The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter

Photograph: Getty Images

America's coast guard boarded a vessel off **Venezuela's** coast, days after Donald Trump ordered a "complete blockade" of oil tankers under sanctions that enter or leave the country. Kristi Noem, America's secretary of homeland security, said the ship was "operating as part of the Venezuelan shadow fleet to traffic stolen oil". Earlier this month America seized another tanker near Venezuela.

Democrats criticised the Trump administration after America's **Department of Justice** removed 16 photos from a set of files related to Jeffrey Epstein, a convicted sex offender who died in 2019. The DOJ released the trove of documents on Friday; on Saturday several images from it were deleted without explanation, including one that featured Mr Trump.

American and **Russian** officials met in Florida for talks over ending the war in Ukraine. Kirill Dmitriev, Vladimir Putin's special envoy, said that discussions were "proceeding constructively" and would continue on Sunday. Earlier Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, said America had proposed trilateral talks with Ukraine and Russia in Florida. European officials could also take part.

Russia stepped up attacks on **Ukraine's** Black Sea coast, targeting the port of Pivdennyi and infrastructure in the Odessa region. The assault damaged reservoirs and a bridge linking the area to Moldova, disrupting trade and energy supplies. Ukraine, meanwhile, said it used drones to strike a Russian oil rig operated by Lukoil in the Caspian Sea.

Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, plans to brief **Donald Trump** on options for new strikes on Iran, according to NBC News. Israeli officials believe Iran is rebuilding its ballistic-missile programme after it was hit by Israeli and American strikes earlier this year. Mr Netanyahu is expected to raise the issue at talks with Mr Trump later this month in Florida.

Delaware's Supreme Court reinstated a $56bn pay package for **Elon Musk**, boss of Tesla, an electric-car maker, after a seven-year legal fight. In 2024 a judge found that the world's richest person had improperly influenced board members who came up with the record compensation. The high court found that Mr Musk is entitled to a stock-based compensation plan worth $140bn.

Nawaf Salam, **Lebanon's** prime minister, said the country was close to completing the disarmament of **Hizbullah**, an Iran-backed militia, south of the Litani river in southern Lebanon. The move is a condition of a ceasefire with Israel and has a deadline of the end of the year. Efforts to disarm Hizbullah have been hampered by Israeli air strikes and the group's refusal to fully give up its weapons.

A **Pakistani court** sentenced **Imran Khan**, a former prime minister, and his wife, Bushra Bibi, to 17 years in prison each. The couple were convicted of buying luxury gifts at heavily discounted prices, causing losses to the state. The sentence will begin after Mr Khan completes an earlier prison term. He denies the charges, which his party says are politically motivated.

Word of the year: slop, once a term for watery gruel, it has become shorthand for the AI-generated rubbish clogging the internet —from fake videos to autogenerated articles. Read the full story.

Illustration:

Love in the time of artificial-intelligence bots

We are looking back on 2025. Today, artificial intelligence

Singlehood has been rising across the rich world. Many singletons say they are happy. But surveys suggest that a large share are not. Increasingly, the lonely and frustrated have sought companionship with AI chatbots—7% of young singles say they would consider a robo-romance.

A robo-partner has its pluses. Unlike humans, bots are endlessly acquiescent. (They won't make you watch "The Lord of the Rings", again, on Christmas day.) And this year large language models have become better than ever at mimicking human emotion. Users are flocking to them. Character.AI, a chatbot that offers distinct personalities, has gained 20m monthly users. Maoxiang, China's biggest companion bot, has around 1.2m. Elon Musk's xAI has launched Ani and Valentine, two flirtatious love-bots.

Critics warn that such relationships create impossible expectations for human ones. But bots may offer the lonely a kind of intimacy they cannot find elsewhere. In an increasingly atomised world, that is no small thing.
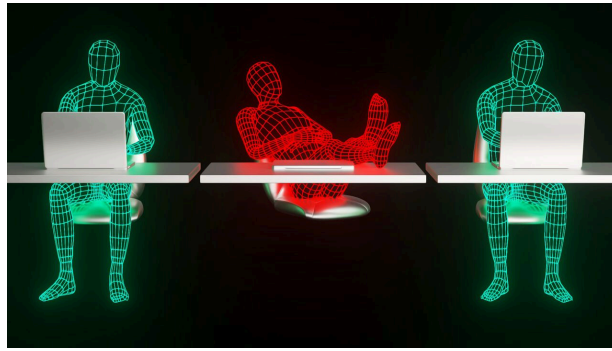
Illustration: Timo Lenzen

Tidings of joyless-corporate adoption

Three years into the generative-AI wave, demand for the technology looks tepid. A recent survey found that only 11% of Americans were using it at work, down from recent peaks. Tech firms plan to spend some $5trn on AI infrastructure over the next five years, an amount which will require $650bn a year in revenue to justify—around 13 times today's sum. Without rapid and wholesale adoption of AI, those returns will remain out of reach.

What's behind the slow uptake? Some point to economic uncertainty—businesses may be feeling more frugal. Others point to the AI models themselves, which may just not be good enough yet. Others still blame managers, who may be bad at encouraging their use.

History teaches that technology adoption spreads in fits and starts. Still, the current plateau suggests that AI's economic pay-off will arrive more slowly, more unevenly and at greater cost than the investment boom would imply.

Photograph: Magnum Photos

New models to predict the weather

Weather is notoriously hard to predict. Small changes in conditions can have disproportionate effects. Climate change is making weather even more volatile, meaning forecasting is harder than ever. This year, artificial intelligence has shown it can help.

The Indian monsoon, which brings three-quarters of the country's rainfall each year, is essential for its agriculture. For decades the government has used numerical weather models running on supercomputers for forecasting. These offered broad guidance a month ahead of a weather event, but nothing detailed beyond five days. This year India used AI models trained on historical weather records. The models were able to predict rainfall 30 days in advance, and also forecast a mid-season stall that numerical models missed. Almost half the farmers said the information influenced what they planted and when.

AI models can also run on laptops, meaning they could be deployed easily elsewhere. Indeed, India's success has already inspired similar projects in Africa and Bangladesh.
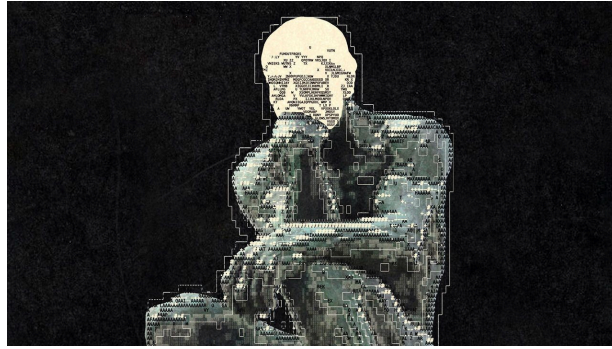
Illustration: enigmatriz

Does AI make you stupid?

Technology has freed people from much mental labour. Calculators saved them from doing sums in their heads. Navigation apps removed the need for map-reading. Now AI promises to lighten mental loads further still.

But some research suggests it might affect cognition in a different way to older technologies. In July researchers at MIT found that students with access to AI used their brains less than those without when writing essays. They were also less able to recall details about the task. Another study found that heavy AI users scored lower on critical-thinking assessments.

This could simply mean that people with greater critical faculties are less likely to rely on AI. But researchers say that the technology might encourage "mental offloading" in general, which may lead to long-term critical-thinking decay. There is currently little evidence that any damage is lasting. But the technology is new, and humans don't yet rely on it for every mental task. That is changing fast.

*Reserving judgments is a matter
of infinite hope.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald