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All articles

OpinionExams

The Observer view on basing pupils' results on teacher assessment

Observer editorial

Gavin Williamson, once again, has passed schools a poisoned chalice to avoid any political risk to himself

Throughout the pandemic, Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, has barely put a foot right. Photograph: Barcroft Media/Getty Images

Throughout the pandemic, Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, has barely put a foot right. Photograph: Barcroft Media/Getty Images

Sun 28 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

A pandemic that has seen schools shut for months, exams cancelled for two years running and has consigned the majority of university students to a distance-learning model, was always going to wreak havoc with children

and young people's lives. However, time and again the government has, through a mixture of incompetence, carelessness and a desire to pass the buck, made things worse.

So it was with last summer's examinations fiasco. The cancellation of all exams resulted in pupils enduring weeks of uncertainty as the government insisted on using a crude algorithm to adjust teacher assessments to reduce any grade inflation, then dropped this when all the problems – about which government had been warned – came to fruition. This created significant problems for universities, with some over-subscribed and others under-subscribed as a product of the resulting grade inflation. And it may yet have long-term impacts on the class of 2020 as employers regard their GCSE and A-level results as less reliable.

The government has had months longer to prepare for the cancellation of this summer's exams and one might have expected last year's experience to motivate Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, to publish a backup plan for consultation last autumn. Instead, Williamson clung to the unrealistic hope that schools might be able to stay open for the whole academic year. As a result, the government has only just published proposals for what will replace exams this summer, leaving little time for scrutiny and improvement. In trying to escape any accountability for student complaints about grades, Williamson has loaded far too much on to schools and teachers in interpreting how to allocate grades fairly. This creates a system that risks being just as dysfunctional as last year's.

The government was right to cancel exams, as difficult as that is for young people. This cohort has missed so much school since March 2020 – with varying amounts of learning loss depending on where pupils live and their social background – that it would have been very difficult for any system to be fair. Moving to teacher-based assessment for another year means schools can take into account how much of the syllabus young people have been taught.

However, the government's chosen route has given conflicting and unclear messages to teachers on assessing grades. On the one hand, schools have been told they should award grades based on the standard at which a student is performing, not at their potential standard without pandemic-related

learning losses. This could be interpreted in different ways by different schools. On the other hand, the government has created the expectation that the grade distribution in 2021 should look similar to that of 2020, where there was significant grade inflation. These are contradictory signals.

> In one sweep, the government has created a system that risks more, not less, grade inflation than in 2020

In an ambiguous system with high uncertainty and little consistency, schools will feel as if they need to ensure their own students are not disadvantaged. In one sweep, the government has therefore created a system that risks more, not less, grade inflation than in 2020. This is damaging to the whole cohort of young people, because it undermines the value of their qualifications if they are seen to present an inaccurate, potentially inflated picture of their skills and knowledge. Little wonder that the Education Policy Institute's overall assessment is that "the risks of an unsatisfactory outcome appear to be uncomfortably high".

This system – whereby inconsistency is baked in through unclear guidance to schools – has been created as a result of Williamson wanting to wash his hands of any responsibility for taking a national view of how grades should be awarded; instead he is just pushing this on to teachers. In trying to avoid anything resembling an algorithm, he has abandoned any proper notion of moderation or standardisation of grades. Yet, in normal years, the exam system relies on such a formula: each spring, a representative sample of pupils sit national reference tests that the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) uses to judge the overall performance and determine the distribution of grades. This ensures that any improvement or worsening of grades comes as a result of genuine differences between the cohort sitting exams and those that came before.

The government has had enough time to implement a modified version of this system to help guide schools. Or, for example, there could have been compulsory but discrete assessments from exam boards to measure young people on parts of the syllabus they had actually learned in school, which could be used by teachers as an anchor around which to produce their assessed grades. Instead, students now face a double injustice: the lost

learning due to school closures, and the lost chance to certify their progress for universities and employers in a fair and meaningful way.

There was no flawless system to replace exams that could have been deployed this summer given the protracted school closures but Williamson has decided to put minimising any political risk to himself – by giving unhelpfully vague guidance to schools and leaving it up to them – ahead of ensuring that we treat a cohort of young people whose education and wellbeing has suffered hugely during the pandemic as fairly as possible. Perhaps it was too much to expect anything different from an education secretary who, at every opportunity in this pandemic, has put off making difficult decisions to the detriment of children.

Yet again, he is letting down the nation's youth.

OpinionMohammed bin Salman

The Observer view on Saudi Arabia's crown prince

Observer editorial

How can the west continue to do business with the man who approved Jamal Khashoggi's murder?

Mohammed bin Salman: 'What happens when he next visits Washington or London?' Photograph: Reuters

Mohammed bin Salman: 'What happens when he next visits Washington or London?' Photograph: Reuters

Sun 28 Feb 2021 01.15 EST

As details emerged of the gruesome 2018 murder in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul of the exiled dissident and journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, most observers became convinced it could not have happened without the approval of the all-powerful Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

The US intelligence report, published last week, definitively supports that conclusion.

Joe Biden is to be commended for making the CIA's findings public after they were blocked by Donald Trump. The US sanctions imposed on Saudi government employees involved in the killing, and new measures to curb foreign agents who harass dissidents abroad, are welcome. But Biden's too-pragmatic decision not to penalise Salman himself, the plot's ringleader, and, in effect, let him off the hook, is dismaying.

The reasoning behind this shabby act of realpolitik is obvious enough. Saudi Arabia is an important western ally. Its cooperation is needed if Iran's destabilising regional activities and nuclear programme are to be curbed. Hopes that Riyadh will follow the UAE and Bahrain in normalising ties with Israel are a factor, too. Saudi Arabia remains a key energy producer. And the crown prince, 35, is likely to lead the country for decades to come.

> For too long, the House of Saud's authoritarianism has been tolerated in exchange for cheap oil and arms sales

Yet Biden also says upholding human rights is a top priority. He has made ending the disastrous war in Yemen, where Saudi forces are engaged, an important policy objective. To this end, he has already suspended sales of offensive weapons. Speaking last week to King Salman, the crown prince's father, Biden said he wanted to recalibrate the overall US-Saudi relationship on the basis of increased respect for universal values.

The contradiction is glaring. How can Biden, and Britain's foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, credibly stress the paramount importance of human rights and the international rule of law while continuing to do business with a man the US publicly accuses of conspiracy to murder? What happens when Salman next visits Washington or London? Will he be arrested? On the principle of universal jurisdiction employed by a German court to try Syrian war criminals last week, he certainly should be.

Having exposed the lethal activities of the Rapid Intervention Force, a Saudi special forces-style unit, will the US and UK demand its disbandment

and the prosecution of its commanders and operatives? Several members of the hit squad that murdered Khashoggi in Istanbul belonged to the RIF. "The group exists to defend the crown prince [and] answers only to him," the CIA report said.

Anticipating Biden's stance, Saudi leaders took pre-emptive action. Prominent Saudi women's rights campaigner Loujain al-Hathloul and the journalist Nouf Abdulaziz were recently freed from jail. Yet other leading women activists are still reportedly held. They include Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah and Mayaa al-Zahrani, along with many other political prisoners.

Symbolic, selective releases are not nearly enough. If the Saudi royals are determined to protect the crown prince rather than sack him, as he deserves, a broader relaxation of regime controls on democratic rights must be the west's price for continued normal relations. For too long, the House of Saud's authoritarianism has been tolerated in exchange for cheap oil and arms sales. In an age of climate crisis and pandemic disease, this cynical bargain stinks.

What should the British government do? It must not allow geostrategic concerns to trump fundamental rights and values. It should sanction the crown prince, at the very least, by adding his name to the list of 20 Saudi nationals on whom Raab imposed travel bans and asset freezes last year over their involvement in Khashoggi's death.

Britain should halt sales of weapons and equipment that could be used in Yemen or to suppress domestic dissent. And it should unreservedly back efforts to bring Mohammed bin Salman to justice for conspiracy to murder.

Observer comment cartoon
Budget 2021

The chancellor prepares his budget – cartoon

The weekly stats uncoveredVaccines and immunisation

Both Covid jabs are working well in the real world, not just the lab

David Spiegelhalter and Anthony Masters

Behind the numbers: the policy of giving as many first jabs as possible is already cutting hospital admission rates

A pharmacist prepares the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid19 vaccine at an NHS vaccination centre in Ealing, west London. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

A pharmacist prepares the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid19 vaccine at an NHS vaccination centre in Ealing, west London. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Sun 28 Feb 2021 02.15 EST

We should by now be familiar with the idea of a vaccine's efficacy, but last Monday three analyses of vaccine effectiveness were published. Despite the confusing similarity, these are different concepts: efficacy is measured in

tightly controlled clinical trials, effectiveness is how well a vaccine works in the messy real world.

In trials, healthy volunteers are put in vaccinated and control groups at random – this ensures the groups are comparable and differences in outcomes must be due to the vaccine. If we simply compare people who have been jabbed with those who have not, they will differ in all sorts of ways: older and other higher-risk people will be first in the queue, while communities that are hesitant to be vaccinated may also be at higher risk. These confounders can lead to systemic bias in estimating effectiveness. So, studies use elaborate statistical analysis to make fair comparisons.

For example, a remarkable study of the entire adult population from Scotland compared hospital cases with Covid-19 in 1.1 million vaccinated people with 3.2 million who were not vaccinated, taking into account differences in age, sex, deprivation and other factors. Effectiveness peaked four weeks after one dose, at 85% for the Pfizer/BioNTech and 94% for the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine. It is tempting to claim the Oxford jab was better but the overlapping, plausible ranges around these estimates (76% to 91% and 73% to 99%) show we can't conclude they are really different. Encouragingly, the combined effectiveness for over-80s was 81% (range 65% to 90%).

Reduced hospital admissions are vital but we must also stop infection and transmission. Pfizer's effectiveness against infections in healthcare workers, accounting for age, ethnicity and other factors, was around 70% three weeks after one dose, and 85% a week after the second dose. This reassuring conclusion also held for the new B.1.1.7 variant.

These studies show that both vaccines give high levels of protection after one dose to all ages, vindicating the bold decisions the UK made and giving grounds for optimism.

- 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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OpinionTelevision

John Torode, don’t sneer at TV dinners, they can be the perfect tonic

Rebecca Nicholson

Ignore the MasterChef maestro: eating on the sofa while watching a favourite show can be a great way to switch off

John Torode: ‘I don’t understand why people would want to sit with some food on their lap.’ Photograph: Dave J Hogan/Getty Images

John Torode: ‘I don’t understand why people would want to sit with some food on their lap.’ Photograph: Dave J Hogan/Getty Images

Sat 27 Feb 2021 12.30 EST

John Torode, the Australian chef and *MasterChef* presenter, ruffled the nation’s feathers when he said that he and his wife Lisa Faulkner would not dream of eating in front of the box. “We wouldn’t ever consume food in front of the television,” he said. “I don’t understand why people would want to sit with some food on their lap and dribble down their shirt and all over a clean sofa.”

Questionable eating habits aside – I can just about manage not to dribble all over my sofa these days, even if it’s spag bol – it is all right for him to say that. *MasterChef* is on at either 8pm or 9pm, far later than most people have dinner in this country. What are we, European? But he is throwing *Celebrity Antiques Road Trip* right under the bus.

Torode was backed up by his *MasterChef* co-host Gregg Wallace, who said that he comes home to “a family around the table with a bottle of wine”.

This debate coincided with a third lockdown initiative in my house, an attempt to lift some of the dreary repetition of the winter that never ends.

We decided to stop the lockdown habit of automatically eating in front of the TV, and to start having evening meals at the table again. I am not saying that this is why my partner of many years turned to me one night and sighed, “Have we finally run out of things to say to each other?”, but, well, I’m not saying it isn’t, either.

Irritatingly, I don’t think Torode is wrong. It is lovely to sit down and eat together, and it is important, and it marks the transition from day to night, particularly in these shapeless times. Now that we’ve adjusted, most nights we have had conversations that we might not have had otherwise, had we still been watching three episodes of *The Sopranos* every evening. Owing to the pandemic, eating in this deliberate and leisurely way feels more possible than it once did. We are less busy, less constrained by other commitments.

But that’s OK for us. In this unsettled era, a lot of people are busy, some more so, particularly if they’re working and homeschooling, and the idea of making a ceremony out of dinner is just one more job to add to the list. In some of the small flats I have lived in, the dining table was the sofa, because a dining table wouldn’t fit. And sometimes, eating in front of the telly is simply a relaxing way to switch off at the end of another long day. Right now, if that is what is needed, then we should all feel free to munch our way through yet another repeat of *You’ve Been Framed*.

Lady Gaga: dognapping has taken a violent turn

Lady Gaga offered $500,000 for the return of her dogs. Photograph: Mike Coppola/Getty Images for Turner

At first glance, you wonder if celebrity news has lost it completely. The WTF headlines made it seem cartoonishly villainous: Lady Gaga's dogs had been stolen by armed robbers, and a reward of half a million dollars was offered for their return; information of secondary order, it seemed, was that somebody had been shot.

You read on and realise that this is late-stage celebrity news, horrible and dystopian. In 2004, Paris Hilton's chihuahua Tinkerbell mysteriously went missing and was returned after a reward of $5,000 was offered. In 2021, Ryan Fischer, the man who walks Gaga's dogs, was shot in the chest, as two of her three French bulldogs were dognapped.

This is a grim, frightening affair, and has caused concern among LA's dog walkers, who are said to be changing their routines, no longer walking after dark, learning self-defence, wearing bodycams and even arming themselves. Gaga is reported to be distraught. "It's very appalling that someone would shoot somebody to steal some dogs," Gaga's father, Joe Germanotta, told CNN, with obvious incredulity.

In the UK, dognapping has been on the rise for months, more than doubling from 2019 to 2020, as thieves cash in on high demand for puppies during lockdown, exploiting people's willingness to pay thousands for a companion whose faeces you will be putting in tiny plastic bags for the next decade. Our attachment to our pets is strong, and a theft like this is horrifying. Gaga's dogs were eventually handed in, and Fischer is expected to make a full recovery.

Kelsey Grammer: he's listening, but who to?

Kelsey Grammer. Photograph: Toni Anne Barson/WireImage

Now that television has run out of original ideas, it makes sense that the beloved *Frasier*, which ended in 2004, would be next in line for a reboot.

The return of the series was officially announced last week, with confirmation that Kelsey Grammer would star and executive produce. I found myself Googling "is Eddie still alive?", knowing in my heart what the answer would be. For anyone who hopes beyond hope that dogs live a long, human-length life, I am sorry to reveal that Moose, who played Eddie, would be 30 if he had lived to the present day; he passed away in 2006.

So Eddie won’t be back, and nor will Martin Crane, as the great John Mahoney died in 2018. There is no news on whether David Hyde Pierce will return as Niles, nor Jane Leeves as Daphne, one of the few English actors to sound as if she were an American actor faking an English accent for the role. Reports say that they are not “currently attached” to the project.

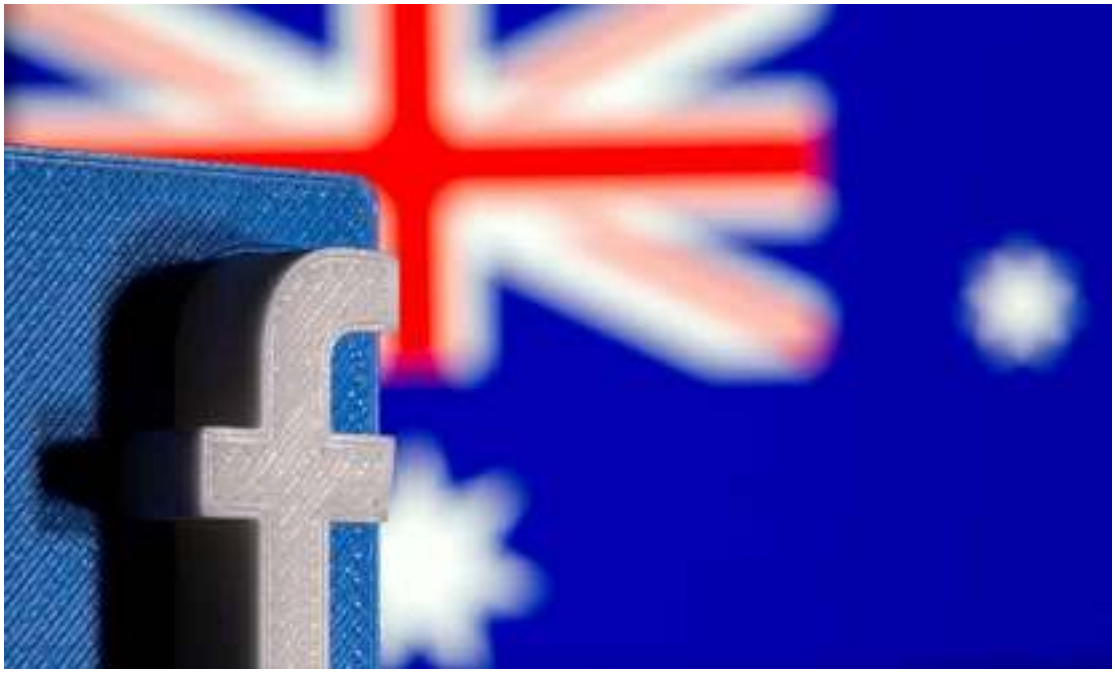
Another big revival, *Roseanne*, managed to survive, in the end, without Roseanne, and only time will tell, but I wonder if *Frasier* will really be *Frasier* if it’s only Frasier who is back.

• Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

Observer lettersFacebook

Letters: it’s time to call big tech’s bluff

The internet giants must be held to account and made to compensate publishers for using their material



The EU drafted a copyright directive before Australia took action on Facebook. Photograph: Dado Ruvić/Reuters

The EU drafted a copyright directive before Australia took action on Facebook. Photograph: Dado Ruvić/Reuters

Sun 28 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

John Naughton’s piece was flawless apart from a couple of omissions (“Australia shows the way. It’s the job of governments not big tech to run democracies”, Comment). If we want similar rules to Australia in the UK, it is worth mentioning that the UK government was one of the main defenders of the EU 2019 copyright directive, which recognises the need to compensate publishers for their contribution in producing press publications so crucial to the journalistic diversity we need in a democracy. The drafting of the EU directive came long before Australia’s action. Interestingly,

Google is believed to have spent around £30m opposing the directive. It is to be hoped that the UK government will translate the provisions into law very soon. It helped write them, after all.
Carole Tongue, chair, UK Coalition for Cultural Diversity
London SE1

Naughton makes the significance of the row between Facebook and the Australian government crystal clear. Ever since the 1996 US Telecommunications Act gave the nascent internet platforms the right to pretend they were letter carriers rather than publishers, the need to constrain them has been inevitable.

As Naughton says, "it is high time we called the industry's bluff". Roll on global legislation to ensure that content providers get their fair share of the proceeds of their labours – and that the internet giants are held to account for the slurry of hatred and mendacities they so endlessly publish.
Dr Brian Winston
Lincoln

The role of the journalist

Kenan Malik is right ("Muslim leaders should be questioned like everyone else", Comment). A journalist has every right to ask tough, uncomfortable questions. The questions have no bearing on the interviewer's thoughts; they're merely questions that they think worth asking. TV and radio journalists are often presented as being bad people based on their tone, or on the questions they ask. Occasionally such characterisations may be true, but usually not.

I prefer forensic interviews that hold people to account over friendly interviews that fail to effectively scrutinise. Emma Barnett and Emily Maitlis have both been criticised recently. Is there also an element of sexism to all this whipped-up anger?
Sebastian Monblat
Sutton, London

Why we need PR

Will Hutton sums up the challenges facing the Labour party very accurately ("Keir Starmer has caught the public mood. Now he can begin to shape the political argument", Comment). However, I would suggest that his final comment – "Yes, it's society stupid. But it's also Europe, stupid" – should be expanded with the addition of "Yes, it's the voting system, stupid". If the Labour party really wants to end the mess that the Conservatives have made of running this country for so long, they must surely join the other progressive parties and accept the need for proportional representation. Then we can all move on to the general election campaign with confidence that it will bring real democracy to the UK at last.

Richard Carden

Denton, Harleston, Norfolk

Where was Aung San Suu Kyi?

Kenan Malik asks the important neglected question, "Where were the protesters when the Rohingya were being murdered?" (Comment), highlighting the role of Nobel peace prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi in the process. The latter cannot be excluded from criticism now that the military have turned against her. At the time of the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, she dismissed this vulnerable minority as being "not Burmese" and therefore unworthy of protection.

Jennifer Rees

Cardiff

Crunching the numbers

I read Dr Kit Yates's article with despair ("I'm a maths lecturer – and I had to get my children to teach me", News). He is right that it is not the teachers' fault. Most are intelligent and expert educators. Crucially, however, few people – including teachers and curriculum designers – have a thorough understanding of basic maths.

Moreover, some curriculum designers have insufficient understanding of young children and how they think. Posed with the problem, "There were seven birds sitting on a tree, two fly away. How many are left?", a six-year-

old might reply, “Seven”, as there are still seven birds, albeit not all on the tree.

There are considerable pressures – often arising from parents – on teachers and curriculum designers to present “sums” and expect answers to be recorded formally (eg 4-1 = 3). If, however, young children are given more opportunities to explore and discuss maths practically then they are more likely to develop a good understanding without being confused by symbols or trying to recall what method to use and when. This has proved successful in Finland and is being trialled elsewhere.

It is time that more mathematicians, psychologists and early years educators worked together with young children to put an end to generations of individuals who not only dislike maths but who find it utterly confusing.
Anne Cockburn, emeritus professor of early years education
University of East Anglia, Norwich

How wonderful to see experts on maths and English (Kit Yates and Erin Kelly) on the absurdities of the current curriculum. Erin Kelly, “a bestselling novelist who teaches creative writing”, is spot on when she rails against the “Dickensian” and “joyless” teaching of grammar. For decades I have tried to teach grammar at every age and level and have always failed. This is because when we speak or write we don’t think in grammatical categories: we should, as Kelly says, be teaching persuasive language and how to engage the reader. We are still haunted by the ghost of Dickens’s Mr Gradgrind.
Don Salter
Newcastle upon Tyne

Troubled waters

Further to Rowan Moore’s piece (“Johnson, man of steel”, Notebook), I was reminded of Nikita Khrushchev’s wry observation: “Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build bridges even when there are no rivers.”
David Hughes
Bath

Edward Said, literary giant

It is hard to see how Edward Said's attitude to fiction could be described as that of "contempt" ("How literary failures fuelled Edward Said's contempt for fiction", News). The fact that he saw political change as more likely to be stimulated by the interventions of the public intellectual, or that he was dismissive of his own forays into the literary domain, should not be used to detract from a lifelong engagement with literary fiction which he wrote about with passion.

Whether defending Joseph Conrad against his detractors or promoting the early writing of the now famous Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury or contrasting the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani with Dickens and Stendhal, Said never ceased to read literature as the touchstone of the political imagination, a major player in how we envisage, and struggle for, a just world.

Jacqueline Rose, co-director
Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities
London WC1

For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 28 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

In a caption and the text of an article we misdescribed James Corner as an architect. He has been appointed as lead landscape architect for the Camden Highline structure ("Manhattan makeover for London with floating green walkway plan", 21 February, page 23).

The mayor of Trappes is Ali Rabeh, not "Rabbeh", as an editing error caused his name to be spelt (""It's so unfair': life on the streets of the French town branded as 'lost to Islam'"", 21 February, page 32).

Other recently amended articles include:

After the Nobel, what next for Crispr gene-editing therapies?

Scientists say clinical trials for 'variant-proof' vaccines could start very soon

Call for new Beveridge report as number of destitute UK households doubles during Covid

How should we address Charles Darwin's complicated legacy?

From the docks to the eBay – will online marketplaces save the fishing industry?

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 researchWorking from home

Working from home turns out not to be the dream we were sold

Torsten Bell

Money saved on commuting is eaten up by the need for bigger homes in order to avoid being confined to the kitchen table

Working from home is predicted to become the new norm. Photograph: franckreporter/Getty Images

Working from home is predicted to become the new norm. Photograph: franckreporter/Getty Images

Sun 28 Feb 2021 01.45 EST

Homeworking is all the rage. Apparently, we'll all be at it permanently. So proclaim lifestyle gurus and HR consultants. Many make a profession out of talking as if only professional work exists, forgetting that only a third of

working adults are working entirely from home even in this lockdown. You don't find many scaffolders working on the kitchen table.

The gurus aren't just predicting that working from home is here to stay, they're also prophesying that it'll be great and cheap. Not only will commuting costs disappear, homeworking will make housing cheaper, as not living near the office will mean everyone is paying small-town rents while earning city-centre salaries. Back in the real world, new research shows that homeworking households actually spent about 7-10% more on housing compared with similar non-remote households in the same region. Why? Homeworkers need more space so have bigger houses. The only thing less fun than a pandemic spent at the kitchen table is a lifetime at one. Homeworkers also tend to live in more expensive areas. Maybe you care more which neighbourhood you live in if you never leave it.

So a bit more working from home will become the norm for some with flexibility benefits, but it's no nirvana. Homeworkers aren't abolishing the office – they're just paying for the pleasure of taking it home.

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

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OpinionVaccines and immunisation

It is only a matter of time before we turn on the unvaccinated

Nick Cohen

Poverty and religion are creating a class the newly inoculated will come to resent

- Coronavirus - latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

The Cow Pock – or The Wonderful Effects of the New Inoculation by James Gillray in 1802. Photograph: Historical/Corbis/Getty Images

The Cow Pock – or The Wonderful Effects of the New Inoculation by James Gillray in 1802. Photograph: Historical/Corbis/Getty Images

Sat 27 Feb 2021 14.00 EST

It is easy to see how the pandemic could lead to class and racial strife by imagining how the UK will stand in six months' time. The vindictive will start to describe Covid as a sickness of choice. Its victims will be victims of their own stupidity. They might have accepted vaccination. They might have protected themselves and others if, as seems likely, vaccines limit infections.

Rational people will ask why they should continue to accept restrictions on their freedoms because of ignorant delusions. Employers will demand to know what possible argument there is against allowing the owners of pubs, airlines, restaurants, hotels or holiday homes to demand proof of protection when immunity passports might save their business. To make it personal, how would you feel come the autumn if someone you love contracted cancer and the NHS delayed treatment because it had to look after needlessly ill Covid patients?

The poor suffer disproportionately from Covid as they suffer disproportionately from everything else. But it could soon be a sickness of poverty. In Birmingham – the only city to have produced detailed statistics – just 60% of people over 80 accepted the jab in Alum Rock, a deprived and racially mixed part of the inner city, while 95% accepted it in Sutton Four Oaks, an overwhelmingly white commuter suburb. Public health workers told me of their fears, but said they could never speak their minds in public. So let me spit it out for them. If good citizens who have taken their jabs, see poor white people, ultra-orthodox Haredi Jews, black or south Asian men and women, they may remember the stories about anti-vax illusions and cross the road or move down the bus to avoid them, or refuse to hire them or provide them with services.

We have been lucky that to date the public faces of the anti-vax and Covid-sceptic movements have been upper-middle-class white men. Laying into the likes of Piers Corbyn and Toby Young is a pleasure as much as a journalistic duty. The only prejudice you worry about fanning is a legitimate aversion to over-indulged cranks. How long this relaxed state will last as demands to punish the unvaccinated grow is another matter.

The right supplies one answer to vaccine apartheid. It opposes immunity passports as a step on the road to a dictatorial society where we won't be able to work or play without some functionary demanding we produce our papers. Conservative fears aren't wholly neurotic, but they should not allow their myth of the freeborn Englishman to fool them into believing that the majority of the population won't welcome passports as a route out of lockdown.

The right cannot go further than rejectionist opposition because all attempts to stop Covid-19 becoming an endemic infection involve a reordering of society. There are hundreds of thousands, maybe more than a million, undocumented migrants in the UK. As Gracie Bradley of Liberty pointed out to me, Theresa May's "hostile environment" for migrants makes them frightened of visiting vaccination centres. When the NHS shares data with the Home Office and immigration enforcement, they have every incentive to stay away.

Since he was mayor of London, Boris Johnson has toyed with offering an amnesty for illegal immigrants. Conservatives and many others hate the idea because it rewards migrants who broke the rules. But the practical arguments for regularising the position of countless thousands who dare not report a crime, appear in court as a witness, or protect themselves and wider society by agreeing to a vaccine should crush all doubts. An amnesty is essential, and now would be a good moment for the prime minister to find the backbone to take on the Conservative core vote, assuming he has a backbone to find, that is.

> Theresa May's 'hostile environment' for migrants makes them frightened of visiting vaccination centres

The housebound, the homeless and many people with severe mental and physical disabilities need vaccinations to come to them because they cannot or do not know how to reach NHS centres. In short, they require a bigger NHS and stronger state, not the minimal state of Tory dreams.

Yet when all the nice social democratic proposals have been offered, the fact of wilful ignorance remains. As so often with conspiracy theories, the endorsement of elite charlatans is vital to its spread. Emmanuel Macron's attempt to cover up the failure of the European commission to supply vaccines with the false claim that the Astra-Zeneca inoculation is "quasi-ineffective" for older people has fuelled anti-vax sentiment across the continent, and will lead to many preventable deaths.

Extreme religious elites are less visible but no less calculating. I spoke to workers at Migdal Emunah, a charity that fights forced marriages and child abuse in Haredi Jewish communities. I could not understand how religious leaders could accept a Covid infection rate nine times above the UK average. They told me what I should already have known: theocrats would do anything to avoid legitimising the scientific worldview. Once they allow modernity in, once they accept that the works of men are superior to the commands of God, their control of the mind and body, particularly of women's bodies, would be at risk. Better to tolerate death and sickness than allow the rotten structure to fall.

The left is usually blamed for failing to take on reactionary ideas in minorities. But if it is crippled by liberal guilt and the demands of electoral expediency, then the right, or parts of it, is simply indifferent. It doesn't know about the conflicts in minority communities and doesn't see the need to know either.

Doctors and, to their credit, government ministers, understand they must allay people's fears. There's nothing wrong with reaching out but at some point they will need to take on the propagators of fatally fake news with more vigour. If they do not, we will be in an intolerable position. The poor, among whom ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented, suffer the greatest health inequalities. During the pandemic, they disproportionately risked their lives in frontline services, while experiencing the highest death rates. As the pandemic slows down, they will continue to suffer the highest death rates along with new variants of the old plagues of racism and snobbery.

• Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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