

# Gravitational waves, human genius and the wonder of making the unknown, known

**The Globe and Mail – Editorial – Feb. 14, 2016**

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[...] How can we appreciate this thing we call the universe that dwarfs us into triviality and simultaneously spurs our curiosity to intellectual feats that demand their own wonderment? It takes a precious moment of discovery, one we can now experience thanks to physicists whose ground-based laser beams captured the instant a billion years ago when two black holes collided – and began sending news of their impact across the inattentive vastness of space and time.

Humans may no longer be the centre of the things, but this is a still moment for human self-congratulation. We get to live in a world that for all of its flaws and shortcomings includes these rare people who search for the unseen movements of distant galaxies, testing the limits of comprehension in the most limitless realm possible.

The violent collision of the two black holes sent gravitational waves rippling across space a billion years ago. On Earth, a billion light years away, the signs of this impact have only just reached us. Scientists at two American laboratories had the power to detect the rippling movement of this long-ago moment, a barely discernible distortion of distance occupying a mere one-thousandth the width of an atomic nucleus, lasting just 2/100ths of a second.

The universe is 13.8 billion years old, and astronomers have been able to study the later stages of its unfolding by observing emissions of electromagnetic radiation – light in its various forms. But light can't be seen from the first, opaque 400,000 years of time. Now that gravitational waves dating back to the murky beginning of things have been captured, it becomes possible to observe the totality of existence in a new way – and how often can that be said?

# Legalizing pot? First we need rules on who can grow it, and where.

**The Globe and Mail – Editorial – Feb. 23, 2016**

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[...] When you're growing a large number of cannabis plants in an indoor space, things tend to get skunky. It's a longstanding gripe that the neighbourhood smells strongly of weed.

There's nothing illegal about this particular operation, but its existence highlights some obvious questions as the federal government prepares to legalize marijuana. Namely, who should be allowed to grow pot, how much should they be allowed to cultivate, where, and under what conditions?

Pot proponents point out, not unreasonably, it's not full legalization if you're forbidden from growing your own weed. Lots of people make small amounts of wine or beer in their garage or basement. It's also legal to smoke your own

Others argue, not unreasonably, there must be safety and zoning requirements for large cultivating operations, and smaller ones, and they shouldn't be stinking up residential areas. Cities don't allow backyard pig farms or a helipad in the driveway.

There is a line to be drawn somewhere. Ottawa will need to find a way that allows people to grow their own in (very) small amounts, while protecting neighbours from side effects. You don't have the right to put anything like an industrial operation into a residential neighbourhood. This is going to have to be regulated – federally, provincially or municipally.

Some legal-pot jurisdictions allow home growing [...]. Others don't. As is too often the case with cannabis policy in this country, the legal picture is muddled. More clarity should come Wednesday after a Federal Court judge rules in a British Columbia case involving medicinal marijuana growers.

But what is clear once again is that legal pot means highly regulated pot, and not a free-for-all. The way Canada ultimately proceeds on the home-grown front will reverberate in the other countries reviewing their drug policies. This merely reinforces the point that it's important for Ottawa to get this right.

# Kenya's Mobile Generation Accesses Loans Through Phones

VOA News – February 18, 2016 – Lenny Ruvaga

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Samuel Kinuthia, a chef in Nairobi, begins his workday by preparing ingredients for the day's special.

He has been a chef for the last 18 years and started his own catering business last year to supplement his regular income.

Kinuthia got the loan to start his business through Branch, a microlender that provides financial services including loans to Kenya residents via their mobile phones.

Branch, with its comparatively affordable interest rates, has been a boon for Kinuthia's business.

"Catering equipment is quite expensive and I have been trying to acquire a few items here and there," Kinuthia said. "But Branch has been with me all along the way. And it's also less of a hassle because at 8 to 9% on a 42-day loan, is quite easy to maintain and quite friendly, and then the repayment plan — you can pay in small amounts even before the scheduled payment dates."

Introduced in 2015 by Matt Flannery, Branch is a microfinance institution that has been billed as a bank in your pocket. The app can be accessed on Google Play and on Facebook.

For a six-month repayment period, clients can apply for loans from as little as \$10 to a maximum of \$500. And the interest rates are as low as 5% in a country where banks charge as much as 26%.

There are three other major companies targeting the microloan market: M-Shwari, M-Co-op Cash and KCB M-Pesa, all of them linked to large commercial banks.

"We don't necessarily see ourselves directly competing with them. We don't think this is a winner-takes-all market," said Andrew Huelsenbeck, Branch Country Director. "We are very excited to be working alongside them, and I think we are all working toward the same goal here."

And for Kinuthia, that goal is using advancements in technology to make it easier to expand his business.

# Parliament should allow doctors to prescribe cannabis

Though in many US states this proved to be a prelude for broader legalisation, it should be considered on its own merits

Editorial – @IndyVoices – 11 February 2016

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Those responsible for the Government's drug policies could not be accused of any exaggerated deference to the world of scientific papers, double-blind trials and laboratory-bound research. The Psychoactive Substances Bill – which outlaws anything likely to alter a user's mindset – was described in the *New Scientist* as one of the "stupidest, most dangerous and unscientific pieces of legislation ever conceived". It demonstrates Parliament moving in the opposite direction to the tonnage of evidence showing that draconian approaches to recreational drug use have failed.

Where campaigners may find the forces of political suspicion less monolithic is in the use of cannabis for medical purposes. Though in many US states this proved to be a prelude for broader legalisation, it should be considered on its own merits, and not merely as the thin end of the wedge. Two recent scientific surveys, considering more than 100 randomised, placebo-controlled trials, showed that marijuana proved useful in the treatment of multiple sclerosis, glaucoma, anorexia, Lou Gehrig's disease and epilepsy. It can reduce chronic pain levels by 30 per cent. To withhold a chemical that can benefit patients on the basis that it may be used recreationally is neither just nor logically consistent: morphine can be administered on the NHS in cases of extreme pain; why not allow cannabis to be used where the pain level may be lower but exposure to it has often lasted far longer?

On Wednesday the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Drug Law Reform launched an inquiry into medical cannabis. Thursday brings the launch of "End our Pain", a campaign which calls for doctors to be allowed to prescribe cannabis. The APPG could reasonably cut to the chase and join in. Criminalising people who seek to reduce pain and suffering with cannabis is illogical, inhumane and thoroughly unscientific.

# Beyond the Emissions Test at VW

The New York Times Editorial Board – FEB. 16, 2016

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Volkswagen is rarely out of the news these days, but the stories hardly paint a coherent picture. One report says VW is planning to offer “generous” compensation to American owners of VW cars with software designed to cheat on emissions tests. Yet another says that the trickery may not have been illegal in Europe, where auto manufacturers can apparently determine engine settings for pollution testing, making sure their test cars will pass even if the cars on the road never would. Does that mean the scandal is all about testing standards?

No, it does not. Though European regulators are notoriously more lax in their testing and have long had an accommodating relationship with the auto industry, the salient point is that Volkswagen and other major auto producers are well aware that the nitrogen oxides exhausted by diesel engines lead to respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses, smog and acid rain, and cause premature deaths — in Europe as in America — and have deceived the public about controlling them. That is what the scandal is all about.

Volkswagen, which has considerable experience with diesel engines and, until the scandal, had ambitions to be the world’s largest auto producer, should have been the leader in clean diesel — and indeed that’s what it claimed to be in its loud “Clean Diesel” advertising campaign. Yet even now, VW — and quite possibly other automakers — seems unable to understand that from the public’s point of view, the problem was not so much cheating on tests as concealing the threat that its cars posed to the health of the public.

[...] As long as VW and other car manufacturers see emissions testing, in the United States or in Europe, as a purely technical hurdle to be managed through heavy lobbying, cagey engineering, deft public relations and liberal payouts, the real problem will not be solved.

# University technical colleges are transforming pupils' lives

Editorial - @IndyVoices – 4 February 2016

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A minister's record is often judged by the achievements their government shouts loudest about, while quiet but brilliant ideas go unnoticed. So it has been with the creation of university technical colleges – schools which offer vocational training in a range of professions such as engineering, healthcare, construction and business, alongside traditional GCSEs, and link their pupils to both apprenticeships and employment opportunities.

The colleges, which take pupils from the age of 14 to 19, were the idea of the former Education Secretary Lord Baker. There are already 39 UTCs up and running, with another 20 in the pipeline.

We report on 5 February on the latest success: a college in West Bromwich where young students will – alongside their core subjects of English, maths and science – be trained in the particular skills that are in demand in the health service, including radiography and dental nursing. It's a savvy move, considering that the NHS is now the fifth-largest employer globally. Figures show that employers are happy with former UTC pupils' work: 99% of those who left at the age of 16 last summer were in education, training or employment, along with 97% of those who left at the age of 18 – far higher than the state sector average.

Critics warn that asking a child to specialise at the age of 14 is far too early in their development, and there may be some reasons for caution given that other Western nations such as the US do not allow specialisation in higher education, and employment is becoming more interdisciplinary. Nevertheless, a growing gap between the roles that exist in our economy and the skills that young people leave education with does exist; any attempt to reduce that must be welcomed.

Without the Baker Dearing Trust, the idea could have hit the buffers. As it is, these colleges are changing young people's lives. And Lord Baker should be celebrated for that.

# Female athletes flying high

**It's a no brainer. They deserve equal treatment and have become strong role models for a new generation of Australians**

**Sydney morning Herald – February 5, 2016**

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Federal Sports Minister Sussan Ley knows a bit about flying: she's held a pilot's licence since the age of 20 and still flies around her huge electorate of Farrer. No surprise, then, that she was outraged in 2012 when Australia's men's basketball team the Boomers flew business class to the London Olympics while the more successful female team, the Opals, had to fly economy.

The public anger was palpable. That sort of disparity in treatment would never be accepted in any other workforce. So when former New South Wales premier Kristina Keneally took over at Basketball Australia, she ensured men and women players received equal travel and accommodation conditions.

This week Ms Ley went further. She will tie \$130 million in taxpayer funding from the Australian Sports Commission to equal treatment of male and female athletes by sporting organisations.

It's a no-brainer. As Ms Ley says, female athletes have become strong role models for a new generation of Australians. While women feature in only 7% of sports coverage on TV, the proportion is rightly increasing. What's more, female teams have topped the world when their male counterparts have struggled.

But sometimes these issues are complex. Ms Keneally has slammed the Australian Olympic Committee for forcing sporting bodies to fly with sponsor Qantas to the 2016 Rio Games. The AOC only subsidises enough for the economy fare and only books athletes on Qantas, when cheaper business class fares are available elsewhere. As such, Ms Keneally says, many elite Australian athletes will have to fly Qantas economy when their administrators could upgrade them to business if the rules were changed and they could shop around.

It's an issue Ms Ley needs to address as well if she is serious about all female athletes getting the conditions they deserve.

# London's new Monet exhibition: the glory of the garden

**It's hard to say whether Monet was a painter who gardened or a gardener who painted, but he was a pivotal figure in both arts**

**Editorial – The Guardian – 26 January 2016**

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Was Claude Monet a painter who gardened? Or a gardener who painted? Visitors to the Royal Academy's exhibition *Painting the Modern Garden*, in which Monet is the dominant presence, may find the difference as tricky to resolve as the horticultural details of the blooms conjured by his brushwork.

What is crystal clear, however, is that this exhibition ought to be unusually irresistible in a nation in which eight out of 10 households have some sort of garden and where Monet reproductions adorn thousands of walls. For Monet was not just a master painter of flowers but a painter from and of the age when gardening was emerging, in part as a reaction to industrial-era living, as an emblematic leisure activity and symbol.

The colourful dahlias and chrysanthemums that adorn the canvases at the Royal Academy were often newly developed varieties in Monet's lifetime, their price and allure a reflection of burgeoning European trade links with Asia. And while gardens were expressions of the new status of the leisured class who are occasionally glimpsed in the paintings, they appealed to wider aspiration too.

In the early 1900s, just as Monet was buying the water-lilies that produced the triptych of late period paintings at the climax of the new exhibition, Ebenezer Howard was promoting the garden city movement. The necessity of art and of gardens are twin threads that are woven together through our lives, exactly as they are in this exhibition.

# Arming the police isn't a magic bullet solution to terrorism

Telegraph View – 15 Jan 2016

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Yesterday's horrific attacks in Jakarta serve as a reminder of the ambitions and reach of radical Islamists. The killers used suicide bombs and pistols, relatively primitive weaponry, to target a densely populated area. The same could happen in Britain. The UK has to be prepared for the worst. To that end, the Metropolitan Police is going to train 600 extra armed officers, and armed patrols will more than double.

Britain has never been very comfortable with the sight of policemen carrying guns; it undermines the traditional image of the friendly local bobby and can, of course, generate public safety concerns of its own. Chris Phillips, former head of the National Counter Terrorism Security Office, has warned: "There will be mistakes," especially in high-stress situations similar to the attack on the Bataclan theatre in Paris. Nevertheless, an armed response remains the most effective way of dealing with an assailant who cannot be negotiated with.

Of course, training more firearm officers is only one small element of Britain's anti-terror strategy, and is far from a perfect solution. The security forces have to keep a close eye on the movements of likely suspects, and black markets in weaponry need to be shut down. The ease of access to guns in Europe facilitated the outrages that occurred in Paris last year. And, sadly, the ubiquitous presence of armed French police did not prevent those attacks. Perhaps more important than firepower is speed – arriving on the scene fast enough, and in sufficient force, to halt a terrorist assault. Hopefully, the knowledge that the state is ready and able to stop a massacre before it happens will discourage the extremists from even trying.

# Screen Actors Guild Awards Take on Diversity Issue

VOA News – January 31, 2016

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"This is what we talk about when we talk about diversity. Different race, color, creed, sexual orientation," said Laura Prepon of the television show *Orange Is The New Black* as she motioned to her fellow cast members who won the ensemble prize Saturday at the Screen Actors Guild Awards.

Diversity was the running theme of the night, from the producers of the show and from the remarks of the actors.

Diversity has become the topic of much conversation in the entertainment industry following the announcement of the Oscar nominations that for a second year straight failed to go to any people of color.

But the SAG Awards include television shows and movies, while the Oscar categories are focused only on films.

Idris Elba won two awards Saturday, one for supporting actor in the Netflix film *Beasts of No Nation* and his lead performance in the BBC miniseries *Luther*.

"Ladies and gentleman, welcome to diverse TV," Elba said on his third trip to the stage as a presenter.

In *Addison to Elba*, Queen Latifah won an award for her portrayal of blues singer Bessie Smith on HBO, Viola Davis won for her work on the ABC-TV show *How to Get Away with Murder* and actress Uzo Aduba won for *Orange Is The New Black*.

The newspaper drama *Spotlight* won the best picture prize.

Leonardo DiCaprio took home the best film actor award for his outdoor-adventure in *The Revenant*, while Brie Larson won the top actress prize for her role as a mother in *Room*.

Best supporting actress went to Alicia Vikander for *The Danish Girl*. Her mother is an actress and Vikander said she watched her mother act. "I learned then and I know still that acting is not in a bubble, that magic only happens between acting companions."

# Two Top Black Stars to Boycott Oscars

VOA News – January 18, 2016

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Two prominent African-American entertainers say they are boycotting this year's Oscar ceremonies because the 20 nominees for acting awards are all white.

Director Spike Lee wrote an open letter to the Academy Award board of governors Monday, asking, "How is it possible for the second consecutive year all 20 contenders under the actor category are white? 40 white actors in 2 years and no 'flava' (an urban term for things that are different from the ordinary) at all. Can't we act?"

Lee also criticized the lack of minorities in studio executive offices, where he says the decisions on what movies and television shows will be produced are made.

Black actress Jada Pinkett Smith also announced her intention to boycott the Oscars, which are the film industry's top honors. She is the wife of actor Will Smith, whose critically lauded performance in the film *Concussion* failed to result in an acting nomination.

"Begging for acknowledgment, or even asking, diminishes dignity and diminishes power. And we are a dignified people and we are powerful," Pinkett Smith said.

Academy President Cheryl Boone Isaacs said in a statement late Monday the organization is taking steps to alter its membership and will review its recruitment in the coming weeks to bring "much-needed diversity" in the future.

"I am both heartbroken and frustrated about the lack of inclusion," she said. "This is a difficult but important conversation, and it's time for big changes."

The Academy has hired black comedian Chris Rock to host and black producer Reginald Hudlin to co-produce this year's Oscars show.

# Many of us share Eddie Redmayne's love-hate relationship with smartphones

Editorial - @IndyVoices –12 January 2016

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Eddie Redmayne is not the first smartphone user to wonder whether it is the device that owns him, and not the other way around. He reports behaviours many will recognise: reaching for the phone first thing in the morning, parting sorely from it late at night. It is at this juncture that one starts to dream of a simpler way of life, one before the advent of phones that can watch your weight, tell you the weather and organise your love life, all while “helping” you to work out of the office, and time the cooking of a beef stroganoff ready meal.

Most indulge in such Edenic visions of the early 2000s only for a moment, before grasping anxiously for their phone, and all its pleasant distractions. Mr Redmayne went a step further: he swapped his smartphone for an analogue handset, attempting, so he says, to live more “in the moment”.

The actor, who missed out on a Golden Globe for his role in *The Danish Girl*, deserves recognition for setting himself up as a guinea pig in this way.

And we could all learn from the conclusions of his trial. Mr Redmayne found that he had to spend hours more on his laptop, doing the same amount of work online, only at half the convenience, and often late at night. His wife was not so fond of that state of affairs, either. Nearly all of us have faced smartphone-related wrinkles in our relationships.

But the simple truth is smartphones have made modern life richer, allowing those who possess one to access vast collections of music, and an inconceivable amount of information, at the brush of a finger. There ought to be some ground rules: never browse while at a table with another human being, for one. But ditching them altogether is far more trouble than it's worth. Mr Redmayne has now readopted his iPhone.

# Low-income kids were given a gift for their parents and for themselves, but could only keep one

Colby Itkowitz – The Washington Post – December 18, 2015

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A few dozen low-income children in Atlanta were asked recently to make a difficult choice: They could have the Christmas present of their dreams. Or they could give a gift of their choosing to a parent.

These kids, who ranged from 6 to 11 years old, belong to the Boys and Girls Club of Metro Atlanta, where 83% are from poor families. Some can't afford to put up a Christmas tree at home.

Their wishes for themselves ranged from a computer to an Xbox 360 to a Barbie house. When asked what they thought their parents would want, one little boy guessed a ring because "she's never really had a ring." Another said a television. The next said a watch.

Then the kids were given their dream gift. And the gift for their parents. With both gifts sitting in front of them, the kids were told they could only pick one.

In the end, they all chose to sacrifice what they wanted to make their parent happy.

Adrienne Leon, the Boys and Girls Club of Metro Atlanta marketing specialist, said the parents were blown away that their kids chose to give to them and were so attuned to what they would want and enjoy.

The video is a project of UP TV, a television channel dedicated to uplifting programming. The network has an "uplift someone" campaign, and the theme this year is "give it up," to encourage people to think about what they'd be willing to give up to help another.

Wendy McCoy, UP TV senior vice president of marketing, said the organizers were amazed at the children's selflessness. [...] "It's really driving home the true meaning of Christmas that it's better to give than receive."

And in that spirit, the network ultimately let the kids keep both gifts.

# Apple Criticizes British Plans to Expand Online Surveillance

Reuters – December 22, 2015

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Apple has raised concerns about British plans to give security agencies extra online surveillance powers, saying a planned law could weaken the security of personal data for millions of people.

Britain unveiled proposals for sweeping new powers last month, including the right to find out which websites people visit, that it said were needed to keep the country safe from criminals, fraudsters and militants.

Critics say the Investigatory Powers Bill gives British spies powers beyond those available in other Western countries, including the United States, and it is an assault on freedoms.

Apple said it was opposed to proposals in the bill that would weaken encryption, such as the explicit obligation on service providers to help intercept data and hack suspects' devices.

The California-based company, which uses end-to-end encryption on its FaceTime and iMessage services, said the best way to protect against increasingly sophisticated hacking schemes and cyber attacks was by putting into place increasingly stronger — not weaker — encryption.

"We believe it is wrong to weaken security for hundreds of millions of law-abiding customers so that it will also be weaker for the very few who pose a threat," the iPhone maker said. "In this rapidly evolving cyber-threat environment, companies should remain free to implement strong encryption to protect customers."

As well as being able to carry out bulk interception of communications data, the bill would also allow the security services to perform "equipment interference," whereby spies take over computers or smartphones to access their data.

In its submission to the draft bill, Apple criticized any such requirement to create "backdoors" and intercept capabilities that could weaken the protections built into Apple products.

[...] Since the extent of U.S. and British surveillance was laid bare in media reports based on documents stolen by Edward Snowden, Western governments have debated the balance between protecting privacy and countering the threat from Islamist militants.

# Don't blame the innocent for terror attacks: Editorial

Toronto Star – Nov 16 2015

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A fire deliberately set in a Peterborough mosque over the weekend underscores the potential for a backlash against law-abiding Muslims following the horrific attacks in Paris. But what followed also illustrates the fundamental decency of most people — regardless of religious faith.

Support has surged for the Kawartha Muslim Religious Association after a blaze at Masjid Al-Salaam, the only mosque in the area, caused an estimated \$80,000 in damage on Saturday night. The building was empty and no one was hurt, but less than an hour before flames and smoke erupted about 70 people were in the mosque to celebrate the birth of a baby.

Political leaders at Queen's Park, and people at every level of society, have spoken out against this shameful attack. A crowd-funding campaign raised more than enough money on Monday to fix the mosque. And several church groups have reportedly offered space for Peterborough's Muslims to worship until repairs can be made. That's a heartening response.

Police appear to be treating the arson with due seriousness and are investigating it as a hate crime. They couldn't confirm a specific link to the attacks in Paris on Friday in which Islamic State extremists killed more than 130 people. But, coming a just a day after that carnage, it's entirely understandable to suspect a connection.

Canadians, and everyone around the world, should guard against blaming the vast majority of Muslims leading law-abiding lives for the actions of a radical and misguided few. A backlash fuelled by mistrust and anger would only cause more hurt to innocent people.

[...] Condemning all Muslims for the misdeeds of a small minority of terrorists makes no more sense than blaming all Canadians for the fire in Peterborough.

Hate and bigotry of every form must be resisted. This country is never stronger than when we pull together against injustice.

# Pesticide rules should be overhauled after damning study

Editorial - @IndyVoices – 18 November 2015

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There comes a time when emerging scientific evidence builds a strong enough case to warrant a change in policy. We may have reached that point now with the controversial group of pesticides known as neonicotinoids – or “neonics” – which have been repeatedly linked, in experiment after experiment, with deleterious impacts on bees, bumblebees and other pollinating insects which collectively ensure the production of some £230bn-worth of crops worldwide.

The Government’s view on neonics has been that of the traditional fence-sitter. There is no evidence, it says, that these substances are any more harmful than other pesticides and, until such evidence is found, the companies that sell them should be allowed to do so. Indeed, this summer the Government decided to lift an EU-wide moratorium on neonics, at least temporarily in certain parts of the country, after pressure from the National Farmers Union to protect England’s oilseed rape crop.

Now, yet another study published in a leading peer-reviewed journal by independent university scientists has shown that neonicotinoids may not be as benign as the pesticide’s manufacturers insist. This time, the researchers demonstrated that bumblebees exposed to “field-realistic” levels of the chemicals become far less capable when it comes to pollinating apple trees.

This is the first study to show the impact on the pollinating ability of bumblebees. Other studies have demonstrated “sublethal effects” on the foraging behaviour, reproductive success and homing ability of bees.

Of course farmers need to protect their crops against damaging insect pests. But there comes a time when they need to ask whether or not the pesticide they are using is unwittingly having a negative impact on overall crop production. What is the point of protecting a fruit crop with neonics if the same pesticide is hampering the ability of bees to pollinate the trees? It is time for the Government to think again about which side of the fence it wants to stand on.

# Wolves, lynx and wild boar 'should be reintroduced to British forests'

Victoria Richards – The Independent – 15 July 2015

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Wild animals including wolves, lynx and wild boar could be reintroduced to British forests as part of a campaign to restore species hunted to extinction.

Plans put together by Rewilding Britain would see the animals roaming Scotland and other parts of the UK in an attempt to allow “native forests to regenerate, while giving the seas a chance to recover from industrial fishing”.

Supporters of the scheme argue that Britain should follow in the footsteps of other European countries, which are already home to large predators. They also maintain that the move would improve biodiversity.

Lynx, which eat deer, rabbits and hares among other animals but are not considered a risk to people, have not been seen in Britain for 1,300 years. [...]

But the proposals have drawn criticism from farmers' leaders - who say that the countryside has already experienced problems after the reintroduction of other species, such as beavers and sea eagles. They say that dams built by beavers have increased erosion and the risk of flooding in neighbouring fields, and that sea eagles, also known as white tailed eagles, kill lambs.

The Scottish government is now trying to decide whether the beavers - which were put in place in Argyll as part of a scientific study - should stay.

National Farmers' Union Scotland said politicians and Scottish Natural Heritage should “show stronger leadership” on the issue of rewilding.

Vice President Andrew McCornick said: “Our countryside provides food, forestry, tourism, renewables, field sports and environmental goods. Recent history has taught us any species introduction, whether legal or illegal, can have an impact on the many benefits that the Scottish countryside currently delivers.”

The Scottish government said they intend to consider the issues carefully - but said there are currently “no plans” to reintroduce top predators such as lynx or wolves.

# Sugar: cut it out

Editorial – The Guardian –15 July 2015

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As the nation digests its breakfast of sweetened cereals and bread on Thursday, the UK's official nutrition advisers, the scientific advisory committee on nutrition, will publish a new recommended daily limit for sugar. They are expected to confirm a provisional suggestion that people should halve their daily calories from sugar from 10% to 5%. If adopted, a small 45g bar of our favourite milk chocolate would account for more than half the recommended daily allowance. It will also mark official recognition of growing global concern about the impact of sugar on the widening obesity epidemic.

This week has provided more shocking evidence of the toll of the nation's disastrous eating habits: first, the British Medical Association reported that 26,000 children had to have rotten teeth removed in hospital last year. Another report calculated that 135 people a week are having body parts amputated because of diabetes. This is an unacceptable cost, both for the patients and for the NHS. It is time for the government to take meaningful action. There is a long list of policies proven to work in trials or other countries. The workability of a general sugar tax is open to question, but doctors believe that taxing sugary drinks could work. Food companies could be obliged to improve food labelling, including making it clear that sugar substitutes can be just as damaging. Supermarkets should ban sweets and chocolate at checkouts and introduce tighter restrictions on two-for-one offers. Supersized portions should be shrunk. Advertising needs more regulating. What is missing is not the detail but the will. Each one of these ideas means telling both voters and powerful corporations what to do.

Under the coalition, public health went backwards. Nutritional standards in schools were weakened, the once-effective Food Standards Agency was hollowed out and its funding cut. But [...] if the government started to intervene on sugar in a meaningful way it could begin to build the evidence and public support.

# 'No Fishing' at the North Pole

By THE NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD – JULY 21, 2015

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Fishing at the North Pole may seem ludicrous to a world raised on the notion of the top of the world as a deep-frozen wasteland, but at the rate the Arctic Ocean is melting it may not be long before fishing trawlers can operate in waters that have been inaccessible for more than 800,000 years.

So it was a good idea for the five nations that have territorial claims around the Arctic Ocean — the United States, Canada, Russia, Norway and Denmark — to put a “No Fishing” sign on the high seas portion of the central Arctic until full scientific studies have been conducted.

The declaration to prevent unregulated fishing in the central Arctic acknowledged that fishing beyond the 200-mile exclusive economic zone of the coastal states is not likely to start in the near future. But it is not too early to take precautions: The annual “State of the Climate” report by the American Meteorological Society disclosed the highest average sea surface temperatures on record last year, with especially high temperatures in the Northern Pacific.

It’s a good idea, too, because the agreement by the five nations signed in Oslo last Thursday provides a template for the kind of cooperation that is critical as the melting ice opens vast new commercial possibilities, including shipping lanes and access to deposits of oil, gas and minerals.

The fishing moratorium does not prevent the five nations from fishing in their own territorial waters (the United States has banned commercial fishing in its exclusive economic zone off Alaska’s North Slope since 2009), nor is it binding on other countries, Asian or European, that are watching the great northern thaw with interest. But the declaration explicitly invites other countries to join in the process of developing fishing regulations when commercial fishing becomes possible in the central Arctic Ocean. [...]

# High cost, low benefit: Defra's gamble with a pesticide that appears to kill bees

Editorial – The Independent – 24 July 2015

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Crude as it may be, perhaps the best way to assess whether neonicotinoids should be used as pesticides is to examine the upside and the downside.

The upside of these particular chemicals is that they are very effective; they boost crop yields, and thus keep the price of food and biofuels low. That is a clear benefit to the public, both here and abroad, and an increasingly valuable one as pressures on agricultural land intensify. They also make gardens look prettier, arguably, by reducing predation on plants.

The potential downside, however, is much more significant. Bees, like many other creatures, are much taken for granted, but life on planet Earth – including humanity – would become extremely difficult to sustain without their role in pollinating crops and food sources.

The fact that the EU and other jurisdictions have changed the rules on the use of neonicotinoids so often, and that there is still so much disagreement about their side-effects, illustrates that there is no absolute scientific conclusion on the risks from which to begin. The prospect of that scientific clarity being achieved is even more remote now that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) refuses to publish the minutes of the meetings of its Expert Committee on Pesticides, and other pieces of evidence that could prove useful.

Even if there were agreement among impartial experts, consensual science has been wrong about other important interventions in the world of nature in the past. And, in the end, such judgements are necessarily political; we live in a democracy, not a technocracy.

[...] The benefits of these pesticides are relatively modest. Yet the potential loss from a devastating and irreparable reduction in the bee population – already possibly threatened by disease – is truly “life changing” for humanity – for the worse. Neonics, as they have become known, are simply not worth it.

# Climate change

Observer editorial – 4 October 2015

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Mark Carney calls it the Tragedy of the Horizon: the chronic inability of Britain's leaders, whether in business or politics, to tackle challenges that extend more than a few years ahead. There are plenty of examples, from the shameful failure to build enough homes to the indecision about whether, and where, to add to airport capacity. But climate change is the ultimate example: it presents an existential threat to the status quo, yet it barely features in the day-to-day calculations of many business and policymakers. It's too big, too scary and, most of all, too distant, to start planning for.

The governor of the Bank of England was castigated by some last week for offering doom-laden prognostications about global warming's potential impact, straying into territory more commonly occupied by the Green party than financial technocrats. Some in the City believe the spirit of buccaneering free enterprise and the inexorable advance of innovation will eventually meet the challenges of climate change head on, as evidence mounts of its potential costs. Yet as Carney pointed out, threats often take financial markets by surprise, even when they should have been foreseeable. Volkswagen's flagrant fiddling of vehicle emissions tests surely scotches the idea that big business will get to grips with the problem of its own accord.

Carney is correct that if climate change catches investors unawares it could present a major threat to financial stability and he should be commended for raising the issue. His relatively modest starting point – a climate disclosure task force, to determine how companies should make public their potential vulnerability to climate change – is a sensible one, but it may not go far enough.

If he is right that what is required to equip Britain for the future is a "technological revolution", the government may have to step in and marshal the financial and technological resources necessary [...]. Making much more information available, as he suggests, must only be the beginning.

# The future of the Olympics

Observer editorial – 2 August 2015

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On Friday, Beijing was awarded the 2022 Winter Olympics, making it the first host city to put on both the summer and the winter games. No matter that there will be no natural snow – the games will instead rely on machines churning out thousands of artificial tonnes. It's hard to know what's more farcical: this, or Fifa's decision to award the 2022 World Cup to the desert state of Qatar, which promised to install air conditioning in open-air stadiums.

That the IOC was faced with a decision between just two contender cities in countries that both have a poor track record on human rights – Beijing, and Kazakhstan's Almaty – highlights a serious problem for the future of the Olympics. Originally, there had been many more potential cities in the mix: Krakow, Stockholm, St Moritz, Munich and Oslo. One by one, they all withdrew citing concerns about cost and a lack of popular support. Just last week, Boston also withdrew its bid to host the 2024 summer games. It is becoming ever more difficult for democratic nations to build a popular mandate to host the games. They have become hugely expensive, flamboyant affairs that often fail to deliver on promised legacies. [...]

Sochi 2014, with its price tag of \$51bn, may represent the depressing future of the Olympics. Costs spiralled as contractors jacked up prices. Putin introduced new anti-gay legislation. The IOC will increasingly face decisions between states with terrible human rights records, whose leaders have no need to secure a democratic mandate and are happy to spend ludicrous amounts of money.

It doesn't have to be like this. When Los Angeles hosted the Olympics in 1984, it used existing venues, had a modest budget and was the first games in Olympic history to make a profit. The IOC urgently needs to restore the original values of Olympic sport to its selection process

# Cultural Destruction as a War Crime

**The New York Times Editorial Board – Oct. 8, 2015**

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The International Criminal Court began legal proceedings last week against Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, a radical Islamist accused of directing the destruction of 10 religious sites in Timbuktu, Mali. The destruction occurred in 2012 when Ansar Dine, a group linked to Al Qaeda, overran Timbuktu and tried to impose its version of an Islamic regime. The group was ousted from Mali in 2013 when French forces intervened.

This is the first time the International Criminal Court will examine the destruction of religious sites as a war crime. The court's action is important as it comes as the Islamic State continues its destruction of ancient monuments in Syria. On Sunday that group blew up the Arch of Triumph in the 2,000-year-old Roman city of Palmyra, despite international protests over its destruction of the ancient Temple of Baal at the same site in August.

The case against Mr. Mahdi in the International Criminal Court strengthens hope that members of the Islamic State will, one day, also face justice for their cultural and religious crimes. The head of Unesco, Irina Bokova, hailed the case for breaking "new ground for the protection of humanity's shared cultural heritage and values."

Ansar Dine, like the Islamic State, sought nothing less than the obliteration of an entire culture with the destruction of its practices and religious beliefs. Prosecution for such cultural crimes, however, must proceed in tandem with accountability for all war crimes and crimes against humanity. In Mali, Ansar Dine committed rape, torture, abduction and forced marriages. Clémence Bectarte, a lawyer for a group of victims in Timbuktu, laments that these crimes are not mentioned in the charges the International Criminal Court has brought against Mr. Mahdi.

[...] Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court should redouble efforts to identify and prosecute perpetrators of crimes against Mali's people, along with the destruction of their religious heritage.

# The egg question: Should scientists alter DNA of human embryos?

Editorial – The Independent – 18 September 2015

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“Designer babies” is a phrase with Orwellian overtones – test-tube children made to order courtesy of the wonders of modern genetics. It’s a dream to some, a nightmare to others. The reality, of course, is more complicated and subtle. At present we have no idea how to safely enhance the human genome of IVF embryos to improve things like intelligence or athletic ability – even if this were possible or desirable.

But the day may soon come when we have to consider whether genetic changes to the chromosomes of IVF embryos should be allowed for medical purposes, such as avoiding inherited disorders. Currently, this “germline gene therapy”, as it is known, is illegal in the UK.

However, the UK’s IVF legislation was changed in 2008 to allow the genetic manipulation of human embryos for research purposes, if it is done under licence. As we report today, scientists have now applied for the first research licence to use a powerful gene-editing technique known as Crispr/Cas9 to alter the DNA of the chromosome of human embryos. This is a momentous decision. For the first time in the UK, regulatory authorities will have to consider whether to allow the genetic engineering of human IVF embryos – albeit for research purposes only and not for implantation into the womb, which remains illegal.

The technique will help scientists understand the basic biology of early human development, and more specifically answer questions about how the placenta forms and how it can sometimes fail to attach to the uterus – a cause of repeated miscarriages in some women.

But this research will inevitably open the discussion on whether we should, at some point, allow scientists to genetically modify IVF embryos for eliminating inherited disorders or creating resistance to disease. This is not about designer babies; it is an exciting new horizon for medicine.

# Too young for school? An education is about more than getting into university

Editorial – The Independent – 10 September 2015

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The evidence that babies born in the summer months, and who start their school careers up to nine months earlier than their peers, lag behind academically is now uncontroversial. Differences in achievement between older and younger pupils in the same school year, though peaking in the earliest years, persist through to the teens. Relative to children born in September, children born in August are reportedly two percentage points less likely to go to university at the age of 18 or 19.

Under pressure from the parents of summer babies, who worry whether their child is ready to start school just weeks after their fourth birthday, the Government now proposes allowing parents of children born between April and August to delay entrance through the school gates by a whole year if desired. [...]

Yet this idea appears to be based on research findings considered in isolation. Put into practice, it requires schools and their teachers meaningfully to plan lessons for a classroom of new pupils aged anywhere between four years, two weeks and five years, six months; any gap in abilities will be exaggerated, not ameliorated.

Schooling is designed not only to educate but to socialise. The ministers behind this latest initiative appear to have forgotten that children from poorer households on average arrive in school already trailing their wealthier classmates. If those children were kept out of school for an extra year, how much harder it might become to address those inequalities. And as children grow older, the class outliers by age will feel increasingly out of step among their contemporaries [...].

Schools were not built as factories to produce university graduates, nor should they be redesigned to meet that function. Even from the first hours inside the gates, schools do more than teach the three Rs, but, once again, that fact risks being ignored in the race to manage statistics.

# Magical Thinking on Migrants

Editorial – The New York Times - MAY 10, 2015

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Libya's descent into lawlessness since the toppling of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi in 2011 has spawned a terrible enterprise: smuggling people from Africa and the Middle East across the Mediterranean to Europe. In response, at Europe's urging, the United Nations Security Council is going to be asked to consider a draft resolution authorizing military intervention in Libya against the smugglers.

Military intervention would be a grave mistake. It could sabotage negotiations for a power-sharing deal between Libya's warring factions, thus killing chances of a political solution to the chaos in Libya. It is, in fact, a cynical strategy, born of Europe's panic over a tide of foreign migrants. Smugglers have lured hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, Eritreans and others fleeing conflict and misery, while selling a pack of lies to sub-Saharan Africans about the wonderful opportunities that await them in Europe.

So far this year, more than 1,800 migrants have died trying to cross the Mediterranean. On April 23, the European Union called an emergency meeting after some 700 migrants perished in a single incident. After the meeting, Dimitris Avramopoulos, the European Union's top migration official, announced: "Europe is declaring war on smugglers." As part of that war, Europe says it wants to seize or even sink smugglers' empty boats.

Destroying all the boats would condemn migrants to exile. A far better (and obvious) way to put the smugglers out of business is to make migration from Libya to Europe safe and legal. On Monday, the European foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, is scheduled to discuss the draft resolution for military intervention in Libya at a meeting of the United Nations Security Council. The Security Council should tell her that no military intervention is needed — just compassion and common sense.

# Study: More Trees Improve Health

Rosanne Skirble – Voice of America – July 9, 2015

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Trees clean the air, provide shade, and reduce climate changing emissions. And, says environmental neuroscientist Marc Berman, they also improve the health of people who live near them.

"I'm very interested in how the physical environment affects the brain and behavior," says Berman, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Chicago.

His study of the effect of urban trees, published in the journal *Nature*, merged tree data and health surveys from 31,000 residents of Toronto, Canada.

"We found that, controlling for income and age and education, neighborhoods that had more trees on the street ... that was related to improved health in those neighborhoods."

## Monetary trees

Specifically, the study found that ten more street trees per city block was related to a one percent increase in people's health, as self-reported in the surveys. Berman says people in those blocks suffered less from hypertension and obesity compared with other neighborhoods with fewer trees.

"And that one percent increase in health perception seems pretty modest, but at least in our study to get that equivalent increase with money, you'd have to give every household in that city block \$10,000 and have them move to a neighborhood that is \$10,000 wealthier or make people seven years younger."

## Just plant them

Sounds pretty good, but could what works in Toronto work elsewhere? Berman says yes, it would, if you increase the number of trees on the street by ten.

While the study doesn't identify which mechanism triggers those benefits, it finds that initiatives to plant more trees can improve air quality, relieve stress and promote physical activity — all contributing factors to overall better health.

# Reforms to teacher training

Observer editorial – 5 July 2015

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[...] Mathematical logic and reason lie at the heart of some of humanity's greatest achievements. Without it, there would be no progress and no modernity.

Fitting, then, that Stephen Hawking will deliver the BBC's 2015 Reith lecture to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Einstein's theory of relativity. But as we tune in, we need to ask whether we're doing enough to nurture the talents of the scientists and mathematicians of the future. Not simply to produce the next Hawking, but because competence in the subject at school is one of the strongest predictors of life success. Yet in OECD global maths rankings, the UK comes just 26<sup>th</sup>.

In this context, the news that an increasing proportion of pupils is being taught maths by non-specialists is deeply worrying. For it is the quality of teaching that is the most important difference between a good and an average school. No teacher can be truly great without passion and the ability to explain and inspire. But expertise and deep understanding are also fundamental.

Einstein once commented: "If you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it." Its inverse is also true: to explain something to a six-year-old you must properly understand it yourself. The teaching of maths by non-specialists is a trend unfolding against a troubling backdrop: a general shortage within the profession and government reforms that have watered down teacher training and scrapped the need in state-funded schools for a teaching qualification.

Of course there are some teachers who are born brilliant, but for the majority, the ability to educate is a skill that needs nurturing. To reform Britain's training system based on the flawed premise that we have an abundance of naturally outstanding teachers put off by the need to train will do nothing to address shortages and will serve only to undermine the profession's status.

# The technology for self-driving cars is here – so let's use it

Editorial – The Independent - 7 July 2015

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As we continue to digest the wonder that is the driverless electric car, the experts now bring us a “platoon” of electric taxis, moving together in such perfect harmony that they can all but eliminate wind resistance and cut vehicle emissions. It should be ready by 2030, though no one has considered why a platoon of taxis is much use to anyone. Still, the principle seems sound enough.

The odd thing, perhaps, about the driverless electric car – and indeed taxi cab – is why it has so far not colonised our roads.

Google and Apple are, it seems, trying to bring us the first electric driverless vehicle, taking their imperial ambitions into the territory traditionally occupied by Ford, Toyota, Volkswagen and so many other traditional makers – which are also pushing ahead with their own technologies.

The technology is already out there, or much of it, in the most mundane family transport. Satnav, once confined to a few high-end vehicles and an expensive option, now comes “as standard”.

Move a little further up the automotive chain and you will find radar and adaptive cruise control. This means that your car can be left on a motorway, say, and will brake and accelerate its own way from A to B, within the speed limit.

All you need to do is to stay awake and steer. When you arrive at your destination, it will park itself. Blind-spot sensors are an especial help to protect cyclists. Linking all these systems is the way to create a driverless car. It needn't be powered by electricity, but if it is, then it potentially adds huge environmental benefits.

Many of us cannot wait for the time when those unable to drive will be able to hop into such a car, punch in an address and let the car take the strain while we find better things to do.

# A day for the rest: For many, Sunday is special because of its enforced boredom

Editorial – The Independent - 8 July 2015

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Usdaw or Asda? The Chancellor today takes the risky political step of launching a consultation period on changes to Sunday trading.

The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers – along with most of the churches – fear the threat to the “specialness” of Sunday, the biblical day of rest, and the work-life balance of retail workers. Shoppers, by contrast, usually want to be able to buy an iPad at 8pm on a Sunday, just as they can on a Wednesday.

It’s a generational thing. Older citizens can recall a time when Sunday was the most feared day of the week, and not only because the bulk of the population used to turn up at church or chapel to make themselves accountable to the Almighty.

Sunday was indeed special, in the sense that no shops were open, there was very little television, and there was very little else to (not) do. In parts of Wales, you couldn’t even pop into the pub. [...]

Yet it was never an immutable part of British life and sprang from the excesses of English puritanism – specifically the Sunday Observance Acts of 1627 and 1677 – and an accretion of such restrictions thereafter, not least the Retail Meat Dealers (Shops) Act of 1936 and the strange wonder that was the 1950 Shops Act. Under that law you could buy a pornographic book on a Sunday but not a Bible, unless that Bible had been bought from a bookstall at a designated airport or railway station.

In 1994, and after much angst, some of these regulations were swept away. But many remain, and they sit oddly in a multi-faith society, one that counts consumerism as a new religion.

Will George Osborne finally lift Oliver Cromwell’s shadow from the retail sector? We shall say a prayer for him.

# Plight of the bumblebee: Science offers a way to save this vital pollinator

Editorial – The Independent – 9 July 2015

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Pity the poor bumblebee. Its very name invokes the awkwardness of the aerodynamically challenged. Yet it is a highly successful pollinating insect and our pity should rather be directed at our own miserable if unwitting efforts to wipe it out, and with it a vital part of our food chain.

An impressive international study has convincingly demonstrated just how dire the life of the bumblebee has become over the past half century of rapidly rising global temperatures. Scientists have unequivocally linked increasing temperatures to the squeezing of the bumblebee habitat in a sort of “climate vice”.

What is most disturbing about this study of 67 bumblebee species living on two continents, Europe and North America, is that while the southern boundaries of many bees have been pushed further north, the northern boundaries have remained largely as they were, hence the vice-like grip on bumblebee populations.

For some inexplicable reason, our bumbling garden friends have not been willing or able to fly further north to expand their range as their southern habitats have shrunk. This has come as a surprise, even given the apparently limited flying ability of this key pollinator of economically important fruit and vegetable crops.

This has led some scientists to suggest a little help in the form of “assisted migration”, a relatively new concept in biology to help embattled species cope at least temporarily with encroaching climate change. It will involve moving some members of a species into new, cooler habitats further north of the normal home range.

Of course, the trouble with such a technological fix is that it is treating the symptom rather than the cause. All our experience with invasive species [...] suggests extreme caution with any such undertaking.

However, desperate times may require desperate remedies – especially as time appears to be fast running out for our bumbling, buzzing hairy friend.