

Digital mental health

You rightly point out that “the world needs more tools to deal with depression and addiction” (“Let magic into the daylight”, June 8th). Psychological treatments such as cognitive-behavioural therapy and interpersonal psychotherapy are effective for about two-thirds of cases of clinical depression.

A growing number of randomised control trials demonstrate that mood-management interventions based on these treatments can prevent half or more of new episodes of major depression in people at risk.

Fully automated digital health interventions have been shown to be effective in administering treatment and preventive therapy: anyone with access to the internet could use them. The marginal cost goes down dramatically the more people use the treatment, making it economically feasible to provide it to anyone in the world free of charge.

We should create digital apothecaries, that is, online portals providing unlimited access to evidence-based Massive Open Online Interventions in as many languages as possible. We can do that with today’s knowledge and technology, at a reasonable cost.

PROFESSOR RICARDO MUÑOZ
Director
Institute for International Internet Interventions for Health
Palo Alto University

Using your time wisely

Vasily Grossman was a gifted reporter, able to paint compelling panoramas during the second world war. But, contrary to the thrust of your article (“Smoke and dust”, June 8th), he was a mediocre novelist. His characters lack the inner life that Tolstoy’s have. I wonder whether “Stalingrad” is worth the amount of my remaining life I’d have to give up to read its 1,000 pages.

If you want great war literature, I recommend Christa Wolf’s “Kassandra” (she knows

something about defeat and captivity) and “Trilogy” by H.D., the most eloquent expression of what was at stake in the war and the debt people owe, those who fought for democracy.

ERIC PURCHASE
Lewiston, New York

Plastic fantastic

Europe and America ship their collected plastic waste en masse to Asia and wrongly assume that it is recycled there (“Refusing refuse”, June 15th). Nothing could be further from the truth: it is dumped.

After China halted imports of Western plastic waste in 2017, it seems that Malaysia will soon follow. As a consequence, plastic waste will go to underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia with even lower environmental standards and thus there is a greater chance that these plastics will be dumped and litter the ocean.

In Europe waste policy focuses on households separating their waste. As a result, it is expected that much less plastic will disappear in an incinerator. However, these targets and the increase in the related taxes mean that the quality of the plastic waste is becoming increasingly poor.

In terms of carbon emissions, the benefit of plastic recycling compared with plastic incineration is very modest. It would take an average household 60 years of plastic separation to compensate for the carbon emissions of a single plane trip from Amsterdam to Los Angeles.

Burning plastic seems like a mortal sin. But it is better for the environment to set fire to low-grade plastics in efficient incinerators. Machines can use infrared techniques to extract plastic from the residual waste. Because machines take out the good types of plastic, the quality of the plastic to be recycled increases.

RAYMOND GRADUS
Professor of public economics and administration
Vrije Universiteit
Amsterdam

Order, order!

Though I don’t recognise your characterisation of the magistracy as characters from a Wodehouse novel (“Bench pressed”, June 22nd), two elements of your article are beyond dispute.

First, the number of magistrates has halved in the past decade, driven by short-sighted recruitment freezes leaving too few magistrates to do the work required. And the second is that with the current statutory retirement age of 70, more than half the remaining magistrates will retire in the next decade, leaving a significant gap to fill. As an emergency measure this could be dealt with in part by raising the retirement age in areas where there is a clear shortage.

But the bigger need is to recruit thousands more magistrates, creating a modern, diverse magistracy that reflects the community that it serves. This should bring in volunteers from every background, because it is wrong that only lawyers can make the complex decisions facing courts. With training, and support from legal advisers, lay people can and will make well-informed, well-reasoned decisions that bring about just outcomes.

JOHN BACHE, JP
National Chair
Magistrates Association
London

Life with a view

You are correct in noting that the air-traffic-control industry is resisting change (“A holding pattern”, June 15th). For most, the opportunity for change is simply to merge and enhance existing systems, creating economies of scale and raising the standard of technology. A more fundamental shake-up would be to replace ground-based air-traffic management with trajectory management, for which traditional air-navigation service providers are largely unnecessary.

It is difficult to imagine any industry volunteering for its own extinction, but the concepts are mature and the tech-

nology plausible; someone without the burdens of legacy will almost certainly find a way to realise it in the near future.

JIM COZENS
Air-traffic management consultant
Whiteley, Hampshire

The desire of superiority

Rather than turning to Plato’s “The Republic” for an insight on Boris Johnson, Bagehot (July 22nd) might find a better comparison with Alcibiades, an Athenian statesman and orator. Alan Ryan notes that he was “brilliant, self-destructive, and wayward...with a passion for fame and no inhibitions about attaining it.”

FORREST STUDEBAKER
Plattsburgh, New York

The Aristocats

Your interesting leader on pets (“Reigning cats and dogs”, June 22nd) asks the age-old question of how *Homo sapiens* came to dominate.

Observing any furry mammal for a period of time—my cats spend a good six hours a day grooming themselves—makes me wonder: could we handle the task of, say, piloting an aeroplane for 12 hours across the oceans, or a desktop computer through a ten-hour office day, if we had to lick our fur every 20 minutes?

MATTHIAS KISTLER
Zürich

With respect to our often indulgent relationship with our pets *The Economist* asks “who’s in charge now?” Some 450 years ago, Michel de Montaigne, in “An Apology for Raymond Sebond”, asked a very similar question: “When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?”

GARY MARTON
New York

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