a bed. "It's embarrassing knowing we could take them to the UK," he said. "We've got to do something here otherwise we'll only see a trickle of people coming to the UK." These people are burned out, they've travelled half way across Ukraine and all they can think about is where to sit down and get some rest, water and soup. They can't begin to think about bureaucracy and paperwork."

The government is still maintaining some checks need to be made on those applying to come to Britain through the sponsorship route. Michael Gove, Secretary of State for levelling up Houses and Communities (government minister), has said that security checks would establish whether people "are who they say they are" and prevent the scheme "being exploited possibly by criminal elements". The Home Office is carrying out checks that the people offering up their homes are in a position to provide that support.

Murray said he was hoping to travel back to the UK via Poland to push for the government to spread the word more successfully about the sponsorship programme and encourage humanitarian groups to link up with local council officials. "It's being passed on through the grassroots and word of mouth rather than being driven top down," he said.

A spokesperson for the Home Office said: "We are moving as quickly as possible to ensure that those fleeing horrific persecution in Ukraine can find safety in the UK, setting up both the Ukraine family scheme and now the homes for Ukraine scheme, which allows those without family connections to come here.

"We have streamlined the visa application process so valid passport holders no longer have to attend in-person appointments before arriving and made changes to the forms people have to fill out in order to help people through the process as quickly as possible."

The Guardian, 23 March 2022

Crying in exam room reveals health care's problems

Christine Bechtel

I had never cried in a doctor's office. But there I was, a few weeks back, sobbing in the exam room. As a new resident of Fort Myers, Florida, I was trying to establish a relationship with a local primary care physician. From the start, the doctor's focus was her computer, not me. She stared at a screen, while I stared off into space.

She challenged me on why I had an inhaler prescribed by a previous doctor. I explained that hay fever leaves me short of breath. But her screen said I needed an asthma diagnosis, which I don't have. Then she asked why my blood pressure was so high – a first for me. Bewildered, I said I had ended a lifelong friendship the night before. Sidetracked again: It turns out there is no software code for that.

I needed a dose of kindness and some clinical insight. I got clicking and keystrokes instead. The tears flowed soon after. All I wanted was a human connection, but the doctor-patient relationship – the most important element in all of health care – was dead on arrival.

To be clear, the doctor is a victim as much as I am. In 20-plus years as a patient advocate and policy wonk, I've seen how electronic records chain doctors to keyboards, how independent primary care doctors are disappearing, and how financial incentives in government billing leave doctors with less time to spend with patients. There's plenty of focus on each of these issues, and many others. Yet there's not nearly enough emphasis on the larger crisis they've created. The doctor-patient relationship is collapsing.

The breakdown of relationships is bringing health care to the breaking point. In conversations with hundreds of health professionals, I've heard that it's all but impossible to develop the kind of genuine relationships that facilitate better health for patients and higher professional satisfaction for doctors.

No wonder half of doctors and nurses are burned out. No wonder they are leaving health care in droves. And no wonder about half of Americans say health care is getting worse. The pandemic didn't help at all, thanks to virtual visits, masks that hide smiles and the politicization of medical treatment that introduced distrust into the doctor-patient relationship.

The lack of connection like I experienced is costly in both human and financial terms. Studies show that a strong doctor-patient relationship improves patient health outcomes. Evidence also shows that a continuous bond between a patient and primary doctor reduces costs. Without it, patients will go anywhere for care, regardless of quality or cost. They go to pharmacies, urgent care and emergency rooms, instead of coordinating with a single physician. The result is as well documented as it is painful: higher costs and poorer health.

There is an urgent need to restore relationships to the heart of health care. Patient well-being, physician fulfillment and health care spending depend on it. Long-term reforms depend on policymakers and health professionals, but in the short run, there are important steps that each of us can take. To start, patients can connect with their health providers on a more personal level. After all, the doctor-patient relationship is a two-way street.

Remember when we all banged pots and pans in the pandemic to honor our health care heroes? We should do something similar, if quieter. Honestly, I could have done a better job at my recent appointment. A couple of personal questions would have gone a long way. Doctors can rethink their workflow and leverage team members to reduce the time spent on documentation. That will free up time to develop more meaningful relationships with patients. While the system too often stands in the way, it's time we fight back, one conversation at a time.

Patients and doctors also can come together to ask hospital or doctor's office administrators to ease off the relentless push for efficiency and create more time for relationship building. I've seen a united front achieve success many times, including recently in Rochester, New York, and Jackson, Mississippi. Heartfelt conversations led to less physician burnout and better patient experiences, while inspiring hospital administrators to prioritize the bonds at the heart of health care.

Health care needs an infusion of relationships, for the benefit of everyone in health care and society as a whole. I'm not the only one who has had a horrible experience at the doctor's office, and the doctor I saw isn't the only one who's unhappy. We're drifting apart, but if we work together, we can start to heal our increasingly sick health care system.

USA Today, 12 April 2022

How to Understand Kids' TikTok Brains

Julie Jargon

Remember the good old days when kids just watched YouTube all day? Now that they binge on 15-second TikToks, those YouTube clips seem like PBS documentaries. Many parents tell me their kids can't sit through feature-length films anymore because to them the movies feel painfully slow. Others have observed their kids struggling to focus on homework. And reading a book? Forget about it.

What is happening to kids' brains? "It is hard to look at increasing trends in media consumption of all types, media multitasking and rates of ADHD in young people and not conclude that there is a decrease in their attention span," said Carl Marci, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Links between attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnoses and screen time are subject to debate, since many factors could account for a steady rise in cases. Yet even parents whose children don't qualify for that medical diagnosis say their kids are more distracted. Emerging research suggests that watching short, fast-paced videos makes it harder for kids to sustain activities that don't offer instant -- and constant -- gratification.

One of the few studies specifically examining TikTok-related effects on the brain focused on Douyin, the TikTok equivalent in China, made by the same Chinese parent company, ByteDance Ltd. It found that the personalized videos the app's recommendation engine shows users activate the reward centers of the brain, as compared with the general-interest videos shown to new users.

Brain scans of Chinese college students showed that areas involved in addiction were highly activated in those who watched personalized videos. It also found some people have trouble controlling when to stop watching. "We speculate that individuals with lower self-control ability have more difficulty shifting attention away from favorite video stimulation," the researchers at China's Zhejiang University wrote.

A Wall Street Journal investigation last year found that TikTok's algorithm figures out what users like based on the amount of time they watch each video, and then serves up more of the same. TikTok said it is now developing ways to diversify the videos. A TikTok spokeswoman said the company wants younger teens to develop positive digital habits early on, and that it recently made some changes aimed at curbing extensive app use. Kids have a hard time pulling away from videos on YouTube, too, and Google has made several changes to help limit its use, including turning off autoplay by default on accounts of people under 18.

When kids do things that require prolonged focus, they're using directed attention. This function starts in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for decision making and impulse control. "Directed attention is the ability to inhibit distractions and sustain attention and to shift attention appropriately. It requires higher-order skills like planning and prioritizing," said Michael Manos, the clinical director of the Center for Attention and Learning at Cleveland Clinic Children's. Kids generally have a harder time doing this -- and putting down their videogame controllers -- because the prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed until age 25.

Dr. Manos said the ever-changing environment of TikTok doesn't require sustained attention. "If kids' brains become accustomed to constant changes, the brain finds it difficult to adapt to a nondigital activity where things don't move quite as fast," he said. TikTok is now allowing users to make videos as long as 10 minutes, up from the previous maximum of 3 minutes and from its initial 60-second maximum.

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that gets released in the brain when it's expecting a reward. A flood of dopamine reinforces cravings for something enjoyable, whether it's a tasty meal, a drug or a funny TikTok video. "TikTok is a dopamine machine," said John Hutton, a pediatrician and director of the Reading & Literacy Discovery Center at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. "If you want kids to pay attention, they need to practice paying attention."

Researchers are just beginning to conduct long-term studies on digital media's effects on kids' brains. The National Institutes of Health is funding a study of nearly 12,000 adolescents as they grow into adulthood to examine the impact that many childhood experiences -- from social media to smoking -- have on cognitive development.

The study's investigators are focusing now on the impact specific apps have on children's brain development. The results aren't in yet. Bonnie Nagel, one of the study's investigators and a professor of psychiatry and behavioral neuroscience at Oregon Health & Science University, said she predicts they will find that when brains repeatedly process rapid, rewarding content, their ability to process less-rapid, less-rewarding things "may change or be harmed."

The Wall Street Journal, 5 April 2022

I've decided to become an #influencer. How hard can it be?

Sofie Hagen

I know it's the height of toxic capitalism, but you get free stuff and money – so what's not to like? Maybe the fact it's really difficult For the past two years, I have been trying really hard to become an #influencer. I just wanted to #influence people to live their best lives, to find their inner strength and – OK, I wanted free stuff. If you can't beat it, join it. Capitalism, that is.

Since I have 100,000 followers on Instagram who listen to what I say, to whom I often recommend my favourite products and services, why not double-check if the brands want to pay me to do so? I would rather they pay me than someone who isn't me. What I am saying is: I wanted to do the very easy job of #influencing and get lots of money for it.

I assume, since you are reading the Guardian, you are frowning disapprovingly while sucking on an avocado because #influencing is vapid and superficial. But are you really telling me that, if someone offered you £1,000 to take a photo of the aforementioned avocado and post it to Instagram using the hashtag #avocadosrule and tagging @avocado in the post, you wouldn't be tempted?

I made an oath: I would never lie. I would never recommend anything that I didn't use or want to use myself. And I wouldn't stop being myself on social media: I would keep posting about social issues. If brands didn't like that, I wouldn't work with them. It was time to take my followers and turn them into cash money.

Someone offered me £800 to post a photo of myself in a thong, but I'm not sure if that was a brand or just … a man. I started with a few #gifted skincare products and a gold card to my favourite all-you-can-eat Sunday roast buffet restaurant. Someone offered me £800 to post a photo of myself in a neon green thong, but I'm not sure if that was a brand deal or if that was just … a man.

Then an #influencing agency signed me – as an actual #influencer. I was so excited. I laughed when my new agents told me that they would, of course, give me some training – until I realised they weren't joking. I was taken through the seven apps I needed in order to be a content creator – it turns out that the average photo needs to go through at least three photo-editing apps before it's worth posting – and I was taught about hashtags and algorithms.

Posting in the morning or evening is best: that is when people are on their way to work or relaxing at home. Don't post at weekends; people aren't on their phones. You can hide your hashtags in the comments section and they still work. Differentiate between photos of your face, your body, food, beauty and nature. Stick to one colour scheme across your grid. Once you have posted, spend half an hour commenting on people's comments: Instagram rewards engagement by showing your post to more people.

And so on.

Then my home was dissected. My dinner plates were all shiny – they should be matt. My table tops were shiny, too – I would need to get special photoshoot backgrounds that look like fancy marble counters on which to pose my food. Now, I constantly notice how shiny everything is: my cutlery, my picture frames, my forehead. It's all very not #Instagrammable.

I have gained so much respect for #influencers. You have to get up early, because morning light is the best. You have to have a tidy – and matt – house. Your food always gets cold, because it takes for ever to curate a photo of it. You have to understand complex and ever-changing social media algorithms. You have to plan ahead and think strategically. It's a full-time job, not an easy side hustle. I find myself desperately clinging to my job as a comedian and trying to merge the two: to be funny in my #sponcon (sponsored content) so that no one notices the mess in the background, or the fact that it's dark outside because I slept until 4pm.

Of course, beauty standards suck, materialism is the worst and "perfect" social media posts make people feel super-insecure about themselves. But it's hard for me to blame the women who have found a way to get rich by taking advantage of a beauty- and perfection-obsessed, toxic and capitalist system. Because it's way harder than it looks. Unfortunately.

The Guardian, 8 May 2022

Western powers have realised Russia is largely immune to sanctions

Phillip Inman

The war against Russia is one western countries want to fight with only economic sanctions, not guns.

Russia's conflict with Ukraine, despite its long gestation and planning by Vladimir Putin and his supporters in the Kremlin, was supposed to end quickly once financial retaliation began. Yes, there would be military skirmishes on the ground, but little more than a few casualties were expected once a range of penalties began to bite.

The western powers have quickly realised that unless they are willing to fire the financial equivalent of a nuclear arsenal, Putin has made sure Russia is largely immune, at least in the short term.

Over a decade, Kremlin policy has carefully reduced domestic public and private sector debt and allowed the central bank time to build a war chest of foreign assets large enough to shore up the country's finances for months, if not years. This means that the sanctions put in place over the past couple of days by the EU, US, UK, Japan and Canada are unlikely to have any significant effect on the Russian economy or its financial stability. Only the full package of measures used against Iran – shutting Russia out of the international payments system, Swift, while also banning purchases of Russian oil and gas – will do the trick.

As Hosuk Lee-Makiyama, the head of the European Centre for International Political Economy, said, Europe has allowed itself to become more integrated with Russia, while Russia has separated itself from Europe. He said EU countries owned a combined €300bn of Russian assets that would be vulnerable to confiscation if a full-blooded financial war broke out. The UK owns billions more via firms such as BP, which has a near-20% stake in the Russian oil company Rosneft.

"Sanctions are one of the few options that European countries have in a conflict situation like this. If you disconnect North Korea or Iran from the international financial system, you do not expose yourself to that much damage." Speaking on BBC News, he added: "But while I don't say it is impossible to envisage Russia being barred from the Swift system, it is a nuclear option that means you exterminate yourself along with your enemy."

Swift (the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) is the main secure messaging system that banks use to make rapid and secure cross-border payments, allowing international trade to flow smoothly. It transmits trillions of dollars' worth of deals every day but is coming under pressure from a Chinese government-backed rival, Cips, which Russia could use to conduct its financial business deals supplemented by direct transactions with counterparties.

It is also possible for the G7 countries and EU to ban the purchase of Russian gas and oil, but commodities analysts agree that while there is spare capacity in oil markets to make up for the loss of Russian supplies with a price rise limited to $140 a barrel, there is no hope of boosting gas output to fill a gap created by a Russia ban. Shortages would quickly force countries in Europe to ration gas and the price would be likely to rocket back to nine times normal levels, as seen before Christmas, stirring memories of the 1974 oil price shock.

Andrew Kenningham, the chief Europe economist at the consultancy Capital Economics, said that while some countries – the Czech Republic and the Baltic states – had pushed for bans on Russian gas, "others are more reluctant and it would presumably take much more devastating developments in the conflict to trigger such measures".

Tom Mayne, a Russia expert at the thinktank Chatham House, said there was room to improve the current sanctions that allow a Russian kleptocracy access to London's financial markets.

In a report last year, the thinktank said an effective anti-kleptocracy drive would "close legal loopholes, demand transparency from public institutions, deploy anti-corruption sanctions against post-Soviet elites and prosecute British professionals who enable money laundering by kleptocrats".

Even the ramped-up sanctions announced by Boris Johnson fall short of this effective ban on illegal Russian money entering UK economic life. The UK is keen to go further than the EU with restrictions on Russian energy imports, but the EU has allowed itself to be much more dependent than the UK, limiting its appetite for further sanctions. Without bans on gas and oil exports, and expulsion from international payments systems, the impact of sanctions will be limited.

The Guardian, 25 February 2022

Uber and Lyft are offering fuel surcharges and cash back offers for workers. Is it enough?

Sara Ashley O'Brien

In response to soaring gas prices, Uber and Lyft recently announced they'll start tacking on temporary fuel surcharges to rides. Uber, beginning Wednesday, is charging customers an extra $0.45 or $0.55 per ride and $0.35 or $0.45 on delivery orders. Lyft will add a $0.55 to each ride starting next week. Both companies said the fees will go straight to drivers.

Before the announcements, when asked what they were doing to help drivers, the companies pointed to partnerships they previously struck with a startup, GetUpside, that provides cash back on fuel at participating stations. This week, DoorDash and Lyft each also touted gas rewards or cash-back programs. However, to access them, workers need to open debit cards with the companies.

Willy Solis, a gig worker based in Denton, Texas, said the various announcements are "designed in a way to make it sound like they're doing everything they can to take care of the drivers when in reality they're not." Solis, who does gig work for Uber Eats, Instacart, DoorDash, said he's been working six days a week instead of his usual five to make up for the rising fuel costs. Solis said where he used to fill his tank for $20 to $30, he is now spending $40 to $50 to do so. Solis said, "I've been more critical of the orders I take and the distance I'm taking them, seeing if they're worth my while."

To some who've studied the gig economy, responses from the companies are another example of how they hide the cost of working for their platforms, to both workers and the public, while financing efforts to keep them classified as independent contractors responsible for their own expenses.

In November, Uber using a feature that allows drivers to "pause" incoming trips to find a nearby gas station through an integration with GetUpside. By getting fuel at those stations, drivers can receive up to $0.25 per gallon depending on the location. In late January, Lyft announced a similar partnership with the company. While the partnerships made for good press releases, GetUpside also has a consumer app that anyone can download and use to get cash back on things like gas and groceries. Solis told CNN Business that when he arrives at a gas station recommended by Uber, he typically finds cheaper gas nearby at a non-partner location.

"Usage across the board is up on the consumer side significantly, both in the Uber and Lyft driver apps because prices are rising so fast," said GetUpside CEO Alex Kinnier. He wasn't aware Uber and Lyft had mentioned the partnerships in recent statements but that he's "flattered" by it.

Today's fuel prices may be historically high, but drivers have seen their take-home pay squeezed by gas costs for as long as the ride-hail platforms have existed. According to Christo Wilson from Northeastern University who studied Uber's algorithms several years ago, the companies could factor the price of fuel into the algorithm that determines how much drivers get paid. "They know where drivers are and getting the average gas price in that area wouldn't be challenging," Wilson told CNN. "They also know how far and how long drivers are active during trips, as well as the make and model of their car, so estimating their fuel usage shouldn't be too challenging either."

Uber, like other gig companies, have "a history of externalizing costs onto drivers." Asked why Uber didn't factor the cost of fuel into its pay algorithm in a dynamic way, the company said it doesn't want driver earnings to decrease if prices fall or shift unpredictably. Solis noted a more meaningful way Uber and Lyft could have structured the new fuel surcharge, is a flat fee per trip.

By design, companies like Uber and Lyft don't cover expenses like fuel for workers. And they've spent lavishly in recent years to keep it that way, namely by backing efforts that ensure they can continue to treat workers as independent contractors rather than employees.

This month, Washington State passed legislation that enshrines the contractor classification for Uber and Lyft drivers while offering them some new benefits. Notably, the companies would not have to provide any minimum wage protections when workers are cruising around looking for passengers, a reality of the job that's even more expensive given gas prices. To Solis, the response from gig companies to the ongoing fuel issue is just the latest example of the burden of gig work falling to the workers. He said, "It is important to know we are the ones absorbing this cost regardless of whatever compensation they claim to be offering."

CNN Business, 17 March 2022

Even a mugger didn't want my old Nokia. So why are so many people turning to 'dumbphones'?

Max Fletcher

I was never ideologically opposed to smartphones. It all began one spring afternoon when a group of friends and I were mugged. The assailant demanded our phones and wallets but when I handed him my Nokia 1110, the mugger's response was categorical: "Nah, mate."

It was humiliating. While my friends could bask in universal sympathy – they had, after all, lost their beloved and expensive BlackBerrys – I had to tell the rest of our school and the police that my phone had been rejected. But there was another way of looking at it. My Nokia had been through a lot. Dropped so much its case had smashed, it had now survived a robbery. A more glamorous device would have crumbled under the pressure, but my phone was made of sterner, simpler stuff.

When I thought about it like that, I wasn't ashamed of my phone; I was proud. And when I lost it in my second year of university, I decided I wouldn't upgrade. It was 2011, my friends were buying iPhones, but I stayed low-tech. For the next 10 years, I didn't look back. Now it seems more and more people are recognising the virtues of keeping it simple: just last week the BBC was heralding "the return of 'dumbphones'".

Functionality was never a problem. Dumbphones can call and text and, if you have a computer, that's really all you need. The biggest problem is the way others regard you. There are plenty names for people like me – refusers, anti-technologists, neo-luddites – and most of them are negative. My resistance was pretty passive. Besides, I was hardly living in a cabin in the woods. I had already succumbed to Facebook, I used Gmail. I still had a device in my pocket that was capable of converting a message into radio waves that travelled at the speed of light – even if, in predictive text, "food" always came out as "done".

The more smartphones took over, however, the more my resistance hardened into something more principled. Like anyone outside the mainstream I was forced to construct a rationale for my modus vivendi, not least to justify it to my friends, who had grown tired of sending me tailored invites to events because I wasn't on any WhatsApp groups. I would opine that smartphones aren't really about making our lives easier; they're about allowing private companies to profit from areas of our lives that were previously closed to them. It might be quicker to order a cab through an app than to find the number of a local service, but in exchange for that efficiency you allow a company to log and sell your data. They make millions from this and what do you save? Seconds. And what precious time you gain you're likely to squander scrolling through content anyway.

I would even argue that smartphones can make people worse at performing everyday tasks. Basic orienteering skills and transport knowledge have been outsourced to apps like Google Maps, leaving us lost and confused the moment those services fail. If my friends called me a hypocrite, I would reply, haughtily, that my poor sense of direction was entirely God-given. In short, in order to defend myself, I became an "ideologist". When I met another dumbphone user, I felt an instant affinity. We would swap techniques for navigating the world – how, before we flew to foreign cities, we had to print out maps to take. We would bemoan how hard old-school texting can be on thumbs, and how most of the time we just called, which our friends found alarming.

But in August last year, I lost my footing on a sheep track and my Nokia fell into a Scottish stream, it gave up the ghost after a decade of loyal service. At the start of the pandemic, my mother had sent me her old iPhone 5s in the hope that the isolation of lockdown might finally convince me to join the family WhatsApp group. At first I had politely declined, but I knew if I bought another Nokia now she would never forgive me. I would say it's made my life easier, but in complicated ways. I no longer have to carry my laptop with me. But then my 5s is not much better than a Nokia. It can't support iOS 14, which means that most apps are beyond it. And for some mysterious reason it will only send and receive messages, even via SMS, when it's connected to wifi. And when I turn on mobile data, it promptly switches off.

In some ways, it's a good compromise. I can still feel like a survivalist, finding new ways around my phone's shortcomings, while also being able to receive images of my brother's new baby. But such is built-in obsolescence, pretty soon I'll have to get a new phone. If I decide to stay with a smartphone, it'll have to be second-hand because if there was joy in using an old Nokia for a decade, it was about saying yes to something that others rejected. Something only the most discerning mugger could love.

The Guardian, 29 March 2022

A new, riskier Cold War

Ian Bremmer

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created tremendous uncertainty for tens of millions of people, but there is one thing we can be sure of: Russia and the West are now at war. US and European officials will continue to say they want to avoid a direct military conflict between NATO and Russian fighters, but historically severe economic sanctions imposed on Russia, the Western supply of sophisticated and deadly weapons to Ukrainian fighters, and the US-European effort to isolate President Vladimir Putin's regime over the longer term amount to a declaration of war.

This is a turning-point moment for the world. Assuming NATO and the Russians are able to avoid direct military confrontation and barring an increasingly difficult to imagine climbdown by Putin, Russia and the West face a new Cold War. In many ways, this confrontation will be less dangerous that the 21st century version, but in other ways, there is much greater risk for all these countries and the entire global economy.

A new Russia vs the West confrontation will be less dangerous mainly because Russia is not the Soviet Union. Russia's gross domestic product is smaller than that of the American state of New York and the sanctions will likely shrink its already stagnant economy by 10% or more over the coming year. The country's banking system faces risk of collapse. In a globalized world, that's important.

The Soviet Union and its eastern European satellites were mainly insulated from western economic pressure by the disconnect between their economic systems. Today, Europe stands united and firmly (if not always completely) aligned with the United States, while former Soviet republics struggle in various ways to resist Putin's pull. In addition, the Soviet Union had genuine ideological appeal for people and politicians in every region of the world. Today's Russia, which has no particular ideology, has no allies with whom it shares political values. It has client states and dependents. When the UN General Assembly voted on March 2 on whether to condemn its invasion of Ukraine, only Belarus, North Korea, Syria and Eritrea voted with Russia (Venezuela was in UN arrears and couldn't vote). Even Cuba abstained rather than back Putin's show of force.

But what about China? Western leaders and media have fretted over the strengthening of ties between Russia and the emerging giant. Even here, Russia's options are less than ideal. The two countries share a common desire to limit US international influence and the risk of a more confrontational approach to both countries from Europe. But Russia is very much the junior partner in this partnership of convenience.

China's economy is 10 times larger than Russia's, and while China would be happy to help sustain Russia by buying the oil, gas, metals, and minerals it can no longer sell the West, Beijing knows it will be Moscow's only important friend and will want discounted prices on all these commodities. More importantly, China's future lies in its growing economic strength, which will depend on continuing pragmatic ties with the US and EU to protect its long-term commercial interests. Beijing won't condemn Russia's invasion, but it is likely to comply with at least some of the western sanctions on its economy in the name of supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and its own bottom line.

Yet, in the 1970s and 1980s, US, European and Soviet leaders were able to build guardrails that prevented the many wars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America from triggering a catastrophic crescendo in Europe. In particular, there was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty. New diplomatic infrastructure and confidence-building measures between the West and Putin's Russia will take years to build.

In the meantime, the weapons of Cold War have become more dangerous. It's impossible to know the true depth and scale of each side's cyber-capabilities, but we know that both sides have increasingly sophisticated digital weapons they haven't used, including some that could target financial systems, power grids and other essential infrastructure to devastating effect. Cyber-weapons won't kill as many people as a nuclear warhead can, but they are far more likely to be used as tools of open warfare. They are less expensive, easier to design, more widely available and easier to hide than the heavy weapons that cast shadows of the second half of the 20th century. They also allow Russia to practice forms of information warfare that were unavailable to Soviet-era spies. Next month's French elections will provide an early opportunity to test new strategies. US midterm elections in November – and its 2024 presidential election – will prove critically tempting longer-term targets.

For now, all eyes are on Ukraine. Russian troops and artillery will continue their quest to bring that country under President Putin's control. He has shown no willingness to back down. But millions of Ukrainians will continue the fight, even if Russian soldiers seize their country's entire territory, and western leaders will continue to support them. The harshest sanctions in history will remain in place and indeed increase. On the road to a new Cold War, there is now no turning back.

Kathimerini English Edition, 10 March 2022

Love meat too much for Veganuary? Try Regenuary instead

Phoebe Weston

Proponents say the 'regenerative farming' eating challenge encourages consumption of more sustainable animal products – but is it just greenwash?

With Veganuary expected to reach more than 2 million sign-ups globally since its launch in 2014, the 31-day plant-based pledge is once again making headlines this January as food manufacturers, supermarkets and restaurants cater to the movement. But for people wanting to eat more sustainably, yet not willing to cut out meat completely, there is another consumer challenge to try: Regenuary.

The idea for people to source as much food as possible from producers who use regenerative farming methods was conceived three years ago by Glen Burrows, co-founder of the Ethical Butcher, who was a vegetarian for 25 years because he didn't like the way meat was produced. "Back in 1989, being a vegetarian was basically like being a Martian," he says. "I became that awkward guy at dinner parties and slightly enjoyed that moral smugness, but then after a long period of time, I wasn't that well. It wasn't suiting me."

So he started eating meat again. "It was like a life-force had been switched back on … I was going for my second black belt in martial arts." He particularly likes offal. "For me, it's almost like doing drugs."

Burrows' aim with Regenuary is to get people thinking more about how their food is produced. "The whole point of the movement is to think more about the impact of their food choices, and stop the oversimplified narrative that all plant-based foods are better than animal-based," he says.

Unlike the fairly self-explanatory rules of Veganuary, Regenuary is more nuanced and involves eating seasonal produce from farms that proponents say have lower, or even beneficial, environmental or social impacts. This idea is gaining ground and "regenerative" may be the farming buzzword of 2022. It remains a rather broadly-defined concept – essentially it is any form of farming that simultaneously improves the environment, including in a social sense.

But while many support the idea of regenerative farming, they argue that the priority should be to stop people eating meat. Simon Lewis, professor of global change science at University College London, says: "While I'm supportive of regenerative agriculture and community agriculture and protecting soil, I do think Regenuary is greenwash for eating meat and drinking dairy." Lewis says we need to be clear on the science that plant-based diets are better for the planet, and he is worried movements like Regenuary are "muddying waters" on this issue.

Avoiding meat and dairy is considered to be the biggest single way someone can reduce their impact on the planet. Scientific studies show humans farm about 4.1bn hectares of land globally, and that if we all adopted a vegan diet, just 1bn hectares would be used. This would mean more space to protect wild habitats and plant trees. This is the land "sparing" approach to wildlife protection.

Burrows believes people should eat "better" meat, but not necessarily less of it. For him, the value in food comes from being able to see where it comes from, supporting grass-based grazing systems and getting farmers and consumers involved in short, direct supply chains.

However, in terms of carbon emissions, science says regenerative meat-eating is only sustainable if coupled with a reduction in the total amount eaten, a fact which the UK's farming unions are still loath to admit.

Among consumers, many people would not be willing to do Veganuary, but might try Regenuary and that is to be applauded, says John Lynch, a researcher on the University of Oxford's future of food programme, so long as reducing meat consumption is part of that effort.

"Some people are already vegan, and they want to carry on not eating any livestock products, and that's fine. They don't need to have a target of eating meat once or twice a week. Whereas if you're eating meat or dairy every single day then even if you just cut back slightly that's still going to be a good step in the right direction," he says.

The Guardian, 15 January 2022

The blessing of 'rote' memory

Jeff Jacoby

Here's a hypothesis: Perhaps one factor in Volodymyr Zelensky's skill as a wartime political leader is his training as an actor, which developed his ability to rally followers, evoke empathy, and convincingly express the justice of the cause for which Ukraine is fighting. Arguably, the many years Zelensky spent memorizing scripts and honing the ability to deliver lines effectively are now contributing to his effectiveness as Ukraine's president. In a similar vein, historians have argued that Ronald Reagan's experience in Hollywood prepared him to become the “Great Communicator” who later proved so successful as president of the United States.

Winston Churchill wasn't a professional actor. But he too committed prodigious amounts of material to memory — not only entire speeches to be delivered in Parliament, but also vast swaths of Shakespeare's plays. More than one observer has suggested that the rhetoric in Churchill's wartime speeches echoes the inspiriting patriotism — “We few, we band of brothers” — of the message delivered by Shakespeare's Henry V before the Battle of Agincourt.

I don't want to overstate the point. It does seem plausible to me that practice at memorizing texts and reciting them by heart would be an asset for anyone with political aspirations. But memorization is a wonderful and valuable activity regardless of any political benefits.

There was a time when memorization was a standard feature of American schooling. In 1927, New York City's board of education directed grade schoolteachers to teach poetry to pupils, with particular emphasis on the use of rhythm, diction, and imagery. Children were to memorize at least some of the poems they studied. Among the material recommended by the board “for reading and memorization” in the first, second, and third grades were works by Robert Louis Stevenson, Christina Rossetti, Alfred Tennyson, Lewis Carroll, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. By the time they were in seventh and eighth grades, students were memorizing chunks of Edgar Allan Poe and Shakespeare, along with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Needless to say, it isn't only literature that can be memorized. The elements of the periodic table, the names and locations of the 50 states, the 46 US presidents, the first 100 digits of pi, the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, all the best picture Oscar winners — the list is literally endless. When I was 11 or 12, I took it into my head to memorize the names of every sitting US senator and governor. Some of my sports-minded friends knew the starting lineup of each American League baseball team. When my twin niece and nephew were toddlers, my brother taught them the names of the 15 former Soviet republics and their capitals. He would say “Kyrgyzstan” and, from their highchairs, they would call out “Bishkek.”

Everyone memorizes some things — the multiplication tables, their Social Security number, song lyrics, the Wi-Fi password, family members' birthdays — but memorization for its own sake has long since gone out of favor. Writing in The American Scholar more than 40 years ago, the late Clara Claiborne Park, a professor of English at Williams College, commented on the disdain with which professional educators dismissed learning material by heart as mere “rote memory.” She quoted one college professor who sneeringly called memorization “the lowest form of human intellectual activity.”

But there is nothing “low” about mastering a block of information so effectively that you can surface it at will. Who has ever regretted being able to recite Rudyard Kipling's “Recessional” from memory? Or readily identify a bird from its songs? Or name the planets of the Solar System? You don't have to be a “Jeopardy!” contestant to relish having instant recall of thick slices of knowledge. Memorization takes work, but there is joy in the accumulation of knowledge that requires no googling.

The more information for which you develop “muscle memory,” the more tools you have for thinking and reasoning — the more connections you can perceive in the world, the more insights you can draw, the more moments of intellectual serendipity you may experience. In that sense, memorized information is mental circuitry that provides a path for imagination and understanding to flow. Granted, memorizing “mere” facts and figures is not the same as learning to think. But it does stock one's mind, as Park put it, with something “to think about, to think with, a range of language to think and speak in.” Our brain's capacity for memory is immense. We really should be putting it to better use.

The Boston Globe, 20 April 2022

Jackson's nomination is historic, but her impact on Supreme Court in short term likely will be minimal

Robert Barnes

Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh's ascension to the Supreme Court moved it considerably to the right. The addition of Justice Amy Coney Barrett gave conservatives a supermajority they had long dreamed about. But if Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson is confirmed by the Senate to replace the soon-to-retire Justice Stephen G. Breyer, the short-term impact on the controversial cases that command much of the public's attention will likely be minimal. There will still be only three liberals on the court, specializing in writing dissents.

President Biden described Jackson as a "consensus-builder" when he introduced her at Friday's White House event. But the court's right flank is moving fast and not particularly looking for compromise, as even Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., himself a conservative, can testify. Roberts found himself alone with the liberals as the majority allowed a restrictive Texas abortion law to take effect even though its constitutionality is suspect. He was on the losing side as the same group of five reinstated an Alabama congressional map that a lower court had said was so unfair to Black voters it violated the Voting Rights Act. Breyer over the long run has been the most pragmatic and compromising of the court's liberals, and he has often found himself frustrated in the attempt to find common ground.

And there is more to come. The court is currently considering a Mississippi abortion case in which the state is asking to get rid of Roe v. Wade's guarantee of abortion rights. It appears likely to overturn a New York gun-control law. The ability of parents to use public funds to pay for religious school tuition for their children is on the agenda. On Monday, the court will hear a major environmental case that could limit the ability of federal agencies to impose broad regulations in addressing the nation's problems. Breyer, who has made his retirement effective at the end of the court's current term and contingent on his successor being confirmed, is dealing with those.

Jackson would debut in a new term next fall that already features the next round in the Alabama voting rights showdown; where to draw the line between religious beliefs and anti-discrimination laws protecting LGBTQ people; and whether universities may continue to consider race as one factor in building their student bodies. It is a safe assumption the court's liberals did not want to take up those cases. The two remaining justices on the left, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, have become specialists at dissent. Sotomayor has taken the lead on the Texas abortion law, Kagan has become the master of brittle protests about voting laws.

But anyone whose job includes a lifetime appointment is looking to the distant horizon. There was unprecedented pressure on the 83-year-old Breyer to retire now, with a Democrat in the White House and the thinnest control of the Senate. His reinforcement is 30 years younger, with decades of service ahead.

As the first Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court, Jackson would likely draw attention and have an immediate public platform in a way Breyer never achieved. He labored in the shadow of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, appointed one year before him. And there are plenty of examples of how a justice can be influential, in time, whether or not he or she is on the winning side. Justice Antonin Scalia said he pitched his sharply worded dissents to law students, hoping they would take seed in a new generation of lawyers.

Ginsburg became a late-in-life heroine — the Notorious RBG — drawing crowds of liberal women and men wherever she went. Sotomayor has used the attention she receives as the Supreme Court's first Latina to write children's books and stress her success after humble beginnings as a message of hope. Justice Clarence Thomas's unique view of the law and Constitution used to be a singular pursuit. But 30 years later, he's now on a court with like-minded colleagues.

Jackson brings legal experiences other justices lack. She would be the first public defender on the court, and brings more criminal law experience than probably any justice since Thurgood Marshall. Like Sotomayor — but none of the others — she has been both a district court and an appellate judge. At her confirmation hearing for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, she deflected questions about whether her race made her see the law differently.

But all justices bring their pasts to the table. After Marshall died, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the court's first woman, wrote an appreciation of the civil rights leader, who was the court's first African American. "At oral arguments and conference meetings, Justice Marshall imparted not only his legal acumen, but his life experiences, constantly pushing and prodding us to respond not only to the persuasiveness of legal argument, but also to the power of moral truth," she wrote.

The Washington Post, 25 February 2022

No, I will not switch airplane seats with you

Damon Young

I am an assertive driver. Not aggressive, because that word is too aggressive. But I am decisive with speed. Still, if I'm attempting to merge and someone lets me in, I will roll down my window and wave to them. If it's raining, I will just have a wet hand.

I pray before meals. Not every meal. But meals with meat.

I tip generously, regardless of the service. (This tipping dogma could be somewhat due to some subconscious behavioral subversion of the stereotype that Black people don't tip well. But unpacking that would take much more space than I'm allotted here, so let's move on!)

I attempt to be the last to enter elevators, and the last to exit. (Sometimes, though, this can backfire, when multiple people are playing the same elevator chicken game, and the door closes. This is why I prefer stairs.)

If I am eating a meal with you, I will make every effort to sit with my back to the wall, to ward off potential danger with … my eyes, I guess? A soup spoon? I don't know. I haven't really thought this through.

I don't ride city buses anymore, but when I did, I wouldn't just give up my seat for women, elderly people and those who appear to have a physical disability, I wouldn't even sit if the bus was packed and seats were limited. Few things made me feel better about myself than when I did this. There was no difference, in my head, between me standing in the aisle, satisfied with my sacrifice, and a soldier diving on a live grenade to save their troop.

I also perform all of the boilerplate chivalry: the opening of doors, the holding of umbrellas and even the walking closest to the curb when with a woman. So, if you're with me, and a car jumps the curb, we'll both probably die, but at least I'll die first.

Do I do all of these things because I'm a good person? Or is it just a performance of socially consensused goodness? I don't know! What matters is that I do these things.

But there is one thing I haven't done. Will not do. Will never do. Will grow angry enough at you to throw spitballs at you if you ask me to do. And that's move my seat on a plane to accommodate you so that you can sit with your friends or family or concubines or whoever else you're flying with.

Your grandma's on the flight with you and you want to sit next to her? Granny should've taught you to plan ahead. Maybe Granny wants a break from her thoughtless progeny. You ever think about that? Of course not, because you're thoughtless. You're separated from your 6-year-old son? Braylin has to learn to fend for himself. Plus, this ain't Antarctica. It's an 80-minute, temperature-controlled trip to Albany on a flying couch. He'll be fine next to his new Uncle D.

The rationale for my abject refusal to budge is simple. I hate flying. It is a thoroughly uncomfortable experience for me, from the moment I enter the airport. There's the vaguely fascist security line, where we're de-shoed, de-walleted and de-belted while waiting to jaunt through a doorway of allegedly targeted radiation. There are (White) people in line with tank tops and flip-flops, and then the heavily armed (mostly White) people waiting to accost you after you get through it, like you're on an assembly belt to 1923. There's the dystopian vectors of pestilence and Chick-fil-A called "airport terminals." And then there's the flying itself, which I cannot do comfortably unless under the influence of a narcotic and whichever divine grace five Hail Marys provides me.

To somewhat alleviate this anxiety, I'm very intentional with seating. I need a window seat, so that I can rest my head against it and sleep. I am also 6-foot-2 with a big head, a short torso, long legs and big feet, and airplane seats are apparently built for Simone Biles. Which means that paying extra for legroom - even if that means an exit row or first class - is paramount. Not for comfort, but for less discomfort.

So, asking me to change my seat to accommodate you is essentially asking me to give you money and give myself a panic attack just so you can whisper in your wife's ear about hummus. ("Babe, did you try the garlic? I think I tasted a hint of ginger.") Nope. Naw. Never. I will fight you.

Maybe this makes me a bad person. That's fine. I'll be that. I'll also be asleep, so I don't care!

The Washington Post, 8 May 2022

Kate and William's Caribbean tour is hit by claims of 'tone deaf PR and colonialism'

Rebecca English

William and Kate's tour of the Caribbean yesterday faced criticism from royal observers over claims of a series of 'tone deaf' PR moments that smacked of 'colonialism'. Led by the BBC's royal correspondent Jonny Dymond, the row was jumped upon by Harry and Meghan's cheerleader-in-chief Omid Scobie to rabble-rouse on social media. In a piece focused on what he described as 'defeat plucked from the jaws of victory' given the warm reception they received on the ground, Mr Dymond highlighted the duke and duchess's visit to Trench Town in Kingston, Jamaica, where they were welcomed by thousands of cheering well-wishers.

However the abiding image of the engagement – as far as social media is concerned, although not on the ground – is that of William and Kate poking their fingers through the links of a metal fence along a football field to greet locals on the other side. While England footballer Raheem Sterling did exactly the same thing, the Cambridges have been accused of 'white-saviour parody'. The BBC correspondent wrote in his online piece: 'Palace staff must be wondering how the defining image of the Cambridges' trip to the Caribbean was not the explosion of joy and pleasure that greeted the couple in downtown Kingston. 'But instead, what looked to many as some sort of white-saviour parody, with Kate and William fleetingly making contact with the outstretched fingers of Jamaican children, pushing through a wire fence. It was a bad misstep for a couple who are surprisingly media-savvy.'

Mr Scobie, co-author of Harry and Meghan's biography, Finding Freedom, took to Twitter to jibe: 'This tour was an opportunity to try to show the monarchy can modernise – hold themselves accountable where appropriate, be eager to listen and learn, mindful, open to change. Instead, even the media royalists are writing how out of touch parts of the trip have come across.'

The Daily Mail's own Jan Moir yesterday labelled the tour 'a disaster' that left her 'dying of embarrassment ... for our country, for the Cambridges. What this week showed is that the days of the big royal overseas visit are surely numbered,' she wrote. 'The very idea that the Royal Family should sally forth, in all their finery and jewels, to far-away lands to meet people they expect to bow and curtsey to them, or pay homage at the very least, is an increasing absurdity.'

Mr Dymond also highlighted the Mail's exclusive story about how the couple were forced to cancel the first engagement of their visit to Belize after being caught up in a row over indigenous land rights and anger that their helicopter was being allowed to land on a village football field. The couple's decision to drive out of a Jamaican military commissioning parade in the Queen's 1960s open top Land Rover, intended as a 'charming homage ... just felt like a clunky reminder of a more deferential time,' Mr Dymond added.

Yet in the Caribbean, much was well received, including William's keynote speech in Jamaica when he went further than any other member of the Royal Family in airing his 'sorrow' at the 'abhorrence' of slavery. The Mail understands William took time over his speech, revisiting his script just hours before he delivered it to think carefully about his choice of words.

'He wanted to reflect what his father had previously said on the issue and add his own words from the heart,' a source said. He was also said to be 'relaxed' over the moment the prime minister of Jamaica, Andrew Holness, told him and Kate in front of the cameras that he was determined to break ties with the Queen and for Jamaica to become a republic. A source said: 'The prime minister was elected on a platform of independence so it was no surprise. He was very warm and welcomed their visit. It was done respectfully. The duke was very relaxed.'

Praise has also been handed to the couple for their efforts to largely sidestep big set piece engagements in favour of smaller ones where they have been able to thank those whose efforts often go unrewarded, visiting hospitals, schools and charities. Yesterday, in The Bahamas, they spent the day dodging downpours on the final stop of their tour.

At a traditional Bahamian Junkanoo – or street parade – in Nassau Kate was particularly taken by one performer, five-year-old Cattleya Green, who along with her sister, Tatiana, eight, had dressed in colourful home-made costumes to resemble traditional Bahamian straw dolls. Kate hunkered down on her heels, paying no mind to her £350 pistachio-coloured dress by Self Portrait with distinctive gold earrings by local designer Nadia Irena, to chat to the little girl. Some of the crowds had been waiting for up to five hours to catch a glimpse of the couple. Colette Gard, 47, from Nassau, said: 'I love the fact that they are here. Kate is such a great princess, so glamorous and kind. William will be a great king. We love them in the Bahamas.'

Trade and Peace: The Great Illusion

Paul Krugman

On April 12, 1861, rebel artillery opened fire on Fort Sumter, beginning the U.S. Civil War. The war eventually became a catastrophe for the South, which lost more than a fifth of its young men. But why did the secessionists believe they could pull it off? One reason was they believed themselves to be in possession of a powerful economic weapon. The economy of Britain, the world's leading power at the time, was deeply dependent on Southern cotton, and they thought a cutoff of that supply would force Britain to intervene on the side of the Confederacy. Indeed, the Civil War initially created a "cotton famine" that threw thousands of Britons out of work.

In the end, of course, Britain stayed neutral -- in part because British workers saw the Civil War as a moral crusade against slavery and rallied to the Union cause despite their suffering.

Why recount this old history? Because it has obvious relevance to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It seems fairly clear that Vladimir Putin saw the reliance of Europe, and Germany in particular, on Russian natural gas the same way slave owners saw Britain's reliance on King Cotton: a form of economic dependence that would coerce these nations into enabling his military ambitions.

And he wasn't entirely wrong. Last week I castigated Germany for its unwillingness to make economic sacrifices for the sake of Ukraine's freedom. But let's not forget that Germany's response to Ukraine's pleas for military aid on the eve of war was also pathetic. Britain and the United States rushed to provide lethal weapons, including hundreds of the anti-tank missiles that were so crucial in repelling Russia's attack on Kyiv. Germany offered and dragged its feet on delivering ... 5,000 helmets.

If you think I'm trying to help shame Germany into becoming a better defender of democracy, you're right. But I'm also trying to make a broader point about the relationship between globalization and war, which isn't as simple as many people have assumed.

There has been a longstanding belief among Western elites that commerce is good for peace, and vice versa. America's long push for trade liberalization, which began even before World War II, was always in part a political project: Cordell Hull, Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of state, firmly believed that lower tariffs and increased international trade would help lay the foundations for peace.

The European Union, too, was both an economic and a political project. Its origins lie in the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1952 with the explicit goal of making French and German industry so interdependent that there could never be another European war. And the roots of Germany's current vulnerability go back to the 1960s, when the West German government began pursuing Ostpolitik -- "eastern policy" -- seeking to normalize relations, including economic relations, with the Soviet Union, in the hope that growing integration with the West would strengthen civil society and move the East toward democracy. Russian gas began flowing to Germany in 1973.

So does trade promote peace and freedom? Surely it does in some cases. In other cases, however, authoritarian rulers more concerned with power than with prosperity may see economic integration with other nations as a license for bad behavior, assuming that democracies with a strong financial stake in their regimes will turn a blind eye to their abuses of power.

I'm not talking just about Russia. The European Union has stood by for years while Viktor Orban of Hungary has systematically dismantled liberal democracy. How much of this weakness can be explained by the large Hungarian investments that European, and especially German, companies have made while pursuing cost-cutting outsourcing?

And then there's the really big question: China. Does Xi Jinping see China's close integration with the world economy as a reason to avoid adventurous policies -- such as invading Taiwan -- or as a reason to expect a weak-kneed Western response? Nobody knows.

Now, I'm not suggesting a return to protectionism. I am suggesting that national-security concerns about trade -- real concerns, not farcical versions like Trump's invocation of national security to impose tariffs on Canadian aluminum -- need to be taken more seriously than I, among others, used to believe.

More immediately, however, law-abiding nations need to show that they won't be deterred from defending freedom. Autocrats may believe that financial exposure to their authoritarian regimes will make democracies afraid to stand up for their values. We need to prove them wrong. And what that means in practice is both that Europe must move quickly to cut off imports of Russian oil and gas and that the West needs to supply Ukraine with the weapons it needs, not just to hold Putin at bay, but to win a clear-cut victory. The stakes here are much bigger than Ukraine alone.

The New York Times, 12 April 2022

You'll Miss Fossil Fuels When They're Gone

Allysia Finley

What would a world without oil and gas look like? We're getting a preview: surging prices for food and other everyday goods. Oil and natural gas aren't needed to only generate energy. They're also critical for an array of products including face masks, diapers and vegan leather.

Consider fertilizer, which is produced using hydrogen from natural gas (the molecule CH4). Natural gas accounts for about 75% to 90% of fertilizer production costs. Russia and Belarus are large producers, and uncertainty about sanctions has reduced their exports. But skyrocketing natural-gas prices in Europe have also pushed fertilizer producers such as Norway's Yara and Hungary's Nitrogenmuvek to curtail production. Some suspended operations last fall when Russia slowed natural-gas deliveries.

As a result, fertilizer prices last month hit a record. Many farmers are scaling back land in cultivation. Some say they plan to use less fertilizer, which could reduce crop yields. Others are switching from planting corn and wheat to soybeans, which require less fertilizer. The fertilizer shortage couldn't have come at a worse time. The war is disrupting grain shipments from Russia and Ukraine, which account for a quarter of global wheat exports. Wheat prices last month hit a record. While Americans will have to pay more for cereal and pasta, Africans could experience severe food shortages. At the same time, food manufacturers report that the cost of plastics for containers and packaging is soaring. Plastics are made from oil and natural gas, which are in short supply globally.

Hydrocarbons known as natural-gas liquids are used as feedstock for petrochemical plants. Ethane (C2H6) is isolated from natural gas and then processed into ethylene, which is converted through a chain of chemical reactions into polyethylene -- the most common plastic in use today, found in shopping bags, water bottles, catheters and even bulletproof vests.

U.S. shale fracking produced a gusher of natural-gas liquids including ethane. As a result the cost of plastic feedstock plunged and petrochemical investment exploded. Ethane prices today are about half of what they were in 2011, though they crept up this past year as demand increased. In 2018 the American Chemistry Council estimated that 333 chemical-industry projects valued at more than $200 billion had been announced since 2010. With so much gas from shale fields, the U.S. in 2015 became the world's top exporter of ethane, surpassing Norway. Ethane exports have increased to 508,000 barrels a day from nothing in 2013 and have become a major feedstock for petrochemical plants in Canada, China, Europe and India.

One little-appreciated fact is that some cheap plastic products imported from China are made from ethane fracked in the U.S. Overseas petrochemical plants also use the petroleum-based hydrocarbon naphtha as a feedstock. Russia is a major exporter of naphtha, but fracking has made low-cost American ethane more globally competitive. Another common byproduct of natural-gas processing and oil refining is polypropylene. There's a good chance you're wearing something with polypropylene. It's in iPhone cases, fitness apparel and female sanitary products. Early in the pandemic, Exxon Mobil tapped its petrochemical supply chain to ramp up polypropylene production for face masks.

Polypropylene is also often used in appliances, medical sutures, food containers, furniture and plastic drinking straws. Progressives in places like Seattle and San Francisco have banned single-serve plastic straws. Yet they mandated face masks, which are made from the same raw material. Surgical masks are now among the most common kinds of litter in California, especially near schools.

The inconvenient truth for progressives is that petrochemicals are ubiquitous and indispensable. Replacing oil and gas as an energy source poses enormous technological challenges. Replacing them as a product feedstock would be next to impossible. As much as progressives loathe fossil fuels, they can't live without them. Drive an electric car or ride a bike? Streets are paved with asphalt, which is made from petroleum bitumen. The cost of asphalt, by the way, is also soaring in tandem with oil prices. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted how even a modest decline in the supply of oil and gas can send prices for energy and raw materials soaring. Government policies that restrict oil and gas production won't only increase energy prices. They will raise prices and lead to shortages across the economy. Welcome to the wonderful world without oil and gas.

The Wall Street Journal, 5 April 2022

West trying to cancel Russia like it did JK Rowling, Putin claims

Tom Ball

Dictator compares criticism of author to backlash against invasion

JK Rowling said: “Critiques of western cancel culture are possibly not best made by those currently slaughtering civilians for the crime of resistance”

Vladimir Putin has claimed the West is trying to “cancel” Russia for its traditional views, much as it did to JK Rowling for her views on trans rights.

In a speech delivered to a gathering of Russian artists on Friday, the president decried western “cancel culture”, which he said was now trying to eradicate Russia’s contributions to the cultural canon.

“They cancelled Joanne Rowling recently. The children’s author — her books are published all over the world — fell out of favour with fans of so-called gender freedoms, just because she didn’t satisfy the demands of gender rights. Today they are trying to cancel a thousand-year-old country,” Putin said during a televised meeting with Russian winners of cultural prizes.

“I am talking about the progressive discrimination against everything connected with Russia, about this trend that is unfolding in a number of western states, with the full connivance and sometimes with the encouragement of western elites.”

Rowling replied on Twitter: “Critiques of Western cancel culture are possibly not best made by those currently slaughtering civilians for the crime of resistance, or who jail and poison their critics. #IStandWithUkraine”.

She linked to a news story about the jailing of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Putin has repeatedly pushed “culture war” themes, insisting that progressive views on trans and gay rights have corrupted the decadent West while Russia remains pure.

He went on to claim that the West was trying to cancel composers such as Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Rachmaninov, a possible reference to the decision by the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra to remove Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture from its forthcoming programme.

Putin likened “cancel culture” to book burning in the Third Reich, a theme he has returned to several times during the invasion of Ukraine. “We remember the footage when they were burning books,” he said. “It is impossible to imagine such a thing in our country and we are insured against this thanks to our culture.

“And it’s inseparable for us from our motherland, from Russia, where there is no place for ethnic intolerance, where for centuries representatives from dozens of ethnic groups have been living together.”

On Thursday the Russian embassy in France tweeted a cartoon showing a corpse labelled with the word “Europe” being injected with a syringe labelled “cancel culture”. The tweet was deleted after a few hours.

Putin has repeatedly attempted to project Russia as the defender of traditional values.

In a televised annual news conference last year, the dictator compared gender nonconformity and the push for trans rights to “new strains” of a pandemic much like the coronavirus.

“If someone thinks that women and men are the same thing, then be my guest. But there is common sense,” he said. “I stick to the traditional approach that a woman is a woman, a man is a man, a mum is a mum, and a dad is a dad.”

The Times, 25 March 2022

Journalists' group 'dismayed' by treatment at Beijing Winter Olympics

Helen Davidson

Reporting conditions for journalists covering the Beijing Winter Olympics fell short of international standards despite assurances from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCCC) of China has said.

The club said it was "dismayed" that at a time when global attention was trained on China more than ever the government and Olympic officials still failed to uphold their own rules on accredited foreign media. Instead "government interference occurred regularly during the Games", both inside and outside venues, when journalists tried to interview athletes and local residents.

The FCCC also highlighted significant online trolling and abuse of journalists who had covered Olympic events and related stories. "In some cases these attacks were fuelled by Chinese state media accounts and Chinese diplomats," it said, describing an observed aspect of state-backed online harassment and propaganda campaigns.

The FCCC statement listed a number of claims of intimidation, obstruction and harassment, including some that the IOC – widely criticised for granting the Games to a government accused of crimes against humanity – had dismissed as "isolated incidents".

"After an Olympic ski event, a foreign reporter was prevented by a Beijing Olympic official from interviewing a Hong Kong athlete in the Games' mixed zone, a space supposedly governed by international Olympic rules," the statement said. "Most visibly, a reporter with the Dutch national broadcaster NOS was hauled off camera during a live TV broadcast by plainclothes security men, despite the fact that he had been standing in a spot police directed him to only minutes earlier."

During the opening ceremony, the NOS's Sjoerd den Daas was reporting live from outside the Olympic "bubble" in Beijing when he was grabbed and dragged away by security officials.

"Unfortunately, this is increasingly the daily reality for journalists in China," the Dutch outlet later tweeted, adding that Den Daas "is fine and could fortunately finish his story a few minutes later".

The IOC said it was an "isolated" event that would not affect foreign media reporting at the Games, but the FCCC said foreign reporters were frequently tailed or manhandled by security or officials while trying to report from outside Games venues.

A France 24 correspondent said they were assigned a "guide" while reporting from outside the bubble, who reported back if their interviews "deviated" from the official narrative.

The FCCC said it was disappointed that China had tightened conditions for the press, "contrary to the Olympic spirit".

It added: "The FCCC urges the Chinese authorities to uphold their own stated rules on accredited foreign press in China: namely, to allow journalists to book and conduct their own interviews without threat of state interference and to report freely in public areas. Unfortunately, neither rule was enforced at a time when global attention was trained on China more than ever."

Press freedom in China has been worsening in recent years, with increasing reports of harassment – online and in person – as well as government-led difficulties. Ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics, the FCCC had accused officials of "continuously stymying" media attempts to cover the preparations and lead up.

The Beijing organising committee denied the accusations and said it had "never recognised" the FCCC, but said it "guaranteed the freedom of reporting" by international media on the Games in accordance with "relevant Chinese policies". The promise was on the proviso journalists abided by "relevant Chinese laws, regulations and anti-epidemic policies".

Plastic packaging increases fresh food waste, study finds

Zoe Wood

Research by sustainability charity Wrap debunks idea single-use plastic on fruit and veg helps prevent waste

Supermarkets should stop selling fresh produce such as apples and potatoes in plastic packaging, research suggests, because it does not make them last longer and adds to pollution and food waste.

The 18-month study by the sustainability charity Wrap, which also looked at sales of bananas, broccoli and cucumbers, debunks the idea that single-use plastic wrappers help prevent waste.

Instead, this packaging often forces people to buy more than they need, increasing the problem of wasted food.

Marcus Gover, Wrap's chief executive, said that while packaging was important and often carried out a critical role to protect food, its research had found that plastic wrap "doesn't necessarily prolong the life of uncut fresh produce", adding: "It can in fact increase food waste in this case."

Britons throw away almost half a million tonnes of fresh vegetables and salad and a quarter of a million tonnes of fresh fruit – worth a total of £2.1bn – each year because it has gone soft or mouldy, or the date label has expired. This waste is bad for the planet: about one-third of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions are associated with food and drink.

In the battle with food waste, packaging was found to be a less important part of the picture than other factors, such as enabling people to buy the right amount or how it was stored.

"We found that storing food in the fridge at below five degrees gave days, weeks, and, in the case of apples, months more quality product life," said Gover. "We found that for most items, the plastic packaging they were sold in made little or no difference to their shelf life.

"In cases where consumers had no choice but to buy more than they needed in pre-packed packaging, this could actually increase food waste," he added.

Wrap studied the five items: apples, bananas, broccoli, cucumber and potatoes, stored in the original packaging and loose, and at different temperatures.

It calculated that if these five products were sold loose, and the best-before dates removed, it could save more than 10,300 tonnes of plastic and about 100,000 tonnes of food from being wasted each year – the equivalent of 14m shopping baskets of food.

The food waste was prevented because people bought the right amount and used their judgment, rather than date labels, to decide if food was still good. One in 10 people dump groceries based on the date, resulting in good food being thrown out.

Most supermarkets sell some of these items loose already but Wrap, whose work helps shape government policy on sustainability matters, said its research presented compelling evidence for a wider range of fruit and veg to be sold this way.

As people faced rising fuel and food prices, there was a compelling economic as well as environmental case for ringing the changes in grocery aisles, Gover said, and retailers should step up and act on Wrap's findings. "This helps save the planet and us money at the same time," he said.

Wrap conceded it would take time for things to change and it will now consult the Food Standards Agency, Defra, and the food industry to make loose produce in supermarkets a reality by 2025.

The Guardian, 24 February 2022

Starbucks Workers In Seattle Vote to Form Union

Dave Jamieson

That makes seven Starbucks stores that have voted to unionize in a matter of months.

The campaign to unionize Starbucks stores has made headway in the coffee chain's hometown, with the union winning an election at a store in Seattle on Tuesday. Workers at a store in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood voted unanimously to join the union Workers United, which has been organizing baristas around the country since last year. The 9-0 election victory for the campaign brings the total number of union Starbucks stores to seven, including five in New York and one in Arizona.

Workers have filed petitions for union elections at more than 140 other stores in 27 states, making it likely their ranks will grow in the coming weeks. So far, the union has lost just one election out of eight. Rachel Ybarra, a barista at the Seattle shop, said following the vote count that a resounding victory in the company's backyard could embolden workers elsewhere to try to form a union. "I know this is going to make other stores more confident to contact us," Ybarra said.

A Starbucks spokesperson said in an email that "we still believe in Starbucks' direct relationship with our partners but will continue to respect the [legal] process."

The union campaign, known as Starbucks Workers United, has been organizing store by store around the country, starting with the Buffalo area of New York. Around 13 workers will be part of the bargaining unit at the Seattle store, though other locations number around three dozen.

Starbucks has roughly 9,000 company-owned stores in the U.S., all of which were non-union until last year. The company has opposed the union campaign, with managers holding meetings with workers urging them to vote "no." The union has accused Starbucks of a litany of unfair labor practices, alleging the company has retaliated against union organizers.

The National Labor Relations Board, which referees collective bargaining in the private sector, found merit in the union's claims in Arizona, saying Starbucks singled out a pair of pro-union workers, one of whom lost her job. Starbucks has denied the allegations.

Starbucks announced last week that its longtime leader, Howard Schultz, would be returning atop the company to replace outgoing chief executive Kevin Johnson. Schultz will take over at a critical juncture in the unionization effort. "We have to take a hard look at how we are doing as a company, and as a community of partners," he said in a message to Starbucks employees last week.

Schultz has dealt with unions at Starbucks in the past. Several of the chain's original stores and its roastery in the Seattle area were represented by a union in the 1980s. The union was eventually decertified and no longer represented those workers by the early 1990s, a development that Schultz wrote about with approval in a memoir. Under Schultz's helm, the company later successfully fended off an organizing effort by the Industrial Workers of the World that began in the early 2000s.

But the current campaign has already notched a historic string of victories, and baristas promise there are more to come. Sydney Durkin, a worker at the newly unionized Seattle store, warned Tuesday that Schultz would be fighting a "losing battle" if he hopes to slow the organizing campaign. "If he's going to come in expecting his old tactics to work, he's going to find a whole new reality," Durkin said.

HuffPost, 22 March 2022

Toilet paper shortages could be the next side effect of the energy crisis

Rosie Frost

Energy prices have soared in Europe and industry experts are now warning that it could lead to shortages of items that require a lot of energy to produce - including toilet paper.

We could be about to return to the early days of the Covid pandemic when people stockpiled toilet paper amidst rumours it was about to run out completely.

Creating this bathroom essential is incredibly energy-intensive. Manufacturing one tonne of paper products requires an average of 11.5 gigajoules of energy. That's enough to make around 11,500 pots of coffee.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, the price of natural gas has risen rapidly to reach almost €120 per megawatt-hour. It is the highest it has been in the past year and Europe relies heavily on this fossil fuel for its energy.

As the third biggest industrial energy consumer in the EU, the paper industry is already being impacted by the rising cost of electricity.

In Italy, paper firms have halted production due to the energy shock caused by the Ukraine war. The crisis has hit the entire chain of production from toilet paper to packing material and even recycling.

"If last December Italian paper mills were paying five times more for natural gas, with which they produce electricity to run their plants," explains Lorenzo Poli, chief of Assocarta, the trade group for the Italian paper industry. "These days the cost has increased tenfold, with peaks of fifteen times more."

He adds that paper mills resisted the rise in energy prices late last year, even producing at a loss, but now more and more paper factories are coming to a halt.

"The pandemic did not stop us, an energy shock is succeeding following the current crisis situation between Ukraine and Russia," says Poli. For those that have managed to remain open, energy prices are set to increase yet again with Russia threatening to cut off gas supplies to Europe. Removing the paper industry's reliance on fossil fuels requires energy grids to change.

The EU is already looking to cut demand for Russian gas by two thirds before the end of the year and plans to make Europe independent from these energy sources well before 2030. It is time to "tackle our vulnerabilities and rapidly become more independent in our energy choices" according to Frans Timmermans, executive vice-president for the European Green Deal. "Let's dash into renewable energy at lightning speed," he said on Tuesday as the EU announced its decision to move away from Russian fossil fuels.

"Renewables are a cheap, clean, and potentially endless source of energy and instead of funding the fossil fuel industry elsewhere, they create jobs here." He added that the war in Ukraine had demonstrated the urgency of accelerating the clean energy transition.

Paper manufacturers have welcomed the decision but are still worried about how energy-intensive industries like theirs will cope in the short term.

Euronews, 11 March 2022

Two glasses of wine can exceed daily sugar limit, warn UK experts

Samantha Haynes

Adults can exceed their recommended daily limit of sugar by drinking just two glasses of wine, experts have warned.

The Alcohol Health Alliance UK (AHA) said product labelling on alcoholic drinks was "woefully inadequate" as it published new analysis of popular wines.

It looked at the calorie and sugar content of 30 bottles of red, white, rosé, fruit and sparkling wine sold in the UK.

The AHA, which represents more than 60 health organisations, said there was a wide variation of sugar and calories across different wines, but that with this information missing from most labels, consumers were "being kept in the dark" about what they were drinking.

It said that government guidelines recommend that adults consume no more than 30g of so-called free sugars a day, but that it was possible to reach almost this entire amount by drinking two medium glasses of wine.

The AHA analysis suggested that many of the most sugar-packed wines were the ones which had the lowest strength of alcohol.

It said that with no legal requirement to display sugar content on alcohol labels, drinkers may opt for a lower-strength alcohol thinking that this is a healthier option but could unwittingly be upping their daily sugar intake.

The analysis also examined the calories in wine.

The AHA said that just two medium-sized glasses of the most calorific wines analysed contain more calories than a McDonald's hamburger.

Wines with high calorie content also tended to be higher-strength drinks.

The AHA said that none of the 30 products examined in the study displayed sugar content on their labels – information which is required for all non-alcoholic drinks.

Calorie content was only displayed on 20% of the labels examined.

Prof Sir Ian Gilmore, the chair of the AHA, said: "Alcohol's current exemption from food and drink labelling rules is absurd.

"Shoppers who buy milk or orange juice have sugar content and nutritional information right at their fingertips.

"But this information is not required when it comes to alcohol – a product not just fuelling obesity but with widespread health harms and linked to seven types of cancer.

"The government must publish its planned consultation on alcohol labelling without further delay – which we have been waiting for since 2020.

"As well as calorie labelling and nutritional information, we need prominent health warnings and the UK chief medical officers' low-risk weekly drinking guidelines on labels. Studies suggest that this could help reduce alcohol harm by increasing knowledge of the health risks and prompting behaviour change."

Alison Douglas, the chief executive of Alcohol Focus Scotland, added: "Alcohol labelling is woefully inadequate in this country and allows the alcohol industry to decide what information it will and won't include on its products, despite alcohol claiming the lives of 70 people a day in the UK.

"The alcohol industry have dragged their feet for long enough – unless labelling requirements are set out in law, we will continue to be kept in the dark about what is in our drinks.

"People want and need reliable information directly on bottles and cans, where it can usefully inform their decisions."

Sky News, 16 February 2022