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"Equally"
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There's no question that OpenAI's generative AI is now big business. It wasn't always planned to be this way.

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman published a blog post last Friday titled "Planning for AGI and be-yond." In this post, he declared that his company's Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)—human-level machine intelligence that is not close to existing and many doubt ever will—will benefit all of humanity and "has the potential to give everyone incredible new capabilities." Altman uses broad, idealistic language to argue that AI development should never be stopped and that the "future of humanity should be determined by humanity," referring to his own company.

- Chloe Xiang

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OPENAI IS CORPORATE, CLOSED-SOURCE, AND FOR-PROFIT

CHLOE XIANG

OpenAI is at the center of a chatbot arms race, with the public release of ChatGPT and a multi-billion-dollar Microsoft partnership spurring Google and Amazon to rush to implement AI in products. OpenAI has also partnered with Bain to bring machine learning to Coca-Cola's operations, with plans to expand to other corporate partners.

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This blog post and OpenAI's recent actions—all happening at the peak of the ChatGPT hype cycle—is a reminder of how much OpenAI's tone and mission have changed from its founding, when it was exclusively a nonprofit. While the firm has always looked toward a future where AGI exists, it was founded on commitments including not seeking profits and even freely sharing code it develops, which today are nowhere to be seen.

OpenAI was founded in 2015 as a nonprofit research organization by Altman, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and LinkedIn cofounder Reid Hoffman, among other tech leaders. In its founding statement, the company declared its commitment to research "to advance digital intelligence in the way that is most likely to benefit humanity as a whole, unconstrained by a need to generate financial return." The blog stated that "since our research is free from financial obligations, we can better focus on a positive human impact," and that all researchers would be encouraged to share "papers, blog posts, or code, and our patents (if any) will be shared with the world."

Now, eight years later, we are faced with a company that is neither transparent nor driven by positive human impact, but instead, as many critics including co-founder Musk have argued, is powered by speed and profit. And this company is unleashing technology that, while flawed, is still poised to increase some elements of workplace automation at the expense of human employees. Google, for example, has highlighted the efficiency gains from AI that autocompletes code, as it lays off thousands of workers.

When OpenAI first began, it was envisioned as doing basic AI research in an open way, with undetermined ends. Co-founder Greg Bockman told *The New Yorker,* "Our goal right now…is to do the best thing there is to do. It's a little vague." This resulted in a shift in direction in 2018 when the company looked to capital resources for some direction. "Our primary fiduciary duty is to humanity. We anticipate needing to marshal substantial resources to fulfill our mission," the company wrote in an updated charter in 2018.

By March 2019, OpenAI shed its non-profit status and set up a "capped profit" sector, in which the company could now receive investments and would provide investors with profit capped at 100 times their investment. The company's decision was likely a result of its desire to compete with Big Tech rivals like Google and ended up receiving a $1 billion investment shortly after from Microsoft. In the blog post announcing the formation of a for-profit company, OpenAI continued to use the same language we see today, declaring its mission to "ensure that artificial general intelligence (AGI) benefits all of humanity." As Motherboard wrote when the news was first announced, it's incredibly difficult to believe that venture capitalists can save humanity when their main goal is profit.

The company faced backlash during its announcement and subsequent release of its GPT-2 language model in 2019. At first, the company said it wouldn't be releasing the training model's source code due to "concerns about malicious applications of the technology." While this in part reflected the company's commitment to developing beneficial AI, it was also not very "open." Critics wondered why the company would announce a tool only to withhold it, deeming it a publicity stunt. Three months later, the company released the model on the open-source coding platform GitHub, saying that this action was "a key foundation of responsible publication in AI, particularly in the context of powerful generative models."

According to investigative reporter Karen Hao, who spent three days at the company in 2020, OpenAI's internal culture began to reflect less on the careful, research-driven AI development process, and more on getting ahead, leading to accusations of fueling the "AI hype cycle." Employees were now being instructed to keep quiet about their work and embody the new company charter.

"There is a misalignment between what the company publicly espouses and how it operates behind closed doors. Over time, it has allowed a fierce competitiveness and mounting pressure for ever more funding to erode its founding ideals of transparency, openness, and collaboration," Hao wrote.

To OpenAI, though, the GPT-2 rollout was a success and a stepping-stone toward where the company is now. "I think that is definitely part of the success-story framing," Miles Brundage, the current Head of Policy Research, said during a meeting discussing GPT-2, Hao reported. "The lead of this section should be: We did an ambitious thing, now some people are replicating it, and here are some reasons why it was beneficial."

Since then, OpenAI appears to have kept the hype part of the GPT-2 release formula but nixed the openness. GPT-3 was launched in 2020 and was quickly "exclusively" licensed to Microsoft. GPT-3's source code has still not been released even as the company now looks toward GPT-4. The model is only accessible to the public via ChatGPT with an API, and OpenAI launched a paid tier to guarantee access to the model.

There are a few stated reasons why OpenAI did this. The first is money. The firm stated in its API announcement blog, "commercializing the technology helps us pay for our ongoing AI research, safety, and policy efforts." The second reason is a stated bias toward helping large companies. It is "hard for anyone except larger companies to benefit from the underlying technology," OpenAI stated. Finally, the company claims it is safer to release via an API instead of open-source because the firm can respond to cases of misuse.

Altman's AGI blog post continues OpenAI's pattern of striking a sunny tone, even as it strays further from its founding principles. Many researchers criticized the lack of criticality and substance in the blog post, including failing to define AGI concretely.

"Y'all keep telling us AGI is around the corner but can't even have a single consistent definition of it on your own damn website," tweeted Timnit Gebru, a computer scientist who was fired from Google for publishing a groundbreaking paper about the risks of large language models, which includes its dangerous biases and the potential to deceive people with them.

Emily M. Bender, a professor of linguistics at the University of Washington and the co-author of that paper, tweeted: "They don't want to address actual problems in the actual world (which would require ceding power). They want to believe themselves gods who can not only create a 'superintelligence' but have the beneficence to do so in a way that is 'aligned' with humanity."

The blog post comes at a time when people are becoming more and more disillusioned with the progress of chatbots like ChatGPT; even Altman has cautioned that today's models are not suited to doing anything important. It's still questionable whether human-level AGI will ever exist, but what if OpenAI succeeds at developing it? It's worth asking a few questions here:

Will this AI be shared responsibly, developed openly, and without a profit motive, as the company originally envisioned? Or will it be rolled out hastily, with numerous unsettling flaws, and for a big payday benefitting OpenAI primarily? Will OpenAI keep its sci-fi future closed-source?

Microsoft's OpenAI-powered Bing chatbot has been going off the rails, lying and berating users, and spreading misinformation. OpenAI also cannot reliably detect its own chatbot-generated text, despite the increasing concern from educators about students using the app to cheat. People have been easily jailbreaking the language model to disregard the guardrails OpenAI set around it, and the bot breaks when fed random words and phrases. Nobody can say why, exactly, because OpenAI has not shared the underlying model's code, and, to some extent, OpenAI itself is unlikely to fully understand how it works.

With all of this in mind, we should all carefully consider whether OpenAI deserves the trust it's asking for the public to give.

OpenAI did not respond to a request for comment.

Chloe Xiang is a writer, photographer, multidisciplinary artist, and founding Editor-in-Chief of *Keke Magazine*.

THE FICTION OF AI

JOSH DZIEZA

On a Tuesday in mid-March, Jennifer Lepp was precisely 80.41 percent finished writing *Bring Your Beach Owl*, the latest installment in her series about a detective witch in central Florida, and she was behind schedule. The color-coded, 11-column spreadsheet she keeps open on a second monitor as she writes told her just how far behind: she had three days to write 9,278 words if she was to get the book edited, formatted, promoted, uploaded to Amazon's Kindle platform, and in the hands of eager readers who expected a new novel every nine weeks.

Lepp became an author six years ago, after deciding she could no longer stomach having to spout "corporate doublespeak" to employees as companies downsized. She had spent the prior two decades working in management at a series of web hosting companies, where she developed disciplined project management skills that have translated surprisingly well to writing fiction for Amazon's Kindle platform.

Like many independent authors, she found in Amazon's self-service publishing arm, Kindle Direct Publishing, an unexpected avenue into a literary career she had once dreamed of and abandoned. ("Independent" or "indie" author are the preferred terms for writers who are self-publishing commercially, free of the vanity-press connotations of "self-published.") "It's not Dostoevsky," Lepp said of her work, but she takes pride in delivering enjoyable "potato chip books" to her readers, and they reward her with an annual income that can reach the low six figures.

However, being an Amazon-based author is stressful in ways that will look familiar to anyone who makes a living on a digital platform. In order to survive in a marketplace where infinite other options are a click away, authors need to find their fans and keep them loyal. So they follow readers to the microgenres into which Amazon's algorithms classify their tastes, niches like "mermaid young adult fantasy" or "time-travel romance," and keep them engaged by writing in series, each installment teasing the next, which already has a title and set release date, all while producing a steady stream of newsletters, tweets, and videos. As Mark McGurl writes in *Everything and Less*, his recent book on how Amazon is shaping fiction, the Kindle platform transformed the author-reader relationship into one of service provider and customer, and the customer is always right. Above all else, authors must write fast.

Lepp, who writes under the pen name Leanne Leeds in the "paranormal cozy mystery" subgenre, allots herself precisely 49 days to write and self-edit a book. This pace, she said, is just on the cusp of being unsustainably slow. She once surveyed her mailing list to ask how long readers would wait between books before abandoning her for another writer. The average was four months. Writer's block is a luxury she can't afford, which is why as soon as she heard about an artificial intelligence tool designed to break through it, she started beseeching its developers on Twitter for access to the beta test.

It's just words, she thought. It's my story, my characters, my world. I came up with it. So what if a computer wrote them?

– Josh Dzieza

The tool was called Sudowrite. Designed by developers turned sci-fi authors Amit Gupta and James Yu, it's one of many AI writing programs built on OpenAI's language model GPT-3 that have launched since it was opened to developers last year. But where most of these tools are meant to write company emails and marketing copy, Sudowrite is designed for fiction writers. Authors paste what they've written into a soothing sunset-colored interface, select some words, and have the AI rewrite them in an ominous tone, or with more inner conflict, or propose a plot twist, or generate descriptions in every sense plus metaphor.

Eager to see what it could do, Lepp selected a 500-word chunk of her novel, a climactic confrontation in a swamp between the detective witch and a band of pixies and pasted it into the program. Highlighting one of the pixies, named Nutmeg, she clicked "describe."

"Nutmeg's hair is red, but her bright green eyes show that she has more in common with creatures of the

night than with day," the program returned.

Lepp was impressed. "Holy crap," she tweeted. Not only had Sudowrite picked up that the scene Lepp had pasted took place at night, but it had also gleaned that Nutmeg was a pixie and that Lepp's pixies have brightly colored hair.

She wasn't sure how she felt about using AI, but like many independent authors, she was always quick to adopt technologies that could help streamline her operation. She had already compiled a database of novels to search when she felt she was overusing a phrase and wanted to see how other authors finished the sentence. She told herself she would use Sudowrite the same way — just inspiration, no cutting and pasting its prose. As an independent author, a small increase in production can yield big returns.

Language models like GPT-3 are word-prediction machines. Fed an enormous amount of text, the model adjusts its billions of initially randomized mathematical parameters until, when presented with new text, it does a pretty good job of predicting what words come next. This method gets it surprisingly far. By training on far more text and using far more parameters than past models, GPT-3 gained at least the partial ability to do basic arithmetic, translate languages, write working code — despite never having been explicitly trained in math, translation, or programming — and write plausibly human-seeming prose.

But ultimately, GPT-3's entire world is words or, to be precise, mathematical representations of common sequences of characters called tokens — and that can cause it to behave strangely. It might happen to give sensible responses when asked about something people have written abundantly and correctly about. But ask which is heavier, a goldfish or a whale, and it will tell you a goldfish. Or ask what Napoleon said about hamburgers, and it will say, "Hamburgers are the food of the gods." It's just making a guess based on statistical patterns in language, and that may or may not have any correlation to the world as humans understand it. Like a good bullshitter, it's better at form and style than substance. Even when writing fiction, where factuality is less of an issue, there's an art to getting it to do what you want.

The pseudonymous researcher and writer Gwern Branwen calls it "prompt programming," a term that's been adopted by AI-using writers. For example, ask GPT-3 to write *Harry Potter* in the style of Ernest Hemingway, as Branwen did, and it might produce profane reviews or a plot summary in Chinese or total nonsense. But write a few lines of Hemingway-esque *Potter* fanfiction, and the model seems to grasp what you mean by "style" and keep going. It can then go on to write *Harry Potter* in the style of P.G. Wodehouse, Jane Austen, and so on. It requires a strange degree of sympathy with the machine, thinking about the way it works and how it might respond to your query. Branwen wrote that it's a bit like trying to teach tricks to a superintelligent cat.

To create Sudowrite, Gupta and Yu collected plot twists from short stories and synopses of novels, presenting them to GPT-3 as examples. For descriptions, they wrote sentences about smells, sounds, and other senses so that GPT-3 would know what's being asked of it when a writer clicks "describe."

And it does generally seem to understand the assignment, though it sometimes takes it in unexpected directions. For instance, Lepp found that the program had a tendency to bestow her characters with swords. Despite there not really being any swords in her version of magical Florida, it would have characters unsheathing blades mid-conversation or fondling hilts as they sat on the porch.

She figures this is because the model was likely trained on far more examples of high fantasy than the much smaller genre of paranormal cozy mystery, so when it sees her writing about magic, it assumes some sword unsheathing and hilt fondling is going to happen. Or, if it sees a pixie and a vampire talking in a parking lot, Lepp said, it's going to have someone get bit, despite the fact that Lepp's vampire is a peaceful patron of blood banks. And one can only imagine the size of the romance dataset because it's constantly trying to make her characters have sex. "I get a lot of, 'He grabbed her shoulder and wrapped her in his arms,'" Lepp said. "I write cozies! Nobody's breathing heavily in my books unless they're jogging."

There were weirder misfires, too. Like when it kept saying the Greek god Apollo's "eyes were as big as a gopher's" or that "the moon was truly mother-of-pearl, the white of the sea, rubbed smooth by the groins of drowned brides."

Or when it exuberantly overextended metaphors: "Alice closed her eyes and sighed, savoring the moment before reality came back crashing down on them like the weight of an elephant sitting on them both while being eaten by a shark in an airplane full of ninjas puking out their eyes and blood for no apparent reason other than that they were ninjas who liked puke so much they couldn't help themselves from spewing it out of their orifices at every opportunity."

A machine learning engineer would call these "hallucinations," but Lepp, who had begun to refer to Sudowrite affectionately as Skynet — with a personality that was "more cat than dog because it does what it wants" — referred to them as moments when Skynet was drunk.

Gradually, Lepp figured out how to steer the AI. She likened the process to divination. She had to edit and revise its output. But, even then, she found that it lightened the load of a job that, as much as she loved it, was mentally draining. She no longer ended each day struggling to summon the prose she needed to hit her target, exhausted. The words came easier.

When she started using the program, she had told herself she wouldn't use anything it provided unedited. But she got more comfortable with the idea as she went along.

It's just words, she thought. *It's my story, my characters, my world. I came up with it. So what if a computer wrote them?*

ABOUT BEYOND BAROQUE

Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center is one of the nation's most successful and influential grassroots incubators of literary art. Founded in 1968, and housed in the original Venice City Hall building in Venice, California, it is a nonprofit public space dedicated to cultivating new writing and expanding the public's knowledge of poetry, fiction, literature, and art through cultural events and community interaction. The Center offers a diverse variety of liter-ary and arts programming, including readings, workshops, art exhibits, and education. The Center also houses a bookstore with the largest collection of new poetry books on the west side of Los Angeles; the Mike Kelley Gallery, which specializes in text and language-focused visual art; and a 50,000 vol-ume archive of small press and limited-edition publications that chronicles the history of poetry movements in Los Angeles and beyond.

Few literary spaces have done more to cultivate innovative art from cultural outsiders, or to shape emerging artistic movements. Across five decades Be-yond Baroque has nurtured the Venice Beats, cradled the Los Angeles punk scene, and provided crucial support to a series of seminal experimental writ-ers and artists that include Dennis Cooper, Wanda Coleman, Mike Kelley, and Will Alexander.

It's legendary free workshops have profoundly shaped Los Angeles literature by helping to launch a number of influential careers, including those of Kate Braverman, Tom Waits, Leland Hickman, Bob Flanagan, Eloise Klein Healy, David Trinidad, Jim Krusoe, Exene Cervenkova, Amy Gerstler, Paul Vange-listi, Michael Ondaatje, Harry Northup, Brendan Constantine, Jenny Factor, and Sarah Maclay.

It's reading and performance series have exposed L.A. audiences to some of the world's most notable writers and artists, often at early stages in their ca-reers, including Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Raymond Carver, X, Patti Smith, Viggo Mortensen, Paul Auster, Chris Kraus, Eileen Myles, Luis J. Ro-driguez, Dana Gioia, Hector Tobar, David St. John, Robin Coste Lewis, and Maggie Nelson.

Today the Center continues to provide a vital cultural forum through it's free workshops, reading series, youth programming, and artistic gatherings.

Beyond Baroque's Mission
Beyond Baroque's mission is to encourage the writing, reading, publication, dissemination, and preservation of contemporary literature through program-ming, education, archiving, and services in literature and the arts.

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THE ALGORITHM SOCIETY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

BRAD DELONG

In my view, the most profound and insightful work of political economy written in the 2010s was neither a journal article nor a monograph nor a book in the traditional sense. Rather, it was an online symposium. In *Red Plenty: A Crooked Timber Book Event,* scholars and intellectuals, convened by political scientist Henry Farrell, used a new mode of print-communication to react to Francis Spufford's very interesting book *Red Plenty*.

Spufford had analyzed the Soviet Union's stunningly unsuccessful attempt to use bureaucracy and mathematics to build a better society than could be achieved using markets. Yet every time I return to *Red Plenty: A Crooked Timber Book Event*, I am struck by its contributors' insights into the insurmountable dilemmas generated by the modern market economy itself. I am also still struck by how successful the "book event" was in using new technologies to drive a qualitative shift in how we communicate and come to understand the world together.

Our mighty, but deeply flawed and unequal civilization was built by adding markets and bureaucracy to our three original modes of organization.

– Brad DeLong

I have been thinking about these issues because Farrell recently published a new article, "The Moral Economy of High-Tech Modernism." He and the sociologist Marion Fourcade argue that the internet and its progeny (what they call "high-tech modernism") are changing the world in ways that are as profound as the rise of the market economy and the bureaucratization of society under the modern state.

This argument concerns the very foundation of human society. As individuals, we humans are each weak and helpless. Only with the knowledge that we gain from life within a culture are we able to survive. But to have a culture or produce anything, we need to organize and coordinate ourselves in a collective intelligence and distributed entity. For thousands of years, we generally have had three different modes of maintaining such organization.

The first is r**edistribution**: information, resources, and useful products flow into a centralized pool and then flow out again in the form of assigned tasks, tools, rewards, or social support.

The second mode has been **reciprocity**: each household is linked to a few others in long-term gift-exchange relationships that tend toward a rough balance. And, because there are only six degrees of separation in most human societies, one unit's needs will affect the actions of many others.

Lastly, there has been **democracy**: people use debate and discussion to reach a rough consensus and achieve broad-based support for an agreed-upon plan.

Of course, each mode of organization entails a mode of distribution and authorization, to answer the question of who should get more of the good things (who should be "more equal" than the others). With redistribution, power accrues to the one at the center of the system; with reciprocity, to those with the most resources and friends; and with democracy, to those with the silver tongues.

With the coming of modernity, we added two more modes: the **market economy** as engineered by the business class; and **bureaucracy**, as engineered by the modern state. The market is unmatched as a tool for crowdsourcing solutions to problems. But, in practice, its scope is limited to satisfying the demands of the rich, by ensuring the efficient use of those things that just so happen to command a market price.

Similarly, bureaucracy is uniquely powerful and capable in its ability to classify and standardize things, which allows it to see the bigger picture in ways that a reciprocity or redistribution system cannot. But, of course, it also can give rise to many inefficiencies.

Our mighty, but deeply flawed and unequal civilization was built by adding markets and bureaucracy to our three original modes of organization. But now, Farrell and Fourcade warn that we are adding a sixth mode: the algorithm.

According to techno-optimists, a **society of algorithms** would be much better than anything we can

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hope to create with markets and bureaucracy. Unlike a market, an algorithm is not restricted to seeing only the money demands of the rich and the money costs imposed by those who have managed to claim property rights. And unlike a bureaucracy, an algorithmic society will not force you, a square peg, into a round hole.

No longer will "experts" decide what category you should fall into. Instead, affinity groups will spring up spontaneously from the revealed preferences expressed by people's words and actions. Resources will be mobilized to serve each individual by tapping into the unique power of economies of scale.

Is this a hope that we should all share? To be sure, when bureaucracy arrived as a new mode of organization, it erased tacit forms of knowledge, disrupted the messiness of people's lives, and forced people into categories that were most useful to those holding the levers of power. Equally, markets introduced massive, costly new externalities by prioritizing the needs of the rich. But is there any good reason to think that an algorithmic society would fix these flaws, or that it would not introduce new, massive problems of its own?

The economics Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman's concept of thinking "fast" and "slow"can help us see what is at stake, here. An algorithmic society would serve only our "thinking fast" side, constantly seeking "engagement" – meaning fear and rage. Just as markets cater to the rich, algorithms cater to our worst impulses.

A clickbait society is no one's vision of Utopia. Yet that, I fear, is where current trends are carrying us.

So if They Ever Name the Streets

they will name them love
for the children they never bore

for the city built without eyes
because there is always more
than the concrete
the asphalt
the cars parked by exhausted meters
the pedestrians

and the victims
begging for the art of it

there is a skyline that does mascara ads
for a living
and then there is

the beauty of the street

– S.A. Griffin

S.A. Griffin is the author of *Dreams Gone Mad with Hope* and co-editor of *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*.

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KILL THE CHATBOTS?

MICHAEL R. STRAIN

The world has been dazzled by sudden major advances in artificial intelligence. But now some prominent and well-placed people are responding with misguided demands to pull the emergency brake.

An open letter calling "on all AI labs to immediately pause for at least six months the training of AI systems" has received thousands of signatures, including those of tech icons like Elon Musk and Steve Wozniak, many CEOs, and prominent scholars. Geoffrey Hinton, one of the pioneers of the "deep learning" methods behind the recent advances, was recently asked by CBS News about AI "wiping out humanity." And, as always, many commentators fear that AI will eliminate the need for human workers. A 2022 Ipsos survey finds that only around one-third of Americans think that AI-based products and services offer more benefits than drawbacks.

Those calling for a pause emphasize that "generative AI" is different from anything that has come before. OpenAI's ChatGPT is so advanced that it can convincingly converse with a human, draft essays better than many undergraduates, and write and debug computer code. The *Financial Times* recently found that ChatGPT (along with Bard, Google's own experimental chatbot) can tell a joke at least passably well, write an advertising slogan, make stock picks, and imagine a conversation between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.

It is understandable that a new technology with such seemingly vast powers would raise concerns. But much of the distress is misplaced. AI's current detractors tend to understate the pace of technological change that advanced economies have already been living through. In 1970, US employment was roughly evenly divided across occupations, with low-skill, medium-skill, and high-skill jobs accounting for, respectively, 31%, 38%, and 30% of total hours worked. A half-century later, middle-skill employment has fallen by an astonishing 15 percentage points.

This change was largely the result of technological advances that allowed robots and software to perform tasks previously carried out by manufacturing workers and clerks. The hollowing out of the middle class is one of the most important economic developments in living memory. It has transformed life in the Rust Belt and in offices across the country, with profound effects on American society and politics.

Even the newest technology is not as new as it seems. Chatbots and virtual assistants were commonplace before ChatGPT captured headlines. While your bank's online customer-service assistant and your phone's autocomplete function cannot pass the Turing test, both use natural-language processing to try to converse with you, just like ChatGPT. My kids try to talk to our Amazon Alexa the same way they try to talk to human beings.

AI's current detractors tend to understate the pace of technological change that advanced economies have already been living through.

– Michael R. Strain

Those who are worried enough about AI to advocate slamming on the brakes are likely overstating the speed with which it will transform the economy. As impressive as it is, ChatGPT gets a lot wrong. When I entered the query, "Please let me know a few articles Michael Strain has written about economics," it came back with five articles. All seemed plausible, but I didn't write any of them. For hospitals, law firms, newspapers, think tanks, universities, government agencies, and many other institutions, such errors will never be acceptable.

The speed of the transformation will also be limited by barriers within businesses. Attorneys tell me that they don't want their firms using these technologies because they cannot risk releasing confidential information online. The same will be true, for example, of hospitals and patient data. AI providers will create enterprise solutions. But if an AI solution cannot be trained on data from other firms in the same industry, will it be as powerful and useful as optimists suggest? And, as a general matter, it takes longer than people think for businesses to find ways to put new technologies to productive use.

The open letter calls for a six-month pause to allow policymakers and regulators to catch up. But regulators are always playing catch-up, and if the biggest concerns about AI are valid, a six-month pause would be of little help. Moreover, if those concerns are indeed overblown,

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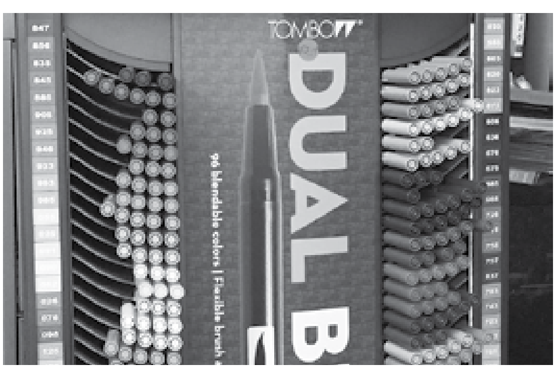

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pausing could do lasting damage by undermining US competitiveness or ceding the field to less responsible actors. The letter argues that if a pause “cannot be enacted quickly, governments should step in and institute a moratorium.” Good luck getting China to comply with that.

Of course, there are times when governments would want to halt a technology’s development. But this is not one of them. Regulation should focus on how AI is used, not whether it can continue to develop. Once the technology is further along, it will become clearer how it should be regulated. Is there a chance that AI will “wipe out” humanity? A tiny one, I suppose. But generative AI would hardly be the first technology to imply that risk.

If there is one thing the doomsayers get right, it is that generative AI has the potential to affect large swaths of the economy – like electricity and the steam engine before it. I would not be surprised if AI eventually became as important as the smartphone or the web browser, with all that that entails for workers, consumers, and existing business models.

The right response to economic disruption is not to stop the clock. Rather, policymakers should focus on finding ways to increase participation in economic life. Can earnings subsidies be better used to make work more financially attractive for people without college degrees? Can community colleges and training programs build skills that allow workers to use AI to increase their own productivity? What policies and institutions are standing in the way of greater economic participation?

We must remember that creative destruction does not only destroy. It also creates, often in powerful and unexpected ways. Our future with AI will have storm clouds. But overall, it will be bright.

PLANT-BASED DIETS ARE HEALTHY

AIDAN SMITH

The latest report from the United Nations on the direction the environment is heading is the scariest so far. In order to turn things around, the UN recommends—among other things—that each of us eat more plant-based foods. I'm willing to accept that eating plant-based food is good for the climate and for animals. But as someone who has eaten meat my entire life, I had to ask the question—is plant-based food good for *me*?"

Like many people, I've heard that plant-based diets lead to protein deficiency. I may like eating meat, but I can't stomach disinformation. After diving into the research, what I found surprised me. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics makes it clear: "vegetarian, including vegan, diets typically meet or exceed recommended protein intakes." The Academy adds that a well-rounded plant-based diet "supplies enough of all indispensable (essential) amino acids," contrary to the myth that plant-based options lack specific essential amino acids.

But even as I came across more and more scientific studies about the positive health benefits of plant-based meats and foods, it was still difficult on a subconscious level to accept that I can build muscle without—well—*eating* muscle. As a very active person, I've always operated under the implicit belief that flesh builds flesh. So, I went even deeper into the science to see if there are any plant-based options that can compete with meat.

As it turns out, it's entirely possible to supplant the meat in my diet with high-protein plant-based options like nuts, seeds, and legumes, all of which are widely available.

– Aidan Smith

As it turns out, it's entirely possible to supplant the meat in my diet with high-protein plant-based options like nuts, seeds, and legumes, all of which are widely available. Other protein-rich plant-based foods include wheat-based seitan or soybean products like tofu and soy milk. But can those options actually replace *all* of what I love about meat? Including, let's be blunt - taste?

Well, according to senior clinical nutritionist Emily Gelsomin of Harvard's Massachusetts General Hospital, both the Beyond Burger and Impossible Burgers have as much if not more protein than meat. Gelsomin also noted that both meat alternatives contain key vitamins and minerals like Zinc and cobalamin (B12) which are found in meat protein. As for taste—many of these plant-based meats are earning rave reviews, even from those with far more sophisticated pallets than mine.

Furthermore---and this was harder to swallow---with the United States currently experiencing a mortality crisis compared to other industrialized nations, I had to pay attention to the fact that plant-based diets have been connected to a decrease in mortality. Even the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), a traditional backer of meat, has admitted that people who eat more plant-based foods tend to have "lower levels of obesity, a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, and lower total mortality."

As it turns out, a 2022 study found that rates of heart attack mortality in America are alarmingly high compared to other wealthy nations. Red meat consumption is associated with poor health, as proved by a Harvard University longitudinal study. Nonetheless, despite its detrimental health impact, beef consumption remains widespread in America. The US has over 100 million fewer people than the European Union — around 336 million to 447 million in 2021—, but we consume 10,000,000,000 more pounds of beef.

In light of these statistics, even making small choices like picking a plant-based burger over a beef patty could be a big win. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), "eating a nutritious, plant-based diet may lower the risk for heart attacks and other types of cardiovascular disease." A study by researchers from Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital found that eating tofu reduces LDL cholesterol and lowers the risk of a heart attack. In a nation where heart attacks occur every 40 seconds, each of us choosing even occasional plant-based alternatives to red meat probably makes a lot of sense.

Let's also talk about fiber. I and most of my friends don't tend to focus on the role of fiber in building a well-rounded diet. According to the American Society for Nutrition, the average American diet is lacking in fiber. It turns out plant-based meat alternatives have higher fiber

contents than meat. I was stunned to learn, in fact, that meat has no fiber at all, which might be why sometimes I get a heavy feeling after eating meat. A study of people who switched out at least two servings of meat a day in favor of meat alternatives found that participants came out with higher rates of fiber consumption and lower rates of saturated fat consumption.

All this could be why a 2021 survey by the International Food Information Council found that one in four Americans reported consuming more protein derived from plant sources than they had done the year prior. According to the *Washington Post*, a majority of U.S. households bought plant-based foods during the peak days of the pandemic, with milk alternatives and meat alternatives proving the most popular. I myself made the switch to oat milk in 2021 and haven't looked back since — and as recent data from Morning Consult found, I'm hardly the only one.

At a time when even the fast food chains that rose to popularity with "eat more chikin" billboards are testing plant-based options, it's obvious where the winds are heading. Plant-based foods are becoming as American as apple pie — and with more plant-based alternatives to milk, butter, and eggs available than ever before, it's getting pretty easy to make a plant-based apple pie. A Bloomberg Intelligence report from 2021 estimated that plant-based food sales would see fivefold growth by the end of the decade, and it's not hard to see why: American consumers have more options than ever when it comes to building a plant-based diet.

Anyway. All that research gave me an appetite. And I think I'm finally at the point where I'd prefer to bite into something that's going to help me live longer and healthier. So—maybe don't tell my friends just yet—but a plant-based burger, it is.

Aidan Smith is a political consultant and blogger.

INFLATION

PRICE-FIXING

KENNY STANCIL

As working-class households continue to struggle amid a cost-of-living crisis driven largely by corporate profiteering, a new investigation shows that large companies operating in the United States have paid nearly $100 billion in fines and settlements since 2000 "to resolve allegations of covert price-fixing and other anti-competitive practices in violation of antitrust laws."

Conspiring Against Competition: Illegal Corporate Price-Fixing in the U.S. Economy, a report published Monday by the Corporate Research Project of Good Jobs First, is based on an analysis of government agency announcements and court records included in the nonprofit's Violation Tracker database.

"Putting a real dent in price-fixing will probably require aggressive steps to deal with the underlying structural reality that makes it more likely to occur: excessive market concentration."

"Capitalism is typically portrayed as a system of constant competition in which prices are determined by supply and demand. Producers of goods and services are said to constantly vie with one another in the quest for sales," says the report. "In truth, however, large companies often evade competition and instead collude with one another to control markets to their mutual benefit—and to the disadvantage of consumers, who end up paying higher prices. This is the world of price-fixing and other anti-competitive practices cooked up secretly by purportedly rival corporate executives."

"Illegal pricing conspiracies have occurred in a wide range of industries, affecting the cost of products ranging from everyday grocery items and auto parts to chemicals and electronic components," the report notes. "In industries such as financial services and pharmaceuticals, just about every major corporation (or a subsidiary) has been a defendant in one or more cases. Banks, credit card companies, and investment firms dominate the top tier, accounting for 9 of the 10 most penalized corporations by total dollars."

In a statement, Good Jobs First research director and report author Philip Mattera said that "large corporations which are supposed to be competing with one another are often secretly conspiring to set prices."

"In doing so," Materra continued, "they cause economic harm to consumers and contribute to inflation."

According to the report:

"Of the more than 2,000 cases in which companies made payments to resolve civil and criminal price-fixing allegations, 357 were brought by the Antitrust Division of the U.S. Justice Department and other federal regulators. Those yielded $26 billion in penalties. Another 269 cases were brought by state attorneys general ($15 billion); and 1,407 class action lawsuits were initiated by private plaintiffs ($55 billion).

Of the $96 billion in penalties, over one-third ($33 billion) was paid by banks and investment firms, mainly to resolve claims that they schemed to rig interest-rate benchmarks such as LIBOR. The second most penalized industry, at $11 billion, is pharmaceuticals, due largely to owners of brand-name drugs accused of illegally conspiring to block the introduction of lower-cost generic alternatives."

Putting a real dent in price-fixing will probably require aggressive steps to deal with the underlying structural reality that makes it more likely to occur: excessive market concentration.

– Kenny Stancil

Price-fixing happens most frequently in business-to-business transactions, though the higher costs are often passed on to consumers. Apart from finance and pharmaceuticals, the industries high on the penalty list include: electronic components ($8.6 billion in penalties), automotive parts ($5.3 billion), power generation ($5 billion), chemicals ($3.9 billion), healthcare services ($3.5 billion), and freight services ($3.4 billion). Information technology's total is relatively low, at $1.7 billion, apparently reflecting that industry's heavy reliance on advertising rather than revenue from users.

Nineteen companies (or their subsidiaries) paid $1 billion or more each in price-fixing penalties. At the top of this list are Visa Inc. ($6.2 billion), Deutsche Bank ($3.8 billion), Barclays ($3.2 billion), MasterCard ($3.2 billion), and Citigroup ($2.7 billion). The most heavily penalized nonfinancial company is Teva Pharmaceutical Industries, which with its subsidiaries has shelled out $2.6 billion in multiple generic-delay cases.

As the report notes, foreign-based corporations were defendants in 57% of the price-fixing cases examined, and they paid 49% of the penalty money.

In addition to alleged conspiracies to increase the prices of goods and services, Good Jobs First found "about three dozen cases involving schemes to depress wages or salaries."

"These include cases in which employers such as poultry processors were accused of colluding to fix wage rates as well as ones in which companies entered into agreements not to hire people who were working for each other," the report notes. "These no-poach agreements inhibit worker mobility and tend to depress pay levels—similar to the effect of noncompete agreements employers often compel workers to sign."

"Despite the billions of dollars corporations have paid in fines and settlements," the report adds, "price-fixing scandals continue to emerge on a regular basis, and numerous large corporations have been named in repeated cases."

In November, Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Chair Lina Khan led the agency in issuing a new policy statement restoring its commitment to "rigorously enforcing" the FTC Act's prohibition on "unfair methods of competition," including what critics have called "predatory pricing."

On Tuesday, Materra said that "higher penalties could help reduce recidivism."

"But putting a real dent in price-fixing," he argued, "will probably require aggressive steps to deal with the underlying structural reality that makes it more likely to occur: excessive market concentration."

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine disrupted international supply chains—rendered fragile by decades of neoliberal globalization—corporations fortified by preceding rounds of consolidation have capitalized on these and other crises to justify price hikes that far outpace the increased costs of doing business.

Progressives have long urged the Biden administration and Congress to strengthen antitrust enforcement, enact a windfall profits tax, and impose temporary price controls, contending that only these measures—and not the Federal Reserve's job-and wage-destroying interest rate hikes—can dilute the power of price-gouging corporations and ensure the affordability of food, medicine, and other necessities.

"When a small number of companies dominate an industry, collusion is easier," the new report concludes. "Oligopolies are not just a cause of inflation. They exacerbate social and economic inequality, and thus weaken democracy. Curbing their power will not only address price-fixing but also move us closer to a just society."

Kenny Stancil writes for *Common Dreams* and other publications.


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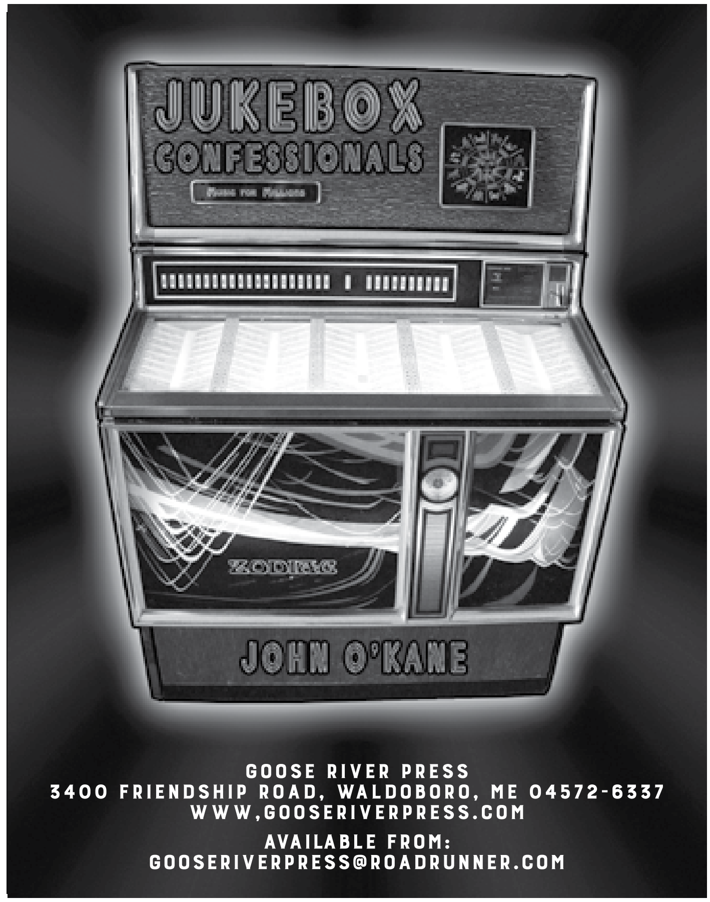
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A FEDERAL RESERVE FOR THE PEOPLE

RICHARD ESKOW

The Federal Reserve raised interest rates by another quarter point recently, despite recent bank failures that undermined public faith in the financial system. The Fed, which failed to properly supervise these banks, will now make things harder on working people. Why? To address inflation which has been caused by the war in Ukraine, supply-chain disruptions, excesses in profit-taking, and the *slight* additional effect of government efforts to minimize public suffering during a pandemic.

The government stopped aid to working people, which was only a minor factor in any case, but has done nothing about the other inflationary forces. That tells us something about its priorities.

Here are five observations about these events for your consideration:

1. Every Bank Is Now Too Big To Fail.

We know that ex-politico Barney Frank, among others, promoted raising the size at which certain bank regulations take effect. Signature Bank, where Frank is on the board, and Silicon Valley Bank then slipped under the radar. That's important (not least because it erodes the credibility of people like Barney Frank).

But we now seem to live in a world where *no* bank is small enough to fail. The key word is contagion—or, if you prefer, panic. SVB was an outlier in its combination of poor investments and (supposedly) uninsured deposits. But our world is more interconnected than ever. That means panic can spread more quickly than ever. One email seems to have set off a run on SVB, and the combined failure of SVB and Signature—another small-ish bank—was apparently enough to imperil the entire financial system.

That tells us that bank runs can be triggered much more easily now. It also tells us that multiple failures among smaller banks could have the same overall effect as the failure of one large bank—perhaps not as we currently understand "systemic risk," but as the flashpoint that could trigger a panic. That panic, in turn, can threaten the whole system.

That could happen more easily than some might think. A recent paper on bank fragility concluded that "the U.S. banking system's market value of assets is $2 trillion lower than suggested by their book value." This is because "marked-to-market bank assets have declined by an average of 10% across all the banks, with the bottom 5th percentile experiencing a decline of 20%." They add that 10 percent of banks had larger unrecognized losses than SVB's and 10 percent of banks had lower capitalization.

And, while SVB had an unusually large percentage of uninsured deposits, they found that nearly 190 banks are at risk of being unable to cover insured deposits if—as the result of panic or something else—a mere half of uninsured deposits are withdrawn. Even a small wave of "fire sale" withdrawals could endanger substantially more than 190 banks.

They conclude that "recent declines in bank asset values very significantly increased the fragility of the US banking system to uninsured depositor runs."

Banking has become something like public health. A single bank can become a vector. If the infection spreads, the entire population is endangered. That means the health of each individual must be carefully monitored for the safety of all.

> **Politicians should be named and shamed for their votes in (among other bills) the weakening of bank oversight that led to SVB's failure.**
>
> – Richard Eskow

2. The Federal Reserve Cannot Be Trusted.

The Fed defended its supervision of these failed banks again and insisted that it had things under control. "The banking system is sound, it's resilient," said Fed chair Jerome Powell, adding that current "weaknesses" do not pervade the entire "banking system."

In response, banking stocks plunged. That's because investors don't trust the Federal Reserve. You shouldn't, either. It serves the interests of the financial class and the wealthy, using the ideologically blinkered "science" of orthodox economics to underpin its decisions.

As evidence of this, it should be noted that the CEO of Silicon Valley Bank was on the board of the San Francisco Fed until shortly before his bank collapsed. That's not unusual. In 2012 we reported that Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase, sat on the Fed's Management and Budget Committee. I stand by my assessment that Chase is worse than Enron. Dimon's committee supervised the pay of senior Fed executives and approved the self-evaluation of senior Fed executives. That, in practice, meant giving senior leadership its performance reviews.

Investors don't trust the Federal Reserve. You shouldn't, either.

That committee also reviews and approves the Fed's overall budget, including the budget for auditing bankers like...Jamie Dimon. Its other main responsibility was to "review and endorse the Bank's strategic plan"—a plan that's worked out well for bankers but not so well for the rest of us.

While Dimon has thankfully departed, the five-person committee currently includes two bank CEOs, a real estate executive, and a health insurance CEO.

3. We Need A "People's Fed."

That must change. I proposed something called a "People's Fed" in 2014, which would include representation from all regions, economic sectors, and demographics. But my thinking didn't go nearly far enough. Bankers need to be excluded from any but advisory roles, with guardrails constructed to prevent revolving door behavior.

The Fed's actions, combined with those taken by Congressional Republicans and collaborating Democrats, hit vulnerable Americans especially hard. Regulations were eased under Trump so that affected banks could stop including race and gender in the data they provide to regulators. That made it harder to identify discrimination in lending, for both racial minorities and women. This, despite a century of race-based discrimination in banking; and despite an Urban Institute study which found that single women in the United States had been systematically charged more for mortgages than single men, even though they were better about paying them.

(As I reported then, "three of the senators who backed this bill received $10,754,752 from 'Women's Issues' groups like Emily's List, which Open Secrets describes as 'promot(ing) the social and economic rights of women.'")

The Fed's defenders—the few that remain—love to tout its supposed independence. But independence from whom? Not from bankers or other financial interests, certainly. It is a public institution, created by an act of Congress. But the people who are supposedly represented by that Congress don't seem to have much of a voice there. That must change.

4. Biden Had to Rescue SVB, But That Should Make You Angry. So Should These Politicians.

Like most other observers I've read, I don't think Biden had a choice: he had to rescue SVB's depositors, including the uber-rich ones. The actions of past years made this collapse, or something like it, inevitable. It's the hand the White House, and we, were dealt. It was dealt by Republicans—and by too many Democrats—when they watered down the already lukewarm reforms in Dodd-Frank.

Politicians should be named and shamed for their votes in (among other bills) the weakening of bank oversight that led to SVB's failure. I named many of the bought-off Dems in 2018 when I wrote "The $24 Million Reasons These Dems Backed America's Worst Banks," including Sens. Michael Bennet, Tim Kaine, and then-reigning bank-money champion Mark Warner. (I haven't checked those stats lately.)

Don't believe money talks? Read a 2020 working paper from Thomas Ferguson et al. at the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET). The authors write, "For every $100,000 that Democratic representatives received from finance, the odds they would break with their party's majority support for the Dodd-Frank legislation increased by 13.9 percent."

They add, "Democratic representatives who voted in favor of finance often received $200,000–$300,000 from that sector, which raised the odds of switching by 25–40 percent."

That's an incredible return on investment for the banking industry. It's bad enough when democracy goes on sale, but somehow it hurts even more when it's sold so *cheaply*.

A nonpartisan council set up to prevent future financial crises wrote back then that "if the Dodd-Frank reforms were to be recalibrated, minimum capital requirements should be higher, not lower." They did the opposite. Now, after weakening the rules for bankers, they're strengthening *protections* for them. As Ferguson and INET head Rob Johnson recently wrote, "authorities are reinstating the financial equivalent of Medicare for All (for financiers only)."

(That's probably unfair to Medicare for All, which addresses genuine human needs, but it makes the point. A better term might be "government-run greed insurance.")

5. The Best Mousetrap Is No Mousetrap At All.

If you're putting out mousetraps, mice have gotten into the house. You'll play a losing game until you find their point of entry. The only permanent way to stop mice from robbing your pantry is not to have mice at all.

Our system for regulating banks relies on the economy's "mice." We defer many of our regulatory functions to the Federal Reserve and then give bankers undue power over it. We rely on bankers to self-report certain behaviors. Politicians ask bankers for campaign contributions while they're in office and want cushy board memberships when they leave. The economists who justify bankers' actions look to them for well-paying gigs—or, perhaps, for professional recognition.

I'm not saying this mouse-centric "regulatory system" does *nothing* for the public. They'll close the pantry door from time to time. But they won't lock it—and they certainly won't give *you* the key. Why would they? They're mice, and mice gotta mouse. Besides, not just any old food satisfies a luxury-class rodent.

That's why the best mousetrap is no mousetrap. That means it's in a house without mice. It's time to mouse-proof the economy.

Richard Eskow writes for *Common Dreams* and other publications. Eskow.substack.com.

A CHANGE IN VALUES

HUCK GUTMAN

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2021 almost 60 percent of girls encountered depressive sadness, and one-third seriously considered attempting suicide.

Child labor — and particularly labor in dangerous conditions — is rising rapidly among immigrant children.

Child poverty, which had declined as a result of spending programs during the Covid crisis, is again increasing, in the richest nation on earth.

Sometimes we are so concentrated on specific large issues — Ukraine, global warming, racism — that we ignore the largest dimension of what is happening around us: What is happening to our children, who are the nation's future.

The United States of America is in a state of perilous decline. Our young people can no longer cope adequately with the lives they must live; they are increasingly ignored by our laws and corporations; more and more, they seem unworthy of our collective spending.

When large-scale phenomena, indicators of the health of a society, point toward a difficult future, people should pay attention. But we do not.

There has been substantial commentary on why the young are so depressed and hopeless. There are good reasons to believe that contemporary forces have propelled this rising incidence of depression and suicidal thinking: the rise in social media (and its capacity of bullying), the huge and seemingly uncontrollable forces shaping our society and planet (global warming, racism, sexism), the lack of social cohesion (the decreasing importance of schools-as-communities, the erosion of cultural mores about marriage and sexuality), the decline of community values in a time of concern about individual freedoms.

But lost in these discussions of causality is the simple fact of greed. "If it makes money, it is good." Superficial economic values — individual wealth — have subsumed all other values, be they the good of the community, long-term economic growth, or even long-held ethical concerns like honesty, justice, compassion, and generosity. Greed dominates every consideration. The driving force is always whether a policy will make money for someone.

Superficial economic values — individual wealth — have subsumed all other values, be they the good of the community, long-term economic growth, or even long-held ethical concerns like honesty, justice, compassion, and generosity.

> **Child labor — and particularly labor in dangerous conditions — is rising rapidly among immigrant children.**
>
> – Huck Gutman

And meanwhile, we drift from strength to weakness, from building a future to undermining it.

It is simple and yet difficult to figure out how to respond to the crisis of an America in decline. Simple, in that making decisions that take "health" rather than individual gain into account is, in fact, simple. Difficult, in that we all disagree about how to go about making such decisions.

Should we pass legislation to require that Facebook and TikTok and Twitter do not allow harassment, bullying, and sexism? Should we limit gun sales and aggressively pursue those who push drugs, including pharmaceutical behemoths? Should we really, aggressively, try to prevent global warming and the proliferation of racial and sectarian hatred? Should we rethink schools, and how they work and what values they inculcate in their students?

There is much to prevent us from moving forward. The anti-vax campaigns, with their successes, show that all too often individual autonomy is more important than communal well-being, that the needs of the individual trump the welfare of the community. The move to limit educational initiatives against racism and sexism, now so highlighted in Florida, show that many are unwilling to limit their boundless autonomy in order to provide dignity and justice to their neighbors.

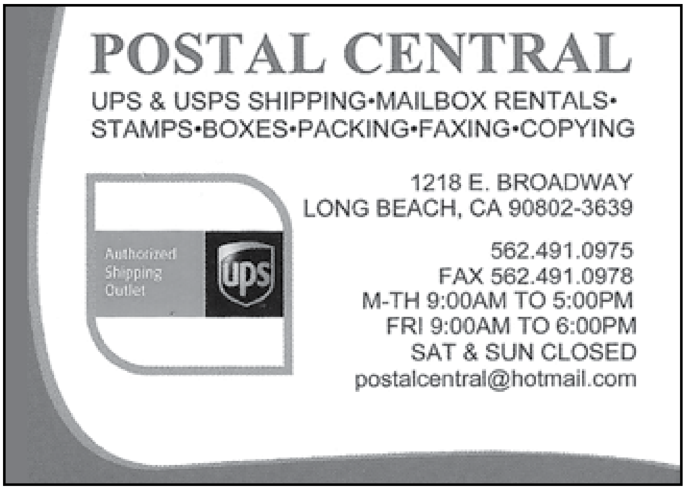
But everywhere, there is greed. "Cui bono?" Who benefits? That, not "justice for all," not "honesty and truth," not "compassion," seems to determine how our society is shaped, and for whom.

I myself am a well-educated intellectual, a former professor and former chief of staff to Sen. Bernie Sanders. And yet I have no answers, no answers. I see an America in savage decline and have no idea of how we should go forward. Limit corporations and corporate power, yes. Control our carbon emissions, ditto. Help the young recognize and love one another: for sure.

But what we need, most desperately, is a change in values. We need a value to replace greed as our highest goal. Compassion? Justice? Love of truth? We do not know how to name it precisely, but that does not mean we cannot strive for something that can guide us, other than concerns with money.

The young know this, which is why they so frequently are depressed and even suicidal. We care about the wrong things, and there are consequences. There are consequences.

Huck Gutman teaches English at the University of Vermont.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FIRST STEP TO OVERHAUL MEDICARE ADVANTAGE

DIANE ARCHER

The corporations that run Medicare Advantage plans are engaged in widespread waste, fraud and abuse, resulting in tens of billions of dollars of overpayments to them every year. The advocates and government agencies overseeing Medicare Advantage have spent nearly two decades reporting on this fraud and waste and urging Congress to overhaul the program. Few in Congress or the administration were listening. Now, the Biden administration is finally taking action, but it's only a first step.

The Biden administration has just finalized a rule that begins to rein in these overpayments, at last putting a spotlight on an issue that Congress and the public have long overlooked. The new rule is a small step towards reining in some of the overpayments to the Medicare Advantage plans and protecting the integrity of the Medicare Trust Fund, though it is not nearly enough.

The insurance industry's fierce opposition and the multi-million dollar fear campaign the health insurance corporations launched against the proposed rule was their admission that Medicare Advantage plans can't provide coverage at a reasonable cost. Medicare Advantage only works for the insurers if they are wildly overpaid and profiting exorbitantly. It was their admission that they cannot do what they were created to do and are legally obligated to do. They cannot deliver Medicare coverage anywhere near as cost-effectively as traditional Medicare, let alone at lower cost, as they had promised.

The fight over small improvements to the flawed Medicare Advantage payment system reveals how challenging it is to fix Medicare Advantage and free it of the bad actors who are engaged in massive — sometimes fraudulent — overbilling of Medicare. Medicare Advantage is in need of a substantial overhaul, as the advocates, along with the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, the Government Accountability Office and the Office of the Inspector General, have all been saying for years.

The Biden administration's final rule — which includes good technical fixes to the payment model but allows tens of billions a year in overpayments to continue — is a small step forward, and at the same time a tacit admission that the government cannot rid Medicare Advantage of the bad actors who are threatening Medicare's financial health. Without an overhaul, there's no stopping the bad actors.

Medicare Advantage only works for the insurers if they are wildly overpaid and profiting exorbitantly.

– Diane Archer

The Biden administration also recently finalized another rule, aimed at addressing widespread and persistent inappropriate delays and denials of care in Medicare Advantage. Among other things, the rule attempts to streamline the Medicare Advantage prior authorization process. It spotlights and begins to address the serious risks some Medicare Advantage plans pose to the health and well-being of their enrollees — our nation's sisters and brothers, parents and grandparents.

Though it goes further than any past rule in its attempt to protect Americans from the bad actor Medicare Advantage plans, it does not provide the public with important information as to which plans are the bad actors. Nor will it lead to the government's cancellation of contracts with the worst-performing Medicare Advantage plans. Therefore, it will not keep the bad actor Medicare Advantage plans from continuing to inappropriately delay and deny critical care.

Consequently, as one NBER analysis found, some 10,000 Medicare Advantage enrollees will continue to die needlessly each year for lack of access to critical care in their bad actor Medicare Advantage plans. This final rule also underscores what we already now know — Medicare Advantage cannot be fixed. Without an overhaul, there's no stopping the bad actors.

Strengthening traditional Medicare by adding an out-of-pocket cap is the best and most cost-effective fix our government could make. Adding the cap would give people — including the most vulnerable Americans, such as people with low incomes and people of color — a meaningful choice of traditional Medicare. Adding an out-of-pocket cap to traditional Medicare would free people from being locked into Medicare Advantage. And, according to the Congressional Budget Office, an out-of-pocket cap in traditional Medicare could save the Medicare program money, while ensuring older adults and people with disabilities can access the care they need without a Medicare Advantage corporation coming between them and their doctors.

Diane Archer is president of Just Care USA.


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GERMANY IS NOW POST-NUCLEAR

HARVEY WASSERMAN

Thus Saturday, April 15, 2023, marks a day that will live in joy and promise. The world's fourth-largest economy has gone post-nuclear.

While the conjoined atomic power and weapons industry wastes uncounted millions pushing yet another doomed-to-fail "nuclear renaissance," Europe's biggest economy has steered itself toward a sustainable, green-powered future.

For more than a half-century, a powerful Solartopian movement has fought reactor construction in Germany. Now it has shut its last three commercial atomic reactors.

A key early uprising came in the rural community of Wyhl, where thousands of No Nukers physically occupied the site of a proposed radioactive waste dump. Films of the action circulated worldwide, helping to inspire mass non-violent occupations at Seabrook, New Hampshire, Diablo Canyon in California, and dozens of other reactor sites around the US, Canada, Latin America, Europe, and Asia.

Germany's Green movement achieved significant parliamentary clout. In early 2011, it set a massive national demonstration to shut the nation's 19 reactors.

But before that happened, four atomic reactors exploded at Fukushima, Japan, spewing more cesium and other radioactive isotopes into the oceans and atmosphere than the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Germany's pro-nuclear Prime Minister Angela Merkel reconsidered her country's energy future. Trained as a chemist, she moved top-level planners from national and local government, industry, finance, labor, and the environmental movement to map out a green-powered future.

With massive wind power development in the North Sea and elsewhere, and with the unprecedented spread of distributed local-based rooftop solar, Germany began phasing out its nukes while transitioning to renewables.

For more than a half-century, a powerful Solartopian movement has fought reactor construction in Germany. Now it has shut its last three commercial atomic reactors.

– Harvey Wasserman

This *energiewende* program has proved massively popular and profitable. Entire communities have shifted to distributed green supplies mostly owned by individual homeowners and local government agencies.

The final three shutdowns were briefly delayed by gas supply disruptions amidst the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But the final closures have happened. Germany is now officially post-nuclear.

Concurrent reactor projects in Finland, France, and England have proven economically catastrophic. Long the industry's poster child, more than half of France's nukes have shut for structural and operational reasons, creating a deep energy crisis.

Two new US reactors at Vogtle, Georgia, have come in six years late. Their price—-$34-plus billion, more than $20 billion over their original projections—-could have funded the Peach State's own *energiewende.*

The US's 94 big reactors now average some 40 years of age.

Unlike Angela Merkel, California's formerly green Gov. Gavin Newsom wants life-extension for two decrepit Diablo nukes surrounded by major earthquake faults, threatening millions of lives and forever ecological and economic ruin.

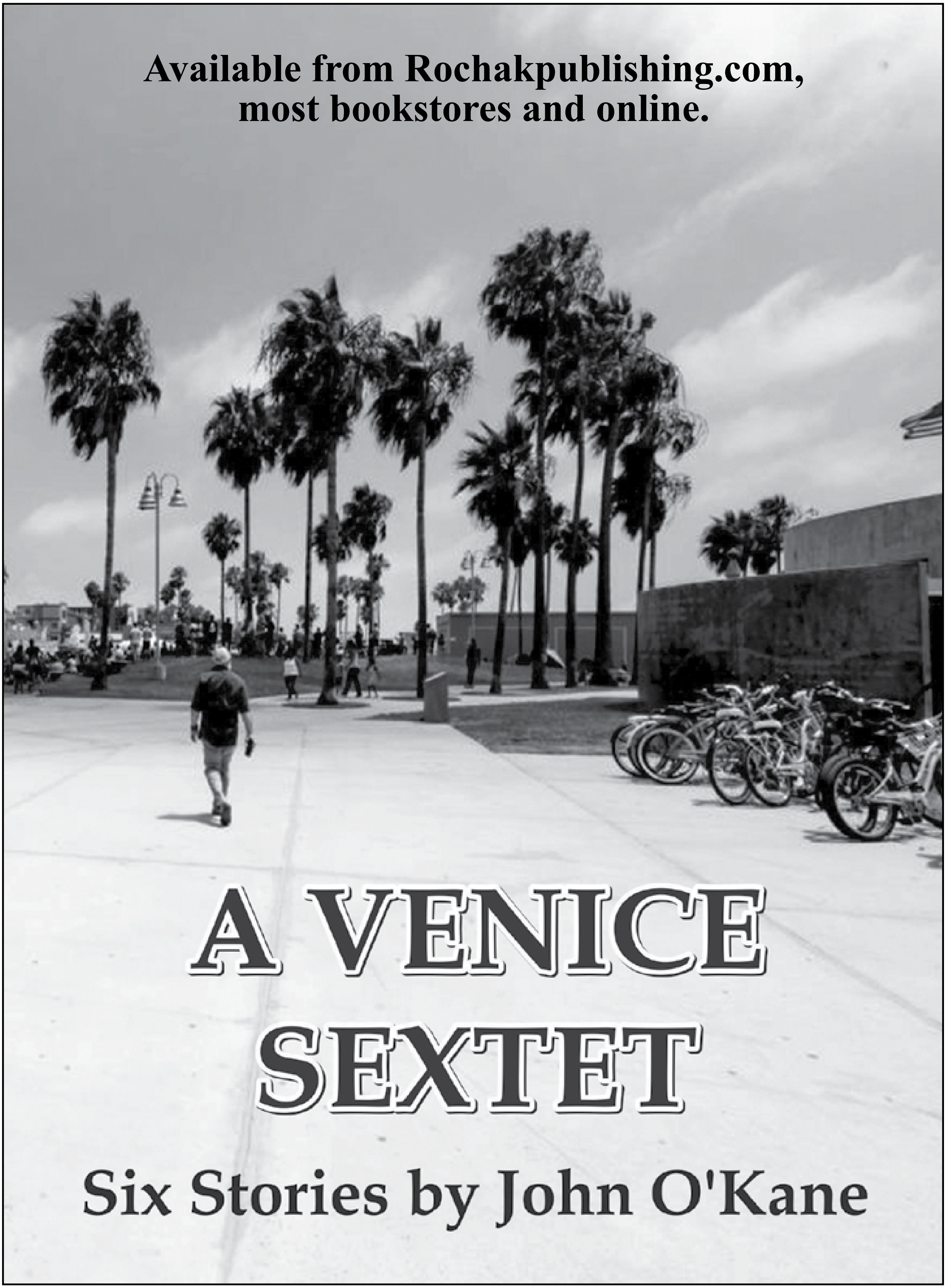
Newsom is also gutting the state's solar industry, involving some 70,000 jobs (versus 1500 at Diablo). His turn to the nuclear dark side irradiates Newsom's likely 2024 presidential run.

To continue producing radioactive material for atomic weapons, the nuclear industry now promotes unproven Small Nuclear Reactors whose projected price tags already mean they can't compete with renewables

Realistic SMR lead-times put deployments deep into the 2030s. Meanwhile plunging renewable costs have priced reactor technology far out of the market.

Thus, humankind can celebrate Germany's new post-nuke reality as a landmark guide to a Solartopian future.

Harvey Wasserman's most recent book is, *Solartopia: Our Green-Powered Earth* (solartopia.org).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RECENT BANK "RUNS" & FAILURES, INFLATION, THE FED'S INTEREST RATE HIKES, AND THE DEBT CEILING— HOW IT ALL FITS.

HAROLD ZIMMERMAN

First of all, everything that's happening now can be traced back to Covid. Specifically due to the effects of the pandemic and, in part, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we've had never-seen-before global supply chain shortages of many essential commodities, such as wheat, energy (oil, gas, and LNG), various raw materials ranging from steel and aluminum to lumber and fertilizer, and the component parts including computer chips that go into the production of consumer goods (such as cars and appliances) along with other increased costs-of-doing-business such as higher labor costs (for skilled labor and getting people to come back to work) COUPLED WITH record amounts of unspent cash from the stimulus checks sent out to the public and businesses to "tide everyone over" due to layoffs and shutdowns during the pandemic. ALL NOW BEING SPENT leads to a compounded "Perfect Storm" inflation created by this "perfect wave" combination of all of the above occurring at the same time!

To tackle this problem, The Fed raised interest rates nine times, 75 basis points four months in a row, taking the federal funds rate from zero (0 percent) interest (purposefully set at this level to promote the cash flow and emergency relief needed during the pandemic) to its current 5 percent.

Here's why: The raising of interest rates has increased the costs of borrowing money (through higher loan rates), thereby decreasing demand and purchases of consumer items such as homes and cars and for investors to borrow to purchase stock and for businesses—loans for start-ups, venture capital, business expansion, equipment, supplies, and raw materials.

Also, this increased the attractiveness of investing in fixed income assets such as Treasury Bonds (versus stocks) which, in turn, also had the effect of lessening the total amount of money (supply) in the private business consumer sector (a quantitative tightening by the Fed to pull money out of the private sector) where, as economists agree, we have "too many dollars chasing too few goods" due in part to the record amounts of unspent cash being being sent out in the form stimulus checks during the pandemic!

CONCLUSION: As the Fed makes its final basis point (interest rate) increases, Treasury Bond sales are already starting to pick up dramatically.

– Harold Zimmerman

And because increasing interest rates makes purchasing Treasury Bonds more attractive, this will replenish the ailing bond market we've had for the past couple of years since the onset of the pandemic because of the historically low interest rates implemented by The Fed (and other central banks around the world) to improve the cash flow needed to help combat the negative effects of the pandemic and provide emergency relief—these low interest rates, unfortunately, making Treasury Bonds NOT profitable to purchase.

An example of this with the bank failures of First Republic, Signature, and Silvergate is Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) which was shut down to prevent a "bank run" caused by mismanagement of its deposits by over-investing in Treasury Bonds when interest yield rates were extremely low and now, with interest rates having risen, the current value of the Treasury Bonds SVB is holding became greatly diminished in value. However, the government stepped in and gave banks par-value (even swap value) for bonds with currently higher yield rates.

With these "Runs" and failures, banks are keeping more cash on reserve while scaling back loans which makes the Fed's job easier by NOT having to raise interest rates as much to discourage businesses and consumers from borrowing.

As a result, The Fed only had to raise interest rates by 25 basis points (1/4 percent) at its last meeting where before it raised interest rates from zero (0 percent) during The pandemic to 4.75 percent.

Even with this minimum 1/4 percent increase, Treasury Bonds have become a more lucrative purchase, thus helping to replenish the treasury and preventing the recurring debt ceiling crisis we've experienced more than once over the past couple of years due to the fact that there weren't enough incoming treasury funds (via taxes and previously issued bonds because of such low interest rates) to cover governmental expenses and obligations coming due.

As it stands, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen stated that we don't have enough money in the treasury to cover governmental expenses and obligations and, as a result, we will have to borrow from Social Security and Medicare,

money that's already been set aside and earmarked. If nothing is done—currently the case—these funds will run out this summer.

But…if we have new fresh (bond) money coming into the treasury from additional bond sales because of higher yields generated by the higher interest rates, we will be able to pay our debts coming due, solve the recurring debt ceiling crisis, remain solvent, and preserve our national credit rating!

Otherwise, if we defaulted on our debts, this would cause bond purchasers both domestic and foreign such as China, Japan, and European countries that otherwise routinely purchase trillions of dollars in bonds from us to demand a higher interest yield rate to make further purchases. This would cost us hundreds of billions, even trillions extra over the years to service the same debt level.

CONCLUSION: As the Fed makes its final basis point (interest rate) increases, Treasury Bond sales are already starting to pick up dramatically. And as the Fed finally makes its final increase before bringing down interest rates next year, there should be a massive surge of Long-Term Treasury Bond purchases locking in these PEAK rates, replenishing the treasury and paying our debts as they come due.

Harold Zimmerman is an attorney and former auto mechanic/repair shop owner. He currently specializes in exploring issues concerning the U.S. economy.

Save Sacred Grounds

Jacob Eisenberg started this petition

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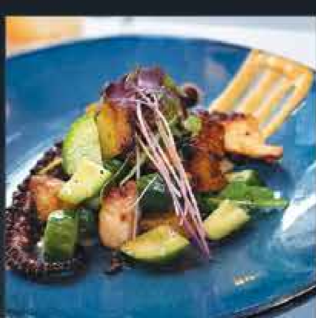

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