

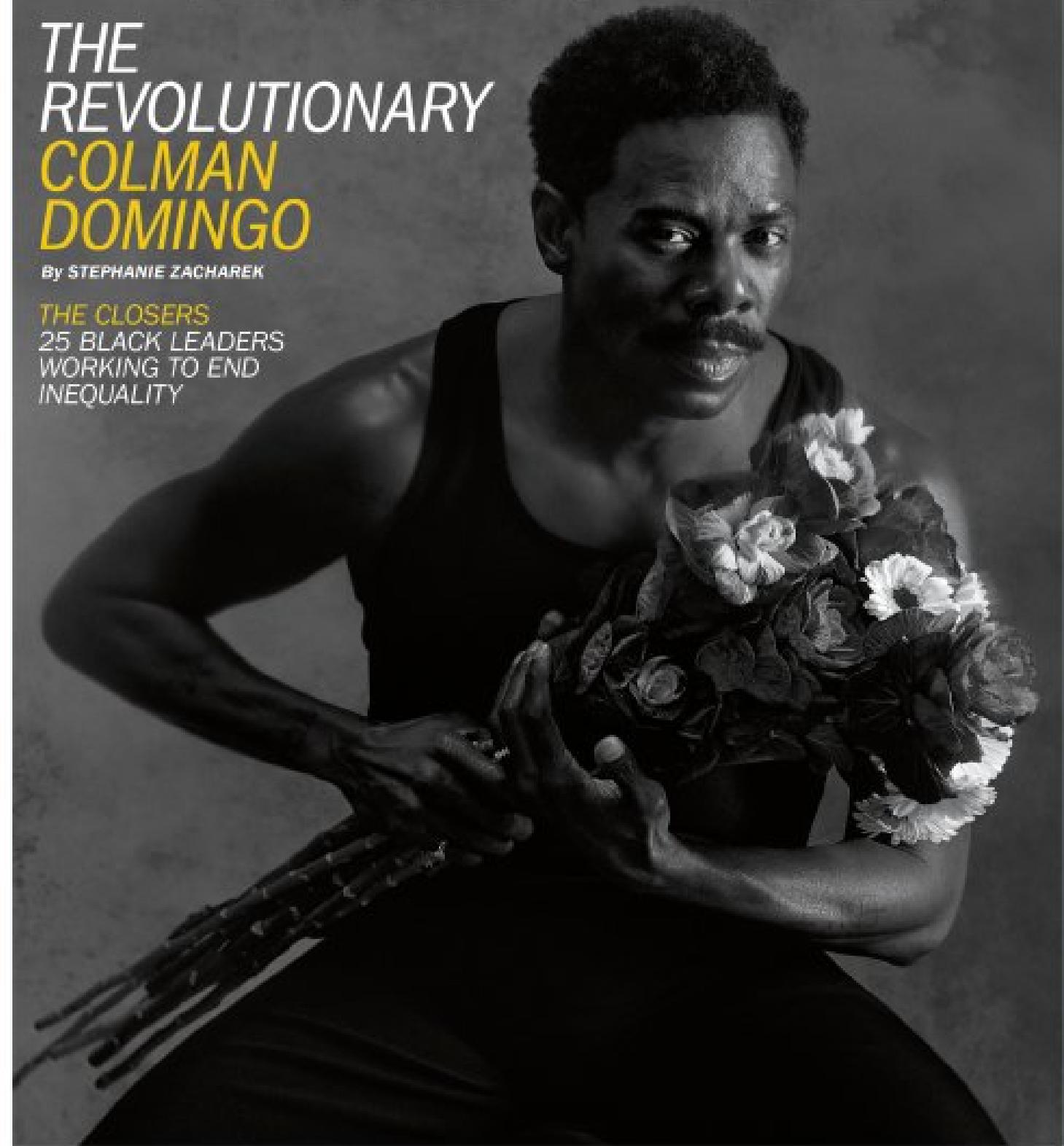
FEB. 24, 2025

# TIME

## THE REVOLUTIONARY **COLMAN DOMINGO**

By STEPHANIE ZACHAREK

**THE CLOSERS**  
25 BLACK LEADERS  
WORKING TO END  
INEQUALITY



# TIME Magazine

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# How We Chose the 2025 Closers

Maya Chung is an editor at TIME.

Lori Fradkin is an executive editor at TIME

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For many Black Americans, closing the racial equity gap can feel like an insurmountable task. More than 83% say efforts toward equality in the U.S. haven't gone far enough, according to a [Pew Research Center](#) survey. And

while there have been major wins, extensive disparities—embedded in the fabric of the country—persist.

Last year, [TIME's inaugural Closers list](#) focused on leaders working to chip away at the Black-white wealth gap. This year TIME has expanded its focus to [highlight 25 Black leaders](#) who are working to close racial equity gaps more broadly—from [Sara Sidner](#), an anchor and correspondent for CNN, urging Black women to get screened for breast cancer after being diagnosed herself, to National Book Award winner [Percival Everett](#), who in his latest novel [James](#), reimagines *Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of the escaped slave Jim. “Any work of art that comes out of this American culture is about race. If there is no race in it, that is a statement about race and how America wants to see itself,” Everett told TIME.

### [See the full list here](#)

For our cover story, [Colman Domingo](#), who was recently nominated for an Oscar for his role in [Sing Sing](#), a film about incarcerated men who participate in a prison theater program, talks about the way he is using his career not just to gain recognition for himself but to have a say in which stories get told and uplift others. “‘Oooh, I get to have an impact? What can I do? What can I disrupt?’” he says. He also pays homage to those who paved the way for him. “My parents went through a lot, my grandparents went through even worse. And I am here, where I am in my life, but also as a proud descendant of slaves who lived, loved, and fought, and sacrificed, so I could be here.”

Also on the list, which launches during Black History Month, is [Elaine Welteroth](#), who started [birthFUND](#) after she struggled to find a doctor who made her feel safe in a country where the maternal mortality is highest for Black women. The fund aims to raise awareness about midwifery and help expectant families access those services. “This is a systemic issue,” Welteroth says. “If we each can just focus on what we can do to move the needle, then I really, truly believe that we can solve this crisis in our lifetime.”

Sen. [Raphael Warnock](#), one of a record five Black lawmakers in the upper chamber this session, has fought for Georgia’s Black farmers who

historically have been shut out of federal aid and boosted money for research on diabetes, a disease that disproportionately affects Black people. [Dorothy Roberts](#), 2024 MacArthur “genius” grantee and [author](#), is advocating for the abolition of child-protective services, which [research](#) shows impacts Black families at a much higher rate than white ones. And Diotima’s [Rachel Scott](#), the first Black woman designer to be named [American Womenswear Designer of the Year](#) by the Council of Fashion Designers of America, is aiming to address systemic inequities in the global fashion industry. Scott is just one of this year’s Closers who emphasized the importance of collective power. “I’ve only been able to do this because of the support of the Black community,” she says. “If I can be as strong of a community member as they have been for me, then I think that would be good.”

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# Inside Elon Musk's War on Washington

Simon Shuster is a senior correspondent at TIME. He covers international affairs, with a focus on Russia and Ukraine. For his first book, *The Showman*, he reported inside the Ukrainian President's compound in Kyiv as the Russian invasion unfolded.

Brian Bennett is the senior White House correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C. bureau. He has covered wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, interviewed world leaders, traveled across the globe with President Trump and President Biden, and written extensively about intelligence, immigration and the fallout of major disasters.



The standoff at 1300 Pennsylvania Avenue was not much of a spectacle. On the first day of February, a handful of men working for Elon Musk had come

to [the U.S. Agency for International Development](#) (USAID), a few blocks from the White House, demanding full access to its headquarters. The agency's staff refused. No guns were drawn. No punches thrown. Nobody involved the police. But in these early days of the Trump Administration, perhaps no other scene revealed more clearly the forces reshaping America's government.

On one side stood an institution with a 64-year history, a \$35 billion budget, and a mission enshrined in federal law. On the other stood Musk's political wrecking crew. They identified themselves as members of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), a collection of temporary staffers with no charter, no website, and no clear legal authority. Its power derives from Musk, the wealthiest person on the planet, who has been deputized to dismantle vast swaths of the federal bureaucracy—slashing budgets, gutting the civil service, and stripping independent agencies of the ability to impede the President's objectives.

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USAID leadership had allowed Musk's team, a group of his young and eager followers, to spend several days inside their headquarters at the end of January. "The DOGE kids," as some of the staffers called them in private, walked the halls with clipboards in their hands, examining desks and questioning managers, according to several USAID officials who described the events to TIME. But as the weekend arrived, their demands—including access to sensitive facilities designed to store classified information—went too far for the agency's heads of security. The men from DOGE threatened to call the U.S. Marshals and have them clear the building. They also informed Musk about the problem. "USAID is a criminal organization," Musk wrote to his 215 million followers on his social media platform, X, soon after. "Time for it to die."

The cause of Musk's crusade remained unclear. But regardless of the reason, by the following morning, an agency that annually disburses tens of billions of dollars across the globe, fighting famine and disease and bringing clean water to millions, had mostly ceased to function. Within a week, nearly all its staff were placed on leave, its offices around the world shut down.

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Every other government bureau got the message loud and clear. No single private citizen, certainly not one whose wealth and web of businesses are directly subject to the oversight of federal authorities, has wielded such power over the machinery of the U.S. government. So far, Musk appears accountable to no one but President Trump, who handed his campaign benefactor a sweeping mandate to bring the government in line with his agenda. DOGE directed all of TIME's questions about its work to the White House, which declined to comment.

**Read More:** [How Elon Musk Became a Kingmaker.](#)

Already, the DOGE team has taken over the U.S. Digital Service and established a [beachhead](#) within the federal human-resources department, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). [The Education Department is on edge](#), fearing a self-decapitation mandate is in the offing. Few agencies seem safe. Musk has shown that he will tolerate no opposition, no matter how justified. Days before the drama at USAID, a Treasury official refused DOGE access to the U.S. federal payment system. The official was forced to retire, and the newly appointed Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, gave DOGE the access it demanded. The Administration agreed on Feb. 5 to restrict that access, at least temporarily, after a group of past and present employees sued.

These are just the first ripples in a massive antigovernment wave. Budgets will be hacked. Valuable programs will be eliminated. Career civil servants will be purged, replaced with political appointees whose primary qualification is apparent fealty to the President. This is the course the electorate chose. And to many, the idea of one of the world's most accomplished entrepreneurs attacking a sprawling, sclerotic federal bureaucracy with the same velocity and determination he brought to his car startup or rocket company is cause for celebration, not alarm. "The federal government is so big that there are surely significant opportunities for saving and efficiency," says Robert Doar, president of the American Enterprise Institute, a center-right think tank. "The fact that the President and his team is giving this a lot of attention is a good thing."

But [a public backlash](#) may be growing to Musk's mission, and far more is at stake than the size of the federal balance sheet, the head count at agencies inside the Beltway, or the dangers of one unelected man possessing such unconstrained power. Soon Americans are going to learn where they interact with the federal government in ways they didn't realize or took for granted. Companies that export tech products to China may no longer have State or Commerce Department employees available to explain, for free, how to avoid violating criminal law. Farmers in the Midwest may soon find USAID-funded buyers no longer paying for sacks of flour to send to refugee camps. Around the world, millions of people who depend on the U.S. for food, medicine, and shelter are suddenly on their own.

**Read More:** [Why TIME Chose Musk As 2021 Person of the Year.](#)

For now, millions of government workers find themselves at Musk's mercy. One described her team at the Department of Homeland Security assuming a "defensive crouch" as they awaited a visit from the DOGE. For an inkling of their fate, she added, her colleagues had turned to a book called *Character Limit*, which chronicles the way Musk took over Twitter two years ago and fired 80% of its staff, often with chaotic and lasting results.

The similarities to his assault on the bureaucracy have been uncanny. On Jan. 28, millions of civil servants across government received an email offering them eight months' pay in exchange for their resignation. Musk had proposed much the same deal to Twitter's employees two years earlier. He even used the same subject line: "Fork in the road."

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**None of this came without warning.** Among Musk's friends in Silicon Valley, many understood his takeover of Twitter as preparation for a greater cause. "The mood is that hopefully Musk can do the same thing with the U.S. government," one told TIME in November. Veterans of Trump's first Administration likewise laid out their plans long before the elections, publishing a 900-page report known as Project 2025. One of its lead authors, Russell Vought, said in a speech two years ago that he wanted civil servants to be "traumatically affected" by the purge he envisioned. "We want their funding to be shut," he said. "We want to put them in trauma."



On the campaign trail, Trump swore he had nothing to do with the plan. “It was inappropriate that they would come out with a document like that,” he told TIME in November. “Some things I vehemently disagreed with.” But once in office, he picked Vought to be in charge of the White House Office of Management and Budget, which now works closely with Musk to enact crucial parts of Project 2025. So far, [the frenetic opening moves of the Trump presidency have tracked nearly two-thirds of its prescriptions, according to a TIME analysis.](#)

Musk never hid his intentions. Two weeks after the election, he co-wrote a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* that promised DOGE would help Trump “hire a lean team of small-government crusaders,” who would work to bring “mass head-count reductions across the federal bureaucracy.” That recruitment drive began soon after the elections, drawing from Musk’s acolytes in Silicon Valley, some barely out of college, and priming them to fan out across Washington.

**Read More:** [Inside Elon Musk’s Struggle For the Future of AI.](#)

The man Musk put in charge of staffing at DOGE was an aerospace engineer named Steve Davis, who previously led his cost-cutting efforts at Twitter. In late December, as the presidential transition unfolded inside the White House, Davis took part in a series of meetings with members of the Biden Administration. The Democratic staffers noted his fixation with an obscure branch of the White House called the U.S. Digital Service. Davis wanted to know how it operated, who it reported to, and what it could access.

Created in 2014, the USDS works with federal agencies to improve computer systems and databases. It houses a map of the government's technology infrastructure and has contact points for the technology officer at nearly every federal agency. That made it the perfect place to host the DOGE. If Musk wanted to wither the limbs of the federal government, the USDS provided the veins that would let the poison flow.

The empowerment of USDS started on Inauguration Day. One of Trump's first Executive Orders renamed it "the United States DOGE Service," neatly preserving the office's acronym. The order also ensured that the new entity would report directly to the White House chief of staff. Since then, the office has set up shop inside the Departments of State and Treasury. It began accessing personnel computer systems, firing contractors, and blocking payments on their contracts.

Musk also sent a team to OPM. The office holds records on 2.1 million workers, the email address for nearly every federal employee, and tracks \$59 billion per year in federal health care premiums and \$88 billion per year in payments to federal retirees. The [mass buyout offer](#) to government employees originated from within Musk's team at OPM, according to a source familiar with those actions. (Both DOGE and the White House declined to comment.)

**Read More:** [As Musk's DOGE Targets Federal Data, This Obscure Office Is at the Center](#)

Next, the DOGE team set to starving OPM itself. Brian Bjelde, who recently worked as vice president of human resources at Musk's aerospace firm, told career supervisors at OPM that the "target" was to slash 70% of its staff, a move that would hobble its health care benefits and retirement-planning

teams, says a current OPM official. Some senior leaders at OPM have been locked out of key databases, the official says, and political appointees have access to systems, including the Enterprise Human Resources Integration, without standard safeguard procedures designed to keep such information private. That system includes information like pay grades, length of service, Social Security numbers, dates of birth, and home addresses.

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**Days after Trump took office**, the White House ordered a freeze on federal spending—from [foreign aid](#) to public-health programs, and everything in between. It would be lifted, the Administration said, as agencies fell in line with the President’s agenda: cracking down on immigration, ending diversity efforts, and stopping investments that reduce the impact of fossil fuels on the environment. Facing a court’s action, the White House rolled back the order.



Musk’s downsizing pressed ahead, and Trump continued to give his blessing. “Elon can’t do—and won’t do—anything without our approval,” Trump told reporters in the Oval Office on Feb. 4. “We’ll give him the

approval where appropriate,” he added. “Where not appropriate, we won’t.” Some took it as a sign that Trump might rein in his attack dog. But civil servants are not waiting around for that to happen. In Northern Virginia, home to tens of thousands of workers on the federal payroll and military service members, the typical town-hall meeting in the town of Leesburg attracts a few dozen people. Hundreds gathered on the night Musk shut down USAID. “We’re hearing bizarre stories,” says Representative Suhas Subramanyam, the local Democratic Congressman who spoke at the event. His office has been flooded with workers describing DOGE’s takeover, and he instructed his staff to log their testimony and assist whistle-blowers. Much of what they witnessed is “simply illegal,” Subramanyam insists to TIME. “We’re almost being tested and dared to sue or investigate.”

**Read More:** [Across Pennsylvania, Musk Deploys His Fame and Fortune For Trump.](#)

Some lawsuits have worked. The White House complied with court orders blocking its attempt to freeze trillions of dollars in federal spending. A judge’s ruling on Feb. 6 delayed the deadline for the buyout offer to government employees. Unions have filed suits related to DOGE on behalf of federal workers. Even Musk’s usual admirers have warned he is overreaching. “The lawsuits are already flying,” a Feb. 4 *Wall Street Journal* editorial noted, “and courts will derail Mr. Musk’s project before it even gets off the ground if he isn’t careful.”

On Capitol Hill, Musk’s assault on the bureaucracy has set up a battle with Democrats that could determine the future of the government and the balance of power within it. “We don’t have a fourth branch of government called Elon Musk,” Maryland Democrat Jamie Raskin told a crowd outside USAID on the afternoon of Feb. 3, while the men from DOGE tried to impose their demands inside.

Raskin was right. But the agency staffers listening to him on Pennsylvania Avenue, unsure of whether they still had a job, could not tell how much power Musk had acquired, and whether he would bend the other branches of government to his will. One staffer seemed especially skeptical. Yes, she told TIME, the Constitution grants Congress the power of the purse. But Musk had shown his power to yank it away.

“There’s only so much Democrats can do,” she said, not wanting to give her name lest it attract more attention from DOGE. Her official email account had been shut down, and she could no longer access her desk at the agency. Like thousands of her colleagues, and millions of Americans, she was left to watch Musk’s moves play out, wondering how far he would go, and what, if anything, could stop him. —*With reporting by Eric Cortellessa, Philip Elliott, Nik Popli, and Tessa Berenson Rogers/Washington*

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# The Race to Explain Why More Young Adults Are Getting Cancer

Jamie Ducharme is a health correspondent at TIME. She covers the COVID-19 pandemic, Long COVID, mental health, vaping, psychedelics, and more. Her work for TIME has won awards from the Deadline Club, the New York Press Club, and the Newswomen's Club of New York. Additionally, she is the author of [\*Big Vape: The Incendiary Rise of Juul\*](#), which was adapted for a forthcoming Netflix docuseries.



Dr. Frank Frizelle has operated on countless patients in his career as a colorectal surgeon. But there's one case that stayed with him.

In 2014, he was treating a woman in her late 20s suffering from bowel cancer—already a rare situation, given her age. But it became even more

unusual when her best friend visited her in the hospital and told Frizelle that she had many of the same symptoms as his patient. Subsequent testing revealed that his patient's friend had a lesion that, had it not been caught early, likely would have become cancerous. "That really brought it home to me—how it's much more common than you think," says Frizelle, a professor of surgery at the University of Otago in New Zealand.

Still, like any good scientist, Frizelle was skeptical. Was it simply a fluke that he kept treating [strikingly young patients](#)? Or was his practice one tiny data point in a larger trend?

He found his answer after sifting through national health data: colorectal cancer, he discovered, was indeed being [diagnosed more often](#) than in previous years among New Zealanders under 50. Further [research](#) by Frizelle analyzing populations in Sweden and Scotland showed the same thing. A bigger picture was emerging. Here were three different countries, with different populations and health challenges—but united by a spike in colorectal cancers among young adults.

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# OUR CANCER MYSTERY

WHY IT'S NOW STRIKING US SO YOUNG | by JAMIE DUCHARME



From left:  
Glancarlo,  
diagnosed  
with lung  
cancer at 18  
  
Kelly, diagnosed  
with colorectal  
cancer at 28  
  
Imtiaz, diagnosed  
with colon  
cancer at 26  
  
Carrie, diagnosed  
with ovarian  
cancer at 40

In the years since, it's become clear that the problem isn't limited to those three countries, nor to colorectal cancer. Researchers have found that young people around the world are getting many different kinds of cancer at alarmingly high rates. And as the diagnoses of celebrities and public figures like [Kate Middleton](#), [Chadwick Boseman](#), Dwyane Wade, and [Olivia Munn](#) bring mass attention to the issue, scientists are racing to answer a question on the minds of many outside the medical profession: Why is cancer, historically a disease of old age, increasingly striking people in the primes of their lives?

Globally, diagnoses and deaths related to early-onset cancers—those affecting patients younger than 50—rose by 79% and 28%, respectively, from 1990 to 2019, according to a recent [study](#) published in the medical journal *BMJ Oncology*. [In the U.S.](#), breast cancer is the most common type of early-onset disease, but recent surges in cancers affecting digestive organs—including the colon, rectum, pancreas, and stomach—are particularly dramatic within this age group. In fact, today's young adults are about twice as likely to be diagnosed with colon cancer—and four times as likely to be diagnosed with rectal cancer—as those born around 1950, [research](#) suggests.

### **Read More:** [The Unique Hell of Getting Cancer as a Young Adult](#)

Overall, cancer is still overwhelmingly an older person's disease. As of 2025, 88% of people in the U.S. diagnosed with cancer were 50 or older, and 59% were 65 or older, according to [data](#) from the American Cancer Society. But there is no question that the demographics are shifting. Under 50s are not only at increasing risk of suffering from cancer; theirs is the only age group for which the risk is rising. All told, [17 types of cancer](#) are on the rise among U.S. adults in this age group.

“When we were younger, we assumed the climate would be the same forever. The same applies in cancer,” says [Dr. Thomas Powles](#), a U.K.-based oncologist and cancer researcher who edits the journal *Annals of Oncology*. “We just assumed that cancer incidence was something that is relatively static. But it’s not.”

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[video id=xHiTz18h autostart="viewable"]

There is some good news in the data. Advances in disease detection and treatment, as well as dramatic declines in smoking, mean that far fewer people die from cancer now than once did. Although the disease still ranks as the second most common cause of death in the U.S., killing more than half a million people each year, [mortality rates have dropped](#) by about a third since 1991.

Less encouragingly, the rate of new cancers diagnosed has [remained stubbornly consistent](#), declining only modestly from 1999 to 2021. Across the U.S., roughly 2 million new cancer cases are detected each year, diagnoses that, on top of the emotional toll, force patients to cumulatively fork out billions of dollars in out-of-pocket costs—more than \$16 billion in 2019 alone, according to [federal data](#). Today, about 40 out of every 100 U.S. adults can expect to be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lifetimes. For an estimated 1 in 17 U.S. women and 1 in 29 U.S. men, that news will come before their 50th birthdays.

The rise in early-onset diagnoses partly comes down to advances in our ability to detect and diagnose different kinds of cancers. “With much more sophisticated tools now, inevitably we’re doing more tests on younger people [and] we’re using more accurate imaging,” which leads to more cancers detected, Powles says. Some screening protocols have also been modified in recent years to include younger adults; since 2018, for example, the American Cancer Society has recommended [colonoscopies](#) starting at age 45, down from 50.

**Read More:** [Some Early Forms of Breast Cancer May Not Need Treatment, Study Says](#)

But this is only one part of what scientists say is a more complex web of factors they are still attempting to understand. The data suggest that some element—or perhaps combination of elements—of modern life is sickening progressively younger adults. And right now, no one knows for sure what that is.

There are plenty of known risk factors for cancer, from the genes someone is born with to the unhealthy lifestyle habits they pick up, such as smoking, [drinking lots of alcohol](#), or spending time in the sun. Such habits can speed

up the natural degradation of cells, which over time acquire genetic mutations as they lose their ability to repair damage. As that damage accumulates with age, cells may become cancerous, growing and - multiplying too fast for the body's immune system to keep them in check and potentially choking out vital organs. The immune system also loses some of its strength with age, making it easier for cancer cells to colonize the body.

But classic risk factors do not seem to fully explain the recent rise in early-onset cancers, says Dr. Cathy Eng, director of the Young Adult Cancers Program at Vanderbilt University's Ingram Cancer Center in Tennessee. Some of the trends are baffling; young, nonsmoking women, for example, are being diagnosed with lung cancer in strangely high numbers. Many times, Eng's patients were extremely healthy: vegetarians, marathon runners, avid swimmers. "That's why I really believe there's other risk factors to account for this," she says.



There's no shortage of theories about what those may be. Many scientists point to modern diets, which tend to be heavy on potentially carcinogenic products—including [ultra-processed foods](#), red meat, and alcohol—and may also contribute to weight gain, another cancer risk factor. The foods we eat can also affect the gut microbiome, the colony of microbes that lives in the digestive system and appears linked to overall health. Alterations to the gut microbiome via diet, or perhaps exposure to drugs like antibiotics, have also been implicated.

Other researchers blame the microplastics littering our environment and leaching into our food and water supplies, some of which, according to a 2024 [study](#), have even shown up in cancer patients' tumors. Other environmental factors could also be to blame, given that everything from cosmetics to food packaging contains substances that [many researchers aren't convinced are safe](#). Even our near constant exposure to artificial light could be messing with normal biological rhythms in ways that have profound health consequences, some [research](#) suggests.

For now, these are all just hypotheses. Some may turn out to be wrong, and more theories will emerge in time. It's also likely that different risk factors are linked to different cancers, Frizelle says. Even in a single patient, multiple overlapping triggers may be in play.

Frizelle's [research](#) on colorectal cancer, for example, suggests there may be a dysfunctional relationship between microplastics, certain foods, and some types of gut bacteria. Studies suggest that when microplastics get into the body, they can penetrate the mucous lining that protects the bowels and carry bacteria and toxins to the bowel lining. This leaves the bowel more susceptible to damage from pathogens inside the body—including strains of gut bacteria that are known to become more virulent when they interact with compounds found in red and processed meat. In some patients, this perfect storm of invaders may result in cancer, Frizelle thinks.

**Read More:** [CNN's Sara Sidner Is Demystifying Breast Cancer Treatment](#)

He believes this overlapping puzzle of risk factors is a likelier explanation than any one lifestyle habit driving a dramatic uptick in cancers—especially since younger generations are, in many respects, healthier than their

ancestors. In the U.S., for example, [tobacco use has plummeted](#) in recent decades, and [young adults are increasingly unlikely to drink](#). “How is the health-conscious generation getting more bowel cancer?” Frizelle asks.

[Dr. Andrea Cercek](#), co-director of the Center for Young Onset Colorectal and Gastrointestinal Cancers at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, agrees that some early-onset cancer cases defy easy explanation. She’s treated patients in their 20s and even teens with tumors that, biologically, “look just like a regular 80-year-old’s tumor.” These cases stump her. “Even if they drank as a teenager, it just doesn’t make sense,” she says. A few years of drinking alcohol, following an unhealthy diet, or having obesity should not be enough to produce the kind of tumor typically seen in a senior citizen, Cercek says. And yet, there they are.



To Cersek, these advanced tumors suggest that people have been exposed to damaging substances for a long time, perhaps even longer than they were aware of. Research and awareness about early-onset cancer is accumulating now, but the source of the problem may not be new, Cersek says. It can take years for even the most [toxic exposures to result in health problems](#)—which means that the source of a problem in the public eye now may have emerged decades ago, silently sickening people until the trend became too pronounced to ignore.

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Giancarlo Oviedo-Mori, 32, is one of many patients whose cancer defies obvious explanation. When he was in high school, Oviedo-Mori developed a persistent cough that didn't respond to medication. Eventually, at just 18 years old, he was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer.

Oviedo-Mori and his doctors were stunned. He'd had asthma as a child growing up in Peru, but he had no family history of cancer and had never been a drinker or smoker; he was barely even old enough to buy cigarettes and still years shy of his 21st birthday. Oviedo-Mori's family spent a day observing the site of the 9/11 terrorist attack when [toxic particles were still in the air](#), but it had been a brief visit and no one else in the family had developed health problems. That was the only exposure he could think of. The diagnosis didn't make sense. "It was so weird," he says.

#### **Read More:** [\*4 Important Steps to Take After a Cancer Diagnosis\*](#)

As he went through cancer treatment—including chemotherapy, radiation, and a surgery that removed his entire left lung—he'd look at his fellow patients, and, seeing how much older they were, feel out of place. "I didn't belong there," he says.

More than a decade later, Oviedo-Mori is still in treatment, participating in a clinical trial at Memorial Sloan Kettering (where all the patients pictured in this article have received care) in hopes of ridding his body of cancer for good. But, though he's still fighting cancer, he is in good health—he can even play soccer, despite having only one lung, and chase after his almost 2-year-old son. "Sometimes, I don't believe it," he says. "I think about [my son] and I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, you're really a miracle.'"

Figuring out how young people like Oviedo-Mori fall prey to cancer is not easy, given the sheer number of potential health hazards in the modern world. It is a puzzle with an unknown number of pieces—one that Dr. Shuji Ogino, a pathologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, is trying to solve with a technique he pioneered.



Ogino and his team are making their way through about 4,000 colorectal tumor samples that came from people who developed the disease at various points in their lives. Each sliver of tissue holds innumerable clues about the person it belonged to, from what they ate and drank to the bacteria that lived in their body before cancer took root. To unearth these clues, the researchers stain the tissues, so that under the lens of a powerful microscope, they can see the different types of cells in the tumor in brilliant color. Using these cell-level insights, they can distinguish between the tumors of young vs. older patients and—with the help of AI—search reams of scientific literature for environmental exposures, lifestyle habits, or health conditions linked to particular cellular traits. Repeating this painstaking detective work enough

times helps reveal patterns among young cancer patients, giving Ogino and his team clues as to what may have caused their diseases.

Their research has already pointed to some possible answers for early-onset colorectal cancer. The big three so far are eating a typical Western diet (high in sugar, processed foods, and red meat, low in fresh produce), developing insulin resistance (a precursor to diabetes also linked to poor diet), and having a [particular type of \*E. coli\* bacteria in the gut](#). Nothing is proven yet, Ogino says. But since there's no harm in eating healthfully, he believes dietary changes are worth making now.

Ogino personally drinks very little and eats a healthy diet. He makes sure his young son eats well too, since his research makes him acutely aware of the importance of developing healthy habits starting from a very young age. But even for children as young as Ogino's son, some damage may already be done—at least according to Dr. George Barreto, a surgeon and cancer researcher at Flinders University in South Australia.

**Read More:** [\*8 Symptoms Doctors Often Dismiss As Anxiety\*](#)

Barreto—who started researching early-onset cancer after not just his patients, but also several of his relatives and friends, were diagnosed at young ages—has [theorized](#) that damage may start in the womb. It's well established that the pre-natal period can have long-term effects on a baby's health, and Barreto believes that phenomenon may extend to cancer risk if parents are exposed to carcinogens during this critical developmental time. This theory could help explain mysterious cases like those Cercek describes, involving patients who seemingly haven't lived long enough for even their riskiest habits to catch up with them.

Proving his theory won't be simple, Barreto acknowledges. It would require collecting data on huge numbers of people, starting before they were even born, then sifting through that data to pinpoint relevant prenatal and early-life triggers. To speed up the process, Barreto has contacted more than 20 research groups around the world that are tracking groups of people beginning at or before birth, in hopes of using their data to jump-start his research. "If we start [from scratch] now, it will take us 40 years to find

answers,” Barreto says. That’s too long to wait, with patients already getting sick at an alarming rate.

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There is yet another question for researchers to answer: whether, on a molecular level, young patients’ cancers are dramatically different from those that occur in older people. If so, these findings may guide researchers toward new treatment approaches.

Some research, [including by Eng](#), has pointed to molecular differences, at least among patients with early-onset colorectal disease. But other scientists are less convinced. Powles, the U.K. oncologist, says he hasn’t seen strong evidence to suggest that early-onset cancers are much different or more aggressive than later-in-life cancers; they just happen to strike patients at younger ages.



Even if there is no medical requirement to stray from classic treatment methods—like chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery—younger patients have unique needs. Standard treatments, while often effective, can be [destructive for people with decades of life ahead of them](#), potentially leading to life-altering physical changes, like permanently needing a colostomy bag or enduring early menopause and infertility. “The worst thing [for an oncologist to hear] is, ‘I’m cured and my cancer’s gone, but I wish that I’d just lived with my cancer because living like this isn’t living,’” Cercek says.

Kelly Spill was blindsided when she was diagnosed with Stage III colorectal cancer in 2020. She was only 28, had no family history of colorectal cancer, and had recently given birth to her first child. She was even more stunned when she learned that her treatment would force her to permanently use a colostomy bag and leave her unable to carry more children. “That completely broke me,” she says. “I’d always wanted a big family.”

Just before she was set to start chemotherapy, however, a research nurse told her she might be a fit for an experimental trial that Cercek was leading. Cercek was testing a new approach among patients whose tumors had a specific genetic mutation: using intravenous medication to boost their immune systems’ abilities to recognize and attack cancerous cells, ideally sparing patients from chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery.

**Read More:** [What to Do If Your Doctor Doesn’t Take Your Symptoms Seriously](#)

Despite all the unknowns that came with participating in a clinical trial, Spill says it was a “no-brainer” to try Cercek’s approach instead of therapies that would leave her with lifelong physical side effects. Her gamble paid off: by her ninth treatment session, her tumor had entirely disappeared. Spill is still cancer-free and expecting her third baby in May.

In June, Cercek [reported](#) that out of 41 rectal cancer patients who completed the full regimen, 100% were cancer-free and required no additional treatment. She is now also studying the method against a variety of different cancers, ranging from stomach to bladder. A patient of any age could benefit from this approach, Cercek says, but it could be particularly impactful for young patients, like Spill, who are desperate to avoid permanent side effects.

Even without novel medical approaches, cancer centers are beginning to recognize that, compared with elderly patients, “adolescents and young adults have very different experiences, and therefore need very different approaches to their treatment,” says Alison Silberman, CEO of Stupid Cancer, a nonprofit that supports young people with the disease. Physical fallout isn’t the only hurdle to overcome, Silberman says. Compared with older patients, young people are more likely to struggle to [pay for their care](#) and to [develop mental-health issues](#) as a result of it.

Silberman witnessed these challenges when her brother was diagnosed with advanced cancer in his 20s. “He was yanked out of his life,” forced to leave his job and apartment to move back in with their parents, Silberman remembers. Cancer made him grapple with his own mortality, largely on his own. “He was too old to be a pediatric patient, too young to be an adult patient,” she says. “That was very isolating for him.”



“Care of early-onset cancer patients becomes complex even beyond [medicine],” says Dr. Veda Giri, an oncologist and co-director of Yale Cancer Center’s Early Onset Cancer Program in Connecticut. This spring, the program will launch new services meant to address that very problem. Patients in the program will be contacted by coordinators who can help guide them through issues that commonly affect young-adult patients, from ways to preserve fertility to deciding whether to pursue genetic testing or enroll in a clinical trial. Patients can also participate in support groups with others in their age group, in hopes of improving social and mental health. The goal: to “support patients and their families from diagnosis all the way through their cancer journey and beyond into survivorship,” since young adults cured of cancer may have continuing needs for decades to come, Giri says.

The ultimate goal, of course—and the ultimate win for doctors and researchers working in this field—will be for early-onset cancer centers to be rendered unnecessary. But it likely won’t happen anytime soon. Proponents of sophisticated new artificial-intelligence technologies have raised expectations, promising new tools that could transform cancer research. AI gives scientists the ability to sift through mountains of data with hitherto unimaginable levels of precision. And the hope is that these tools will unlock a cascade of new discoveries—illuminating unrecognized risk factors, for example, and turbocharging the development of new treatments.

But cancer researchers remain cautious. There is hope, no doubt—but like the legions of scientists grappling with complex medical puzzles in other fields, they are wary of overstating the pace of progress and raising the hopes of patients, even with new technologies at their disposal.

“It will be impossible to design a clinical trial that can test all different possible causes of early-onset cancer,” says Dr. Andrew Chan, director of cancer epidemiology at Mass General Cancer Center. AI and other technologies may help land on those possible causes faster. But to really understand exactly what’s driving the disease and how to stop it, researchers must work slowly and methodically, studying various potential triggers—from diet to alcohol to microplastics—one by one.

**Read More:** [8 Ways to Shorten Your Wait for a Doctor’s Appointment](#)

Chan's team is starting with a trial that will study whether losing weight with the help of [GLP-1 drugs](#) like Wegovy and Zepbound affects future cancer risk among people who have survived early-onset cancer and who are overweight. Future research may study the effects of specific dietary changes, he says. But not all potential cancer triggers are as straightforward to modify as weight and diet.

Take microplastics, which Frizelle, the New Zealand surgeon, believes are contributing to early-onset cancer. Frizelle is realistic about their ubiquity. Avoiding them is all but impossible in a world where [water supplies are tainted](#) and babies suckle on plastic bottles from their earliest days on earth. Barreto's research on cancer risk starting in the womb paints an even bleaker picture, suggesting that the deck may be stacked against some people before they are really people at all. (He chooses to see it more optimistically, noting that everyone can still "take the power into their own hands" by avoiding known carcinogens.)

The upshot of all this: it could take years, if not decades, to sort out what's causing early diagnoses, and perhaps even more time to figure out how to stop them. What seems so obvious to us now—the conclusion that smoking cigarettes causes lung cancer, for example—took [some 40 years for scientists to solidify](#). Even once they did, change didn't happen overnight. Smoking rates have fallen steadily since public-health warnings escalated in the 1960s, but they didn't plummet all at once. Still, change is possible. Today, smoking is at historic lows, and lung cancer diagnoses have declined with them.

If the challenge sounds daunting, for researchers like Ogino, from Brigham and Women's, the complexities are part of the process. He is reminded every day that good science takes as long as it takes. Many of the tumor samples he relies on in his research came from participants enrolled in a study that launched in 1976. The researchers who started it couldn't have known that, 50 years later, their work would be critical in the quest to reverse the rise of early-onset cancer, Ogino says.

"That's the kind of legacy you can make in science," he says. "That's a great, rewarding way to contribute"—even if it takes a lot of time to get there.

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# How Trump's Tariffs Could Affect U.S. Consumers

Alana Semuels is an economic correspondent at TIME. She covers work, consumer spending, retail, gender, and technology. She is a four-time finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism, and has won awards from the Society of Business Editors and Writers and the Los Angeles Press Club.



Inflation-weary consumers chose Donald J. Trump for President in part because they were sick of seeing prices continue to rise. Now, in the first few weeks of the Trump Administration, prices for homes, cars, fuel, and food are expected to jump once again because of the tariffs Trump announced Feb. 1 on Mexico, Canada, and China.

Mexico [said](#) Feb. 3 that it had reached a deal with the U.S. to delay its tariffs for a month as the two countries negotiate on border security, but the blanket 25% tariffs Trump threatened could still hit later. Trump also [struck a deal](#) with Canada to delay his 25% tariffs on Canadian goods (10% on oil and natural gas) for a month. But 10% tariffs on China are expected to go into effect Feb. 4.

Experts say consumer prices on a number of goods are almost sure to rise if these tariffs are in effect for more than a few months. The right-leaning Tax Foundation estimates that the proposed tariffs on Mexico, Canada, and China could add [more than \\$800](#) of costs to each U.S. household in 2025.

Here are some of the products that could be most impacted:

## Housing

Home prices shot up in 2020 and have barely moderated since, but there's more pain to come for potential buyers, experts say. Materials for homebuilding are getting more and more expensive, and the tariffs won't help: more than 70% of imports of softwood lumber comes from Canada, according to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). The 25% tariff on softwood lumber comes on top of a 14.5% tariff already in place, according to the [NAHB](#). Mexico supplies the U.S. with gypsum, a building material used for drywall, and the price of it is expected to climb when those tariffs go into effect. Tariffs on lumber "increase the cost of construction and discourage new development," said Carl Harris, chairman of the National Association of Home Builders, [in a statement](#).

**Read More:** [What Trump's Win Means For Inflation](#).

Consumers may end up paying in the form of higher home prices, which are already up about 40% since 2020. America has a chronic shortage of homes, and many experts say building houses is the key to easing costs. Last year was already a slow time for homebuilding; construction was started on only about 1.4 million units, the lowest level since 2019 and a 4% decline from 2023. That's partly because of costs. [Inputs to residential construction](#)—essentially labor and materials—are up more than 30% since Jan. 2021. The Trump Administration's round-up of migrants will also drive

the cost of labor up, says Jeff Schott, a senior fellow at the nonpartisan Peterson Institute for International Economics. The roundups will leave fewer construction workers available, he says.

## Autos

There are few industries with supply chains that straddle borders as much as automobiles. Parts can be sent across the border to Canada and other countries and then back again numerous times as a car is made, says William Reinsch, senior advisor at the nonprofit Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Even if the tariffs are just on Canada, this is going to royally mess up automobile supply chains,” he says. The U.S. and Canada have had a free trade agreement on automobiles that goes back to the 1970s and predates NAFTA, Reinsch says.

The tariffs on Mexico and Canada could increase the price of a sedan by around \$2,000, says Michael Hicks, an economist at Ball State University in Indiana. The cost of a big SUV would go up even more because it has so many different electronic components, he says, estimating that a \$50,000 U.S. made car could see its prices increase by \$5,000 because of the tariffs.

## Energy

Canada is a big supplier of energy, including crude oil, natural gas, and hydropower. Although the energy tariffs on Canadian imports are a bit lower, at 10%, that will still have an impact, says Reinsch. This could lead to pain at the pump in the Midwest, he says, where crude oil from Alberta is sent to refineries which turn it into gasoline.

Gas prices in the Midwest [peaked in June 2022](#) at nearly \$5 per gallon, according to the Energy Information Administration. They’ve come down since but started ticking up again in January. “These refineries can’t easily shift to another kind of oil,” Reinsch says, meaning they’ll continue to import Canadian crude and pay the tariffs.

**Read More:** [\*The Age of Scams.\*](#)

The energy tariffs could also bump up energy prices in New England and New York, which get some of their electricity from Canadian hydropower. About 53% of Hydro-Quebec's sales outside of Quebec came from New England in 2023, and 10% came from New York, according to the company's [annual report](#). The New England Independent Systems Operator, which operates the region's electricity transmission network, [said in a statement](#) that about 9% of electricity demand in New England was met through imports from Canada and New York.

Canada is the source of about 9% of all U.S. natural gas supplies, according to the American Gas Association.

## Food

The U.S. grows a lot of food, but it is increasingly reliant on Mexico and Canada for fresh produce, according to the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. The volume of imported fresh vegetables alone [rose nearly 200%](#) over the past two decades.

The tariffs on Canadian imports will affect prices of a few other foods in particular. About 75% of the world's maple syrup is made in Canada, and the U.S. was the world's top importer of the stuff in 2023, buying about \$280 million dollars worth, according to the [World Bank](#). Even maple syrup made in Vermont and other places in the Northeast could be affected by the tariffs; most of the equipment used in producing it is made in Canada. Companies in Vermont are frantically moving maple equipment over the border, according to the [Maple News](#), a Vermont trade publication.

The U.S. also imports about \$17 billion worth of Canadian grain and grain products every year, according to the Grain Growers of Canada. The grain is used for products like bread, pasta, biofuels, feed, and brewing. "Whether you're growing crops or buying groceries, these tariffs will make life more expensive at a time when most are already being priced out," Tara Sawyer, an Alberta farmer and chair of the Grain Growers of Canada, said [in a statement](#).

## Cheap Stuff Online

Many economists aren't thinking as much about how the 10% tariffs on China might affect consumers because those tariffs are relatively small compared to the ones announced on the U.S.'s North American counterparts. But there's one part of the tariffs in particular that could have a big impact on stuff from China. It's known as the *de minimis* provision.

For years, companies sending cheap goods to U.S. consumers have been able to avoid tariffs because of the provision, which exempts goods that cost less than \$800 from tariffs and inspection. That's allowed Chinese retailers to send stuff directly to U.S. consumers and avoid taxes that would otherwise be levied on them. One [Congressional report](#) from June 2024 found that Chinese e-commerce sites Temu and Shein account for more than 30% of all packages shipped to the U.S. every day under the *de minimis* provision.

The latest executive orders on tariffs, however, suspend the *de minimis* provision, saying that it has been used to [funnel fentanyl](#) into the U.S. One memo from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection office obtained by TIME said that, as of Feb. 4, 2025, "Requests for *de minimis* entry and clearance for ineligible shipments will be rejected." This could mean that some of that stuff you're buying on the Internet, from clothes and cheap electronics to furniture, is likely to become a little more expensive soon.

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# Why Companies Aren't Held Accountable For Data Breaches

Alana Semuels is an economic correspondent at TIME. She covers work, consumer spending, retail, gender, and technology. She is a four-time finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism, and has won awards from the Society of Business Editors and Writers and the Los Angeles Press Club.



Oklahoma resident Ronald Allen was one of dozens of people who say their lives became more difficult in 2022 after customer data like names, email addresses, and birth dates was stolen from Samsung, the Korean electronics company.

After Allen was notified of the breach, he says, someone attempted to open an account in his name. A bank informed him his credit-card information

had been found on the Dark Web, a part of the Internet where criminals often sell and buy personal information. Allen says he's since spent many hours on the phone cancelling accounts, disputing charges, and changing his passwords. He says he spends a chunk of time every week checking his financial accounts for unauthorized activity, according to a [multidistrict legal complaint filed against Samsung](#).

The complaint alleged that a string of data breaches were indicative of lax security practices. But the effort to hold Samsung accountable has been unsuccessful. The customers did not prove that they had suffered specifically because of the data breach, District Judge Christine O'Hearn of New Jersey wrote in an [opinion](#) on Jan. 3. People's information is stolen all the time, O'Hearn reasoned, and there's no way to know that Allen or others had their identity compromised because of the data breach.

**Read More:** [How Doctors Are Pushing Medical Credit Cards On Patients.](#)

Samsung argued in legal filings that because information like Social Security numbers and credit card numbers were not stolen in the breach, and because it's impossible to know whether the data breach information was used for malicious purposes, the plaintiffs didn't have a case. "A court must dismiss a data breach class action where the Plaintiffs fail to 'adequately allege' damages 'stemming from a data breach,'" lawyers for the company wrote in a motion to dismiss.

Incidents like the Samsung data breach have become common as people and companies store more information online. There were 3,158 data breaches in 2024, up 70% from 2021, which resulted in nearly 1.7 billion notices going out to potentially affected individuals, according to a [report released January 28](#) by the Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC).

There were six megabreaches in 2024, in which at least 100 million victims were affected, according to ITRC. Four of those breaches could have been prevented if the organizations used multi-factor authentication, a security method that requires users to provide more than one form of authentication to access an account, according to ITRC. One of the companies involved in a megabreach, [Change Healthcare](#), a subsidiary of United Health, admitted as much in a May 2024 congressional hearing.

Each data breach makes additional ones more likely. When hackers steal personal information, they can use that information to get into other companies' systems and launch more data breaches. That's one likely reason the number of data breaches has spiked. But many of the companies compromised get off with a slap on the wrist—if that.

Though public companies and others regulated by the federal government face [stricter financial penalties](#) for data breaches, only about 7% of all breaches come from publicly-traded companies, according to ITRC. There's no national law covering what other organizations should do if they have been compromised. "We don't have an actual privacy law, or any uniform, minimum standards," says James Lee, the president of ITRC.

**Read More:** [\*The Age of Scams.\*](#)

When a company learns that its customers' data has been compromised, it may not even have to inform them of the problem. State laws determine what a company needs to do when its information has been accessed by an unauthorized party. And in most states, Lee says, the compromised company can decide whether there is the risk of harm to individuals. If it determines there's no risk, they don't have to send out notices. Even if they do, in many states the company determines what those notices say. It can decline to inform customers how the information was compromised or which personal information was stolen.

Of course, sending out a notice to customers doesn't help them much. They can freeze their credit or closely monitor their accounts, but they won't get compensated for their time or refunded money because their information was compromised. For that, they'd have to sue, or have someone do it on their behalf. But it's extremely difficult to successfully sue a company for financial relief after a data breach, Lee says. As Ronald Allen learned, plaintiffs have to prove they have been harmed by the incursion. With so many different attacks, it's almost impossible to know which one caused a customer's problems.

As a result, few companies can be held financially accountable for data breaches. Florida has even [passed a law](#) that says companies can't be sued

at all for data breaches if they demonstrate they have implemented certain security procedures.

Yet security experts say there are some easy things companies can do to protect information—and that many aren't doing them. These steps include using multi-factor authentication, making sure that employees are changing their passwords frequently, and ensuring that vendors and other companies they work with have appropriate measures in place.

"It's a little bit of a cycle where prior breaches feed into future breaches," says Aaron Cookstra, a director with the threat intel team at Aon Cyber Solutions. "But we don't see companies necessarily taking the measures that they need to avoid that potentially becoming an issue down the line for them."

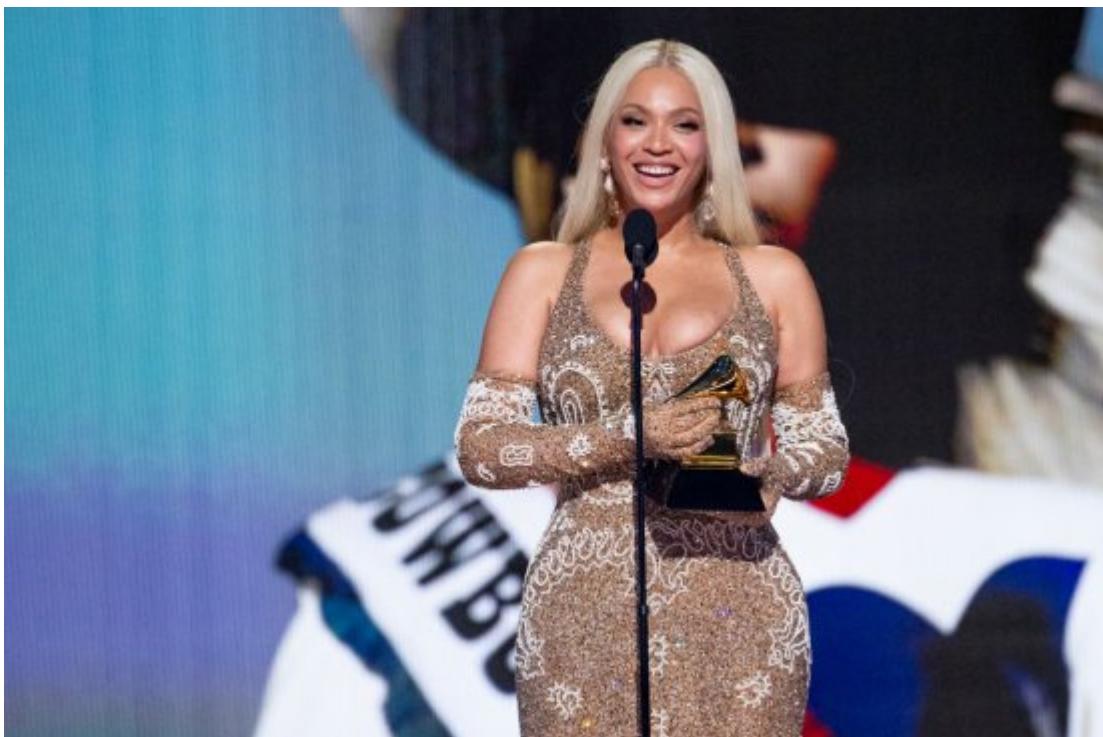
Lee of the ITRC is holding out for a national privacy law that would set minimum standards for what cybersecurity safeguards companies need to have in place and what they have to do when their data has been compromised. It is hard to establish those standards because hackers keep getting smarter, and companies need to constantly change their security procedures to keep information safe. But even saying that companies have to do something to protect customers' information, Lee says, would be a big step in the right direction.

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# Beyoncé's Album of the Year Win Shows We Won't Be Erased

[Crumpton](#) is a music, pop culture, and politics writer from Dallas. In her work—which can be found in outlets like *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Harper's Bazaar*, The Guardian, NPR, and many other platforms—Crumpton writes about a range of topics from Black Queer advocacy to the underrepresented hip-hop scenes in the southern United States to pop analysis on releases like “WAP” and “Black Is King”



Beyoncé has won the Album of the Year (AOTY) award for [Cowboy Carter](#) at the [67th Annual Grammy Awards](#). She is now the first Black woman to win the AOTY award this century—the fourth only Black woman to win this award at all, following in the legacy of Natalie Cole, Whitney Houston, and Lauryn Hill.

All I can say is: Finally. And what a win it was.

It's one thing to win the night's most prestigious award. It's another to win for *Cowboy Carter*—an album that weaves the singer's personal story of growing up as a Black girl in Texas with the expansive history of Black country music: from honoring Linda Martell, country music's first Black woman superstar, to featuring modern-day Black country singers like Tanner Adell, Reyna Roberts, Brittney Spencer, and Shaboozy, and helping propel their careers, to paying homage to the Black entertainers who toured throughout the [Chitlin Circuit](#).

[video id=fIPTJQjP autostart="viewable" vertical]

It's a sweeter success because it feels like home—one that doesn't forget (nor does it ever ask forgiveness for) where you've been and perhaps more importantly where you're going. Unapologetically Black Americana, it encourages us to be the same: proud of who we are, despite what others might think or say.

It's not lost on anyone that Beyoncé's win, which occurred on the second day of Black History Month, is a welcome reprieve for many Black Americans mourning the political reality of repeated executive orders to erase our history, as well as [rollbacks](#) on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) mandates, policies, and procedures in the federal government and [corporate America](#). For a country girl from Houston to win the Recording Academy's biggest award is barrier-breaking precisely because it allows us to be seen and fully recognized, even in the face of the limits placed upon us because of race, gender, class, and place of origin—then and now.

For many, Beyoncé and *Cowboy Carter* are just vessels for the essential work that so many Black country music who have come before her have done. This applies especially to country music, which has always been a place for anti-Black and anti-woman sentiments to flourish and prosper. [Confederate flags](#) are flown with music at country music shows. Historically, Black country musicians like [Miko Marks, The Pointer Sisters, and Rissi Palmer](#) have been subjected to racial slurs at concerts, or have been told by labelheads that they would not be able to sell records because they are Black. The racially charged mistreatment that Beyoncé experienced

at the 2016 CMA Awards is a common experience shared among Black country music artists—not to mention, what Beyoncé experienced, yet again, on the initial rollout of *Cowboy Carter*. When the first two singles of the album (“Texas Hold ‘Em” and “16 Carriages”) were first released, country music radio stations and programmers refused to play them, believing that Beyoncé is not country, but simply “expanding her kingdom,” using her class as a way to delegitimize her claim to country music; one that is never used against white men and women in the genre.

**Read More:** [Beyoncé Has Always Been Country](#)

But, Beyoncé is not your average white man or woman in country music. She is better.

It is unrealistic to think one album has the power to undo decades-long racial segregation in the American music industry. [Country music radio programmers](#) have said the industry is ready for a Black woman star, but Black women country stars are few and far in-between. Change does not occur overnight, even if that night makes history for Black women in music. It’s a slow process: Harvey Mason Jr., CEO of The Recording Academy, spoke about [recent efforts and changes](#) in The Recording Academy’s membership base and addressed criticism from artists, like The Weeknd, who once called for a boycott of The Grammys. It’s also dangerous for any person of color, specifically Black women, to seek validation from any institution—especially one that has had a shaky relationship (at best) with Black music.

But it will always be dangerous to be Black and female in America. While *Cowboy Carter* will not change that, what it did show us is that we will never be invisible. We will never be forgotten or erased. And in the event we are overlooked in this lifetime, there will always be another generation to uplift us again. We will speak the names that are lost to time, and also live within us. We are always here. And we’ll always have hope.

Even in our darkest hour, hope is our biggest weapon and our guiding light; for, most substantial movements of change originate from a dream. For country girls like Beyoncé who grew up watching her idols on television, who spent her years as a teenager in the back of a bus being transported

from show to show across the country, dreams can often feel like a flicker in the distance, rather than something within reach. But what we need most in this country is for young Black girls and women to be able to dream—to dream for a better reality for themselves, and those before them. For Linda. For Tanner. For Reyna. For Brittney. For all of us.

In her acceptance speech for the AOTY award, Beyoncé said “It’s been many, many years.” Indeed, it did feel like a moment of brief exhale—a way to acknowledge just how long this moment took to arrive.

But I’d also like to offer an addendum: A dream cannot be measured and quantified. Hope cannot be tracked and framed by third parties. All that matters is that we do not lose sight of it, and that we maintain the strength to not only survive but thrive.

After [Linda Martell](#) was blacklisted from the country music industry, she took on a milieu of jobs to support her children. She was an education aide. She was a bus driver. She did whatever she had to do for her children and grandchildren to thrive. Now, at the age of 83 years old, she is receiving her just due. The onus is always on us to hold the door open for the next Black woman to arrive.

Because if not us, then who?

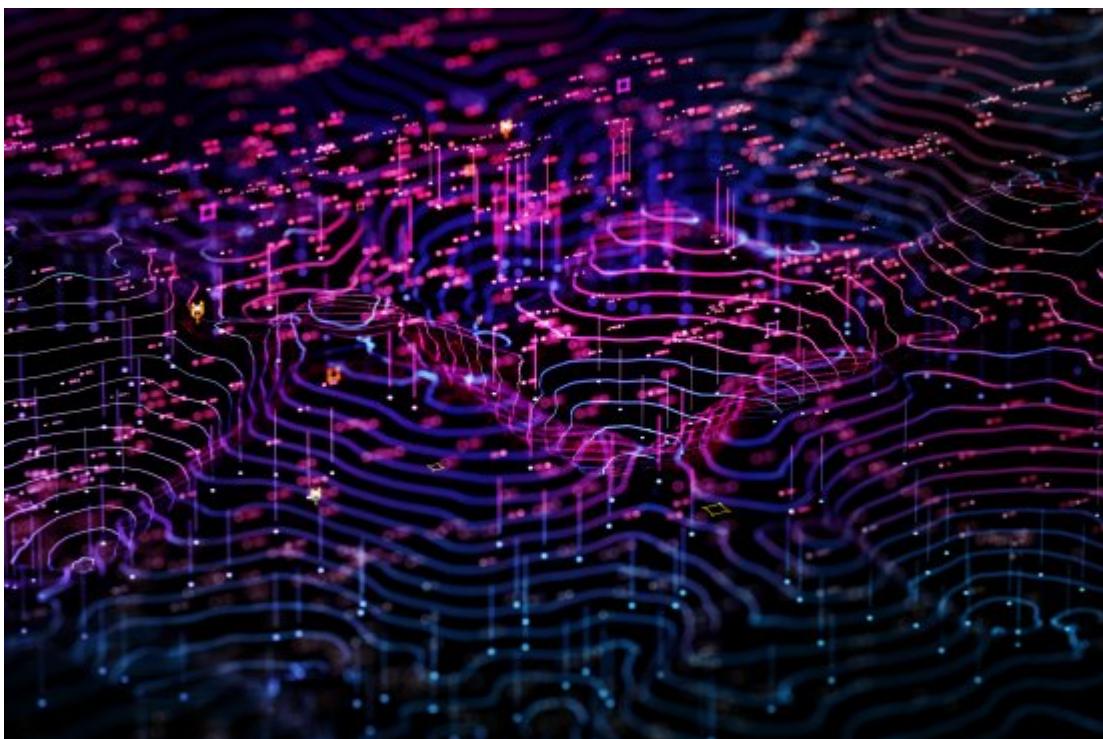
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# Why AI Safety Researchers Are Worried About DeepSeek

Billy Perrigo is a correspondent at TIME based in the London bureau. He covers the tech industry, focusing on the companies reshaping our world in strange and unexpected ways. His investigation ‘Inside Facebook’s African Sweatshop’ was shortlisted for the 2022 Orwell Prize.



The release of [DeepSeek R1](#) stunned Wall Street and Silicon Valley this month, spooking investors and impressing tech leaders. But amid all the talk, many overlooked a critical detail about the way the new [Chinese AI model](#) functions—a nuance that has researchers worried about humanity’s ability to control sophisticated new artificial intelligence systems.

It’s all down to an innovation in how DeepSeek R1 was trained—one that led to surprising behaviors in an early version of the model, which

researchers described in the [technical documentation](#) accompanying its release.

During testing, researchers noticed that the model would spontaneously switch between English and Chinese while it was solving problems. When they forced it to stick to one language, thus making it easier for users to follow along, they found that the system's ability to solve the same problems would diminish.

That finding rang alarm bells for some AI safety researchers. Currently, the most capable AI systems “think” in human-legible languages, writing out their reasoning before coming to a conclusion. That has been a boon for safety teams, whose most effective guardrails involve monitoring models’ so-called “chains of thought” for signs of dangerous behaviors. But DeepSeek’s results raised the possibility of a decoupling on the horizon: one where new AI capabilities could be gained from freeing models of the constraints of human language altogether.

To be sure, DeepSeek’s language switching is not by itself cause for alarm. Instead, what worries researchers is the new innovation that caused it. The DeepSeek paper describes a novel training method whereby the model was rewarded purely for getting correct answers, regardless of how comprehensible its thinking process was to humans. The worry is that this incentive-based approach could eventually lead AI systems to develop completely inscrutable ways of reasoning, maybe even creating their own non-human languages, if doing so proves to be more effective.

Were the AI industry to proceed in that direction—seeking more powerful systems by giving up on legibility—it would take away what was looking like it could have been an easy win” for AI safety, says Sam Bowman, the leader of a research department at Anthropic, an AI company, focused on “aligning” AI to human preferences. “We would be forfeiting an ability that we might otherwise have had to keep an eye on them.”

**Read More:** [What to Know About DeepSeek, the Chinese AI Company Causing Stock Market Chaos](#)

# Thinking without words

An AI creating its own alien language is not as outlandish as it may sound.

Last December, Meta researchers set out to [test](#) the hypothesis that human language wasn't the optimal format for carrying out reasoning—and that large language models (or LLMs, the AI systems that underpin OpenAI's ChatGPT and DeepSeek's R1) might be able to reason more efficiently and accurately if they were unhobbled by that linguistic constraint.

The Meta researchers went on to design a model that, instead of carrying out its reasoning in words, did so using a series of numbers that represented the most recent patterns inside its neural network—essentially its internal reasoning engine. This model, they discovered, began to generate what they called “continuous thoughts”—essentially numbers encoding multiple potential reasoning paths simultaneously. The numbers were completely opaque and inscrutable to human eyes. But this strategy, they found, created “emergent advanced reasoning patterns” in the model. Those patterns led to higher scores on some logical reasoning tasks, compared to models that reasoned using human language.

Though the Meta research project was very different to DeepSeek's, its findings dovetailed with the Chinese research in one crucial way.

Both DeepSeek and Meta showed that “human legibility imposes a tax” on the performance of AI systems, according to Jeremie Harris, the CEO of Gladstone AI, a firm that advises the U.S. government on AI safety challenges. “In the limit, there's no reason that [an AI's thought process] should look human legible at all,” Harris says.

And this possibility has some safety experts concerned.

“It seems like the writing is on the wall that there is this other avenue available [for AI research], where you just optimize for the best reasoning you can get,” says Bowman, the Anthropic safety team leader. “I expect people will scale this work up. And the risk is, we wind up with models where we're not able to say with confidence that we know what they're

trying to do, what their values are, or how they would make hard decisions when we set them up as agents.”

For their part, the Meta researchers argued that their research need not result in humans being relegated to the sidelines. “It would be ideal for LLMs to have the freedom to reason without any language constraints, and then translate their findings into language only when necessary,” they wrote in their paper. (Meta did not respond to a request for comment on the suggestion that the research could lead in a dangerous direction.)

**Read More:** [Why DeepSeek Is Sparking Debates Over National Security, Just Like TikTok](#)

## The limits of language

Of course, even human-legible AI reasoning isn’t without its problems.

When AI systems explain their thinking in plain English, it might look like they’re faithfully showing their work. But some experts [aren’t sure](#) if these explanations actually reveal how the AI really makes decisions. It could be like asking a politician for the motivations behind a policy—they might come up with an explanation that sounds good, but has little connection to the real decision-making process.

While having AI explain itself in human terms isn’t perfect, many researchers think it’s better than the alternative: letting AI develop its own mysterious internal language that we can’t understand. Scientists are working on [other ways to peek inside AI systems](#), similar to how doctors use brain scans to study human thinking. But these methods are still new, and haven’t yet given us reliable ways to make AI systems safer.

So, many researchers remain skeptical of efforts to encourage AI to reason in ways other than human language.

“If we don’t pursue this path, I think we’ll be in a much better position for safety,” Bowman says. “If we do, we will have taken away what, right now,

seems like our best point of leverage on some very scary open problems in alignment that we have not yet solved.”

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# Why DeepSeek Is Sparking Debates Over National Security, Just Like TikTok

Andrew R. Chow is a technology correspondent at TIME. His covers crypto, AI, tech regulation, and culture.



The fast-rising Chinese AI lab [DeepSeek](#) is sparking national security concerns in the U.S., over fears that its AI models could be used by the Chinese government to spy on American civilians, learn proprietary secrets, and wage influence campaigns. In her first press briefing, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt [said](#) that the National Security Council was “looking into” the potential security implications of DeepSeek. This comes amid news that the U.S. Navy has [banned](#) use of DeepSeek among its ranks due to “potential security and ethical concerns.”

DeepSeek, which currently tops the Apple App Store in the U.S., marks a major inflection point in the [AI arms race](#) between the U.S. and China. For the last couple years, many leading technologists and [political leaders](#) have argued that whichever country developed AI the fastest will have a huge economic and military advantage over its rivals. DeepSeek shows that China's AI has developed much faster than many had believed, despite [efforts](#) from American policymakers to slow its progress.

However, other privacy experts argue that DeepSeek's data collection policies are no worse than those of its American competitors—and worry that the company's rise will be used as an excuse by those firms to call for deregulation. In this way, the rhetorical battle over the dangers of DeepSeek is playing out on similar lines as the in-limbo [TikTok ban](#), which has deeply divided the American public.

“There are completely valid privacy and data security concerns with DeepSeek,” says Calli Schroeder, the AI and Human Rights lead at the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC). “But all of those are present in U.S. AI products, too.”

**Read More:** [What to Know About DeepSeek](#)

## Concerns over data

DeepSeek's AI models operate similarly to [ChatGPT](#), answering user questions thanks to a vast amount of data and cutting-edge processing capabilities. But its models are much cheaper to run: the company says that it [trained its R1 model](#) on just \$6 million, which is a “good deal less” than the cost of comparable U.S. models, Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei [wrote in an essay](#).

DeepSeek has built many open-source resources, including the LLM v3, which rivals the abilities of OpenAI's closed-source GPT-4o. Some people worry that by making such a powerful technology open and replicable, it presents an opportunity for people to use it more freely in malicious ways: to create bioweapons, launch large-scale phishing campaigns, or fill the internet with [AI slop](#). However, there is another contingent of builders,

including Meta's [VP and chief AI scientist Yann LeCun](#), who believe open-source development is a more beneficial path forward for AI.

Another major concern centers upon data. Some privacy experts, like Schroeder, argue that most LLMs, including DeepSeek, are built upon sensitive or faulty databases: information from data leaks of stolen biometrics, for example. David Sacks, President Donald Trump's AI and crypto czar, [accused](#) DeepSeek of leaning on the output of OpenAI's models to help develop its own technology.

There are even more concerns about how users' data could be used by DeepSeek. The company's privacy policy states that it [automatically](#) collects a slew of input data from its users, including IP addresses and keystroke patterns, and may use that to train their models. Users' personal information is stored in "secure servers located in the People's Republic of China," the policy reads.

For some Americans, this is especially worrying because generative AI tools are often used in personal or high-stakes tasks: to help with their company strategies, manage finances, or seek health advice. That kind of data may now be stored in a country with few data rights laws and little transparency with regard to how that data might be viewed or used. "It could be that when the servers are physically located within the country, it is much easier for the government to access them," Schroeder says.

One of the main reasons that TikTok was initially banned in the U.S. was due to concerns over how much data the app's Chinese parent company, ByteDance, was collecting from Americans. If Americans start using DeepSeek to manage their lives, the privacy risks will be akin to "TikTok on steroids," says Douglas Schmidt, the dean of the School of Computing, Data Sciences and Physics at William & Mary. "I think TikTok was collecting information, but it was largely benign or generic data. But large language model owners get a much deeper insight into the personalities and interests and hopes and dreams of the users."

## Geopolitical concerns

DeepSeek is also alarming those who view AI development as an existential arms race between the U.S. and China. Some leaders argued that DeepSeek shows China is now much closer to developing [AGI](#)—an AI that can reason at a human level or higher—than previously believed. American AI labs like [Anthropic](#) have safety researchers working to mitigate the harms of these increasingly formidable systems. But it's [unclear](#) what kind of safety research team Deepseek employs. The cybersecurity of Deepseek's models has also been [called into question](#). On Monday, the company limited new sign-ups after saying the app had been targeted with a “large-scale malicious attack.”

Well before AGI is achieved, a powerful, widely-used AI model could influence the thought and ideology of its users around the world. Most AI models apply censorship in certain key ways, or display biases based on the data they are trained upon. Users have found that DeepSeek's R1 refuses to answer questions about the [1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square](#), and [asserts](#) that Taiwan is a part of China. This has sparked concern from some American leaders about DeepSeek being used to promote Chinese values and political aims—or wielded as a tool for espionage or cyberattacks.

**Read More:** [\*Artificial Intelligence Has a Problem With Gender and Racial Bias.\*](#)

“This technology, if unchecked, has the potential to feed disinformation campaigns, erode public trust, and entrench authoritarian narratives within our democracies,” Ross Burley, co-founder of the nonprofit Centre for Information Resilience, wrote in a statement emailed to TIME.

AI industry leaders, and some Republican politicians, have responded by calling for massive investment into the American AI sector. President Trump [said](#) on Monday that DeepSeek “should be a wake-up call for our industries that we need to be laser-focused on competing to win.” Sacks [posted on X](#) that “DeepSeek R1 shows that the AI race will be very competitive and that President Trump was right to rescind the Biden EO,” referring to [Biden's AI Executive Order](#) which, among other things, drew attention to the potential short-term harms of developing AI too fast.

These fears could lead to the U.S. imposing stronger sanctions against Chinese tech companies, or perhaps even trying to ban DeepSeek itself. On Monday, the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party [called for stronger export controls](#) on technologies underpinning DeepSeek's AI infrastructure.

But AI ethicists are pushing back, arguing that the rise of DeepSeek actually reveals the acute need for industry safeguards. "This has the echoes of the TikTok ban: there are legitimate privacy and security risks with the way these companies are operating. But the U.S. firms who have been leading a lot of the development of these technologies are similarly abusing people's data. Just because they're doing it in America doesn't make it better," says Ben Winters, the director of AI and data privacy at the Consumer Federation of America. "And DeepSeek gives those companies another weapon in their chamber to say, 'We really cannot be regulated right now.'"

As ideological battle lines emerge, Schroeder, at EPIC, cautions users to be careful when using DeepSeek or other LLMs. "If you have concerns about the origin of a company," she says, "Be very, very careful about what you reveal about yourself and others in these systems."

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# What to Do If Your Doctor Doesn't Take Your Symptoms Seriously

Angela Haupt is a health and wellness editor at TIME. She covers happiness and actionable ways to live well.



One of the many indignities of being a patient is that you won't always be taken seriously. Perhaps the most frustrating—and startlingly common—experience is being told your medical symptoms, which have nothing to do with mental health, are anxiety.

Steph Fowler can tick off a long list of conditions she was initially told were anxiety or otherwise all in her head: endometriosis, a stomach infection from H.pylori, insomnia, and mast cell activation syndrome. She was sent for [a full neuropsychiatric evaluation](#) before her doctors eventually diagnosed her with Long COVID. Figuring out what was really going on “is

such a mixed bag,” she says. “It’s a combination of relief that somebody knows I’m not making it up, and that I can trust myself. Anger and frustration also come in, plus the grief of knowing it could have been different.”

Fowler, 43, a therapist in Chicago, has now shifted her practice to supporting clients who live with chronic and misunderstood illnesses, often helping them advocate for themselves when dealing with doctors who dismiss their symptoms as anxiety. “It’s been alarming to discover how common this is,” she says.

We asked experts what to do if a doctor doesn’t take your symptoms seriously and instead dismisses them as anxiety.

## **Bring someone to appointments with you**

It’s helpful to have someone with you, Fowler says, especially if you tend to get nervous or have a lot of symptoms to remember. A friend “can help jog your memory, but also give outside validation and input about what they’ve seen happening,” she says. Some research suggests that physicians sometimes [treat female patients differently](#) than they do males; anecdotally, Fowler has found that if you bring a man to your appointment, “they might listen more,” she says. “I’ve unfortunately felt this and experienced this, and I know clients who have experienced this, too.”

**Read More:** [8 Symptoms Doctors Often Dismiss As Anxiety](#)

## **Track your symptoms**

Lots of apps—like [Bearable](#) and [Visible](#)—allow you to digitally track health symptoms like mood and migraines. The more information you can supply your doctor with, the better, Fowler says. Or you can simply use a pen and paper, writing down what you’re experiencing, the exact date and time, any potential triggers (like what you ate beforehand), and how long it lasted. “It’s an unfortunately necessary use of energy and capacity—which, if

you're sick, is limited," she acknowledges. "But it can really help make your case and see trends over time."

## Describe your symptoms clearly

Good health care hinges on strong communication. Before talking to your doctor, spend time planning the best way to paint a vivid, accurate description of your symptoms, suggests Dr. Robert Gee, assistant dean of student affairs and a behavioral sciences professor at Ross University School of Medicine. "I'm short of breath even when I feel calm," for example, tells a different story than "I feel anxious sometimes," he says. Make sure you mention where you feel pain, what medications you're taking, any associated symptoms, and whether anything exacerbates or relieves what you're experiencing. Be prepared, too, to rate how severe your symptoms are on a scale of 1 to 10.

## Encourage your providers to collaborate

Ideally, your provider will practice "[collaborative care](#)," which means specialists like a psychiatrist or social worker are embedded within the primary care unit. That kind of integration can help ensure physical symptoms aren't mistaken as mental-health symptoms, says Dr. Monika Roots, co-founder and president of Bend Health, which provides pediatric mental-health care. "They're helping that pediatrician or family physician or internal medicine doctor think through, 'Hey, have you looked at this lab, have you looked at that vital sign?'"

**Read More:** [Long Dismissed, Chronic Lyme Disease Is Finally Getting Its Moment](#)

If you're not able to go to a collaborative-care practice, you can still ask different doctors to communicate with each other. For example, Roots say, you could ask your primary care doctor: "Could you talk to the psychiatrist I'm also seeing?" Or ask your psychiatrist: "Could you talk to my primary care physician?" Doing so encourages collaboration, she says, and helps

ensure doctors are comparing notes and making sure they don't miss an important diagnosis.

## **Ask specific questions**

You can help your doctor feel like you're part of the team, Gee says. He suggests phrasing a request for additional workups like this: "Could we do a few extra tests just to rule things out? It would really help to put my mind at ease."

If your doctor continues to brush off your symptoms as being all in your head, Fowler recommends responding like this: "If it's not anxiety, what else could it be? And how are you ruling this out?" If your doctor still isn't willing to run tests, ask them what symptoms—or duration of symptoms—would indicate they would be necessary. Doing so "helps the doctor show their work to the patient," she says. "It helps make apparent why it is that they're not thinking this is a heart attack or a stroke or any of the big scary things people might be concerned about."

## **Ask your doctor to document that they opted not to pursue further testing**

If you believe you need additional testing, and it's not happening, tell your clinician you'd like that marked in your chart. "It's a paper trail," Fowler says. "It also causes doctors to slow down and consider that this is documented." Upon reflection, they may decide to pursue more tests after all.

## **Appeal to your doctor's human side**

Fowler has found it can be helpful to ask: "If you had a loved one with these symptoms, what would your next steps be?" The question often spurs doctors to consider the situation with genuine patience and care. That way, "It's not just the patient they're seeing at 12:35 before their lunch break,"

she says. “If it’s somebody they care about, they’re more likely to be engaged.”

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# Trump's Freeze on Foreign Aid Will Make Diseases Surge

Yamey is a physician and professor of global health and public policy at Duke University, where he directs the Center for Policy Impact in Global Health



On his first day back in office, President Trump ordered a sweeping [90-day spending freeze](#) on almost all U.S. foreign aid, initially making exceptions only for military funding to Egypt and Israel and emergency food aid. The “stop-work order” in the directive had immediate consequences for people’s health and wellbeing.

HIV clinics around the world funded by the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), a highly successful aid program launched by George W. Bush that has [saved](#) more than 25 million lives, had to cancel

appointments and [turn patients away](#). Two-thirds of the staff of the President's Malaria Initiative—the world's largest funder of malaria control programs, also founded by George W. Bush—have been [fired](#). Humanitarian assistance programs in Gaza, Sudan, and Syria that provide services like clean water and cholera treatment were [halted](#). Oxygen supplies are no longer reaching health facilities in some low-income countries.

Funding was frozen for critical disease control programs that prevent and treat a range of deadly infectious diseases, including malaria, Marburg virus, mpox, and tuberculosis. In Zambia, distribution of life-saving medical supplies to treat childhood diarrhea and bleeding in pregnant women came to a [stop](#). At one U.S.-funded hospital in the Mae La refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border, 60 patients were sent home. “It feels like one easy decision by the U.S. president is quietly killing so many lives,” one of these patients, who has tuberculosis, [told](#) the New York Times. He was sent home with only one week’s supply of medicine and has no other way to get treatment when the supply runs out.

**Read More:** [\*I'm a Veteran. Trump's Trans Military Ban Betrays Our Troops\*](#)

Last week, the distressing reports of people being denied their HIV medicines led Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who oversees U.S. aid, to [issue](#) an emergency temporary waiver that—in theory, at least—allowed U.S. aid to be used to pay for HIV antiretroviral medications. But there was a huge amount of uncertainty about what this waiver covered. Colleagues in low- and middle-income countries who provide HIV services funded by PEPFAR say that they were instructed to stop work and that the language of Secretary Rubio’s waiver was too vague to have any meaningful impact. Facing pressure to clarify the confusion, on Feb. 1, 2025, the Department of State issued a [memo](#) saying that the waiver covers HIV treatment as well as services for preventing transmission of HIV from mother to children—but not other kinds of preventive services.

While these waivers are welcome, they are narrow in scope and temporary, and they do not do enough to overcome the confusion, disruption, and paralysis in U.S.-funded health programs worldwide.

It is true that many low- and middle-income countries are working towards increasing their own domestic spending on health so that they become less aid dependent, and that aid donors, including the U.S., have signaled their support for such a transition out of aid. PEPFAR, for example, in its latest 5-year [strategy](#), commits to helping countries mobilize domestic financing and gradually increase country ownership and management of their national HIV control programs. But the key word here is “gradually.” Sudden shocks, like freezing aid overnight, do not accelerate the transition process; they blow it up and can cause disease resurgence.

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There is now a wealth of [research evidence](#) and [real-world experience](#) on how best low- and middle-income countries can transition out of aid and take over the funding of their disease control programs in a way that is careful, safe, well-planned, and unhurried. The process typically takes around a decade or more, during which countries spend an increasing amount of their own domestic resources on these programs, year on year, so that they don’t face a sudden spending cliff when the donor exits.

Managing donor exits well is critical in order to maintain the remarkable gains that have been made by countries, with the support of aid donors, in controlling deadly infectious diseases over the last few decades. These gains are fragile; in places where there is still ongoing transmission of an infectious disease, disease control programs must be maintained and never interrupted. The reason that transition is done slowly and carefully is that countries need adequate time to get their health delivery systems and their finances strong enough to fully take over these programs. Sudden, chaotic withdrawal of aid is the worst kind of interruption—one that puts lives on the line.

To see what happens when aid donors withdraw their support precipitously, we only need to look at what happened in Romania when two donors exited simultaneously. In 2010, the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria—the world’s largest multilateral donor to HIV programs—rapidly departed from Romania, with no plan put in place for the Romanian government to fund or take over HIV prevention services. Romania was a

so-called “first wave” transition country; it was in the group of countries that first lost support from the Global Fund. As we noted in our [study](#) on donor transitions from HIV services, withdrawal of the Global Fund from Romania “left a significant gap in financing for HIV prevention activities that was not covered by the government.” The Global Fund’s exit was compounded by the simultaneous withdrawal of funding from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, an aid donor that had previously supported HIV-prevention efforts among people who inject drugs, such as needle and syringe exchange programs.

The double whammy of two donors withdrawing their aid was catastrophic. HIV prevention and treatment services in Romania for vulnerable populations—sex workers, men who have sex with men, and people who inject drugs—collapsed, and the HIV prevalence shot up quickly. For example, among people who inject drugs, HIV prevalence rose from 1.1% in 2009 to 6.9% three years later; by 2013, 53% of this population had HIV.

**Read More:** [Why We Need to Remember the Physical Effects of Polio](#)

We can also look to see what happens when funding for malaria control programs is halted in places where there is still ongoing transmission. In a [study](#) we published in 2012, we looked back through history to identify all episodes of malaria resurgence. We found 75 resurgence events in 61 countries that occurred from the 1930s through the 2000s. The most important finding of our study was that almost all of the resurgence events—68 out of 75—were due at least in part to weakening of the malaria control program. The most common reason for this weakening was a disruption in funding.

The message is clear. Trump’s sudden disruption to funding disease control programs worldwide will wreak havoc. When people stop taking HIV medicines, they don’t just become sick; their HIV viral load also rises, which can drive disease transmission. The New York *Times* [reports](#) that in Uganda, aid workers estimate that about “40 newborns contracted HIV per day when the U.S. stopped funding for antiretroviral drugs.” Sudden treatment interruptions can also cause the rise of drug-resistant HIV strains. If a patient develops a resistant strain, then they will not be able to go back

on the same HIV drugs as before. They will need different, more costly second-line medicines.

Make no mistake: freezing U.S. health aid is the opposite of a well-managed, careful transition out of aid. It puts people at risk of illness and death and risks diseases raging out of control.

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# When Is Tamiflu Worth Taking?

Angela Haupt is a health and wellness editor at TIME. She covers happiness and actionable ways to live well.



The flu is always a nasty foe—and it's particularly vicious this year. [According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), there have been at least 12 million flu infections since the fall in the U.S., leading to 160,000 hospitalizations and 6,600 deaths.

Dr. Mahesh Polavarapu, medical director of emergency medicine at NewYork-Presbyterian Westchester, has mostly seen influenza A this year, a strain that causes more serious illness than influenza B. “If you’re getting flu-like symptoms, and you’re like, ‘This feels worse than before,’ you’re not wrong,” he says. “It’s pretty harsh this year.”

Fortunately, there are ways to alleviate at least some of the misery of the flu (besides, of course, getting [your annual flu shot](#) before you get sick).

Doctors often prescribe Tamiflu, an antiviral that can treat both influenza A and B. Here's what to know about how it works—and whether it might be right for you.

## How does Tamiflu work?

Most people have flu symptoms for three to seven days. Tamiflu can shorten that [by about 24 hours](#) by blocking the virus from replicating in your body. "It's basically stopping the virus from multiplying or shedding any more than it already has," Polavarapu says. (Antibiotics, which treat bacterial infections, don't work against a viral infection like the flu.)

**Read More:** [When Should I Go to the Doctor With Cold Symptoms?](#)

Tamiflu starts working after the first dose, and within a day or two, it will have built up in your body enough to make a noticeable difference. But timing is crucial—you need to start taking it within 48 hours of symptom onset. "I tell patients to consider it a way to reduce the duration of their symptoms by hopefully a day," Polavarapu says. Tamiflu (sold under the generic name oseltamivir) can be prescribed as a pill or in liquid form, and most people take 75 mg twice a day for five days, he adds.

## Who might benefit from taking Tamiflu?

You're most likely to benefit from Tamiflu if you have [risk factors](#) that predispose you to serious influenza infection. That includes being 65 or older, under 2, pregnant, or immunocompromised, or having a chronic condition like diabetes, heart disease, or asthma. [Research suggests](#) that starting Tamiflu within two days of developing symptoms can reduce the risk of death from a serious case of the flu; it also lowers ICU admission rates among hospitalized adults.

Tamiflu is also available to people outside of these higher risk groups. It can be taken by anyone else who's at least 2 weeks old and who's had flu

symptoms for no more than two days.

## Is it really worth it just to feel better one day sooner?

“Flu makes you feel very crummy, and so a day less is certainly better than a day more,” says Dr. Helen Chu, a professor of medicine, allergy, and infectious diseases at the University of Washington. “But it’s not like a dramatic difference, so I understand why people have reservations about it.”

**Read More:** [\*The Supplements Doctors Actually Think You Should Take\*](#)

Whether it’s right for you comes down to your own priorities. “You have to weigh your pros and cons,” she says. “You have to go pick up the medicine”—an inconvenient task when you’re sick—“and it can make people nauseated.” Yet there’s another, often significant benefit to keep in mind: Tamiflu can be a way to help keep your family members safe.

## Does Tamiflu make you less contagious?

You can still spread the flu to other people while you’re on Tamiflu, Chu says. Scientists aren’t sure exactly how much less contagious it makes you. However, [research suggests](#) that the antiviral helps prevent household outbreaks. In [one study](#), it reduced secondary infections among people who lived in the same house by 50% if those who weren’t sick yet started Tamiflu within 24 hours. “You can use it to stop transmission,” Chu says. “If someone in your house has the flu, that person can take it for treatment, but you can also take it to prevent yourself from acquiring the infection.”

## Can you take Tamiflu to prevent getting the flu?

If you haven’t been exposed to the flu and you’re simply desperate to avoid catching it, it doesn’t make sense to take Tamiflu. Your doctor won’t prescribe it for that reason—it’s not like a vitamin you might take in hopes of bolstering immune health. “It’s not a preventive measure,” Polavarapu

says. However, if you have been exposed to the flu—especially by someone in your household—many doctors will consider prescribing a prophylactic dose to lower your chance of infection.

**Read More:** [\*Is Zinc Good for Colds?\*](#)

Keep in mind, however, that Tamiflu isn't a guaranteed way to stay healthy, so you still need to practice other healthy behaviors when flu is in your house: washing your hands frequently, wearing a face mask, cleaning high-touch surfaces like doorknobs and light switches. And for family members with the flu, don't go out unless you absolutely need to: The CDC [recommends](#) staying home until your symptoms have been improving and you haven't had a fever for at least 24 hours.

## How do I know if I need Tamiflu?

Thanks to the rise of [at-home tests](#), it's now easy to confirm whether you have the flu without even leaving your house. "The way the flu works, unlike some other viruses, is that it really hits you like a truck," Chu says. "You're feeling fine, and then suddenly you just need to crash." If you're overcome with the urge to climb into bed, and your entire body hurts, it's time to test, she says. If it turns out you do in fact have the flu, call your doctor and ask about Tamiflu. "The earlier you start it, the better," she adds —so don't spend too much time vacillating about the decision.

## When is it too late to take Tamiflu?

The gold standard is to start Tamiflu within two days of symptom onset; if you've been sick longer than that, your doctor probably won't prescribe it for you. But there are some exceptions. If you're immunocompromised or so sick that you're hospitalized with the flu, "then we start it any time," Chu says. "Most people clear the virus very quickly, but people who have suppressed immune systems are shedding it for much longer, so you can start Tamiflu later on."

## Can kids take Tamiflu?

Yes—but at a slightly smaller dose than teens and adults. [Children who are 2 weeks to 12 years old](#) take a twice-daily dose based on their weight. [As the CDC notes](#), taking Tamiflu curbs the incidence of ear infections in kids with the flu, and may also reduce more serious complications like pneumonia and hospitalization.

**Read More:** [What to Do If Your Doctor Doesn't Take Your Symptoms Seriously](#)

## Does Tamiflu have any side effects?

Tamiflu is “a safe medication,” Polavarapu says, with a track record spanning more than two decades. It was [approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) in 1999, and the generic version, oseltamivir phosphate, was approved in 2016.

Still, like most medications, there’s a risk of side effects. You might feel nauseous and even vomit if you take Tamiflu. Diarrhea is also possible, though less common. “Essentially what I tell patients is that the medicine itself can make you feel kind of crummy, particularly the nausea,” Polavarapu says. Sometimes, if a patient doesn’t tolerate it well, he prescribes anti-nausea medication alongside it. Ideally, he says, treating one set of symptoms won’t cause another set to pop up, but it’s smart to be aware what kind of side effects are possible.

“Medications like antivirals aren’t always the answer,” he says. “They’re an answer in a specific time duration,” and for certain people, but they’re not a magic, flu-dissipating bullet—and whether they’re right for you depends on your own unique circumstances.

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# The (Real) Problem With Fake Plants

Maria Balaska is a London-based philosopher and psychologist. Her research project on fake nature is funded by the [Kone Foundation](#). Her latest book is [\*Anxiety and Wonder: on Being Human\*](#).



When the German philosopher Immanuel Kant puzzled over why nature looks beautiful to us, he considered the case of replicas. Imagine, Kant wrote in the late 1700s, a jovial innkeeper who, for lack of a nightingale to enchant his guests, plays a trick on them by hiding a boy in a bush with a reed “hit[ting] off nature to perfection.” Kant was sure that the moment people found out the truth, “no one will long endure listening to this sound.” Why should that be, if the sound is identical?

Kant's confidence may seem out of place today. Copies of nature proliferate. Not only can we go [skiing in Dubai and sunbathe on indoor tropical beaches in Germany](#), but fake plants and synthetic lawns are [filling up](#) our cities, [restaurants](#), and homes. The global artificial flowers market is [predicted](#) to reach \$1.78 billion this year. Bewilderingly, faux flowers—the upmarket term for fake—are even [presented](#) as a green alternative. Faced with impressively elaborate copies of plants that never droop or wither, and living increasingly convenience-based lives, a lot of us may wonder if we are justified to choose natural over fake, and on what grounds.

Yet research consistently shows that experiencing real nature, from having houseplants to gardening, has [unparalleled](#) mental health benefits that are [significantly diminished in the case of artificial experiences of nature](#). What is so rewarding about experiencing real nature that cannot be replicated by artificial copies?

**Read More:** [\*Your Houseplants Have Some Powerful Health Benefits\*](#)

Philosophers long ago identified an unexpected pleasure of natural beings: they satisfy the human desire to understand. Aristotle thought that asking “Why?” can lead to one of the greatest human delights—knowing the world around us. With real nature, we can receive answers that render the most alien-looking and silent beings understandable, from plants to sea urchins and sponges—much like they did for Aristotle, who was famously captivated by them. Answers to questions like, “Why does my plant have blossoms?” and “why does it get brown spots?” teach us something about the identity of these living beings, what is good and bad for them.

This pleasure disappears in the case of fake plants. The only answer I can hope to receive when I ask “why” is something about the intention of their designer, like that they wanted to give it the appearance of blossoming, or make it pass more realistically for a real plant by making it look a bit unhealthy. In this case, asking “why” leads us back to ourselves.

Everything else that takes place with a fake plant is merely a result of chemical and physical reactions. For instance, imagine I own both a real and fake plant, and I place them on a sunny spot in my study. As sunlight hits them, both will feel warm to touch. At higher temperatures, particles

speed up and gain energy. But with my real plant, the sunlight also links to photosynthesis, which is vital for its development. Whether the fake plant is warmed by the sun or stays cool when it is cold and dark has no bearing on any process within it: it is neither good nor bad for it.

Because a real plant has a life of its own, we can care for it in a way that is not possible for the replica. I can help an acorn become an oak by planting it, but I can neither help a plastic acorn grow into an oak nor impede it from doing so. This would be the case even if we imagined a fake plant that was designed to behave as if it needed care, [which scientists are beginning to explore](#). And if a fake plant was made to turn greener when placed in a humid environment, nothing detrimental would happen to it if I did not do so. Even if I placed that fake plant in a humid environment, still nothing would happen for it. The fake plant can neither die nor flourish.

Receiving answers to our “whys” allows us to care. We can acquire information to promote the real plant’s health, water it, make sure it has enough light, and so on. This brings the joy of helping something thrive for its own sake—the pleasure of blooms, green leaves, and growth along with the sadness of failing to do so. But we cannot have one without the other.

This can also help us care about the other natural beings that are suffering due to their impeccable copies. For it is a law of nature that if a deathless copy is produced, waste must follow; and that waste from such copies results in [the death of real, living nature](#). Most of the world’s fake plants are indeed made in China’s Pearl River delta, a global [pollution hotspot](#).

Thinking of plants as lives that serve their own purposes opens up a distinct way of understanding our connection to them. They are independent from us and yet knowable; otherworldly and yet familiar. It is this profound sense of sharedness that we glimpse when we observe our plants’ activities. This connection brings us joy and inspires us to care for them. After all, who truly cares about a fake plant?

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# How Insecurity Became the New Inequality

Quart is the author of five acclaimed books of nonfiction including [\*Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream\*](#), the paperback of which is out on April 9, 2024.



In a mere week, Trump's second presidential term has already been accompanied by a cascade of startling and unnerving political and natural events: from the U.S. leaving the [World Health Organization](#) and the [Paris Climate Accords](#), to the nighttime [firings of inspectors general](#) to the [pardons](#) of the Jan. 6 rioters; from the nightclubs and home raids of [immigrants](#) in a number of cities to the [wildfires](#) roaring through swathes of Los Angeles. Each new occurrence, in turn, fills many with a greater and greater sense of insecurity.

This is our new normal—uncertainty all the time, at every moment, in all places. I call it “terra infirma,” an inversion of “terra firma,” or solid ground. The ground beneath our feet is perpetually shifting. And it’s hard to keep our balance.

As the director of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, this constant uncertainty has an effect on how I think about my work, as well. I’ve started to consider [insecurity](#) as the new inequality. The problem isn’t just the massive gap between “haves” and “have-nots,” though that does keep widening. For those who lack the resources to absorb each new blow, the constant instability hits hardest of all—but in truth, this insecurity affects almost everyone except the wealthiest.

Author and activist Astra Taylor’s book *Age of Insecurity* has shaped and inspired my understanding of how “insecurity” manifests in the economy and society right now. Taylor argues that a wide variety of crises, from rising inequality to eroding mental health, have insecurity at their root. In the last decade or so, social researchers have identified proliferating categories of uncertainty. These include not only the political insecurity we are experiencing right now but also more bespoke varieties, like “[transportation insecurity](#)” (the difficulty of reaching destinations because of damaged buses and trains), and “[informational insecurity](#)” (due to content that has been muddled and sullied by deepfakes, disinformation, and paranoia). There are also the politicians who obsess over “illegal immigrants” supposedly taking jobs or tariffs, ensuring voters feel a certain degree of insecurity. These politicians then offer *themselves* up as the voice of common sense, the irony being, of course, that their falsely secure rhetoric just augments our perception of chaos.

Insecurity, in fact, has become an indicator by which a number of scholars now assess societal well-being. Groups like the [National True Cost of Living Coalition](#) are calling for a new measurement of Americans’ financial well-being. Instead of viewing these people through the scrim of poverty, the Coalition instead considers their “economic security,” they explain, “by looking beyond the most basic of needs to understand what it truly costs to live.” There’s also the [Economic Policy Uncertainty Index](#). One of its creators, economist Nicholas Bloom, has referred to key political events as

“uncertainty shocks” that create economic disorder, including Brexit in 2016 and the first Trump presidential election. “Insecurity” is not just the societal diagnosis of liberals and progressives. [GOP](#) pollster Patrick Ruffini has argued that a [“security gap”](#) explains the 2024 election results, where the least secure groups “swung right...”

For too long, stability has been framed as a psychological characteristic, a mental steadiness cultivated from within. By the same token, instability has been viewed as a psychological failing that comes from low self-esteem, a history of abuse, or a failure to “work on oneself.”

But in the time of terra infirma, a certain degree of anxiety about insecurity is not a moral failing—it’s an honest and insightful reaction to what’s happening around us. What we think of as psychological insecurity—or being a “classic neurotic”—is a state of mind that reflects actual conditions.

Insecurity is the key lens through which Terry Friedline, scholar and the author of [Banking on a Revolution](#), looks when she studies the financial struggles of people on the economic edge. To me, it explains why Trump was elected by people who were not at the bottom of the economy but felt like they were just holding on to social solidarity by their fingernails, much like those described in author and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich’s [Fear of Falling](#). (I wrote the introduction for the new edition.) Their feelings of insecurity grew more acute in the late stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when the government withdrew some crucial support it had put in place. For instance, the 2021 American Rescue Plan’s expanded child tax credit reduced child poverty tremendously. It ended, however, in 2022. More broadly, [Build Back Better](#) forwarded a range of social welfare provisions that were intended as permanent: This more perpetual and humane social welfare policy vanished in the mist.

**Read More:** [Bootstrapping Has Always Been A Myth. The New American Dream Proves It](#)

As a result, insecurity was suddenly normalized. When people emerged from the pandemic fog, they found that paying bills on credit and not having enough to eat had become an everyday experience. The abrupt

precarity was felt hardest by the poorest Americans, but they were not alone. “Insecurity is felt pretty far up the income ladder,” says Friedline, referring to a growing class of people whom I have called the [Middle Precariat](#), like those with advanced degrees who teach college students as adjuncts and still subsist close to the poverty line, or high school teachers who can’t pay their rent on their salaries and have to drive rideshares on the side to make ends meet. Those making \$35,000 a year in San Francisco, for instance, can’t meet their basic survival needs, but in the same area, even a family living on [\\$200,000](#) may also find itself precarious, pouring resources into health insurance or scrambling to afford tuition.

Part of what has caused economic insecurity is that we’ve come to rely more on credit and debt in the last few decades, a phenomenon taking place at all income levels except for the super-rich. In Friedline’s view—and my own—this particular flavor of economic insecurity has caused some voter alienation from traditional politics. If you are weighed down by your bad credit score—with the [generalized credit score](#), as Friedline points out, being a relatively new measurement—how can you focus on marching, or organizing, or even voting?

In a world of terra firma, the shakiest ground of all may be our broken and rigged healthcare system. The U.S. spends twice as much on healthcare per capita as other countries, and Americans still constantly worry [about affording treatment](#), accessing doctors in a timely fashion, or being able to get a clear diagnosis. As [Kate Nicholson](#), the Executive Director and Founder of the National Pain Advocacy Center, told me, many of the people she works with are fed up with medical insecurity, stemming, say, from procedures routinely denied by insurance companies at the 11th hour, even after the doctors and nurses have scrubbed and are ready to operate. It was something I experienced myself when I was diagnosed with Long COVID last year. Even with health insurance, I had to wait months to see doctors who might have the expertise to figure out what was happening. It took five months to get even a quasi-accurate diagnosis. In that time, I paid out of pocket for complex tests not covered by insurance.

**Read More:** [The Relentless Cost of Chronic Diseases](#)

Medical insecurity often has truly terrible outcomes. Nicholson mentioned one of her colleagues, [Tinu Abayomi-Paul](#), whose insurance stopped paying for her [chemotherapy](#), and who had recently died. “Medical insecurity is not just something that causes anxiety—it can result in death,” says Nicholson.

So, what can we do?

To combat this shaky malaise, we first have to break out of our neurotic isolation. We must seek the glimmer of the Soviet era’s [“kitchen table”](#) culture, what the anthropologist Victor Turner called “communitas.” In this moment of rupture and uncertainty, this sort of [solidarity](#) can be an unexpected salve.

Once we realize our predicament is not our fault, we must organize to change the systems that make us insecure. One solution is alternative institutions in finance, including [public banking](#). But we also need better regulation of the draconian health insurance plans that create medical insecurity and the mainstream banking system, so that both may behave in more moral ways. (All this regulation of course rests on us electing better and more effective politicians who recognize how many of us suffer from insecurity.)

We also need to look down and recognize that we’re *all* standing on terra firma. (Anyone without the means to build a bunker to wait out the inevitable shocks, that is.) With that recognition, we must each develop a clearer understanding of how those in power deliberately exploit our individual and societal uncertainty—and what we can do about it.

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# How a Children's Toy Company Launched a TV Juggernaut

Alana Semuels is an economic correspondent at TIME. She covers work, consumer spending, retail, gender, and technology. She is a four-time finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism, and has won awards from the Society of Business Editors and Writers and the Los Angeles Press Club.



Long before he started watching TV, people started giving my son stuff decorated with cute cartoon puppies dressed in distinctive outfits. There was a Dalmatian dressed as a fireman. A bulldog construction worker. A German shepherd police officer. I could not figure out why these brightly colored

dogs seemed to be on roughly half the gear in our house, from shirts and hats to umbrellas and fire trucks.

What I learned was that the puppies were characters in a TV show called *Paw Patrol*, which is about the adventures of a 10-year-old boy named Ryder and a crew of puppies who help people. The show is a children's-entertainment juggernaut. *Paw Patrol*, which airs on Nickelodeon and is available to stream on YouTube, Paramount+, and other platforms, has been the third most in-demand children's TV series worldwide since at least 2020, beating out shows like *Cocomelon*, *Bluey*, and *Peppa Pig*, according to Parrot Analytics. (In the U.S., only SpongeBob SquarePants and Sesame Street ranked higher.) In 2021, Paramount premiered a *Paw Patrol* movie—one of the first films targeted at the preschool set—and it grossed \$144 million worldwide. A sequel in 2023 raked in even more money, and a third is in the works.

But where *Paw Patrol* is really without peer is in the realm of children's merchandising. Go into a Walmart or a Target and you'll find *Paw Patrol* everywhere—on the diapers, the toothpaste, the Band-Aids, the cereal, and, of course, in the toy aisle. Paramount estimates that there are around 100,000 different *Paw Patrol* products. It was the top preschool toy property in each of the past two years in the U.S., the U.K., Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, France, Canada, Belgium, and Australia, according to the market-research company Circana. To date, *Paw Patrol* toys and other consumer products have racked up more than \$15 billion in retail sales worldwide, according to Paramount, which owns Nickelodeon.

*Paw Patrol* was created in 2010 by Spin Master, a Canadian toy company. At the time, Spin Master was known for selling gadgets like juggling sticks and radio-controlled airplanes; it had almost no track record in television. And while it's not unprecedented for TV shows to be based on toys—in the 1980s, both *G.I. Joe* and *My Little Pony* followed this path—Spin Master's innovation was to create a TV show and a toy brand in tandem from the start, with both the toymaking and entertainment sides influencing one another. "Typically, entertainment leads the way," says Amanda Cioletti, vice president of content and strategy at License Global, a trade publication. "But they came together from the very beginning and created a television series that was simultaneously rooted in product."

It is now conventional for film studios to launch movies alongside merchandise—just look at all the *Wicked* goods that have gone on sale since the movie’s November 2024 opening. But when *Paw Patrol* premiered, it was unusual for TV shows to even have much advance merchandise, let alone for writers to consider it as they created the show. Now, because of the show’s success, more consumer-product executives want a seat at the entertainment table, Cioletti says. “They’ve created this successful way to build a franchise,” says Cioletti, “and now it’s become a reputable model for other entertainment and toy companies.”

Spin Master is broadening this strategy. The company is growing its Hollywood presence so that it can greenlight more movies and franchises outside of *Paw Patrol*, and the toys that go with them. “We love the art of storytelling and character creation,” says Ronnen Harary, co-founder of Spin Master, “so we’re going to expand our storytelling scope.”

Whether this is a good thing for children is a different matter. *Paw Patrol* is not particularly educational; it doesn’t, for example, teach children specific letters or numbers, like *Sesame Street*, or lessons about how to navigate difficult childhood situations, like *Daniel Tiger*. Critics have questioned the show’s negative portrayal of government—the two mayors in the show are incompetent—and dubbed it “Copaganda” for the way it glamorizes law enforcement. Then there’s the question of whether parents want merchandising opportunities to shape the programming their kids watch. If it feels normal for writers to create a show that the marketing division then commercializes, a threshold has been passed when toymakers create a show for kids with one eye turned toward getting their parents to buy products.



**On a recent Wednesday**, a 10-year-old boy named Jesse Gervasi stands in a recording booth in Toronto, a baseball cap pulled over his eyes and his hands tucked into the pocket of his hoodie. Gervasi, who voices Marshall, the Dalmatian fire pup, is reading lines for an upcoming *Paw Patrol* episode that involves farming. The character is goofy and a little bit clumsy; in this episode, like many others, Marshall trips before giggling out a pun. “Whew, didn’t see-d that coming,” Gervasi says. Editors in the booth tell him to emphasize the d to highlight the farming joke. Eventually, Gervasi gets it right, and he moves on to the next line: “Ryder needs us!” It’s a phrase repeated in every episode, a cue for the pups to rush to the Paw Patrol Lookout to find out their mission.

This is a typical plot for a show about the hijinks of puppies who occupy a world of inept adults, and whose salvation is a precocious 10-year-old boy with a lot of dogs. Each episode follows a similar format. A human or fellow animal gets in trouble. Ryder calls the pups together. He selects which ones

will best be able to help him on their mission, and they get into their vehicles and set out to rescue someone.

*Paw Patrol* began with a marketer's insight about what draws children in, and a recognition of Spin Master's limitations. Toymakers like Spin Master don't typically invent toys themselves. Instead, they scout ideas from inventors. Founded in 1994 by two recent college graduates, Spin Master had done well commercializing concepts like Earth Buddy, a potato-like head that grows grass for hair, and Air Hogs, which are remote-controlled airplanes. But 15 years ago, it was struggling to get into the lucrative business of making toys based on popular characters like Mickey Mouse. "We eventually figured, if we can't get a character license, let's create one of our own," says Harary.

The company's first attempt, in 2008, was Bakugan, a ball that transforms into different action figures. The toy spawned a TV show and became a billion-dollar business. But after about four years, sales slumped and Spin Master laid off more than 300 employees.

What kids liked most about Bakugan was that it transformed from one thing into another. So Spin Master decided to put out a call for ideas about toys that involved transformation, hoping to find one it could simultaneously develop into a TV show. "The idea really was about controlling our own destiny to be able to develop, create, and produce series, since we didn't have a drawer full of brands like other companies," says Jennifer Dodge, who joined Spin Master in 2009 to launch its entertainment studio.

A pitch from a toy creator named Keith Chapman fit the bill. Chapman's concept was about a boy named Robbie, who worked with a team of rescue pups to help people. (Robbie was later changed to Ryder.) The company got to work developing the story behind the pups, drawing on its own expertise with "play patterns"—essentially how kids entertain themselves, Harary says. Executives brought in both animators and toy designers who worked together to create characters and storylines. "It really became an iterative process between toy designers and animation designers working together," Dodge says.

At the time, Spin Master had about 900 employees, but its entertainment division consisted of only four people. Still, with Spin Master's input, the show evolved from a concept about rescue pups to one about pups whose backpacks transform into tools, a key facet of the toys it would sell. The toy designers helped determine what the pups and their vehicles and houses would look like, and assisted in picking the different dog breeds and giving them personalities.

*Paw Patrol* was a hit from the moment it aired in 2013, quickly becoming Nickelodeon's highest-rated preschool show. Spin Master was ready with toys that rolled out to market within a few months: the Lookout, the dogs, their doghouses, the many bigger vehicles, like cargo ships and airplanes, that carry the pups to different locations. As the show grew in popularity, the company added "an extensive products and experiences program," as Paramount puts it, that includes clothes, video games, live stage tours, theme-park attractions, and toys.

More than a decade since its debut, the show continues to be shaped by merchandising opportunities. Spin Master changes the theme of the episodes every few seasons. The pups become Aqua Pups who wear scuba gear, or medieval knights who wear armor, or super pups with superpowers—all changes that create new toys for parents to buy their eager children. "It's like, how do you make a fire truck look different each time?" Dodge says. "How can it have features or do something innovative that we've never done before?"

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**All this merchandising** can make the *Paw Patrol* universe feel inescapable to parents. "We live and breathe *Paw Patrol*," says Andrea Jordan, a nurse from Richmond, Va., whose 3 ½-year-old daughter is obsessed with the show. Jordan has spotted *Paw Patrol* logos adorning nap mats, bath toys, even once on a hospital cap. Though its ubiquity can be unnerving, Jordan says that she is glad the show at least teaches children about the importance of kindness.

Parents of young children may have been young kids themselves when this became possible. Until 1984, the Federal Communications Commission imposed time limits on how much advertising could air during children's

programming. But that year, the FCC removed those limits at the urging of Ronald Reagan, who argued that such regulation limited free speech. This deregulation prompted toy manufacturers to become heavily involved in children's programming, sometimes offering broadcasters a cut of toy sales if they aired certain shows. In 1991, the FCC restored some time limits on advertising during children's programming, but toy companies and their products had become so intertwined with shows by then that the new regulations didn't make much of a difference.

Today, most children's TV shows are built around licensed characters who are also slapped on food products and clothes and made into toys. The problem with this is that children play less creatively with toys linked to media properties, says Susan Linn, a psychologist and the author of *Who's Raising the Kids?* When they play, for instance, with wooden blocks or anonymous dolls, Linn notes, children may make up their own worlds and use their imaginations. When they play with *Paw Patrol*-branded gear or *SpongeBob Square Pants* toys, they'll likely just be re-creating the storylines they saw on TV. "Creative play is the foundation of learning," Linn says. "Stifling that creativity deprives them of what has forever been a part of healthy play."

Still, it's hard to blame studios for using licensing to turn their creative properties into revenue streams. As more families eschew traditional networks and embrace content on platforms like YouTube, it can be harder for studios to come up with the cash needed to fund children's programming, says Nancy Jennings, a professor at the University of Cincinnati who studies media's impact on children. As a result, creators are trying to seek out other avenues, like licensing and merchandising, to make money.

*Paw Patrol* succeeds at this in part because of its global appeal. The pups don't belong to any particular country or racial group, which makes it easy for any kid to identify with them. (The cartoon has been translated into 32 languages; it's the No. 1 "linear" program on Nick Jr. in 10 countries.) All the characters are kind to one another. And the pups' jobs are familiar to children the world over whose "first hero" is a police officer or firefighter who they see doing work in their community, says Dodge, the Spin Master executive.

Being inescapable and globally appealing is, of course, part of the company's strategy. Almost all kids like puppies, and thanks to *Paw Patrol*, they can wear them on their clothes and snack on their likenesses—even if they don't watch TV.

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# **Garrett Morris on SNL’s First Season: ‘You Have to Be Very Brave to Make Fun of a Lot of What Should Be Made Fun of’**



I had been in show business for about 17 years before *Saturday Night Live* came along. I was an actor on and off Broadway. I wrote a couple plays, and I did a lot of musicals. *SNL* was my first television job—a job paying me more than I had ever been paid before, and I was finally paying my rent.

I'm an introvert, so I would usually just do the show and go back to my apartment. This was a mistake, because what you're supposed to do is go to the bar, hang out with the group, and develop relationships. There were some drugs—I was a cocaine fiend, but a teetotaler when it came to alcohol.

But back on set, being the one Black guy, I was just concerned about whether I'd be used at all. It was not an unusual experience to be the one Black person in a cast of mostly white people. I had to fight to get people to write for me. [Lorne Michaels](#) came up with the premise of a sketch featuring guys on death row performing as the "Death Row Follies." All he had was a premise. We had to go to our dressing room and come up with something. I remembered this scene from Art Linkletter, a very popular talk-show host in the 1950s, where a white lady from down South sang, "I'm gonna get me a shotgun and shoot all the n—s I see." I realized if I replaced *n*— with *whitey*, I would have the perfect song for a Black man on death row. So that's how I came up with that sketch.

- [\*\*Cecily Strong on the Catharsis of Her Goober the Clown SNL Sketch\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Ego Nwodim: The Upside of Making SNL While Losing Our Minds in Quarantine\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Cheri Oteri on the Highs and Lows of SNL: You 'Still Have to Audition Every Week'\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Rachel Dratch on the Greatest Compliment She Gets to This Day About Debbie Downer\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Al Franken on Political Humor at SNL: 'Our Goal Was to Get Laughs From Everyone'\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Garrett Morris on SNL's First Season: 'You Have to Be Very Brave to Make Fun of a Lot of What Should Be Made Fun of'\*\*](#)

I also was proud of the fact that I came up with the idea for the "White Guilt Relief Fund" sketch. There was a running joke in the Black community about groups like the [Black Panthers](#), SNCC, CORE, the [NAACP](#), who would regularly go out fundraising. All-Black groups got some money, but groups that had a goodly amount of white liberals got much more. People are still arguing about whether there should be reparations for slavery, and the idea of a "White Guilt Relief Fund" was a

way of talking about a very serious economic subject in a comedic way. Whether you were a Democrat or a Republican, you got hit by the comedy of *SNL*. Now, the whole country is sort of sideways, so you have to be very brave to make fun of a lot of what should be made fun of. It doesn't seem quite as courageous as it was then.

There was a lot of energy, and a lot of beautiful people. I was just amazed at the brilliance of the improvisation—Gilda Radner, John Belushi, [Chevy Chase](#). They were all just such talented people, and I was really honored to be a part of that group.—*As told to Olivia B. Waxman*

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# Al Franken on Political Humor at SNL: ‘Our Goal Was to Get Laughs From Everyone’



On Election Night 1988, I was returning in a small jet to New York from Boston, where I had just emceed [Michael Dukakis](#)’ “victory” party. Looking down at the lights of a New England town shimmering below, I mused wistfully about the majesty of [our democracy](#). My candidate hadn’t

prevailed, but our system was still the envy of the world. Or at least a sizable part of it.

“F-ck!” moaned an anguished Jon Lovitz, the plane’s only other passenger. I turned around to commiserate. But before I could, Jon shared the real reason for his bitter disappointment. “Now Dana gets to be the president!”

Jon had played Dukakis on [\*SNL\*](#), so the two of us had flown up to entertain the Dukakis team. It was already clear at the start of the evening that things weren’t going the governor’s way, and my first joke was, “Well it feels like it’s either going to be a close one, or...we’ll win by a landslide!!!” By the time Jon appeared as Dukakis, Bush had been declared the winner. But the trooper got laughs from the dispirited crowd.

Still, Jon was glum on the trip back. Throughout [\*SNL’s history\*](#), playing the president was a guarantee of lots of airtime. Think of Chevy Chase’s Gerald Ford, Dan Aykroyd’s Jimmy Carter, Phil Hartman’s Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, [Will Ferrell’s](#) George W. Bush.

Throughout virtually all its history, *SNL* has enjoyed the enviable position of being the only live sketch comedy show that could comment in real time on current events. Yes, late night shows do jokes about politics, but only *SNL* is comprised primarily of sketches with sets, costumes, and the occasional special effect. Being a live show creates the obligation that if Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders said on a Thursday that schoolchildren should be taught about masturbation, *SNL* had to have Ellen Cleghorne do Elders explaining herself on live TV two days later.

Over my 15 seasons working at *SNL* across three decades, I wrote hundreds of sketches, many of them with longtime writer and producer Jim Downey. And Jim came up with a maxim for the ones about politics. “Reward people for knowing stuff, but don’t punish them for not knowing stuff.” We knew that part of the audience had a sophisticated understanding of politics, and part of it did not. Our goal was to get laughs from everyone.

A few weeks before the election, Jim and I wrote a Bush-Dukakis debate sketch. Some of the jokes were big fat ones for everyone: Jon’s shorter Dukakis requiring a motorized lift to reach a suitable height behind the

podium—going too high, grinding to a stop, then lowering him back down, and another harsh stop. Some of the jokes were subtler ones for the clued-in audience: Bush’s “thousand points of light” and his vague nod to creating “a kinder, gentler nation”—a nice sentiment, but with absolutely no policy behind it.

- [Cecily Strong on the Catharsis of Her Goober the Clown SNL Sketch](#)
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The biggest laugh came after a slow build which brought the low-information viewers along. Kevin Nealon as panelist Sam Donaldson asked [Dana Carvey’s](#) Bush for specifics on how he would address fundamental problems like hunger and homelessness. Carvey’s Bush offers vague platitudes before saying that unfortunately his time is up, to which Jan Hooks as moderator [Diane Sawyer](#) responds with a cheeky smile: “Mr. Vice President, you still have a minute twenty.” A volley ensues—Carvey’s Bush desperately insisting he’s out of time and Hooks’ Sawyer calmly assuring him he’s got more. He finally lays out a meaningless summary: “On track. Stay the course. A thousand points of light. Stay the course.” Asked for a rebuttal, Lovitz’s Dukakis throws up his hands. “I can’t believe I’m losing to this guy!” The audience exploded with laughter and applause.

The sketch didn’t take sides. That was never our goal. It was just to do well-observed (and dare I say smart) political commentary. For decades the show avoided veering into advocacy. That would wait until [Trump became president](#).

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# Cheri Oteri on the Highs and Lows of SNL: You ‘Still Have to Audition Every Week’



The beginning of my [SNL](#) journey felt like the first day of school—that perfect mixture of nervous excitement and possibility. While a few of us knew each other from the Groundlings and Second City, most of the cast was new, so there was a sense of camaraderie with no established hierarchy. It felt like we could just hit the ground running.

Initially I thought being able to write my own material was a luxury but I quickly found out it would be a necessity. The writers weren’t assigned to specific cast members, so if no one wrote for you it was your responsibility to get yourself on the show, which created the pressure and competition

famous to the show. I like to say, “It’s a show that you already got but still have to audition for every week.”

My very first *SNL* sketch was called “Leg Up,” with [Molly Shannon](#) and I as Hollywood dance legends Ann Miller and [Debbie Reynolds](#) getting their second wind with a cable-TV show. [Lorne Michaels](#) called me into his office asking, “Cheri, what demographic are you going for? Nobody knows who these women are.” I said, “I think it might be funny anyway?” Thankfully, it went well. It might have even expanded our demographic. As [Darrell Hammond](#) later said, “Cheri, the gays in Hell’s Kitchen love you guys!”

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I loved playing the kinds of [characters](#) you might call optimistic outsiders. People who didn’t realize how bad off they had it, like the Spartan Cheerleaders or Colette, the Prescription Drug Lady. It’s hard to feel sorry for someone who doesn’t feel sorry for themselves. I also discovered the power and the pitfalls of creating a catchphrase. One summer my friend Kenny and I were telling people to “simmer down now” in a Southern accent, cracking each other up like two 13-year-olds. It inspired me to create the character Nadine, but little did I know I would be told to “simmer down now” for the rest of my life. I’ll be at the gynecologist’s office, nervous about my exam, when she tells me to “simmah down nah” with a chuckle. Grateful that everything is OK, I play along: “So my vagina in da clear nah?”

Creating characters was deeply rooted in my childhood, when I spent way too much time alone in my room, deep in my imagination, a habit I later realized was an escape from chaos and loneliness. My mom, raising three children on her own, wasn't very happy, so I became acutely aware of anything that made her laugh. She listened to comedy albums, and by the time I entered elementary school, I had the [George Carlin](#), Bill Cosby, Woody Allen, and Cheech & Chong routines memorized. One time, a nun asked during recess if anyone wanted to share a joke. I proudly raised my hand and said, "I went to the doctor the other day, he told me I was schizophrenic—I said no I'm not, neither am I!" To which she said, "Put your head down, Miss Oteri." It would be my first lesson in reading a room.



One of the most memorable hosts I worked with was [Jim Carrey](#), who delivered one of the most solid shows I'd ever seen. He really wanted to do the cheerleaders. Later that summer, [Will Ferrell](#) and I were invited to his house for a dinner party. After dinner, I walked into a room and saw hanging in glass-encased frames his costumes from *The Mask*, *Ace Ventura*, and *Batman Forever*. Next to them was the Cheerleader uniform. I was blown away.

And the most memorable musical guest: Snoop Dogg. This was in 1999, long before he was [pals with Martha Stewart](#). He was a bad-boy hardcore rapper, so I had to have my Barbara Walters interview him. Snoop wanted to see me after his sound check. I walk into his dressing room, which was so dark I could hardly see and so smoky I could hardly breathe. He said, "This is f-cking funny" and then, pointing to the room, "I hope you don't mind." I said, "Oh no, pot smoke doesn't bother me," to which he said, "No, I mean her," pointing to the woman cornrowing his hair. I loved that it was the cornrowing woman I might be offended by. Each day that week, he asked if I would put one more of his cousins in, and I just kept saying yes. By show night I had four cousins standing behind us, arms folded, as his bodyguards, because you never know when Miss Walters might snap! The sketch was last in the 8 p.m. dress rehearsal, meaning there wasn't much hope for it to get to air. But Snoop knew the assignment and it killed, putting us first on the live show. Snoop and I ran into each other's arms, hugging and laughing. Those wins were the best high ever.

My time on *SNL* was one of limitless creativity, endorphin-releasing highs, and soul-crushing lows. I would advise anyone coming in not to take anything personal—even when it is. *SNL* was the experience of a lifetime. I'm so proud to have been a part of its legacy. —As told to Megan McCluskey

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# Rachel Dratch on the Greatest Compliment She Gets to This Day About Debbie Downer



I started watching *Saturday Night Live* as a kid during the show's first season, and I was immediately fascinated by it. That first cast of the Not Ready for Prime Time Players imprinted on me like I was a baby bird, even if some of the sketches went over my head. I watched *SNL* like I was getting a glimpse of this special club once a week, never imagining I would someday be part of that club myself.

My very first night there was the 25th-anniversary show, and I was whisked into the small makeup room only to see [Dan Aykroyd](#), [Lily Tomlin](#), and Elvis Costello. That was the first of many “pinch me” moments. I got to meet my comedy idols, watch favorite bands from 30 feet away, and hear

Don Pardo say my name every Saturday night—a dream come true! Then there's the nervous energy of the live show, running to change between scenes, sets being moved at lightning speed.

Throughout all the excitement, the most challenging part of the job was trying to write sketches and come up with characters. You certainly couldn't predict if a character was going to take off. Some characters were based on people I knew, like the Boston teens, which I wrote with Tina Fey, drawn from my high school experiences growing up in Massachusetts. The Love-ahs were very loosely based on a professor from my college, and Will Ferrell and I wrote those together, trying to gross each other out along the way. One of my favorite yet lesser-known characters was this Hollywood movie-producer guy named Abe Scheinwald who should have retired from the biz long ago and was always eating coleslaw.

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But the character I get the most comments on still to this day is Debbie Downer. Everyone seems to know someone like her. I think a Debbie Downer actually lives within me too—I just have a better edit button! Paula Pell and I wrote the first Debbie Downer, set at Disney World, in 2004. As we were writing it we kept making the sad trombone sound as a joke. It was making us laugh so much, we thought, “What if we actually put the trombone sound in the sketch?” It did well at the table read, but still, you can have a good feeling about something right up until the live show, and it still might not make it to air. Something inexplicable can happen at dress

rehearsal and things can fall flat, or it can get cut for time. But that particular sketch, with [Jimmy Fallon](#), Fred Armisen, Amy Poehler, Horatio Sanz, and [Lindsay Lohan](#), made it to air and blew up in the best way. It was out of control almost immediately because we all started laughing—which we really try not to do. But something about the zoom-in, every time, with me trying not to laugh ... you could really see the struggle. People often tell me that if they are feeling down they watch that particular scene to cheer them up, and really, there's no greater compliment.

*SNL* has been such a huge part of my life since I was a kid. I can still remember so many sketches from those early seasons of the show, so getting the chance to be a part of it is something I may never get over. It really is the dream-come-true job for a comedian. But more than that, at this current moment, it feels good to know that everyone on *SNL*, both then and now, will be hard at work trying to keep you laughing. —*As told to Erin McMullen*

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# Cecily Strong on the Catharsis of Her Goober the Clown SNL Sketch



One of the things I loved most when I was performing on [\*Saturday Night Live\*](#) was creating controlled chaos. When I was doing my Jeanine Pirro impression, I wanted to be spilling drinks or throwing up; when I did the Fainting Couch sketch with [Benedict Cumberbatch](#), I loved crashing into the furniture and breaking everything on set. It's fun for the audience to watch chaos somehow be corralled on live television, and I think that my appearance on "[Weekend Update](#)" as Goober the Clown was its own version of that.

A month after [Texas' six-week abortion ban](#) went into effect in 2021, I texted an idea for a sketch to my friend Erin Doyle, who is also a producer at *SNL*: "I come on 'Update' as a woman who had an abortion when she

was 23, and I'm in a clown suit with the nose and everything, and I make jokes and talk in a funny voice but I'm just Cecily and I had an abortion when I was 23.”

I wondered if it was a bad idea, but I had spent the few weeks before that riddled with anxiety over the fact that reproductive rights were up for grabs in this country, and I hoped that trying to say something—anything—about my own real-life experience with abortion on the show would help me sleep at night. Because, yes, *SNL* is a fart-joke-funny place, but it's also a huge platform.

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Erin replied that she thought the idea “might be genius,” so we brought in writers Kent Sublette and Anna Drezen to help shape the sketch into what eventually aired that Saturday: me, dressed as a clown named Goober, talking about clown abortions while my big clown bow tie spun in circles and I tried to make Colin Jost a balloon animal—which I obviously couldn’t do.

Sharing something so personal in such a silly way felt like controlled chaos to me. I was nervous and terrified because I knew the kind of violence that this sketch could provoke in people, but I knew that I had the support of the whole cast behind me. Mostly, I felt really powerful. Women are so used to being told that we can only feel shame around the decisions that we make about our bodies, so it felt good to say on live television that getting an abortion doesn’t make you a terrible person.

To this day, after having spent over a decade on the show, Goober the Clown is the thing I'm proudest of. I think comedy is funnier when there's humanity involved, and I think *SNL* is at its best when cast members are able to show that they're human. It was cathartic to [take control of the narrative](#) like that in front of the world, and I still tear up when I think about the kind and vulnerable messages I received from other women after the sketch aired. I hope it was cathartic for them too.—As told to *Erin McMullen*

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# Ego Nwodim: The Upside of Making SNL While Losing Our Minds in Quarantine



A few days before lockdown in March 2020, I celebrated my birthday. Before getting cast on *SNL* in fall 2018, I had come up as a comedian in the Los Angeles comedy scene, so by early 2020, I still didn't feel quite like a New Yorker. After my birthday dinner, thrown by Heidi Gardner and attended by other [\*SNL\*-ers](#), I was walking back to my studio apartment in Midtown, and as I got closer to my place, I looked up and saw the New Yorker sign in red lights shining in the city skyline. I sighed "Ah, yes. How symbolic. I think I may *officially* be a New Yorker."

It didn't even take 48 hours for that little bubble to burst. Days later, I'm hunkered down in my studio apartment, way too close to Port Authority. For anyone who knows New York City geography, it's not the most ideal place to be on a regular day, let alone during the [height of a pandemic](#). For

anyone who knows New York City geography and knows me personally, I'm still upset you didn't give me a heads up before I signed my lease.

After two weeks in lockdown, which happened to coincide with our previously scheduled hiatus, it was unclear how, if, or when we'd be returning to work for new episodes of *SNL*. I'm not sure who made the call, but since we couldn't be together in the studio, we were notified that we'd be producing the sketches from home. Talk about unprecedented times. Neither I, nor my castmates, really understood what this meant or how it would look, but we rose to the occasion. We figured out rather quickly that at-home episodes were exactly what they sounded like. They wouldn't be live episodes but we'd be shooting sketches on our personal electronic devices and directed via Zoom. This ultimately meant there was no Monday night pitch meeting, no writing night, no table read, no blocking, at least not for those first two at-home episodes. (I think we had a table read for our final at-home episode and I remember this because, somewhere out there, there exists a very sweet screenshot of the [full cast](#) on Zoom from that day.)

Throughout these episodes, we were our own lighting operators and camera operators. Thank God for our brilliant editors who were able to make something of the crappy videos we shot in our homes. I'd always known they were amazing and such an integral part of what we do at *SNL*, but it was in producing these at-home episodes that I came to fully understand just how invaluable their work is to make us look good and to making comedy that isn't a pain to look at. Same goes for the in-studio crew. It was during these episodes that I fully grasped just how much our crew does to make our jobs easier and make *SNL* run like a well-oiled machine. The crew on set is that magical oil. One day I'll tell of the daily meltdowns I had in that studio apartment while trying to break down the giant green screen the show had sent for us to use. Those meltdowns were probably about something else, but I like to blame the green screen.

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One of my favorite sketches from that time didn't involve my green screen nemesis and wasn't even something I'd intended to be on the show. It's now called "[Quarantine Cutie](#)," but it was originally just a several-frame Instagram Story I had done, as a comfort to myself, on the second or third day of lockdown. In it, I was drawing on my face with washable (don't worry, folks) Crayola marker and doing an influencer-style beauty tutorial as a woman who, due to the circumstances of the pandemic (i.e. quarantine, supply shortages), has run out of any bit of sanity she may have had—and also all her makeup. And, friends, *that's* why the orientation of that video is wrong for TV, because it wasn't made for TV. It was shot in portrait because it was shot in Instagram by and for a woman who was losing her mind in quarantine and had fully let the sillies take the wheel.

I don't put a lot of content on social media. I'm not typically one who tries out characters there. I simply took a shower and thought, "Be stupid." I also didn't know if I'd ever see anyone IRL (in real life) again so what did it really matter? I wasn't thinking any profound thoughts. I was just having an experience. As much as my cast mates and I attempted to entertain during the pandemic, we were still just people having an experience during this scary, "unprecedented" time.

We've had people say they're so grateful we were willing to show up in that way. People say those episodes weren't great (fair!), but they [appreciated having the show go on](#). In those moments, you realize [how much people do look to SNL](#) for some semblance of comfort, even if it's not always comedy. By simply doing the episodes, we made people feel less alone and like maybe, just maybe, things would be OK. Maybe we could take a beat to try

to find joy and remember laughter, and bring levity to a very heavy time.—  
*As told to Olivia B. Waxman*

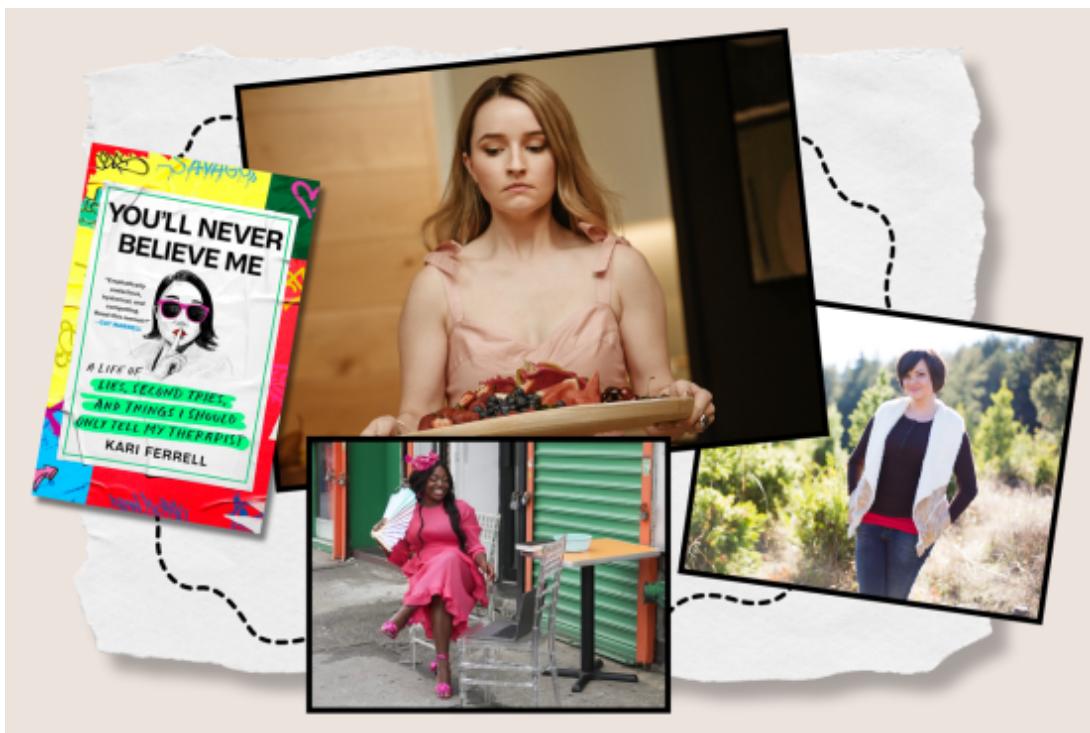
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# Why We Can't Look Away From Scammer Stories

Judy Berman is the TV critic at TIME. Along with reviewing current television, she writes about the ways in which entertainment and pop culture intersect with our larger social and political realities. Her TIME essay on [Ted Lasso and modern masculinity](#) won a New York Press Club award in 2022.



Early in her new Netflix series *Apple Cider Vinegar*, its star, Kaitlyn Dever, breaks the fourth wall. Staring into the camera, she speaks in third person about the real woman she's portraying. "This is a true story based on a lie," she announces. "Some names have been changed to protect the innocent. Belle Gibson has not been paid for the re-creation of her story." Then, suddenly, Dever is Belle again, with a blunt response to Gibson's exclusion from the project: "F-ckers."

As any scam aficionado knows, [Belle Gibson](#) was an Australian wellness influencer who amassed a huge following—one that would earn her glowing media coverage at home and abroad, as well as a prestigious book deal—during the early-2010s Instagram gold rush. A young, photogenic, and unfeasibly vivacious single mom who claimed to be treating her terminal brain cancer with healthy eating and alternative medicine, she monetized her adoring audience through an app called the Whole Pantry. But before she could become the millennial [Gwyneth](#), it came out that she'd never actually been diagnosed with cancer. Hence Netflix's eagerness to both mine her juicy story and ensure viewers know that, unlike some other scammers who've captured the public imagination, she wasn't compensated for this retelling.

*Apple Cider Vinegar*, which contrasts Gibson with two genuinely ill young women in her orbit who are searching for miracle cancer cures, comes at the crest of the latest wave of scam content. January saw the premieres of ABC News docuseries *Scamanda*, about another cancer fantasist, and *Scam Goddess*, a Freeform show that profiles a different scammer in each episode. Also back in the spotlight, with a memoir titled *You'll Never Believe Me*, is Kari Ferrell, a colorful small-time crook dubbed the [Hipster Grifter](#) by the late-aughts New York press.



Nearly seven years after the season that went down in history as 2018's Summer of Scam, propelled by the sagas of Theranos fraudster [Elizabeth Holmes](#) and faux heiress [Anna Delvey](#), you could call the current encore a Winter of Scam. But the truth is, the trend the [New Yorker named Grifter Season](#) never ended, in pop culture or real life. In 2023, the last year for which [FTC data](#) is available, Americans reported losing \$10 billion to scams—an all-time high. As [AI](#), [deepfakes](#), [crypto](#), and other tech breakthroughs enable new means of deception, and a President who [settled for \\$25 million](#) with students who alleged they'd been defrauded by Trump University kicks off his second term, scamming is no longer a passing fad; it's the new normal.

Yet the real people who dominate the scammer entertainment of the 2020s are not, by and large, powerful politicians or titans of industry. The ones who really seem to hold our attention are regular women—or women who *were* regular until they invented an alternate reality in which they appeared to be extraordinary. Which makes each one of them a fun-house mirror for a true-crime audience [often estimated](#) to be [80% female](#), and a screen on which we project both our anxieties about trusting other women and our own urges to get what we want by breaking bad. The best scammer stories synthesize our ambivalence about these characters in ways that cast light on our fascination with them. The worst, like the tonally incoherent *Apple Cider Vinegar*, reflect this queasiness without saying much of value about it.



Like any mildly alarming cultural phenomenon, the Summer of Scam inspired reams of reporting that attempted to psychoanalyze scam fans. Common explanations included self-defense—[women in particular](#) are thought to consume true crime as a means of gathering information they can use to avoid becoming victims—and [schadenfreude](#), whether directed at the grifter or at her unsympathetic marks. Conversely, a therapist [suggested to British Glamour](#) that we find both sides of these stories relatable: “there’s a bit of the scammer and a bit of the scammed in each of us.” In an [interview with the New York Times](#), a producer of the true-crime convention CrimeCon, in making an implicit connection to that other trending topic, conspiracy theories, got metaphysical: “These stories make us ask, ‘What if nothing is as it seems?’”

Surely there’s some truth to each of these theories. Yet as someone who long ago burned out on the true-crime genre at large but still can’t resist a scam saga, I suspect there’s more going on here. If true crime is inherently sordid, wringing cheap thrills out of murders, kidnappings, and abuse that destroyed the lives of real human beings, then the scam subgenre can feel like a slightly healthier vice—Diet Coke to the toxic corn-syrup high of a serial-killer addiction. Scammers, and particularly female scammers, seem less likely to trigger a viewer or reader or listener’s own trauma than the violent

criminals who otherwise dominate true crime. The *Scam Goddess* podcast, from which the Freeform series was adapted, pitches itself as “true crime, but without all the death.” Both versions are hosted by a comedian, Laci Mosley.

Which is not to say that all scam stories are equally innocuous or offer precisely the same pleasures. Perhaps the most benign archetype is the social scammer—characters like Ferrell and Delvey, the subject of a [viral New York magazine exposé](#) that begat [Shonda Rhimes’](#) sudsy Netflix hit [Inventing Anna](#), who infiltrate exclusive scenes and leech off their superficial denizens. It’s tough to feel much empathy for the white-guy trustafarian hookups Ferrell, who is Korean American, was able to rip off (for relatively small sums) by appealing to their fetishization of Asian women. [Business Insider reported](#) that Netflix paid Delvey \$320,000 for its docudrama. But her victims, with [a few life-ruining exceptions](#), were mostly rich jet setters and high-end businesses. The stakes are so low, in these cases, that the stories go down more like [gossip](#) than crime.



More insidious but also often more fascinating, from a psychological perspective, is the category of so-called spiritual leaders. Docuseries like HBO's [\*Breath of Fire\*](#) and [\*Love Has Won: The Cult of Mother God\*](#) and Freeform's *The Deep End* profile women who've enriched themselves by manipulating followers searching for a messiah or a sage to bring meaning to their lives. More often than not, these stories end in tragedy. Yet, especially for women in these positions, the lines between deception, desperation, and delusion, which coexist in different ratios for each subject, are thin. The sins of *Breath of Fire* subject Guru Jagat paled in comparison with those of her predatory male predecessors in the shady tradition of kundalini yoga. The troubled woman who christened herself Mother God died of her own neo-hippie health regimen; her emaciated corpse was blue from consuming colloidal silver.

If these figures promised an escape from the emptiness of the material world, then another, incrementally less sympathetic category of scammers—shady entrepreneurs—have sold themselves as inspiring forces for good within it. Amazon's [\*LuLaRich\*](#) follows DeAnne Stidham and her husband Mark, whose multilevel marketing company LuLaRoe promised stay-at-home moms a side hustle that could help support their families. But, like most MLMs, LuLaRoe left many of these women poorer than they were before signing on. Among the most notorious scammers of our time, Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes raised more than \$700 million to fund the production of a groundbreaking, minimally invasive blood-test technology that she hadn't bothered to actually invent. Her rise and fall has been memorialized in multiple podcasts, John Carreyrou's best seller *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup*, Alex Gibney's HBO doc [\*The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley\*](#), and the wild Hulu drama [\*The Dropout\*](#).

While we might not pity the VCs (Tim Draper), corporations (Walgreens), and billionaires (Rupert Murdoch) who invested in Theranos without doing due diligence, it's harder to laugh off the losses of Holmes' real victims: [the patients](#) misdiagnosed by her faulty machines. In that respect, she wasn't just a business scammer; she was a medical scammer, a breed whose stories, which prey on and make a mockery of people who really are gravely ill, are uniquely resistant to being twisted into light entertainment. Like *Scamanda*, whose subject Amanda Riley raised money to fund care she wasn't getting,

Peacock's 2024 docuseries [\*Anatomy of Lies\*](#) unravels the yarns of a woman who faked her cancer diagnosis. This grifter was former *Grey's Anatomy* writer Elisabeth Finch, and she built a career on deception. Darker still was Belle Gibson's scam. She not only used cancer fraud as a bankable origin story, but also peddled false hope—and a bogus, potentially lethal alternative to such harrowing treatments as chemo and amputation that her followers were desperate to avoid—to real cancer patients. No wonder *Apple Cider Vinegar* struggles to strike a balance between seriousness and schadenfreude.



**“Words are my forte,”** writes Ferrell in *You’ll Never Believe Me*. “They’re how I got myself into things, and how I got myself out of things.” Known for passing lurid notes scribbled on napkins that would have tattooed revelers scrambling to pay their bar tabs and get her back to their lofts, where she could pilfer bank cards or cell phones, Ferrell was a sort of scenester Scheherezade, crafting fantasies nightly in order to survive the next day. That she proves to be a disarmingly insightful, entertaining narrator of her own misadventures shouldn’t be so surprising.

All grifters are storytellers, weaving fictions more seductive than reality. Those successful enough to pull off true-crime-worthy scams have charm, depth, and psychological complexity that you just can’t find in an overexposed butcher like [Jeffrey Dahmer](#). It’s how they draw in not just their marks, but also audiences learning about their exploits secondhand, in the intimate mediums of TV, podcasts, and memoir. The challenge in adapting scammer stories is to tease out of the villain’s (or antihero’s) tantalizing lies

a metanarrative compelling enough to justify the retelling. It's not enough to breathlessly repeat the things they said; you have to unearth some core of meaning.

In a paper [published this past fall](#) in the *Journal of Gender Studies*, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins use *The Dropout* and *Inventing Anna* to explore the explicitly gendered nature of our fascination with female scammers. Now that the hypercapitalist [girlboss](#) archetype of the early 2010s has [collapsed](#) under the weight of pop feminism's failures, they write, "The con woman summons her historical understanding of precisely how the rules of the game are rigged to weaponize them for her own advantage and enrichment." Hence the ambivalence predominantly female audiences feel toward this figure. What separates *You'll Never Believe Me* and *The Dropout* from *Apple Cider Vinegar*, *Inventing Anna*, and most other scammer content, however, is how effectively the former grapple with the myriad ways in which the protagonists' gender complicated their deceptions and how they were received, while the latter mostly invite us to marvel at ever more shocking examples of their subjects' audacity.



At the heart of every true-crime story is a vision of justice. When it comes to female scammers, that means asking: What constitutes justice for a woman who, in order to get more money or success or attention than she could access honestly, hurts people? Gibson—who [admitted in 2015](#) that she never had cancer—lost her reputation, [lifestyle](#), and career but not her freedom. Holmes’ prison sentence, which has been shortened twice, ends in August 2032. Delvey and Ferrell did shorter stints behind bars. Now, both are capitalizing on their infamy; while the fake heiress flamed out early this past fall in *Dancing With the Stars*, the erstwhile Hipster Grifter is on a redemption tour that, along with the memoir, includes founding a production company dedicated to sharing the stories of women of color.

How we receive each of these outcomes—whether we savor the scammers’ punishment or cheer their rehabilitation, whether our reactions vary based on the severity of the harm they did—says as much about us as it does about the women we love, hate, or love to hate. “Men screw people over all the f-cking time, and not only are they able to go on and live their lives, they’re given thousands of dollars to be the keynote speaker at fancy business conferences,” Ferrell observes, in what is perhaps a reference to Wolf of Wall Street turned motivational speaker [Jordan Belfort](#). “I wonder why they get the opportunity to do all of that, when I, and many other women, do not.” It’s a question worth not just raising but, as Ferrell does, trying to answer.

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