

THE WORLD THIS WEEK

The world this year 2025

Donald Trump's second term began with significant domestic and international policy changes, including withdrawals from climate accords, increased border enforcement, and the cancellation of diversity programs. His "Liberation Day" tariffs in April caused a temporary stock market dip, but markets generally had a good year. The Stargate project, a \$500bn AI infrastructure investment, marked a new AI industrial policy in America, with AI-related companies like Nvidia soaring. A fragile ceasefire in Gaza was brokered by Mr. Trump, though peace remains precarious following Israeli bombings in Iran. Elsewhere, major conflicts erupted between India and Pakistan, and in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The weekly cartoon

No significant coverage this issue.

LEADERS

China proved its strengths in 2025?and Donald Trump helped

In 2025, President Xi Jinping benefited greatly from Donald Trump's actions, with China defying trade tariffs and demonstrating its industrial dominance. China's "chokeholds" in manufacturing, green technology, and AI, as well as its research leadership, were highlighted. Mr. Trump's tariffs and attacks on American science inadvertently played into Mr. Xi's hands, alienating allies and impeding domestic innovation. While China's short-term advantage is clear, its rigid politics and economic issues like deflation and overcapacity could stifle long-term dynamism. The leader piece argues that Mr. Trump's scorn for universal values and embrace of ethno-nationalism risk squandering America's greatest advantages.

Two months in, the Gaza ceasefire is floundering

Two months after its signing, the Gaza ceasefire deal is collapsing, with Gazans facing dire living conditions exacerbated by winter storms and continued skirmishes. The ambitious second phase? Hamas disarming, a new government, and reconstruction? has not materialized, largely due to Hamas's refusal to disarm and a global loss of interest. Donald Trump's "board of peace" announcements have been delayed, and no country has committed to a peacekeeping mission. The lack of progress prolongs suffering, empowers Hamas, and strains regional relationships,

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underscoring the urgent need for faster action from America and its allies. The credibility of Mr. Trump's future peace initiatives is at stake if the Gaza deal fails.

The Economist's country of the year for 2025

The Economist's country of the year for 2025 is Syria, recognized for its remarkable political improvement. After the flight of Bashar al-Assad in late 2024, the new ruler, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has brought about positive surprises, maintaining stability and forging international relations despite initial fears of Islamist rule or chaos. While Canada and South Korea also navigated turbulence well, and Brazil punished a coup attempt, Argentina's economic reforms under Javier Milei were impressive, significantly reducing inflation and poverty. However, Syria's shift from a brutal dictatorship to a more peaceful and normal life, with three million Syrians returning home, marks the most significant positive change.

What Novo Nordisk, OpenAI and Pop Mart have in common

Runaway success, as seen with OpenAI, Novo Nordisk, and Pop Mart in 2025, presents significant challenges for businesses. Firms struggle to scale production to meet unpredictable demand, risking overinvestment or underinvestment, as illustrated by OpenAI's \$1.4trn computing power commitment. Unmet demand can also foster shadow markets, with Novo Nordisk battling copycat weight-loss drugs due to initial supply shortages. Lastly, early success attracts legitimate competitors who learn from pioneers' mistakes, allowing rivals like Eli Lilly and Google to catch up or even surpass first-movers. Sustained commercial success, therefore, requires a difficult-to-replicate and continuously evolving business model, rather than just a hit product.

Your Well Informed guide to surviving Christmas

The "Well Informed" column offers evidence-based advice for navigating Christmas feasting. To mitigate alcohol's effects, it recommends strength training, choosing clear spirits, sipping slowly, alternating with water or electrolyte drinks, and stopping well before bed. For food, easing damage can be achieved by consuming beneficial plant proteins and viscous fiber like almonds or oats, which block cholesterol absorption. Eating sugar with fats, protein, and fiber prevents glucose spikes, and opting for whole fruit over juice is advised for its fiber content. The guide also acknowledges alcohol's psychological upsides in fostering social connection and relaxation, emphasizing moderation in all things, including moderation itself.

LETTERS

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

The Weekly Digest

Correspondence expresses concern over America's new national security strategy, highlighting Europe's continued freeloading on defense despite rising threats from Russia. Letters also warn that President Trump's approach aligns with autocrats like Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, fostering internal European divisions. Critics argue that American policy actively seeks to "cultivate resistance" within Europe, thereby destabilizing the continent. They urge European leaders to strengthen institutions and avoid political expediency, which could be exploited by illiberal forces.

UNITED STATES

Will California try to block Hollywood's next megadeal?

States are increasing their antitrust enforcement, often independent of federal action, creating a potential hurdle for major mergers. California's Attorney-General, Rob Bonta, is a significant wildcard who could challenge any deal, even if federal regulators approve it. This assertiveness follows precedents like the states' role in torpedoing the Kroger-Albertsons grocery merger. The issue is especially pertinent as Netflix and Paramount compete to acquire Warner Bros Discovery, a deal Bonta's office has already expressed skepticism about, driven partly by concerns for Hollywood unions and his own political ambitions.

Toll roads are spreading in America

Toll roads are becoming more prevalent in America due largely to the declining revenue from petrol taxes, which historically funded highway maintenance. States like Indiana are expanding their authority to toll existing interstates to address massive road maintenance deficits. While tolls can help fund infrastructure and reduce congestion, the trend faces opposition from some Republicans who prefer state takeover of private assets and free roads. This shift indicates a growing national challenge in funding critical infrastructure as vehicle fuel efficiency improves and gas tax hikes remain politically unpopular.

More schools in America are adopting a four-day week

An increasing number of American schools are adopting a four-day week schedule, expanding from rural areas to towns and cities, driven by aims to save money or attract teachers. While teachers, students, and parents generally report higher morale, better attendance, and improved behavior, academic results for pupils are often middling, with some studies suggesting students fall behind. The policy yields minimal budget savings and its impact on teacher retention is debated. Concerns exist for children from single-parent families who lose a day of childcare, but overall parent satisfaction remains high.

The race for an AI Jesus is on

The Weekly Digest

A new app called "Text with Jesus" uses OpenAI's ChatGPT to offer personalized theological and personal advice, featuring an avatar with a hipster beard. The app, popular in American and Latin American cities, allows users to consult various biblical figures. Stéphane Peter, the founder, acknowledges blasphemy concerns from critics who argue the AI Jesus doesn't align with biblical teachings. Pope Leo has cautioned against deriving wisdom from aggregated data, and the app, while not enabling a "Satan" feature by default, hints at the ethical dilemmas surrounding AI in spiritual guidance.

A vote against gerrymandering shows why political courage is rare

Republican state senators in Indiana demonstrated rare political courage by rejecting a gerrymandering bill designed to benefit their party, despite intense pressure and threats. This act, influenced by public opposition and a desire for principled conduct, stands in contrast to the increasing political conformity seen across both major parties. The incident highlights the debased state of American politics, where politicians often prioritize party loyalty over independent judgment, and comes at a time when America needs independent thinking to confront internal and external challenges. The decision by Indiana senators suggests that dissent and argument are still possible, even in a polarized environment.

THE AMERICAS

An oil boom where the Amazon meets the Atlantic

Brazil is pursuing a new oil boom in the Equatorial Margin, a biodiverse region where the Amazon meets the Atlantic, aiming to revive its depleting reserves. Despite President Lula da Silva's green platform, the potential gains from an estimated 10bn recoverable barrels of oil are too significant to ignore, promising trillions in revenue and thousands of jobs. The drilling presents considerable environmental risks, given the region's unique ecosystems and strong, unpredictable currents. While most locals welcome the prospect of development, indigenous groups express concerns about potential oil spills, and the influx of migration already strains local infrastructure.

Javier Milei loosens his grip on the peso

Argentina's President Javier Milei has cautiously loosened his control over the peso by allowing its exchange band to widen with inflation, rather than a fixed 1% monthly. This change, welcomed by the IMF and markets, aims to address the peso's overvaluation, boost exports, and facilitate foreign-reserve accumulation. The previous policy of maintaining a strong peso had hindered these goals, requiring the US Treasury to intervene and support the currency during midterm elections. While a full float is yet to come, this move is a significant step in Mr. Milei's liberalizing reform program.

ASIA

Can Australia defend itself against jihadist murderers?

A terrorist attack at Sydney's Bondi Beach, perpetrated by a father and son with Islamic State ideology, killed 15 people and exposed vulnerabilities in Australia's security. The younger attacker was known to intelligence services, and both had traveled to the Philippines, a region of IS activity, shortly before. The incident has intensified demands from Jewish leaders for government action against antisemitism, which has seen a sharp rise in Australia. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has pledged tougher hate-speech laws and stricter gun controls, with authorities considering a national firearms register, as the country grapples with a resurgence of gun violence.

Why has the border between the Koreas fallen silent?

The border between North and South Korea has fallen silent, reflecting South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's conciliatory approach to reducing tensions. His administration halted loudspeaker broadcasts of K-pop and news into the North, a practice reignited by his conservative predecessor, leading the North to reciprocate by turning off its own noise. This softer stance, which also includes silencing radio broadcasts by South Korea's spy agency, is a significant concession to North Korea's regime, which fears uncensored information. However, critics question whether this gesture will succeed in coaxing Kim Jong Un back to negotiations, especially as North Korea enjoys stronger ties with China and Russia.

The botched response to a devastating storm infuriates Indonesians

Cyclone Senyar ravaged Sumatra, Indonesia, causing over 1,000 deaths, widespread home damage, and displacement of nearly a million people, yet the government refused to declare it a national disaster or accept foreign aid. This nationalist stance, championed by President Prabowo Subianto, led to slow and poorly coordinated relief efforts, infuriating residents. Environmentalists argue that extensive deforestation for palm oil plantations exacerbated the floods. Indonesia, ranking third globally in vulnerability to natural disasters, appears ill-equipped to handle future extreme weather events, further highlighting the consequences of the government's "arrogance."

CHINA

Jimmy Lai's judgment day

On December 15th, Hong Kong media mogul Jimmy Lai was convicted of conspiring to commit sedition and foreign collusion, a verdict widely seen as a blow to civil liberties. Lai, 78, has been imprisoned for over 1,800 days and faces a potential life sentence, with his supporters

viewing him as a martyr for freedom. The court's extensive judgment accused him of being "obsessed" with undermining Hong Kong and Beijing, citing his calls for foreign sanctions. This case, the first related to foreign collusion under the national-security law, sets precedents amid growing concerns about China's tightening control over Hong Kong and muted international response from leaders seeking deals with Beijing.

The Christmas-industrial complex centres on Yiwu

Yiwu, China, serves as the world's Christmas capital, with vast wholesale markets dedicated to festive decorations, contributing to China's massive trade surplus. However, President Donald Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs on Chinese goods have significantly impacted these exports, particularly to America, causing a \$940m decline from the previous year. In response, Yiwu's merchants are diversifying by increasing exports to European markets and employing strategies like disassembling products to circumvent tariffs. Despite these challenges, the city's worldly traders continue to focus on future orders for various global festivals, reflecting their adaptability in a turbulent global trade environment.

MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA

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

Donald Trump's Gaza peace plan is faltering, with the second phase of the 20-point agreement stalled amidst ongoing chaos and skirmishes. This phase, intended to deploy an International Stabilisation Force (ISF), install a technocratic government, and disarm Hamas, has seen no progress; no countries have pledged troops, and Hamas remains in control. American officials, however, continue to insist the plan is moving forward, highlighting projects like tunnel destruction and "planned communities" for Palestinians. Deepening disagreements between Israel and America, particularly over the inclusion of Turkey in the ISF and Israeli control of access to new compounds, further complicate prospects for reconstruction and lasting peace.

Just 74 intensive-care beds remain in Gaza

Gaza's healthcare system is in ruins, with only 74 intensive-care beds and 215 emergency-room beds remaining functional across 18 partially operating hospitals. Six hospitals have been destroyed and 11 are out of commission, leaving residents with severely limited access to medical care and critical supplies like fuel and drugs. Israeli restrictions on "dual-use" items, including surgical instruments and X-ray equipment, further impede recovery efforts. The war also killed 10% of healthcare workers, and over 18,500 patients, including 4,000 children, await evacuation for treatment. The profound physical and psychological trauma, particularly for children, underscores the urgent need for a \$7bn-8bn rebuilding effort that will take years.

Ethiopia wants to build Africa's biggest airport

Ethiopian Airlines plans to build Africa's largest airport near Addis Ababa, aiming for an annual capacity of 110m passengers to cement Ethiopia's status as the continent's air-travel hub. The \$10bn project, partly funded by ET and the African Development Bank, seeks to support stability and development after years of internal strife and address the existing airport's limitations. Despite ET's strong profitability and interest from American and Chinese financiers, the project faces skepticism due to its massive cost, ongoing civil conflicts, and increasing competition from Gulf and Turkish airlines. Concerns also exist about government meddling in ET's traditionally professional management and the displacement of 15,000 people.

EUROPE

Ukraine scrabbles for handholds against Russia's massive assault

Ukraine achieved a significant tactical victory by counter-attacking and liberating most of Kupiansk in the north-east, challenging Russian claims of military success. This operation, described as creative and adapting to the modern battlefield, encircled Russian troops and cut off supply routes, inflicting heavy casualties. However, elsewhere, Russia continues its massive assault, making limited but steady territorial gains in Donbas and Zaporizhia, pushing back Ukrainian defenses faster than at any point since the war began. Ukraine faces critical shortages in conscription and materiel, while Russia leverages its larger pool of recruits and growing drone warfare competence, enabling its offensive to continue for several more months.

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

Milan and Cortina are leveraging the 2026 Winter Olympics to attract ultra-high-net-worth individuals to Italy. Milan's luxury sector has boomed since a 2017 tax break lured the wealthy, leading to new clubs, private schools, and soaring property prices. Cortina d'Ampezzo, a renowned luxury resort, is co-hosting the games, reinforcing its opulent image. While the influx of wealth boosts the economy, it also causes housing affordability issues and concerns over construction scandals. Despite these challenges, the strategy is proving successful, with Milan becoming a magnet for global affluent investors and families.

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

German cities often resemble war zones on New Year's Eve due to intense firework battles, a tradition that leads to numerous injuries, fires, and overwhelmed emergency services. Despite polls showing public support for an extended ban on firework sales, many politicians resist, considering it an inviolable national tradition. Most of the damage is caused by illegal, powerful fireworks smuggled from neighboring countries, which are difficult for police to distinguish from legal ones. Campaigners, however, draw hope from the Netherlands' recent decision to outlaw private fireworks, though the German ban is still years away from implementation.

European nationalism is dead. Long live European gastronationalism

Despite decades of European integration and harmonized laws, culinary traditions remain a potent source of national identity and division, giving rise to "gastronationalism." Food disputes, like Italy's agriculture minister's outrage over "incorrect" carbonara, highlight how deeply emotions are tied to recipes. Historically, dietary peculiarities have been used to denigrate neighbors, and a distinct North-South culinary divide persists. Southern European countries actively protect their foods with EU "geographic indication" rules, while others embrace globalized cuisine. This culinary chauvinism, though seemingly small-bore, reflects a broader cultural resilience against homogenization and a playful assertion of national pride.

BRITAIN

How to heal the trauma from Northern Ireland's killings

The British government's new Northern Ireland Troubles Bill aims to address the conflict's legacy by establishing commissions for "information recovery," shifting focus from prosecutions to truth-telling. This policy, agreed with the Irish government, replaces a controversial Conservative-era de facto amnesty that angered many. The Troubles, which killed over 3,500 people, continue to cause trauma, exacerbated by the glorification of killers by some ex-paramilitaries and politicians. While past inquiries like Bloody Sunday provided apologies, they haven't resolved deep-seated conflicts or unionist fears of retrospective legitimization. The challenge remains immense, as healing the trauma will take far longer than ending the violence itself.

Britons are becoming obsessed with pet photography

Britons are increasingly obsessed with professional pet photography, particularly around Christmas, with a 2024 survey finding they post three times as many pet photos as partner photos on Instagram. This trend is driven by affluent "pet parents" who view animals as family members and are willing to pay for elaborate shoots, including those with London landmarks or high-art aspirations. Social media profiles for pets are also common, especially in wealthier areas. While the industry is growing, it requires patience and quick reflexes from photographers, as demonstrated by one who was accidentally head-butted by a wolfdog.

A portrait of Britain's aristocrats

Britain's aristocracy, though numerically small (794 hereditary peerages), still holds significant physical and cultural influence, owning a third of the land and permeating literature and place names. However, their political power is ending, with the House of Lords set to remove its last 85 hereditary peers in 2026, concluding a thousand-year era. Modern aristocrats, unlike their predecessors, are often preoccupied with managing finances due to generations of death duties,

with many opening their stately homes to the public. Despite criticism of inherited privilege, a "biscuit-tin Britain" cherishes this heritage, with millions joining charities to preserve historical properties.

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 tactics in Britain, leading to a rise in mass arrests across the political spectrum. His strategy, which posits that more activists jailed generates more publicity and martyrs, has seen groups like Take Back Power deploy attention-grabbing stunts like custard-chucking. While once a left-wing tactic, the right is now adopting similar approaches, creating its own "martyrs" and movements, like "The Mothers" marching against asylum-seekers. This reflects a broader "millenarian turn" in British politics, where catastrophism and radical ideas are increasingly seen as rational responses to perceived civilizational threats.

CHRISTMAS SPECIALS

A journey into the world's most mysterious rainforest

The Congo basin, the world's second-largest tropical rainforest, remains poorly understood despite its immense importance as a terrestrial carbon sink and biodiversity hotspot. Researchers are making startling discoveries in climate science, ecology, and archaeology, utilizing lidar technology and genetic analysis of elephant populations to understand its ecosystems and ancient human migrations. However, this "great green lung" of Africa is severely threatened by logging, mining, and deforestation, with experts warning it may soon emit more carbon than it absorbs. Efforts to protect it are underway, but challenges from dysfunctional governments and corruption make conservation difficult.

What The Economist discovered at dating bootcamp

Dating manuals, a genre offering advice mainly to men, reflect a lack of social capital in an age of rising singlehood, despite often being illiterate, immoral, or borderline illegal. These guides, from Ovid to modern "pick-up artists," reveal a historical male terror of talking to women. "Mystery," a dating guru, teaches a formulaic, expensive "Bootcamp" in Miami, emphasizing "Demonstrating Higher Value" and "negging" to attract women. While such courses can improve social skills by forcing interaction, they are criticized for misogyny, though the underlying principles, like the importance of displaying value, echo even Jane Austen's observations.

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

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Humanity's long and complex relationship with alcohol, rooted in an evolutionary adaptation 10 million years ago, has profoundly shaped civilization by fostering social cohesion and cooperation. Ethanol's unique chemistry allows it to quickly influence the brain's reward and endorphin systems, easing anxiety and enhancing sociability. However, alcohol abuse leads to 1.8m deaths annually, and new research increasingly highlights even moderate drinking's health risks, particularly for cancer. A growing wariness of booze, especially among younger generations, coupled with the rise of weight-loss drugs like Ozempic and innovations in low/no-alcohol "functional" drinks, suggests that humanity's historical love affair with alcohol may be nearing its end.

The tariffs that nearly stole Christmas

President Donald Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs in 2025 severely disrupted the US toy industry, leading to production halts, layoffs, and a desperate scramble for firms to survive. Toymakers, who largely produce in China, faced prohibitive tariffs of up to 145%, threatening bankruptcy for many. Despite a temporary reprieve, companies like The Queen's Treasures struggled, while larger firms like Lego adapted by building factories closer to customers, though not necessarily in the US. Legal challenges, such as Learning Resources v Trump, questioned the legality of the tariffs, with a Supreme Court ruling potentially forcing \$140bn in refunds. The crisis highlighted the complexities of global supply chains and the limited impact of tariffs on creating US factory jobs.

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

India's Dalit community, historically "untouchables," has developed a rich, yet largely invisible, cuisine shaped by cruelty, scarcity, and shame. Their diet embraces ingredients shunned by upper-caste Hindus, such as pork, beef, offal, and foraged wild greens, transforming them into flavorful dishes like blood fry and honeycomb curry. Despite caste discrimination being outlawed, prejudice persists, with incidents of "cow vigilantism" and a "pure vegetarian" bias impacting Dalits and Muslims. A handful of historians and activists are now working to bring this stigmatized cuisine from the margins to the mainstream, challenging upper-caste notions of "purity" and celebrating Dalit heritage.

The battle to stop clever people betting

Sports-betting firms actively employ sophisticated "player-profiling" strategies to identify and restrict "sharps" (skilled bettors) who use statistical models to find advantageous odds. Sharps, who often target obscure markets and bet as soon as odds are released, face stake restrictions and account limitations across betting outlets. To circumvent these, professional gamblers resort to "bearding" (using others to place bets), "priming" (intentionally making losing bets to raise limits), and "whale-flipping" (getting big losers to place bets for them). While some jurisdictions are exploring limits on betting restrictions, many bookmakers defend them as essential to their business model and a way to maintain market integrity.

Adam Smith is misinterpreted and his influence overstated

Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations," celebrating its 250th anniversary, is often misinterpreted and its influence overstated, according to this analysis. Popularly seen as a proponent of self-interest and the "invisible hand" leading to optimal outcomes, Smith's first work, "Theory of Moral Sentiments," actually emphasized human sympathy and the "impartial spectator" in decision-making. He also favored government intervention in areas like education and certain trade laws, contradicting modern libertarian interpretations. Furthermore, Smith's "labour theory of value" laid groundwork for Marxism, and some of his core ideas were not original, leading to questions about his intellectual honesty and his status as the "father of economics."

What street talk reveals about Anglophone civilisation

English slang, from ancient terms like "arse" and "bollocks" to modern coinages like "skibidi," serves to baffle outsiders and bind groups together. Historically, dictionaries of slang, like Francis Grose's 1785 "Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue," documented how people circumvented taboos and used ironic detachment to cope with hardship, as exemplified by soldiers' vocabulary in World War I. Today, with social media accelerating language diffusion, slang's half-life is shorter, and countless subcultures generate their own patois. Lexicographers like Jonathon Green face challenges in keeping up with this rapid evolution, but argue that slang is not just common language but a richer, more expressive form of communication reflecting cultural identity and sentiment.

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

El Segundo, California, known as "Gundo," is emerging as a critical hub for hardware innovation, driving America's fight for industrial supremacy against China. This beachside city, once a manufacturing powerhouse, is experiencing a rebirth fueled by venture capital and a diaspora of engineers from SpaceX, Palantir, and Anduril. These startups, with patriotic fervor and an anti-Silicon Valley ethos, focus on complex hardware for defense, space, and energy, aiming to repatriate manufacturing jobs and technology. Firms like Rangeview and Neros are developing high-precision casting and lethal drones, stripping Chinese technology from their products, despite the high costs and perceived lack of blue-collar jobs, all while hoping President Trump's policies will support their mission.

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

A carved wooden replica of a Jain temple has had a remarkable journey, transforming from a tea-promotion device at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair into a "Gateway to Luck" at a Las Vegas casino, and finally finding sacred meaning in a Jain center in Buena Park, California. Commissioned by British colonialists to boost tea sales, its Jain origins were largely ignored by its commercial owners. However, a growing Jain community in Southern California, who recognized its religious significance, acquired the temple. Despite fire safety and structural

limitations preventing its use for traditional worship, the "wandering temple" has become a priceless focal point, reinforcing Jain identity and serving as a symbol of their faith and heritage in America.

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

Historical video games like Paradox Interactive's Europa Universalis 5 are transforming how people engage with and learn about history, offering interactive simulations rather than passive narratives. These "Great Games" allow players to control historical states through centuries, managing diplomacy, economies, and conflicts, generating rich "alternate histories" that challenge the notion of a fixed past. The games teach complex concepts like the "security dilemma" through direct experience, fostering a deeper understanding than textbooks. While simulations have limitations, they provide an alluring, hands-on approach that cultivates history enthusiasts and offers a "procedural rhetoric" that smuggles ideas into players' minds, making history more accessible and engaging.

How two explorers, a mother and a baby made America

The Lewis and Clark expedition, ordered by President Thomas Jefferson after the Louisiana Purchase, was pivotal in America's westward expansion. Lewis and Clark, accompanied by Sacagawea and her infant son, Pompey, charted new territory, encountered Native American tribes, and made significant scientific discoveries. Pompey's presence was crucial, reassuring tribes that the heavily armed expedition was peaceful, potentially averting disaster. The expedition's journals and maps provided invaluable guidance for future settlers, confirming the immense potential of the new lands. Jefferson, a visionary "man of facts," orchestrated this monumental undertaking, but ultimately underestimated the challenges of controlling westward expansion and avoiding conflict with Native Americans.

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

Catering on a mega-cruise ship like the Star of the Seas is a titanic logistical feat, with Chef Gary Thomas overseeing 26 restaurants and preparing 100,000 meals daily for up to 7,600 guests and 2,350 crew. Inspired by Auguste Escoffier's kitchen principles of specialization and division of labor, the operation demands military discipline and meticulous preparation, with ingredients costing \$1.5m for a weeklong cruise. Inventory manager Randy Nicolas uses AI-powered software, Crunchtime, to forecast precise ingredient needs, managing 25,000 items from lobster tails to bottled water. Despite efforts to minimize waste, the all-you-can-eat buffet model and health regulations contribute to significant food disposal.

How wolves became dogs

The unique symbiosis between humans and dogs began over 14,000 years ago, far predating other animal domestications, likely in East Eurasia. Theories suggest wolves became dogs through natural selection, adapting to scavenge from human settlements ("scavenger

hypothesis") or benefiting from discarded lean meat from hunter-gatherers. Genetic and psychological adaptations, dubbed "dognition," allowed dogs to thrive in proximity to people, including a unique ability to read human minds and a special facial muscle for "puppy-dog eyes." While deliberate human breeding later led to diverse dog breeds, the initial domestication was a complex evolutionary process that established dogs as true companions and skilled operatives.

A journey along East Asia's hidden artery

The Kuroshio, or Black Stream, a powerful ocean current in East Asia, has profoundly shaped the region's societies, trade, and migrations for millennia. Flowing northward from the Philippines past Taiwan and Japan, it historically facilitated Spanish galleon trade and sustained rich fisheries, despite its dark, clear waters. Indigenous communities, like the Tao people of Orchid Island, have cultures deeply intertwined with the current and its flying fish. Archaeological evidence suggests ancient humans navigated the Kuroshio to settle the Ryukyu islands, demonstrating an early "innovation mindset." However, climate change is now altering the Black Stream, causing warming waters, shifting ecosystems, and contributing to more chaotic weather events like intense snowstorms.

How Jane Austen revealed the economic basis of society

Jane Austen's novels, written 250 years ago, meticulously reveal the economic realities of her society with a quantitative precision unusual for literature. Her narratives consistently demonstrate that while wealth isn't sufficient for happiness, it is a necessary foundation, with characters' financial status serving as shorthand for their social standing. Austen's personal experiences, growing up one step removed from wealth, informed her keen understanding of income gradations and financial struggles. She also subtly engaged with contemporary economic theories, such as Malthus's population principle, and even anticipated concepts like Milton Friedman's permanent income hypothesis. While she criticized profligacy, she disdained miserliness even more, championing "enthusiasts" who stimulated the economy through spending.

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

Comparing the fortunes of Jane Austen's characters across her novels reveals "fiscal twins" with similar incomes, like Mr. Bennet and Colonel Brandon. However, the purchasing power of money fluctuated significantly due to rapid inflation during the Napoleonic wars, which spanned the settings and publication dates of her books. For instance, Mr. Rushworth's £12,000 annual income in "Mansfield Park" (set later) was worth considerably less than Mr. Darcy's £10,000 in "Pride and Prejudice" (set earlier) when adjusted for inflation. Therefore, by this economic logic, Mr. Darcy remains the richer and more desirable catch among Austen's wealthy bachelors.

The most friendless place on earth

Contrary to popular belief, loneliness is not exclusively a "first-world problem"; surveys indicate it is more prevalent in poorer, collectivist societies, with Africa identified as the loneliest region globally. Madagascar, one of the poorest countries, shows a staggering 60% of people in its south reporting loneliness. Poverty exacerbates loneliness by limiting social opportunities, increasing drudgery, and straining relationships due to financial stress and migration for work. Cultural expectations in collectivist societies can also trap individuals in unsatisfying relationships. Interventions like "social prescribing" in the UK and "friendship benches" in Zimbabwe demonstrate that direct approaches to fostering social connections can effectively reduce loneliness and improve well-being.

Two centuries ago, Russian revolutionaries tried to change the world

Two centuries ago, on December 26th, 1825, a group of aristocratic military officers known as the Decembrists attempted a coup in St Petersburg, inspired by Enlightenment ideals. Though they sought emancipation for serfs, representative government, and rule of law, their disorganization and the tsar's decisive action led to their swift defeat and brutal punishment, including executions and exile to Siberia. Despite their failure, the Decembrists transmuted into a powerful myth, becoming symbols of honour and self-sacrifice for generations of Russian writers and dissidents. Their legacy continues to be debated, representing a beacon of individual dignity and the enduring hope for a different Russia, even in contemporary times.

The rise and fall and rebirth of lapsang souchong

Lapsang souchong, the world's original black tea, originated over 400 years ago in China's Wuyi hills and became a sensation in the West, particularly among Victorians and figures like Winston Churchill. Its distinctive smoky flavor, initially a result of curing leaves over pine fires, has led to a divisive reputation. However, its popularity in the West is now fading due to changing palates, association with "granny," and proliferation of cheaper, chemically-smoked imitations. In China, by contrast, the genuine, meticulously produced tea, known as zhengshan xiaozhong, thrives as a premium product, with new unsMoked varieties like Jin Jun Mei fetching exorbitant prices from a growing wealthy market.

How magicians stay relevant in the age of AI

Magicians today face new challenges?shrinking attention spans, social media exposure, and the jading effect of technology?but adapt by leveraging spectacle, humor, and even revealing secrets. Much like Harry Houdini, who masterfully used publicity and fiercely defended his act, modern conjurors like Justin Flom generate millions of views by showing how tricks are done, often finding the "secret is more entertaining than the trick." While some fear exposure diminishes wonder, others, like Asi Wind, subvert the act of revelation itself. Technology also offers new tools for illusions, but the core appeal of live magic, creating a "hiccup in the texture of everyday life," persists as people crave genuine wonder in an AI-saturated world.

INTERNATIONAL

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

Generation Z is increasingly reconsidering university education in favor of skilled trades, driven by concerns about high tuition costs, AI's impact on white-collar jobs, and the immediate earning potential of manual work. Figures show a rise in vocational training and apprenticeships, with trades like lift technicians and electricians offering competitive median salaries, often exceeding those of many arts and humanities graduates. These blue-collar skills are also critical for advanced manufacturing and defense industries, which face severe labor shortages. While a stigma remains, countries like Switzerland offer integrated vocational and academic paths, and degree apprenticeships in companies like BAE Systems and TSMC provide promising models for future workforce development.

How to survive abandonment by America

From East Asia, America is perceived as an unreliable partner, demanding increased defense responsibility and economic alignment while threatening abandonment. South Korea, in particular, faces demands for significant investments in the US and military support in potential US-China conflicts. An emerging consensus in South Korea favors pragmatism, seeking trade deals with Trump while being wary of antagonizing China. There's also growing interest in developing nuclear-powered attack submarines with America, and a mainstream debate about acquiring independent nuclear weapons, a prospect surprisingly receptive to Trumpworld if it reduces allied "neediness." This preparation reflects a lonelier, harsher world where middle powers must consider stronger alliances, like with Japan, to survive perceived US abandonment.

BUSINESS

The plan to rescue Novo Nordisk

Novo Nordisk, pioneer of weight-loss jab Wegovy, is undergoing a transformation to regain its lead in the obesity drug market from rival Eli Lilly. After underestimating demand and suffering supply shortages, its market value plummeted as Lilly's Zepbound gained significant traction. New CEO Maziar Mike Doustdar plans to launch oral and higher-dose injectable versions of Wegovy, expand direct-to-consumer sales, revise pricing strategies, and increase acquisitions to build a broader portfolio. The company has also announced 9,000 job cuts and a narrower focus on diabetes and obesity. This internal battle to become a nimble consumer brand is crucial as it faces fierce competition and impending patent expirations in emerging markets.

Retreating from EVs could be hazardous for Western carmakers

Western carmakers are hitting the brakes on their electric vehicle (EV) transition plans as customer demand slows and governments ease deadlines, such as the EU dropping its 2035 petrol car ban. High upfront costs, limited smaller EV models, and inadequate charging infrastructure have dampened enthusiasm. Ford's \$19.5bn asset write-down and shift back to hybrid models exemplify this retreat. However, this slowdown risks ceding market share to fast-growing Chinese EV brands, which are rapidly expanding globally despite tariffs. Western carmakers must balance short-term profits from petrol cars with sufficient long-term investment in EVs to remain competitive and avoid an unassailable lead for their rivals.

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. Data annotators, now specialized experts in various fields, are training advanced AI models and earning high hourly wages. Forward-deployed engineers (FDEs) are crucial for embedding AI tools into organizations, blending technical expertise with client-facing consulting and sales skills, and requiring emotional intelligence to understand human users. The rise of AI risk-and-governance specialists highlights the need to ensure bots operate safely and responsibly. Chief AI officers, combining technical knowledge with industry expertise, are also emerging in C-suites to manage AI integration, underscoring that human personality and oversight are becoming premium skills.

Luxury handbags may be shoddier than you think

Luxury handbags, once a key driver of industry growth and profit, are facing increased scrutiny over quality, with viral online videos exposing flaws like loose stitching and dye melt. This comes as the handbag market experiences a slump, influenced by middle-class financial strain and a consumer shift towards "experiences" over material goods. Luxury brands, which significantly raised prices post-pandemic, are now seeing complaints about quality amplified, impacting their reputation. The rise of secondhand luxury marketplaces and "superfake" knock-offs further challenges traditional brands. In response, companies like Chanel and Prada are investing in manufacturers and tightening production oversight, with Hermès's handcrafted Birkin bags serving as an example where craftsmanship still commands sales and avoids quality concerns.

How to conduct a job interview

Job interviews, despite their often-stereotypical and anxiety-inducing nature, remain the most useful part of the selection process when conducted correctly. Structured interviews, which involve standardized, job-related questions scored systematically, have the highest predictive value for future job performance. Unstructured interviews, however, are far less effective. The challenge lies in managers' reluctance to adopt structured formats, as it can feel like a loss of agency. Even the best interviews only predict a small fraction of job performance, so combining them with other assessments like personality tests and work samples is crucial. Ultimately,

hiring a stranger requires a script, a scoring system, and a dose of realism.

SpaceX, OpenAI, Anthropic and their giga-IPO dreams

SpaceX, OpenAI, and Anthropic, once exclusively funded by private investors, are reportedly exploring massive IPOs, potentially becoming the largest since Alibaba in 2014 or Saudi Aramco in 2019. This shift is driven by their escalating capital needs for ambitious projects like Starship and AI computing power, as private markets plateau. However, going public presents significant dilemmas; for SpaceX, it means more scrutiny of Elon Musk's corporate governance, while OpenAI and Anthropic face market impatience over their substantial net losses. The success of these IPOs, which would trade access to deep public capital for heightened oversight, will test whether their lofty private valuations can withstand the discerning demands of public markets.

FINANCE & ECONOMICS

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

America's prominent short-sellers, including Jim Chanos, Carson Block, and Andrew Left, hold varied views on the current stock market, which is near all-time highs and displaying "exuberance similar to 2021" particularly in AI. While Chanos sees alarm bells in "data-centres-in-space" ambitions, Block is more sanguine, and Left anticipates a potential "deflation" when the market cycle turns. All agree that pinpointing the exact timing of a market reversal is impossible, but they expect signs like weakening AI profits or a sharp rise in unemployment to signal the shift. Concerns are high regarding shareholder losses from AI uncertainties and the potential for increased fraud, especially as short-sellers face intensified legal scrutiny, potentially leaving fewer to uncover wrongdoing in future booms.

Meet the American investors rushing into Congo

American investors, including mining firm KoBold Metals, are rushing into the mineral-rich Democratic Republic of Congo, driven by President Donald Trump's "Washington Accords." These deals, inked with Congo and Rwanda, aim to secure access to critical minerals like lithium and cobalt, diversifying supply away from China. Despite Congo's pervasive conflicts and corruption, American firms report increased ease of operation due to US government backing. Trump's deal includes provisions for a "strategic asset reserve" for American investors and upfront tax agreements, but ongoing informality and M23 rebel control over key mining sites, like Rubaya, present significant challenges. The initiative tests Trump's deal diplomacy and its ability to challenge China's mining dominance in the region.

This Christmas, raise a glass to concentrated market returns

The Weekly Digest

Bank of America and Cisco recently hit new record share prices, almost two decades after their pre-financial crisis peaks, highlighting a surprising phenomenon in global stock markets. Despite overall indices being significantly higher than in 2007, a substantial proportion of individual companies?36% globally and 25% in America?remain below their former glory. This trend underscores the powerful force of concentrated returns, where a small number of "superstar" stocks, such as Apple, Nvidia, and Netflix, account for the vast majority of shareholder wealth creation. For most investors, the underperformance of many firms is not a concern, as overall portfolio growth is driven by the exceptional few.

Crypto's real threat to banks

The crypto industry, having weathered initial disdain from Wall Street, is now posing a significant political threat to traditional banks by supplanting their privileged position within the American right. Despite a year of deregulation benefiting banks, crypto has gained clout, partly through the legal certainty granted to stablecoins by the GENIUS Act. Banks are alarmed by loopholes allowing stablecoins to offer "rewards," potentially drawing demand from bank deposits. Furthermore, the approval of national bank-trust charters for five digital-finance firms signals crypto's growing access to the federal banking system. This shift in political influence means that in clashes between banks and crypto, outcomes are no longer guaranteed in favor of traditional lenders, forcing banks to seek alliances with unexpected partners on the left.

Watch who you're calling childless

The common measure of fertility, the total fertility rate (TFR), suggests a sharp decline in births in Western countries, including America, leading to fears of population shrinkage. However, the TFR, which measures hypothetical births based on current age-specific rates, is often misleading as it primarily captures the "tempo" or timing of births, not the "quantum" or total number. A different measure, the completed fertility rate (CFR)?average births by age 44?shows American women are having as many babies over their lifetimes as two decades ago, having merely deferred childbearing to later ages. This suggests that rather than a doomsday scenario of infertility, the issue is more about shifted timing, which historical examples like Sweden's fertility recovery support.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

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

The Harbin skull, recently linked to the mysterious Denisovans, has ignited a debate over the origins of this elusive human cousin and could challenge the out-of-Africa theory for Homo sapiens. DNA evidence suggests Denisovans and Neanderthals split from modern humans before diverging from each other. However, the skull's morphology (physical shape) implies

that the lineage leading to Denisovans and early Homo sapiens diverged from Neanderthals later, possibly outside Africa. This discrepancy between genetic and morphological data presents a conundrum for palaeoanthropologists, who hope that further fossil discoveries and advanced DNA extraction techniques from Chinese fossils will clarify the Denisovan's role in human evolution.

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

Saudi Arabia is rapidly pursuing a national strategy to host the world's cheapest data centers for artificial intelligence (AI), leveraging its abundant, low-cost solar electricity and vast land. The state-backed company, Humain, aims to pivot the country away from fossil fuels, securing cutting-edge chips and partnering with global firms. By offering output tokens for AI models at half market price, Humain attracted a \$3bn data-center deal with AirTrunk. A recent meeting between MBS and Donald Trump also unlocked import licenses for 35,000 Nvidia chips, signaling a reversal in US policy and a bold ambition to build a world-first AI operating system, despite tight timelines.

How dogs make teens feel less anxious

Dogs may help reduce anxiety and improve sociality in teenagers by influencing their gut microbiota, according to research by Kikusui Takefumi at Azabu University. The study found that dog-owning teens exhibited fewer social problems, including reduced aggression and social withdrawal, compared to non-owners. Saliva samples revealed a higher abundance of specific Streptococcus and Prevotella 7 bacteria variants in dog owners, which were inversely correlated with delinquent behaviors. Further experiments with mice, infused with microbes from both groups of teens, showed that those with dog-owner microbes displayed more social behaviors. This research suggests that microbiome transfer from dogs may have a direct, beneficial impact on the human brain and mental health.

Are some types of sugar healthier than others?

When it comes to sugar, its type—whether refined white, raw, or honey—makes no significant difference to health; instead, how and when it's consumed matters most. All sugars predominantly contain fructose and glucose, with glucose causing blood sugar spikes and fructose being processed into fat by the liver. A key strategy is to eat sugar slowly and avoid sugary drinks like fruit juice, which lead to rapid absorption. Consuming sugar alongside fiber, protein, or fat, such as in cakes with nuts, helps to slow absorption and increase satiety. While some "natural" sugars contain minor minerals or fiber, the amounts are typically too small to offer substantial health benefits.

CULTURE

The Weekly Digest

What goes into raising the turkey on your holiday table

Raising turkeys for holiday tables is a labor-intensive process, largely undertaken by small, multi-generational farms like Baffoni's Poultry Farm, which has nearly a century of experience. These farms primarily raise broad-breasted whites for their rapid growth and appearance, supplying millions of birds for Thanksgiving and Christmas. The process, from hatching day-old poults to staggered arrivals and eventual slaughter, requires careful management to ensure various sizes are available. Despite the unglamorous, back-breaking work, Adam Baffoni emphasizes the pride in upholding family tradition and the importance of local farms. The shift in consumer preference towards knowing their food sources helps these smaller operations, but they still face intense competition from large industrial farms and the challenge of managing the sights and smells of an active poultry farm in increasingly suburban areas.

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

Timothée Chalamet and Sydney Sweeney emerged as Hollywood's biggest winners in 2025, starring in glitzy Christmas films like "Marty Supreme" and "The Housemaid" respectively. Both actors have achieved true movie stardom, a rarity in today's fractured attention economy, by lending their popularity to films rather than the reverse. They skillfully maintain mystique by feeding the publicity beast without fully sating it, using sly stunts and aloof responses to media frenzies. Their ability to draw audiences to cinema screens is crucial for the industry, which faces competition from streaming and the emerging threat of AI actors. Chalamet and Sweeney represent the best hope for keeping human stars and character-driven storytelling alive in an evolving entertainment landscape.

The best podcasts of 2025

This year's top podcasts covered a diverse range of topics, from the history of clothes in "Articles of Interest" to the political career of Jerry Springer in "Final Thoughts." "Fela Kut: Fear No Man" explored the Nigerian musician's pioneering of Afrobeat. "Flesh and Code" delved into human relationships with AI companions, while "Heavyweight" addressed life's unfinished moments. "Missing in the Amazon" investigated the disappearance of a journalist and an indigenous activist, and "Past Present Future: Politics on Trial" examined lawfare. "The Protocol" traced the history of transgender medicine, "Shell Game" explored AI's impact on the workforce, and "The Wargame" simulated Britain's response to a potential war with Russia.

ECONOMIC & FINANCIAL INDICATORS

Economic data, commodities and markets

No significant coverage this issue.

OBITUARY

Iain Douglas-Hamilton fought to save the beasts he loved

Iain Douglas-Hamilton, a campaigning zoologist, dedicated his life to studying and saving African elephants, pioneering methods like aerial censuses to quantify the devastating impact of ivory poaching. His research, starting in Tanzania in 1965, revealed individual elephant quirks and led him to become a fierce advocate for conservation, testifying to the US Congress and helping pass the African Elephant Conservation Act. After Idi Amin's fall, he masterminded anti-poaching air and ground patrols in Uganda, laying the groundwork for elephant population recovery. In 1993, he co-founded Save the Elephants, contributing to population increases in several African countries. Despite these successes, forest elephants remain critically endangered, a stark reminder of the ongoing challenges in protecting these magnificent beasts.