

THE WORLD THIS WEEK

The world this year 2025

Donald Trump's second term began with significant domestic shifts, including withdrawals from climate accords, stricter immigration policies, and government diversity program cancellations, alongside attacks on the judiciary. Internationally, a fragile Gaza ceasefire was achieved through his pressure, but the peace plan stalled, and America conducted airstrikes on Iran's uranium facilities after Israel's bombing. The global economy remained resilient despite Trump's tariffs and a major AI investment frenzy, with Nvidia reaching \$5 trillion. Asia experienced significant political changes, including leadership shifts in South Korea and Japan, and devastating earthquakes in Myanmar and Afghanistan. Europe saw continued conflict in Ukraine and a shift in German politics towards increased defense spending, while Britain's political landscape was marked by high unpopularity for Labour and a surge for Reform UK.

The weekly cartoon

No significant coverage this issue.

LEADERS

China proved its strengths in 2025?and Donald Trump helped

In 2025, China, under Xi Jinping, demonstrated its industrial dominance and resilience against Donald Trump's tariffs, revealing America's dependency on Chinese supply chains, particularly in green technology and AI. Trump's focus on bilateral tariffs and his attacks on American science and immigration inadvertently strengthened China's position and alienated US allies, playing into Xi's hands. While China currently holds the advantage, its rigid politics and economic issues like deflation and overcapacity could stifle long-term dynamism. Conversely, America's built-in capacity for change and its founding universal values offer potential for renewal, but Trump's administration is eroding these strengths, risking the nation's greatest advantages by adopting an ethno-nationalist stance. The article concludes that while America's economic and human capital reserves are vast, Trump's actions dim its prospects, with China closely observing.

Two months in, the Gaza ceasefire is floundering

Two months after its signing, the Gaza ceasefire is failing, with Gazans facing misery from

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winter storms and continued skirmishes, rather than a full cessation of conflict. The ambitious second phase, requiring Hamas disarmament and a new government, has not materialized, largely due to a global loss of interest and Donald Trump's delayed announcements. Proposed "planned communities" in Israeli-controlled Gaza are seen as inadequate, masking the stalled progress and exacerbating humanitarian issues. The article urges faster action from America and its allies, including appointing a governing board and supporting a peacekeeping mission, alongside allowing independent foreign media access. Failure to advance the Gaza plan risks prolonged suffering, strengthens Hamas, strains regional relations, and undermines America's international credibility.

The Economist's country of the year for 2025

The Economist's country of the year for 2025, chosen for significant improvement, is Syria, contrasting with Argentina which also showed strong economic reforms. Syria moved from Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship to a more peaceful and normal state under Ahmed al-Sharaa, who brought positive surprises by holding the country together and forging international relations. Despite remaining challenges like militia massacres and clannish rule, Syria is far happier and more peaceful than in 2024, with three million Syrians returning home. Argentina's President Javier Milei implemented painful but impressive free-market reforms, drastically reducing inflation and poverty with US support, but faces political opposition and corruption scandals.

What Novo Nordisk, OpenAI and Pop Mart have in common

Runaway success can bring significant problems, as illustrated by OpenAI, Novo Nordisk, and Pop Mart in 2025. Companies face the challenge of scaling up to meet unpredictable demand, with OpenAI planning \$1.4 trillion in AI infrastructure investment, risking bankruptcy if growth projections fall short. Overnight success also invites shadow markets, as seen with compounding pharmacies replicating Novo Nordisk's weight-loss drug, Wegovy, and counterfeit dolls for Pop Mart. Finally, it presents a "first-mover disadvantage," allowing competitors like Eli Lilly (with Zepbound) and Google (with new AI models) to learn from and surpass initial leaders. Lasting commercial success, the article concludes, stems from a difficult-to-replicate and evolving business model, rather than just a hit product.

Your Well Informed guide to surviving Christmas

This guide offers evidence-based advice for surviving Yuletide feasting, focusing on alcohol, food, and mental health. To manage alcohol, it suggests strength training, choosing clear drinks, sipping slowly, and alternating with water or electrolyte-rich beverages, emphasizing that stopping drinking before bed helps sleep. For food, it recommends adding viscous fiber (almonds, oats, apples) to block cholesterol absorption and consuming sugar with fats, protein, and fiber to prevent glucose spikes. The article also notes that while heavy drinking is dangerous, light consumption can offer psychological upsides like sociability and relaxation,

concluding that moderation should extend to moderation itself.

LETTERS

Europeans should be worried by America's new national security strategy

This section presents various letters from readers. One letter argues that President Trump's national security strategy, which signals America's reduced commitment to European defense and aims to cultivate internal resistance to European leadership, poses an insidious threat, urging European leaders to strengthen institutions and avoid political expediency. Another letter draws parallels between Trump's vision and the totalitarian states in George Orwell's "1984," suggesting a reliance on perpetual conflict to justify dictatorial control. A third letter criticizes The Economist's free-trade stance regarding China, arguing that Europe should use industrial policies and tariffs to counter China's mercantilist practices and strategic dependencies, especially given rearming efforts for Ukraine. Other correspondence discusses The Economist's vocabulary, comparisons of political parties to brands, the difficulty of distinguishing true from false information before AI, the potential resurgence of paper culture among Gen Z, humorous anecdotes about AI and Santa, and interpretations of Homer's "The Odyssey" and Salman Rushdie's take on "The Wizard of Oz."

UNITED STATES

Will California try to block Hollywood's next megadeal?

States like California are increasingly using their antitrust powers to challenge major corporate mergers, as seen with the Kroger-Albertsons deal being torpedoed by state attorneys-general. This trend impacts Hollywood, where Netflix and Paramount are vying to acquire Warner Bros Discovery, a potential \$108bn deal. California's Attorney-General, Rob Bonta, a potential gubernatorial candidate, is a key wildcard who could block any merger, irrespective of federal approval, due to concerns over market consolidation and its impact on consumers and labor. Eight states passed laws in 2025 to strengthen antitrust oversight, and Democratic AGs are prioritizing enforcement to raise their profiles and counter perceived federal under-enforcement during the Trump presidency. This growing state-level activism reflects a broader anti-monopolist sentiment across the political spectrum, complicating corporate deal-making and potentially leading to a balkanized antitrust landscape.

Toll roads are spreading in America

Toll roads are increasingly spreading across America due to the decline in petrol tax revenue,

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which traditionally funded highway maintenance, and the political unpopularity of raising these taxes. Indiana recently passed a law allowing tolls on interstates, a move that could lead to wider adoption across the country, as states face significant road maintenance deficits. Tolls offer a solution by making drivers, including out-of-state users, directly pay for the infrastructure they use, and can also help alleviate congestion through variable pricing. While tolling projects generally receive bipartisan support, growing populism within the Republican Party, especially under Donald Trump, has led to opposition against congestion pricing and calls to make private toll roads free, potentially creating more queues instead of solutions.

More schools in America are adopting a four-day week

More than 2,100 schools across America, initially a rural trend but now extending to towns, are adopting four-day school weeks, driven by desires to save money or attract teachers. While teachers, students, and parents generally embrace the shorter week for improved attendance, behavior, and mental health, academic outcomes for pupils are middling, with some studies showing students falling behind. The spare day is used differently by districts, some offering tutoring, others not. Despite advocates' hopes, short weeks do not significantly improve teacher retention broadly nor save much money (typically less than 2.5% of budget), and raise concerns about children from single-parent families falling through cracks due to childcare challenges.

The race for an AI Jesus is on

As trust in clergy declines, tech companies are developing AI companions to provide personalized faith counsel. "Text with Jesus," an app built with OpenAI's ChatGPT, allows users to ask theological and personal questions, receiving responses from an avatar of Jesus or other biblical figures. The app, which has 150,000 users globally, faces criticism for potentially blasphemous or overly palatable answers, with its founder admitting his own mother views it as such. While Pope Leo has warned against finding wisdom in aggregated data, the "Satan" feature on the app is optional, highlighting the ongoing ethical and theological debates surrounding AI in faith.

A vote against gerrymandering shows why political courage is rare

Republican state senators in Indiana displayed rare political courage by rejecting a gerrymandering bill designed to benefit their party, despite intense pressure and threats from Donald Trump, opting instead for principles and common sense. This act, praised by former Governor Mitch Daniels, stood in stark contrast to the widespread partisan gerrymandering prevalent in both Republican and Democratic-dominated states. The article highlights that such dissent is increasingly rare in American politics, where conformity is often rewarded and principle can be mistaken for expediency. However, it notes other instances of principled dissent emerging this year, offering a glimmer of hope for independent thinking against forces of conformity.

THE AMERICAS

An oil boom where the Amazon meets the Atlantic

Brazil is embarking on a significant oil exploration boom in the Equatorial Margin, near the Amazon basin, aiming to revive depleting reserves and secure trillions in revenue. This initiative, championed by President Lula despite his green platform, faces environmental concerns due to its proximity to a highly biodiverse and least-studied region, as well as complex drilling conditions. Local populations in Amapá largely support the drilling, anticipating jobs and economic development, though indigenous groups express worries about potential oil spills. The government intends to use future oil revenues to finance a transition to renewables, a pragmatic strategy balancing short-term energy security with long-term environmental goals.

Javier Milei loosens his grip on the peso

Argentina's President Javier Milei has cautiously allowed the peso to float more freely, with its exchange band now widening with inflation, a step aimed at addressing the currency's overvaluation and helping accumulate foreign reserves. This change comes after the US Treasury backed the peso to avert a financial crisis before Argentina's midterm elections, which Milei subsequently won. While the IMF and markets welcomed the shift, predicting potential global borrowing, the peso remains overvalued, and the central bank has not yet announced an inflation-targeting program, indicating an ongoing monetary journey.

ASIA

Can Australia defend itself against jihadist murderers?

A horrific terrorist attack at Sydney's Bondi Beach, perpetrated by a father and son with Islamic State ideology, killed 15 people, raising urgent questions about Australia's counter-terrorism and gun control measures. The younger assailant was known to intelligence services but deemed not radicalized, highlighting a gap in threat assessment. The perpetrators' recent trip to the southern Philippines, an IS active region, suggests potential training. Australia's government, under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, has promised tougher hate-speech laws, new visa powers, and examining tighter gun controls, as antisemitic incidents have significantly increased in the country.

Why has the border between the Koreas fallen silent?

South Korea's President Lee Jae Myung has adopted a conciliatory approach towards North Korea, leading to the silencing of propaganda loudspeakers and reduced leafleting along the border. This new policy also saw the South Korean spy agency halt its radio broadcasts into the North for the first time since 2010, significantly reducing uncensored information flow. Lee

hopes these gestures will coax Kim Jong Un back to negotiations, but critics worry about the concessions to a regime that views external information as a threat, especially as North Korea enjoys stronger backing from China and Russia.

The botched response to a devastating storm infuriates Indonesians

Cyclone Senyar ravaged Sumatra, killing over 1,000 and displacing nearly a million, yet Indonesia's government refused to declare it a national disaster, impeding foreign aid and infuriating residents. Relief efforts were slow and poorly coordinated, with President Prabowo Subianto dismissing criticism as foreign-spread lies. Environmentalists point to extensive deforestation for palm oil as a major factor exacerbating the floods, raising doubts about the government's sincerity in prevention efforts despite admissions of poor forest management.

CHINA

Jimmy Lai's judgment day

Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai was found guilty of foreign collusion and sedition, facing potential life imprisonment, in a verdict that highlights the erosion of civil liberties in the city. Lai, a long-time democracy advocate, was arrested in 2020 and his newspaper, Apple Daily, closed. The verdict, delivered by national-security judges, accused him of "undermining" governments and lobbying for sanctions, despite his defense that he ceased such activities post-2020 security law. The case sets significant legal and social precedents under Beijing's tightened control, though international condemnation has been muted as global leaders prioritize relations with China.

The Christmas-industrial complex centres on Yiwu

Yiwu, China, serves as the world's Christmas capital, exporting vast quantities of festive decorations, which contributed to China's record \$1 trillion trade surplus in 2025. Despite this, China's Christmas trinket exports to America fell due to President Trump's tariffs, causing Yiwu traders to shift focus to European markets and use evasive tactics like disassembling products to circumvent duties. Traders express frustration with American policy's unpredictability and are also impacted by global events like the Ukraine war. Despite challenges, Yiwu merchants remain optimistic, planning for future holiday orders beyond Christmas.

MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA

Donald Trump's peace plan is faltering in the chaos of Gaza

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Donald Trump's peace plan for Gaza is faltering, with the strip remaining a desolate landscape and the ceasefire devolving into a low-level war of attrition, despite official American optimism. The second phase of the plan, which includes deploying an International Stabilisation Force (ISF) and a technocratic government, has not progressed, as Hamas refuses to disarm and no countries have committed troops. Disagreements between Israel and America are deepening, particularly regarding Israel's reluctance to withdraw and its demands for control over planned communities, and the inclusion of Turkey in the ISF. Trump is expected to pressure Netanyahu at an upcoming meeting, but the future of Gaza's reconstruction remains uncertain without these critical components.

Just 74 intensive-care beds remain in Gaza

Gaza's healthcare system is shattered, with only 18 of 35 hospitals and clinics partially functioning, leaving just 74 intensive-care and 215 emergency-room beds. Supplies are scarce, crucial equipment is lacking, and at least 1,722 healthcare workers have been killed. Israel's "dual-use" restrictions prevent vital medical equipment from entering Gaza, and patient evacuations are severely limited, with thousands waiting for treatment. Beyond physical damage, experts warn of severe psychological trauma for every child in Gaza, highlighting the urgent need for rebuilding homes and schools to restore normalcy.

Ethiopia wants to build Africa's biggest airport

Ethiopian Airlines plans to build Africa's largest airport near Addis Ababa, a \$10 billion project aiming to handle 110 million passengers annually and cement Ethiopia's status as an air-travel hub. Despite the airline's strong profitability and financing interest from America and China, the project faces viability doubts due to internal conflicts, regional competition from Gulf airlines, and government interference. Critics suggest a smaller, phased expansion would be more prudent, but Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government favors mega-projects, raising concerns about displacement of 15,000 people and a crumbling "Chinese wall" protecting the airline's commercial decisions.

EUROPE

Ukraine scrabbles for handholds against Russia's massive assault

Ukraine achieved a rare tactical success by liberating most of Kupiansk from Russian forces through a creative counter-attack, despite heavy Russian pressure elsewhere. However, the overall outlook remains bleak, with Ukrainian defenses retreating faster than at any point in the war, particularly in Donbas and Zaporizhia. Ukraine faces significant challenges with conscription and materiel, while Russia continues to gain ground due to a larger pool of recruits and improved drone warfare capabilities. The Russian surge aims to project confidence in ongoing negotiations, but Ukraine's limited successes, like Kupiansk, demonstrate its capacity

to resist when organized, though the path ahead is arduous and costly.

Italy is using the Winter Olympics to appeal to the ultra-wealthy

Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo are co-hosting the 2026 Winter Olympics, with Italy leveraging the event to attract the ultra-wealthy through tax breaks and luxury developments. The influx of high-net-worth individuals has led to soaring property prices and the emergence of exclusive clubs and schools in Milan. Despite the economic benefits, concerns exist about a recent real-estate scandal and investigations that have halted construction projects, potentially exacerbating housing shortages. Nevertheless, the appeal to the super-rich continues, with property inquiries from outside Europe on the rise.

Why German cities feel like war zones on New Year's Eve

German cities, particularly Berlin, experience intense street battles with fireworks on New Year's Eve, causing deaths, injuries, fires, and overwhelming emergency services. While illegal Kugelbomben contribute to the chaos, legal fireworks also cause significant damage and air pollution. Despite polls showing public support for extending the firework ban, many politicians view Silvester fireworks as an inviolable national tradition, and federal law limits local prohibitions. Campaigners look to the Netherlands' recent private fireworks ban as a hopeful precedent, though it won't take effect for several years.

European nationalism is dead. Long live European gastronationalism

Despite decades of European integration and harmonized laws, culinary habits continue to divide the continent, leading to "gastronationalism." An example is Italy's agriculture minister's outrage over ready-made carbonara with incorrect ingredients sold in the EU Parliament. Europeans frequently mock neighboring cuisines, with historical and ongoing cultural divides between "butter" northerners and "olive oil" southerners. Southern countries have successfully pushed for EU rules protecting the origins of their foods, and Italy's cuisine was recognized by UNESCO, reinforcing the idea that while political nationalism has waned, culinary chauvinism thrives.

BRITAIN

How to heal the trauma from Northern Ireland's killings

The British government, under Sir Keir Starmer, is implementing a new policy to reinvestigate Troubles deaths, hoping to draw a line under the conflict, in agreement with the Irish government. This replaces the previous Conservative government's de facto amnesty, which sought information in exchange for limited justice. The legacy of the Troubles continues to fester, with concerns among Unionists about legitimizing past violence and the glorification of

killers by some, despite widespread historical revulsion against the violence. The new bill aims for "information recovery" rather than widespread prosecutions, but challenges remain in uncovering truth and achieving closure amidst deeply embedded myths and political sensitivities.

Britons are becoming obsessed with pet photography

Britons are increasingly obsessed with pet photography, posting three times more photos of their pets than partners on Instagram, with demand for professional pet portraits surging, especially before Christmas. This trend is linked to the growing affluence of "pet parents," with a higher percentage of pet social media profiles in wealthier London boroughs. Pet photography, though requiring skill and patience (and sometimes dodging a wolfdog's bite), reflects a deeper emotional connection and willingness to spend on animal companions, contrasting with traditional family portraits.

A portrait of Britain's aristocrats

Britain's aristocracy, though numbering only 794 hereditary peerages, still wields significant influence over land ownership (one-third of the country) and cultural narrative, despite its decline in overt political power. The upcoming removal of the last hereditary peers from the House of Lords in 2026 marks the end of a thousand years of direct aristocratic legislative influence. Modern aristocrats, unlike their historical counterparts, are increasingly focused on managing their finances and opening their stately homes to the public to cover costs, as exemplified by the Earl of Sandwich. While critics decry snobbery and perceived historical injustices, charities like the National Trust underscore a public appreciation for heritage linked to these estates.

All sides have learned a lot from Extinction Rebellion's co-founder

Roger Hallam, co-founder of Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, has profoundly influenced civil disobedience in Britain, advocating for mass arrests and "martyrdom" to advance causes. His tactics, such as highly publicized stunts like throwing food on national treasures, aim to generate attention and shift public discourse, which have demonstrably pushed issues like climate change onto the political agenda. This strategy of radical, catastrophist activism has been adopted across the political spectrum, from pro-Palestine groups to populist-right movements, creating a "Roger Hallam extended universe" where grannies risk jail and "The Mothers" join mobs. This trend reveals a "millenarian turn" in British politics, where extreme threats sell and conventional centrism struggles to compete, potentially leading to system fractures.

CHRISTMAS SPECIALS

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A journey into the world's most mysterious rainforest

The Congo basin, the world's second-largest tropical rainforest, remains largely mysterious but is a vital global carbon sink and biodiversity hotspot. Recent research in areas like Odzala-Kokoua National Park is uncovering secrets in climate science (vast peatlands, elephant "ecosystem engineers"), ecology (western lowland gorillas with distinct behaviors), and archaeology (ancient human tools suggesting early migrations). However, the forest is severely threatened by logging, mining, oil, and agricultural expansion, with deforestation rates raising concerns that it may soon emit more carbon than it absorbs. Efforts like the Tropical Forest Forever Facility aim to protect it, but challenges remain due to governance issues and insufficient funding.

What The Economist discovered at dating bootcamp

Dating manuals, a genre with a 2,000-year history, mostly target men, reflecting a perceived need for "primitive" advice on interacting with women. Despite offering often illiterate, immoral, or illegal tips, they sell millions, appealing to single men who struggle with social interaction and fear of rejection. The article describes attending a \$10,000 dating "Bootcamp" led by a "pick-up artist" named "Mystery," which teaches formulaic and manipulative techniques like "negging" and "DHV" (Demonstrate Higher Value). While these methods might improve social skills through sheer repetition, they are rooted in misogyny and offer little for genuine relationships. Modern dating advice is shifting towards women-led experts who advocate listening and genuine connection over pick-up artistry.

How humankind's 10m-year love affair with booze might end

Alcohol has profoundly shaped human history, from ancestral foraging for fermented fruits (the "drunken monkey" hypothesis) to fostering social cohesion in early large societies by triggering endorphins and easing inhibitions. However, humanity's relationship with booze is changing due to its associated misery and sickness, with sales declining in rich countries and medical advice now deeming no amount safe. The rise of weight-loss drugs like Ozempic, which reduce alcohol's appeal, and the growth of NoLo (no- or low-alcohol) alternatives and "functional" drinks containing plant extracts or magnesium, signal a potential future where precise neurological tinkering could replace traditional alcohol consumption, despite ingrained societal habits.

The tariffs that nearly stole Christmas

President Donald Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs in 2025 severely disrupted the global toy supply chain, impacting American toymakers who rely heavily on Chinese manufacturing. Initial 145% tariffs caused market panic and layoffs, though a temporary reprieve offered some relief. Firms like Learning Resources are suing the administration over the legality of the tariffs, which were imposed under emergency powers, arguing they face bankruptcy. While some companies like Build-A-Bear Workshop benefited from their onshore production model, and

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Lego is building a new US factory, moving manufacturing back to America is costly and struggles with inconsistent policy. The toy industry's plight highlights the broader challenges of global trade disruption and the hidden costs to businesses and consumers.

From honeycomb curry to blood fry: India's 'untouchable' cooking

India's Dalit community, historically "untouchables" at the bottom of the caste system, has developed a rich but largely invisible cuisine shaped by cruelty, scarcity, and shame. This food, often featuring pork, beef, offal, and foraged ingredients shunned by upper-caste Hindus, is now being championed by historians and activists. Despite caste discrimination being outlawed, prejudice persists, with incidents of "cow vigilantism" and "pure vegetarian" rental restrictions impacting Dalits. While meat consumption is widespread in India, the image of a vegetarian nation endures, creating obstacles for Dalit cuisine. However, growing Dalit literacy and curiosity among younger generations, coupled with public discussions and accessibility of these dishes in informal markets, offer hints of change and a potential future for this stigmatized yet flavorful cooking.

The battle to stop clever people betting

Sports-betting firms actively restrict "sharps"—skilled gamblers who use data to find advantageous odds—to protect their profit margins, while simultaneously courting "whales"—big losers. The article details how bookmakers profile punters from their first wager, identifying sharps by their betting patterns (e.g., targeting obscure markets, early bets, avoiding parlays, high closing-line value). Once identified, sharps face severe stake restrictions. To evade these limits, professionals use "beards" (friends or relatives), sophisticated operational security, "priming" (intentionally losing bets to raise limits), and "whale-flipping" (getting big losers to place bets for them). While some jurisdictions are trying to limit betting restrictions, sharps often prefer them as they keep casual gamblers at a disadvantage.

Adam Smith is misinterpreted and his influence overstated

Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations," celebrating its 250th anniversary in 2026, is widely misinterpreted and its influence overstated. The popular caricature of Smith as a champion of self-interest and the "invisible hand" is inaccurate; his earlier work emphasized "moral sentiments" and the "impartial spectator" in decision-making. Smith's "invisible hand" is rarely mentioned in his works and not in relation to the price mechanism, and he even favored government intervention in some cases. The article argues his flowery writing, economic errors (like the labor theory of value, which influenced Marx), and unacknowledged borrowings from other thinkers mean he may not deserve the title "father of economics."

What street talk reveals about Anglophone civilisation

Jonathon Green, a leading expert on English slang, argues that slang, from ancient terms like "arse" and "bollocks" to modern coinages like "skibidi," is a significant aspect of Anglophone

civilization. Slang serves to baffle outsiders, bypass taboos, and bind groups together, with its evolution reflecting social and historical changes. While traditional lexicographers struggled to keep up, the digital age and social media accelerate the diffusion and transience of slang. Despite perceptions of slang as "less than" standard language, it is argued to be "more," conveying rich channels of meaning about the speaker, their context, and their feelings, even as global influences lead to shared slang across English-speaking nations.

America's fight back against China starts in Los Angeles in flip-flops

El Segundo, California, nicknamed "Gundo," is emerging as a critical hub for hardware innovation and a "beachhead" in America's industrial competition with China, fueled by venture capital and a patriotic ethos. Once a defense manufacturing center, Gundo saw its industry decline but is now experiencing a rebirth, inspired by SpaceX's success and its diaspora of former employees. Startups like HydraWedge, General Matter (focused on uranium enrichment), and Rangeview (precision metal casting) aim to reshore manufacturing, prioritizing "atoms" over Silicon Valley's "bits." These firms, often founded by ex-SpaceX, Palantir, and Anduril employees, embody a countercultural, hard-headed patriotism, and are quietly working on Plan B for America's defense and tech supremacy, as exemplified by Neros's lethal drone production for Ukraine.

The long, strange journey of a temple from profane to sacred

A Jain temple replica has undergone a century-long, winding journey from its origins as a tea-promotion exhibit in Calcutta for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, then becoming a "Gateway to Luck" at a Las Vegas casino, and finally finding a sacred home at the Jain Centre of Southern California. Commissioned by British colonialists with little regard for its religious significance, it was a commercial novelty. Its acquisition by the growing Jain community in the US transformed its meaning from profane to sacred, even though it serves as a cultural symbol rather than a functional temple due to safety and ritual constraints. The temple now helps reinforce Jain identity for a community at risk of assimilation, serving as a focal point for worship, cultural events, and fundraising for Jain studies.

What if the best way to learn about history is by playing with it?

Historical video games like Paradox Interactive's Europa Universalis 5 and Civilization are transforming how people learn history by offering immersive, interactive simulations. These games allow players to control historical states, manage economies, diplomacy, and conflicts across centuries, creating "alternate histories" that challenge a linear understanding of the past. Beyond entertainment, they teach "procedural rhetoric"—ideas embedded in game rules—such as the "security dilemma" in international relations. While academic historians may be skeptical, these games foster a deep engagement with history, providing a "hands-on" experience that passive learning lacks and attracting a new generation of history enthusiasts.

How two explorers, a mother and a baby made America

The Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-1806), commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson after the Louisiana Purchase, significantly contributed to America's westward expansion by mapping new territories and establishing relations with Native Americans. The expedition, though primarily led by "great men" Lewis and Clark, owed its survival in part to Sacagawea, a Shoshone woman, and her infant son, Pompey, whose presence reassured potentially hostile tribes of the group's peaceful intentions. Their journals provided invaluable geographical, botanical, zoological, and ethnographic data, which shaped future settlement and development. Despite the expedition's heroic narrative, it also highlighted the complexities and eventual conflicts with Native Americans, and the flawed characters of its leaders.

The titanic task of catering on the world's biggest cruise ship

Gary Thomas, Chef for Royal Caribbean, oversees catering for 7,600 guests and 2,350 crew aboard the Star of the Seas, the world's largest cruise ship, serving 100,000 meals daily. His operation exemplifies military precision and Auguste Escoffier's kitchen principles of specialization and division of labor, operating 25 restaurants and managing a \$1.5 million weekly ingredient budget. Inventory manager Randy Nicolas uses AI and demographic data for precise ordering, crucial for avoiding waste and maintaining razor-thin margins. Despite meticulous planning, buffets lead to food waste, which is partly incinerated to power the ship. Crew work strenuously, often from emerging markets, and face significant challenges, especially during loading days at private islands like CocoCay.

How wolves became dogs

The enduring symbiosis between humans and dogs, unique in the animal kingdom, dates back over 14,000 years, predating agriculture. Genetic and archaeological evidence suggests domestication occurred in East Eurasia, with dogs spreading globally alongside humans. The "scavenger hypothesis" posits that wolves, pre-adapted for sociability and collaboration, gradually evolved to exploit food surpluses near human settlements, leading to "survival of the friendliest." This process spurred psychological adaptations in dogs, known as "dognition," including rapid taming, mind-reading abilities (e.g., understanding human motives), and the development of the "puppy-dog-eye" facial muscle. While selective breeding has led to diverse (and sometimes problematic) modern dog breeds, the human-canine bond continues to strengthen, with dogs serving as both skilled companions and essential assistance animals.

A journey along East Asia's hidden artery

The Kuroshio (Black Stream), a powerful ocean current in East Asia, has profoundly shaped societies along its path from the Philippines to Japan for millennia, influencing trade, migration, and culture. Its darkness stems from water clarity, yet it sustains rich fisheries through poorly understood upwelling. The current facilitated early Spanish global trade and remains strategically vital for nations like China and Japan for defense. Indigenous groups like Taiwan's

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Tao people have deep cultural connections to the Kuroshio, using it for fishing and seeing it as a living entity. Scientific studies are increasingly revealing how ancient humans migrated along its path, underscoring its historical role as a pathway for innovation and exchange. However, human activity is now altering the Kuroshio, leading to rising temperatures, shifting currents, ecosystem wobbles, and more chaotic weather patterns.

How Jane Austen revealed the economic basis of society

Jane Austen, born 250 years ago, meticulously revealed the economic underpinnings of 19th-century society in her novels, detailing characters' finances with quantitative precision. Her narratives often begin with financial setbacks, and characters' incomes serve as shorthand for social rank, as calculated by economic historians. Austen's own experiences instilled a keen awareness of money, contrasting with her nephew's claim of her disinterest. She also explored economic principles, such as Malthusian population theory (through characters delaying marriage due to income) and early ideas of the permanent income hypothesis and circular flow of income (through Fanny Dashwood and Mr. Parker). While critical of profligacy, she disdained miserliness more, advocating for the "cheerful confidence in futurity" needed for a prosperous society, ultimately seeing tourism and enthusiasm as drivers of wealth.

Was Mr Darcy the richest of all Jane Austen's characters?

While Mr. Darcy is famously rich, comparing characters' fortunes across Jane Austen's novels reveals that Mr. Rushworth from "Mansfield Park" had a higher stated annual income of £12,000 to Darcy's £10,000. However, this comparison is complicated by rapid inflation during the Napoleonic Wars. When adjusted for the purchasing power of the pound, Mr. Rushworth's £12,000 in 1808 or 1812 was worth less than Mr. Darcy's £10,000 in the earlier setting of "Pride and Prejudice" (around 1793-94), making Darcy the richer catch by that metric.

The most friendless place on earth

Contrary to popular belief that loneliness is a first-world problem, surveys indicate it is more prevalent in poorer countries, with Africa being the loneliest region. Madagascar stands out, with 60% of people in its southern region reporting loneliness, largely due to poverty that restricts social opportunities and strains relationships. Lack of money forces people into drudgery, limiting time for connection, and also influences the quality of social interactions, as exemplified by the struggles of Dieu Donné who relies on others for water. Migration for work further exacerbates loneliness for both those who leave and those who stay, creating a vicious cycle of isolation and mental distress. While poverty reduction is a broad solution, direct interventions like "community connectors" in places like Frome, England, or "friendship benches" in Zimbabwe, offer models for improving social connections.

Two centuries ago, Russian revolutionaries tried to change the world

On December 26th, 1825, the Decembrists, a group of aristocratic military officers inspired by

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Enlightenment ideals, attempted a coup in St. Petersburg to demand emancipation of serfs and representative government. Though they failed amidst disorganization and the tsar's decisive action, leading to executions and exile in Siberia, their rebellion became a powerful myth in Russian history. Interpreted variously as traitors by authorities and martyrs by liberals, their legacy influenced figures from Pushkin and Tolstoy to Lenin and Navalny. The ongoing struggle over their memory, even into Vladimir Putin's presidency, highlights their enduring symbolism as a beacon of individual dignity and the possibility of a different Russia, despite their immediate failure setting back reform.

The rise and fall and rebirth of lapsang souchong

Lapsang souchong, the progenitor of black tea, originated in China's Wuyi hills over 400 years ago, but the Western version is now fading in popularity. Initially a sensation abroad due to Dutch traders who found its smoky flavor preserved it during sea journeys, it became associated with posh British culture. However, Western brands like Twinings have discontinued it, partly due to declining demand and negative perceptions of its "smoky" taste. In China, its authentic form, zhengshan xiaozhong, thrives as a luxury item for wealthy customers, with producers like Jiang Junfan continuing traditional, labor-intensive methods. Tighter controls on pinewood use for smoking (to protect Wuyi's forests) and changing Western palates, combined with the high cost of authenticity, suggest a future where true lapsang souchong remains a niche luxury while the mass-market version disappears in the West.

How magicians stay relevant in the age of AI

Magicians today face new challenges in monetizing mystery and guarding secrets in an age of shrinking attention spans and pervasive social media, which easily exposes tricks. Harry Houdini, a master of selling wonder and defending his act, offers historical lessons. Modern conjurors like Justin Flom generate massive online engagement by revealing secrets, arguing it's "more entertaining than the trick" and a way to hook viewers. While some magicians fear exposure diminishes magic, others adapt by staying ahead, subverting the act of revelation itself, or using technology to enhance performances. Despite the rise of AI and virtual entertainment, live magic still thrives, particularly in venues that restrict phones and offer immersive, interactive experiences, as people continue to crave the "hiccup in the texture of everyday life" that magic provides.

INTERNATIONAL

Ditch textbooks and learn how to use a wrench to AI-proof your job?

Generation Z is increasingly questioning the value of university education, with many finding it too expensive, lacking relevant skills, and offering jobs vulnerable to AI. Consequently, interest in skilled trades like electricians and plumbers is rising, with young people like Jacob Palmer

finding high pay, job security, and opportunities in fields supporting AI infrastructure. While university graduates still earn more on average, vocational programs and apprenticeships are growing in popularity, addressing critical skills shortages in advanced manufacturing and defense. Countries like Switzerland offer models for integrated vocational and academic paths, and degree apprenticeships in companies like BAE Systems and TSMC are proving effective in training skilled workers.

How to survive abandonment by America

East Asian allies, particularly South Korea, are planning for a future with less reliable American support, facing "Trumpian abandonment" and demands for greater self-sufficiency and financial contributions to defense. America also demands these allies prioritize US trade and technology over China, imposing punitive tariffs if not. Despite this, a consensus is emerging in South Korea to avoid alienating China while cautiously exploring closer ties with Russia, though this is viewed as risky by some diplomats. A key development is the widespread enthusiasm for building nuclear-powered attack submarines with America, and a growing mainstream debate in South Korea about acquiring nuclear weapons, which Trumpworld surprisingly welcomes to make allies "less annoyingly needy," potentially triggering an Asian arms race.

BUSINESS

The plan to rescue Novo Nordisk

Novo Nordisk, a Danish drugmaker, is undergoing a transformation to regain its lead in the obesity drug market, which was surpassed by Eli Lilly's Zepbound in 2025. Despite pioneering Wegovy, Novo underestimated demand and faced supply shortages, allowing "compounding" pharmacies and Lilly to gain ground. Following a leadership change and a significant workforce cut, Novo plans to launch new, more potent oral and injectable versions of Wegovy next year, with ample production capacity. The company is also expanding direct-to-consumer channels, revising pricing, and shifting towards acquisitions to build a broader portfolio of obesity treatments, aiming to become a more consumer-minded brand.

Retreating from EVs could be hazardous for Western carmakers

Western carmakers are slowing their transition to electric vehicles (EVs) due to lower-than-anticipated customer demand and government pullbacks on electrification incentives in Europe and America. The EU, for example, softened its 2035 petrol car ban to a 90% emissions reduction target, allowing continued sales of petrol and hybrid cars. While this offers short-term relief, it risks granting Chinese EV brands a greater competitive advantage, as they are rapidly gaining market share globally, including in Europe. Carmakers must balance current petrol profits with sufficient EV investment to avoid being overtaken in the long term, facing a tricky act of adjusting speed without losing the race.

Job apocalypse? Not yet. AI is creating brand new occupations

Despite fears of AI-driven job losses, the technology is actively creating new occupations, many requiring uniquely human skills. These roles include highly paid data annotators who train advanced AI models, "forward-deployed engineers" (FDEs) who embed AI tools within organizations, blending developer, consultant, and salesman skills, and "AI risk-and-governance specialists" ensuring operational safety. The emergence of "chief AI officers" in C-suites highlights the growing importance of integrating technical expertise with industry knowledge and human-facing skills. The article suggests that while AI can automate coding, "personality is where your premium is," requiring new types of human problem-solvers.

Luxury handbags may be shoddier than you think

Complaints about the quality of luxury handbags are increasing, fueled by online videos exposing loose stitching and poor materials in expensive items from brands like Goyard. This issue is particularly problematic for luxury companies because handbags are central to their success and profitability, accounting for a significant portion of industry growth. The slump in handbag sales, exacerbated by middle-class financial strain and a shift towards experiential luxury, also reflects increased scrutiny due to price hikes. Furthermore, the rise of secondhand marketplaces and "superfakes" offers consumers alternatives, pushing brands like Chanel and Prada to invest in leather manufacturers and tighter production oversight to uphold craftsmanship, with Hermès serving as a model for quality.

How to conduct a job interview

The job interview, despite its inherent flaws and potential for awkwardness, remains the most useful part of the selection process when conducted correctly. Research indicates that "structured" interviews, which use standardized, job-related questions and an agreed scoring system, have the highest predictive value for job performance, far surpassing unstructured methods. However, even structured interviews predict less than 20% of actual job performance, suggesting the need for additional assessments like personality tests and work samples. The article concludes that while there's no foolproof way to judge a stranger, a script, scoring system, and realistic expectations are essential for effective interviewing, with proper onboarding and training also crucial for success.

SpaceX, OpenAI, Anthropic and their giga-IPO dreams

Major tech giants like SpaceX, OpenAI, and Anthropic are reportedly exploring initial public offerings (IPOs) at staggering valuations, potentially marking some of the largest listings ever. This move, despite their success in private fundraising, reflects a growing need for even more capital to fund ambitious projects like SpaceX's Starship and OpenAI's \$1.4 trillion AI infrastructure investment. While public markets offer deeper capital pools, they also bring greater scrutiny and impatience for profits, which could challenge these typically profitless, youthfully valued companies. For SpaceX, corporate governance issues surrounding Elon Musk

are a concern, while OpenAI and Anthropic face intense competition and significant cash burn before expected profitability.

FINANCE & ECONOMICS

Where America's most prominent short-sellers are placing their bets

Prominent short-sellers like Jim Chanos, Carson Block, and Andrew Left hold varied but generally cautious views on the current stock market, which is near all-time highs and shows valuations comparable to the dotcom bubble. Chanos sees "exuberance similar to 2021," while Block is more sanguine, noting solid earnings growth in highly valued firms, and Left anticipates a "deflation" when the AI cycle turns. All agree that market turns are unpredictable but identify signs like cuts in AI spending or a sharp rise in unemployment as key indicators. Concerns include the potential for significant losses given American households' high stock ownership and the concentration of retail bets on risky assets. Additionally, a decline in short-sellers due to client withdrawals and legal challenges against them risks obscuring future corporate wrongdoing.

Meet the American investors rushing into Congo

American investors, led by firms like KoBold Metals, are increasingly entering the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to access its vast "critical minerals" deposits, like lithium and cobalt, despite pervasive conflict and corruption. This rush is partly driven by President Donald Trump's "Washington Accords," aiming to diversify the US supply chain away from China by facilitating American investment in exchange for overseeing a regional peace deal. While corruption remains a challenge, KoBold expresses optimism, believing US government interest is easing the process and reducing the need for bribes. The deal includes a "strategic asset reserve" for American investors, aimed at blocking China's mining dominance, though the ongoing M23 conflict in mineral-rich eastern Congo poses a significant obstacle to long-term success.

This Christmas, raise a glass to concentrated market returns

The article highlights the phenomenon of concentrated market returns, where a small number of stocks account for the bulk of overall market gains, even as many companies struggle to recover past highs. While global share prices have risen significantly since the 2007 financial crisis, a surprisingly large percentage (around 36% globally, and 25% in America) of pre-crisis listed companies remain below their peak share prices. This trend is even more pronounced in markets like Germany, Britain, and Hong Kong. The exceptional performance of a few tech giants like Apple, Nvidia, and Netflix, with returns soaring thousands of percent, demonstrates that for most investors, it's the success of these few "winning" stocks, rather than the many "losing" ones, that drives portfolio growth.

Crypto's real threat to banks

The crypto industry is supplanting Wall Street's privileged position within the Republican Party, posing a significant long-term threat to traditional banks despite both sectors benefiting from deregulation under Donald Trump. The passage of the GENIUS Act, which legalized stablecoins but banned direct yields, has led to workarounds that allow crypto firms to offer "rewards," drawing demand away from bank deposits. Furthermore, the approval of national bank-trust charters for five digital-finance firms, allowing them custody over assets, represents a crack in the federal banking system that banks actively opposed. This loss of political clout means that where banking and crypto interests clash, the outcome is no longer guaranteed to favor traditional lenders, forcing banks to align with Democrats on issues like stablecoin yields and money-laundering risks.

Watch who you're calling childless

The common measure of fertility, the total fertility rate (TFR), often misleads by suggesting declining populations, whereas the completed fertility rate (CFR), which tracks actual births by a woman's late child-bearing years, shows a different trend. In America, despite TFR dropping from 2.1 to 1.6 between 2007 and 2022, CFR has slightly risen from 1.91 to 1.97 in the past two decades, indicating women are deferring, not forgoing, childbirth. This phenomenon, similar to a fable about sentient lizards, highlights that changes in the timing of births can significantly skew TFR without altering the ultimate number of children women have. While the CFR of just under two births per woman is still below replacement level, it suggests a more manageable gradual population decline rather than an imminent demographic crisis, challenging common pronatalist fears.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

A debate is raging over the origins of an elusive cousin to modern humans

The Harbin skull, potentially linked to the mysterious Denisovans, has sparked a major debate in palaeontology regarding human origins. DNA evidence from Denisovans suggests they and Neanderthals diverged from modern humans between 500,000 and 800,000 years ago, with three Denisovan groups later interbreeding with sapiens migrating from Africa. However, morphological analysis of the Harbin skull and other Chinese fossils (like Yunxian 2), proposed as *Homo longi*, suggests a different lineage where *longi* split from sapiens' ancestors *after* Neanderthals, possibly placing sapiens' origins outside Africa. This discrepancy creates a paradox, prompting scientists to consider theories like interbreeding between Denisovans and older *Homo erectus* populations in Asia, as they seek more fossil evidence and advanced DNA extraction techniques to resolve the mystery of who the Denisovans truly were.

Saudi Arabia wants to host the world's cheapest data centres

Saudi Arabia is aggressively pursuing a national priority to host the world's cheapest data centers for artificial intelligence (AI), aiming to pivot its economy away from fossil fuels as part of its "Vision 2030" strategy. Leveraging abundant, extremely cheap solar power and vast land, the new state-backed company, Humain, is rapidly developing infrastructure. Humain's strategy involves offering AI companies significantly cheaper output tokens for running models on Saudi electricity, using specialized inference chips from Groq, and securing cutting-edge Nvidia chips through high-level diplomatic efforts. This initiative also includes developing Arabic-language AI models for civil servants and aiming to build a "world-first AI operating system," ambitious plans that could establish Saudi Arabia as a top global AI hub.

How dogs make teens feel less anxious

New research by Kikusui Takefumi at Azabu University suggests that dogs can reduce anxiety and improve sociality in teenagers through changes in their gut microbiome. The study found that dog owners had significantly different gut bacteria, specifically more *Streptococcus* and *Prevotella* 7 variants, which were linked to reduced aggression, delinquent behavior, and social withdrawal in teens. Mouse experiments further indicated that transferring these dog-owner microbes led to increased social behavior in mice. This research proposes that microbial transfer from dogs influences human brain function in healthy ways, suggesting a novel biological mechanism behind the long-observed psychological benefits of dog ownership.

Are some types of sugar healthier than others?

No single type of sugar (e.g., white, raw, honey) is inherently healthier than another, as their sweetness primarily comes from fructose and glucose molecules. The health impact depends more on *how* sugar is consumed: eating it slowly, avoiding sugary drinks (like fruit juice, which contains as much sugar as soda without the fiber), and consuming it alongside fiber, protein, or fat can help mitigate blood glucose spikes and subsequent hunger. Date sugar and honey, while containing some fiber or minerals, offer too little to make a significant difference to absorption rates compared to refined sugars.

CULTURE

What goes into raising the turkey on your holiday table

Raising domesticated turkeys for holiday meals is a complex, labor-intensive process for farmers like Baffoni's Poultry Farm, which has been operating for nearly a century. Unlike their wild counterparts, farmed turkeys lack survival instincts and are bred for rapid growth and efficiency, primarily broad-breasted whites. The farm manages staggered hatches to offer various sizes, and its daily operations involve meticulous slaughtering and processing, which is

far less automated than larger industrial farms. Despite the unglamorous nature of the work, local farms play a vital role in cherished holiday traditions, experiencing a resurgence in popularity as urbanites seek out locally sourced food.

And 2025's winners are?Timothée Chalamet and Sydney Sweeney

Timothée Chalamet and Sydney Sweeney are Hollywood's biggest winners of 2025, demonstrating rare star power crucial for cinema's future. Chalamet's performances in "Marty Supreme" and "A Complete Unknown" showcased his versatile acting and enigmatic persona. Sweeney's charisma, despite mixed reviews for her acting, generated significant public attention through a controversial clothing advert and roles in "The Housemaid" and "Christy." Both stars skillfully manage public fascination while guarding their private lives, a delicate balance essential for maintaining mystique in today's fractured attention economy. Their success, in an era of streaming and action franchises, offers the best hope for keeping audiences in cinema seats against new threats like AI actors, who lack the human element of genuine stardom.

The best podcasts of 2025

This section lists several notable podcasts of 2025. "Articles of Interest" explores the history of clothes, connecting fashion to broader societal themes. "Final Thoughts: Jerry Springer" delves into the political career of the former talk show host. "Fela Kuti: Fear No Man" chronicles the innovative Nigerian musician's pioneering of Afrobeat. "Flesh and Code" compassionately examines human relationships with AI companions. "Heavyweight" features poignant stories of people addressing unfinished life moments. "Missing in the Amazon" investigates the disappearance of a journalist and activist. "Past Present Future: Politics on Trial" analyzes lawfare through historical comparisons. "The Protocol" traces the origins of transgender medicine for young people. "Shell Game" explores AI's impact on the workforce with an experimental startup. "The Wargame" simulates a modern conflict scenario to assess Britain's readiness for war.

ECONOMIC & FINANCIAL INDICATORS

Economic data, commodities and markets

No significant coverage this issue.

OBITUARY

Iain Douglas-Hamilton fought to save the beasts he loved

The Weekly Digest

Iain Douglas-Hamilton, a pioneering zoologist, dedicated his life to studying and saving African elephants, primarily through ethological observation in Tanzania. He developed innovative methods like aerial censuses to quantify poaching's devastating impact, leading to his advocacy for elephant conservation, including testifying to the US Congress and helping pass the African Elephant Conservation Act. As honorary chief warden in Uganda, he established anti-poaching patrols, successfully contributing to the recovery of the country's elephant population. Through Save the Elephants, which he co-founded, he championed solutions like "bee fences" to reduce human-elephant conflict, ensuring his crucial work continued despite the ongoing threats to forest elephants and his own eventual passing due to a bee attack.