The Guardian

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2021.03.04 - 2021.03.07

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OpinionAmazon

The ‘soulless corporation’ look – yes, it’s Amazon on the high street

Barbara Ellen

Till-free convenience is all very well until the bill eventually arrives at home

Customers shop at the new Amazon Fresh store in Ealing, west London. Photograph: Niklas Halle'n/AFP/Getty Images

Customers shop at the new Amazon Fresh store in Ealing, west London. Photograph: Niklas Halle'n/AFP/Getty Images

Sat 6 Mar 2021 13.00 EST

I may be a retail misanthrope, but are the till-free Amazon Fresh shops a depersonalised step too far? At first sight, the basic concept (wander in, wander out, get charged later) looks tailor-made for me.

I already don't need much shopping "face time". I was never one for going 1950s-walkabout with a wicker basket collecting items from different artisan shops, served by smiling central-casting shopkeepers, straight out of a Happy Families card deck. Each to their own: if people get their kicks cosplaying Camberwick Green, then good luck to them. Though you have to wonder if this nostalgia is their own or, rather, a borrowed memory from parents or grandparents.

Personally, I couldn't care less if shopkeepers don't know my name. I'm happy sashaying around my local supermarket with the self-scanner. I was also happy – far too happy – with the advent of online shopping. Even

before lockdown, I did 95% of my Christmas shopping staring at a screen, prodding keys. I ended up feeling guilty about my one-woman assassination of the British high street. But Amazon Fresh *is* on the high street. Whatever else you could criticise it for, it's a real-life, real-time experience. So, what's the problem – why does it all look so creepy?

First, the obvious issues with Amazon: data-harvesting (though data is only kept for 30 days), tax-swerving, reported bad treatment of workers, and the rest. Amazon Fresh has staff, just not as many as regular supermarkets. All those jobs "disappeared" for your customer convenience, and it's disturbing how, increasingly, even the jobs that do exist are shuffled out of sight.

> What seems different with Amazon Fresh is that everything about Amazon, right and wrong, is suddenly right up in your face

What happens when the wifi blips and people are charged for 7,000 Amazon own-brand falafel wraps? What *isn't* disturbing about cameras tracking your every move? Moreover, in this big-tech era, surely customers should be able to tally their shop as they go, instead of waiting for phones to cough up the information hours later? It just seems sly, as though shoppers are being encouraged to turn into impulse-buying zombies. Ah, wait…

Maybe that's the issue. Amazon Fresh truly replicates online shopping, in good ways (ultra-convenience) and bad – customers lulled into next-stage retail-detachment. So, what's new? For decades, we've fretted about fast food; did we really think that fast shopping would be consequence-free? What seems different with Amazon Fresh is that everything about Amazon, right *and* wrong (efficiency, depersonalisation, manipulation), is suddenly right up in your face. It's the ramming home of not only Amazon's dominance, but also its attitude problem.

Even for convenience-first souls like me, that feels like a little too much Amazon. "Dystopian" is a word that's been cropping up, and certainly *Nineteen Eighty-Four* springs to mind. Big Jeffer staring down as we submit to Amazon, including the food we eat. Amazon may have made a mistake. Amazon Fresh just might wake us all up.

There are plain speakers. And then there is Shaun Bailey

Shaun Bailey: said a universal basic income would be squandered on drugs. Photograph: Jonathan Hordle/REX/Shutterstock

When will Tory contempt for the poor cease to be dressed up as plain speaking? Conservative mayoral candidate Shaun Bailey told the London Assembly, where a trial for the universal basic income (UBI) was being discussed, that UBI would lead to people buying "lots of drugs".

Bailey cited his experience as a youth worker to back this up, but surely it doesn't belong in a general discussion about poverty? Or, to a certain Tory mindset, have the disadvantaged been promoted from "benefit-skivers" to "extras on *The Wire*" now?

Bailey also pondered whether UBI would "drive prices up for basic goods when we know people could just buy them because the money's there". Thanks, Shaun, that was all very interesting.

This isn't Bailey's first motormouthed rodeo. He became a special adviser for David Cameron when the then-prime minister might have been keen to

demonstrate that the "40-year-old black man" he mentioned in the 2010 election debate wasn't the only BAME person of his acquaintance. Bailey failed to get elected in 2010 and 2017, though this hasn't deterred him from sharing his opinions about the homeless (they should save for a mortgage), single mothers (they want to live off benefits), and more. .

This kind of drivel masquerades as plain speaking when it's mere dog-whistling to those who deride struggling people. Bailey's statement seems yet more astonishing at a time when one in five schools have set up food banks. Perhaps, UBI would enable people to buy food for their families, or is that too much plain speaking? Regardless, on behalf of all Londoners, I'd like to thank Bailey for showing us exactly who he is.

Feuds aside, Taylor and Katy are thoroughly modern women

Forever sisters? Taylor Swift and Katy Perry. Photograph: Danny Moloshok/Reuters

Time was, it was difficult to keep up with the Taylor Swift/Katy Perry feud. The once-sworn pop foes spent some time engulfed in a frenemy-mushroom cloud of diss-tracks, shared exes, cloaked tweets and stolen

backing dancers. Think: Bette Davis and Joan Crawford of the Spotify generation. Last time I checked, they'd made friends again. In one way, they'll be forever sisters.

Swift has just rebuked Netflix for a "lazy deeply sexist joke" that appeared in the sitcom, *Ginny and Georgia*, where a character says: "You go through men faster than Taylor Swift." Nice bit of casual slut-shaming there. Meanwhile, Perry has been photographed in a swimsuit playing on the beach with her six-month-old baby. Perry looks perfectly normal and gloriously happy. Apparently too happy for some – she was subsequently body-shamed for having human thighs.

What life-affirming messages these are for the female fans of both artists. One, women are only allowed one sexual partner in their entire lives, or they risk becoming on-screen shorthand for promiscuity. Two, if you haven't slimmed down to a Twiglet six months after giving birth, you have completely failed as a woman, and must be placed under house arrest until further notice. Let's hope that Swift and Perry are friends again – they sure have a lot in common.

- Barbara Ellen is an Observer columnist

Opinion Budget 2021

The Observer view on Rishi Sunak's 'generous' budget

Observer editorial

The chancellor chose to appeal to Tory swing voters rather than help those who have suffered most in the pandemic

The chancellor Rishi Sunak poses outside 11 Downing Street on budget day. Photograph: David Cliff/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

The chancellor Rishi Sunak poses outside 11 Downing Street on budget day. Photograph: David Cliff/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 7 Mar 2021 01.00 EST

The word "generous" was liberally peppered through the chancellor's budget speech last Wednesday. Rishi Sunak has gone out of his way to portray himself as the nation's benefactor, ensuring that hard-pressed

individuals and businesses have enough financial support to weather this economic and public health crisis.

For many, this budget will do the trick. But, like every budget delivered by a Conservative chancellor over the last decade, it offered much grimmer pickings for low-paid parents and young people, who have suffered some of the worst economic effects of this crisis.

This pandemic has hit everyone hard, but the health and economic consequences have been felt much more sharply by some than others. Professional workers are more likely to have been able to work from home, reducing their exposure to the virus, and more affluent households have been able to save more during this crisis as their outgoings have dropped. Low-paid workers are more likely to have been doing essential jobs like care work, delivery driving and supermarket work, that mean they have had to risk their health by going out to work during the pandemic. They have seen their outgoings go up as a result of the higher costs of having children at home and rising food prices.

'Young people need help now': Britons want more from 2021 budget
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There was zero acknowledgement of this in Sunak's budget. On the contrary, he announced a universal credit cut of £20 a week from October, which will mean the poorest households will see incomes drop by 7%, just as the country is forecast to hit peak unemployment. This will leave unemployment benefit at the lowest real level it has been since the early 1990s. This comes in the context of a decade of steep cuts to the financial support for low-paid families with children: some families have lost thousands of pounds of tax credits a year since 2010. Sunak's predecessor George Osborne said these cuts were a necessity. They were a political choice: the proceeds paid for billions of pounds of tax cuts a year for businesses and more affluent households. It was an intentional redistribution from the low-paid to the comfortably affluent.

Young people have also suffered economically during this crisis. They are always scarred most by recessions in the long term, but this recession in particular has hit the hospitality and leisure sectors that disproportionately

employ young people. Yet, as the former prime minister Gordon Brown pointed out last week, the Kickstart youth job scheme has created only three jobs for every 1,000 young people so far. More broadly, the government has done too little to avoid long-term unemployment: not a single person has been helped by the Restart scheme yet, and there is nowhere near enough funding for retraining of people facing structural unemployment as a result of this crisis.

Instead, the chancellor has bet that a big stimulus to business investment – delivered through tax breaks – will be enough to encourage growth. A more measured approach would have been to tackle inequality and inject demand into the economy at the same time by giving low-income families more cash to spend, and NHS workers a much-deserved pay rise rather than a real-terms pay cut.

But this was a budget designed to appeal to Conservative swing voters rather than to alleviate hardship among those who need the most support. There is no greater tell than the way in which the new funds announced to provide support to the most deprived parts of the UK are skewed towards Conservative seats, despite many being relatively affluent. The chancellor's own constituency, Richmondshire, has been put in the top-priority group despite being in the top five most prosperous places in England. Yet Sunak could not find the money to help hard-pressed key workers put food on the table for their children. Generous he is not.

Observer comment cartoon
Coronavirus

Covid winners and losers – cartoon

NotebookPoetry

Stevie Smith’s poems suit a pandemic, even if they’re as soothing as sandpaper

Rachel Cooke

Fifty years after the poet’s death, works that were never meant to console are newly resonant

Stevie Smith pictured in 1969. Photograph: Jane Bown/The Observer

Stevie Smith pictured in 1969. Photograph: Jane Bown/The Observer

Sun 7 Mar 2021 01.05 EST

Today is the 50th anniversary of the death of Stevie Smith. She was 68, and had been suffering from a brain tumour. At the end, her head wrapped in a startling pink turban, she was reported to have amazed visitors by performing her final poem *Come Death* from her hospital bed.

I've been keen on Smith ever since I was a teenager, a passion that at one point was so fierce that I was unaccountably moved to give a paper on her at an academic conference. (While other people's side hustles are intended to make them extra cash, apparently mine must all involve unpaid work of the most futile kind.)

I love her spikiness. Sitting at an angle to everyone else, she cannot easily be appropriated; her verse will never appear in one of those ghastly anthologies that promise to console us whether we're in love, or deeply grieving. She is as soothing as sandpaper, and all the better for it.

But watching Juliet Stevenson play her at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse for *Dead Poets Live* – a celebration that's free to stream until 5 April – I

began to waver. The pandemic suits Stevie even better than a Peter Pan collar. (She was a famously prim dresser.) Covid has brought the suburbs into their own once again, and she was nothing if not the queen of Palmers Green: a person for whom bus journeys and bandstands bordered on the holy.

She needed life to be small, a constriction her poetry captures in a way that seems newly resonant now. Above all, there's her preoccupation with loneliness. The first poem Stevenson reads is *Do Take Muriel Out* from 1950, in which a woman's friends have all disappeared, taken (no spoilers here) by who knows what, or why.

Fable of a Korea girl

I smiled when I read that a North Korean defector had spent six hours walking along the border with South Korea, the guards there seemingly oblivious to his presence. It made me think of *Crash Landing on You*, in which a South Korean heiress, having been blown off course while paragliding, dashes around the wrong side of the border completely unimpeded, the North Korean guards being either too drunk, or too busy sobbing over a romantic TV show, to notice her.

If you've run out of TV to watch, this series is my steer, though it's hard to describe. Imagine a telenovela that has collided with a Korean comic strip, and you're about half way there. It comes with a love plot – what a cutie one of the North Korean soldiers turns out to be! – but it's satirical, and quite funny, too. It also has an almost Dickensian morality. It is a fable of self-improvement. Marooned, minus all her usual luxuries, in the north (an alien realm meticulously recreated on screen), our spoilt heroine, Yoon Se-ri, is set to become a kinder, less materialistic person. Also, a less picky eater.

Literature of longing

A tinnitus masker is a device that fights noise with noise (to simplify: the brain gets distracted, and one sound cancels out the other). On this principle, I'm treating my ongoing loneliness by reading nothing but the

literature of longing. Last week, I devoured – not once, but twice – Fitzcarraldo's new English edition of *Simple Passion*, in which the great Annie Ernaux describes the suspended animation of a love affair with a man who is not free. Every paragraph, every word, brought me closer to a state of purest yearning, and thus my restless anxiety and general stupefaction were magically relieved, albeit only temporarily.

Rachel Cooke is an Observer columnist

OpinionMeghan, the Duchess of Sussex

In the battle of Meghan versus the Firm, who do we cheer on? How about neither...

Catherine Bennett

The highly dysfunctional family has plenty to fear from the Sussexes' television interview

Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, in conversation with Oprah Winfrey. Photograph: Joe Pugliese/AP

Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, in conversation with Oprah Winfrey. Photograph: Joe Pugliese/AP

Sat 6 Mar 2021 14.00 EST

Maybe it's modern, maybe it's reckless self-harm, maybe it's the pervasive influence of RuPaul. Whatever explains Buckingham Palace's new line in taunting abdicators – basically, missing you already, bitches – it must have seemed like a promotional miracle to the makers of the imminent Oprah-Sussexes interview.

For Meghan Markle, leaving Britain must seem more and more like the right choice | Afua Hirsch
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Hardly had Oprah announced her coup when, abandoning a preference for pained silence that had seen it through crises from the abdication to the Morton book, the Charles interview, Diana's *Panorama* and Andrew's *Newsnight* self-immolation, the palace couldn't resist explaining that, excuse it, for all it cared the Sussexes could sashay fully away. "In stepping

away from the work of the royal family," it said, planning on the last, snitty word, "it is not possible to continue with the responsibilities and duties that come with a life of public service."

The Sussexes miaowed right back: "We can all live a life of service, service is universal."

A pause, while allies of the snubbed monarchy pondered further advance interview-retaliation. Last week, the *Times* splashed with backdated complaints about Meghan's alleged bullying (which the palace had mysteriously failed to resolve). An aside on Saudi-gifted earrings presumably added credibility to claims, in a 2018 memo written by Jason Knauf, who now runs the Cambridges' charitable foundation, complaining that Meghan had bullied two staff members "out of the household".

The palace, again uncharacteristically unmuting, was "clearly very concerned" to re-hear this, and would be investigating, it announced, to see if "lessons can be learned". Possibly carried away with its own audacity in meanwhile cultivating mistrust of its first bi-racial family member, it added: "The royal household has had a dignity at work policy in place for a number of years and does not and will not tolerate bullying or harassment in the workplace."

> Did it consider, too, how easily this endorsement of extramural HR standards could expose a hereditary hierarchy?

As much as it rewardingly provoked the Sussexes, this unsuspected passion for workplace dignity naturally raised questions about the palace's contrasting torpor when Meghan was herself bullied by the UK press. Just as carelessly, it introduced a concept that could be difficult to harmonise with an institution that depends on the continual assertion of an innate superiority whose only reliable proof is the humble delight or servitude of nearby inferiors. Did it consider, too, how easily this endorsement of extramural HR standards could expose a hereditary hierarchy that has only recently dispensed with male primogeniture, to popular expectations on, say, diversity?

As for dignity or its opposite, some personal abasement will be essential so long as Charles, the incoming sovereign, wants his toothpaste squeezed, his tantrums indulged, and friends, as well as colleagues, to call him "Sir". On the other hand, we learned, the palace's dignity at work policy has operated for "a number of years". Maybe it has already revolutionised the way Prince Andrew talks to servants. Has he stopped telling them to fuck off? Will the palace be investigating claims about palace staff being treated as a matter of course as a lower form of life?

"The art of being a good servant," Paul Burrell recalled in *A Royal Duty*, "was to perform as many of my duties as possible without being seen. A servant's life was spent in the shadows and, at best, he or she should be invisible." The peculiar indignity of palace valet duties will surely horrify an HR department whose allegiances have so radically shifted in favour of the servants. Doubling as alarm clocks, the valets crept into dark rooms with tea, drew curtains and ran baths for the able-bodied, and set out "the gentleman's" clothes: "Trousers flat across the chair with a pocket corner turned back so they could be easily picked up; a folded shirt, as if fresh from a box, placed at a vertical angle on the trousers, every button open and cufflinks inserted; a clean pair of undershorts on top; shoes with laces undone beside an easy chair, socks on top…"

> Maybe, raised in a family that fetishises rank, some level of petulance and condescension is to be expected

By dint of stringent legal enforcement, the palace has kept such accounts of compulsory indignity to a minimum. Wendy Berry's *The Housekeeper's Diary* could be published, following an injunction, everywhere except the UK; Charles even extracted a judgment that entitled him to Berry's profits. Burrell enjoyed more freedom with his scenes of book-dodging at Highgrove. "It was a randomly thrown missile. Prince Charles was a renowned object-thrower when he lost his temper."

Diana, too, could snap, snark and bully servants. Princess Margaret liked her human ashtrays. There is, then, still enough reliable material to confirm – now traumatised domestics are a cause for palace concern – that it should indeed launch an investigation, one that also features the behaviour of white

members of the family. Though maybe, raised in a family that fetishises curtseying and rank, some level of petulance and condescension is to be expected, at least among the stayers.

The more painful the palace-Sussex vendetta for admirers of the monarchy – as well as some admirers of the Sussexes – the more it looks affirmative for republicans. What kind of decent, publicly funded institution reduces people to this? Could the Sussexes, however irritating, not be allowed more graciously to quit?

Of all the arguments for a constitutional monarchy, the most effective has generally been the unassailable dignity of the current Queen as head of state, as opposed to the probable personal awfulness of any vulgar substitute (always assumed for the sake of royalist argument to be essential).

But now, to add to Andrew's disgrace, Charles's self-indulgence and the propensity for feuding and death-stares among younger royals with a sideline in mental health, the palace is happy to exchange its remaining high ground for a scrap about who said what to Jason at around the time it was doing nothing to prevent the persecution of Meghan Markle in British tabloids. All one can say as a republican is fantastic, keep it up.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

The weekly stats uncoveredCoronavirus

How do we track and measure new variants of coronavirus?

David Spiegelhalter and Anthony Masters

Behind the numbers: The UK's gene sequencing labs are at the forefront of global efforts to trace and identify every single case

- Coronavirus latest updates
- Coronavirus - see all our coverage

A patient's Covid-19 swab is taken out from a sterile tube. Scientists now now that UK epidemic was seeded by more than 1,000 distinct variants of the virus. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

A patient's Covid-19 swab is taken out from a sterile tube. Scientists now now that UK epidemic was seeded by more than 1,000 distinct variants of the virus. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

Sun 7 Mar 2021 01.50 EST

All viruses change through random mutations. Through genomic sequencing we now know that the UK epidemic was seeded by more than 1,000 distinct variants from people returning from Italy, Spain and France in February and March 2020, explaining why we got off to such a bad start.

These tiny changes are mostly inconsequential. Sometimes the virus gets lucky and spreads more easily, or causes more severe illness, in which case it earns the label Variant of Concern (VOC). In December, the rising B.1.1.7 lineage (also snappily known as VOC-202012/01) instigated new restrictions across south-east England, wrecking the tier system and ruining Christmas plans. This became known as the "UK variant" in other countries, while in the UK it is the "Kent variant". It is unclear what people in Kent call it. More than 100,000 cases have been confirmed by sequencing.

Why is this one variant so concerning? Recent analysis concluded it increases transmission by 43% to 82%. There is also evidence of greater harm, but this is still being explored. Fortunately, there is a proxy measure for this variant, which allows monitoring of its progress without full sequencing, known as S-gene target failure (SGTF). The Office for National Statistics infection survey showed that, of positive cases with sufficient viral load, around 15% in England had SGTF in mid-November. This rose to more than 95% by the middle of February.

This variant showed similarly rapid climbs to dominance outside the UK, rising from 4% of cases in Denmark at the start of the year to 75% at the end of February.

New variants have hit the headlines, including those first identified in South Africa and Brazil. The UK is at the forefront of efforts to track the new variants, and has contributed around half of published sequences to the global Sars-CoV-2 genome repository.

The existing vaccines appear to work well for the UK variant: for others we are still waiting for data on protection against severe illness. Experts

express confidence that vaccines can be adapted if necessary, and we must hope they are right.

David Spiegelhalter is chair of the Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication at Cambridge. Anthony Masters is statistical ambassador for the Royal Statistical Society

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The shifting patterns of EnglishCoronavirus

May I have a word about… why Covid sounds so much better in German

Jonathan Bouquet

One nation excels above all others in virus vocabulary

Welcome to the one-and-a-half-metre society. Photograph: David Gannon/AFP/Getty Images

Welcome to the one-and-a-half-metre society. Photograph: David Gannon/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 7 Mar 2021 01.15 EST

The Germans might be rather slow on administering Covid vaccines to their citizens, but they're certainly not hanging about when it comes to coining words to describe elements of the pandemic. According to a new report

from the Leibniz Institute for the German Language, more than 1,200 coronavirus-related words have been added to the language.

And some are absolute zingers. For example, do you sport a Spuckschutzschirm (spit protection umbrella) or do you favour a Gesichtskondom (face condom)? And are you always punctilious in observing Anderthalb-Meter-Gesellschaft (one-and-a-half-metre society)?

It must be such a comfort to the Germans that they can lead the world in one sphere of the Covid crisis even as their leaders exhibit Olympic-standard dithering in delivering the all-important jabs. There's probably a word for that in German too.

Last week was a red-letter day in the Bouquet household with the delivery of Mick Herron's new book, *Slough House*. I'm glad to report that Herron's "hero", Jackson Lamb, is on sparkling form, if anyone quite so dissolute and shambolic can actually sparkle, his malapropisms still flying off the page.

I was particularly taken by: "We can always rely on you to play devil's asparagus." And Herron has a nice touch in tweaking old favourites. Here's Lamb again, talking to his hapless agents: "Remember, all of us are lying in the gutter. But some of you are circling the drain." Pure joy.

And finally, I heard on the shipping forecast that a weather front "was losing its personality". A new one on me, but so much more poetic that dribs and drabs, spits and spots, mist and murk, don't you think?

Jonathan Bouquet is an Observer columnist

Names in the newsMaroon 5

Where have all the bands gone? Well, Adam Levine is in one himself

Rebecca Nicholson

The Maroon 5 singer ruffled feathers with comments about the decline of groups, but going it alone is easier and cheaper

Adam Levine: ‘I feel like there aren’t any bands any more.’ Photograph: Gregg DeGuire/FilmMagic

Adam Levine: ‘I feel like there aren’t any bands any more.’ Photograph: Gregg DeGuire/FilmMagic

Sat 6 Mar 2021 12.30 EST

Adam Levine, frontman of Maroon 5 – and let’s face it, if “name any member of Maroon 5” were a question on the final round of *Pointless*, you’d be forced to say Adam Levine three times and watch the prize money disappear before your eyes – has been talking to Zane Lowe of Apple Music about his nostalgia for bands.

Levine said he felt as if bands were “a dying breed” and that he wished there were more of them. “It’s funny, when the first Maroon 5 album came out there were still other bands. I feel like there aren’t any bands any more, you know?” he said.

The internet, and particularly bands on the internet, have been relatively unforgiving of this observation, putting their hands up to be ticked off the bands register. There has been an undercurrent of snobbery about Maroon 5, too, because they are a pop group. Levine’s words did sound clumsy, and

had a faint whiff of the “disco sucks” movement to them of that particular kind of “that’s not real music” pub chat, and it makes it seem as if Levine thinks he’s doing it right, while everyone else is doing it wrong. Though I will say that you can’t nip to the shops for chewing gum without hearing Moves Like Jagger, over a decade after it was released, which suggests that he and his band have done something right.

It’s easy to list bands in response – what about Haim! What about Wolf Alice! What about Haim! – but in a broad sense, he is not wrong. The album charts are where all of the bands are hiding, just not bands with many members who were born after the 1980s: Queen, Fleetwood Mac, Foo Fighters and, I realise you might not heard of this obscure bunch, but the Beatles, whose singles compilation album *1* has been in the charts for 303 weeks. The singles charts, meanwhile, are full of solo artists. You have to scroll a long way down to find a group.

This has been the case for years, and there are plenty of reasons why that might be: digital technology and the internet making it easier for one person to do everything; modern pop as a solo artist’s game; less glamorous but crucial economic factors like a laptop being cheaper than a whole band’s worth of instruments, or most cities lacking affordable rehearsal space for a band’s worth of people to fit into. Yet the picture is not bleak. Music has continued to innovate. It is resilient like that.

Sarah Silverman’s Paris joke just isn’t funny any more

Sarah Silverman has apologised for offending Paris Hilton. Photograph: David Crotty/Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

Under headlines that could have been ripped from 2007, Paris Hilton has revealed that she has accepted an apology from Sarah Silverman, for a joke that the comedian made about her at that year's MTV movie awards.

On her podcast, *This Is Paris*, Hilton talked about "sitting there wanting to die" as Silverman joked about Hilton going to prison; watching it now, more grisly than the crude punchline, I think, is an entire auditorium of celebrities seeming to cheer at her getting locked up.

Silverman has talked before about the "roast" culture that dominated comedy at that time, particularly American comedy. On her own podcast, she addressed the resurfaced controversy at length, saying to Hilton: "I'm sorry I hurt you. Comedy is not evergreen. We can't change the past. What's crucial is that we change with the times."

The joke in question has not aged well, and it's obvious from the footage that Hilton was upset. But I am glad that Silverman isn't opting for the straightforward mea culpa and is acknowledging the complexity of the situation. There is a tendency towards disingenuous moral certainty, to decide we wouldn't have laughed at a crass gag like that even then, but

plenty did, and I might have. I can't remember, but I might have. It is reductive to treat comedy from two decades ago as if it were written yesterday.

Back on a special episode of her podcast, Hilton accepted the apology. I will listen to Silverman's podcast for the response to the response to the response.

A fitting resting place for a Sylvia Plath fan

Sylvia Plath's grave in the cemetery of St Thomas The Apostle Church, Heptonstall, West Yorkshire. Photograph: Alamy

It is revealing of the number of cemeteries that I have found myself wandering around on various holidays and trips that I have a favourite grave.

In London's Highgate cemetery, where the showier burials are of Karl Marx and George Eliot, the most wonderful belongs to the pop artist Patrick Caulfield, who simply has the word "DEAD" carved into a headstone. It makes me smile whenever I see it. I rarely find graveyards to be morbid. They are a testament to an array of life.

“Might there be a vast flurry of applications from people wanting to be buried in close proximity to their literary heroes and heroines?” As an admirer of cemeteries, I read the full judgment by the Worshipful Mark Hill QC, chancellor of the diocese of Leeds, in an unusual case last week, after a woman applied to be buried in the same churchyard as Sylvia Plath.

The woman is not from the area but, as a lover of literature, she said, she “felt profoundly spiritual” on visiting the cemetery in Heptonstall, near Hebden Bridge. The ruling took into account several factors, including the uniqueness of the application, and the fact that there was a “superabundance of space” in the graveyard. It was, Hill decided, unlikely to set a precedent.

- Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

Observer lettersPrisons and probation

Letters: our prisons are a national disgrace

Observer columnist Eva Wiseman painted a picture of a justice system at breaking point. We need action

Wandsworth prison in London. Photograph: Andrew Aitchison/Corbis via Getty Images

Wandsworth prison in London. Photograph: Andrew Aitchison/Corbis via Getty Images

Sun 7 Mar 2021 01.00 EST

Eva Wiseman is rightly impassioned by our inability as a country to summon the will to reform our creaking prison system ("Prison reform is slow, but could the will to change be growing?", Magazine). She draws our attention to many of the most telling areas of failure which should inspire appetite for change. Are we shamed by a recidivism rate of 65%? Do we care that we lock up more women and children than any other European

country? The political attitude to prison seems hardly to have developed since Victorian times, while public perceptions are starting to appear more progressive.

Sadly, this government, like its predecessors, cannot decide whether prison should punish, deter or reform as its top priority, as demonstrated by the incompatible appointments of Rory Stuart and Chris Grayling as ministers with responsibility for prisons, the first a reformer, the latter with a reactionary agenda. The home secretary should pick up Ms Wiseman's gauntlet and act on the mountain of evidence confronting her that her prison system is a national disgrace.

Christopher Martin
Bristol

Republicans not racist

Maurice Walsh writes that the republican movement of 1921 "played the race card" to win freedom (Focus). He evidences this by treating Irish republicanism as being represented only by its most reactionary elements. Republicanism was quick to support anti-slavery struggles: Thomas McCabe, Mary Ann McCracken, John Boyle O'Reilly and Terence MacSwiney were all outspoken anti-racists. The execution by the British in 1916 of those committed to socialism and anti-imperialism – Connolly, Pearse, Casement – gave space for more reactionary arguments to come to the fore.

The formation of the Free State was a defeat for republican anti-imperialism. As Sinn Féin politician Liam Mellows put it, the acceptance of partition meant that "we are going into the British Empire now to participate in the Empire's shame, and the crucifixion of India and the degradation of Egypt. Is that what the Irish people fought for freedom for?" To paint the republican movement of the time as racist is to misrepresent the best of it and cover over the fact that the actual imperialists – the British – used the suppression of the Irish struggle to develop all the tactics they would employ in defence of empire elsewhere, from the development of militia to terrorise the native population (the Black and Tans) to the use of partition itself as a political strategy. In this centenary year, there has been

little critical reflection on any of that.
Nick Moss
London NW10

Maurice Walsh describes Erskine Childers as "the former English officer and bestselling spy novelist". This omits Childers's most significant occupation – as a clerk in the House of Commons from 1895 to 1914. So far as we know, although several clerks have since followed in Childers's footsteps by publishing novels, he remains the only clerk to have been executed by firing squad.
Paul Evans, former clerk in the House of Commons
Crickhowell, Powys

The down side of gene-editing

Philip Ball presents an upbeat assessment of Crispr gene-editing therapies ("After the Nobel, what next for Crispr?", the New Review) but the seeds of darker possibilities are present in his identification of four companies already working to exploit this technology. The political consensus favours a laissez-faire approach to business so these companies, and others, will be left largely free to innovate applications of gene-editing according to market demand.

Unconstrained competition is bound to lead to the erosion of ethical guidelines and to the selling of non-medical uses of Crispr with the potential to be highly socially disruptive, such as the introduction of alterations in cosmetic appearance, cognition, memory and emotional response. Rather than sleepwalking into this future, it would be better if the potential downsides of the commercial exploitation of Crispr were more widely debated.
Jamie Carnie
Bath

Preserver of the human race

Nick Cohen captured all the intricacies of the vaccination debate ("It is only a matter of time before we turn on the unvaccinated", Comment). However,

your caption alongside the accompanying cartoon by Gillray omitted its sub-heading, which referred sarcastically to the "wonderful" effects of the smallpox vaccination, while parts of cows were seen to be growing out of the bodies of those who had received the cowpox-based vaccination.

The debate about the efficacy and safety of such a procedure, which we are seeing repeated today, was equally heated at the start of the 19th century. By way of a riposte to Gillray, Cruikshank produced an equally powerful cartoon in 1808 depicting Jenner as a heroic figure, saving the lives of children who would otherwise have been disfigured by smallpox. While Jenner appeals to the doctors who oppose him, one turns and replies: "Curse on these vaccinators…." Meanwhile, an angel places a laurel wreath on the head of Jenner with the words: "The preserver of the human race."

Ian Ferguson
Pickering, North Yorkshire

Portrait of a lady

Your article on Hortense Mancini highlighted her intellectual and literary accomplishments, but you diminished those by using a depiction of her as an allegorical object of male fantasy ("How Charles II's clever mistress set trends ahead of her time", News). Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to use the painting after Voet in the National Portrait Gallery, or Kneller's later portrait from 1693, both of which show Mancini as a woman in her own right?

Mark Liebenrood
London WC1

Regional variations

The government imposition of rent rises for the learned societies of Burlington House couldn't have come at a more appropriate time ("Under threat: the birthplace of Darwin's historic theory", News). Now the move to distribute facilities round the country is growing, several new centres of learning could be set up.

I suggest Leeds for the Geological Society as it is at the heart of the Carboniferous strata; Bolton, the home of Fred Dibnah, for the Society of Antiquaries; and Lyme Regis for the Linnaean Society, where it would sit very well with natural history and the evolution of the dinosaurs.

William Burgess

Guiseley, West Yorkshire

For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sat 6 Mar 2021 19.00 EST

In an article about Covid vaccines, the answer to a question about efficacy claimed that if a vaccine had 93% efficacy in clinical trials, that meant 7% of people who received the jab still got the disease. This was an incorrect interpretation of the figures. It actually means that the risk of contracting the disease is reduced by 93% in people who get the vaccine ("I've had my vaccine – how well will it protect me, and for how long?", 28 February, page 8).

An article about Oprah Winfrey said she was partnering with the Duchess of Sussex on a mental health series for Apple TV. In fact, the partnership is with Meghan's husband, Prince Harry ("The Oprah effect: star who made her interviews public therapy", 28 February, page 32).

An article about Roy Hodgson referred to the Sebastian Faulks novel *A Week in September*. The book is called *A Week in December* ("Will the dotage of Roy Hodgson, English football's tourist, be haunted by regret?", 28 February, page 16, Sport).

Near-homophone corner: "Climate change is an issue the Murdoch press has disassembled on for years" ("Q&A: Michael E Mann", 28 February, page 22, the New Review).

Other recently amended articles include:

CDFI: the community spirit that's saving borrowers from payday loans

Fergus Henderson's 'whole animal' recipes inspired chefs on both sides of the Atlantic

Elisabeth Murdoch funds film school that says no to nepotism

Write to the Readers' Editor, the Observer*, York Way, London N1 9GU, email observer.readers@observer.co.uk, tel 020 3353 4736*

Hidden gems from the world of researchCoronavirus

When will we realise that without sick pay the ill must work?

Torsten Bell

Research reveals that financial support of infected workers benefits everyone, but the government won't budge

A member of the United Voices of the World union pickets the Sage care home in Brent, north London in a strike over sick pay on 6 February. Photograph: Guy Smallman/Getty Images

A member of the United Voices of the World union pickets the Sage care home in Brent, north London in a strike over sick pay on 6 February. Photograph: Guy Smallman/Getty Images

Sun 7 Mar 2021 01.10 EST

We need people who have – or might have – the coronavirus to stay at home to protect others' lives. The government's job is to protect their livelihoods so they're able to do so. That's why decent sick pay is so essential in a pandemic.

Unfortunately, the UK came into this crisis firmly at the bottom of the international statutory sick pay league table; 2 million low earners don't qualify at all. Even those qualifying only get £96 a week, just a quarter of their earnings on average. The government recognised, but didn't solve these problems, by ensuring people get sick pay more quickly as well as if they need to isolate but aren't ill. A new £500 track-and-trace support payment was also introduced, but only one in eight workers qualify.

The world of research has warned us repeatedly to deal with this problem. Back in July we learned that care homes paying sick pay were significantly less likely to have Covid cases. Last week, a deep dive into the experiences of US states showed that those introducing sick pay saw huge (up to 30%) reductions in seasonal flu cases, proving that people will do the right thing and stay home if they can afford to do it.

Last March, I didn't think it was possible we'd get a year through this pandemic without sorting out the UK's inadequate sick pay system. It turns out I was wrong, providing another reminder that just because a problem is blindingly obvious doesn't mean it'll get fixed.

Torsten Bell is chief executive of the Resolution Foundation. Read more at resolutionfoundation.org

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