

The Watchman

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Wednesday briefing: What Ofgem's prepayment meter restrictions really mean

Nimo Omer, 19/4/23

Good morning. Energy companies have been the focus of criticism after stories about firms forcibly installing prepayment meters in the homes of vulnerable customers came to light. They say they have no choice; that this practice is a last resort aimed at customers who are not engaging with them and racking up unsustainable debts. But some see it as a covert way to disconnect people from the grid. Since 2009, energy companies have not been allowed to disconnect pensioners or people living with under-18s in the coldest months of the year – prepayment meters are viewed as a way for companies to get around this problem, claiming that the

consumer is making a choice if they do not top up. In February, after months of pressure, Ofgem announced a temporary blanket ban on energy firms forcibly installing prepayment meters. This week Ofgem said that when that ban is lifted, firms will still be barred from installing them in the homes of customers over 85 and other vulnerable groups. The regulator also announced that representatives from the energy companies will have to make at least 10 attempts to contact a customer, conduct a “site welfare visit” and wear body cameras as part of a new code of conduct. Is this enough? Campaigners argue the new measures do not offer protection to all and the Liberal Democrats have called the guidelines “woefully insufficient”. I spoke to Guardian business correspondent Alex Lawson about what this all means in practice. That's right after the headlines. Five big stories US news | Fox is to pay the voting technology firm Dominion US\$787.5m in a settlement to avoid a high-profile

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defamation trial. The deal was announced just before opening statements were due to be delivered in the Delaware supreme court and has ended the dispute over whether Fox News and its parent company knowingly broadcast false allegations that Dominion was involved in a plot to steal the 2020 election. Politics | Rishi Sunak is under investigation by the parliamentary watchdog over a potential failure to declare his wife's stake in a childcare company in six ministerial registers. If the inquiry finds that he has breached the code of conduct for MPs, Sunak could be ordered to apologise to the House of Commons. Russia | Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich has had his appeal rejected and will be held in detention before his trial in May on charges of espionage. Gershkovich is the first US journalist to be detained in Russia on espionage charges since the end of the cold war and, if found guilty, could face up to 20 years in prison. Foreign policy | James Cleverly has told the Guardian

that Britain should not "pull the shutters down" on China as it would be damaging to the national interest, arguing that the UK's approach needs to be more nuanced. Health | Research has found that up to one in 20 new diabetes cases could be related to Covid infection. While lifestyle factors like being overweight or obese continue to be the main driver for the increase, this data is the latest evidence that the pandemic may be contributing to a rapidly escalating diabetes crisis. In depth: 'The stakes could not be higher' Photograph: Libby Welch/AlamyAt the start of the year, energy companies were facing concerted opposition from both charities and politicians, following a winter of soaring energy bills that left many people living in cold, damp homes, which for vulnerable people could have deadly consequences. "The stakes could not be higher," Alex says.As energy bills rose, many people could not keep up – according to the End Fuel Poverty Coalition, 29% of the population is in debt to their energy firm and last year

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600,000 people were forced to switch to prepayment meters after struggling to pay their bills – up from 380,000 in 2021. “Against all that backdrop the government effectively did very little – Grant Shapps wrote to suppliers saying, ‘Make sure that you’re checking if you are installing prepayment meters [PPMs] into people’s homes that they’re not vulnerable’ and Ofgem made similar noises,” Alex says. Ofgem finally announced bans on installing PPMs under a warrant after an investigation by the Times revealed how debt agencies that were working for British Gas were ignoring signs of vulnerability or knowingly installing prepayment meters in the homes of vulnerable customers. Who is exempt from PPMs? Energy suppliers have agreed to a ban on prepayment meters being involuntarily installed in the homes of “high-risk” customers, which includes over-85s who do not have support in their homes, anyone with a terminal illness and those who rely on a continuous energy supply to

power medical equipment. People with health conditions that can be aggravated by living in a cold home are also exempt. Then there is the second “medium-risk” group who are not completely protected from forced prepayment meters. Instead energy firms will have to assess them on a case-by-case basis – this includes those who are 75 to 84 years old, people living with children under five, those with serious health conditions like Parkinson’s, cerebral palsy and mobility issues, as well as people with certain mental health conditions. And there are those exempt for temporary situations like pregnancy or bereavement. It seems like a pretty comprehensive list but campaigners have said it does not go far enough considering the number of vulnerable people struggling with bills. And then there is the question of whether these companies will be able to properly assess if someone has a health condition. “The responsibility for identifying those health conditions, and then

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monitoring them, appears to lie with the energy companies,” Alex says. “So what they’re going to need to do is either retrain or employ people who can assess a medical condition when they go on these trips to the house,” which is a significant expense in an industry that is not in a great financial state. “Although we see lots of headlines about energy companies making lots of money, that typically tends to be in the production businesses or if they’re electricity generators, rather than the retail energy business,” he adds. “I’m not saying that there isn’t some money to be made, but for retail it’s not the billions that we’ve seen in some of the headlines.” What’s next? A key criticism of these new rules is that they are voluntary and even though Ofgem will begin a consultation on making the voluntary part of the guidelines part of suppliers’ licence conditions (so that they can be fined or have their licence revoked), the underlying problem remains that these companies are difficult to

police from the outside. Ofgem has said it will not lift the ban until it is happy with each supplier’s approach. This would include a comprehensive audit to make sure they haven’t wrongfully installed prepayment meters and where they have, they would need to compensate the customer and take them off the meter. “I think what they’ll do is a sort of case-by-case situation, so each supplier proves that they can be trusted,” Alex says. “It’s important to say that you can still elect to be on a prepayment meter and some people say they are useful for budgeting and that prepayment meters are a good way of keeping track of [household finances].” The new guidelines deal with the most egregious forms of forcible installation of prepayment meters but ultimately do not offer people guaranteed access to energy. “This is a big deal, but it could be bigger,” Alex says. What else we’ve been reading Coronation keepsakes in Windsor. Photograph: Maureen McLean/Rex/Shutterstock

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Here's Marina Hyde on the naturally bizarre run-up to King Charles's coronation: from £50 commemorative tankards to quiche discourse to "4,000 articles about the attendance or non-attendance of a couple of guests". Charlie Lindlar, deputy production editor As part of the Guardian's Cotton Capital series, Simon Hattenstone's story on the origins of the Manchester City and Manchester United logos is fascinating and incisive. "The ship has nothing to do with football and everything to do with the business from which Manchester made its money. The product of slavery became so subtly embedded in our culture that we celebrated it in our club badges even without realising it," he writes. Nimo For the Guardian's What makes me happy now series, acclaimed author Curtis Sittenfeld writes on falling hopelessly in love with her "brave, beautiful and occasionally malodorous" pandemic companion: Weenie the rescue chihuahua. Charlie Vaping was supposed to be a safe alternative to smoking but for Imogen West-Knights, it's

just given her a new expensive addiction. Nimo "I'm ready to be cancelled," Arwa Mahdawi bravely declares, as she argues that perhaps, maybe, it could be said that Succession is a touch overrated. "It is the same old story over and over again: rich people backstabbing rich people and swearing a lot as they wallow in opulent misery." Charlie skip past newsletter promotion Sign up to First Edition Free daily newsletter Archie Bland and Nimo Omer take you through the top stories and what they mean, free every weekday morning Privacy Notice: Newsletters may contain info about charities, online ads, and content funded by outside parties. For more information see our Privacy Policy. We use Google reCaptcha to protect our website and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply. after newsletter promotion Sport Real Madrid players celebrate after Rodrygo scored their second goal at a UEFA Champions League quarter-final second leg match. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/The Guardian Football

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| Real Madrid beat Chelsea 2-0 in last night's Champions League match at Stamford Bridge. "It was a night when Chelsea were heavy on perspiration, low on inspiration, Lampard's lineup lacking the X factor, which is quite the oddity given the £550m lavished on new players by the ownership since their installation last May," writes David Hytner. Meanwhile, Milan reached the Champions League semi-finals for the first time in 16 years after standing firm in their match against Napoli and drawing 1-1. Boxing | UK Anti-Doping has confirmed that Conor Benn has been provisionally suspended after failing two voluntary drug tests last year. The ruling has serious ramifications for any British boxing licence-holder who had been planning to be involved in Benn's next bout outside the UK. Snooker | World Snooker Tour head Barry Hearn has said that activists who disrupt sporting events should be jailed after a Just Stop Oil protester threw a packet of orange powder over a snooker table at the World

Snooker Championship. Hearn predicts that there will be further incidents at Wimbledon and the Open unless Britain became less of a "soft touch as a nation". The front pages The Guardian's print edition this morning leads with "UK must not 'pull shutters down on China', Cleverly warns Tories". "NHS targets will return if Starmer becomes PM" says the i while the Daily Telegraph has "The NHS is broken, declares Starmer". Better health news in the Times: "Soup and shake diet can reverse diabetes" (of the type 2, err, type ...). "You're paying the price of rise in fat cat salaries!" – the Daily Express blames "town hall chiefs" for rising council taxes. "When WILL someone get a grip on the eco fanatics?", asks the Daily Mail, after the snooker was disrupted, about which the Sun says "As student Edred, son of a mega-rich investor, ruins the snooker, MPs demand TOFF JUSTICE". "Killer knives: Five Tory promises ... still kids die" says the Daily Mirror about what it calls the "'Zombie' blades betrayal" – the paper,

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and victims' families, say that despite promised bans not enough has been done. "How was sleepover psychopath labelled low risk?", asks the Metro, about Damien Bendall being released only to kill his pregnant partner along with three children. The top story in the Financial Times is "Goldman hit by trading slowdown as retail reversal drives costs higher". Today in Focus Photograph: ReutersThe court case pushing Indian democracy to the brinkCritics have long accused Narendra Modi of eroding the world's biggest democracy. Now, ahead of next year's general election, his main political rival could be jailed – for defaming the name Modi. What's going on?Cartoon of the day | Martin Rowson Illustration: Martin Rowson/The GuardianThe UpsideA bit of good news to remind you that the world's not all badVolunteers working to create Great Avon Wood. Photograph: Alexander TurnerMany of us have baked a cake from scratch, or assembled some flat-pack furniture from scratch, but

what about a forest? The Bristol charity Forest of Avon Trust is doing just that, on 40 hectares (100 acres) of farmland in Somerset, partnering with Avon Needs Trees. The goal is to plant 40,000 trees over three years, with the help of almost 500 volunteers. They are putting a mix of 30 kinds of native tree species – from hazel to hawthorn to pedunculate oak – in the ground, creating a forest that can be home to creatures such as kites, kestrels, barn owls and butterflies. Photographer and writer Alexander Turner documents the process in this photo essay for the series The age of extinction. Sign up here for a weekly roundup of The Upside, sent to you every SundayBored at work?And finally, the Guardian's puzzles are here to keep you entertained throughout the day – with plenty more on the Guardian's Puzzles app for iOS and Android. Until tomorrow. Quick crossword Cryptic crossword Wordiply

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Book Review: Caliban's War - James S. A. Corey

@edent, 19/4/23

After finding the first Expanse book mildly interesting, I was badgered into reading the sequel. It isn't good. The first book made for some interesting "engineering" sci-fi. What would it take to travel at excess g-force? What are the practical implications of living on a low-gravity moon? That kind of thing. But it was let down by being a mish-mash of recycled plots - big evil corporations, vomit zombies, hard-bitten alcoholic detectives. Yawn. The sequel is, basically, Mass Effect without the charm. It's just trope after clichéd trope. The authors have belatedly realised that women exist. So we get Private Vasquez from Aliens and a weary-comedy-grandma to even out the gender balance. We get taken on a series of self-contained levels. Find the thing, walk through the corridor, shoot the baddies,

have some forced banter with your team-mates, exit. Repeat. You've played this game a hundred times before. The political machinations are a child's view of what grown-ups do. The characters rarely do anything unexpected. Oh, and the cliff-hanger at the end is totally unearned. I'm not trying to be contrarian. This is sci-fi which would have been stale 50 years ago. There's so much brilliant original sci-fi out there - tackling big ideas in new and unexpected ways - go read that instead.

curl speaks HTTP/2 with proxy

Daniel Stenberg, 14/4/23

In September 2013 we merged the first code into curl that made it capable of using HTTP/2: HTTP version 2. This version of HTTP changed a lot of previous presumptions when it comes to transfers, which introduced quite a few challenges to HTTP stack authors all of the world. One of them being that with version 2 there can be more than one

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transfer using the same connection where as up to that point we had always just had one transfer per connection. In May 2015 the spec was published. 2023 Now almost eight years since the RFC was published, HTTP/2 is the version seen most frequently in browser responses if we ask the Firefox telemetry data. 44.4% of the responses are HTTP/2. curl This year, the curl project has been sponsored by the Sovereign Tech Fund, and one of the projects this funding has covered is what I am here to talk about: Speaking HTTP/2 with a proxy. More specifically with what is commonly referred to as a “forward proxy.” Many organizations and companies have setups like the one illustrated in this image below. The user on the left is inside the organization network A and the website they want to reach is on the outside on network B. HTTP/2 to the proxy When this is an HTTPS proxy, meaning that the communication to and with the proxy is itself protected with TLS, curl and libcurl are now capable of negotiating

HTTP/2 with it. It might not seem like a big deal to most people, and maybe it is not, but the introduction of this feature comes after some rather heavy lifting and internal refactors over the recent months that have enabled the rearrangement of networking components for this purpose. Enable To enable this feature in your libcurl-using application, you first need to make sure you use libcurl 8.1.0 when it ships in mid May and then you need to set the proxy type to `CURLPROXY_HTTPS2`. In plain C code it could look like this: `curl_easy_setopt(handle, CURLOPT_PROXYTYPE, CURLPROXY_HTTPS2); curl_easy_setopt(handle, CURLOPT_PROXY, "https://hostname");` This allows HTTP/2 but will proceed with plain old HTTP/1 if it can't negotiate the higher protocol version using ALPN. The old proxy type called just `CURLPROXY_HTTPS` remains for asking libcurl to stick to HTTP/1 when talking to the proxy. We decided to introduce a new option for this simply because we anticipate

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that there will be proxies out there that will not work correctly so we cannot throw this feature at users without them asking for it. command line tool Using the command line tool, you use a HTTPS proxy exactly like before and then you add this flag to tell the tool that it may try HTTP/2 with the proxy: `--proxy-http2`. This also happens to be curl's 251st command line option. Shipping and credits This implementation has been done by Stefan Eissing. These features have already landed in the master branch and will be part of the pending curl 8.1.0 release, scheduled for release on May 17, 2023.

filtered version of Common Crawl that's often used for training large language models. They include a neat interactive tool for searching a domain to see if it's included - TIL that simonwillison.net is the 106,649th ranked site in C4 by number of tokens, 189,767 total - 0.0001% of the total token volume in C4.

Inside the secret list of websites that make AI chatbots sound smart

Simon Willison, 19/4/23

Inside the secret list of websites that make AI chatbots sound smart Washington Post story digging into the C4 dataset - Colossal Clean Crawled Corpus, a