

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

*"The object of the Monitor is to injure no man,
but to bless all mankind."*

— MARY BAKER EDDY

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What widespread data center opposition shows us

Staff writer Story Hinckley reports this week from rural Utah, at the site of what would be one of the largest data centers on Earth.

The specs of this proposed project are astounding: bigger than the size of Manhattan; a heat signature that rivals a volcano; the ability, according to some scientific analyses, to raise nearby nighttime temperatures by 12 degrees. This is not what is currently called a hyperscale data center. This is much, much larger.

But that's not the point of Story's piece.

Instead of the predictions of dire environmental consequences, Story focuses on the reaction within Utah to this proposed facility. There is, she found, a cross-partisan, grassroots effort that's not just about blocking the project, but about citizens reasserting control over the political process and how money influences it. Republicans and Democrats are largely aligned, she says, on wanting more say about how policymakers make choices about the land, about the extent to which artificial intelligence should reshape physical and economic worlds, and about who gets to determine how resources are used.



By Stephanie Hanes
Print Editor

This pushback is increasingly common in the United States. Commentators from across the political spectrum have observed that, while opponents might cite water or electricity usage as their reasons, there are deeper rationales for the reaction against data centers.

Some say the opposition is a common response to new technologies, repeated from the printing press forward. Others blame an "activist" class they accuse of bringing climate change concerns to any debate. Still others say it's a reaction to the rapid development of artificial intelligence and the comparatively snail-paced policymaking around it.

But there's another explanation – one that comes through in a number of articles in this issue and elsewhere across the Monitor's platforms. And it involves agency, fairness, and accountability.

A year and a half ago, I traveled through rural Maryland to talk with people who were slated to lose swaths of land to new, high-powered transmission lines carrying power to data centers in northern Virginia. Local officials, farmers, and most residents opposed the Maryland Piedmont Reliability Project. And they had rapidly joined together, across political lines, to push back against it. People from both the conservative right and progressive left told me how they felt it was simply not right for big business, distant politicians, and even more distant tech moguls to make decisions that impacted the land and homes they had tended for generations.

They wanted a say, they told me, and they wanted to redefine what "progress" meant.

In this issue, you'll read about people from South Korea to Canada to Route 66 who are debating and advocating their own versions of progress. There will be disagreements about what

that word means for policy and politics and miles-long rows of computer servers. But despite tropes that paint our era as one of apathy and distraction, our reporting shows agency – individuals and communities putting aside differences to demand both fairness and the ability to define what matters. ■

NEWS: DISPATCHES

FCC weighs cutting internet access at schools, libraries

Public schools and libraries across the United States could face steep increases in the prices they pay for internet service, following a review being launched by the Federal Communications Commission.

More than 100,000 schools and 11,000 libraries rely on the program known as E-Rate, which has provided discounts of between 20% and 90% for three decades, thanks to a 1996 law passed by Congress that mandates telecom providers subsidize universal access.

About 47 million students and library patrons depend on this access for connectivity, according to the Congressional Research Service.

But in a notice for public comment filed in late August, the FCC cited increased concern about the impact excessive screen time is having on children and suggested that it might be time to end subsidies for school- and library-based broadband and Wi-Fi services.

The commission also said the internet is so widely available that subsidies might no longer be necessary. "At what point should policymakers conclude that the program's core objective has been achieved?" it asked.

The move is vigorously opposed by The School Superintendents Association and the American Library Association, which implored its members to weigh in.

"If funding is eliminated or reduced, libraries across the country could face difficult choices between maintaining internet access and funding other essential services," the library association said in an email blast to its members.

Jamar Rahming, CEO of the Cuyahoga County Public Library, a 27-branch system outside Cleveland, says a reduction of subsidies could jeopardize digital access that allows residents to apply for jobs, join telehealth medical appointments, and video chat with relatives overseas.

The change could also imperil library programs that train workers in the use of artificial intelligence, which have become critical in a region hard-hit by the loss of blue-collar jobs, Mr. Rahming says.

Roughly 250 miles away in Lansing, Michigan, Sheryl Knox, the technology director of the Capital Area District Libraries, a 14-branch system that serves 244,000 people in both urban and rural areas, said a rollback of subsidies could lead her system to cut back on mobile hot spots that allow residents without high-speed internet to watch streaming movies and listen to audiobooks at home.

Changes could also raise administrative costs.

"Everything runs through the internet," Ms. Knox says, "all patron records, the library catalogue, when someone places a hold that's on our server. If we have to pay more for that, it's less for everything else."

The \$2.5 billion in annual support provided to schools and li-

barriers is covered by fees paid by telecommunications companies.

The subsidy has long been a target of President Donald Trump's inner circle. Last year, the America First Legal Foundation, founded by White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller, filed an amicus brief in a failed legal challenge that asked the Supreme Court to rule E-Rate unconstitutional.

In The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, widely viewed to be the Trump administration's policy framework, now-FCC Chairman Brendan Carr wrote it was time to "end wasteful broadband spending policies."

Innovations such as low-orbit satellite services from StarLink and Amazon "counsel in favor of eliminating many of the heavy-handed FCC regulations," Mr. Carr wrote, in a chapter that targeted "universal service requirements."

In its request for public comment this week, the FCC laid out a number of possibilities, including restricting internet subsidies to rural schools and libraries, excluding areas with larger tax bases, or eliminating subsidies entirely.

The split is not entirely partisan.

Last year, a long list of Republican lawmakers – including Sens. Deb Fischer of Nebraska, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Roger Marshall of Kansas, and Mike Crapo of Idaho – joined Democratic colleagues in defending the program in an amicus brief filed before the Supreme Court.

"The world is more interconnected than ever, making consistent and reliable access to communications services a necessity for full participation in society," the lawmakers wrote.

The FCC's deadline for public comment is Oct. 13, setting up a process that could lead to new rules early next year.

– Aaron Glantz / Staff writer

Polling in this year's primaries missed the mark

Preelection polls were wide of the mark in two closely watched Democratic primaries in Michigan and Wisconsin. In both races, polling showed progressive candidates leading by large margins, but the results proved much closer. In Michigan, former public health official Abdul El-Sayed only narrowly defeated Rep. Haley Stevens to win the party's nomination for an open U.S. Senate seat. In Wisconsin, left-wing state lawmaker Francesca Hong lost the gubernatorial primary by a razor-thin margin to David Crowley, a moderate who runs Milwaukee County, Wisconsin's largest municipality.

Many of the polls that forecast blowout victories for Mr. El-Sayed and Ms. Hong were internal surveys that partisan groups selectively released. But independent polls also failed to predict the outcomes.

Problems with polling aren't new, but the challenges have grown amid an evolving information landscape in which many people no longer own landlines or answer calls from unknown numbers. This electoral cycle included a purported pollster who admitted to conducting no actual polling after promoting a fraudulent survey – one which Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass cited in a now-deleted post on X.

Polling misses are particularly common in primaries, which have become increasingly important at a time when most House seats aren't competitive in the general election. What happened

in Wisconsin and Michigan, as well as in Minnesota's U.S. Senate primary, is what often happens: Polls offered a preelection snapshot that didn't predict the outcomes of complex, late-breaking races.

The average polling error in statewide primaries is 13 percentage points, according to an analysis by FiftyPlusOne, a political polling website that analyzed 87 Senate and gubernatorial races held in 2014, 2016, and 2024. One in 10 of these races had an error rate of around 20 points. By comparison, polls taken in the two weeks before the 2024 presidential election averaged within 3.3 percentage points of the results, according to the American Association for Public Opinion Research. (In 2016 and 2020, the average error was above five points.)

But polling misses in primaries can have a real impact. Polls shape media coverage of candidates and affect their ability to raise money by casting them as viable or not in the eyes of donors. In presidential primaries, they set expectations and determine how results are spun and who has momentum. Candidates also rely on internal polls to hone their positions on issues and build coalitions.

"Candidates conduct polls for strategic purposes, and they only release information for strategic purposes," says Michael Traugott, a professor emeritus at the University of Michigan who studies political campaigns and how they communicate.

This is why we have independent polls, says Lee Miringoff, a former president of the National Council of Public Polls. News organizations began commissioning preelection polls in the 1950s so that they weren't reliant on polls released by campaigns. "They felt the public had to have their own source of independent information," he says.

– Simon Montlake / Staff writer

Abrupt US shift prompts calls in South Korea for nuclear weapons

The South Korean marine corps said that Washington had canceled joint drills originally scheduled for September, citing competing demands in Iran. The announcement came days after President Donald Trump curtailed another round of high-profile defense exercises, noting that he was disappointed in South Korea's refusal to help with the U.S. war in the Middle East.

In Seoul, the dual cancellations have added to the sense that U.S. military support has become conditional – and are reigniting calls for South Korea to develop its own nuclear arms.

Several U.S. allies around the world are facing the same challenge: If a country can no longer count on Washington's support, it must pursue a more self-reliant approach to national security. But South Korea might be best poised to make an actual, radical change toward that end. The government under President Lee Jae-myung is relatively strong, as is South Korea's economy, and security is top of mind for Korean voters. As the number of military-age men declines and the threat from Pyongyang grows, many are eager to shore up regional stability, but are also wary of getting dragged into other countries' conflicts.

Acquiring nuclear weapons – a once-taboo notion that now has growing support among South Korea's public – would dramatically shift the paradigm in northern Asia.

"The more transactional the alliance [with the United States] appears, the stronger the argument becomes in Korea for autonomous

defense capabilities,” says Cheong Seong-chang, vice president of South Korea’s Sejong Institute.

A recent survey found about 80% of South Koreans believe the country should invest in becoming a nuclear state, up from about 64% in 2013.

“The taboo has substantially eroded,” says Christoph Bluth, a professor of international relations and security at the University of Bradford in England. “Nuclearization is increasingly treated as a legitimate strategic option.”

President Lee has not backed the development of nuclear weapons, but he has advocated for South Korea to take back wartime operational control from the U.S.

Experts warn that these efforts could backfire. South Korea has so far managed to avoid getting involved in the war in Iran, or in a contingency plan for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, but not without some strategic maneuvering. Becoming a stronger military power and defense industry exporter could make that maneuvering harder.

– Kelly Kasulis Cho / Contributor

Syria moves off US terrorism sponsor list

The designation had restricted exports to Syria, requiring prior U.S. government approvals, and kept many international banks and companies from doing business in the country. It prevented Syrians from using American technology such as Google services to Amazon, without disguising their location. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in a statement credited Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa for distancing the country from international terrorism. Although the U.S. Commerce Department still must revise its classification of Syria, the announcement is expected to lead hesitant international banks, lenders, and insurers to consider Syria a place to do business.

The Syrian government has passed an investment law enacting sweeping incentives for foreign and local investors, strengthened its central bank, and is auditing its financial system to identify and fix compliance gaps.

– Staff

Drought out West: Bears look for human food to binge

Wildfires. Smoky skies. Lawn-watering limits. Fewer slopes to ski. Coloradans have increasingly lived with the effects of dire drought.

Now, bears are emerging as the latest bellwether of a warming West.

Colorado has logged nearly twice as many bear encounters this year compared with last. Dwindling natural food sources have sent them sniffing toward kitchens and garbage cans, wildlife experts say. Seemingly desperate, the animals have even shown up in cities. Recently, Denver police officers helped coax a black bear from a tree.

In August alone, black bears broke into homes, bit people, and pilfered from a pie shop. Between January and mid-August last

year, Colorado Parks and Wildlife reported 3,115 “bear sightings and conflicts.” This year, that count nearly doubled to 6,129.

While drought reduces fruit, nuts, and grasses for bears, wildfires have also wiped out some of their meals. Along with heat waves, dismally low levels of snowpack – a vital trickle-down reservoir for the region – have contributed to dry conditions. Like other Western states, Colorado has had its warmest year on record, since 1895, a federal drought monitor reported this past spring.

“We might expect an increase in wildlife sightings in general,” beyond bears, says Cassandre Venumière-Lefebvre, a wildlife biologist at Colorado State University. One furry guest recently came to campus on move-in day.

Picking fruit as soon as it’s ripe from backyard trees and securing trash in bear-resistant cans can help deter lurkers, says Ms. Venumière-Lefebvre. When the animals repeatedly get grub from homes, the state wildlife agency warns, they can “lose their natural wariness of people” and learn to return.

Colorado only has black bears. Generally, if it hasn’t seen you yet, “it’s best to just quietly walk away,” the biologist says. If the bear is aware, “make yourself bigger, yell, ‘Hey bear!’ and then move away calmly.”

Wildlife officials in the state can euthanize bears after repeat incursions into developed areas. Still, says Dr. Venumière-Lefebvre, black bears are “pretty wary of people.”

But that hasn’t stopped the hungry animals from venturing close.

In her Denver neighborhood in late August, Kathryn Muldoon watched a bear perch itself in a tree – a few blocks from a highway – as authorities arrived.

It’s crazy the bear made it this far and “no one noticed,” says Ms. Muldoon. Still, the police and wildlife officials “handled it very well.”

Eventually, the 100-pound male bear flopped down into a tarp. “It didn’t have the smoothest landing, but the bear is ok!” Colorado Parks and Wildlife said on X.

How did it even get there?

“We don’t really have any clues,” says spokesperson Kara Van Hoose.

Famished bears

The bears are meant to binge right now. In a phase called hyperphagia, the state says, bears can spend up to 20 hours daily searching for food and stocking up winter fat. A good diet helps them reproduce and for cubs to survive.

As omnivores, they’ll eat everything from berries to baby deer. And, apparently, frozen pizza from Diane Smooke’s duplex in Edwards, west of Denver.

In August, Ms. Smooke says, a bear climbed through an open window and trashed her kitchen. The animal also nudged knobs on her electric stove, which caused food wrappers strewn on top to smolder.

“It was a mess,” says the retired occupational therapist. More than 20 years in town, Ms. Smooke says this was a first. “He ate half an apple and put it back in the fruit bowl.”

Wildlife officials eventually trapped the bear, which had also broken into her neighbor’s place, she says.

To help with deterrence, a new state law that took effect in August increases consequences for humans. The law lowers the burden of proof from “intentionally” to simply “knowingly” leaving food in the open when there’s a reasonable chance it could lure bears.

Late in the month, the state wildlife agency posted an update: The Denver bear had been released to the wild. A video shows him

bounding away through drought-dry grass.

– Sarah Matusek / Staff writer

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

\$450
MILLION

The amount in financing Colombia requested from the World Bank as it conducts emergency relief efforts following the 7.4 magnitude earthquake Aug. 10. The World Bank disbursed \$200 million toward quake response efforts on Aug. 14. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates reconstruction could cost between \$1 billion and \$10 billion.

\$3
BILLION

The amount the U.S. Treasury pays each day in interest on the nation's \$40 trillion debt, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Interest payments on debt have risen 14% from the same period last year, driven by a larger debt burden and higher long-term interest rates.

68%

The share of Puerto Rico experiencing drought conditions. A record-dry summer has depleted key water resources on the island, forcing the government to implement rotating 48-hour water shut-offs for more than 180,000 households and businesses.

\$200
MILLION

The amount pledged to the Phoenix Species Project, an initiative to reverse the decline of 100 of Earth's most threatened animal species. Backed by Leonardo DiCaprio's Re:wild and Jeff Bezos' Bezos Earth Fund, it is the largest single philanthropic fund dedicated to recovering critically endangered species.

\$12.5
BILLION

The amount Josh Kushner, the brother of Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, and Bob Iger, the former CEO of Disney, agreed upon to purchase the Los Angeles Lakers, pending NBA approval. This represents a record price for a U.S. professional sports team.

– Emily Staunton and Donald Keough / Staff writers

Sources: United Press International, El Pais, Reuters, Fortune, BBC, The Associated Press, The Guardian

OUR WORLD

Made in China? Tech giants rethinking production.

Tech companies are moving production out of China as pressure builds to diversify supply chains. Google plans to shift production of all its smartphones and other Pixel products to India and Vietnam in 2027, according to a recent Nikkei Asia report. Apple, meanwhile, aims to make all U.S.-bound iPhones in India by the end of 2026. Even Microsoft, long considered a China stalwart, appears to be scaling back its footprint; corporate filings show the company has closed more than a dozen offices in China since 2021.

– Lindsey McGinnis

“We were on tenterhooks after the eggs were laid.”

That's Mhairi Maclauchlan, the site manager at Campfield Marsh in Cumbria, England, describing the reserve's nervous wait before a set of osprey chicks successfully hatched recently. Ospreys are continuing their revival in England with the first chicks hatched in more than a century on land owned by The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Driven to extinction in the United Kingdom in the early 1900s, the birds migrate to West Africa in the winter and return to the U.K. to breed.

– Tim Backshall

“We are transforming our intelligence services.”

That was Alexander Dobrindt, Germany's interior minister, speaking in August to German newspaper Bild about a plan to “revolutionize” Germany's security architecture by giving its spy agencies operational powers. The government has approved a draft law to lift restrictions on German intelligence services put in place during the years after World War II. The decision came after a deadly car-ramming attack in July in Berlin and the more recent discovery of an explosives-laden drone at Leipzig airport.

– Matthew Bell

Recovered artifacts on display in Pakistan

“Legacy Returns Home,” a new exhibition at the Islamabad Museum, features hundreds of repatriated artifacts from Pakistan's Buddhist history. The collection includes pieces that were illegally smuggled out of Pakistan and made their way to New York, where they were seized by the Antiquities Trafficking Unit of the Manhattan District Attorney's Office and subsequently returned. Though a predominantly Muslim country, Pakistan was once a hub of South Asian Buddhism. The antiquities housed in the exhibition include a gold Strato I coin minted circa 105-85 B.C.E., a second-century Buddha footprint, and terra-cotta figurines dating from 3500-2600 B.C.E.

– Hasan Ali

HANSEL VALLEY, UTAH

Unlike anything on Earth, a proposed mega data center by the dwindling Great Salt Lake sparks a backlash

Utah aims to be industry-friendly. But choosing a fragile ecosystem to house such a sprawling facility has generated intense grassroots opposition.

By **Story Hinckley** / Staff writer

As data centers proliferate across the country, amassing space in both acreage and America's politics, no projects compare with the one planned for this corner of northwestern Utah.

The basic specs describe an endeavor unlike anything on Earth. The Stratos Project is set to take over 20,000 acres of desert brush and farmland in Box Elder County, abutting the Great Salt Lake. Even at this reduced size (the original plan was 40,000 acres), the site would be bigger than Manhattan. At full build, the Stratos Project estimates it would consume 9 gigawatts of electricity, more than twice the amount used to power the rest of the state.

"We keep saying 'data center,' and that's something different" from this project, says Robert Davies, an associate professor of physics at Utah State University. His calculations put the project's electricity consumption at more than double what the developers are suggesting. The thermal energy coming off the Stratos Project, says Dr. Davies, could be equivalent to the energy of 23 atomic bombs being deposited on this valley every day in the form of waste heat – potentially raising nighttime temperatures in the area by as much as 12 degrees Fahrenheit.

Given that the project is discussed in terms of atomic bombs, and given that grassroots opposition to data centers appears to have permeated every region of the country, such a project might seem daunting, if not impossible, to many developers. But Stratos is backed by Kevin O'Leary, who has earned the sarcastic nickname "Mr. Wonderful" because of his ruthlessness toward fledgling startups on the reality TV series "Shark Tank." He plans to change the name of Hansel Valley – with its rolling farmland, nearby migratory bird refuge, and soon, the biggest data center in the world – to Wonder Valley.

Mr. O'Leary and his team had decent reason to believe that if such a gargantuan project were to work anywhere, it would work here. That has a little bit to do with the demographics of Box Elder, which is a rural and Republican county within a rural and Republican state, and a lot to do with an obscure Utah commission that allowed the project to get approved in May without the same community input or environmental reviews that typically dog data centers a fraction of Stratos' size. In news interviews, Mr. O'Leary has described Hansel Valley as "arid desert" that's "not in anybody's backyard."

But many assumptions that Stratos' investors or Utah politicians might have had about Box Elder County – about either the

acquiescence of its people or the barrenness of its landscape – have been proved wrong over the past few months. County commission meetings have been moved to the local fairgrounds for space, some of the most powerful local politicians have been voted out of office, and efforts to save the ever-shrinking Great Salt Lake have seen a surge of interest. If data center opposition has scrambled politics and electoral stereotypes across the country over the past few months, Box Elder County has shown that to be true even in the unlikeliest of places.

"The environment here is largely compliant," says Brenna Williams, who has lived in Box Elder County for two decades. "We take what we get and go with the flow and don't speak out about much. I bet they were totally shocked when all of a sudden they had all this backlash."

Bipartisan blowback

Few issues have united increasingly polarized Americans like data centers. Voters across the country – rural and urban, Republican and Democratic – have joined in opposition, criticizing data centers for guzzling local communities' resources with little long-term economic gain for residents. Seven in 10 Americans oppose the construction of an AI data center in their area, according to a Gallup survey from March. That means more Americans say they are willing to live next door to a nuclear power plant.

This opposition includes conservative voters – like many of those in Box Elder County – who typically align with the Republican Party's guiding principles of a free market and small government. While 75% of Democrats in the Gallup poll strongly or somewhat oppose data centers to support AI in their community, 63% of Republicans say the same. In early August, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas announced a pause on new data centers in his state, which had the fastest-growing data center market in the country, pending a thorough review of their energy and water usage. U.S. Rep. Byron Donalds, the GOP gubernatorial nominee in Florida who is backed by President Donald Trump, has been running ads about how he will "protect Florida families and communities from data centers."

At least 75 data centers worth approximately \$130 billion were blocked or delayed in the first quarter of 2026 alone, according to the research firm Data Center Watch, roughly equivalent to the entire pushback in 2025. Lawmakers in 15 states have introduced legislation for data center bans or pauses, and more than 100 localities have already approved their own pauses. In mid-July, New York became the first state to enact a statewide moratorium when Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul signed an executive order putting a one-year pause on facilities using more than 50 megawatts.

"Large" data centers in the United States are sized at 10 to 50 megawatts. New, "hyperscale" data centers use between 200 and 500 megawatts. The Stratos Project "is 20 times bigger than the high end of a hyperscale data center," says Dr. Davies. "This would be one of the largest single-site heat sources on the entire planet. That includes volcanoes."

Grassroots opposition has already come to northwestern Utah. In June, the two Box Elder County commissioners who were up for reelection were voted out of office, along with Utah's most powerful state lawmaker, Republican State Senate President Stuart Adams, who also chairs the special state group that approved the project.

And in response to criticism of the Stratos Project, Utah Republican Gov. Spencer Cox signed an executive order in late May establishing a "higher bar" for data center development in the state. (Mr. Cox, however, hasn't walked back his support for the Stratos

Project itself.)

“Effect on resources,” such as water and energy, was the top concern by participants in the Gallup poll – more than half of poll respondents mentioned this. But some who study data centers say these claims are overblown. Even in the West, which is in the middle of a historic megadrought, more water is used every year watering lawns. Utahns are shocked when they are told that data centers currently use less than 1% of the state’s water, says Ben Abbott, a global ecologist at Brigham Young University in Provo. Dr. Abbott pays close attention to the state’s water supply as executive director of Grow the Flow, a group leading the effort to save the Great Salt Lake.

There is a tendency “for any change in a community to get a lot of blowback,” he says. And as Americans grow increasingly anxious about the societal and professional implications of artificial intelligence, and without a clear national direction for regulating the technology, many say data centers have stood in as a useful proxy for voters to vent their fears and frustrations. When Dr. Abbott first heard about the pushback rising up in the sleepy, northwestern corner of his state, he thought, “Let’s cool our heels” and wait for the details.

“But then, when I saw the specs of the [Stratos] project,” says Dr. Abbott, “my jaw just dropped.”

The project initially requested 13,000 acre-feet (more than 4 billion gallons) of annual water rights. After reading through the project’s details, however, Dr. Abbott concluded that the amount of water needed for the project could be closer to 100,000 acre-feet. That kind of water usage by Stratos “would more than erase all the work we have done to save [the] Great Salt Lake,” he says.

The past 25 years in the American West have been the driest since the year 800, say scientists. Less snowpack, as well as more water diversions for agricultural and urban uses, has brought the lake down to less than 33% full and 8 feet below its minimum healthy elevation. Without the Salt Lake region cutting water usage by 40%, the lake’s ecosystem could be dead in the next few years, says Dr. Abbott, as the final puddles of water become too salty for anything to live. Among other consequences, the professor and others say, the lake’s deterioration has international implications for the 12 million migratory birds that stop here every year. “We’re in a total state of emergency,” he says.

Mr. Cox officially declared a state of emergency over Utah’s record-breaking drought in May, and he has lobbied Washington for funding to save the Great Salt Lake. All of which makes his support for the Stratos Project confusing, say locals, especially as the governor calls on Utahns to pray for rain and pushes a campaign to save the Western Hemisphere’s largest saline lake ahead of the 2034 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics.

During a news conference in late April, Mr. Cox argued that Utah had a national security “obligation” to build data centers and compete against China, while rebutting claims that Stratos’ approval was pushed through. “We can’t just say no and shut the doors and go home and let China win this, this technology race, so that just can’t be an option,” Mr. Cox said. “I’m so tired of our country taking years to get stuff done. It’s the dumbest thing ever. We think that taking time makes things better or safer. It absolutely does not.”

One week later, in a post on X, Mr. Cox reiterated that “Industry” is Utah’s state motto, but expressed regret for his news conference comments while also instructing state departments to follow through on conducting thorough environmental assessments. Later in May, the governor said “there’s no question, the process was

not good” for approving Stratos, and that future projects like this should involve input from both his office and the state legislature.

A heated meeting

Just as Box Elder County is an unsuspecting location for a data-center opposition movement, Ms. Williams, the longtime resident, is its unsuspecting leader, even by her own admission. The soft-spoken grandmother of six was enjoying her retirement as a former econometrician – a specialist who studies the intersection of economics and statistics. Then, in late April, she heard at the grocery store that the Box Elder County Commission would be voting in a few days on whether to approve a data center project endorsed by Utah’s Military Installation Development Authority on 40,000 acres of private land in the county.

The legislature created MIDA almost two decades ago after Utah’s Hill Air Force Base, one of the state’s largest employers, faced possible closure in the mid-1990s. The goal for the eight-member board, a mix of elected officials appointed by other elected officials, is to approve economic projects “with a military touch,” said Mark Shepherd, a MIDA board member and mayor of Clearfield City, Utah, on a panel about the Stratos Project in July. And this state-level political group is granted great power to do so, as MIDA can levy taxes for projects while bypassing local or county laws. Critics argue that MIDA has taken power beyond its original charter, approving projects such as Stratos and a Deer Valley ski resort development whose military connection is tenuous at best.

Ms. Williams was one of more than 1,000 people to show up in early May to a Box Elder County Commission meeting, which had been moved to the county fairgrounds to accommodate the expected crowd. “I don’t know that has ever happened in Box Elder County history,” says Brigham Daniels, an environmental and property law expert at the University of Utah. When the three commissioners signaled they were ready to approve MIDA’s project without the public input that many attendees came for, there were boos and jeers. The commissioners moved to a private room and approved the project unanimously. As she was leaving the fairgrounds, Ms. Williams’ husband, Alan, whose family has lived in Box Elder County for five generations, turned to her and said, “Are you really going to referendum this thing?”

The next morning, Ms. Williams and other locals went to the county clerk and filed for a referendum, which would allow local voters to either approve or reject the Stratos Project at the ballot box. The county denied the referendum, with the county attorney arguing that the issue wasn’t legally referable to voters because the objection was to administrative actions, not “broadly applicable legislative acts.” If a data center project the size of a big city is not “broadly applicable” to the county, says Dr. Daniels, “then we have all lost our minds.”

Ms. Williams and members of a group she helped create, the Box Elder Accountability Referendum, known as BEAR, filed an appeal of the referendum denial. In early August, attorneys for both the county and Mr. O’Leary asked a judge to dismiss the appeal. BEAR now plans to file a motion on why the appeal should go forward. O’Leary Digital, Mr. O’Leary’s company backing the Stratos Project, did not respond to repeated requests by the Monitor for comment.

“They are going to do everything they can to draw this out as long as possible,” says Ms. Williams. She doesn’t see opposition dwindling, however.

Mr. Shepherd, the MIDA board member, assured concerned locals at the Grow the Flow panel event that the project would be

subject to a full slate of environmental reviews and permits, which are currently in a “holding pattern” as the referendum process plays itself out. Whereas a city would have to get environmental reviews and permits done before an economic project is approved, MIDA operates “almost the opposite,” says Mr. Shepherd. In other words, the project approval comes first, and then the project must meet the state’s environmental standards.

But the problem with this process, say legal experts, is that promises were already made to developers. Now, outside of the referendum process, any government backtracking on the project could open the state of Utah to lawsuits. And without any state environmental assessments, local scientists say, they must do their own analyses – often on their own time – to help locals understand what the project could mean for such a fragile ecosystem.

Because, in a place like this, that fragility is not discreet. Nearby Locomotive Springs, named for the noise of the water that once rushed up from the earth, is now a stagnant pond with green algae blooming at its edges. A single dirt road cuts across the landscape, running parallel to wire fences snarled with tumbleweeds. At the Great Salt Lake’s Monument Point, the soft, gray belly of the lake bed lies exposed, no water in sight.

“We’re past the point where we should be concerned” about the lake, says local business owner Val Anderson, as he stands with his sister, Rhonda Lauritzen, and holding a photograph of their father here at the lake’s edge just a few decades ago. Now, to touch the waters of the Great Salt Lake, Ms. Lauritzen needs to walk out on the lake bed for more than 4 miles from the shoreline where she swam as a teenager.

“They thought [the Stratos Project] was a good idea here, because if you look superficially at the landscape, there is a lot of empty open land here,” says local artist Erik Linton, who has walked miles around barren salt flats only to find a covey of snowy plovers congregated around a spring. “Just because it doesn’t look maybe what most people think is a stereotypical beautiful lush landscape, then it’s empty and not useful. ... That’s such a misguided way to value land.”

After a few silent minutes at the now-still Locomotive Springs, there is a rustling. An animal’s croaking rides away with the wind, and two sparrows rise from the reeds. ■

BEIJING AND SEATTLE

From mahjong clubs to ‘Chinamaxxing,’ why Chinese culture seems to be everywhere

Americans are embracing traditions from the Middle Kingdom with an enthusiasm not seen since before the pandemic. Beijing welcomes the trend.

By Ann Scott Tyson / Staff writer

It’s a warm weeknight in Seattle’s trendy Capitol Hill neighborhood, and hundreds of 20-somethings cluster around green felt table tops, talking and laughing as they clack the white tiles of a 19th-century Chinese game.

The Emerald City Tile Club began last year with just a handful

of mahjong players, and quickly “blew up,” says founder Sean Herrera. These days, it meets twice a month, and table reservations are snapped up within minutes.

Chinese culture suddenly seems everywhere, from the mahjong groups springing up nationwide to the surging interest in Chinese trinkets and video games. On social media, Westerners extol the benefits of “Chinamaxxing” by embracing traditional Chinese wellness habits, such as wearing house slippers, and influencers beam gee-whiz China tours to millions of viewers – helping amplify an idealistic, state-sanctioned image of the Asian superpower.

In sharp contrast to the pandemic years, when the country’s popularity hit rock bottom, China and many things Chinese are now regaining favor in the American mainstream. Polls show that the percentage of Americans with positive views of China, while still a minority, has nearly doubled since 2023, with young people’s attitudes the most favorable. Beijing is taking note, as are ordinary folks in China.

“It’s good that Chinese culture is being absorbed and inherited – before it was suppressed and ignored,” says Wang Feifei, a teacher from China’s southern Anhui province, posing for photos with her sister in traditional Chinese garb at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing.

“Foreigners come to learn some of our Chinese culture, understand some of our customs and lifestyles, and then start imitating us,” she adds. “We’re very proud.”

China maximizes its soft-power boom

Such U.S. enthusiasm for Chinese culture, however superficial, would have been hard to imagine a few years ago. When the pandemic hit in early 2020, China closed its doors to most foreigners, limited internal travel, and imposed draconian lockdowns. U.S. President Donald Trump often attacked Beijing for what he called the “Wuhan virus,” fueling anti-Chinese sentiment, fear, and a spike in hate crimes against Asians.

It was a low point for many Chinese Americans, including Sherry Zhu, a social media influencer raised in New Jersey, who has recalled in media interviews being teased as a child for her cultural heritage.

But in 2025, she saw the pendulum swinging the other way. On social media, Americans were embracing Chinese culture and lifestyle habits, praising Chinese technology, and even joining the Chinese social media app Rednote. Ms. Zhu, a self-described “Chinese baddie” whose parents were both born and raised in China, joined in.

“I’m gonna let you in on a little secret, OK?” she jokingly told her TikTok followers early this year. “Tomorrow, you are turning Chinese.”

Ms. Zhu proceeded to post rules for “becoming” Chinese: drinking warm water, eating congee and hot pot, and celebrating Chinese holidays. In recent weeks, she’s posted about traveling in China and popular Cantonese TV dramas. Her posts went viral, racking up millions of views and adding fuel to an emerging “Chinamaxxing” trend.

From welcoming a record number of foreign tourists – including growing numbers of U.S. citizens – to selling more hot-water thermoses, China is already reaping gains from its growing soft-power influence.

State-run media and officials are eager to promote the trend, seeing it as complementary to the country’s growing hard power – showcased by breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, green energy, and e-commerce.

In May, China’s ambassador to the United States, Xie Feng, de-

scribed Chinamaxxing as part of an “unstoppable” force bringing the U.S. and China closer together.

A one-sided view of China

Still, researchers warn that Americans are not gaining a full picture of China.

A series of studies published last year found that TikTok and other made-in-China social media platforms featured more pro-Chinese Communist Party content than American apps, and suppressed posts on sensitive topics such as the Chinese government’s human rights abuses. U.S. influencers who travel to China – sometimes on Beijing’s dime – tend to highlight China’s skyscrapers and high-speed rail, while glossing over signs of its stagnant economy. They often present their experience as the “real China.”

During a trip to China in April, Ms. Zhu echoed that position in a Chinese-language interview for Xinhua. “Not many people get to travel to China, so I want to make propaganda about what China is really like,” she said.

Tianyu Fang, a Harvard University researcher focused on Chinese technology trends, says “there’s this fascination with Chinese futurism” that ignores how the country is built by a low-paid, less-educated labor force that lacks protections or upward mobility.

“There is always this Western expat who goes to China, and everything is cheap and convenient,” he says. Yet the Chinamaxxing trend is “blind to a lot of the real problems in China,” including human rights abuses and the challenges of living in an authoritarian surveillance state.

Ultimately, he says, these trends might say more about Americans’ needs than China’s inherent cultural appeal.

For instance, the explosion in mahjong get-togethers across the U.S. – up 235% during the first half of this year – reflects a broader Gen Z shift away from digital life to in-person gatherings such as trivia nights and bird-watching, according to data from ticketing platform Eventbrite. Several of the young tech workers at Seattle’s Emerald City Tile Club said it was a cool place to socialize.

“It keeps growing, friend to friend,” says organizer Thomas Lof-tus. “It’s very much a social club.”

On a deeper level, young Americans might be feeling pessimistic about their own prospects and could be looking elsewhere for answers, says Mr. Fang. “I observed this wave of [young people] seeming more positive about China as the U.S. was scaling down its globalist aspirations,” he says, leading some to conclude that “we need to be more like China.”

■ Donald Keough contributed reporting to this story from Boston.

AMARILLO, TEXAS

‘Sit with the women’: Finding hidden history on Route 66

Researchers sought stories of those who lived and worked along the road before it was “America’s Main Street.” They made an unexpected discovery.

By Harry Bruinius / Staff writer

Before Karina Amalbert set out across Route 66 two years ago, much of the American West existed for her mostly as a place on a map.

Born and raised in Florida, with family roots in Puerto Rico, Ms. Amalbert likes to joke that “anything past Alabama was foreign to me.” When she told her family that a new graduate fellowship was sending her to Amarillo, Texas, their response was equally revealing. “They literally were like, ‘Where is that?’” she remembers. “And I had to pull out a map.”

She arrived in the Texas Panhandle and climbed into a large white rental van with a group of young Latina researchers for what would be, for several of them, their first real American road trip, in this case to conduct historical fieldwork.

For 16 days, the van would carry them west through the Texas Panhandle, New Mexico, Arizona, and on toward California. It had many of the ingredients of the classic Route 66 road trip: a group of young people, an uncertain itinerary, a highway stretching west.

But Ms. Amalbert and her companions had been sent onto America’s most legend-full road to look for the people the folklore had largely left out.

Sehila Mota Casper had spent years puzzling over that absence. “I love Route 66,” she says. “But whenever I think about Route 66, I think about it as a poetic Americana thing,” says Ms. Mota Casper, a Tejana historian and executive director of Latinos in Heritage Conservation. She thought of the country’s love affair with cars, family vacations, diners, and motels.

Then she began asking a different question. “What was the Latinx or Mexican experience along Route 66?”

That question became a central thread of her organization’s Abuelas Project, a community archive built from oral histories, photographs, and digital maps. Much of the western road crossed landscapes with Mexican and Indigenous histories older than the United States itself. Today, less than 1% of the 100,000-plus places on the National Register of Historic Places reflect Latino history, Ms. Mota Casper found.

“I was a kid that loved history, that loved reading,” she says. “I would go to the library every single day.” But the stories she heard in her Texas family were often nowhere in those books. “So, that’s where it all started,” she says. “Just curiosity and reading.”

Finding community memory

The team she assembled went looking for the highway’s untold stories. Not only along Route 66, as it turned out, but increasingly beside it. “In order to get at that Latino experience, we had to get off the beaten path.”

In Amarillo, their first major research stop, a student fellow found Teresa Kenedy, a volunteer neighborhood historian who

began connecting the newcomers with residents of the city's historic Barrio neighborhood. The team managed roughly four oral histories that day, then they drove west.

In Albuquerque's Barelás neighborhood, the researchers documented B. Ruppe Drugstore, once the New Mexico city's longest continuously operating pharmacy, now a museum. One of its most prominent figures was Doña Maclovía Sánchez de Zamora, who began working there in 1989, and later became part-owner. She made it a *yerbería*, selling traditional herbs.

It was exactly the sort of history their project was seeking: an ordinary neighborhood business that had also functioned as something larger – a place of healing, knowledge, and community memory.

In Flagstaff, Arizona, the team interviewed Irene Dominguez, a retired hairdresser, inside the salon she kept in her home. Farther west in Seligman, they documented Angel's Barber Shop, opened in 1950 by Angel Delgadillo. Mr. Delgadillo was hardly unknown to Route 66 enthusiasts: After Interstate 40 bypassed Seligman, in 1987, he helped organize the movement that became the Historic Route 66 Association of Arizona, the first of its kind, and helped pioneer the revival of the old road.

"We learned more from asking people questions and the face-to-face interactions than we ever could have learned out of those books," Ms. Amalbert says.

By San Bernardino, California, the team encountered a fourth variation: history not simply as memory, but as a reason to remain responsible for a place.

Tamara Serrao-Leiva, a museum curator the team interviewed there, described feeling an obligation to return attention to her own community – to invest in its "shared identity."

History, she told the researchers, could draw people together and help them "really steward their place well."

Road-trip reunion

Two years after that road trip, Ms. Amalbert and Ms. Mota Casper are sitting around a table at La Frontera in Amarillo with owner Mary Martínez, whose own life seems almost designed to explain why the project was named Abuelas, which means grandmothers.

It was a reunion of sorts, since Ms. Martínez was one of the people who provided an oral history of Amarillo's Barrio neighborhood, and the women came to talk about the project.

Ms. Martínez began making tortillas on this property with her mother-in-law when it was a shop in the 1970s. Then, for many years, it was her in-laws' family grocery store. It became La Frontera restaurant in 1985, and she now owns it, over 50 years after she first started working here.

"That's how I learned so much about the Barrio," Ms. Martínez says. "All the elders would come over here. They were all *comadres* and friends to my *suegra*. So, she knew them all, and then I got to know them."

Around the table, the conversation jumps among tortillas and grandmothers, businesses and family histories.

"We realized that if we wanted to do this project, we couldn't do it in an archive, in a different room," Ms. Amalbert says. "It's always over water, coffee, a table, where we get to hear these family stories."

And throughout the road trip, one pattern had become difficult to miss. Women were often not simply remembering these places. They had mostly built them – restaurants, *tortillerías*, and other neighborhood businesses, passing both work and stories from one generation to another.

The Abuelas Project now puts those memories into interactive StoryMaps covering Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, combining oral histories with photographs, historical research, and geography.

"It's grandmothers who kept our stories alive in that era," Ms. Amalbert says.

Then she offers the researchers' road-trip advice: "Sit with the women," she says. "You're gonna learn some good, good stuff." ■

ENDEAVORS

CARTERVILLE, MISSOURI

Heroes on the front lines and the homefront: This veteran remembers them all

By Harry Bruinius / Staff writer

Claire Swatosh came home. Others did not.

That is the simplest way to understand the Heroes Museum, a memorial garden and artifact exhibit this Marine veteran has spent much of the past 30 years building beside Old Route 66.

It is not a roadside attraction, exactly, though travelers from around the world do stop. It is not a private collection, exactly – though the museum is crowded with artifacts he has brought in over the decades: flags, uniforms, firefighting gear, as well as photographs and other keepsakes, which he carefully arranges and displays.

It is, rather, one man's ongoing answer to an obligation he never quite stopped feeling.

"I spent 21 1/2 years in the Marine Corps," says Mr. Swatosh, who, well into his eighth decade, is still running a landscaping business. "I had a lot of friends that didn't come home. This is my way of giving back."

Along Route 66, America has built thousands of shrines to motion: neon signs and motor courts, old diners and filling stations – places that remember the road as escape. Mr. Swatosh built something slower beside it.

He started the project three decades ago with the idea for a simple memorial pond with a flag. But he kept adding to it. Pathways. Native plants and grasses. A waterfall and gazebo.

"All this rock I've hauled in from Arkansas, or eastern Missouri – the glitter rock actually come out of Canada," Mr. Swatosh says.

He grew up in Iowa and joined the Marine Corps at 17, a young man living on his own and needing something to turn his life around, he says. He had never been far from home until he boarded a plane for San Diego. He stayed almost 22 years, working on the decks of aircraft carriers and then retiring as a gunnery sergeant in 1991.

His service took him through the last years of the Vietnam War and later through the conflict in Lebanon in the 1980s. Along the way, losses accumulated. One still stands out: "a young officer, very, very intelligent." He pauses, breathes deeply. "That was the straw that broke the camel's back."

He moved to southwest Missouri in 1993, working for a local explosives factory. After being laid off, he started his landscaping business.

From the start, he wanted to make his property on Route 66 a memorial for veterans. There have been three different versions over the years, and in some ways it's still not finished.

His memorial dune buggy – which he has slowly built over the past 13 years, using his monthly retirement check to fund the project – is supposed to make people stop, look, and think.

“That’s nothing about me,” he says of the museum and its centerpiece. “It’s about all the people that served, come home; served, didn’t come home.”

The stones in the walkway can be removed and inscribed with the names of those lost. People who stop sometimes buy one to honor someone they knew. The garden and museum honor military veterans, firefighters, law enforcement officers, medics, and service animals.

“The military’s not the only heroes,” Mr. Swatosh says. “We’ve got hometown heroes, too.”

He does not charge admission. Visitors leave donations if they want. Each year, he sets a goal for Toys for Tots and matches what the museum brings in with money from his business. Last year, he says, he helped provide 104 bicycles and hundreds of dollars in toys for local families.

Visitors find him from everywhere: Norway, Germany, Russia, France, Switzerland, Hungary, Spain, Italy. Motorcyclists come in groups. Families wander in from the old road. Some arrive curious about Route 66 nostalgia and find, instead, a working man’s theology of remembrance.

“I don’t preach my faith, but if I wake up in the morning, then the Lord’s blessed me with another day,” Mr. Swatosh says. “If it had been up to me, I’d have been gone a long time ago. Lord’s got other plans. So I’m a firm believer that he looks over me and takes care of me.

“And, you know, the things I’ve seen, some of the things that I’ve done, pushes me to keep going, keep adding on, keep giving back.” ■

CLAIRE SWATOSH

- Joined the U.S. Marine Corps at age 17 and served nearly 22 years, from the last days of the Vietnam War through the conflict in Lebanon in the 1980s
- Started his Heroes Museum along Old Route 66 three decades ago
- Supports the local Toys for Tots program by matching donations from the museum’s visitors

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

BOSTON



Cameron Pugh

Sometimes, reporting feels a lot like pulling at a loose thread. Those threads can come in many forms: a passing comment during a meeting with a source, for instance. For me, a recent thread began with a Boston Herald article that made passing reference to Somerville, Massachusetts, going three years without a single traffic death. I wondered how Somerville, a densely populated Boston suburb known for its quirky charm, managed to pull that off. So I pulled at the thread. As it unraveled, I found a hopeful – and overlooked – story about how a community and its doggedly persistent leaders came together to make roads safer for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians alike. ■



Goodluck Ajeh

BOSTON

I never thought my first assignment as a staff writer for the Monitor would be about elephants. Yet, there I was at Commonwealth Avenue Mall, notebook in hand, weaving through a herd of gigantic bulls, cows, and calves, looking for passersby to interview. The striking scene is part of a traveling exhibition of 100 life-size elephant sculptures, each modeled after a real elephant in southern India, to promote human-wildlife coexistence and conservation. At first, I was nervous to approach random people for interviews. After scouting the scene and identifying key sources, I had a plan. One, two, three successful interviews later (and dozens of rejections), a light bulb went off: Rejection is part of finding the right source. ■



Sophie Hills

DES MOINES, IOWA

Pork chops on a stick, deep-fried mac and cheese, and PB&J corn dogs are all on offer at the Iowa State Fair. Braving a thunderstorm, I perused dahlias, squash, and ears of corn vying for judges’ approval. But amid the food and farm exhibits, I kept an eye out for another fixture: political hopefuls. I came across Rob Sand, Iowa’s state auditor and a Democrat running for governor. The following day, Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly, a potential presidential contender, flipped pork chops in a rite of passage embraced by presidents from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama. For one couple, politics is as much a part of the fair as the food. They’ve camped in the same spot for 28 years and seen politicians from Newt Gingrich to Joe Biden to Donald Trump. It’s a tradition as enduring as the butter cow. ■



Howard LaFranchi

NEW YORK

Howard LaFranchi was at the United Nations headquarters in New York – a venue he has frequented often in the quarter century that he has covered the world body – when a magnitude 7.4 quake struck Colombia on Aug. 10. The U.N. has come to be seen by critics as a “lethargic behemoth on the sidelines of global crises,” says Howard. But on this day, at the noon briefing less than 24 hours after the quake, Colombia’s U.N. resident coordinator addressed reporters: “Not about what to do but about what they were doing already,” Howard says, including applying lessons from Venezuela’s devastating quake in June. It served as a counternarrative in real time. “It really demonstrated how the U.N. still serves a vital role in the world,” he says. ■

– Sara Miller Llana / International editor

Inside the process for choosing a new UN chief

Pressure is growing on the world body to prove its effectiveness and relevance. Here's how its next secretary-general will be selected.

By **Tim Backshall** / Staff writer

When the first U.N. secretary-general, Norwegian Trygve Lie, handed off to his successor in 1953, he gave a stark assessment of the difficulty of the role. "Welcome to the most impossible job in the world," he said.

The search is now underway for a new person to take on this challenging and high-profile position. The current secretary-general, António Guterres, will end his tenure on Dec. 31 after serving for 10 years.

According to the United Nations, the secretary-general's job is "equal parts diplomat and advocate, civil servant and CEO." The holder of the role acts as "a spokesperson for the interests of the world's peoples, in particular the poor and vulnerable."

But, as Mr. Lie found when faced with Cold War clashes between East and West, particularly in the Korean War, it's a role in which mediating among competing interests can sometimes seem like a thankless task.

The U.N. is also under growing pressure to prove its effectiveness. In a speech to the U.N. General Assembly last year to mark its 80th anniversary, U.S. President Donald Trump railed against the organization and questioned its relevance, claiming he had been more successful than it had been in ending recent wars.

Other countries have called for a reform of the organization's structures, to take away the veto power of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council.

"I think it's important for the U.N. to find someone who can make the U.N. more relevant, or at least have the perception that it's more relevant," says Colum Lynch, a senior global reporter with Devex, who has covered the United Nations for three decades. "It's a really pivotal period for the U.N."

Q: How is a new secretary-general chosen?

It's a long, complicated process governed by Article 97 of the U.N. Charter. The search started in November last year when member states were invited to nominate candidates. The process has been revised over the years to make it more transparent, so candidates now take part in televised question-and-answer sessions with representatives from member states. A U.N. town hall debate was broadcast in July.

Since 1981, a series of straw polls has taken place, allowing representatives from the 15 countries that make up the Security Council to indicate whether they think a candidate should be "encouraged" or "discouraged," or if they have no opinion.

The key votes are cast by the five permanent members – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – which have the power to veto a candidate. But, in reality, experts say, three of those countries hold the most power.

"That's Russia, China, and the U.S.," says Georgina Holmes, a senior lecturer in politics and international studies at the Open University in the U.K. "It's really the decision of the P3 [permanent 3] that this will rest on."

At first, all 15 countries have the same colored ballot slips for the straw polls, so no one knows who is supporting or rejecting a candidate. Later, the five permanent members are given red ballots. A "discourage" vote by one of them on a red ballot is likely to end a candidate's hopes.

But finding the right candidate this time could be particularly challenging.

"At the moment, because of the attack on multilateralism, the weakening of the U.N., and the illiberal politics at play, particularly among the P3 ... it's going to be really hard to find a suitable candidate," says Dr. Holmes.

If no acceptable candidate can be found, she says, there could be a new search, or the process could be extended.

One other factor is the notion of regional rotation – that the job will pass from a candidate from one part of the world to another from a part that hasn't held the position recently. A former U.N. official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, as is the norm for the body, says, "It is widely expected that it is the Latin American and Caribbean states' turn."

Deadlocks can occur if the permanent five disagree, and sometimes a compromise candidate can emerge late in the process.

Eventually, one name will be put forward by the Security Council to the 193 members of the General Assembly for approval. So far, its members have never rejected a recommendation for the secretary-general role.

Q: How many secretaries-general have there been, and could the new one be the first woman?

There have been nine permanent secretaries-general since the U.N.'s formation in 1945. All have been men. They have come from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. The incumbent, Mr. Guterres, is a Portuguese politician who was formerly prime minister of his country.

U.N. custom means the winning candidate cannot come from any of the five permanent member countries.

For this election, there's a lot of interest in whether a woman will be chosen to be secretary-general for the first time, with several strong female candidates. Ten years ago, when Mr. Guterres became secretary-general, a number of women were also in the running but failed to win.

"I think this cohort of women candidates do have a lot more experience behind them," says Dr. Holmes. "Really the main focus [though] is who is the right person for the job, who has the right skills." She says it will be important for candidates to demonstrate that they are best placed to avoid falling out with member states.

Q: When will we know who is chosen?

Typically, a recommendation is put to the General Assembly between October and December.

The process could happen faster if the 15 members of the Security Council coalesce around one candidate at an earlier stage. But it could also take longer if no one emerges from the pack or if the five permanent members can't agree.

"There have been a number of periods of history where there have been issues of deadlocks," says Mr. Lynch, "and they've had to come up with creative ways of trying to overcome those." ■

The learning curve for AI in schools

As American students head back to class, schools are being flooded with offers of AI-powered products to improve learning – from Google and Anthropic to OpenAI and Khan Academy.

Most high schoolers already use artificial intelligence for schoolwork. In 2025, 61% of teachers used AI tools. And more than 30 states have adopted guidelines on the use of AI in education.

The new technology helps teachers with administrative tasks. But most research reveals that students benefit when they bring their own special intelligence about the limits and dangers of AI, such as bias or a possible invasion of privacy.

About one-quarter of teens have asked a teacher how to judge AI accuracy, according to a survey by the nonprofit Common Sense Media. Most see AI as an answer machine and a way to support thinking. Two-thirds say it helps them understand school lessons, not just complete them more quickly.

But at least half of teens acknowledge the skills that AI can't or shouldn't replace: "working well with others" and "fact-checking and critical thinking."

The new AI products for schools, in other words, are forcing new insights on intelligence itself, as well as which expressions of intelligence are best taught by teachers.

At a conference last year, Harvard University professor of cognition and education Howard Gardner stated that "Most cognitive aspects of mind – the disciplined mind, the synthesizing mind, and the creative mind – will be done so well by [AI] ... that whether we do them as humans will be optional."

"On the other hand," Dr. Gardner added, "I don't believe for a minute that aspects of respect – how we deal with other human beings – and ethics – how we deal with difficult issues as citizens, as professionals – can or should be consigned to even the most articulate and multifaceted, intelligent machines."

This year, he told Education Week that AI might push humans to express a higher intelligence – but only "if individuals are intrinsically motivated to stretch their abilities."

For schools, that's the rub: whether AI promotes unity and elevated understanding among students. "What matters," Dr. Gardner concluded, "is that young people learn to work together, particularly on challenging ethical and moral issues." ■

An Africa that prizes economic and political freedoms

In recent years, African nations have been battered by drought, debt, and discord. But Zambia has charted a course toward economic gains while – mostly – protecting its democratic system.

Its Aug. 13 national elections had "far greater ... significance than the country's landlocked status and modest economic size might imply," according to a senior researcher at the London-based Chatham House think tank. President Hakainde Hichilema, reelected

to a second term with 60% of the vote, will govern "a country at the centre of Africa's critical minerals competition, debt diplomacy and shifting regional alliances," wrote Christopher Vandome.

Mr. Hichilema won office in 2021 on the promise of upholding democracy and undoing economic mismanagement that led to a 2020 debt default. He has restructured the debt and slashed inflation from nearly 25% to 6.5%. In 2025, the Zambian kwacha was the world's best-performing currency against the dollar.

"For investors, the priority is continuity and clarity," a mining executive told the Financial Times, noting that "fiscal discipline ... restored [Zambia's] access to international capital markets."

Partnership and the "big picture"

Consistency, discipline, and leaning toward trade over aid are lessons that other African nations are heeding. Both Ghana and Ethiopia have grown their economies and are attracting foreign investment.

President Hichilema views aid cuts as an opportunity to "take care of our own affairs." And, referring to a "sea change" in the global minerals trade, he told the Financial Times this year, "It was [previously] a one-way traffic. Now we are talking of working together as partners ... where investors see the bigger picture."

The challenge in coming years is translating big-picture gains into everyday improvements for citizens, many of whom live in severe poverty. As populations become impatient for change, the tendency is for political leaders to also become impatient – with those they perceive as critics or opponents. While Zambia's election was generally free of violence and fraud, observers are concerned over clampdowns on the media and political opposition.

The Zambian president's initial election in 2021, Mr. Vandome noted, was "premised upon support for democracy and pluralism," and "a mandate to protect the institutions that carried him there."

It would do well for Mr. Hichilema and other leaders pursuing growth to recall that the economic stability and free markets valued by investors rarely exist without political stability and freedoms. ■

Why Afghans cling to education for girls

Five years ago, as the last U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan on Aug. 30, the Taliban grasped the reins of government and have kept a tight hold on them since.

The group's harsh interpretation of Islamic rule excludes girls and women, who make up half of Afghanistan's estimated 50 million people, from any meaningful education or employment opportunities.

Yet, Afghanistan's girls and women refuse to be completely cowed. They tune in to sessions on the radio or attend clandestine classes in neighborhood homes. Others read and reread the same textbooks from pre-Taliban years, when girls could attend secondary school and even university.

"I study in an online school and we have not lost ourselves," one girl told researchers during a recent survey by Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security. "I am an Afghan girl, full of light, full of knowledge, full of power; they can close the school, but they can never extinguish ... my mind," she declared.

Her assertion of individuality, intelligence, and independent

thought is drawing support at, in ways that are both quiet and quietly transformative.

In August, Agence France-Presse reported that 9 out of 10 fathers believe in the importance of girls' education – and are “losing sleep over what to do to help their bright and frustrated daughters.”

Refusing to be “a victim”

“Culture and religion are often used as an excuse by ... extremists,” according to Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who was shot by Taliban fighters in 2012. But “the religion that I know ... encourages education,” she told CNN in 2024, referring to the dozens of Muslim nations where women access education and jobs.

In 2018, Saudi Arabia lifted restrictions on women driving cars, enabling new learning and job options for them. Iran, despite its current strict dress codes, has allowed education and workplace opportunities for women for nearly a century. And it's easy to forget that Yale and Princeton only admitted women in the late 1960, while Columbia held out until 1983.

Girls' and women's right to a full and fulfilling education has not always been a given, but it has been successfully claimed the world over. While the situation in Afghanistan is dire, it need not be dispiriting or hopeless. In the Georgetown survey, 80% of Afghan women were focused on supporting girls' education, viewing it as central to personal empowerment and political peace.

“I am not a victim of war, but an architect of social peace,” one respondent told the researchers, “and this is a voice that must be heard globally.” ■

READERS RESPOND

A syllabus for today's citizens

Your articles in the Aug. 17 Weekly issue on education – including “Parents push for less YouTube, more books in schools,” “Education's AI ‘gold rush’ comes with risks,” and “Don't just believe. Look.” – missed a major point: What is taught is just as important as how it is taught. Although the three R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic) still remain the fundamental basis for all future learning, today's students must also learn:

- The ability to express ideas verbally.
- How to evaluate sources of information (especially social media), including telling the difference between fact and opinion, the message versus the messenger, and what propaganda is and how to recognize it.
- Basic civics, including the structure and function of the government of the United States (local, state, and federal), the role of government in our lives, and how laws are made.
- What your taxes pay for.
- The differences between the three basic forms of government in the world (democracy, totalitarianism, socialism), how property is owned, and how decisions are made.

The future of our democracy depends on having educated, informed citizens.

Susan Jo Burwen
Mountain View, California

THE HOME FORUM

A walk in the rain

An unexpected downpour floods the writer with childhood memories and a defiant joy in getting soaked.

I am told that we are experiencing a very long drought here in Maine. In August, it seemed that some of the trees were already acquiring their fall colors, but on closer examination, I saw that they were turning brown for lack of water. Now that fall is on the horizon, hope has been kindled for abundant rainfall.

There is a certain irony here, because Maine is a “water state.” It has some 6,000 lakes and a number of rivers, not to mention the countless streams that meander through its extensive woodlands. Before the arrival of Europeans, the Native tribes used these waters as highways for their dugout and birchbark canoes. It is said that one can put a canoe in any body of water in Maine and reach any other part of the state without having to portage for more than a mile.

Statistics are no antidote for drought. However, I did look at the drought as a guarantee that I would be able to confidently take a long walk without getting rained on. And so, just recently, I set out over the dry grass of my backyard and listened as the blades crunched underfoot. I headed for town under a cloudless sky.

What a difference a short jaunt can make. On my return trek, the sky began to boil with thunderheads and, moments later, a deluge.

My first impulse, of course, was to run, in hopes of making it home before getting soaked. But a cloudburst is a cloudburst, and within a couple of minutes, I slowed down, looked up, and shrugged, realizing that running was futile. I couldn't get any wetter than I already was.

I walked along in the rain at a leisurely pace, and as I did so, a memory percolated to the surface: the intense thunderstorms of my New Jersey childhood. I recall charging out into the downpours with my friends, running with abandon with arms and voices raised. We'd get drenched as we chased one another or organized a game of stickball in defiance of the elements. This, I considered, is a fundamental difference between childhood and adulthood: A grown-up is too careful, too concerned with propriety and comfort, to deliberately walk in the rain, while a kid embraces the thick, pounding drops as a welcome change of pace, another experience to savor.

This thought accompanied me as I slogged along, the only person walking in the rain as automobile traffic glided past me. One driver pulled over and asked if I wanted a lift. “No, thank you,” I said. “I'm just walking.” As I passed a house, a charitable woman opened her front door and waved me in. “You're getting soaked,” she said, stating the obvious, but I declined her well-meaning offer and walked on.

Just as I arrived home, the rain ceased and the sun came out. Show over. I stood by the front door, the water draining from my clothing. I was filled with regret, not that I had been caught in the rain, but that I had not thought to walk in the rain earlier.

The streets are less crowded, and there is the exhilaration of recollecting a time, many years ago, when such behavior was part and parcel of what it meant to be happy.

– Robert Klose

POETRY

HORSE AND RIDER

*I am not your master but your equal on a day
When sun's broom has swept shadows away
From every corner of this sweet-hayed barn
And cleaned the cracks in worn wooden walls.
You seem glad to see me, glad to get out,
For you know where we are going. The orchard first
Where apples old as Eden bob in waves of wind
That scatters leaves like copper-colored coins.
Cornstalks, restless soldiers, rattle in ranks;
Sunflowers with bowed heads ponder past glory.
We enter a grove where elves might lurk
But they have fled from light's vastness
To wait for dark nights and new moons.
Sun's glare again, and our shadow for company.
Time to turnabout; we go back a different way
Across fields no plow has known for years.
A stone wall but delays us;
You find a gap and pass through.
Almost home, and we go grudgingly,
For days are not always so beautiful.
Let us prolong our parting like lovers;
I shall walk beside you the rest of the way.*

– Andrew Armstrong

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

It's time for independent thinking

Right at the beginning of Mary Baker Eddy's companion book to the Bible, "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," she presents to readers this encouraging observation: "The time for thinkers has come" (p. vii).

In light of how so many people, governments, religions, and organizations may dictate to mankind what to think, that statement sure is a breath of fresh air. It's not that all of what we're told is wrong, or that thinking for oneself means to disregard a country's laws and rules. It's about stepping back and recognizing how regimented our thoughts may become under a stream of dictates, along with the cultural pressure to conform to the mass of mankind's thoughts as a whole.

Christ Jesus lived under a multiplicity of authorities, and he often challenged his followers to think independently. He asked things like, "How think ye?" (Matthew 18:12). And the Apostle Paul counseled that we "be not conformed to this world: but

be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:2).

The will of God includes comprehensive goodness for everyone. Unlike human will, which can be self-serving, dominating, or unfair, God's will is wise, loving, and insightful. To "be not conformed to this world" is to think and reason from what God expresses in prayer. This is the pinnacle of liberty.

What might be a good step toward praying and thinking independently? "Be still, and know that I am God," says the Bible (Psalms 46:10). It's to become more still inside, and then listen for God's tender yet authoritative voice. The voice of God is the Christ, which Jesus turned to in order to help so many people.

Here is an example of thinking from this perspective: The world would tell us that stress and exhaustion are normal. But we can challenge that assumption. When I once had a monumental series of projects to complete, I prayed and realized that I had a choice. I could march along with the world's expectations about fatigue or I could listen for the Christ for inspiration about who I am and the nature of my responsibilities.

I felt such quiet confidence well up in me as I heard God's guidance that I didn't need to toil frantically but instead could enjoy being His self-expression. This meant that I could humbly allow God's strength, intelligence, and persistence to fuel my work. All of the projects were completed smoothly and early, leaving me feeling renewed and ready to take on more.

It is a joy to explore what it means to think and pray by turning to God and responding thoughtfully to His guidance instead of conforming to the jumbled static of a mass mentality. Yes, truly, the time for thinkers has come!

■ Original content on Christian Science written for this column by one of our readers.

CULTURE

LONDON

Early threads of English history go on display in London

After nearly a thousand years, the Bayeux Tapestry makes its long-awaited return to Britain.

By Mark Rice-Oxley / Contributor

When Peter Blunn went online to get tickets to see the Bayeux Tapestry, he found that 20,000 people had gotten there before him.

It made for a lengthy wait, five or six hours altogether. But that is nothing. People in England have been waiting nearly 1,000 years for the iconic medieval artwork to return to the country whose foundation story it tells.

In London's most eagerly anticipated exhibition of the year – or perhaps even the millennium – the tapestry goes on display at the British Museum on Sept. 10.

Hundreds of thousands of people will file past the ancient 70-me-

ter (230-foot) embroidery, taking in its 600 human characters and 58 scenes that relate the events of 1066 – the last time England was successfully overrun by an invading force.

It's a story that every Briton learns about in primary school: the aged Anglo-Saxon king, Edward the Confessor, dying heirless; the plucky nobleman Harold Godwinson seizing his opportunity and being crowned; William, the Duke of Normandy, claiming the throne was rightfully his and sailing from northern France to defeat King Harold (who supposedly died in battle from an arrow to the eye) at Hastings. The year 1066 is as foundational to British schoolchildren as 1776 is to Americans.

"I was at school in the 1960s, and that's where we learned about it," enthuses Mr. Blunn.

But there are not one but two tapestry stories. The first tells the tale of 1066. The second concerns the protracted effort to secure its temporary return to Britain for the first time since it was created.

And it's relevant in a modern Britain that is grappling with some age-old issues of trust: leadership and governance, and the welcoming of newcomers.

It's coming home

No one knows for sure who did the painstaking needlework to create the tapestry, but it is presumed to have been made by English seamstresses at the behest of the Normans. It was created soon after the victory that would make William, forever known as "the Conqueror," the first Norman king of England.

In fact, the Bayeux Tapestry is poorly named, for it almost certainly was not created in Bayeux, and it isn't actually a tapestry. It is an embroidered work of wool on linen, with four different dye colors, five different types of stitch, and nine linen panels making up the 68-meter storyboard.

It disappeared into obscurity and there are virtually no records of it until the 18th century, when it resurfaced at the Bayeux Cathedral, 136 miles or so northwest of Paris. Despite revolution, invasion, war, and occupation, the artifact somehow survived the most tumultuous decades of French history.

By the 1980s, it was safely installed in the Bayeux Museum. Britain has long coveted a chance to show it off in the United Kingdom, viewing it as far more central to British history than French.

"The tapestry is remembered because it is the climactic source that documents this hinge moment in English history," says Peter Jones, a British medieval expert. "The battle was a coin toss; it could have gone either way. The tapestry captures this so well. It's a wonderfully complicated source."

For years, French cultural authorities and historians argued that the tapestry could not withstand a long journey to Britain. But British Museum curators say the closure of the Bayeux Museum for refurbishment provided the opportunity for the work to travel on loan.

The only problem was that Bayeux is about 250 miles by road from London. And the fabric is delicate. So, experts designed a special crate suspended in a metal cage to keep the object steady and cool in the back of a truck. Trial runs were executed to ensure nothing unforeseen would happen.

The cargo was eventually transported via the Channel Tunnel to the British Museum earlier this summer, where it arrived in the dead of night under police guard.

Re-creating the artwork, scene by scene

Tickets went on sale on July 1. "100,000 were sold in 24 hours,"

a British Museum spokesperson told The Christian Science Monitor in an email. "The museum raised over £2.4 million (about \$3.2 million), the largest day of ticket sales in the museum's history."

The \$40 entrance fee will give viewers just 40 minutes to file past the artwork.

But one woman who didn't have to pay – and won't have to stand in line – is Mia Hansson, a seamstress who was rewarded with free tickets because of her own rather unique contribution to tapestry lore.

Ms. Hansson is re-creating the artwork scene by scene and character by character at her home in eastern England. (And before you say, "How eccentrically British!" Ms. Hansson is Swedish).

For 10 years, she has spent two or three hours a day – and sometimes a lot more – marking, measuring, drawing, and stitching. She has completed about 60 of the nearly 70 meters, and hopes to finish next year, before the 1,000th anniversary of William's birth.

"It's very laborious – you have to concentrate," Ms. Hansson says. "When the outlines are drawn, I stitch mainly with a stem stitch and some chain stitches. When the outline's done, I do the inner stitches." Red is the most common color, she says, closely followed by yellow.

"They will never have enough legs"

As such, Ms. Hansson might know the detail of the tapestry better than most: the animals, the battlefield decapitations, the curious scenes in the margins with elements of Aesop's Fables and occasional random nudes.

And the mistakes. Yes, mistakes.

"If there are four or more horses in a scene, they will never have enough legs," she says. Ditto humans. "One of the men going into church with Harold has his hand at an impossible angle," she adds, "and in another scene there are two horse heads and three horse bottoms."

According to Professor Jones, the tapestry gives us not just a story of a proud, self-regarding, opportunistic man (Harold) who overstretches himself. It is also a story of who the people of these islands were – and are. Britain has always been shaped by outsiders and newcomers.

"It reminds us how complex English history is," he says.

Curators say the priceless treasure will return to France late in 2027, to a newly built museum in Bayeux. ■

From a chicken shack to the charts, Jesca Hoop traverses the 'Long Wave Home'

Distance affords the singer-songwriter perspective on her country and life.

By Stephen Humphries / Staff writer

Before Jesca Hoop became a nomadic musician, she was a teenage vagabond.

During one summer in the 1990s, the singer-songwriter lived alone in an apple orchard in Sonoma, California. She'd come of age and left her unhappy childhood home. Ms. Hoop found an abandoned workers' squat, which she likens to a chicken shack, and fitted it with a bedroll. She cooked outdoors over an open fire. One could euphemistically call it a rustic lifestyle.

"It was romantic in a sense, but it was a very lonely period of time," says Ms. Hoop. She recalls wondering: "What do I do with my life? Where are my friends? Where is my family?"

Ms. Hoop's music often explores those very same questions. Her latest album, "Long Wave Home," focuses on tenuous interpersonal relationships and, relatedly, what constitutes a sense of belonging. As for Ms. Hoop's existential question about what to do with her life? She found that writing songs offers meaningful fulfillment. They're a hub for communal experiences with fans around the world.

"If you have a purpose, you have a home," says the musician.

Ms. Hoop, who was born and raised in Northern California, has lived in many places. During her 20s, she was a wilderness survival guide in a program for troubled teens in Arizona. Hiking in the parched mountains, Ms. Hoop sang for her trail companions but wasn't yet ready to pursue singing or songwriting as a vocation.

After several years of never spending more than six months in one place, including that summer in the Sonoma orchard, Ms. Hoop decamped to Los Angeles for a longer haul. While there, she landed a deal with Columbia Records for her 2007 debut, "Kismet." Not long after, Ms. Hoop moved to Manchester, England, where she has lived for the past 18 years. She has released six more albums, not counting a one-off collaboration with Sam Beam, aka Iron & Wine.

"There's no genre that I fit in completely," says the songwriter, whose self-released "Long Wave Home" was praised by Mojo magazine as "her most assured record yet." Its inventive arrangements don't map onto predictable musical topography. The album incorporates orchestration, brass instruments, and a thumb-picked guitar that can almost sound like an African mbira.

"She has an absolutely unique guitar style," says renowned British music producer John Parish, who helmed Ms. Hoop's previous two albums, "Stonechild" and "Order of Romance." "I've never worked with another guitar player that has never sort of strummed. ... She doesn't really play chords. It's all melodies and rhythms, counter-melodies and rhythms."

One example of that is her recent single "Big Storm." Propelled by a springy guitar figure and a trampoline drumbeat, the bouncy song chronicles Ms. Hoop's attempt to escape an unhappy situation by uprooting her life. She sold many of her belongings, including her car, and purchased a one-way plane ticket. When a storm grounded all the flights, she realized that she needed to take responsibility

for her happiness.

"I had to address what was going on," she says. "I didn't end up leaving."

Mr. Parish, who has produced artists such as Tracy Chapman, says that Ms. Hoop's second-greatest strength is her lyric writing. Her songs recount life events with candor yet universal resonance.

"Long Wave Home" includes two protest songs about former homes that are no longer recognizable. The first, "Designer Citizen," offers a wry perspective on America's politics from an American living on the other side of the Atlantic. "It causes me to look at what's going on around us from another angle that I didn't necessarily have access to from my upbringing," she says.

The second, "Playground," is an anguished response to a video clip of barefoot children in Gaza playing soccer amid rubble.

"I said, 'I have a song to write,'" she says. "Let's just sing in the kitchen while I cook, and let's record what I sing."

Her improvised tune had an unexpected Middle Eastern cadence that she adapted to guitar.

"A song generally takes me about a month to write, of constant writing," says Ms. Hoop. "Playground," I wrote in two days."

One place where people can still commune without digital filters is at concerts. For the itinerant musician, it is a space in which she fulfills purpose. A home away from home.

"It's absolutely my favorite place to be," says Ms. Hoop. ■

Songwriter and naturalist: How Shearwater's Jonathan Meiburg straddles two careers

When the indie rock frontman is off the stage, you might find him exploring in the Antarctic.

By Stephen Humphries / Staff writer

Jonathan Meiburg was at a fork in the road of his life. At a truck stop somewhere in Oklahoma, he found a pay phone and lifted the receiver. He made a call he'd been dreading.

That was in the early 2000s. Mr. Meiburg was on tour as a musician in the fast-rising indie rock group Okkervil River. A few years before that, he had been on track to become a scientist. After finishing his undergrad degree, he won a fellowship to study community life in some of the remotest parts of the world. That adventure included being stranded for six weeks on Santiago Island in the Galápagos archipelago. Mr. Meiburg went on to earn a master's degree in geography. But then he joined a band. Could he continue his plans to earn a Ph.D. in biology?

"I ended up at a crisis point," says Mr. Meiburg. "I kind of felt like, 'Oh, the jig's up. Like, I'm going to have to either give up music or give up this.'"

He called his academic adviser from the truck stop to explain his decision. He then climbed back in the tour van and headed to the next gig. Mr. Meiburg chose a path in which he ultimately ended up with his own band, Shearwater. Its 11th art-rock album, "The New World," came out July 31. Yet Mr. Meiburg's journey has taken an unexpected turn of late. In parallel to his music career, he's become

a celebrated naturalist book author. Mr. Meiburg views the two career tracks as exploration of the world's wonders.

"I have never met anyone who is as accomplished in two fields as he is, those being natural science and music," says Jamie Stewart, a friend of Mr. Meiburg and leader of the band Xiu Xiu.

Mr. Meiburg's field recordings of the natural world weave seamlessly into the organic soundscapes of "The New World." For instance, pealing church bells and ululating blackbirds in Berlin herald the tranquil piano motif of "More and More." "You and Your Dog" features coyotes yipping in Los Angeles. "The Only Sound I'm Afraid Of," which starts as a hushed ripple but crests to become a tsunami of anthemic guitar, includes the caws of Tasmanian forest ravens.

"The New World" is an album of otherworldly beauty. That owes much to guests such as Shahzad Ismaily, Laurie Anderson, Leo Abrahams, and musicians from Mali playing instruments such as the *ngoni*, *calabash*, and *yabara*. Shearwater's two other multi-instrumentalist band members, Dan Duszynski and Emily Lee, co-produced the music. As the band's singer and songwriter, Mr. Meiburg brings a curiosity to explore what he describes as the "physical and emotional realms" of the world we live in.

"The first line of that great book, 'The Peregrine' [by J.A. Baker] is 'The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there.' And I'm not saying that I can do that all the time, but you do get little flashes of it," says Mr. Meiburg. "Trying to preserve those and amplify them is, I'd say, the work of both the music and the writing."

The cover of "The New World" depicts an Antarctic glacier floating in the Weddell Sea. After the album was completed, Mr. Meiburg joined a boat crew on the Southern Ocean. That's where he filmed a music video for the album's lead single, "Daydream Unbeliever." During a seven-week expedition, they sent remotely piloted submersibles to the ocean floor 2,000 feet beneath the ice.

Mr. Meiburg says his next book, which is in progress, "The Once and Future Life of Antarctica," aims to impart an appreciation of Earth's epochal transformations. He says people spend so much time worrying about everyday concerns that they lose sight of the big picture.

The author's first book, the critically lauded "A Most Remarkable Creature" (2021), was about a mysterious bird of prey. Mr. Meiburg researched the history of the striated caracara for a compelling travelogue. He ventured to Tierra del Fuego, the archipelago just below the scorpion's tail tip of South America.

Boating in the jungles of French Guiana, Mr. Meiburg has encountered vampire fish, with teeth that extend into their skulls. In a Brazilian rainforest, he came face to face with a jaguar.

Yet he is just as awed by a slug that has a starring role in a recent Shearwater music video. The promo film for the jazzy song "Slugs in the Marigolds" begins with Mr. Meiburg grabbing the creature in a garden and the two embarking on a day trip.

Mr. Meiburg used to torment himself about choosing music over an academic career of studying fauna and flora. But a few years after that Oklahoma truck-stop phone call, he met his academic adviser again.

"He turned up at a Shearwater show at South by Southwest, I think, and said, 'Hey, Jonathan, it's Mike Ryan. I wanted to tell you that I think you really did the right thing,'" says Mr. Meiburg. "I could have kissed him." ■

Mary Oliver: A poet who speaks to the 'state of the soul'

A new PBS documentary explores the enduring impact of her poetry and of her keen observations of the natural world.

By Elizabeth Lund / Contributor

Like many Americans, filmmaker Sasha Waters turned to the poetry of Mary Oliver for comfort during the pandemic. "Her work really seemed to circulate in 2020 and 2021, when people were dealing with grief and loneliness and were finding solace in nature," Waters says. "I was fascinated by how her poems helped people connect during the darkest days, even when they couldn't connect in person."

When the pandemic ended, Waters felt compelled to tell the story of Oliver, who was described as America's bestselling poet in 2007 by The New York Times.

Waters applied for a National Endowment for the Humanities grant in partnership with the PBS series "American Masters" in 2023. She received funding in 2024. Yet in 2025, after production began, funding for the film was cut by the federal government. WNET/American Masters was committed enough to the project to continue with production. Waters' documentary, "Mary Oliver: Saved by the Beauty of the World," debuted nationally Aug. 25 and streams on PBS.

The film is a beautifully nuanced, thoughtful portrait of Oliver and her work, from her first poems, written at age 13, to her great success in midlife. She won poetry's most prestigious prizes, and later, large crowds flocked to her sold-out readings and lectures.

Waters deftly illustrates Oliver's evolution by seamlessly combining archival video and audio recordings, photos, notebook pages, and interviews with contemporary poets and media figures, who discuss the importance of her work and its impact on their own lives.

The film opens with Oliver and others reading lines from several of her poems. Comedian and former talk show host Stephen Colbert explains that he sends the poem "The Summer Day" to his children each year on the first day of summer. When Colbert tries to read the first line – "Who made the world?" – he stumbles with emotion.

Oliver's work resonates, as many speakers note, because she uses vivid imagery and plain language to capture specific moments and convey a sense of wonder at the beauty, rhythm, and order of the natural world. She also asks profound questions and hints at the vast consciousness that underlies all of nature.

That approach stems from Oliver's lifelong practice of walking in the woods and paying close attention to what she saw and heard. She began spending time in nature when she was a child growing up in the suburbs of Cleveland. Yet, as the film reveals, her walks didn't just teach her about nature. They helped her escape loneliness and abuse at the hands of her father.

In audio clips, Oliver describes herself as "kind of a solitary kid" who "very much wished not to be noticed and to be left alone." She also says, "The two things I loved from a very early age were the natural world and dead poets" – especially "Whitman, Whitman, and Whitman."

Those loves accompanied Oliver when she moved, the day after

her high school graduation, to Steepletop, the historic farmstead of one of her idols, Edna St. Vincent Millay, in Austerlitz, New York. Oliver worked there on and off for several years as a secretary for Millay's sister, helping to organize the late poet's papers. Oliver studied for a year at Ohio State University and a year at Vassar College, and then moved to Greenwich Village in New York City. On a return visit to Steepletop, she met Molly Malone Cook, a photographer employed by *The Village Voice*, who would later become the poet's manager and partner for more than 40 years.

Malone Cook provided stability and encouragement, which helped Oliver develop her confidence and talent. Malone Cook also emphasized that "attention without feeling is only a report."

Oliver's first collection of poems, "No Voyage, and Other Poems," was published in 1963, when she was age 28. The couple spent the summer of 1964 in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and stayed to start a new life amid the thriving arts scene and rugged coastal beauty.

Oliver's career surged after Joyce Carol Oates wrote a glowing review of her collection "The Night Traveler" in 1978. "American Primitive" won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1984. In 1992, Oliver received the National Book Award for "New and Selected Poems: Vol. I."

Several poets in the documentary reflect on Oliver's profound impact and distinctive voice. Major Jackson, poetry editor of the *Harvard Review*, says Oliver's work and background differ greatly from his own. Yet after reading "Twelve Moons," he "took to her because the deep kind of lyric presence leapt off the page for me. I could hear that sense of rapture in her work."

One of the most poignant sections is a quick montage of piles of fan mail from people who loved Oliver's words and wanted to thank her for "saving" their lives.

As the documentary continues, Waters addresses Oliver's grief after Malone Cook's death in 2005 and an unhappy move to Florida, where Oliver lived until her passing in 2019. Waters also highlights Oliver's eventual willingness to address abuse from her childhood, and to speak at large conferences. Maria Shriver, then first lady of California, finally succeeded in getting Oliver to speak at the Women's Conference in Long Beach in 2010, after multiple invitations were declined by the publicity-shy Oliver.

When Waters is asked what she hopes viewers will take away from the documentary, she echoes the remarks of poet Ariana Reines, who says people find Oliver's work in moments of joy or crisis because Oliver speaks to the "state of the soul." Waters also notes poet Mark Doty's observation that Oliver wants you to step into her world "and be her."

"That invitation to just look at the world is transcendent," says Waters. "It takes us out of ourselves to really appreciate the interconnectedness of everything in the natural world and how we fit into that, and how maybe we don't necessarily need to be the center of it. We can look outward and just appreciate the beauty and the energy of the world."

Waters also emphasizes Oliver's discipline, which she brought to her writing every day.

"She shows us that you've got to take yourself seriously, make time to just spend time with yourself, and be consistent, not forcing things, but showing up regularly because the creative part of your mind is always ready," says Waters.■

BOOKS

Renoir portraits offer a glimpse into a fleeting world

"The Renoir Girls" contrasts the images of a sweet, privileged childhood with the barbarism of antisemitism, which flared in Nazi-occupied France.

By Barbara Spindel / Contributor

Among the many celebrated portraits by French Impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir are two works featuring sisters from the same prominent family. "Pink and Blue, the Misses Cahen d'Anvers" is an 1881 painting of Elisabeth and Alice, then ages 6 and 4, respectively, clad in frilly white dresses with pastel-colored sashes. An 1880 portrait of their older sister, known as "Little Irène," foregrounds the 8-year-old's elegant dress and striking red hair.

The paintings depict the Cahen d'Anvers family's gilded milieu in Belle Époque Paris. But in the compelling new book "The Renoir Girls: A Hidden History of Art, War, and Betrayal," Catherine Ostler documents the insidious antisemitism of the purportedly tolerant era. "All the artistic glories of Impressionism – its inventiveness, its innovative way with light, its joy – concealed profound social ambivalence, in this instance the ambivalence of painter to client, but ultimately of France to newcomer, of one people to another," she writes.

The two paintings were commissioned by the children's parents, Louis and Louise Cahen d'Anvers, who were well-known figures in Paris' Jewish elite. The Cahen d'Anvers family enjoyed a happy and comfortable existence during the Belle Époque, the optimistic period between the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the start of World War I in 1914. But the hostility toward Jews was evident during the Dreyfus affair, which saw Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army, wrongly convicted of treason in 1894. It reached a violent apogee with the Vichy regime's collaboration with Nazi Germany during World War II.

Ostler reveals at the outset that Elisabeth died in 1944 at age 69, either at Auschwitz or in transit to the concentration camp; she had left Paris for a small French village, whose Vichy-supporting mayor turned her in to the Gestapo.

This gruesome end stands in sharp contrast to the privileged childhoods depicted in the portraits. "Renoir's paintings of these children evoke a Paris of pleasure," the author writes, "that rapturous era of opulence, expansion, and burgeoning empire, with its faith in reason, progress, and the Enlightenment." (It's notable that Renoir himself is known to have expressed antisemitic views: When his payment for "Pink and Blue" arrived behind schedule, the artist wrote to a friend, "I am washing my hands of the Jews.")

Louis Cahen d'Anvers was a prosperous banker; Louise was a lover of art and music who hosted salons, concerts, art shows, and charity functions. Newspapers regularly reported on her activities, with one naming her "one of the wittiest and prettiest women in the high society of Paris." Like many of their Jewish peers, the couple's aim was to assimilate completely into French society. Both Elisabeth and Irène converted to Catholicism during the 1890s; such conversions were not uncommon at the time, particularly when Jewish

women married outside of their faith, as Elisabeth and Irène did.

The first two-thirds of the book are largely devoted to conveying the family's rarefied status during these peaceful years. Ostler occasionally presages darker events to come. She covers the 1886 publication of a viciously antisemitic tract by Édouard Drumont that went on to become a bestseller. And she explores the significance of the Dreyfus affair, which reached its denouement with the captain's exoneration in 1906.

But the primary focus of these chapters is the family's frenzied social calendar, featuring exhaustive descriptions of parties, guest lists, and gowns. For instance, of Elisabeth's 1896 wedding, Ostler writes, "The dresses, of course, are dazzling: Louise in purple velvet with steel-colored embroidery, a purple hat with a black egret; Irène in pale green, with a white satin overlay and a mirrored velvet bodice, and a sable hat with tufts of white feathers; Alice in pale-pink silk with narrow black velvet trim, black chinchilla lantern hat with a white egret."

Ostler succeeds in creating a discordance between the family's peacetime life and the ensuing horrors of wartime. Still, the overly detailed recounting of their high-society exploits becomes tedious and makes the book feel unnecessarily long.

The tone shifts with France's entry into World War I, as Ostler acknowledges, writing, "The incessant fripperies and glamour of the Belle Époque life came to an abrupt end, one that requires the author to stop recording the concerts, houses, dresses, balls, and marriages" that dominated the previous chapters.

Several members of the Cahen d'Anvers family fought for France during World War I, including the Renoir girls' two brothers, Robert and Charles, and Elisabeth's son, Pipo. Irène's son, Nissim, was killed in action. During the interwar period, after Louis and Louise died, Charles donated their magnificent château, Champs-sur-Marne, to the French government.

As Ostler points out, if the family believed that their service or gifts to the nation would protect them during World War II, they were tragically mistaken. Elisabeth apparently thought that her conversion to Catholicism five decades earlier would prevent her from being targeted. Irène lied about her Jewish heritage and survived the war. (Family members told the author that they believed that Irène and her surviving daughter had collaborated with the Nazis.) The brave and resourceful Alice escaped the Nazis, smuggling her grandchildren to safety in England.

One of those grandchildren told the author that when "Pink and Blue," which is now displayed in a museum in São Paulo, Brazil, was loaned to London's Tate museum in 1954, Alice "liked to stand next to it to tell strangers that it was her in the portrait." It's an affecting image – one Renoir girl, approaching age 80, looking on as museumgoers glimpse her lost world. ■

IN PICTURES

To beat a rickety electric grid, a city gets creative

Story by Light Oriye Tamunotonye / Contributor

ABUJA, NIGERIA

Sandra Ogbebor hunches over her softly humming refrigerator and scours through bottles before finally yanking out an orange juice. She hands it to a customer who has been waiting in her food stall, one of many informal shops tucked in an open-air food market in the Nigerian capital. The customer gulps it down in a single stretch and drops it into a bin – visible proof of his relief, at least for this moment, from the sweltering heat.

Ms. Ogbebor runs her cold-drinks business mostly off a rickety, gas-powered generator, as Nigerians are unable to rely on the country's dodgy electric grid.

Some 90 million of Nigeria's 242 million people live with limited access to electricity, a problem that the World Bank estimates costs the economy \$29 billion annually. Decades of corruption and mismanagement of the power sector have forced many businesses to use alternative sources, such as generators.

But with war in the Middle East also sending fuel prices soaring, small businesses in Nigeria are bearing the brunt. In Abuja, creativity is the name of the game.

At beauty shops, for example, frequent power outages don't stop the flow of commerce. Workers do their clients' eyelashes by that 21st-century form of candlelight – their cellphone flashlights.

The gym where Abuja resident Ahmed Umar works installed solar panels, and switched its hours to operate in the early morning and late evening, cutting out the hottest part of the day to save on air conditioning. The work-arounds have hardly dampened his sales pitch. Electricity or not, he's always ready to do business.

"I sell gymwear; I sell gym equipment, too," Mr. Umar, one of Nigeria's ubiquitous jack-of-all-trades entrepreneurs, eagerly tells this Monitor contributor. "If you need gym equipment, I'm your guy. I can facilitate your gym. I can design your gym."

Vincent Nwonye, who used to do brisk business in Abuja as a generator repairman, has seen the work dry up as residents abandon even their backup energy source amid the high cost of gas.

"They call us the giant of Africa," Mr. Nwonye says wryly. "Maybe it's yet to come."

Meanwhile, Ms. Ogbebor buys ice blocks to keep her business afloat – five blocks when there is no "light," as Nigerians colloquially refer to electricity. Even when the light is on, she buys two blocks, to cut down on generator time. And she won't let the heat defeat her.

"You cannot sit down at home," she says. "If you sit down at home, you will even be worse. So, you have to be coming out."

Resting under the shade of a red canopy near her stall, a group of young men signals to Ms. Ogbebor to bring out more drinks. She quickly dashes to the refrigerator. Business, unlike the light, cannot stop. ■

Crossword

ACROSS

1. Assist
5. ___ fide (authentic)
9. La Brea pits' substance
12. Whip up
13. Steinbeck's "East of ___"
14. Back when
15. Not sincere
17. Certain NYC pro
18. Subway station critter
19. Mariah Carey sang "Anytime You ___ Friend"
21. Crosswise
24. Christian in fashion
26. Barnyard noise
27. Obtain justly
29. Prattles
33. Brightened
34. Long, narrow cuts
36. Phooey!

37. Moreover

39. Babe's breakfast

40. Card game warning

41. Chisel or hammer

43. Exceed expectations

45. Bee-related

48. Storage box

49. Protrude

50. Roadside regions

56. Fossey's friend

57. Blunders

58. Company division

59. Old Dodge model

60. Plural pronoun

61. Singing Nelson

.....

DOWN

1. Electric guitar hookup
2. Chocolate chunk

3. Grind (out)

4. Colorful pet fish

5. Flexed

6. Even's opposite

7. Maiden-name intro

8. "Yes ___" (ambiguous answer)

9. Domestic

10. Fine, as cheese

11. Roster with assignments

16. Chair man?

20. Energy amount

21. Experienced

22. Keep the boat afloat

23. Diner fare

24. Boring device

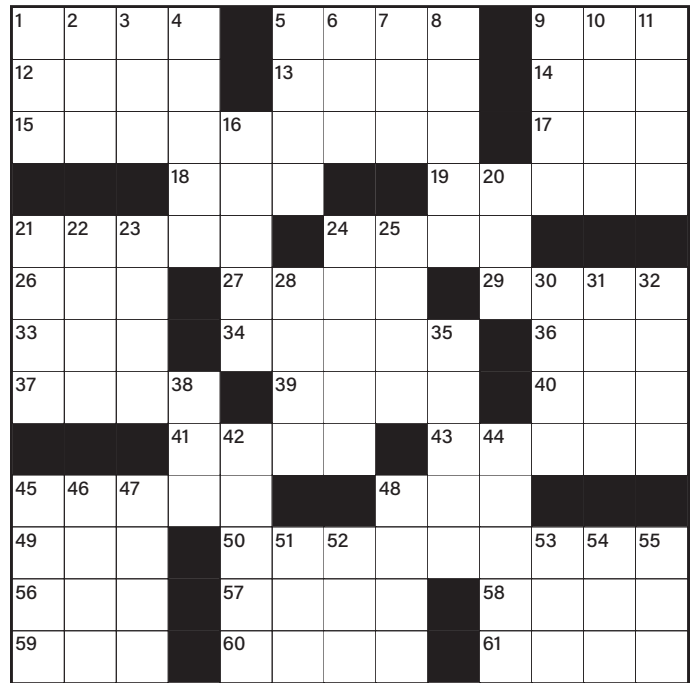
25. Disappear ___ thin air

28. Plus

30. Juxtapose

31. Wedding staple

32. Fly dismissal



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35. Coddle

38. Cockpit prediction

42. Starting point

44. Needless

45. Cracked open

46. Cocoon's content

47. News brief

48. Ornate

51. King's title, for short

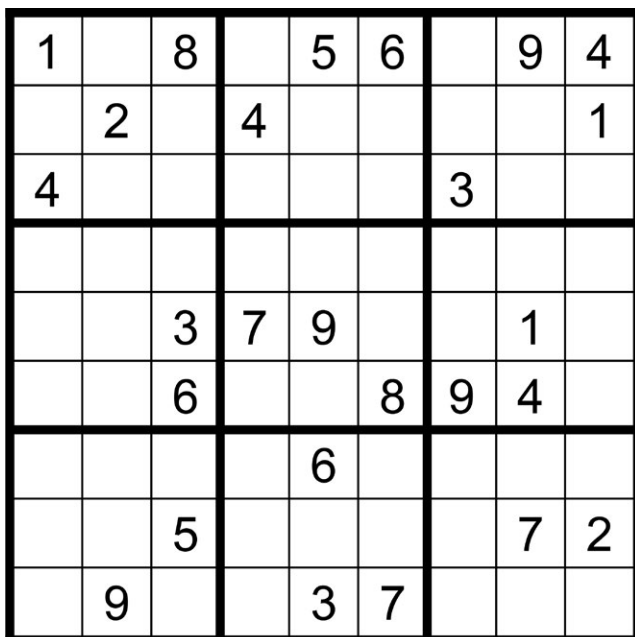
52. Find that's mined

53. Cancel

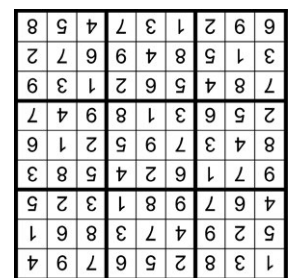
54. Unload

55. Pig palace

Sudoku difficulty: ★★★★★



Crossword and Sudoku solutions



How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in each column, row, and three-by-three block.