

The Weekly Digest

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THE WORLD THIS WEEK

Politics

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party achieved a supermajority victory in a snap general election, giving Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae a fresh mandate. She pledged to cut consumption tax on food and bolster the armed forces, both popular issues amid tensions with China. Japan's stock markets surged and the yen soared following her decisive win.

Thailand's election saw a surprise victory for the Thai Pride Party (BJT), securing 40% of seats, the largest margin in 15 years, marking the first outright win for conservatives this century. Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul will now form a new coalition government

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with other conservative parties.

Bangladesh held an election, the first since 2024's rigged poll, which led to widespread student protests and forced former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina into exile. Her Awami League party was banned from participating, and results for this year's election are pending.

Security officers in Pakistan arrested four individuals, including an Afghan citizen, in connection with a suicide bombing at a Shia mosque in Islamabad that killed 32 people. This was the capital's worst terrorist act in over a decade.

Jimmy Lai, a Hong Kong newspaper publisher and pro-democracy advocate, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for colluding with a foreign power and publishing seditious materials. The sentence drew international condemnation, with the US calling it "unjust" and the UN deeming it incompatible with international law.

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China asserted that stability was being undermined by "anti-China agitators" and hostile external forces.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi reported a "good beginning" to indirect talks with America in Oman, with Donald Trump also stating Iran's strong desire for a deal. Another round of negotiations is anticipated, and America is reportedly preparing to send a second aircraft carrier to the region, increasing pressure on Iran. Meanwhile, Iranian authorities arrested leading opposition figures, accusing them of targeting national unity and colluding with America and Israel amidst a wider crackdown on dissent.

Indonesia pledged to deploy 8,000 soldiers to Gaza as part of the International Stabilisation Force, with troops focusing on medical and engineering roles to aid in disarming Hamas.

Israel's security cabinet approved measures to expand

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control over the West Bank, simplifying Jewish settler land acquisition and increasing authority over the Cave of the Patriarchs. Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich declared an intent to "continue to kill the idea of a Palestinian state."

Ethiopia's army moved large numbers of troops and heavy weaponry towards Tigray, raising fears of a major military offensive after extensive clashes with Tigrayan forces. Ethiopia accuses Eritrea of arming Tigray, while Eritrea claims Ethiopia is instigating conflict, escalating the risk of all-out war.

A school attack in remote Canada resulted in the deaths of an adult and five children, along with the perpetrator's mother and step-brother found dead nearby. The suspect, described as a biological male identifying as female, committed suicide.

Sir Keir Starmer, Britain's prime minister, faced a week

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of leadership struggle amidst revelations about Peter Mandelson's continued friendship with Jeffrey Epstein. Sir Keir admitted prior knowledge of the friendship before appointing Mandelson as ambassador, leading to the resignation of his chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney. Despite historically low poll ratings, Sir Keir has survived for now, but upcoming local elections in May pose further risks.

The White House criticized Donald Trump's plan to repeal the "endangerment finding," a legal rule enabling the government to curb greenhouse-gas emissions, calling it the "largest deregulatory action in American history." This 2009 finding, which states global warming threatens public health, empowers regulation of car emissions and reporting standards, and green groups plan to challenge its repeal in court.

Gallup announced it would cease tracking presidential approval ratings after nearly 90 years, intending to focus

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on public research and thought leadership instead.

Russian authorities arrested three suspects in connection with the shooting and wounding of Lieutenant General Vladimir Alexeyev, the GRU's second-highest-ranking officer, in suburban Moscow. Russia claims the attacker is a Russian citizen born in Ukraine, who was swiftly extradited from the UAE after fleeing there.

Police in Tirana, Albania, clashed with protesters demanding the deputy prime minister's resignation over corruption allegations that have shaken Edi Rama's government.

Juan Pablo Guanipa, a prominent Venezuelan opposition politician, was placed under house arrest hours after his release from prison, with no evidence provided for breaching release terms. While the post-Maduro government has freed 426 political prisoners since January, hundreds remain incarcerated.

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America's Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, reported that armed forces pursued and boarded a tanker transporting Venezuelan oil from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean, part of US sanctions enforcement. Separately, the American military attacked another suspected drug trafficking boat in the eastern Pacific, killing two people.

Cuba announced fuel rationing in response to America's policy of curbing oil supplies, particularly from Venezuela and Mexico, leading Canadian airlines to suspend flights to Havana. The Kremlin described Cuba's energy situation as "critical" and is exploring aid, while omitting Russia's role in bombarding Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

Business

Opening statements began in a Los Angeles trial that will determine whether social-media companies design addictive algorithms targeting young users. The case centers on a woman claiming Instagram and YouTube

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harmed her mental health, alleging platforms use techniques similar to slot machines and the cigarette industry to encourage constant engagement. Separately, Meta is on trial in New Mexico for allegedly failing to protect children from online predators.

Paramount sweetened its offer to acquire Warner Bros Discovery to \$108bn, including shareholder compensation if the deal doesn't close by year-end. Meanwhile, an activist hedge fund is reportedly opposing Warner's acquisition by Netflix, and the Justice Department is reviewing the Netflix-Warner agreement on antitrust grounds.

Kraft Heinz unexpectedly halted its plan to split into two separate public companies, one for sauces and condiments and another for grocery staples. The company cited prudence, choosing to pause the unwinding of the decade-old Kraft-Heinz merger to focus on profits.

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Mattel's share price dropped after reporting an unexpected fall in operating profit and disappointing sales in the final quarter of 2025. The toymaker attributed the struggle to an uncertain business environment last year, including tariffs, which delayed product orders and led to a lack of anticipated late consumer spending.

American employers added 130,000 jobs in January, nearly double analysts' expectations and the largest increase in over a year, which pleased markets. However, the Bureau of Labor Statistics significantly revised down the total number of new jobs created in 2025 from 584,000 to 181,000.

China's economy is on the brink of another deflationary period, with the consumer-price index growing at just 0.2% annually in January. Although prices began to rise again in October after falling for most of last year, the current figures suggest renewed deflationary pressures.

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Britain's economy grew by 1% in the last quarter of 2025 compared to the same period in 2024, contributing to an overall GDP expansion of 1.3% for the entire year 2025.

Novo Nordisk sued Hims & Hers, an online medication provider, to prevent the sale of compounded versions of its weight-loss drugs Ozempic and Wegovy. While pharmacies can compound drugs during shortages or for specific patient needs, Novo alleges Hims acted unlawfully, leading to an FDA investigation and Hims' subsequent withdrawal of its weight-loss pill from sale.

BP wrote down the value of its renewables business by \$3.2bn, reduced spending plans, and suspended its share buy-back program, prioritizing debt reduction. TotalEnergies also announced a cut in its stock buy-backs, as major oil companies faced smaller annual profits last year due to lower oil prices, despite Brent crude rising to nearly \$70 a barrel since the start of this year.

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Schroders, a London-based asset-management firm founded in 1804, agreed to be acquired by Nuveen, an American asset manager, in a £9.9bn (\$13.5bn) deal.

Glencore and Rio Tinto abandoned their proposed merger after failing to agree on terms, marking their third unsuccessful attempt to combine in a decade.

Heineken announced plans to cut 6,000 jobs, or about 7% of its global workforce, over two years, amidst drooping sales and following the resignation of its chief executive in January.

Researchers at Berkeley, in a Harvard Business Review article, found that AI tools, rather than reducing work, consistently intensify it. A study of a 200-person tech firm revealed that employees using AI could do more, leading to a "quietly grown" workload, cognitive fatigue, burnout, and weakened decision-making. The researchers cautioned that short-term productivity gains

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might mask a "silent workload creep."

The weekly cartoon

No significant coverage this issue.

LEADERS

Don't ban teenagers from social media

Efforts to ban teenagers from social media, as seen in Australia and considered by many other countries, stem from valid concerns about mental health and safety. However, such bans are likely to be counterproductive, hard to enforce, and may push young users towards riskier, less regulated platforms. Policymakers should instead focus on forcing tech companies to make platforms safer for teens through better regulation, content moderation, and data disclosure, allowing young people to enjoy the benefits of social media responsibly.

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The world's most powerful woman

Takaichi Sanae's Liberal Democratic Party achieved a historic landslide victory in Japan, granting her a powerful mandate to reshape the country. She must seize this opportunity to address Japan's long-term demographic and economic challenges, including accelerating defense transformation and promoting economic reforms like social-security adjustments and migration. While her nationalist tendencies and populist promises, such as suspending the food sales tax, pose risks to regional relations and fiscal stability, she has a unique chance to lead Japan in a turbulent world.

The Epstein files tell a story of justice denied

The release of 3m pages of Jeffrey Epstein's documents has revealed a vast network of influence-peddling and abuse, implicating powerful figures across finance, science, media, and politics. While many contacts claim

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ignorance, some emails suggest deeper involvement or make light of his crimes, requiring further investigation. The Justice Department's slow progress in filing charges and haphazard redactions, which often expose victims while shielding abusers, represent a profound denial of justice for the numerous women and girls abused by Epstein.

The rich world should beware Brazilification

Brazil's economy offers a cautionary tale for indebted rich nations, despite its decent growth and independent central bank. High interest rates, currently at 15% due to inflation control, force the government to spend about 8% of GDP annually on debt interest, leading to a projected surge in public debt. This predicament is exacerbated by weak institutions, inflation sensitivity, and constitutionally protected pension spending, which accounts for 10% of GDP and crowds out other crucial expenditures. Western countries, showing early symptoms like institutional strain, inflation risks, and

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rising pension costs, face similar challenges and could see their manageable borrowing costs spiral if interest rates increase significantly.

The world lacks tenor singers. Or does it?

Many mixed-sex adult choirs globally face a severe shortage of tenor singers, making some classical repertoire unsingable and affecting the overall sound. The reasons for this decline are unclear, possibly linked to men's voices lowering or the musical difficulty of the tenor part. Choirs have resorted to incentives, hiring semi-professional "ringers," or using arrangements that omit the tenor line, risking a downward spiral. To address this, schools should prioritize singing, especially for teenage boys, and choirs should consider voice coaches, as tenor voices can be cultivated from individuals who might initially identify as basses or altos.

Britain's predicament will get worse before

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it gets better

Britain is experiencing chronic political instability, with Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer clinging to power after a scandal involving Peter Mandelson and Jeffrey Epstein shattered his image. Despite a 2024 landslide, his authority is weakened, key aides have resigned, and Labour's poll ratings are at historic lows. The government is expected to drift left, prioritizing party unity over bold reforms needed to address sluggish growth, rising debt, and strained public services. This stasis contrasts sharply with the urgency of national problems, and without a clear plan or political capital, Britain is likely to face a worsening situation before any genuine improvement.

LETTERS

Is education technology mostly useless?

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Several readers responded to the debate on education technology, with Sean Ryan of McGraw Hill arguing that the issue is poor implementation rather than the tools themselves, citing data showing significant reading gains with consistent usage. Ji Son from California State University Los Angeles suggested distinguishing between hardware/platforms that erode attention and instructional software, noting that ed-tech is essential for fields like coding. Natalia Kucirkova of the Open University highlighted that ed-tech's effectiveness is hampered by how it's financed, advocating for government funding for independent research and outcomes-based contracting. Dr Kate Erricker of Nord Anglia Education presented research showing technology's impact relies on supporting metacognitive strategies, leading to gains in critical thinking and curiosity when integrated with teacher training and reflection.

Additional letters discussed geoengineering the Arctic,

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with Eduard Spielbauer advocating for gradual aerosol increases to reduce melting, citing its low cost and potential to prevent irreversible sea-level rises. Liam McClain of Boston University highlighted the lasting economic and social impact of ancient Roman and Holy Roman Empires on parts of Germany, while Will Lawson corrected the history of Greenland's colonization, attributing it to Norse explorers from Norway. Christian Zeller of Munich cautioned against collider bias in research on child prodigies, and Christopher Linford of Leatherhead suggested that highly able children often lack experience with failure, which can hinder adult success. Beatrice Langford-Bridge of Founex debated the Western ideal of transparency in romantic relationships, arguing that some cultures value a degree of secrecy for harmony, and Eric Evans shared a humorous bagel order from New York. Lastly, Mike Nicholson of Four Marks praised the magazine's use of pop music references in headlines and suggested a competition.

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BRIEFING

More and more countries are banning kids from social media

Governments worldwide are increasingly banning children under 16 from social media, driven by concerns over mental health, online predators, and excessive screen time, with Australia leading the way and many European countries following suit. While surveys show widespread public support for these bans, implementing them is proving difficult, with teenagers finding workarounds and platforms struggling with age verification, often leading to unintended consequences like pushing children to riskier, less regulated online spaces. Researchers note that the direct causal link between social media and mental health issues for the "average child" is less clear-cut than public perception, emphasizing that what matters more is how apps are used and the content algorithms show, requiring better

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data and more targeted regulation rather than blanket prohibitions.

UNITED STATES

How Democrats aim to curb ICE without losing votes

Democrats are pushing to curb Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) excesses through oversight reforms in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) funding bill, demanding measures like body cameras and judicial warrants. This effort comes amidst public outrage over deadly actions by federal agents and a presidential election where immigration remains a key issue, with Republicans accusing Democrats of being soft on border security. While popular safeguards like banning masks for agents enjoy broad American support, the "abolish ICE" slogan divides the Democratic party, as moderates

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fear it alienates swing voters who still desire immigration enforcement but dislike current brutal tactics.

America may be reaching peak Spanish

Despite America being the world's fifth-largest Spanish-speaking country, the number of Spanish speakers is likely to plateau and decline. This trend is driven by stricter immigration policies under Donald Trump, which have reduced the flow of Latin American immigrants, and a generational shift where later generations of Latino families speak less Spanish. While Spanish-speakers worry about their language's fate, 87% of American-born Latinos believe speaking Spanish is not essential to their identity, suggesting America's assimilation process continues to erode language retention, even as English borrows from Spanish.

Lawsuits over transgender medicine for minors could be huge

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Lawsuits concerning transgender medicine for minors are gaining momentum in America, following a \$2m award to a detransitioner and new guidelines from major medical associations. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) and the American Medical Association (AMA) have both advised against gender-related surgery for patients under 19, citing insufficient evidence of benefits and emerging concerns about harms. These shifts echo European findings and highlight the political sensitivity of the topic, with proponents of adolescent transitioning emphasizing patient autonomy while critics foresee hundreds of millions in damages from ongoing detransition lawsuits.

The decline of single-earner housebuyers in America

Single-breadwinner homebuyers are becoming increasingly rare in America, falling from over three-quarters in 1960 to less than one-third today, even as women's labor-force participation has plateaued since

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2000. This decline is largely attributed to rapidly rising house prices, forcing families to rely on two incomes to afford desired lifestyles. While some lament the shift away from single-income households, data suggest that women's full-time work decreases significantly as their husband's income rises, especially among homeowners, indicating that high housing costs play a substantial role in shaping household income decisions.

Alabama offers three tricks to fix poor urban schools

Southern states, notably Mississippi, Florida, Texas, and Louisiana, have shown impressive gains in educational rankings, especially when adjusted for student poverty, often by returning to basics like phonics and accountability. Birmingham, Alabama, a city with predominantly black and impoverished students, has seen remarkable improvements through three local programs: "Every Day Counts" reduced chronic absenteeism by offering rent/utility lotteries for perfect

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attendance; "intersession" provided voluntary extra classes during breaks, boosting reading levels significantly; and "Birmingham Promise" offers free college tuition for public school graduates, funded by a mix of public and private investment. These initiatives, while relatively new, suggest a changing narrative that disadvantaged children can thrive with effective support.

RFK's idea of making America healthy starts with making it politically sicker

Robert F. Kennedy junior, now Secretary of Health and Human Services under Donald Trump, has kept his promise not to remove a federal statement that vaccines don't cause autism but appended a damaging asterisk, questioning the claim's evidence basis. This move exemplifies his role as a "secretary of doubt" against established science and experts, reflecting a broader MAGA movement trend that merges right-wing populism with leftist "whole-Earthism" and paranoia about government and medical establishments. Despite

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the pandemic's role in Trump's initial political struggles, his administration, under Kennedy, is now actively undermining public health institutions, replacing vaccine sceptics on key committees and cutting mRNA vaccine grants, potentially leading to fewer breakthroughs and more unvaccinated people.

THE AMERICAS

Brazil's economy is being throttled by entrenched interests

Brazil's economy, despite outperforming expectations with 3% annual growth and low unemployment, faces a looming fiscal crisis due to unsustainable debt driven by sky-high interest payments. President Lula's increased spending has eroded market confidence, forcing the central bank to maintain real interest rates near 10%, stifling private investment. The core problem lies beyond

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profligacy, in constitutionally protected pensions that consume 10% of GDP, disproportionately benefiting the rich public sector, and a labyrinthine tax system with vast breaks, collectively creating enormous economic drag.

Cuba's fate may be in Marco Rubio's hands

Cuba is experiencing severe economic free-fall due to the Trump administration's effective embargo on foreign oil shipments to the island, leading to fuel rationing and flight suspensions. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, a key architect of the "Donroe doctrine" focused on US dominance in the Western Hemisphere, is in a position to influence the island's future, but faces pressure to balance hardline Cuban-American demands with avoiding a humanitarian crisis. While some push for harsher measures like banning remittances, the White House hopes fuel shortages will force Cuba to negotiate, though the regime insists it will not change its

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communist system.

Central America's biggest city is eternally snarled with traffic

Guatemala City suffers from perpetual traffic congestion, with vehicle numbers doubling in a decade and inadequate infrastructure. This congestion costs Guatemalans over a fifth of their average salary in lost productivity, estimated at \$4bn annually, and contributes significantly to smog. The government has introduced a mobility plan for the capital, proposing new highways and public transport, and secured a \$110m US deal for road-building.

ASIA

How Japan's prime minister will use her massive new mandate

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Takaichi Sanae, Japan's prime minister, achieved a historic election victory, securing a two-thirds supermajority for her Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which will reshape Japanese politics for years. Her personal popularity and plain-spoken style resonated with voters, while the opposition collapsed. This mandate allows her to accelerate defense spending, pursue constitutional revision, and implement large-scale industrial policies to strengthen supply chains and offer inflation relief, but her nationalist views and populist fiscal promises pose challenges to markets and regional relations.

Led by a Marxist, battered by a storm, Sri Lanka is doing better

Sri Lanka, recovering from its worst economic crisis and recently battered by Cyclone Ditwah, is showing surprising resilience under an inexperienced government led by a former Marxist revolutionary. Despite a botched initial disaster response, the recovery phase has been

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managed better, with India playing a prominent role in aid, contrasting with China's absence. The administration, committed to fiscal discipline and an IMF plan, has met belt-tightening targets and seen a tourism boom, yet persistent issues like rising poverty, stagnating incomes, and a lack of clear long-term direction threaten its fragile recovery.

Asia is turning stablecoins into banking infrastructure

Stablecoins are rapidly becoming vital banking infrastructure across Asia, particularly for remittances and business-to-business payments, despite official caution and strict regulations in some countries like India. Millions of freelancers and diaspora workers in the region use stablecoins to send and receive money instantly and at low cost, bypassing traditional wire transfer fees. This shift towards using crypto to solve real-world problems has seen global stablecoin transfer volumes top \$4trn, although the challenge remains to

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prevent their misuse by criminal syndicates, especially in Southeast Asia.

Thailand's conservatives win a shock big victory

Thailand's conservative Thai Pride Party (BJT), led by Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, won a surprise outright victory in the general election, ending years of political deadlock. Anutin's charisma, populist handouts in rural areas, and appointment of technocrats, coupled with a rise in nationalism from border wars, revived the right's electoral fortunes. This result promises political stability but will delay liberal reforms to the monarchy and armed forces, while leaving core economic policy questions unresolved.

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are weaponising cricket

Cricket in South Asia has become a tool for geopolitics,

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highlighted by recent disputes involving India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in the lead-up to the T20 World Cup. India's cricket board, effectively a wing of the ruling BJP, forced the exclusion of a Bangladeshi player from its league due to worsening bilateral relations. Bangladesh was subsequently removed from the World Cup, and Pakistan initially threatened to boycott its match against India before a last-minute deal. These incidents underscore the region's dysfunctional relationships, where sporting and financial losses are deemed secondary to political one-upmanship and upsetting rival nations.

CHINA

What China is really up to in the Arctic

China, despite celebrating record Arctic expeditions and transits, has adopted a subdued posture regarding its

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Arctic ambitions, downplaying its "polar silk road" plans. This shift is driven by a dizzying change in regional geopolitics, particularly intensified security concerns from America, Canada, and Europe over China's close alignment with Russia. While Beijing now presents its activities as climate research and calls for transparent collaboration, Western officials suspect China is gathering data and experience for military purposes, especially given its collaboration with Russia on ports, technology, and joint military patrols in the Northern Sea Route.

What's the point of AI in acupuncture?

China is actively merging traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) with new technologies like AI, exemplified by brainwave-controlled acupuncture gloves and a five-year plan for "smart factories" and AI-driven treatment discovery. While some TCM practices have scientific backing, many lack evidence of efficacy, and some ingredients harm animals. Nevertheless, TCM is

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booming, supported by the Communist Party as a source of national pride and increasingly seen as a holistic health approach. Technology aims to make TCM cheaper, more efficient, and potentially more sustainable, but building trust among patients and establishing an objective, standardized evidence base through rigorous trials remains a significant challenge.

Why China's concert scene has boomed since the pandemic

China is experiencing a massive concert boom post-pandemic, with box-office intake reaching 62bn yuan (\$9bn) in 2025, significantly up from 2019. Local governments are embracing these events, offering subsidies to attract artists, as concert-goers spend heavily on food and accommodation, with every yuan spent on tickets generating nearly seven yuan in additional local spending. This surge in "emotional consumption" reflects a yearning for experiences among youngsters despite a gloomy economic outlook, and while it may be

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seen as a Gen-Z quirk, its economic stimulus potential is welcomed by the Communist Party.

MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA

Don't welcome Africa's newest despot

Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan, initially seen as a reformer, has presided over the country's most dangerous crisis since independence, including mass protests and hundreds of deaths following a ridiculously claimed 98% election victory. Her regime is facing a severe legitimacy crisis, with the EU freezing aid and America reviewing bilateral relations, while she solidifies power by appointing family and loyalists. Despite Tanzania's past economic growth, corruption and a lack of formal jobs for youth fuel discontent, and while the ruling party once reformed in response to public pressure, Mrs. Samia's government shows little

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direction beyond being anti-graft and pro-IMF, making the country's political future unpredictable.

A deadly attack shows Nigeria's security crisis is worsening

Nigeria's security crisis is worsening as jihadists and bandits expand their reach, with a recent massacre in Kaiama region killing 170 people near Benin. President Bola Tinubu blamed "Boko Haram," reflecting how jihadist groups have diversified and moved beyond their traditional strongholds, with factions like JAS and al-Qaeda-linked JNIM establishing new cells. Hundreds of bandit groups, motivated by money and increasingly involved in illegal gold mining, also terrorize communities, thriving in poorly governed areas. The government's military responses have largely failed, and while new policing and state-run security initiatives are planned, limited resources and regional support for armed groups make breaking their grip difficult.

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How Africa's hottest new museum unravelled

The Museum of West African Art (MOWAA) in Benin City, Nigeria, a multi-million-dollar project intended to house returned Benin bronzes, has unravelled and postponed its opening indefinitely due to a dispute with the traditional king, the oba. The conflict escalated over the museum's name and the oba's insistence that returning bronzes be handed directly to him, not the government, accusing MOWAA's leaders of hijacking the restitution process. Critics suggest the oba's motivation is financial, as the royal palace seeks new revenue sources, and many locals view MOWAA as an elite, foreign project.

Why Syria and Iraq cannot reconcile

Syria and Iraq, despite geographic proximity, remain deeply unreconciled due to decades of poisonous relations, exacerbated by Syria's interim president

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Ahmed al-Sharaa's past as a jihadist against American occupiers in Iraq. His history is unforgivable in Shia-majority Iraq, where Iran-backed militias, still embedded in the state, remain opposed to Sunni militants. Sharaa's rise has stirred unease in Baghdad, with the Iraqi intelligence chief reporting a significant increase in Islamic State fighters in Syria, leading to Iraq's prime minister Muhammad Shia al-Sudani withholding diplomatic recognition and strengthening border security.

Why Saudis feel squeezed even as the economy booms

Despite Saudi Arabia's booming economy and ambitious Vision 2030, many young Saudis feel squeezed by stagnant real wages, high rents, and precarious service jobs. Grand "giga-projects" like the Mukaab and The Line have been scaled back due to low oil prices, shifting focus to tourism and manufacturing, which often entail lower-wage private sector roles. While female

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employment has surged, the overall wage gap has grown, and rising costs from tripled VAT and reduced subsidies, coupled with soaring rents in Riyadh, create a sense of declining living standards and a rupture in the traditional social contract, leading to dilemmas familiar in wealthier nations.

EUROPE

A European fighter-jet partnership is verging on a break-up

A European partnership to build a sixth-generation fighter jet, the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), is on the brink of collapse due to dysfunctional collaboration between French, German, and Spanish firms. Despite urgent needs for enhanced air power and increased defense budgets, disputes over work share and intellectual property, particularly from France's Dassault,

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have hobbled the project. This follows a pattern of failed European defense collaborations, and with Germany's rising defense spending, there's a risk of fragmented national projects instead of unified European development.

Emmanuel Macron thinks Europe's crisis demands buying local

Emmanuel Macron insists on "European preference" rules to protect critical industries like steel, chemicals, and defense, making it a central part of Europe's pro-growth strategy. He argues that Europe faces a "geopolitical and geo-economic state of emergency" and must invest in its economy to avoid being "swept aside" by technology from America and imports from China, which he terms a "Greenland moment." While the EU is leaning towards greater strategic autonomy, Germany and others worry this policy, dubbed "protection, not protectionism" by Macron, amounts to harmful protectionism that could deter investment and undermine

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the single market.

Can Germany rearm its way to growth?

Germany's economic recovery remains elusive despite a massive €500bn debt-financed fund for climate and infrastructure, and a rapid ramp-up in defense spending to 3.5% of GDP by 2029. While manufacturing orders are booming due to arms outlays, converting these into production is hampered by bottlenecks and red tape, leading to continued stagnant output and job losses in traditional industries. Economists cautiously optimistic about defense spending kickstarting broader recovery, possibly through innovation and redeployment of idle industrial capacity, acknowledge that significant growth will take longer to materialize, possibly picking up in late 2026.

The Epstein files are sully Norway's squeaky-clean image

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Norway's reputation for wholesomeness and wealth has been tarnished by revelations from the Jeffrey Epstein files, which show prominent Norwegians, including royalty, politicians, and diplomats, had close ties with the convicted sex offender. Crown Princess Mette-Marit apologized for flirtatious exchanges, while former prime minister Thorbjorn Jagland and diplomats Mona Juul and Terje Roed-Larsen are under investigation for potential corruption due to their extensive correspondence with Epstein. These revelations are forcing a national introspection, prompting action from authorities unlike some other implicated countries.

At the last open crossing, Ukrainians flee Russia's annexation

The Mokrany-Domanove border crossing in Belarus has become a crucial humanitarian corridor for 30-40 Ukrainians daily, escaping Russian occupation and Russification in territories like Kherson and Donetsk. Travelers face arduous journeys through Russia,

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"filtration points" by the FSB, and the need for temporary Ukrainian documents in Minsk. Those arriving, mostly women, children, and elderly, recount stories of constant surveillance, expropriation threats, and systematic suppression of Ukrainian identity. Despite the bleak situation, many cling to hope for liberation, even as American-led peace talks pressure Ukrainian leaders to accept the de facto loss of annexed regions.

The European Onion is a joke whose time has come

The concept of a "European Onion," a multi-layered model of integration rather than a uniform "Union," is gaining traction as a pragmatic solution to Europe's inertia and diverse member state interests. Proposed by Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever, this stratified approach allows a federalizing core of countries to advance faster on issues like economic integration and defense, while others remain in looser outer layers. This

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"variable geometry," already seen in coalitions of the willing and differentiated membership for the Euro and Schengen areas, is increasingly viewed as necessary to address urgent geopolitical challenges without being held back by unanimous agreement requirements, despite concerns about fragmentation and complexity.

BRITAIN

Sir Keir Starmer clings to office?but not power

Sir Keir Starmer, Britain's most unpopular prime minister in history, has survived a perilous week marked by revelations about Peter Mandelson's ties to Jeffrey Epstein, costing him two top advisers and the cabinet secretary. Despite a landslide 2024 victory, his leadership is crippled by political maneuvering, a lack of coherent policy, and a rebellious parliamentary party.

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His past shifts from radicalism to technocracy, and his current position as a hostage to Labour's soft-left backbenchers, mean the government is likely to drift left, failing to tackle hard problems like welfare spending, with local elections in May posing further threats.

King Charles tries to limit the fallout from Andrew's Epstein mess

King Charles is attempting to contain the fallout from Prince Andrew's association with Jeffrey Epstein, as new files prompt police to assess allegations of trafficking and the sharing of confidential documents. Former prime ministers Sir Keir Starmer and Gordon Brown have called for Andrew to testify or be interviewed by police. The revelations also highlight the extensive involvement of Andrew's former aides, with one mentioned over 7,000 times in the files, raising questions about palace knowledge and accountability, while official barriers continue to shield royals from public scrutiny.

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Britain's shifting GDP numbers

Britain's economy grew by 1.3% last year, the fastest since 2022 and third-fastest in the G7, providing welcome news for Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, though GDP figures are subject to significant revisions over time. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) releases initial estimates based on partial data, which are typically revised upwards in subsequent months and years, with full accuracy taking about a decade. The Economist's analysis shows that since 2012, the ONS's revisions have increased by half, highlighting the dubiousness of precise early GDP numbers, despite decision-makers often discounting them for quality.

Tin mining is making a surprise return to Cornwall

Tin mining is making an unexpected comeback in Cornwall, with South Crofty, Britain's last tin mine, set to reopen in 2028 after a 30-year hiatus. This revival is

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driven by tin prices hitting record highs, fueled by demand in AI, electric vehicles, and defense, making the project profitable at significantly lower prices. The return is also buoyed by national security concerns, as Britain seeks to reduce reliance on foreign imports and has provided a £29m grant, with potential American investment of \$225m to secure a reliable supply.

Alpha offers a starter course in salvation

The Alpha course, a Christian program originating from a trendy Anglican church in London, has achieved astonishing global success, attracting over 30m participants since 1977 and expanding rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa. The program offers a gentle, structured introduction to Christianity, encouraging questions on an 11-week format, with later introduction of prayer and spiritual gifts. Alpha's success is attributed to its significant funding from wealthy donors, missionary zeal across various denominations (including Catholics), its ecumenical approach that avoids

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controversial topics, and a strategic focus on engaging youth through culturally relevant content.

Britain's "Hillsborough law", pledging candour, is avoiding it

Sir Keir Starmer's proposed "Hillsborough law" aims to make it a crime for public servants to lie, inspired by the 1989 football disaster cover-up. The Public Office (Accountability) Bill mandates a "duty of candour" for all public servants, with prison sentences for misleading inquiries or the public. However, concerns from Whitehall suggest it could lead to an opaque, evasive state, as officials might become "strategically uninformed" or less willing to provide advice to avoid criminal liability. The bill faces trade-offs and risks becoming a performative policy rather than genuinely fostering candor, which is a symptom of healthy institutions, not merely legislated.

The alternatives to Sir Keir

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Sir Keir Starmer's premiership is in crisis, with the most unpopular approval ratings in British polling history and Labour MPs facing electoral misery. While the absence of an obvious successor helps Sir Keir cling to power, potential alternatives like Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham are blocked from standing, or, like Health Secretary Wes Streeting, are tainted by ambition and government ineptitude. Angela Rayner, a working-class northerner, is a frontrunner despite tax investigations, while Ed Miliband, though competent, has been rejected by voters before. The party's inability to voluntarily make tricky decisions means external circumstances, such as by-election defeats or the prospect of 2029 electoral failure, will likely force a change, leading to a lurch leftwards as backbenchers assert control over a weak prime minister.

INTERNATIONAL

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Inside Jeffrey Epstein's network

The release of over 3m pages of Jeffrey Epstein's documents has exposed a vast network of influential individuals, with a group of software engineers analyzing 1.4m emails to create an "alarm index" for disturbing content. Most correspondence was with staff and business contacts, but the network included 500 main contacts across finance, science, media, politics, and technology, including billionaires and celebrities. While many emails were mundane, hundreds flagged by AI contained disturbing sexual messages and references to avoiding parents, with prosecutors urged to prioritize cases where associates discussed meetings with "girls."

Are liberal values a luxury the West cannot afford?

Western politicians and intellectuals, impressed by China's infrastructure and efficiency, increasingly question whether liberal values are a luxury democracies

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can still afford, fearing they are becoming soft and slow. While China's authoritarian "engineering state" can rapidly build projects like high-speed rail, it often comes at the cost of individual rights and vast, potentially wasteful, spending. The article argues that when Western democracies become less liberal, they risk becoming repressive rather than efficient technocracies, trading their strengths for corruption.

ESSAY

America at 250

As America approaches the 250th anniversary of its Declaration of Independence, this series reviews the nation's history, examining its triumphs and hypocrisies. Born from Enlightenment ideals of natural rights and government by consent, the liberal experiment was initially limited, excluding most women, black people,

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and indigenous nations. The review delves into key historical moments, from the Constitutional Convention that enshrined slavery to early political conflicts over federal power and the suppression of critics.

The Declaration of Independence still defines America's purpose, writes Jon Meacham

Jon Meacham argues that the Declaration of Independence was written for America's most challenging moments, serving as a foundational document that defines the nation's purpose through its enduring liberal principles.

Political parties are a feature, not a bug, of American democracy, writes H.W. Brands

H.W. Brands contends that political parties, despite often being loathed, are an essential feature of American democracy, serving as proof of its healthy functioning by

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providing structure and representation.

Six books to understand the Founding Fathers

No significant coverage this issue.

BUSINESS

Asia's capitalists will need to fight for their revolution

Japan's corporate governance reforms, initiated by Abe Shinzo, significantly boosted shareholder returns, inspiring similar efforts across Asia where profits and shareholder payouts remain low due to weak disclosure, insider dealing, and dominant family/state ownership. While South Korea and China have begun reforms, progress is uneven, with countries like Taiwan and India seeing less urgency due to market surges. The article

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argues that lasting change cannot be solely state-mandated, as Asia's aging demographics urgently require rising equity markets, necessitating a bottom-up shareholder activism similar to America's, rather than relying solely on politicians.

Arm wants a bigger slice of the chip business

Arm, the ubiquitous chip designer whose designs power most smartphones, is seeking a larger share of the chip business as artificial intelligence (AI) drives demand for its power-efficient CPUs in data centers and beyond. Despite its pervasive licensing model, which leaves most value with clients, Arm aims to capture more value by selling blueprints for "subsystems" and potentially developing its own custom chips, a move that could generate higher returns but risks upsetting its customer base who value Arm's neutrality. The company's Japanese owner, SoftBank, is also building its own chip portfolio, signaling a potential shift away from Arm as a

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neutral supplier.

China once stole foreign ideas. Now it wants to protect its own

China, historically a hub for counterfeiting and intellectual property (IP) theft, is now waging a "Lafufu-catching" campaign against knock-off products like Pop Mart dolls, as its own companies become IP powerhouses. Chinese courts are inundated with over 550,000 IP cases annually, making the country the world's most litigious for such disputes, driven by excess industrial capacity. Chinese firms are increasingly accusing foreign competitors of stealing their ideas and are now engaging in international IP battles, reflecting a shift from being a notorious copycat to an assertive protector of its own innovations.

America's hottest grocery store is also its priciest

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Erewhon, a micro-chain of ten luxury grocery stores in Los Angeles, has become a celebrity hotspot and social media phenomenon, known for exorbitantly priced products like \$21 smoothies. Its success stems from a strategic blend of exclusivity?cultivated through a \$200 annual membership and limited product availability?and clever tapping into the "wellness" craze, offering organic yet indulgent options. The stores are designed for convenient, frequent shopping, operating as part grocer, part café, and its slow, selective expansion to only a few affluent cities nationwide underscores that its luxury model is tailored for a niche market.

The excruciating quest for a meeting room

The quest for a meeting room in business is depicted as a struggle for the scarcest resource, marked by ritualistic behaviors like carrying water bottles and the precise timing of room appropriation. Groups often hover outside occupied rooms, waiting for occupants to reluctantly vacate, or attempt to find unbooked spaces,

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which leads to territorial disputes and a reliance on faulty automated booking systems. The article humorously highlights the power dynamics and inefficiencies of this daily office struggle, where senior executives can overstay their welcome, and less organized teams often end up without a suitable space.

Private-equity barons have a giant AI problem

Private-equity firms, which made fortunes investing in enterprise software during the 2010s, now face a major challenge from AI, specifically coding tools like Anthropic's Claude. The value of listed software firms has dropped by a fifth this year, and this chill is affecting private markets, with loans to private equity-owned software firms tumbling. While private-equity bosses downplay their exposure, applying public market valuations to their portfolios reveals a stomach-churning exercise, particularly concerning over \$500bn of borrowing tied to software firms in credit markets,

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raising fears of a debt crisis similar to the 2014 shale boom.

FINANCE & ECONOMICS

How to hedge a bubble, AI edition

Investors, feeling jittery about high stock prices, particularly in AI-driven tech, are struggling to find effective hedging strategies against a potential market crash. The dotcom bubble serves as a cautionary tale, where broad market exits were often premature despite significant corrections. While a classic stock-bond split worked well in the late 1990s, today's inflationary pressures and geopolitical risks mean both assets could fall together. Derivative strategies using options offer protection but carry high costs, while diversifying into "low volatility" or "quality" stocks, such as dividend aristocrats, proved to be the most effective strategy

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during past market downturns.

Who wrangled the best trade deal from Donald Trump?

President Donald Trump has concluded a flurry of reciprocal trade deals, including with Argentina, Cambodia, Malaysia, and India, which, while thin and lacking robust enforcement, establish new market access terms. Cambodia and Malaysia paid the highest price, offering sweeping concessions including mirroring US export controls against China, due to their limited leverage. Countries with more leverage, such as the EU, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, conceded less, while Argentina and Britain secured the greatest market access at the lowest cost with capped tariffs and significant carve-outs. Despite Trump's mercantilist aim for surpluses, his tariffs hurt US consumers, while trading partners, forced to open up, may ultimately gain the most as these liberalizing changes outlast the deals.

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Ethnic minorities are driving America's startup boom

America is experiencing a record-breaking startup boom, with 5.7m new business applications in 2025, driven almost entirely by ethnic minorities. Factors like pandemic-induced layoffs, stimulus checks boosting savings, and low interest rates created fertile ground for entrepreneurship. This surge, particularly among black and Hispanic Americans, is partly attributed to the "George Floyd effect," which spurred support for minority-owned businesses, and "necessity entrepreneurship" due to higher unemployment rates. Furthermore, researchers suggest pent-up potential in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods is now being unlocked as obstacles to funding diminish.

What drives the wage gap between men and women?

Recent research using novel datasets from Scandinavian

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countries and a study of women with Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser (MRKH) syndrome (born without a uterus) strongly suggests that motherhood is the primary driver of the wage gap between men and women. The MRKH study found that these women, who know early in life they cannot bear children, have wage trajectories almost identical to their male peers, especially in their 30s and 40s when the general wage gap typically widens. This evidence isolates the effects of childbearing and related life decisions, indicating that removing these factors largely eliminates the earnings disparity.

Chinese homebuyers are enraged by shoddy building standards

Chinese homebuyers, including those in Shanghai, are increasingly enraged by shoddy construction standards in new flats, with crooked walls, faulty installations, and dangerous electrical connections being common issues. This problem has been exacerbated by a 2016 price cap

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on developers and a 2020 funding crisis, which forced builders to cut costs and employ less experienced workers while local bureaucrats pressured for timely project completion. Consequently, homeowners are hiring third-party inspectors to identify numerous hidden problems, leading to a decline in demand for newly built homes and a preference for older, more reliably constructed properties, further hindering the housing market's recovery.

Why China's central bank won't save the country from deflation

China's central bank is constrained from aggressively cutting interest rates to combat deflation, despite consumer prices rising only 0.2% in January and factory-gate prices falling for years. While recent currency movements, like the dollar falling against the yuan, could now make monetary easing more palatable by reducing export competitiveness and import costs, another obstacle remains: bank profitability. Chinese

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banks face record-low margins between deposit and lending rates due to "involution" (disorderly competition), which limits the central bank's ability to lower policy rates significantly without further impacting bank health.

The coldest crypto winter yet

The crypto market is experiencing an unusually bitter "crypto winter," with Bitcoin's value dropping from \$124,000 to \$70,000 and the total market value of cryptocurrencies falling by over \$2trn. This slump feels more severe than previous downturns, as other asset classes like the tech-heavy NASDAQ 100 are recovering, leaving crypto fans feeling isolated. The downturn is driven by significant leverage and liquidations, with billions in leveraged crypto bets unwound. Additionally, the institutionalization of crypto through products like Bitcoin ETFs is paradoxically pulling prices down as outflows intensify, and the asset class has lost its "rebellious streak" and broader appeal to

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professional investors and central banks, which prioritize gold.

How to put a price on a human life

Economists often assign a "value of a statistical life" (VSL) to perform cost-benefit analyses for regulations, such as those combating air pollution, even though it's a ghoulish concept. America's EPA recently decided to stop pricing health benefits due to uncertainty, but critics argue this discounts their importance. Historically, methods evolved from the "human-capital method" (based on lost earnings) to Thomas Schelling's VSL, which estimates how much people are willing to pay to reduce their risk of death. Although the VSL and similar metrics like Quality-Adjusted Life Years (QALYs) are imperfect, having a benchmark for valuing human life is considered essential for making rational policy decisions.

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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

?Flying? electric boats could remake urban transport

Electric hydrofoils, like the Candela C-8 and P-12 ferry, are poised to revolutionize urban transport by "flying" half a meter above water, significantly reducing drag and energy consumption by 80%. This reinvention of the hydrofoil is possible due to the convergence of digital technology (sensors, control systems), advanced materials (carbon fiber), and modern electric drivetrains. These quiet, emission-free, and cost-effective boats offer a smooth ride and minimal wake, enabling faster travel on often-underused waterways, with several cities worldwide already trialing their potential for passenger transport and military applications.

Humans are not the only animals that treat each other's injuries

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Many ant species exhibit sophisticated wound-care behaviors, demonstrating "social immunocompetence" by treating injuries and preventing infection. Erik Frank's research shows carpenter ants performing amputations to boost survival rates from 30% to 80%, while *Megaponera analis* ants rescue injured comrades and apply antimicrobial secretions to wounds. These interventions are effective due to the ants' injury-prone lives and densely populated, bacteria-rich nests. Susanne Foitzik is researching the genetic variants associated with these behaviors, potentially identifying antimicrobial compounds useful against human pathogens.

Robots with human-inspired eyes have better vision

Researchers have developed a new artificial-vision system inspired by the human eye that is four times faster than current state-of-the-art methods, crucial for autonomous vehicles and robotics. The system mimics

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the brain's lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) by using neuromorphic hardware to filter visual information and prioritize processing power, allowing for efficient identification and tracking of rapid movement. This LGN-like layer guides optical flow algorithms, significantly improving speed and accuracy in contexts like autonomous driving, and has the potential to enhance robot interactions in complex human environments.

Does being induced lead to a medicalised birth?

Medical induction of labor, often suggested when pregnancy extends beyond 40 weeks to mitigate risks of stillbirth, is commonly feared by expectant mothers to trigger a cascade of further medical interventions. However, the best evidence, including randomized controlled trials like the American ARRIVE study and a 2020 global review, suggests the opposite: induction does not increase the likelihood of interventions such as

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epidurals, forceps deliveries, or Caesarean sections, and may even slightly lower C-section rates. This research indicates that concerns about an automatic "cascade" of interventions following induction are largely unwarranted.

CULTURE

Need a bit of dating help? The caveman?s guide to romance

Two new books, "Bonded by Evolution" by Paul Eastwick and "The Intimate Animal" by Justin Garcia, offer evolutionary biology insights into modern intimacy, arguing that today's "intimacy crisis" stems from a mismatch between our caveman brains and the dating world. Both authors criticize dating apps for promoting a warped view of compatibility, leading to "consumer" attitudes, frequent rejection for men, and a

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waste of time. They suggest cultivating real-world social networks, prioritizing face-to-face interactions over profiles, and dating fewer people more deeply to foster genuine connections.

The world is suffering from a shortage of tenors

The world is experiencing a worsening shortage of tenor singers, which significantly impacts amateur and church choirs by limiting their ability to perform certain classical works and affecting the overall sound quality. This deficit, prevalent across Europe, America, and Nigeria, is attributed to factors like men's voices lowering and the perceived difficulty of the tenor part, often associated with powerful operatic stars. While some choirs resort to women singing tenor parts or rewriting music, solutions like prioritizing singing in schools and utilizing voice coaches to cultivate tenor voices are crucial to address this musical imbalance.

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Sex, sex and more sex: Emerald Fennell's ?Wuthering Heights?

Emerald Fennell's film adaptation of "Wuthering Heights" takes extensive liberties with Emily Brontë's novel, reimagining it with a significant focus on sex and omitting entire sections, including the second half and several characters. Fennell, who sees the film as her own interpretation and wish-fulfillment, portrays an explicit sexual relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff that is only hinted at in the original book. While fans of her previous bold work may appreciate her audacious take, purists of Brontë's classic, a tale of class, obsession, and violence, will likely be dismayed by the distortion of its original themes and characters.

Africa needs to follow Asia's path to grow

Joe Studwell's "How Africa Works" argues that Africa's underdevelopment is partly due to chronically low population density, suggesting the continent is only now

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reaching the critical mass of people needed for strong economic growth, similar to Asia's past trajectory. He posits that Africa can follow Asia's development recipe?more productive family farms, export-oriented manufacturing, and state intervention in finance?citing Botswana, Rwanda, Mauritius, and Ethiopia as examples of impressive growth driven by "developmental coalitions." As Africa's population booms and its GDP growth is set to outpace Asia-Pacific, the continent's political elites, fearing jobless youth, are increasingly seeing economic growth as crucial for their survival.

The rise of the 9-to-5 influencer

"9-to-5 influencers" like "Corporate Natalie" have found a profitable niche by satirizing and documenting the absurdities of corporate office life on platforms like TikTok. These influencers offer a more realistic glimpse into white-collar work, resonating with viewers who find humor and relatability in shared workplace stresses. Their popularity has led companies, such as Deloitte, to

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hire in-house influencers, recognizing their ability to connect with customers and employees, though many successful corporate influencers eventually quit their jobs to pursue full-time influencing, sometimes to the disappointment of fans who preferred their relatable "9-to-5" content.

Real-life ?Succession?: Media?s most dysfunctional family

Gabriel Sherman's "Bonfire of the Murdochs" offers an absorbing history of Rupert Murdoch, portraying him as the last of his kind of media baron, driven by a transactional view of power and an outsider's mentality. The book traces Murdoch's empire-building from his father's reduced assets to his global media dominance, including the Sun, The Times, and Fox News, noting his "telephone terrorism" and the "anticipatory compliance" of his executives. As he approaches 95, the question of succession has focused on his eldest son, Lachlan, following a decades-long audition. The book marks the

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end of an era, as media power shifts from singular proprietors to algorithms and corporate conglomerates.

ECONOMIC & FINANCIAL INDICATORS

Economic data, commodities and markets

No significant coverage this issue.

OBITUARY

Virginia Oliver worked Maine's waters for nearly a century

Virginia Oliver, a lobster-boat skipper from Maine, died at 105, having worked Maine's waters for nearly a century since she was eight. Defying gender norms in a male-dominated profession, she started lobstering

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full-time at 50, becoming her own boss after growing tired of factory work. Known for her toughness and a sailor's mouth, she skippered her boat, the Virginia, three days a week until a fall at 103, inspecting lobsters and adhering to regulations. She gained recognition late in life through a documentary, maintaining her modest demeanor despite newfound fame.