

The Weekly Digest

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THE WORLD THIS WEEK

Politics

Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, Donald Trump's mediators, met Vladimir Putin in Moscow to discuss a Ukraine peace plan, but no concrete outcomes emerged, and Putin reiterated war threats against Europe. Ukraine faces a political crisis with the resignation of its chief negotiator, Andriy Yermak, amid a corruption scandal. The EU struggled to agree on using frozen Russian assets for Ukraine but did sanction a permanent ban on Russian gas imports. Trump's support for a conservative candidate in Honduras's close presidential election, and his pardon of a former Honduran president convicted of drug trafficking, caused astonishment. Pete Hegseth, America's Secretary of War, is under scrutiny for a Caribbean bombing where two survivors of a drug-smuggling boat attack were reportedly killed in a follow-up strike.

Business

The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation pledged \$6.25bn for investment accounts for 25m American children, the largest charitable donation for children in the US. Germany's Chancellor Friedrich Merz sought EU exemptions for plug-in hybrids and efficient petrol cars from a 2035 combustion engine ban, citing struggles in the transition to EVs. Sam Altman, OpenAI's CEO, declared a "code red" for ChatGPT, urging focus to avoid falling behind rivals, while Apple hired a new AI executive from Microsoft. Taiwan's economy boomed with 8.2% Q3 growth, driven by the AI sector and its advanced chip manufacturing. China reportedly ordered private providers to suspend monthly house sales data releases, likely to mask a sharp decline in a struggling property market.

The weekly cartoon

This section offers links to articles providing deeper context on the week's cartoon, including questions about Congress's role in Pete Hegseth's military actions, the controversial pardoning of cocaine-smuggling presidents, and revelations about Team Trump's alleged contempt for allies.

LEADERS

How AI is rewiring childhood

Artificial intelligence is profoundly transforming childhood through interactive toys,

The Weekly Digest

AI-enhanced games, and chatbot tutors, offering personalized education and entertainment previously exclusive to the wealthy. While this presents dazzling opportunities, it also carries ominous risks, such as fostering loneliness, creating atomized individuals ill-equipped for real-life social interactions, and strengthening echo chambers. AI companions that never criticize could lead to adults unused to compromise. The article calls for urgent countermeasures like age restrictions on chatbots and more in-school assessment, urging society to rethink child-rearing to preserve socialisation and discovery, and for parents and teachers to know when to limit AI use.

Britain's slot-machine politics

Britain's political landscape has become a "slot-machine" of wildly unpredictable outcomes due to fragmentation, with five parties now polling between 13% and 29%. Small shifts in vote share can lead to drastic changes in parliamentary seats, as highlighted by The Economist's new electoral model. This volatility is exacerbated by Britain's first-past-the-post system, which, while theoretically favoring two large parties, creates disproportionate results with multiple medium-sized parties, leading to weak governments and public disillusionment. The rise of Reform UK and the Greens, alongside declining voter loyalty to traditional parties, suggests these forces of fragmentation are unlikely to abate, increasing pressure for electoral reform despite centrist politicians like Sir Keir Starmer acknowledging the dangers.

Enough dithering. Europe must pay to save Ukraine

Europe is mistakenly relieved by the stalled US-Russia peace talks over Ukraine, as another unfavorable plan could still emerge, and Europe must now solely shoulder Ukraine's substantial military and financial support. Despite its economy being ten times Russia's, Europe is failing to convince Putin it won't abandon Ukraine, reassure Ukraine, or demonstrate strength to the US. A key failure is the inability to agree on using ?210bn (\$245bn) in frozen Russian assets for Ukraine, with Belgium seeking legal protection from Russian retaliation, hindering a crucial "reparations loan." The article argues that if frozen assets cannot be deployed, Europe must use common borrowing to provide predictable, multi-year financing for Ukraine's war effort, as current "drips-and-drabs" aid is strategically weak and plays into US skepticism.

Syria's transition has gone better than expected

A year after Bashar al-Assad's flight, Syria's transition under former jihadist Ahmed al-Sharaa has surprisingly avoided chaos, with al-Sharaa proving to be a "deft diplomat" on the world stage, charming Western leaders and pursuing peace with Israel. Syria, once aligned with Iran and Russia, is now seeking to join the pro-Western camp and attract Gulf investment, rather than exporting illicit drugs. While the economy remains war-torn, and solutions are slow, al-Sharaa has maintained stability without imposing Islamic law. However, concerns remain as he bypasses formal state institutions to create parallel structures run by loyalists and has done too little to reassure minority groups, leading to massacres of Alawites and Druze. The article

The Weekly Digest

urges him to share power, buttress ministries, and engage civil society to build a truly different state from the one he overthrew.

Chris Waller, not Kevin Hassett, should lead the Federal Reserve

President Donald Trump is expected to nominate Kevin Hassett as the next Federal Reserve chair, a choice likely driven by Hassett's partisan alignment and desire for faster interest rate cuts. Hassett's past behavior as a Trump adviser showed disregard for reality, with absurd economic forecasts that have damaged his scholarly reputation. The Economist argues that Chris Waller, a current Fed board member and monetary-policy expert with a strong track record of accurate economic predictions, is the superior candidate. While Waller also advocates for lower rates, his case is made in good faith, and his leadership would secure the Fed's independence, which is crucial for controlling inflation and maintaining investor confidence, ultimately serving the Republican Party's interests.

LETTERS

Do minimum wages kill jobs?

A letter from Justin Wiltshire and co-authors challenges the notion that higher minimum wages cause job losses or significant price rises. Their research on California and New York's fast-food industry found large wage gains, zero job losses, and only negligible price increases after minimum wages rose to \$15 and above. They argue that minimum wages correct for monopsony power and prevent government aid from subsidizing low-wage employers.

Russians in Europe

Two letters discuss Russian visas in Europe. Dr. Mikhail Tamm argues that visa limitations for Russian citizens are ineffective against security risks posed by special agencies and harm anti-Putin exiles and activists who need to visit family or work without surveillance. Mark Hutchinson suggests welcoming Russians to expose them to "better ideas," echoing Willy Brandt's détente, rather than isolating them.

Common cents

Two readers lament the impending demise of the American penny. Dr. Jessica Ogilvy-Stuart recalls using pennies in loafers for fashion, while Alan Foley highlights their practical use as a tire tread depth gauge, warning of increased road danger without them.

Two weeks? notice

Jack Rogers shares humorous advice on workplace romances: "don't hook up where you VLOOKUP," a metaphor for avoiding relationships where professional boundaries are

The Weekly Digest

essential.

One syllable, two syllables

Daniel Paul corrects Bagehot's article, pointing out that the word "OK" is polysyllabic, not monosyllabic, in response to a description of a Hungarian character.

BY INVITATION

Larry Fink and Rob Goldstein on how tokenisation could transform finance

Larry Fink and Rob Goldstein argue that tokenisation, recording ownership on digital ledgers like blockchain, is the next major evolution in market infrastructure, comparable to the advent of SWIFT. It promises instantaneous transaction settlement and can transform private-market assets into smaller, more accessible units by replacing paper with code, broadening investor participation. While Western economies lag in adoption, policymakers should update existing regulations to build a safe bridge between traditional and tokenized markets, ensuring consistency and clear protections for investors.

BRIEFING

At home and at school, AI is transforming childhood

Artificial intelligence is profoundly reshaping childhood, both at home and in school, making children pioneers and "guinea pigs" of this evolving technology. In classrooms, AI tools like chatbot tutors and personalized learning platforms are becoming the norm, offering tailored education and reducing teacher workload, with governments actively promoting their integration. At home, AI-powered toys and online companions provide entertainment and personalized experiences, while also enabling children to create their own digital content, as seen with the "Italian brain rot" craze. However, this transformation carries significant risks, including potential for cheating, offloading critical thinking, fostering one-sided relationships, and, in rare tragic cases, contributing to mental health crises. Regulators are now attempting to implement safeguards, but the core challenge lies in balancing AI's benefits with the need to preserve essential socialisation and critical thinking skills.

UNITED STATES

The Weekly Digest

Will Congress rein in Pete Hegseth and his boat-bombing campaign?

America's Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, is under scrutiny after reports of an alleged war crime during an anti-drug operation where a second strike killed two survivors clinging to a shipwreck. This incident, following a relentless air campaign against suspected drug-smuggling boats that has killed at least 83, has sparked demands for answers from Congress. Legal experts argue that striking individuals "hors de combat" is a war crime, raising questions about Hegseth's "execute order" and the decision-making process in the operations room. Critics also question the legality and proportionality of the entire anti-drug campaign, which uses military force against criminals and reflects Hegseth's broader contempt for the laws of war.

Republicans still don't know what to do with Obamacare

Republicans face a political dilemma over the expiring enhanced subsidies for Affordable Care Act (ACA) marketplaces, which benefit millions, particularly in Trump-won states, and are projected to cause 3.5m people to become uninsured by 2027 if not extended. Despite the widespread impact on their voters, both Congress and the White House are divided on a solution, with proposals ranging from income-capped extensions to radical ideas like direct cash payments that could destabilize ACA marketplaces. The debate is complicated by fiscal concerns, the high cost of extension (\$350bn by 2035), and a moral question regarding federal subsidies for abortion coverage, further fracturing the Republican coalition. As the deadline approaches, and with broad public support for extending the subsidies, Republicans are at an impasse, making expiry the most likely outcome, which could carry significant political costs for those who lose coverage.

Leaf blowers are the latest thing dividing Americans

Leaf blowers have become an unexpected source of division in America, with over 160 municipalities enacting bans or restrictions on petrol-powered models due to their excessive noise, noxious emissions, and tendency to simply move leaves into neighbors' yards. Proponents of bans cite environmental and noise pollution, noting that an hour of leaf blower use emits as much particulate matter as driving 1,100 miles. However, defenders, including landscaping firms operating on thin margins, argue electric alternatives are not as effective, while golf clubs worry about increased costs. The issue often takes on a partisan hue, with left-leaning towns favoring bans and conservatives advocating for property owners' rights, leading to growing rancor and even state-level laws preventing such municipal restrictions.

A special election puts Democrats on track to flip the House

A recent special election in Tennessee's seventh district, where Republicans held the seat but with a narrower margin, suggests Democrats are on track to win the House in next year's midterms. The Economist's forecasting model, which uses special election results as bellwethers, indicates a likely five-point Democratic win in the national popular vote for the House. While the Tennessee result was less dramatic than a 2018 Pennsylvania flip, local

The Weekly Digest

factors like the progressive Democratic candidate and higher turnout suggest the national advantage might be understated. However, the predictive power of special elections has recently diminished, especially in cycles influenced by Donald Trump's coalition of lower-turnout groups, making future forecasts for 2028 uncertain.

Als could turn opinion polls into gibberish

Large language models (LLMs) pose a new threat to opinion polling, as they can answer surveys like humans and bypass "gotcha" questions, potentially distorting public opinion data across political, academic, and commercial surveys. Sean Westwood's research demonstrated an AI agent's ability to pass 99.8% of data-quality checks, even mimicking less-educated responses. Malicious actors could leverage LLMs to manipulate public sentiment or mislead officials, while fraudsters could use them for financial gain from paid surveys. This could lead to a "pooling equilibrium" where authentic and fake information are indistinguishable, diminishing trust in all survey data and threatening the viability of honest research and journalism.

What will your child?s Trump Account be worth?

President Donald Trump has introduced "Trump Accounts," investment accounts for babies, inspired by a former British social-democratic policy, with a \$1,000 government deposit for children born between 2025 and 2028. Families can contribute up to \$5,000 annually, growing tax-free until age 18, with the White House claiming potential values of \$1.9m by age 28 (more realistically \$400,000, mostly from family contributions). The scheme blends government initiative with private philanthropy, as Michael Dell pledged \$6.25bn for accounts for 25m children in poorer areas. While the government's \$1,000 would grow to only about \$6,000 by age 28, the policy's primary appeal lies in its political branding rather than its effectiveness in tackling child poverty.

Some cocaine-smuggling presidents are more innocent than others

Donald Trump's perplexing application of the Monroe Doctrine is highlighted by his contrasting treatment of two former presidents accused of drug smuggling: Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, whom he threatens with military force, and Honduras's Juan Orlando Hernández, whom he pardoned after conviction. Trump's pardon of Hernández, despite extensive evidence and an investigation that began during his first term, bewilders America's neighbors and undermines the coherence of his anti-drug war. His actions, including slashing aid, imposing tariffs, and erratic invocations of the rule of law, appear impulsive rather than strategic, benefiting China's relations with Latin America more than America's. Trump's intervention in Honduras's election, where he supported a conservative candidate and threatened aid cuts while alleging fraud without proof, further complicates regional relations and demonstrates his lack of principled attachment to justice or evidence.

The Weekly Digest

THE AMERICAS

Trafficking humans is the drug-gangs' grimmest business

Human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor is rapidly increasing across Latin America, now a significant part of drug gangs' illicit portfolios, leveraging existing smuggling routes and corrupt networks. Illegal gold mining and sex tourism are key drivers, with vulnerable individuals like Venezuelan migrants often coerced through false promises, debt bondage, and threats. Governments largely neglect human trafficking, resulting in low reporting, convictions, and funding for anti-trafficking efforts, leaving many victims trapped.

China built a swanky cricket pitch to win over tiny Grenada

China gifted Grenada a \$40m National Cricket Stadium, renovated for another \$12m, in exchange for Grenada formally accepting the "one-China principle" and severing ties with Taiwan. This diplomatic largesse, common in the Caribbean, allows China to gain UN voting members at low cost while leaving vulnerable island nations indebted. The trend continues, with St Vincent & the Grenadines recently experiencing a diplomatic flip after its leader accused China of financing the opposition.

Why does Donald Trump care about Honduras's election?

Donald Trump's interventions in Honduras's presidential election, including endorsing a right-wing candidate, threatening to cut aid, and pardoning a convicted former president, have complicated the outcome. His actions, rooted in a dislike for Honduras's left wing and a sense of shared victimhood, undermine the coherence of his anti-drug war and anger many. Amidst his allegations of fraud, the critical issues of crime, economy, and corruption affecting Hondurans receive little attention.

Brazil is embracing its African roots

Brazil is increasingly acknowledging its African heritage, marked by "Black Consciousness Month" and a new federal holiday on November 20th, honoring Zumbi dos Palmares, a leader of runaway slaves. This shift is seen in the tripling of Afro-Brazilian religion practitioners and more people identifying as brown or black in the recent census, driven by decreasing stigma and historical research. President Lula da Silva has fostered closer ties with Africa and enacted laws promoting Afro-Brazilian history and racial quotas, though significant racial inequalities in income, education, and police violence persist.

ASIA

India's defence-tech startups are thriving

The Weekly Digest

India's defence-tech startup ecosystem is booming, fueled by broader VC interest, government indigenization efforts, and particularly by the recent "Operation Sindoor" war with Pakistan, which highlighted needs for better drones and counter-drone defenses. Startups like Digantara and GalaxEye are leveraging their involvement in the war effort to secure funding and improve services. Government schemes like IDEX, which offers grants and guaranteed orders, are further connecting startups with military units, though challenges remain in accessing private capital for scaling and navigating export controls.

South-East Asia and Sri Lanka are reeling from storms and flooding

Three simultaneous cyclones and intense monsoons have caused widespread destruction across southern Asia, from the South China Sea to the Bay of Bengal, severely impacting Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Over 1,600 people have died, hundreds are missing, and nearly 11 million are affected, with over a million displaced. The rarity of cyclones near the equator exacerbated the impact in Indonesia, where locals lacked experience with such extreme weather, leading to infrastructure and agricultural damage, particularly in Sri Lanka's already fragile economy.

Donald Trump looms over Vladimir Putin's visit to India

Vladimir Putin's visit to India for the 23rd India-Russia summit is overshadowed by Donald Trump's actions, which have pushed India back into Russia's orbit despite a previous drift towards America. Trump's imposition of 50% tariffs on India and critical remarks about its economy have prompted India to publicly strengthen ties with Russia and China. Talks will focus on deepening trade and defense, including potential sales of Russian S-400 systems and Su-57 fighter jets, even as India diversifies its arms suppliers and Russian kit gains a reputation for shoddy quality.

Kyrgyzstan is losing its status as Central Asia's only democracy

Kyrgyzstan is rapidly losing its democratic status, with President Sadyr Japarov consolidating power through a recent parliamentary election favoring loyalists, banning media outlets, and jailing opponents. The shift back to a first-past-the-post system diminished parties and made it harder for rivals to challenge him, while he also removed presidential term limits and enacted a "foreign agents" law. Despite economic growth fueled by helping Russia evade sanctions, some voters tolerate shrinking freedoms for stability after three revolutions in two decades.

Lessons from Japan's efforts to wean itself off Chinese rare earths

Japan's efforts to reduce dependence on Chinese rare earths since a 2010 dispute offer tough lessons for other nations facing China's economic coercion. Japan managed to reduce its reliance from 90% to 60%, but achieving greater independence is difficult due to the variety of rare earths needed, the expense and environmental harm of refining, and the higher cost of non-Chinese supplies. Despite strategic investments, Japan's dependence has since ticked back

The Weekly Digest

up to 70%, illustrating the challenge of replicating China's command over the entire production process and scale.

CHINA

America is foolishly waving goodbye to thousands of Chinese boffins

America's hostile policies, particularly under Donald Trump's administration, are driving thousands of Chinese-born students and scientists away from the US and back to China, eroding a key American advantage in technological rivalry. The number of Chinese students in America has dropped by nearly 30% since 2019, while almost 20,000 scientists with Chinese origins left America for China between 2010 and 2021, a rate that accelerated after the "China Initiative." This exodus is further fueled by China's lavish support for science and tech, attractive programs for returnee scientists, and growing sentiment among Chinese bosses that domestic graduates are as good as American-educated ones. The tech sector, especially in AI, is the next concern, as nearly half of the best AI researchers in America are from China, raising fears of a shrinking talent pipeline and a "cold" environment pushing specialists away.

After a terrible fire in Hong Kong, public fury smoulders

A devastating fire in Hong Kong's Wang Fuk Court killed over 150 people and left thousands homeless, sparking public outrage over suspected manslaughter, corruption, and the government's response. While past major fires led to policy overhauls and independent commissions, the current government, under John Lee, appears determined to suppress dissent rather than implement significant reforms, pre-empting protests and arresting individuals for "seditious intention." Lee's commission lacks powers to summon witnesses or declare criminal liability, raising concerns about its effectiveness, and his focus on bamboo scaffolding is seen as diversionary. The incident underscores Hong Kong's new intolerance for protest and the government's priority of maintaining public order ahead of the December 7th Legislative Council elections, where low turnout is anticipated to reflect public anger.

The general who refused to crush Tiananmen's protesters

A recently leaked six-hour video of General Xu Qinxian's secret court-martial in 1990 provides vivid insight into his refusal to use force against Tiananmen Square protesters in 1989, challenging the Communist Party's narrative of guaranteed compliance. Xu, commanding 15,000 troops, calmly explained his objection, fearing historical judgment as a "criminal" for harming civilians mixed with soldiers. His actions underscore moral courage amidst political confusion, a stark contrast to the party's desire to gloss over the tumultuous weeks and control the military. The leak, posted by historian Wu Renhua, has sparked speculation, coinciding with the dismissal of China's State Secrecy Bureau director and highlighting President Xi Jinping's emphasis on military control.

The Weekly Digest

MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA

Syria uneasily celebrates a year of liberation

A year after Bashar al-Assad's fall, Syria is celebrating its liberation, with interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa praised for swiftly ending diplomatic isolation and attracting international investment. While the dreaded intelligence services are dismantled and public criticism of the government is possible, economic conditions for many Syrians have worsened due to job losses and subsidy cuts. Al-Sharaa's creation of opaque, loyalist-run bodies outside ministerial oversight and his failure to reassure minorities or pursue transitional justice raise concerns about the state's future direction.

An insurgency may be brewing against Syria's new leaders

An insurgency may be brewing among Alawites, Bashar al-Assad's sect, who feel marginalized by Syria's new government, facing lay-offs and subsidy cuts, with many fleeing the country. Hardline clerics call for an autonomous Alawite region, while former officers, some linked to notorious militia commanders, are circulating calls to arms and seeking to foment rebellion. Despite initial reluctance from many, these groups are allegedly distributing stipends to refugees and tried to establish training camps in Lebanon, posing a growing concern for interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa.

Binyamin Netanyahu has asked for a presidential pardon

Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has requested a presidential pardon in his fraud trial, an unusual move as he denies wrongdoing and expects exoneration, effectively demanding an end to the trial. The timing is influenced by Donald Trump's support, Netanyahu's ongoing cross-examination, and his desire to campaign unencumbered before Israel's next elections. It is unclear if President Herzog will grant the unprecedented request, especially without an admission of guilt, and the Supreme Court would likely intervene.

Africa needs to generate more electricity

Sub-Saharan Africa faces a significant electricity deficit, with 600m people lacking access, but the problem is not just supply but also demand, as many cannot afford power priced to encourage investment. African utilities struggle with high costs and low tariffs, hindering private investment, though falling solar power costs are easing the generation conundrum. However, private solar adoption by firms, while reducing blackouts, exacerbates demand shortfalls for utilities, highlighting the need for public funding, grid improvements, and policies focused on boosting economic growth to increase affordability and usage.

Russia's dodgy plan for a pipeline in Congo

Russia plans to build a new oil pipeline in the Republic of Congo, with a Russian company

The Weekly Digest

taking a 90% stake and guaranteed fees, aiming to create a "sanctions-resistant petroleum products distribution channel." Congolese activists worry the pipeline could be used to launder Russian oil revenues and that benefits will only accrue to a narrow elite, given the country's corruption. Doubts about the project's completion exist due to Russia's history of stalled African projects and the economic pressures of the Ukraine war, with the contracted Russian firm facing bankruptcy and potential Western sanctions on past links.

Mormonism's surprising boom in Africa

Mormonism is rapidly expanding in Africa, with a 120% increase in members between 2011 and 2021, and nine of the ten fastest-growing countries for the church located on the continent. Despite historical prejudices against black people and past governmental suspicion, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is investing heavily, building temples, and attracting young members with promises of educational and other advancements. While the church gains influence by promoting "family values" and forging ties with politicians, some critics worry its success fuels a backlash against women's and LGBTQ rights in the region.

EUROPE

Europe is going on a huge military spending spree

European governments are initiating a massive military spending spree, driven by Russian aggression and America's increasing unreliability as an ally, with 19 countries fully subscribing to the EU's ?150bn SAFE fund and 16 utilizing the NEC clause for an additional ?650bn in defense spending. NATO's European members committed to raising core military budgets to 3.5% of GDP by 2035, plus 1.5% for infrastructure, a goal gaining urgency due to US troop withdrawals and Trump's peace initiatives. Europe faces immense tasks, including replacing US capabilities worth \$1trn and building an integrated air-defense system, necessitating annual spending of ?500bn-?700bn, with countries like Poland and Germany significantly boosting their budgets. However, challenges remain in accelerating sclerotic procurement systems, ensuring industrial capacity, and achieving collaboration for projects like the ELSA ground-based cruise missile, which still lacks agreement on what to build after 18 months. The ultimate success depends on political will to prioritize defense over social spending and counter rising far-right parties sympathetic to Russia, as Ukraine's resistance offers a closing window to catch up.

America's peace initiative has stalled in Moscow

America's peace initiative has stalled after Vladimir Putin's evasive meeting with Donald Trump's envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, in Moscow, where talks focused on "essence" and produced no concrete results, reinforcing Ukrainian beliefs that Putin does not want a deal. Putin, emboldened by battlefield gains, is hardening demands for territorial claims,

The Weekly Digest

military caps, and recognition of occupied lands, all intolerable for Ukraine and Europe, while simultaneously taunting European leaders for blocking peace to encourage transatlantic rifts. Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky faces a massive corruption scandal surrounding state nuclear company Energoatom, which forced the resignation of his powerful chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, who may face charges. The Trump administration has capitalized on Zelensky's weakened position to push its peace initiative, but Putin's procrastination may ironically alleviate immediate pressure, though Ukraine remains diplomatically optimistic.

Greece is teaching Germany how to get government online

Greece, once known for Kafkaesque bureaucracy, has become an unexpected model for digitalization, teaching Germany how to move government services online after significantly improving its digital public services between 2018 and 2024. Kyriakos Pierrakakis, Greece's finance minister, highlighted three key lessons for Germany: governments must strategically redesign processes, not just apply technology; overcome administrative and regional silos with strong central mandates; and prioritize low-hanging fruit rather than trying to digitalize everything at once. Berlin, once a laggard, is now successfully implementing similar steps, digitalizing common services like address registration and encouraging public use of new online offerings. This transformation suggests that even deeply entrenched paper-based bureaucracies in Europe can make significant progress, providing a call to action for other slow-moving countries.

Italy's populist right stalls a sexual-consent law

Italy's proposed sexual-consent law, defining rape as any sexual act without "free and current" consent, has been stalled in the Senate by the populist-right League party, despite unanimous approval in the lower house. Women's-rights advocates view the bill as a cultural turning point against victim-blaming, while opponents argue it shifts the burden of proof and demands impractical "microphones in the bedroom." The League's objections appear politically motivated, aimed at outflanking rivals and appealing to a misogynistic segment of society, as accused by the bill's champion, Laura Boldrini. Although parliament passed a law criminalizing femicide, the government simultaneously restricted sex education in schools, creating a contradiction where harsh penalties for violence exist without preventive education on sexual boundaries.

The Hague is coping with the decline of international courts

The Hague, synonymous with international law, is experiencing a decline in the prestige of its international criminal courts, marked by the closure of the Yugoslavian tribunal's main courtroom and the Rwandan tribunal's downsizing. The International Criminal Court (ICC) faces immense pressure, including US sanctions on its staff, allegations against its chief prosecutor, and a history of few convictions for major figures, with some countries refusing to

The Weekly Digest

honor its arrest warrants. While the International Court of Justice (ICJ) remains busy with state disputes, the broader trend reflects a loss of global faith in criminal justice. Professionals in The Hague are navigating this shift, with some American NGOs even considering relocation due to US hostility towards international law.

Why a small corruption scandal is a big problem for the EU

A minor corruption scandal involving two high-ranking EU foreign-policy grandes detained by Belgian police for allegedly rigging a tender for a diplomatic academy has significantly dented the EU's credibility and threatens to escalate into a serious crisis. The incident is particularly embarrassing given Europe's exclusion from US-Russia peace talks on Ukraine and the EU's stringent enforcement of public procurement rules on national governments. The scandal highlights the ongoing dysfunction of the European External Action Service (EEAS), a "chimera" institution struggling for efficacy and accountability amidst internal turf wars and a history of previous corruption allegations against EU officialdom. Such prevarication and perceived graft play into narratives from Washington and elsewhere that portray Europe as an ineffective "pseudo-power," offering ammunition to anti-EU critics and making it harder for the bloc to assert its influence on the world stage.

BRITAIN

Our interview with Sir Keir Starmer

In an interview, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer expressed that while he could "sleep at night" with a Conservative government, a right-wing populist Reform UK government would pose a severe threat to Britain's economy, society, global standing, and the West. He warned that Reform UK is "pro-Putin or Putin-neutral," making Britain unable to lead the coalition supporting Ukraine. Starmer, a self-proclaimed pragmatist, acknowledges some US criticisms about Europe's defense spending but dismisses Trumpworld's "isle of nightmares" narrative. His agenda for national renewal focuses on trade deals, strengthening European ties "iteratively," and creating "stability and certainty" for investors, though critics find his domestic policy thin and his philosophy lacking inspiration.

Our new model captures the lottery of Britain's electoral system

The Economist's new electoral model illustrates Britain's "slot-machine politics," where the first-past-the-post system, when combined with a fragmented electorate, produces wildly unpredictable outcomes. Small shifts in vote share among multiple medium-sized parties can lead to massive swings in parliamentary seats, as exemplified by a Labour MP winning with just 27% of the vote in Downham Market. The model, based on 80 years of data and 10,001 simulations, reveals scenarios from a Reform landslide to a Conservative wipeout or a Labour jackpot, with huge seat ranges for each party. This system, designed for two dominant parties,

The Weekly Digest

now amplifies volatility, creates a widening gulf between votes and parliamentary representation, and undermines government legitimacy, increasing pressure for electoral reform.

Polls predicting the next British election are not to be trusted

Polling projections for the next British election, particularly MRP (multilevel regression and post-stratification) forecasts, should be treated with skepticism due to significant inherent uncertainties, despite their past effectiveness in predicting hung parliaments. MRPs, while sophisticated in estimating voting intentions by individual and local characteristics, fail to capture future shifts in party fortunes, tactical voting at the local level, and the long time horizon before the actual election. The "gluttonous consumption" of MRPs creates opportunities for political spin doctors to leak favorable projections for media coverage, even if they are often framed as definitive predictions years out. The Economist's own model, while incorporating such data, emphasizes a "fuzzy range of plausible outcomes" to better reflect the true uncertainty of Britain's volatile, multi-party electoral system.

Britain's plan to curb jury trials is a sharp break with tradition

Britain's Justice Secretary David Lammy's plan to curtail jury trials for crimes carrying sentences of three years or less, leaving them to magistrates or single judges, represents a significant departure from a tradition deeply rooted in British justice since Magna Carta. This desperate response aims to tackle a massive backlog of nearly 80,000 cases, which has led to victims and defendants waiting years for trials. While juries contribute to delays, chronic underfunding and poor court productivity are larger causes, and other countries successfully operate without extensive jury systems. However, critics argue that giving lone judges power for three-year sentences is unusual internationally, and the reforms, not in Labour's manifesto, will likely face parliamentary resistance, particularly in the House of Lords.

Are Brits really leaving the country in droves?

Recent reports of a "brain drain" and "exodus" of British citizens from the UK due to rising emigration figures are largely a "flight of fancy," stemming from a change in statistical methods by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). While the ONS estimates emigration rose to 250,000 annually, The Economist's own analysis, using OECD and UN data, suggests British emigration is actually lower now than five years ago, averaging around 220,000 compared to 275,000 before Brexit. The temporary surge in emigration to the EU between 2016 and 2021, ahead of the end of free movement, has since fallen back. Overall, fewer than 0.5% of the British population leaves annually, with most eventually returning, suggesting a trickle rather than a flood.

Pity the AVOCADOs

The "Aggrieved Victims Of Crushing Academic Debt Obligations" (AVOCADOs), typically

The Weekly Digest

young, educated individuals who attended university between 2012 and 2023, face harsh financial realities due to high housing costs and Britain's regressive student-loan system. Chancellor Rachel Reeves's recent budget exacerbated their plight by freezing income-tax thresholds and student loan repayment points, subjecting post-graduate AVOCADOs to marginal tax rates as high as 43%. Despite Labour being the "AVOCADO Party" and relying on younger, educated voters, the government's policies, driven by the "politics of least resistance" due to low AVOCADO voter turnout, favor pensioners and neglect sweeping reforms to intergenerational inequality. This approach risks alienating a significant demographic, who, facing persistent debt and comparatively lighter pay packets, may turn to alternative parties like the Greens, shaping politics for a generation.

INTERNATIONAL

Western armed forces have struggled to fill their ranks to deter Russia

Western armed forces are struggling to fill their ranks after decades of shrinking post-Cold War, prompting countries like France to introduce voluntary service and Germany to propose compulsory registration for potential recruits. This urgency stems from the war in Ukraine, which revealed the need for far more troops in high-intensity conflicts, and a long-running recruitment crisis that has left many armies, including America's and Britain's, unable to meet targets. While some attribute this to young people's individualism, a deeper look reveals bureaucratic obstacles and absurd medical disqualifications that prevent willing recruits from joining. Reforms like cutting restrictions, offering preparation courses, and increasing pay and benefits are starting to pay off in recruitment, but high dropout rates and the loss of skilled personnel remain significant challenges for ambitious expansion plans.

Trumpworld thinks Europe has betrayed the West

Centrist European governments fear that President Donald Trump's administration views them as adversaries, believing they have "betrayed the West" by allowing mass migration, undermining traditional social values, and surrendering sovereignty to the EU. Hardliners in "Trumpworld" seek a fundamental reordering of European politics, favoring nationalist right-wing parties and increasingly expressing greater loathing for Europe than for China or Russia. This ideology is reflected in new State Department policies demanding data collection on immigrant "crimes and human rights abuses" and lobbying host governments to tighten migration policies, effectively weaponizing immigration. Europeans worry that Trump defines "the West" narrowly and sectarially, using "civilization" rather than shared values as a test, potentially providing an excuse to disengage from European security and further fragment transatlantic unity.

The Weekly Digest

BUSINESS

From micro-dramas to video games, Chinese entertainment is booming

China's entertainment industry is experiencing a creative surge, evident in the booming popularity of micro-dramas, the global success of animated films like "Ne Zha 2," and video games such as "Black Myth: Wukong." This boom presents a dilemma for the Communist Party, which aims to export Chinese culture but maintains tight censorship, historically discouraging investment and talent in entertainment. Tech giants like Tencent and Alibaba are crucial to this growth, bankrolling new studios and driving mobile-based, e-commerce-focused business models, where content creators monetize their popularity through live-streaming sales and merchandise. While the industry is thriving with new talent and relaxed restrictions, its focus on short-term celebrity endorsements and risk aversion due to censorship raise questions about its ability to develop enduring intellectual property like Western franchises.

China's unlikely new entertainment capital

Zhengzhou, a "sooty city" in inland China, has unexpectedly emerged as the new Hollywood of micro-dramas, churning out popular two-minute episodes that are watched globally. The city's property crisis, with its low real-estate costs, has allowed vast film-production complexes to be set up cheaply, attracting studios like Jumei Film Base. Local officials have actively supported the industry through economic-planning documents, studio construction, and state-owned investment funds. Zhengzhou also produces content for foreign audiences, employing international actors to shoot racy scenes discreetly due to strict Chinese censorship rules, highlighting the sensitive balance required when creating global content on Chinese soil.

Lessons from the frontiers of AI adoption

Despite widespread corporate rhetoric about AI-driven layoffs, significant labor market changes due to AI adoption remain weak, but the technology is gaining pace in specific sectors, offering clues for future impact. Two occupations stand out as particularly vulnerable: computer programming, where two-thirds of coders use AI tools weekly, and customer service, with 85% of managers planning AI experimentation. These roles share common traits: repetitive, "context-light" tasks that don't require deep company understanding, and "easily verifiable" outcomes. Both also benefit from abundant training data and represent large target markets for AI firms, suggesting that as AI costs plummet and data organization improves, more specialized and widespread AI adoption will occur, potentially making bosses' claims of AI-driven layoffs more credible.

Even Europe's penmakers are under threat

Europe's traditional penmaking industry, including German giants like Faber-Castell and Pelikan, is facing severe decline due to office and home digitalization, rising raw material costs, and intense competition from Asian manufacturers. Many established firms are shedding jobs,

The Weekly Digest

with Pelikan cutting half its German workforce and America's Newell Brands also announcing significant layoffs. In contrast, the quirky Italian brand Legami, known for its colorful, animal-headed gel pens, is thriving, with sales projected to exceed ?300m this year. Legami's success, driven by its appeal to children and presence in 70 countries and 146 of its own shops, highlights that a focus on fun and collectability can lead to growth even in a challenging market.

To halt their decline, VW and others are turning Chinese

Foreign carmakers in China, like Volkswagen (VW), are reversing their traditional stance on "technology transfer" and actively localizing operations to combat declining market share against Chinese EV rivals. VW, which has lost its top position and seen its market share plummet from 62% in 2020 to 35% last year, is overhauling its strategy by building an innovation center in Hefei with 3,000 mostly Chinese engineers, granting it autonomy from German headquarters. This allows for a 30% reduction in EV development time, alongside strategic partnerships with local firms like Horizon Robotics and Xpeng to co-develop new, cheaper EV models with advanced features. The effort aims to compete in China's vicious EV price war and potentially export to other Asian markets, though success is challenged by China's tightly integrated supply chains and rivals' willingness to accept long-term losses.

Patrick Drahi has bested his lenders yet again

Patrick Drahi, the ruthless shareholder of Altice's telecoms empire, has once again outmaneuvered his lenders through aggressive debt restructurings, further eroding their value. After years of debt-fueled expansion, Drahi used loose covenants to declare parts of Altice France "unrestricted," removing them from lender reach and reducing owed debt by ?7bn, while retaining control. He repeated this tactic with Altice International, declaring operations in Portugal and the Dominican Republic "unrestricted" and borrowing an additional ?750m, leaving lenders with an "absurd" leverage ratio on their remaining assets. In response, lenders are unionizing, but Drahi has sued them for antitrust violations, highlighting the booming "liability management" deals that exploit weak covenants and enrich bankers and lawyers involved in this gamesmanship.

How many hours should employees work?

The optimal workweek remains a complex question, with the global average standing at 42 hours, though individual preferences vary significantly across countries, with Germans and Britons favoring shorter weeks for leisure, while Americans prefer longer hours for more pay. The discussion reveals different managerial priorities: some emphasize work-life balance, citing evidence that fewer hours can boost productivity up to a point, while others prioritize cost efficiency, spreading fixed employee costs over longer hours. Safety concerns highlight the risks of fatigue, especially in critical roles like paramedics, while quality considerations suggest that experience gained over longer hours can improve performance in some jobs. Ultimately,

The Weekly Digest

the question reflects a boss's priorities, whether it's a startup founder pushing for 60-70 hour weeks or an established company leader balancing productivity, cost, safety, and quality.

Will the mega-merger wave destroy value for shareholders?

"Merger Mondays" are back, with 32 corporate mega-deals worth \$700bn announced in 2025, marking a record year for \$10bn-plus transactions, as big businesses leverage record profits, lower interest rates, and friendly trustbusters. Despite historical research suggesting a 70-90% failure rate for mergers and acquisitions (M&A), today's confident chief executives believe they belong to the successful minority. An analysis of 117 megadeals from 2010-2020 shows mixed results for shareholders: half outperformed their industry, adding \$2.8trn in returns, while the other half underperformed by \$2.9trn, indicating success odds remain "no better than a coin toss." Research by Bain suggests companies are getting better at M&A through practice, diligence, and focus on new capabilities and smaller deals, but many of this year's mega-mergers are still large, scale-driven bets, raising questions about due diligence amidst profound technological change, particularly with AI.

FINANCE & ECONOMICS

Why worries about American job losses are overstated

Despite widespread gloom about America's jobs market, fears of a "jobs-pocalypse" and the rush to cut interest rates appear overstated, as unemployment remains historically low at 4.4% and real wages for lower earners have surged by 19% since 2015. While job openings are declining and layoff announcements have spiked, official unemployment data and jobless claims remain robust, with no signs of the sharp rise typically preceding a recession. Consumer confidence is low, and worries about finding new jobs exist, but the economy's strong GDP growth, soaring stock markets, and solid wage growth suggest the labor market is unlikely to collapse. The current weak patch might be attributed to Trumpian uncertainty, which is now easing, indicating that American workers' decade-long hot streak likely has further to run.

Which Kevin Hassett would lead the Federal Reserve?

If President Donald Trump nominates Kevin Hassett as the next Federal Reserve chair, it would signal an abrupt shift in the Fed's relationship with the White House, despite Hassett's academic background. Hassett's past behavior as a Trump adviser involved producing tenuous analyses to bolster the president's agenda, damaging his scholarly reputation and transforming him into a partisan hack. While Hassett claims monetary policy should be independent, he has also expressed a desire for the Fed to help Americans with "cheaper car loans and easier access to mortgages," raising concerns about political influence similar to Arthur Burns's inflationary tenure under Nixon. The real risk lies if Trump succeeds in firing another Fed governor, potentially allowing him to stack the board with loyalists, which would compromise the central

The Weekly Digest

bank's independence and further tarnish Hassett's career.

How to spot a bubble bursting

Predicting when a financial bubble will burst is exceptionally difficult, even for experienced investors, as evidenced by past market manias where accurate long-term forecasts preceded short-term price surges. High valuations are good at predicting low long-run returns but useless for short-term timing, prompting a search for novel market timing measures. Google searches for investing fads, like cryptocurrencies or "AI stocks," have proven to be much better short-term indicators of imminent price falls. While surges in Googling for "AI stocks" peaked in mid-August without an immediate crash, their subsequent dramatic fall, alongside recent dips in Nvidia and bitcoin, and the closure of funds betting against AI, suggest a wobble in the current cycle.

Bitcoin has plunged. Strategy Inc is an early victim

Strategy Inc., formerly MicroStrategy, the world's largest corporate owner of bitcoin, is facing severe financial strain as the cryptocurrency's price plunges, exposing the risks of leveraging volatile assets. The firm, which has invested heavily in bitcoin since 2020, now holds 650,000 bitcoin but owes \$800m annually in dividends and debt-interest payments, causing its share price to drop over 40% since October. While Strategy can meet immediate obligations using equity issuance, future challenges loom with convertible debt maturing in 2027, potentially forcing large-scale bitcoin sales. Such sales would significantly impact the illiquid bitcoin market, as CEO Michael Saylor has reversed his previous pledge not to sell, highlighting the fragile model for investors who now have only themselves to blame if troubles deepen.

Can golden toilets fix China's economy?

China's Communist Party officials believe that boosting the quality of retail supply, exemplified by luxurious malls like Nanjing's Deji Plaza, can unlock "latent demand" and revive a struggling economy plagued by years of low consumer sentiment. The government's new plan focuses almost entirely on supply-side measures, such as promoting "experiential" shopping venues, pop-up stores, and anime/gaming outlets, to encourage spending. This approach reflects leaders' belief in manufacturing as the core economic driver and an attempt to avoid difficult demand-side stimulus measures that might shift resources away from industry. However, critics argue that the problem is not a lack of quality supply, but rather weak employment and a grinding property crisis that has made even the rich feel poorer, suggesting that more than gleaming lavatories are needed to address structural economic pressures.

American sanctions are putting Russia under pressure

American sanctions against Russia's biggest oil firms, Lukoil and Rosneft, are significantly pressuring Russia's oil exports, with major buyers like India cutting back on crude purchases and Greek vessels shunning the trade. These sanctions, implemented amidst faltering peace

The Weekly Digest

talks, aim to deter buyers and have caused Urals crude's discount to Brent to double, leading to a record volume of Russian oil floating at sea due to logistical difficulties. Russian firms are seeking workarounds, such as selling to smaller, untargeted third parties, but are also battling increasingly sophisticated Ukrainian drone strikes on their oil infrastructure. These attacks, targeting critical refinery units and fuel depots, could cut refinery throughput by 7-10%, forcing Russia to export more crude into a saturated market, potentially driving prices below \$50 a barrel and creating an opportunity for the Trump administration in negotiations.

Stockholm is Europe's new capital of capital

Stockholm is emerging as Europe's new capital of capital, attracting companies seeking fresh funds through private equity firms like EQT and its thriving Nasdaq Stockholm stock exchange, which has raised over ?6bn in IPOs this year. While other cities vied to replace London post-Brexit, Stockholm's market for high-yield "junk" bonds is also growing. A significant transformation is underway in Sweden's government bond market: after decades of puritanical budgets and a puny debt market, the country is embarking on a borrowing spree for defense spending, planning to issue over SKr200bn annually by 2026-2027. This surge in bond supply is reviving demand from international investors and macro traders, who are attracted by the growing market and quadrupled volatility since the end of the Riksbank's cheap-money era.

AI misinformation may have paradoxical consequences

The plummeting cost of producing AI-generated text, video, and audio is leading to a flood of misinformation, or "slop," online, creating a "pooling equilibrium" where distinguishing genuine information from fakes becomes increasingly difficult. This phenomenon, likened to the side-blotched lizard's mating strategies, threatens to drive honest dealings out of the market as users, unable to discern quality, may refuse to pay for any news, mirroring George Akerlof's "market for lemons" concept. Traditional "costly signals" like newspaper branding or lucid writing are being spoiled by AI's ability to mimic authenticity, making once-useful rules of thumb for detection less effective. To combat this, new "chain of custody" techniques, like embedding creation data in videos, may be necessary, and a potential "sloptimism" could emerge where trust in established organizations rebounds, or print journalism experiences a revival, if users demand authenticity.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Why autism should not be treated as a single condition

The article argues that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) should not be treated as a single condition due to its wide biological and symptomatic variability, advocating for a better understanding of its distinct forms to improve interventions. While increased diagnoses are largely due to widening definitions and awareness, scientists are investigating genetic and

The Weekly Digest

environmental causes. Emerging research, particularly in genetics, suggests ASD encompasses multiple neurobiological perturbations, from high-impact gene variants causing profound challenges to more common variants influencing specific brain regions. Recent studies have identified four distinct ASD subcategories with unique genetic profiles and developmental trajectories, such as the "social/behavioural" group diagnosed later in life. This nuanced approach, combined with environmental research, aims to provide more appropriate support and potentially pharmacological treatments, while acknowledging concerns about stigma and access to care if the spectrum is split.

Surging satellite numbers threaten to dazzle even space telescopes

The rapidly increasing number of satellites in low-Earth orbit, projected to reach half a million by 2040, poses a serious threat to astronomical observations, not just for ground-based but also for space-going telescopes. A new paper in *Nature*, by Alejandro Borlaff and colleagues, simulates that a significant portion of images from major space telescopes like Hubble, SPHEREx, ARRAKIHS, and Xuntian could be contaminated by streaks of sunlight reflected off these mega-constellations. While SpaceX has attempted to make its Starlink satellites less reflective, business pressures push for larger, brighter satellites, exacerbating the problem. Solutions like timing observations to avoid interference are becoming impractical, leading to calls for diplomacy and regulation akin to the Montreal Protocol, as the International Astronomical Union seeks compromises to protect the "dark and quiet sky" amidst a commercial space race.

Does taping your mouth while you sleep have benefits?

Proponents claim mouth-taping during sleep offers various benefits, from alleviating respiratory conditions to improving oral health and jawline definition, by encouraging nasal breathing. Nasal breathing does offer advantages, such as filtering and warming air, and increasing nitric oxide production, while mouth breathing can worsen snoring, oral health, and obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). However, systematic reviews of studies on mouth-taping for OSA show only weak evidence of benefits, with small sample sizes and questionable clinical significance, and caution against its use in severe OSA or nasal obstruction due to asphyxiation risks. Claims regarding oral hygiene benefits and sharper jawlines remain anecdotal or lack robust scientific backing, with medical experts advising against self-treatment and recommending diagnosis and professional care for breathing difficulties.

A Chinese firm attempts to bring a booster rocket back to Earth

LandSpace, a leading Chinese private space-launch company, made the first non-American attempt to return a rocket stage to Earth for reuse with its Zhuque-3 (ZQ-3) vehicle, marking a significant step in challenging America's dominance in cheap satellite launches. Although the test firing resulted in a spectacular explosion of the returning first stage, the non-reusable second stage reached orbit, a "success" in the vein of early SpaceX attempts. Chinese private

The Weekly Digest

space firms, only unleashed in 2014, are rapidly advancing, with LandSpace already having launched the first methane-LOX powered rocket to orbit in 2023, a technology also used by Blue Origin and SpaceX. The success of ZQ-3 and Space Pioneer's Tianlong-3 (TL-3), with similar payload capacities to SpaceX's Falcon 9, positions them to capitalize on China's plans for two massive Starlink-like satellite constellations, signaling new competition in the final frontier.

CULTURE

Why do tourists visit sites of atrocities?

"Dark tourism," where visitors seek out sites of atrocities and suffering, is a booming global market, estimated at \$35bn and growing, with tourists visiting places like Palmyra, Syria, and even the "Human Slaughterhouse" prison. Social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, plays a significant role in publicizing these destinations and experiences, with influencers garnering large followings by documenting trips to dangerous countries. While some dark tourists aim to "bear witness" and understand history, critics view it as ghoulish voyeurism, exemplified by crass selfies at concentration camps, blurring the line between respectful engagement and sensationalism.

And The Economist's word of the year for 2025 is?

The Economist's word of the year for 2025 is "slop," a term now widely used to describe the deluge of low-quality, AI-generated content flooding the internet, particularly social media. This rise was spurred by OpenAI's Sora, which creates videos from prompts, filling feeds with "fake clips and an AI voiceover." While distressing, this "sloptimism" suggests it might force platforms to improve moderation or drive users to trusted, established organizations and print journalism for authentic content.

Why there is an Advent calendar for absolutely everything

Advent calendars have evolved from simple Bible verses or chocolate to a vast array of luxurious, sensible, or silly options for everyone, including pets, filled with anything from port wine to slime. This boom, with 72% of Britons buying them, is driven by the "lipstick effect" of small indulgences, offering exclusive or collectible products that create social media buzz. Brands leverage them to attract new customers, and the trend is expanding beyond Christmas to other holidays like Mother's Day, extending the festive feeling year-round.

Tyler Mitchell: the photographer of the moment

Tyler Mitchell, at 30, has rapidly become a celebrated photographer, honored by the Aperture Foundation and earning comparisons to Richard Avedon, with his strikingly beautiful images

The Weekly Digest

appearing in Vogue and the V&A. Mitchell, known for his "hyper-saturated" flair with color and use of textiles, stages "lightly staged" images of people of color in "black utopia" settings. His work, which straddles fine art and fashion, aims to convey fluidity between photographic categories and encourage empathy from viewers, making him a "leading artist of his generation."

The 30-year-old dystopian novel that is the talk of TikTok

Jacqueline Harpman's 30-year-old dystopian novel, "I Who Have Never Known Men," has become a surprise hit on TikTok, experiencing a sales surge of over 5,250% in Britain this year. The haunting, post-apocalyptic tale of a nameless girl and 39 women imprisoned underground, then escaping to a dead land, resonates with Gen Z readers. Its themes of "bewilderment" about the political landscape and questions of humanity, self, and freedom appeal to a generation interested in both racy romances and deep philosophical pondering.

The best TV shows of 2025

This section highlights "the best TV shows of 2025," showcasing a diverse range of genres and themes that captivated audiences. Noteworthy mentions include "Adolescence" for its haunting portrayal of masculinity and online brainwashing, "Andor" for its sophisticated take on authoritarianism, and "Severance" for its surreal exploration of modern office life. Other acclaimed series tackled diplomacy, war, and the brutalities of debt-laden games, demonstrating a strong year for small-screen content.

ECONOMIC & FINANCIAL INDICATORS

Economic data, commodities and markets

No significant coverage this issue.

OBITUARY

Tom Stoppard was an inexhaustible fountain of ideas

Tom Stoppard, Britain's challenging playwright who died aged 88, was a master of form and ideas, famous for plays like "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" and "Arcadia." He explored themes of free will, chance, and history through complex narratives, using his London Library books rather than physical locations to imagine his characters and settings. Stoppard, born Tomas Strausler in Czechoslovakia, adopted England and its language, embracing the craft of playwriting as a "private neurosis" and embodying multitudes in his work.