

Social Justice Watch 0513

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Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz, Queens Borough President Sharon Lee
and the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence

PRESENT

VIRTUAL TOWNHALL

DOMESTIC

VIOLENCE

RESOURCES

DURING COVID-19

Thursday, May 14, 2020

11:00 AM - 12:30 PM

Learn about Queens resources for survivors
of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

PRESENTERS:

Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence
Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz
Queens Borough President Sharon Lee
Safe Horizon
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*alone.***

RSVP by **Tuesday, May 12** at
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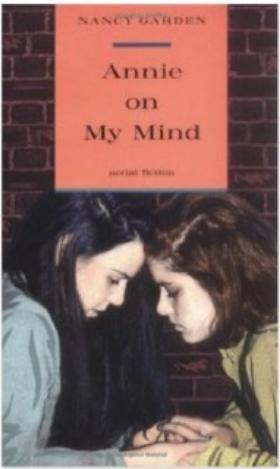


Non-participants can tune-in via
live stream at www.queensbp.org



Mayor's Office to
End Domestic and
Gender-Based Violence

OFFICE OF THE
QUEENS BOROUGH PRESIDENT
CITY OF NEW YORK



Annie on My Mind

by Nancy Garden

★★★★★ 3.98 · Rating details · 39,850 ratings · 1,962 reviews

This groundbreaking book is the story of two teenage girls whose friendship blossoms into love and who, despite pressures from family and school that threaten their relationship, promise to be true to each other and their feelings. The book has been banned from many school libraries and publicly burned in Kansas City.

Want to Read

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Preview

Of the author and the book, the Margaret A. Edwards Award committee said, “Using a fluid, readable style, Garden opens a window through which readers can find courage to be true to themselves.” (less)

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Siddharth

@DearthOfSid



Men whine about "feminazis" essentially because equality feels like oppression to the oppressor. They define a "moderate" and an "extremist" feminist to discourage women from identifying as feminists. The "moderate" feminist has to disown the word and prove she doesn't hate men.

1:58 AM · 01 Nov 19 · Twitter for Android

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The assumption that boys are more likely to be adept at math and science than girls has no foundation in the brain, according to a new study. It is the first to look at human neurobiology to try and understand whether supposed gender differences in mathematical ability are grounded in biology.

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Inverse

A tired stereotype about men and women's brains has been debunked No, the sexes are not hard-wired to process mathematical information differently, scientists say.

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A convicted felon builds a feminist movement from behind bars at an all-male prison in Soledad, California.

www.cnn.com/videos/us/2018/04/18/the-feminist-on-cellblock-y-doc-orig.cnn

telegra.ph/Chaguan-04-28

Telegraph

The push to raise China's age of consent from 14 Chinese society is locked in a dispiriting argument, worthy of a more callous age. The public is debating whether a 14-year-old girl was a victim of rape by her wealthy guardian—three decades her senior—or a willing partner, trading sex for gifts and attention....

telegra.ph/China-Coronavirus-How-Misinformation-Spreads-on-Twitter-04-28

Telegraph

China Coronavirus: How Misinformation Spreads on Twitter

A few minutes before 11 p.m. on January 20, Eric Feigl-Ding was pretty much just another guy on the internet. Sure, he is a Harvard-affiliated public-health researcher who lives in Washington, D.C., and has multiple degrees, but his Twitter account was nothing...

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Telegraph

Dirty money piling up in L.A. as coronavirus cripples international money laundering

Dirty money is piling up in Los Angeles. In the last three weeks, federal agents made three seizures that each netted more than \$1 million in suspected drug proceeds. The reason, according to the city's top drug enforcement official: The

coronavirus pandemic...

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不论是兴高采烈地布置婴儿房，还是平静又期待地织着婴儿袜底，关于怀孕的一切似乎总是幸福而温馨的。而患有产前抑郁的孕妇所经受的煎熬，时常不为人知——孕期荷尔蒙的影响带来剧烈的情绪波动，对孩子满怀厌恨又抱有愧疚，未知的境况下内心的矛盾和挣扎从不停歇，与此同时还要应付不知情的善意祝福。

“这九个月，本该是自己人生中最快乐的时光，却一直在忧虑、憎恨你的孩子，无法倾诉，也难以承认。”

“我们需要接受并正视：不是所有人在怀孕期间都欢天喜地。我可以因为得了产前抑郁而责怪自己，但的确，这是一种疾病。我没有选择患上它，而是它选择了折磨我。”

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Ted

Confessions of a bad feminist

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telegra.ph/Why-American-Students-Havent-Gotten-Better-at-Reading-in-20-Years-05-07-2

Telegraph

Why American Students Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years

Schools usually focus on teaching comprehension skills instead of general knowledge—even though education researchers know better. NATALIE WEXLER APRIL 13, 2018

The Half of It: <https://www.netflix.com/title/81005150>

Director Interview:

<https://www.facebook.com/thecommonwealthclub/videos/1126332294367190/>
Netflix

The Half Of It | Netflix Official Site

When smart but cash-strapped teen Ellie Chu agrees to write a love letter for a jock, she doesn't expect to become his friend — or fall for his crush.

分享一段黃阿麗Ali Wong的有声书，讨论她生完孩子放弃做全职妈妈的心路历程。Ali曾经最大的梦想就是做全职主妇，她甚至提前排好了每天的日程。可等到孩子出生，她才遭受到现实的痛击，那些名人ins里营造的一切都是虚幻，而最重要的是她需要自己挣钱。。。行文和舞台上的Ali一样风趣老辣，但会更深刻地体会到生育女性在事业和家庭上的两难，太难了。

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China Coronavirus: How Misinformation Spreads on Twitter

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Carlos Garcia Rawlins / Reuters

A few minutes before 11 p.m. on January 20, Eric Feigl-Ding was pretty much just another guy on the internet. Sure, he is a Harvard-affiliated public-health researcher who lives in Washington, D.C., and has multiple degrees, but his Twitter account was nothing special. He had about 2,000 followers—a modest count on a scale that reaches into the millions—and his average tweet got about one retweet and five likes.

That all changed when Feigl-Ding read a paper about the new coronavirus spreading out of Wuhan, China, and spotted an eye-popping stat. The paper estimated that the virus's contagiousness, which is captured in a variable called R₀, was 3.8—meaning that every person who caught the disease would give it to almost 4 other people. The paper cautioned that there was “considerable uncertainty associated with the outbreak,” but Feigl-Ding still worried that such a highly transmissible disease would be a key ingredient in the recipe for a major

pandemic. “I read that 3.8 value and I was like: ‘Oh my gosh!’” he told me. “I tweeted it out.”

That’s an understatement. “HOLY MOTHER OF GOD—the new coronavirus is a 3.8!!!” Feigl-Ding’s tweet read. “How bad is that reproductive R0 value? It is thermonuclear pandemic level bad—never seen an actual virality coefficient outside of Twitter in my entire career. I’m not exaggerating.” During the next five minutes, Feigl-Ding put together a thread on Twitter, mostly quoting the paper itself, that declared we were “faced with the most virulent virus epidemic the world has ever seen.”

Read: [The deceptively simple number sparking coronavirus fears](#)

Twitter ate it up. Many people seemed to be experiencing the outbreak, especially from afar, as some kind of distributed movie, watched in grainy cellphone videos sent out of China and populated by Twitter heads filling in the backstory. The thread soon had thousands of retweets. Feigl-Ding’s account was flooded with new followers. Here was a Harvard epidemiologist naming the world’s darkest fear about the new disease and confirming it.

Yet there were issues with Feigl-Ding’s analysis, even if they were not immediately apparent to the people simply scrolling through Twitter. The thread exemplified a deep problem on Twitter: The most extreme statements can be far more amplified than more measured messages. In the information sphere, while public-health researchers are doing their best to distribute scientific evidence, viral Twitter threads, context-free videos, and even conspiracy theories are reaching far more people.

The coronavirus outbreak is a serious public-health problem. Although reports began to surface in early January, the Chinese government massively escalated its response last week, calling for an unprecedented quarantine of tens of millions of people. The outbreak struck within a fraught set of geopolitical circumstances. There is the history of the respiratory illness SARS. There is the uncertainty about how transparent the factions of the Chinese government are being about the severity of the outbreak. There is the sheer size of China—and the appearance of the disease in the weeks leading up to the new year, which sends hundreds of millions of people traveling across the country. And, of course, there is global competition between the U.S. and China, which provides

a little extra incentive (and prospective attention) for Americans on Twitter trying to garner an audience.

Most Americans cannot read Chinese, nor are they present in large numbers on Chinese social-media sites such as Weibo and WeChat. The internet has fractured over the past decade, with American and Chinese social-media companies carving up distinct parts of the world. While that makes it difficult for many Americans to parse what's happening on Chinese social media, it also creates an opportunity for people who are tapped in on both sides. They can arbitrage from the Chinese to the American internet, turning WeChat videos into Twitter gold. Accounts big and small have whipped up quite an apocalyptic fervor in the past weeks, posting scary videos of dubious provenance and veracity. The mainstream media has proceeded carefully, and reporters' stories have seemingly been unable to satiate the rising hunger for more information about coronavirus.

This was the ecosystem in which Feigl-Ding's thread landed. No wonder it took off. Unfortunately, there were some mistakes. While Feigl-Ding included quotes and screenshots of the paper, which was preliminary and not peer-reviewed, he omitted some context, primarily that other infectious diseases such as measles also have very high R₀ numbers. He also made a clear error: "Ding claimed that the new virus was eight times as infectious as SARS, when in fact SARS had an R₀ ranging from 2 to 5, very comparable with these estimates for the new coronavirus," the science journalist Ferris Jabr, who watched Feigl-Ding's thread wing around the internet that Friday night, told me. Feigl-Ding deleted the SARS tweet once he realized the mistake.

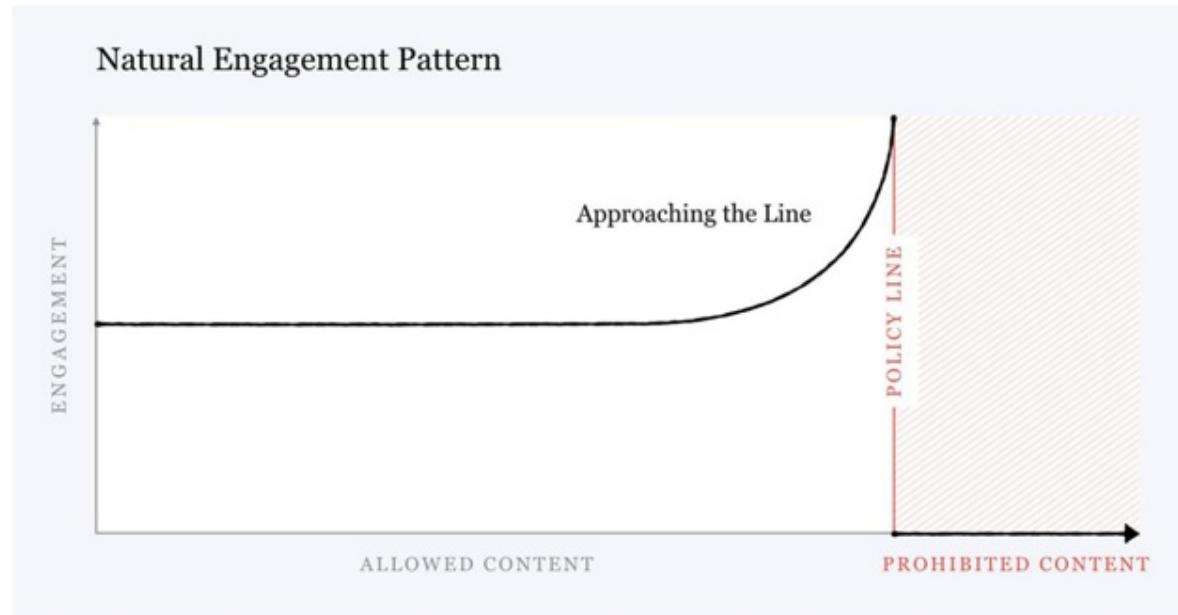
Read: [The dangerous myth of America's ebola panic](#)

The problems didn't end there, though. Feigl-Ding hadn't known that by the time he tweeted about the paper, the researchers had already lowered their estimate to 2.5. And R₀, for that matter, is not the be-all and end-all of the danger of a virus. Some highly transmissible diseases are not actually that dangerous. Other experts chimed in to chide his characterizations (and some of his Harvard colleagues talked directly to him, he told me). One epidemiologist, Michael Bazaco, quote-tweeted Feigl-Ding and proclaimed, "This is fearmongering hyperbole, and borderline public health malpractice." The tone was clearly not straight out of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nor was the form of the tweets.

When Jabr began to add up all the issues, he realized that he should create his own corrective thread. “I decided to counter with a thread that filled in the missing context and collated some of the known facts at the time, along with their sources,” he said. “By the next morning, both our threads had been amplified, but his had still been RTed and liked at least twice as many times.”

By the time of this writing, Feigl-Ding’s thread has roughly triple the likes and retweets of Jabr’s. This is one of the realities of the current information ecosystem: While out-and-out conspiracies and hoaxes will draw some attention, it’s really the stuff that’s close to the boundaries of discourse that grabs the most eyeballs. That is, the information that’s plausible, and that fits into a narrative mounting outside the mainstream, gets the most clicks, likes, and retweets. Bonus points if it’s sensational or something that someone might want to censor. After all, which is more interesting: “HOLY MOTHER OF GOD,” or “the essential data are still being collected and assessed,” as Jabr ended his thread?

In 2018, after years of research into the trouble Facebook was having moderating material on its platform, the company’s CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, identified a dark pattern in Facebook’s data concerning what he called “borderline content”—stuff that was almost prohibited by Facebook, but not quite. He made this chart.



Facebook

Feigl-Ding’s tweets seem to approach the line of what professional ethics would

permit public-health authorities to say. He certainly wasn't endorsing full-on conspiracy theories about bioweapons and zombies, as some people have suggested during the coronavirus outbreak. But he also was far from the calm, slow-down-there stance of the majority of other officials. And, of course, that's what made his message so irresistible.

Twitter has made some effort to slow the spread of misinformation on its platform. Searches for *coronavirus* now produce a link to the CDC with the message "Know the facts."

Feigl-Ding, for his part, admits that he wishes he'd worded things a little differently. "I really wish Twitter was like Facebook and you could edit," he told me. Since his thread went big, he's moderated the tone of his tweets considerably and hewed closer to the public-health consensus on how to describe the situation.

Still, Feigl-Ding is just one guy on the internet. Many people have been tweeting into the borderline space, and not everyone shows signs of remorse.

Misinformation has always been an element of people's response to disease; we didn't have to wait around for social media to be invented to spread rumors or contest facts. But the fundamental difference today is the scope and speed by which social-media platforms enable this to happen—and the strangeness of the information networks that are formed in crisis.

One user in particular, @howroute, has had tremendously viral tweets about the terrible danger the world faces. These have drawn more likes and retweets than anything from Feigl-Ding or Jabr. One shows people in hazmat suits on an airplane. "BREAKING NEWS: This is not a scene from some apocalyptic horror movie, this is a #coronavirus outbreak in China," @howroute posted. The tweet has been retweeted and liked about 50,000 times. "The SARS like virus has already spread to four countries and infected more than 1700 people. US airports are monitored. Be on alert, stay safe!"

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The account has also posted videos supposedly showing people dead in the hallways of hospitals and someone twitching under a hospital sheet. Most of the videos seem to be real, but the context is missing. Within the apocalyptic frame

that they've been given, they are terrifying.

The name on the account is Max Howroute, but I've been unable to find any person by that name in public-records searches. There's no record of Max Howroute working at a publication or producing work other than some satirical YouTube videos, yet the account describes Howroute as a "journalist." Before the Wuhan crisis, @howroute had mostly posted anti-Trump memes. Since the viral hit, the account has gone all in, tweeting completely context-free videos and charging its critics with being Chinese Communist Party trolls. "You're liar and I will report you to Twitter," @howroute tweeted at the Hong Kong dissident artist Badiucao. "You're obviously new here. I'm one of the most trusted sources on coronavirus reporting on Twitter. How dare are you to question my reporting!!"

It's not clear what @howroute is doing, or who is responsible. The account—it often posts using *we*—has not responded to my requests for an interview, and studiously maintains that everything it has posted has been verified. According to fact-checking by *BuzzFeed*'s Jane Lytvynenko, that is not true.

Is @howroute someone seeking global attention, someone who believes what they are doing is righteous, someone who's simply an exploitative grifter? Perhaps the only clear thing about the account is that it has shaped the online conversation about the coronavirus outbreak, regardless of its intentions. It may be that @howroute is "one of the most trusted sources on coronavirus reporting on Twitter," which is exactly the problem. Some entity with no discernible knowledge about China, epidemiology, or infectious disease, working from a pseudonymous account, has become a leading source for people across the world about a global pandemic.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

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Dirty money piling up in L.A. as coronavirus cripples international money laundering

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Dirty money is piling up in Los Angeles. In the last three weeks, federal agents made three seizures that each netted more than \$1 million in suspected drug proceeds.

The reason, according to the city's top drug enforcement official: The coronavirus pandemic has slowed trade-based money laundering systems that drug trafficking groups use to repatriate profits and move Chinese capital into Southern California.

With storefronts closed, supply chains in disarray and the global economy in peril, these complex schemes are hobbled and cash is backing up in Los Angeles, Bill Bodner, special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement

Administration's Los Angeles field division, said in an interview.

The recent million-dollar interceptions were reminiscent of seizures the DEA made before drug traffickers embraced trade-based money laundering, said Bodner, a 28-year agent.

The shuttering of nonessential businesses has made a “tremendous impact” on a money laundering system dubbed the black market peso exchange, he said. In the fashion district in downtown Los Angeles — the exchange’s epicenter — drug trafficking groups from throughout the country use wholesalers to remit profits to Mexico, according to cases filed in federal courts in Los Angeles and elsewhere.



Steven Mygrant, a federal prosecutor in Oregon who charged six people with laundering heroin proceeds through Los Angeles businesses, said two primary factors drive the exchange: Drug trafficking groups need to convert dollars to

pesos, which is expensive to do legitimately, and they need to move money from the United States to Mexico, which is risky to transport in cash.

To accomplish this, Mygrant said, a broker pays pesos for the drug traffickers' dollars. The traffickers deliver cash to an exporter in Los Angeles, who ships goods — commonly clothing, cosmetics, jewelry or sportswear — to a retailer in Mexico. The retailer sells the goods for pesos and pays the broker.

Developed by Colombian cocaine traffickers, Mexican cartels initially did not embrace the black market peso exchange, Bodner said, finding it easier to simply smuggle bulk cash across the border and launder it in Mexico. That changed about 10 years ago, he said, when the Mexican government tightened financial regulations and restricted the flow of dollars into its banks.

California Man charged with trafficking millions of dollars worth of drugs via tunnel from Mexico



California Man charged with trafficking millions of dollars worth of drugs via tunnel from Mexico Rogelio Flores Guzman, a Mexican national with legal U.S.

residency, was charged Friday with trafficking five types of drugs.

Recently, with storefronts closed and agents seizing millions in cash packaged for transport, it appears drug trafficking groups are resorting to older, riskier ways of repatriating profits, Bodner said.

The coronavirus has also cooled Chinese capital flight, he said, which before the pandemic was the primary driver of international money laundering.

With the Chinese government curtailing the amount of money its citizens can shift overseas, drug traffickers and money brokers set up the following system, Bodner said: A Chinese national who wants to convert yuan to dollars and stash it in the United States will contact a broker. The broker instructs this person to pay a factory that produces chemicals used to make methamphetamine or fentanyl.

The factory ships the precursors to Mexico, where they're converted into narcotics, smuggled into the United States and sold for dollars. The broker directs the drug trafficking group to deliver cash to a relative or an associate of the Chinese national whose money initiated the entire sequence.

The money is now in the United States and in dollars, without ever entering the global financial system. "The more money that wants to leave China, the more chemicals go to Mexico and the more synthetic drugs end up in L.A.," Bodner said.

World & Nation Coronavirus chokes the drug trade — from Wuhan, through Mexico and onto U.S. streets



World & Nation Coronavirus chokes the drug trade — from Wuhan, through Mexico and onto U.S. streets The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted many industries, both legal and illicit. Production of fentanyl, which relies on chemical ingredients sourced mainly from Wuhan, China, has been particularly hard hit.

Advertisement

But the pandemic has slowed the cycle significantly, he said. Most narcotics precursors from China are made in Wuhan, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, and factories there are shuttered or operating at a reduced capacity.

“When chemicals aren’t flowing from China, there’s no churn in the money laundering system,” Bodner said. Further, with global markets in upheaval, many of the Chinese nationals who were moving money through the system are now hesitant to stash funds overseas, he said.

Slowdowns in Los Angeles’ money laundering systems come as drug prices rise in the city. With supply chains in disarray, Bodner said, the wholesale price of methamphetamine has soared to about \$1,800 a pound, compared with about \$900 a pound five months ago.

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The push to raise China's age of consent from 14

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Hanna Barczyk

Chinese society is locked in a dispiriting argument, worthy of a more callous age. The public is debating whether a 14-year-old girl was a victim of rape by her wealthy guardian—three decades her senior—or a willing partner, trading sex for gifts and attention. Bored and fractious after weeks of quarantine, many have followed the case eagerly. With each twist in the tale, the public mood has swung. In their hundreds of millions, social-media users have condemned the accused man, a successful lawyer, and expressed disgust at police in the coastal city of Yantai, who declined to pursue rape charges despite several complaints by the girl, who also brought them semen- and blood-stained sanitary pads. On April 13th the central government responded, dispatching prosecutors and detectives to probe Yantai's handling of the case. Three employers—an oil company, a large technology firm and a university—severed ties with the lawyer, who is on bail pending a fresh investigation. More recently the public has tut-tutted over seemingly affectionate telephone calls between the teenager

and her guardian that caused some to doubt her story. Others have scorned the girl's birth mother for handing her child to a middle-aged bachelor offering to be an unofficial foster father.

China's news industry has not covered itself in glory. Spotting a story that stokes readers' indignation, while skirting overtly political themes sure to draw the censors' wrath, outlets have carried prurient interviews with the alleged rapist. He calls himself a man wronged by an ungrateful lover, and shares recorded phone calls from his accuser to back his claims. Quote-seeking reporters have hounded the teenager, now 18, though she has tried to take her own life more than once. They have visited the anonymous girl's hometown, revealing her identity to relatives and neighbours.

Still, reformist lawyers and advocates for children's rights wonder whether some good might emerge from this horrible tale. Notably, they hope that fresh light is being cast on the contradictory tangle of Chinese laws that regulate sexual activity and the young.

At least superficially, China is a conservative country, where rural and small-town elders still chide girls to save themselves for an eligible man. The legal age of marriage in China is high: 20 for women and 22 for men. Before 1980 it was even higher. Towards the end of the Maoist era, when the state sought total control over citizens' bodies and minds, late marriage was used as a tool of population control. Urban couples needed permission from work units to wed. In the 1970s if a couple's combined ages did not add up to 50 they were told to wait, or be denied housing and ration coupons needed to furnish a home. Yet since 1949, when the Communist Party took power, the effective age of sexual consent—as fixed by judicial rulings and then by the law—has been 14. The alleged assaults in Yantai began weeks after the girl reached that age.

Chinese laws do not define a stand-alone age of consent. Instead, the age is derived from rape-related laws. The tradition dates back at least 800 years, when the Southern Song dynasty deemed intercourse with a child under 10 to be statutory rape. Put another way, China's age of consent does not reflect debate about when the young can be trusted to control their own bodies. Instead, it is based on judgments, amended many times over the centuries, about whether men who seek sex with children are always culpable or may have arguments to offer in their defence.

There is nothing new about girls facing harsh and unfair questions about why they let men, including foster fathers, assault them. China's final imperial dynasty, the Qing, required raped women to prove that they had struggled violently throughout their assault, even at the risk of death. If they had ceased resisting at any point, women faced 80 strokes with a heavy cane for consenting to "illicit intercourse". The Qing tolerated the use of adoption as a cover for buying young girls as brides, or for forcing them into prostitution. Even Qing laws on child rape rested on judgments about female lust. A textbook from 1878 cites a commentator opining in tones of prim approval that girls of 12 and under "have no capacity for licentiousness". Not until 2015, after scandals involving officials assaulting under-age girls, did China's legislature revoke a statute from 1979 that defined sex with child prostitutes as a lesser crime than child rape. The law had offered a loophole by allowing men to claim to have paid to assault children.

When the real problem is men with impunity

Guo Jianmei founded Qianqian, a law firm which is representing the victim in the Yantai case. Together with fellow lawyers she has drafted amendments to raise the age of consent, and is seeking legislators willing to help. In a country like China, where feudal morality retains some sway, she asks: "What does a girl at 14 know about sex?" China also needs a debate about coercion and abuses of power, adds Ms Guo. Chinese judges find it easy to decide rape cases involving violent attacks by strangers. But her firm sees too many cases of children sexually abused by authority figures they know well, from schoolteachers to fathers, elder brothers and uncles. The victims struggle to obtain justice.

Another public-interest lawyer, Wang Yongmei, argues for still larger reforms. She would like to see adults barred from sex with anyone under 18. Ms Wang would allow some provision for consenting sex between teenagers, for she has seen cases where angry mothers have unjustly accused their daughter's boyfriend of rape. China needs a child-protection agency and female police trained to support rape victims, she adds.

It takes courage to accuse people in authority of sexual assault. A fledgling #MeToo movement has faced official pressure after young women challenged university professors, television presenters and other powerful men. Ms Wang sees such courage in a new generation of women who refuse to blame themselves for being assaulted. Their bravery is grounds for hope, if the law ever

changes to keep up with them. ■

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"When children say #MeToo"

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Why American Students Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years

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Schools usually focus on teaching comprehension skills instead of general knowledge—even though education researchers know better.

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GERI LAVROV / GETTY

Every two years, education-policy wonks gear up for what has become a time-honored ritual: the release of the Nation's Report Card. Officially known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, the data reflect the results of reading and math tests administered to a sample of students across the country. Experts generally consider the tests rigorous and highly reliable—and the scores basically stagnant.

Math scores have been flat since 2009 and reading scores since 1998, with just a third or so of students performing at a level the NAEP defines as “proficient.” Performance gaps between lower-income students and their more affluent peers, among other demographic discrepancies, have remained stubbornly wide.

Among the likely culprits for the stalled progress in math scores: a misalignment between what the NAEP tests and what state standards require teachers to cover at specific grade levels. But what’s the reason for the utter lack of progress in reading scores?

On Tuesday, a panel of experts in Washington, D.C., convened by the federally appointed officials who oversee the NAEP concluded that **the root of the problem is the way schools teach reading**. The current instructional approach, they agreed, is based on assumptions about how children learn that have been disproven by research over the last several decades—research that the education world has largely failed to heed.

The long-standing view has been that the first several years of elementary school should be devoted to basic reading skills. History, science, and the arts can wait. After all, the argument goes, if kids haven’t learned to read—a task that is theoretically accomplished by third grade—how will they be able to gain knowledge about those subjects through their own reading?

The federal No Child Left Behind legislation, enacted in 2001, only intensified the focus on reading. The statute required states to administer annual reading and math tests to students in grades three through eight and once in high school, and attached hefty consequences if schools failed to boost scores. The law that replaced No Child Left Behind—the Every Student Succeeds Act, enacted in 2015—has eased the consequences but has hardly weakened the emphasis on testing.

What is tested, some educators say, gets taught—and what isn’t doesn’t. Since 2001, the curriculum in many elementary schools has narrowed to little more than a steady diet of reading and math. And when test scores fail to rise after third grade—as they often do, especially in high-poverty schools—subjects like history and science may continue to be relegated to the far back burner through middle school.

To some extent, it does make sense to focus on reading skills in the early

years. One component of reading is, like math, primarily a set of skills: the part that involves decoding, or making connections between sounds and the letters that represent them.

But educators have also treated the other component of reading—comprehension—as a set of skills, when **in fact it depends primarily on what readers already know.** In countries that specify the content to be taught at each grade level, standardized tests can test students on what they've learned in school. But in the United States, where schools are all teaching different content, test designers give students passages on a variety of topics that may have nothing to do with what they've learned in school—life in the Arctic, for example, or the disappearance of Amelia Earhart. The tests then ask questions designed to assess comprehension: *What's the main idea of the passage? What inferences can you make?*

On a daily basis, teachers have their students practice skills and strategies like “finding the main idea” or “making inferences.” And teachers select books that match the given skill rather than because of the text’s content. Rarely do the topics connect: Students might read a book about bridges one day, zebras the next, and clouds the day after that.

Cognitive scientists have known for decades that simply mastering comprehension skills doesn’t ensure a young student will be able to apply them to whatever texts they’re confronted with on standardized tests and in their studies later in life.

One of those cognitive scientists spoke on the Tuesday panel: Daniel Willingham, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia who writes about the science behind reading comprehension. Willingham explained that **whether or not readers understand a text depends far more on how much background knowledge and vocabulary they have relating to the topic than on how much they've practiced comprehension skills.** That’s because writers leave out a lot of information that they assume readers will know. If they put all the information in, their writing would be tedious.

But if readers can’t supply the missing information, they have a hard time making sense of the text. If students arrive at high school without knowing who won the Civil War they’ll have a hard time understanding a textbook passage about Reconstruction.

Students from less educated families are usually the ones who are most handicapped by gaps in knowledge. Another panelist—Ian Rowe, who heads a network of charter schools serving low-income students in New York—provided a real-life example during his remarks. A sixth-grader at one of his schools was frustrated that a passage on a reading test she'd taken kept repeating a word she didn't understand: *roog-bye*. The unfamiliar word made it hard for her to understand the passage. When Rowe asked her to spell the word, it turned out to be *rugby*.

The implication is clear. **The best way to boost students' reading comprehension is to expand their knowledge and vocabulary** by teaching them history, science, literature, and the arts, using curricula that guide kids through a logical sequence from one year to the next: for example, Native Americans and Columbus in kindergarten; the colonial era and the American Revolution in first grade; the War of 1812 and the Civil War in second grade, and so on. That approach enables children to make sense of what they're learning, and the repetition of concepts and vocabulary in different contexts makes it more likely they'll retain information. Not to mention that learning content like this can be a lot more engaging for both students and teachers than the endless practice of illusory skills.

Another panelist—Timothy Shanahan, an emeritus professor at the University of Illinois and the author or editor of over 200 publications on literacy—went on to debunk a popular approach that goes hand in hand with teaching comprehension skills: To help students practice their “skills,” teachers give them texts at their supposed individual reading levels rather than the level of the grade they’re in.

According to Shanahan, no evidence backs up that practice. In fact, Shanahan said, recent research indicates that **students actually learn more from reading texts** that are considered too difficult for them—in other words, those with more than a handful of words and concepts a student doesn't understand. What struggling students need is guidance from a teacher in how to make sense of texts designed for kids at their respective grade levels—the kinds of texts those kids may otherwise see only on standardized tests, when they have to grapple with them on their own.

That view was endorsed by Marilyn Jager Adams, a cognitive and developmental psychologist who is a visiting scholar at Brown University. “Giving children easier texts when they’re weaker readers,” she said during the

panel discussion, “serves to deny them the very language and information they need to catch up and move on.”

The failure to build children’s knowledge in elementary school helps explain the gap between the reading scores of students from wealthier families and those of their lower-income peers—a gap that has been expanding. More affluent students may not learn much in elementary school, but compared to their disadvantaged peers their parents **tend to be more educated and have the money to provide knowledge-boosting perks like tutoring and trips to Europe.** As a result, those wealthy children are far more likely to acquire knowledge outside of school. Poorer kids with less-educated parents tend to rely on school to acquire the kind of knowledge that is needed to succeed academically—and because their schools often focus exclusively on reading and math, in an effort to raise low test scores, they’re less likely to acquire it there.

The bottom line is that **policymakers and advocates who have pushed for more testing in part as a way to narrow the gap between rich and poor have undermined their own efforts.** They have created a system that incentivizes teachers to withhold the very thing that could accomplish both objectives: knowledge. All students suffer under this system, but the neediest suffer the most.

The NAEP is a valuable educational barometer, but it’s important to understand that while standardized tests can identify a problem, they can’t provide the answer to it.

While some elementary teachers have embraced the approach advocated by the NAEP panel, it’s clear that most have been trained to in methods that aren’t supported by research, and that many are resistant to change. The University of Illinois’s Shanahan noted that when he speaks to teachers around the country, they’re aghast at the idea of giving struggling readers grade-level books—even when their state’s literacy standards call for doing so.

Still, schools in some parts of the country are embracing the kinds of insights offered by the panelists. Louisiana has not only created its own curriculum but has also asked the federal government for permission to give tests based on that curriculum rather than passages on a variety of randomly selected topics. If that movement spreads, the National Assessment of Educational Progress may finally live up to its name and the American education system may at last be able to

unlock the untold potential of millions of students.

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