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ARTS & LETTERS

The Chained Reader

How the logic of machines makes us less human

BY DAVID SAMUELS

Something strange happened the first time I encountered an article online that I wrote for a print magazine. The article was an old-fashioned feature that had taken me months to report, then perhaps six weeks to write, plus another six to eight weeks to edit and rewrite with the help of capable editors, copy editors and fact-checkers who helped give the magazine prose of yesteryear its distinctive glossy finish. The layered process by which such texts were produced meant that I had read through my article with close attention over a dozen times before it was published, by which point I could recite long passages of my prose by heart.

Yet the sentences and paragraphs that I saw swimming before me on the screen clearly weren't mine. Rather, they read like a raw, unfinished version of my actual article—an undergraduate parody of something that took me months to write. I was gesticulating wildly where I should have been quiet, drawing attention to myself at weird junctures, and making weird faces at the camera. Points I had made in a sensible, even-toned fashion had been washed out or faded into the background, making it hard to follow my argument. I was living the dream of going into an important meeting with no pants on, except

I wasn't dreaming. Hundreds of thousands of people would soon be seeing this unwonted version of my prose self, stammering and half naked.

There had to be a rational explanation for the disaster on my desktop. My first guess was that a well-meaning copy editor at one of America's most august magazines had accidentally uploaded the wrong file, causing an early editorial draft from months ago to populate the magazine's website. On the verge of calling my editor to alert her to this embarrassing error, I thought to compare the text onscreen to the final galley proof, which I had printed out on paper. (The editing process at print magazines back then involved a succession of proofs that showed the author and her editor the text of the article in a progression of magazine-width columns, then layouts.) Trembling, I located the final proof on my desk, and sat down to reread the product of months of my labor.

Very soon, I found that my blood pressure was returning to normal. The galley proof was identical to the text I remembered writing—serious in the right places, funny in others, embedded in an argument that made logical sense. In other words, it read like the product of months of work, supervised by other high-end professionals whose job was to pay close attention to what they read. What happened was now crystal clear: Someone had indeed published an early,

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BY ALLAN LEVINE

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The discomfiting genius of Hans Josephsohn

BY JOE FYFE



half-finished draft of my article on the magazine's website.

Then I thought to compare the text on the page to the text on my screen. Word for word, they were exactly the same. I was shocked. What happened? Why did a text that read so well in galleys read so shambolically online?

The uniquely powerful insight of the 20th-century discipline of cultural anthropology as formulated by the great French thinker Claude Levi-Straus was that culture is a closed system. A tribal mask hanging on the wall of a hut in Africa or New Guinea has meaning within the culture of the tribe that produced it, which is bound up with their social structures and cosmology. Hang the

same mask next to a Picasso in a white-walled room in MOMA, and it becomes a different object, embedded within the cultural system that contains 20th-century Western art. Culturally speaking, the two masks are wildly and indeed irreconcilably different from each other—even if, physically speaking, they are the same mask.

So too with the act of reading. Like every other human activity, reading is a culturally bound activity, whose meaning is determined by its relation to the larger cultural system in which it occurs. To take a simple example from the history of reading, a medieval monk poring over an illuminated manuscript of the New Testament might appear to be engaging in an activity familiar to all of us: reading. However, if you were to ask that monk what he was doing, he might explain to you that he was speaking aloud the written word of God in order to ensure that it was untainted by human error. Ask the same question of an 18th-century Enlightenment philosopher poring over the exact same manuscript, and he would probably give you an answer related to the application of universal reason or critical inquiry. The activities of both readers, while they might superficially look the same, acquire their meaning from different cultural systems, which constitute the act of reading in entirely different ways.

In the nearly six centuries since the invention of the printing press, the collapse of the dominance of the Catholic Church over Western intellectual life, and the emergence of species of radical selfhood as expressed and propagated through such varied technologies as universal literacy, easily portable books, and cheap hand mirrors, we have become familiar with the idea of reading as a private, inward act of communication between the individual reader and the author of a text, which is part of a cultural system that we call “humanism.” As a humanist reader, I pick up a book, and go sit in a chair. As I scan the lines on the page, my lips don't move, while my eyes tend to move down the center of the page, while also moving from left to right. Because I am musically inclined, I tend to be especially sensitive to percussive consonants and the varying

lengths and punctuation of sentences. If the author of the text gains my trust by demonstrating intelligence and skill—a sense of humor also helps—I sink into a kind of reverie, in which I begin almost semiconsciously to fill in gaps in the text, using my own experiences to extrapolate a complex inner or external landscape from a brief description of a character's perceptions or dress. In doing so, I become a kind of co-author of the text I am reading, which means that in some sense the book I am reading will always be unique to me.

In brief, my thesis here, based on three decades of professional activity as a writer and editor, is that we are at a moment of disjunction in the history of reading, driven by a technological shift that already seems to be as consequential as the birth of the printing press, a shift whose magnitude was already present to me 15 years ago when I had my dizzying encounter with my own text. The answer to the mystery I faced that day was contained, I realized, in my browser. The text I read in the galley proof had been written for the printed page, where it was surrounded by a halo of empty and inert white space. It was like playing an instrument in a concert hall where the audience sits in silence, waiting until the breaks to applaud.

The browser wasn't so polite. In fact, it was constantly tugging at the reader, reminding him or her of the many other interesting articles they could easily read instead of mine, in the rest of the magazine and throughout the entire internet. To aid the reader in making his or her engagement with my text as fleeting as possible, words and phrases within the text were helpfully underlined, in blue; when you clicked on them, they took you to other websites in order to explore, say, the rich history of a plant I had happened to mention in passing, and which had no meaningful connection to the rest of my article, or even the subject of my article. Those websites linked to articles on other websites of varying quality and styles with no apparent connection to each other, except for the fact that they were also located somewhere on the internet. If the expected relation between the text and the empty spaces of the galley

proof reminded me of playing a violin in a concert hall, reading the same text on my browser felt like trying to play a sonata over the din of Grand Central Station during rush hour.

The arrival of large globally networked social media platforms powered by AI, which is the context in which 21st-century humans do most of our reading, has further fractured the more than 600-year-long intimate relationship between the humanist reader and the author, to the point where it is becoming difficult to speak about the reader's experience of a text independent of the social media response, which is being consistently gamed by the hidden hands of political operatives, large corporations, intelligence agencies, and other arms of the state. What these forces have in common is that they seek to interrupt the dialogue inside our heads and replace it with catechisms about what we can say, think, believe, how we are to identify ourselves to others, and what we should be. By forcing the reader to internalize an algorithmically powered chorus of yeas and nays, which are being constantly manipulated by external actors, the platforms can no longer lay claim even to the noisy neutrality of Grand Central Station. Instead, they have become instruments of interpretive enforcement backed by the built-in sanctioning mechanisms of social disapproval, ostracism, or worse. In addition to radically altering the nature of how human beings communicate, exercise power, and accumulate wealth, social media therefore augurs a fundamental transformation of the activity of reading, reversing the radical possibilities for the free play of individual minds that have been encouraged for over 600 years by the accumulated social power and credit made possible by the technologies of the printing press and the printed page, and by the practice of silent reading.

From antiquity up through the 20th century, reading was more than a platform for aesthetic expression or self-centered reveries. Reading was also an important source of knowledge and insight for powerful men as well as some women, a practice that was pursued not only

for its literary, religious, and emotional rewards but also for its sheer practical utility. Reading was as important a source of insight for Marx and Lenin and their followers as it was for Charles Darwin and as it had been for Aristotle and Thucydides. The ways in which the subjectivities of readers of power interacted with those of the authors they found useful were quite different from the ways in which monks read scripture, or social media users communicate online.

But before sketching out some of the salient features of the nature and scale of the changes we are currently going through, and the new habits of reading that they are producing, it is necessary to remove a distraction that pops up whenever the conjunction of technology and reading is raised. Namely, whether machines powered by AI can think. There is no question that AI is an extraordinarily powerful human tool that may be used in ways that may not always appear to accord with the wishes of their ostensible human masters. But as the philosopher John Searle pointed out more than 35 years ago, consciousness is a characteristic of human functioning that is inherent in the specificity of the human biology. To argue that AI can or can't attain consciousness is therefore a simple category error; moreover, it contradicts decades of experience in teaching machines how to "think," which is a word that describes a fundamentally human activity. I am therefore not concerned here with the question of whether machines can think, but with how machines are changing how humans read.

Most social media users reject the premise that they generally behave the way that the software that governs their platforms instructs them to behave, or that their behavior as information-seekers on large networked tech platforms is anything other than an expression of their own internal thought processes. By scrolling through their phones, and "liking" or attacking stray phrases tweezed from articles that were largely or entirely engineered for that purpose, they believe themselves to be gaining valuable information about the world and becoming smarter, better-informed

members of their social group—thereby engaging in an act of self-definition that is increasingly circumscribed by social media platforms, in a closed loop.

Yet seen from the perspective of the platforms that attract and hold the attention of users through gamified loops, social media users may as well be networked bots whose activities are profoundly mediated—if not entirely predetermined—by the platforms that support and guide their activities, to the point of framing their thoughts and actions and defining the meaning and reach of the language they use and consume. And since machines by definition can't think, no one in these algorithmically driven systems can be said to think—which is one reason why the common wisdom of entire classes of "experts" who populate these platforms is at once so remarkably uniform, and so often gob-smacked by reality.

Platforms animated by machine logic turn people into functional subroutines, repeating chunks of language in response to prompts. By doing so, they help the machines to sort categories of information that are unique to human beings into machine-appropriate buckets. The auto-complete function that is now built into every platform from Google to X is merely one obvious way that machines are breaking down the individuating qualities of language into a more impoverished and grammatically rigid—that is to say, less human—language that they can more easily predict. These activities, especially when repeated dozens of times per day, bind their authors, i.e., you, to larger machine-friendly language complexes that train their human users to uncritically accept judgments and prompts that are reinforced by the real-time networked effects of millions of other machine-mediated human users. The results of this process can be fairly judged by the fact that the sentences produced by social media users repeatedly fail basic tests of internal logic and external proof in a way that is frankly impossible to imagine in any recognizably humanistic culture of critical thinking and reading.

The world's richest man understands all of the above, because it is essential to his business. Tesla, Elon Musk's

electric car maker, produces real-world cars that run on batteries that store electricity. However, the desire for cars that operate on such technologies—which is heavily subsidized by governments around the world—is a social product, which is largely generated by memes. Elon Musk is able to get individual investors and large institutional investors alike to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in his stock because Tesla is a meme. The Tesla meme is in turn linked to the meme-world existence of Elon Musk, who creates, shapes and broadcasts his image via social media, which in turn allows hundreds of millions of other people to participate in his work of meme-production—and real-world production—by buying Tesla cars and Tesla stock. Eliminate the linked universe of electric cars, Tesla and Elon Musk from meme-world, and hundreds of billions of dollars in real-world value would vanish.

Elon Musk paid \$44 billion for Twitter because he had every reason to believe that a platform he had used to build his personal brand would be turned against him. That's because Musk is a prominent target for charges of spreading "disinformation," which is a term developed by establishment actors acting in concert with each other to censor speech. The sanctions with which they threatened Musk, which included limiting his reach on social media platforms or kicking him off such platforms entirely, would have most likely crashed his car company. When seen this way, \$44 billion was a very reasonable price to pay as a one-time insurance premium against a type of catastrophic damage that directly threatened a set of companies valued at over \$1 trillion.

Still with me? Great. Now focus for a moment on how you are reading this article. If you are over the age of 40, you will soon recognize that your eyes move across the screen in front of you very differently than they move across a printed page of text; I'm assuming that you still read physical books in order to buy more time for my argument, though the numbers suggest that you don't read printed books very often, even if you still buy them. In any case, the screen-reader in you is demonstrably

“Elon Musk paid \$44 billion for Twitter because he had every reason to believe that a platform he had used to build his personal brand would be turned against him.”

more distracted. At the same time as you are unlikely to be able to remember anything you are reading, your attention is heightened, and made more anxious, by your anticipation of the release or denial of a warm jolt of serotonin that signals social approval or belonging. Because, from the platform's point of view, the texts you consume are simply semisentient spyware, your attention is also accompanied by the—quite accurate—sense that someone is looking over your shoulder. What was once the private, interior experience of reading no longer feels quite so private. The transformation of reading into a public experience means that it is subject to different rules; what is acceptable in private is no longer encouraged or experienced as appropriate.

That's assuming you are human, of course. From the perspective of the text and its purveyors, it matters little whether you are a mechanical subroutine expressed in a string of code or a human user whose platformed reading activity is a functional adjunct to a larger machine process. Statistically speaking, most reading on the planet today is not being done by humans, whether men of power or social media users talking about Taylor Swift. It is being done by machines, which are therefore inevitably reshaping and redefining

the activity of reading for all its practitioners, machine and human alike.

Being a romantic at heart, it is hard for me to dismiss the humanistic yearning for a culture of reading which will very likely soon be unrecognizable except to monks on Mount Athos. As an author, I prefer to inhabit a universe in which every sentence I read is the recognizable product of a set of instructions which function as a kind of authorial DNA, containing the capacity to uniquely populate the many universes that we carry around with us as we interact with other humans, and attempt to inhabit a shared reality.

The practice of silent reading, on which this modern humanistic understanding of reading, and also of what it means to be human, relies, is perhaps first noted by Horace, the leading Roman lyric poet of the age of Augustus, who wrote of “reading and writing which I like to do in silence.” For Horace, as for at least a minority of his fellow Roman readers, silent reading was a preferred practice, distinguished from other types of reading, and which had existed for centuries before the poet's birth. One of the reasons that Roman authors are largely intelligible to modern readers like ourselves is that they read more or less the way we do, and wrote with readers who were at least in some ways like us in mind.

There was nothing necessary about Horace's audience or the poet's habit of silent reading, though. The end of Rome's golden age sent habits of text-based reading moving backward for centuries, until the habit of silent reading by individuals—along with the accompanying practice of writing with interword spaces—became virtually unknown. In Europe, the task of separating out individual words was left to a priestly class of scribes who lived in monasteries, where the vast majority of written texts resided. Monks could mostly read; very few other people could. The monastic Rule of Benedict instructed monks to read in silence, so as not to disturb their fellow monks.

The practice of silent reading also went to the heart of a philosophical debate of great importance within the

Church. The debate began more or less in the fifth century, when the Church emphasized and strengthened the separation of the written and the spoken word. The need for this separation arose in part based on the great philosopher Augustine's understanding of letters as the signs of sounds, meaning that written letters and words were merely a means of communicating oral language through script. But the seventh-century monk Isidore, regarded as the last great scholar of the ancient world, disagreed with Augustine: He understood letters as signs without sounds. Letters, he believed, were signs of things, allowing written words to signal directly to the mind through the eye. Spoken language was therefore understood by the Church as separate from, and inferior to, written language; a diminishment of God's word.

Isidore won. Yet as the historian Paul Saenger writes in his landmark essay "Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society," "the ancient world did not possess the desire, characteristic of the modern age, to make reading easier and swifter because the advantages that modern readers perceive as accruing from ease of reading were seldom viewed as advantages." As far as the Church was concerned, the longer the reader was occupied with God's word, the better. So while the Church itself privileged silent reading in theory, it confined the practice to carefully defined spaces and occasions. In fact, the more the Church could limit and control the relationships between individuals and texts, the better.

Yet the doctrinal primacy of silent reading within the Church perhaps inevitably led to the spread of the practice among laymen, which began at least a half century earlier in Italy, the home of the Church, than it did in northern Europe. "The new privacy afforded by silent reading had dramatic and not entirely positive effects on lay spirituality," Saenger writes. Unsurprisingly, one consequence of the spread of the practice of silent individual reading was a flourishing trade in erotic printed art, not dissimilar to the vast popularity of sites like Pornhub on today's internet.

Saenger's essay is a landmark in the

history of literacy because it fractured the largely unexamined assumption that reading is an innate human capacity whose expression has remained more or less the same over time. Instead, Saenger demonstrated that the activity of reading had changed radically over time; it was also his assertion that the changes he chronicled were selected for by the organization and the capacities of the human brain. For example, Saenger showed that there are discrete systems in the brains of English speakers for the aural understanding and silent visual understanding of language, which are in turn dependent on the spatial organization of the text. If you give a text typed in capital letters with no word separation or punctuation to a class of fifth graders, they automatically read it aloud, which is a continuation of the habit by which a child sounds out words syllable by syllable in order to gain access to meaning. Saenger concluded that, "Only scripts that provide a consistently broad eye-voice span to oral readers can sustain rapid, silent reading as we know it," a practice he defined as "reference reading"—meaning the rapid perusal of texts in order to extract specific, useful information. It was Saenger's thesis that reference reading was prevalent within, and probably essential to the development of, advanced civilizations in both the East and the West.

The practice that Saenger defined as "reference reading" was hardly new. It was beautifully described by the younger Pliny in his letter (*Letters*, 3.5) about the way his uncle read to compile notebooks (and also his *Natural History*) and was traced through the centuries by the scholar Ann Blair in her masterful history *Too Much to Know*. However the use of this particular technology of reading was largely confined to small circles of mostly very well educated scholars, scientists, and others who read widely, and for a purpose.

If one helpful precondition for reference reading is silence, the other was standardized letters and punctuation that made it possible for the extractive eye to scan texts at high speeds. Operating at the edge of the Latin-speaking world, the scribes of the Anglo-Saxon islands sought to preserve and even

augment the power of written language by reintroducing spacing between words, which the Romans had used to facilitate speedy access to the text, while restricting variant forms of letters—innovations that led to the development of many of the standardized typefaces in which books are printed today. "The reintroduction of word separation by Irish and Anglo-Saxon scribes," Saenger wrote, "constitutes the great divide in the history of reading between antique cultures and those of the modern Occident." By lessening the cognitive burdens of text recognition and word-separation, the new standardized scripts made rapid, silent reading possible by reducing the time it took to convert signs into words, even before the inventions of the printing press and movable, standardized type.

As the innovations of the Irish and British monks reached the European mainland in the 12th and 13th centuries, the spread of the new ecclesiastical language software was greeted with equal measures of delight and apprehension, a tension that was perhaps best expressed by the 14th-century Italian poet Dante Alighieri in his narrative of the literary lovers Paolo and Francesca. "One day, for pastime, we read of Lancelot, how love constrained him; we were alone, suspecting nothing. Several times that reading urged our eyes to meet and took the color from our faces ..." the poet writes. What happens next of course is that the lovers kiss, putting their mortal souls in danger.

Dante's lovers were victims of the morally dubious act of reading for pleasure, which is inherent in the intimacy of the encounter with the text. The story of Paolo and Francesca, accompanied by the poet's graphic images of the tortures of hell, was itself meant to be read in private by lay readers, some of whom no doubt fell victim to the same corruptions as Dante's lovers. The idea that reading can be a double-edged sword is therefore nothing new. What is new today is the rebalancing of the social forces that are arrayed against the free imaginative activity of the individual.

Today, we celebrate the Renaissance as the moment when the power of the individual consciousness began to gain

significant traction against the desire of the Church to stand as the sole legitimate arbiter of truth. Reading helped to open up the inner spaces in which men and women could think independently about their own lives and their place in the universe. As a consequence, we have come to think of those inner spaces, as figured through the act of silence reading, as the places where a significant part of our humanity resides. The question is, how long is the centurieslong balance between the sovereign imaginative authority of the individual and the pressure of large institutions and networks likely to hold in an age of new technologies that relentlessly colonize our inner lives, whether on behalf of the large corporations that fracture our online activities into marketable packets of data, or to feed the surveillance nets of spy services and other arms of the state, which see self-guided human thought-activity as a danger to their earthly supremacy, and even to the survival of the planet itself.

In his classic essay “The Humanist as Reader,” the historian Anthony Grafton more or less dates the open celebration of lay reading to a letter written in 1513 by Nicolo Machiavelli to his friend the Florentine humanist and diplomat Francesco Vettori:

Leaving the wood, I go to a spring, and from there to my bird-snare. I have a book with me, either Dante or Petrarca or one of the lesser poets,” Machiavelli wrote. “I read about their amorous passions and about their loves, I remember my own, and I revel for a moment in this thought. I then move up on the road to the inn, I speak with those who pass, and I ask them for news of their area; I learn many things and note the different and diverse tastes and ways of thinking of men. END

In daytime, the book in the reader’s hand is like a net, capturing the reader’s own memories as well as the observations and perceptions of other humans who intrude on the reader in the act of reading. The night offers a more direct and intimate kind of encounter, in

which the philosopher converses directly with the greats. “I am not ashamed to speak to them, to ask them the reasons for their actions,” Machiavelli continues, “and they, in their humanity, answer me; and for four hours I feel no boredom, I dismiss every affliction, I no longer fear poverty nor do I tremble at the thought of death...”

Renaissance humanist literature is replete with such moments of bibliophilic transcendence, from Petrarch carrying his copy of Augustine to the top of Mount Ventoux to the scene described by the whores in Aretino’s *Ragionamenti* of young gallants clustering beneath a young woman’s window with their copies of Petrarch. Newly liberated from monastic library shelves where they were often literally kept chained by monks, books became mobile, personal possessions, which their owners used to define themselves. As Grafton felicitously puts it, humanists personalized their books the way California teenagers of the 1950s personalized their cars, by systematically annotating as they read. Annotations themselves became a quasi-formal literary genre, with Montaigne’s marginal responses to Plutarch and Guicciardini being included in his famous *Essays*.

The reach of the humanistic revolution that Grafton and his fellow early Renaissance scholars have chronicled was greatly aided by the invention of the printing press somewhere around 1440 by the German printer Johannes Gutenberg. The printing press made possible the spread of humanistic scholarship and Protestant individualism, which combined to shape modern reading habits by diffusing relatively cheap copies of books to relatively large numbers of people. Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant churches, proclaimed printing to be “the ultimate gift of God,” while John Foxe, author of the widely printed *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, gave thanks for what he called the “divine and miraculous invention of printing.”

Yet regardless of the growing number of printing presses in Europe, and the importance of printed material in both spreading and combatting the new Protestant faith, reading remained an activity restricted to an elite. The historian

Rolf Engelsing estimates that in Germany around 1500 somewhere around 3%-4% of the population could read, while David Cressy estimates the English literacy rate during the 16th century being somewhere around 10% for men and 1% for women. In Venice in 1587, 26% of boys and 1% of girls attended schools in which they were taught to read.

So how did these early modern readers, however few or numerous, actually read? The sermons and pamphlets that made up a large proportion of printed matter in the first two centuries after the printing press was invented seem to be more scripts than texts, intended to be read aloud to audiences that were mostly composed of illiterates. Sounding not unlike the Catholic Church leaders he so fervently opposed, the Puritan leader John Calvin told the printer Jacques Roux of Geneva that he was reluctant to have his sermons printed because of the confusion that would be engendered by the differences between the written and the spoken word. The emphasis of the new churches on catechisms further underlines the continuing importance of orality even among Protestants. Yet simply by holding books in their hands, and enshrining them in their homes, Protestants and their children were being prepared for lives as readers in a way that Christians of previous generations were not.

The Catholic Church understood the nature and the size of the threat to its authority posed by the practice of private reading. By the Council of Trent in 1546, at which the Catholic Church recognized the Latin Vulgate Bible as the one true version of Scripture, the threat posed by the proliferation of printed books being read in private was clear. “No one, relying on his own skill, shall—in matters of faith, and of morals,” the Church proclaimed, “presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture” contrary to the Church. In 1564, the Church launched the index of prohibited books while warning that only “learned and pious men” should be allowed to read the Bible in translation; laymen would still be allowed to read the Bible in Latin. In 1593, Pope Clement, a staunch opponent of disinformation, withdrew permission for laymen of whatever

levels of piety to read the Bible at all, a prohibition that lasted until the middle of the 18th century.

The genie of reading that the Church released through its innovations in standardizing texts could not so easily be put back into the bottle. A flood of Protestant sermons, natural histories, works of scientific speculation and discovery, works of political philosophy and economy followed, along with memoirs, novels and other texts that were printed cheaply on machines that, if needed, could be hidden in barns and basements. The German historian Rolf Engelsing has documented the radical expansion of available reading material in Protestant areas of Germany, from a small cabinet of approved books to an extensive, varied reading diet. Meanwhile, as “the new bourgeois agents of culture increased in number,” Engelsing wrote, they no longer could find adequate employment; “these ‘free-floating intellectuals’ constituted a potential for unrest through their explicit questioning of the traditional system.”

One result of the changes that Engelsing documents is what the German political philosopher Jurgen Habermas called the “structural transformation of the public sphere,” a new space in which private people assembled into a public, structured by printed matter and the resulting cloud of discussion among readers and their listeners in streets and coffee shops. The new reading public with direct or indirect access to the printed materials that helped structure the new “public sphere” included urban servants, who had free time; access to light; small budgets to purchase printed materials; and easy access to newsstands and booksellers. Chambermaids read comedies, novels, and poems, while soldiers in urban barracks preferred novels and erotica. Much as the internet has done today, the wide availability of written material both democratized the practice of reading and made it shallower, as the Renaissance gave birth to much greater numbers of readers and listeners with much less average capacity for critical engagement with the texts that they read, when compared with their learned, often noble predecessors.

Sometime around 1770, prevailing

“History suggests that the next century may be as bloody as the century that followed the Gutenberg revolution.”

Enlightenment modes of reading deepened and became more empathic, resulting in an even larger audience of readers whose desire and ability to buy books was matched by a new and overwhelming desire to make contact with lives behind the printed page. Novels like Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in Germany, Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Heloise* in France, and Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* in England became wildly popular narcotics that fed national reading manias. “No lover of tobacco or coffee, no wine drinker or lover of games, can be as addicted to their pipe, bottle, games or coffee-table as those many hungry readers are to their reading habit,” wrote the Erfurt cleric Johann Rudolf Gottlieb Beyer in 1796.

Which all seems pleasant enough. What this short-hand account of the Gutenberg revolution leaves out, of course, is the terrifying physical destruction and bloodshed that accompanied these changes in reading habits. In England, the broad diffusion of printing presses led to the decadeslong anti-monarchical revolution led by Oliver Cromwell. The Thirty Years’ War, fought between Catholic and Protestant believers and their hired armies in Central and Eastern Europe remains the single most destructive conflict, on a per capita basis, in European history,

including the First and Second World Wars. It was readers, particularly readers of sentimental novels, and the new emotionally driven picture of humanity they made popular, who expressed their dissatisfaction with the old regimes in France and Germany, and, harnessing the power of the printing presses, swept them away.

Today’s revolution in reading being spurred by the advent of digital technologies may turn out to be even more powerful than the Gutenberg revolution. If the spread of printing presses, combined with the spread of cheap hand-held mirrors, made available to millions of people a new sense of themselves as individuals, and as the authors of their own stories, which were inherently worth reading about and listening to, we can only wonder at the power inherent in billions of iPhones and other smartphone devices which combine a printing press, in the form of access to social media platforms, and a mirror, in the form of ever-more-powerful smartphone cameras, with which users endlessly record and broadcast selfies. Network billions of these mirrors together, and put them in real-time communication with each other, and it seems clear that we are looking at a species of transformative, technologically driven change that reaches deeper inside our heads and hearts and moves at a far greater velocity than anything human civilizations have ever experienced. At the very least, history suggests that the next century may be as bloody as the century that followed the Gutenberg revolution, which gave Europe the Thirty Years’ War.

Governments and other state actors are rightly afraid of what these changes may mean for existing social forms and power structures, though seeking to constrain technology by chaining hundreds of millions of minds has not proved itself to be a particularly productive strategy. What does seem clear is that we are approaching a large-scale social crisis that we are bringing upon ourselves, in part through our reluctance to acknowledge the extent to which how the digital revolution and the new habits of reading it is inculcating are themselves radically altering the institutional

and intellectual framework of Western liberal societies. The extent to which our inner lives are being flattened and made public—meaning less subject to our own control, and more accessible to direct manipulation and censorship by state and quasi-ecclesiastical actors—should give us pause. The idea that we are exchanging modes of reading that have been largely dominant in Western societies for the past few centuries for new technologically mediated modes of reading that have more in common with the centuries in which books were chained and the life of the mind was seen as a threat to the spiritual order maintained by the Church should not strike any sane observer as a hopeful or desirable development.

Machine-based reading, which is the prevent mode of reading today among both humans and machines, was born in 1854, when the English mathematician George Boole published *The Laws of Thought*, which converted the FALSE and TRUE statements at the heart of Aristotle's logic into two digits—zero and 1—that could be crunched by algebraic equations. Eighty-three years later, the American mathematician and electrical engineer Claude Shannon gave life to Boole's insight when he posited that the electrical off/on switches of a differential analyzer could be used to animate Boole's 0/1 bits. Accompanying this realization was the insight that on/off switches could be used to automate Aristotelian syllogisms: One arrangement of off/on switches could calculate AND, a second could calculate OR, and a third could calculate NOT. While the clunky switch-arrangements that Shannon drew up in 1937 have shrunk to miniscule transistors, multiplied into parallel processors, and used to perform increasingly sophisticated styles of mathematics, the arithmetic logic unit (ALU), which is the core design of a computer's brain, remains an automated version of Aristotle's AND-OR-NOT logic, as expressed by Boole and given concrete physical form by Shannon.

What is important to understand here is that the machine-centered definition of reading or "reading" is different in kind from humanistic notions of

reading that we have been discussing, which involve the two-way encounter of the (human) reader with a closed system of symbolic signification we call a text, regardless of whether that system appears on a stone tablet, a piece of parchment, a printed page, or an Apple Retina screen. Through the act of reading, as suggested at the top of this essay, the reader produces the text, just as the text creates the reader; author and reading are bound together by deeply coded sets of instructions about which words matter more than other words, and where to look next, by which a text is produced, and which govern the ways it can be decoded. These instructions refer both inward, toward the closed system of the individual text, and at the same time outward, toward the human experience of real-world sensations and events, resulting in the distinctive form of interiority that we call reading. The individual reader's attention can be altered by the consumption of stimulants or narcotics, or by the distant tinkling of a Chopin sonata, or by a Bill Evans bass line coming through an open window. Yet we recognize all of these varying experiences of a text as reading, just as we recognize that no two readings of the same text are ever exactly alike.

Machines deal with texts by "sorting," meaning that they "read" by breaking the strings of symbols apart and putting the pieces into buckets. They can't escape the mathematical present tense in order to perform causal reasoning, which means that they can't think like historians or novelists, or like human readers. And it shows.

Here is a sample of a novel, written by an AI "deep learning" network: "It took a lot of time, maybe hours, for him to get the money from the safe place where he hid it, so he brought it back in a bundle and left it on the table. Then he noticed the money that had been hiding in the bed, and began walking toward the bed with a large bundle."

What's wrong here? As Gary Marcus and Ernest Davis explain in their essay "Rebooting AI," while the phrases of the AI detective noir feel fluent, the ideas that animate them are incoherent. Where does the second bundle come from, and what does it have to do with

the bundle containing the money that the protagonist has placed on the table? Is the money on the table the same money that is hiding in the bed? These questions don't have answers because machines don't think. The spring that should be moving the story forward, connecting action and motivation, is missing, because the sentences in question are not generated by human logic, but by the machine logic of the ALU, which recognizes a statistical correlation between wallets and safe places.

While current AI systems can produce "human-seeming" effects on the page more often, by drawing on much greater processing/correlating power than their predecessors, they continue to lack what linguists call compositionality, or the ability to construct the meaning of a complex sentence out of the meaning of its parts. AI doesn't really have any direct way of handling compositionality; all it has access to are enormous quantities of data. AI can learn that dogs have tails and legs, but it doesn't "know" how they relate to the life cycle of a dog. Nor can it recognize a dog as an animal composed of a head, a tail, and four legs; what an animal is; what a head is; or how the concept of head might vary across frogs, dogs, and people, yet bear a common relation to bodies. What AI can do is learn to predict that the words wallet and safe place occur in similar kinds of sentences ("He put his money in the wallet," "He put his money in a safe place"), but it has no way to relate that correlation to the human desire to protect one's possessions.

Terry Winograd, a professor at Stanford University, tried to solve the problems of compositionality by creating a simple virtual environment consisting of a handful of objects sitting on a table. He then created a program, named SHRDLU (the second column of keys on a Linotype machine), that was capable of parsing all the nouns, verbs, and rules of grammar needed to refer to and thereby govern his tabletop world. SHRDLU could describe the objects on the table, answer questions about their relationships, and make changes to the arrangement of objects in response to typed commands. If you told it to move "the red cone" and then later referred to "the

cone,” it would assume you meant the red one—a capability loudly trumpeted by AI enthusiasts. Yet when Winograd tried to make the program’s world larger, the rules required to account for the expanding number of words and their possible relationships to each other caused the system to collapse—the problem with applying machine learning to language being that words are arbitrary symbols that are necessarily embedded in human experience that animates the systems in which they produce meaning.

An answer to the problem of machine reading that does seem to work is therefore to have humans do the human part of the operation of reading—namely, to select bits of the interest to other humans, while letting machines use their vast databases and enormous processing power to do the machine part. What is sacrificed in this machine-driven and directed activity, of course, is the imaginative freedom that comes from depth of engagement with the text. “Your readers are search engines,” an agency that specializes in online reading habits informed its clients. “They’re searching for something specific 96% of the time.” According to researchers at Columbia University and the French National Institute, more than 6 in 10 people who share news URLs on Twitter don’t actually bother reading them, though one suspects those self-reported numbers represent a wild underestimation of how little social media users actually read. According to an eye-tracking study conducted by a company called Dejan Marketing, people read word-by-word online a mere 16% of the time. The average online reader, researchers found, engaged with a given piece of online material for 19 seconds, punctuated by 72 “eye stops”—producing an average attention-packet of one quarter of one second per glance. However one might describe this activity, it isn’t reading.

Seen from above, online readers are the unwitting handmaidens of the “gods of big data,” assisting slow but powerful machine learners in performing tasks that humans are better at. Increasingly, from the point of view of large social media platforms, human users are mechanical turks,

“It is grim to think that reading, an activity which was once understood to be a key to human self-liberation, is being transformed into a tool for circumscribing our humanity.”

sorting and identifying the equivalent of bridges and traffic lights. By privileging and rewarding our performance of these activities, the machines are teaching us a new way of reading—linear sorting, i.e., putting things in baskets. Instead of seeking to extract meaning from context in order to expand the space of one’s own inner life, which is something that humans do, social media users look to outwardly conform by extracting hot-button terms and sort them into baskets marked “good” and “bad,” while being rewarded for responding correctly to the cues they are given—i.e., the platforms are training their users to read like machines.

My own suspicion, based on more than a decade of close observation as a writer and editor of the rapid degeneration of American reading and writing habits, is that a lot of what we are seeing in the so-called culture wars in the U.S. is not the rise of a new political ideology, in the sense of a set of fixed beliefs whose adherents believe them to have explanatory power. “Wokeness,” for example, often seems less like an ideology and more like an outcome of the new culture of machine reading, in which human users are tasked with doing the grunt work of breaking down complex human experiences and feelings

into the linear logic of AND-OR-NOT statements.

Devout clergy and secret policemen in all times and places, not to mention the multibillionaire owners of these new systems and platforms, might well see the introduction of this new style of reading as a positive one, in which readers are adjuncts of large machine systems governed by the surveillance state, whose function is to restrain and control human thought and behavior. For readers and writers who take pleasure in their engagement with each other through the text, these developments represent the reversal of six centuries of increasing imaginative freedom and expanding opportunities for empathy with people who might seem on the surface to be radically unlike ourselves.

Anyone who is loyal to humanistic values and to the humanistic practices of reading must refuse to aid the work of installing little secret policemen inside every reader’s head, and then using them to control their fellow readers. Eliminating the space in which the dialogic relationship between writer and reader occurs, by turning private thoughts and experiences into public ones on large social media platforms run according to the logic of machines feels like a markedly regressive development, both for individual humans and for the societies in which they live. The future it promises us is a glowing, hand-held version of the 20th-century’s worst totalitarian nightmares.

It is grim to think that reading, an activity which was once understood to be a key to human self-liberation, is being transformed into a tool for imprisoning minds on a mass scale. At the same time, there is no questioning the power of machines to extend human capacities in ways that we may not even be capable of imagining—like curing diseases and settling large numbers of humans on other planets. Perhaps those who question the wisdom of using humans to populate large machine platforms and surveillance networks will seem to future generations like those timorous souls who predicted that Columbus and his fellow explorers would sail straight off the earth. I doubt it, though.

What does seem clear is that the

glorious inner cathedrals constructed by the monks and fantastically elaborated by generations of writers whose works were reproduced on the printed page, and which helped constitute the core of what we mean by “human,” are in danger. At best, the activity of engaging in an uninterrupted inner dialogue with a printed text will become a niche taste within the larger complex of reading governed by the logic of machines and supervised by government and corporate censors.

One of the great curiosities of old Europe are the surviving libraries of

chained manuscripts, which for centuries have functioned as a powerful metaphor for the liberation of the mind through the propagation of the printed word. Now, through the new technologies of machine reading, as enforced through our increasingly censored and manipulated search engines and monopolistic platforms, we appear to be going backward, to a new era of chained readers. A new set of technologies that promised liberation from censors and gatekeepers is instead producing a tragedy of the mind, by putting a

small number of oligarchs, bureaucrats, and ideologues in charge of what and how we read. Together, the new censors and their robots are on the verge of achieving a constriction of human inner space on a scale that Pope Clement, John Calvin, and other fanatics of their age could only dream of.

History enjoys such ironies. And if you don't like it, you can always pick up a book. ■

This article was originally published on October 03, 2023.

NEWS & POLITICS

The New Push for Censorship Under the Guise of Combating Hate

How an obscure British nonprofit came to influence White House COVID policy and lead attacks on Elon Musk

BY PAUL D. THACKER

In March of 2021 a nonprofit group called the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) released a report about online misinformation. Founded in the U.K. by a former Labour Party political figure named Imran Ahmed, the CCDH was virtually unknown at the time in the U.S., but that was about to change. The report quickly reached the hands of executives at Twitter. “COVID-19 misinfo enforcement team is planning on taking action on a handful of accounts surfaced by the CCDH report,” a Twitter official wrote on March 31. One account they eventually took action against belonged to Robert F. Kennedy

Jr., who was then running against Joe Biden for the Democratic Party's nomination for president.

A few months later, the same report was being cited by the Biden administration. At a press briefing in July 2021, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki quoted from the CCDH report in a briefing where she accused Facebook of undermining federal vaccine policies. “There's about 12 people who are producing 65% of anti-vaccine misinformation on social media platforms,” Psaki claimed, citing the CCDH's work, while warning social media companies to shut down these “misinformation” accounts. “They're killing people,” President Biden told a reporter a short

time later, leveling the charge of murder against Facebook for its alleged role in providing a platform for “vaccine misinformation.”

Facebook's Vice President Monika Bickert later criticized CCDH's claims for being free of evidence—failing to define the term “anti-vaxx,” for example—and neglecting to explain how they came up with their numbers and conclusions. But it had little effect. By then the report had popularized the idea of a “disinformation dozen,” a narrative that hardened as it was promoted by countless news outlets, fact checkers, and social media accounts devoted to round-the-clock attacks on “disinformation.”

More recently, the CCDH has popped up again, leading the battle against Twitter's new owner, Elon Musk, who has been cast as a champion of racists and antisemites. “The CCDH has been at the forefront of reporting on the hate proliferating on X/Twitter since Musk completed his takeover in late October 2022,” Ahmed wrote last month in *The Observer*. In a number of publications over the past year, the group has repeatedly blamed Musk for allowing his platform to spread hate speech. Once again, these efforts have been uncritically amplified in the press and in a letter to Musk from House Democrats that reiterates Ahmed's claims, and cites him and CCDH.

What, then, do we know about the CCDH? In effect, it seems, the organization provides the White House with a powerful weapon to use against critics

including RFK Jr. and Musk, while also pressuring platforms like Facebook and Twitter to enforce the administration's policies. While few journalists have bothered to investigate the opaque group, the available evidence paints a picture that is likely different from what many in the public would expect of a "public interest" nonprofit.

The scale of the CCDH's success must be emphasized for those unfamiliar with the crowded mob of D.C.-based nonprofits churning out reports that seldom get a passing glance from the nation's policymakers. For a tiny, unknown, nonprofit to gain so much attention in D.C.'s crowded, competitive policy space is akin to a pudgy, amateur athlete catching the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl, while setting a new world record in the marathon, all in one week.

So who is the CCDH's founder and leader Imran Ahmed? Where does he get his money? Why did he decide to leave behind politics and start a nonprofit focused on misinformation? And perhaps most importantly, how did a relative unknown from London gain such enormous influence from the White House bully pulpit and within Democratic Party politics?

Imran Ahmed is a political operative who spent several years advising conservative members of the British Labour Party before jumping into nonprofit campaigning to run two interrelated dark money groups: Stop Funding Fake News and the Center for Countering Digital Hate. Shortly after appearing on Twitter in 2019, Stop Funding Fake News claimed some very sizable left-wing scalps in London, mostly by lobbing vague accusations of fake news at political enemies. The group helped to run Jeremy Corbyn out of Labour Party leadership while tanking the lefty news site Canary, after starting a boycott of their advertisers, according to reports in British media outlets, sources who spoke with Tablet, and CCDH's own claims of success.

Although CCDH is still based in the U.K., Ahmed grew the group dramatically after he jumped across the Atlantic to incorporate CCDH as a D.C. nonprofit in 2021. In the states, he forged ties in Hollywood: Talent agent Aleen

Keshishian, who teaches in the cinema program at the University of Southern California, now sits on his board. Just as he had done for the Labour Party, Ahmed used the CCDH to attack as "conspiracy theorists" and "anti-vaxxers" various critics of the Biden arm of the Democratic Party.

After Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced he was running against Biden for the Democratic nomination and appeared on Joe Rogan, Ahmed told the BBC, "He's working really hard to keep people from knowing he's a hardcore anti-vaxxer."

When a federal judge chastised the Biden administration for possible censorship and restricted federal agency interactions with social media companies last July, Ahmed criticized the decision in a *New York Times* report.

In a replay of his success in the U.K., Ahmed is now trying to drive away Elon Musk's advertisers on X, this time based on dubious claims that the social media site is a playground for racists. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, Ahmed said, "We don't talk in the language of technology, we talk in the language of morality ... Advertisers are also human beings. Some of them just don't want to fund the primary vector of hate and disinformation in our society."

Ahmed's history is hard to track. The two groups he has run—Stop Funding Fake News and CCDH—seem to pop up out of nowhere, switch addresses, rarely disclose funders, omit naming all employees, and feature websites that change names or disappear from the internet. Jen Psaki's reference to the "Disinformation Dozen" report made the group famous in July 2021, yet the Internet Archive only has records beginning in 2022 for CCDH's website.

One rumor that came up often in the dozen or so conversations I've had, with people who have observed Ahmed for years, is that he works for British intelligence. Along with other questions emailed to Ahmed a couple weeks back, Tablet asked him to address the allegation he is connected to British intelligence, but he did not respond to repeated requests for comment. One of Ahmed's long-standing friends told me that Ahmed once mentioned that he had

applied to either MI5 or MI6. Because the conversation took place so long ago, the friend couldn't remember which of the two British intelligence agencies it was, and they never later discussed if he had gotten in.

"There's nothing surprising about this," said Mike Benz, a former State Department official who now runs the Foundation for Freedom Online, a free-speech watchdog. "This is not the first rodeo of British and U.S. intelligence services creating a cutout for the purpose of influencing the online news economy, to rig public debate in favor of political speech that supports agency agendas." Ahmed's story is critical to understanding the new push for censorship under the guise of combating hate.

Although he comes from a poor family, Ahmed got a scholarship to attend Britain's prestigious Manchester Grammar school where he excelled, becoming editor of the student newspaper, and then graduating to attend medical school. People who know him describe him as brilliant, and after dropping out of medical school, he studied politics at the University of Cambridge, later becoming an adviser to several members of Parliament in the conservative wing of the Labour Party.

While Ahmed eventually acknowledged in 2020 that he helped launch both Stop Funding Fake News and the Center for Countering Digital Hate, his involvement remained hidden for some years. Stop Funding Fake News started in February 2019 claiming to be a "social movement" too frightened to name its own grassroots activists.

"We didn't want the levels of hate that far braver people than ourselves have been subjected to," some of their anonymous members told the British publication *Jewish News* in April 2019. While proclaiming that you fear for your own safety is a common trope among disinformation activists, members of Stop Funding Fake News showed no trepidation at a meeting with advertising and media agencies to target political opponents.

As Stop Funding Fake News activists told a news site later that June, they convinced 40 brands—including Adobe, Chelsea FC, Harry's, Experion, eBay,

Moonpig, and Manchester United—to block some news outlets from running their ads, essentially starving the sites of revenue in a tactic called “demonetizing.” Stop Funding Fake News also announced that they were “educating” ad agencies, although this seems a euphemism for targeting people or messages that you don’t like. As reported by the British marketing industry news site The Drum:

It said it is now expanding its network to help ‘persuade’ ad agencies that it is ‘bad for their clients to be associated with the lies and racism found on these sites, so it’s in the interest of ad agencies to ensure they don’t put them there.’

That same month, Stop Funding Fake News claimed a big scalp, taking out the Canary, a leftist news site aligned with the political priorities of then-Labour Party leftist leader Jeremy Corbyn. “The Canary has announced that, thanks to our campaign, its business model ‘no longer works’ & they’re downsizing,” the group tweeted in triumph. “We want to spend more time and resources on this campaign & target new sites.”

Even as they remained “anonymous activists,” Stop Funding Fake News clearly had considerable influence with British politicians. In October 2019, a Labour Party MP cited Stop Funding Fake News as the reason advertisements promoting free tours of the Houses of Parliament should be “removed immediately” from Breitbart. “The Stop Funding Fake News Campaign have spotted that adverts for tours of Parliament have been hosted on Breitbart, the extremist, far-right, white supremacist fake news website set up by Steve Bannon,” the MP said.

The diminished stature of the lefty Canary did not bode well for Jeremy Corbyn, and by the end of 2019, more conservative elements in the party had dismissed him from Labour leadership, as the establishment centrist Keir Starmer wrestled back control. But by late 2020, the game was up with Stop Funding Fake News, whose “anonymous activists” were found to be Imran Ahmed and his Labour Party colleagues. Ahmed had by then admitted he ran Stop Funding Fake News, and the Canary news site had figured out that SFFN shared a web

server with the Center for Countering Digital Hate.

“SFFN would argue that, while websites that publish fake news have a right to free speech, they don’t have a right to make money from it,” the Canary reported in December 2020. “But on what authority can this group decide what is and is not ‘fake news’?” The Canary also pointed out that, like all British news sites, the British government regulated them, while Stop Funding Fake News operated in the shadows, free to attack, without any regulation or requirement to disclose members or funders.

“We declare this a hate site,” said former Canary editor Kerry-Anne Mendoza, describing the scorched-earth war against her news outlet. In retrospect, Mendoza said the entire campaign was designed to hammer the British left, plastering labels of “hate” and “fake news” on them that crumbled once government regulators got around to examining the allegations. “They accuse you of hate. Our regulator said the opposite, but that was irrelevant.”

Having throttled the Labour Party’s left wing, Stop Funding Fake News became moribund, rarely tweeting from their social media account. Not that this mattered. Ahmed began running most of his operations from the Center for Countering Digital Hate and pivoted his focus to the U.S. where his list of “disinformation” targets just happened to be critics of the Democratic Party establishment.

CCDH: Center for ‘Claims of Digital Hate

The Center for Countering Digital Hate registered in late 2018 in London, first as Brixton Endeavours Limited, before changing its name to the Center for Countering Digital Hate. When first incorporated, the CCDH’s only director was a staffer for Keir Starmer, a member of the conservative wing of the Labour Party. The group shared an address with an organization that supported Starmer as well. Damian Collins, a member of the Tory Party, later joined as an officer.

In late 2020, CCDH launched a campaign against British TV personality Katie Hopkins, a right-wing populist in the mold of the American writer Ann

Coulter. After Ahmed met with Twitter officials, he succeeded in getting Hopkins briefly removed from the site by claiming she trafficked in hate, later describing her as an “identity-based hate actor.” Celebrating their success, CCDH told media outlets, “We believe social media can empower the world to be even better, but handing megaphones to hate actors is irresponsible and dangerous.”

But campaigning against social media companies makes little sense when most of them are based in the United States, and Ahmed eventually moved to D.C., where he now lives, apparently with an American woman with whom he became engaged.

According to tax records, Ahmed began to run CCDH from D.C. in 2021, and CCDH took in \$1.47 million in their very first year operating in the United States. Nonprofits are not required to disclose their donors, and CCDH did not respond to questions about their funders. However, I happened upon the Schwab Charitable Fund, which allows people to set up private accounts to make anonymous donations. According to Schwab’s 2021 tax forms, someone donated \$1.1 million to CCDH, meaning someone secretly gave Ahmed’s group almost 75% of the donations they raised in their first year.

Other parts of CCDH’s tax records provide interesting insights. The group’s chairman is Simon Clark, a former senior fellow at the Center for American Progress (CAP), a D.C. think tank aligned with the corporate arm of the Democratic Party. CAP was founded by John Podesta, who chaired Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign against Donald Trump. And yes, CAP has close ties to the Biden administration. In other words, the CCDH may not be an objective civic group carrying out disinterested research. Indeed, one might conclude that CCDH functions as an arm of the corporate wing of the Democratic Party, to be deployed against the perceived enemies of corporate Democrats, whether they come from the left or the right.

Clark was also a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Lab. Matt Taibbi has reported that various U.S. government agencies and defense contractors fund the Digital

Forensics Lab which remains a central piece in the “censorship industrial complex.”

“The Atlantic Council, in the past several years, has had seven CIA directors on its board of directors or board of advisers,” said Benz. “And it’s one of the premier architects of online censorship.”

A source close to Ahmed told me he has bragged about meeting celebrities in Los Angeles and the actor Mark Ruffalo has tweeted in support of him. Ahmed’s Hollywood ties may be explained by one of CCDH’s legal directors, the agent and cinema professor Aleen Keshishian, who has managed Natalie Portman and Selena Gomez. On top of Mark Ruffalo, Keshishian’s bio states that her other clients include Paul Rudd and Jennifer Aniston. Ahmed’s connections to Hollywood actors could account for some of the money he has raised from anonymous sources, as wealthy celebrities sometimes wish to keep their political donations hidden from fans.

While hanging out with actors, Ahmed has also kept a close watch on Congress through a PR and lobbying firm he hired called Lot Sixteen. Very few activist groups have the financial means to hire private lobby shops—even those with an established presence on Capitol Hill—but during a few quarters of 2021 and 2022, CCDH paid Lot Sixteen \$50,000 to lobby congressional offices on COVID-19 misinformation and “preventing the spread of misinformation and hate speech online in social and mainstream media.”

Even as he expanded operations into the United States, Ahmed maintained strong ties with British politicians, including Tory Party member Damian Collins, a leading proponent of censoring disinformation. Since 2016, Collins has led a series of inquiries into “disinformation” and “fake news” on social media. Various reports he helped usher through the British government laid the foundation for a 2021 “Online Safety Bill” intended to purge online “disinformation.”

When Collins held hearings on the bill—which was passed into law just weeks ago—the first person to give testimony in support of online bans was Imran Ahmed.

“One might conclude that CCDH functions as an arm of the corporate wing of the Democratic Party.”

Ahmed’s successes in both the U.K. and the United States have also generated new legal concerns. Last month, Republican Congressman Jim Jordan sent CCDH a letter demanding they turn over a list of funders, as well as communications between social media companies and federal agencies accused of censoring Americans. When CCDH failed to provide answers to Jordan’s satisfaction, the congressman upped the ante with a subpoena, alleging the group is working directly with Biden officials.

And now Ahmed is also embroiled in a legal battle with Elon Musk. Last July, Musk’s lawyer sent Ahmed a letter, warning him that a report CCDH put out contained false and misleading claims about Twitter’s control of hate speech on the platform. Ahmed’s research consisted of eight papers, including one alleging that Twitter had taken no action against 99% of the 100 Twitter Blue accounts that CCDH accused of “tweeting hate.”

Publicly, Ahmed ridiculed Musk’s letter, saying it was a declaration of war. Twitter then filed a lawsuit against him and CCDH. Seizing on the lawsuit, Ahmed sent out an appeal for funding, and gave a series of interviews where he claimed Musk was bullying him.

Federal law prohibits unauthorized access into computer systems, and

Twitter alleges that CCDH illegally accessed the computers of a company called Brandwatch, which works with Twitter. Companies subscribe to Brandwatch to gain access to Twitter’s data, allowing them to understand how their company can advertise and promote themselves on the platform.

A recent CCDH report was based on questionable interpretations of Brandwatch data, which Twitter’s lawyers allege they accessed illegally through a third-party that has a Brandwatch subscription: the European Climate Foundation. Twitter also accuses CCDH of illegally scraping their data, which violates Twitter’s terms of service, and of interfering with their contract with Brandwatch. In addition to suing for financial damages, Twitter’s lawyers also allege that Ahmed’s organization violated the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, a criminal statute.

Though Ahmed did not respond to questions about what he plans to do as legal costs for CCDH mount, multiple sources told Tablet that he will likely put on a brave face and try to spin this into a narrative with him as tiny David taking on multiple Goliaths: Elon Musk and Republican lawmakers.

It is too early to say how congressional investigations and lawsuits involving Ahmed will end, but whatever their final outcomes, they are likely to shed more light on how an ambitious Brit came to play such a prominent role in American politics. Ahmed’s path to influence, it’s clear, relied on a new idea of expertise that has more to do with politics than technical knowledge. The fact that fly-by-night nonprofits with political motives can now be elevated into scientific authorities, says less about these groups than it does about hardball politics played by corporate Democrats in the U.S. and new Labour officials in the U.K.

Ahmed’s rise has been impressive, but ultimately he has been a servant to the power of political parties who deployed him and the CCDH to weaponize the charge of hate speech and misinformation against their enemies. ■

This article was originally published on October 2, 2023.

THE REST

→ At least **75,000 health-care workers went on strike against Kaiser Permanente on Wednesday after contract negotiations between the workers' union and the health-care provider failed to reach a new agreement** over the weekend. One of the largest health-care worker strikes in U.S. history, the walkout, which did not include doctors and nurses, primarily comprised support staff like lab technicians and sanitation workers who clean rooms. While talks over wage increases and working conditions between the two sides have resumed, the brunt of the strike's disruption will be felt in California, where a significant number of KP facilities will likely postpone nonurgent procedures because of staffing shortages.

→ **Homeowners in parts of the United States who are increasingly vulnerable to flooding and other extreme weather events are struggling to find affordable insurance policies, with hundreds of thousands of Americans forced to sign with so-called insurers of last resort.** At least 30 states now offer a form of last-resort coverage, but the policies are not exactly cheap, with some homeowners finding premiums as much as ten times as expensive as their previous insurance policies. "The insurance is more than my mortgage," Robert Dubie, a resident in part of California that's been hit with wildfires, told *The Wall Street Journal*. Even with the ballooning premiums, more insurance companies will still be unable to cover their claims due to the uptick in wildfires and other extreme weather events, which could force government agencies to cover more of the burden for relief. "These plans were really only supposed to be a 'break glass in emergency' type of a product," an executive at the Consumer Federation of America told the WSJ.

→ In a move that critics are calling an assault on free speech, **Canadian regulators announced they will now require certain podcasters to register with the government** before the end of November. The new Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission policy, which applies to broadcasters with \$10 million or more in annual revenue, will provide the government with demographic information about their audience, among other pieces of data, while prohibiting them from releasing the podcasts only to people who subscribe to certain internet providers. Some say the new policy will do little harm to free speech and will mostly apply to American streamers like Spotify, getting them to change their distribution strategies as part of the government's effort to boost the Canadian media industry—though that could ultimately harm small, independent podcasters who rely on the larger platforms.

→ **Writers coming back to work from the lengthy Hollywood strike are finding that the deals they had with studios are not going to be extended as the entertainment conglomerates establish a new way of doing business.** According to *Puck*, upwards of 80% of writers learned that their contracts that were suspended during the strike will not be renewed, while at least one studio, Universal Studio Group, said it would not extend deals with writers. "The asteroid has hit," Zack Stentz, a writer on *X-Men*, observed on *X*. As pressure on studios and streamers to turn profits only increased during the strike, the housecleaning of writer deals should pop the Peak TV bubble, with the total number of annual scripted series unlikely to ever reach the high of 600 in 2022. While that could leave many TV writers scrambling for work, the talent pool could funnel back into movies, driving a possible resurgence in film not seen since before the rise of prestige television programming.

THE BIG STORY

Ongoing legal proceedings against Amazon and Google have confirmed long-standing suspicion that both tech giants have leveraged monopoly-like positions to undermine competitors while reaping in billions of dollars in revenue. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Wednesday how the online retail giant's secret algorithm tool allowed Amazon to raise or lower prices in such a way that forced competitors to follow suit, creating arbitrage opportunities that boosted Amazon's margins. Citing sources familiar with the case, the WSJ reports that according to the FTC, Amazon earned at least \$1 billion in surplus profit by using the algorithm.

In the ongoing antitrust case against Google, evidence presented in the courtroom has revealed that the search giant might have implemented an algorithm that degraded billions of search queries a day to drive up results for advertisers. *Wired* reported on Tuesday that during a Google employee's testimony, a briefly displayed exhibit showed internal Google documents that appeared to describe a policy of swapping out organic search results for links to product pages that generate revenue for Google. As *Wired* noted, "[The] behind-the-scenes substitution of your actual query with a different query that just happens to generate more money for the company ... [will ultimately] generate results you weren't searching for at all.

—Sean Cooper

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Built to Last

As Sukkot winds down, we are reminded of the ease with which buildings crumble to dust. And as Simchat Torah begins, we are reminded of how much longer words can endure.

BY STUART HALPERN

It was meant to last forever. Built in 1956 by the legendary urban planner Robert Moses, the New York Coliseum loomed over Columbus Circle in Manhattan, proudly positioned at the southwest corner of Central Park. Named after Rome's own legendary structure, it boasted a soaring ceiling supported by seven massive steel trusses, each 120 feet long and two stories high. It contained 26 stories of office space meant to house captains of industry and an exhibition hall for showcasing mankind's latest innovations. Its white-brick facade was bedecked with four cast-aluminum medallions, literal symbols of power. Three depicted the federal, state, and city seals. The fourth represented the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, chaired by Robert Moses himself.

As the Coliseum's construction neared completion, Moses would mercilessly tease his biographer Robert Caro, who was writing what would become the 1,162-page, Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Power Broker*. Moses thought Caro's endeavor a waste of time.

"He used to ask me about *The Power Broker*, 'How long will it last?'" Caro told a journalist at *Esquire* decades later, while glancing out the window of his Midtown office. "In a short while, it will be yesterday's news."

Out of that small office window, one would have expected Caro to glance at the Coliseum's glistening exterior. Alas, in 1999, the seven trusses were disassembled, the medallions removed, and the facade's white bricks smashed to dust. The Coliseum had been demolished, replaced by the Time Warner Center. *The New York Times* titled its

coverage of the demolition "Built, but Not Destined, to Last," informing readers that "having stood 1,920 years fewer than the one in Rome, the Coliseum on Columbus Circle is about to topple."

The Time Warner Center, too, didn't remain. The building standing at the site now is named the Deutsche Bank Center, after its primary tenant.

Recounting the demolition of the Coliseum all those years later for *Esquire*, Caro mused, "When they tore it down, I felt something about books." He then repeated himself: "When they tore it down, I felt something about books."

Sukkot is a holiday centered around structures. We spend hours, even days, building a replica of a home. Within the metal poles and canvas walls of this makeshift residence, we eat, converse, host family and friends, and if you are courageous enough amid the threat of curious squirrels or nosy neighbors, even sleep. The entire purpose of the holiday is to commemorate the accommodations that God provided for the ancient Israelites during their desert wanderings. While the rabbis debate whether it was physical tents or metaphysical clouds that housed the Jewish people during that 40-year schlep, the holiday's goal remains the same. That asymmetrical, slightly rickety, bamboo-roofed, children's school-project-bedecked sukkah, built with the help of the tall teenager down the block and to be taken down as soon as the holiday is over, is meant to remind us that whether it's in our backyard or on the 145th floor of the world's tallest building, Dubai's Burj Khalifa, no structure will last forever.

"We sit flush with the world," is how Rabbi Alan Lew put it in his reflection

on the High Holiday season, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*. The sukkah is "a 'house' that calls attention to the fact that it gives us no shelter. It is not really a house. It is the interrupted idea of a house, a parody of a house," which we spend the majority of eight days in because "no building of wood and stone can ever afford us protection from the disorder that is always lurking all around us. No shell we put between us and the world can ever really keep us secure from it. And we know this."

It is rather fitting, then, that as the holiday emphasizing the ephemeral nature of what we build finishes, we celebrate words that have been learned from a timeless book. As the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy put it, "The genius of Judaism is the Book and books."

Over Simchat Torah, we rejoice over completing the weekly cycle of reading portions from the Torah, a text whose study has sustained the Jewish people for three millennia and unlike anything and everything mankind constructs, shows no signs of decomposition or decay. We read the ending, and then, like the toddler lovingly begging "again, again" when its mother finishes a favorite book, we begin it once more. We movingly huddle our synagogue's young children under a tallit to ensure that, as they grasp their comfort blankets, cling to their pacifiers, and fiddle with their fidget toys as Deuteronomy is read, they, too, will find comfort in the verses of the covenant, now and as they grow into old age.

In 1909, a young British journalist with a knack for public speaking named Winston Churchill delivered a speech at an Authors' Club meeting. There he reflected:

Someone—I forget who—has said: "Words are the only things which last forever." That is to my mind, always a wonderful thought. The most durable structures raised in stone by the strength of man, the mightiest monuments of his power, crumble into dust, while the words spoken with fleeting breath, the passing expression of the unstable fancies of his mind, endure not as echoes of the past, not as mere archeological curiosities or venerable relics, but with

a force and life as new and strong, and sometimes far stronger than when they were first spoken, and leaping across the gulf of 3,000 years, they light the world for us to-day.

Brightened by the energy of congregants' leaps around the bimah, Torahs in hand, the sight of Simchat Torah's celebrants reveling in the word lights the way for the next generation to feel something about books. "If we work on

marble, it will perish," said the American statesman Daniel Webster. "If we work on brass, time will efface it. If we rear temples, they will crumble to dust. But if we work on men's immortal minds, we engrave on those tablets something which time cannot efface, and which will brighten and brighten to all eternity."

"And all your children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be

the peace of your children," says Isaiah. "Do not read *baneiyikh*, 'your children,'" say the rabbis. "Rather, *boneiyikh*, 'your builders.'"

Power brokers and coliseums rise and crumble into dust. We continue to build, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, something far stronger. ■

This article was originally published on October 4, 2023.

HOLIDAYS

The Antidote to Ableism

In her new book, Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, a disability activist and scholar, takes a 'revelatory and revolutionary' look at everything from the story of Moses to the value of Shabbat

BY JUDY BOLTON-FASMAN

I first met Rabbi Julia Watts Belser in 2016 in Boston before a keynote address she delivered called "Disability and the Art of Midrash." In that talk, she laid out how she interprets text, tradition, and Torah from her perspective as a disabled woman. The approach, said Watts Belser—who uses a wheelchair—is "Torah told at a slant."

Watts Belser continues her ongoing work in Jewish justice and, as her new book, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole*, notes, her "commitment to center the wisdom of queer, feminist, and disabled Jews." In the book, she sources Jewish texts to contextualize and craft new conversations on disability.

As a rabbi, Watts Belser has taught Torah through queer, feminist, and disability lenses to communities across Jewish life, facilitating conversations about access, equity, and belonging. Watts Belser—who is also professor of Jewish studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown

University, core faculty in Georgetown's Disability Studies Program, and a senior research fellow at Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs—told me in a recent interview that she aims for these teachings to be "revelatory and revolutionary."

Watts Belser traces her activism to her undergraduate days at Cornell University, where she enrolled in a disability studies course. "It changed my life," she told me. "I devised a campus-mapping project where a group of us documented barriers in the physical environment, focusing especially on wheelchair access. It was a visceral experience of understanding ableism as a system and structure that results in concrete acts of exclusion."

Her early college experience, she added, "laid the groundwork for a life of activism because it helped me diagnose the problem differently. It taught me that we built this world in ways that disadvantage certain people. It also helped me see that we could build it differently. It's an ethical imperative."

According to Jay Ruderman of the Ruderman Family Foundation, whose

work includes the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project, Watts Belser embodies the "belief that inclusion and understanding of all people is essential to a fair and flourishing community." The Ruderman Foundation—whose advocacy for the disabled began in the Boston Jewish community with a gift to Jewish day schools stipulating that all children, including those with disabilities, were entitled to a Jewish education—advocates for "the inclusion of people with disabilities throughout society." To that end, Ruderman said: "We admire Rabbi Watts Belser's work to incorporate Jewish wisdom, ethics, and literature in her quest to bring about impactful social change for marginalized communities."

Watts Belser opens and closes *Loving Our Own Bones* with the awesome image of correlating the wheels of her own wheelchair to those of God's chariot. The insight came to her years ago at a Shavuot service, which traditionally includes a reading from the Book of Ezekiel. In her book, she highlights Ezekiel's description of the chariot as vast and "lifted up by four angelic creatures with fused legs, lustrous wings, and great wheels. The wheels 'gleamed like beryl,' they were 'wheels within wheels' and the 'spirit of the creatures was in the wheels.'" The image immediately dazzled Watts Belser and led her to the extraordinary idea that God has personally experienced disability.

At the end of the book, she comes back to God's chariot wheels to invoke "a moment of representation and kinship—of seeing myself as a wheelchair user reflected in God's way of moving through the world. While initially

captivated by the idea that the text was a mirror to my own experience, I began to think theologically about the significance of God's wheels. What do they offer? What do they allow God to feel and to know? For me, there is something about the physicality of my experience as a wheelchair user. I feel the ground roll up through my body in a way that most walking people do not. I feel the vibration of the ground coming up through my wheels and into my body. It's a visceral sense of connection."

In her readings of Moses' and Isaac's disabilities, Watts Belser discusses the implications of healing versus curing. For her, the distinction between the two words is not a matter of semantics. She asserts that Moses' speech impediment is not a defect that needs to be *cured*. Moses will always stutter, and he is aided through a set of accommodations that include his brother Aaron as interpreter and a magnificent staff that Pharaoh experiences as dangerous magic and Watts Belser says is "assistive technology." The description is more than a clever bit; it places the staff on par with Watts Belser's wheelchair embodying the wheels of God's chariot.

In *Loving Our Own Bones*, Watts Belser is clear in her writing that she wants "to upend the assumption that lies beneath Midrash Tanhuma that when Moses delivers the words of Deuteronomy, he speaks with flawless fluency. Why should we imagine that Moses has lost the distinctive quality of his own speech? Why should we imagine his mouth remade?"

In an episode of the Association for Jewish Studies' podcast, Watts Belser told her interviewer that Midrash Tanhuma "claims that Moses was cured because he learned Torah. 'You said you were not a man of words,' the midrash asserts, reflecting on Moses' protest in Exodus 4, 'and here now, you speak exquisitely.'"

Watts Belser acknowledges there is healing at the heart Moses' story. However, she says, "Moses is freed of internalized ableism, that terrible sense of insufficiency that led him to tell God he wasn't fit to lead because of his own stutter. But I also mean to name the way

"Disabled folks aren't on this earth to enlighten or inspire. We aren't your heartwarming story, your feel-good click."

that the community is transformed—how people learn to listen more keenly to Moses' voice and value him as a stuttering speaker."

The essence of Watts Belser's thinking about Moses' stutter encapsulates her holistic thinking about disability. She noted in an email following our conversation that her readings of Moses and Isaac's disabilities "ask us to reimagine the way we regard disability, to challenge the common perception that disability is a personal flaw or private lack that needs to be minimized or overcome."

She considers Isaac's blindness and Rebecca's ruse in presenting Jacob as Esau to receive his father's blessing of the firstborn in texts that associate Isaac with low vision or blindness throughout much of his life. There are virtually no visual cues in Isaac's origin story and beyond. For example, Isaac's name evokes the sound of laughter. On Mount Moriah, he asks his father where the lamb is—a natural question from a child for whom so much has been hidden. He intuitively that Rebecca is beautiful, but his love for her is not attached to her physical appearance.

Watts Belser further explained in her email: "Of course, there's no definitive claim to be made here about whether or how Isaac perceives during his early

years. But instead of assuming that every biblical character senses according to the normative pattern, I'm inclined to let the available evidence invite us to ask: What if Isaac has never been secure in his sightedness?"

Loving Our Own Bones is also an intimate portrayal of Watts Belser's relationship with her wheelchair. In the book, she describes how "I flow together with my wheels—two intertwined bodies becoming one as we roll." She says that "over the decades, I've built relationships with many different wheelchairs—getting to know their preferences and particulars, coming to understand how they move through the world and what that means for how we live together."

As Watts Belser and I discussed the mobility her wheelchair provides her—she has traveled the world on her own—we segued into a nuanced discussion of ableism. She firmly and rightly rejected my comment that I did not think of her as disabled. "When people tell me 'I don't think of you as disabled,' it's meant as a compliment," she told me. "But it's predicated on a very negative view of disability. It assumes the category of disability is horrible, tragic, limited, and disastrous. Disability is a part of life. It can be a source of great understanding—an opening to feel and know and explore things I might otherwise have never done." She further explained she proudly uses the term disability "because I believe that living a vibrant unabashedly disabled life is a brilliant way of refuting ableism's lie."

Watts Belser cautions against "making a silver-lining story out of disability. It's bogus and it does tremendous harm to people." In the book, she refers to those stories as "inspiration porn." She writes in her book: "Disabled folks aren't on this earth to enlighten or inspire. We weren't born to put other people's troubles in perspective, to cheer you up, to remind you that it could be worse. We aren't exemplars of courage or cautionary tales. We aren't your heartwarming story, your feel-good click."

Watts Belser told me that the idea of a disabled person as inspiring or serving as a role model brings comparisons that "do no one any good. We all have a stake

in working to undo ableism. It would be a great service if the word ‘inspiration’ is not presented as an ideal.” She wants readers to “recognize and resist the kind of violence that follows when we force people to fit into a one-size-fits-all society.”

Her thinking on Shabbat observance is similarly forthright and unambiguous in refuting ableism as all-encompassing. “Shabbat is my antidote to ableism,” she pointed out. The beauty of Shabbat is to counter ableism’s emphasis on hyperproductivity. “Shabbat is a way of unraveling some of those assumptions

that my worth is measured by my work; my value is bound up with my ability to make and earn and produce.”

For Watts Belser, Shabbat “unbinds” people from our fast-paced world: “Ableism isn’t good for anybody with a body or mind,” she said. “It has its claws in all of us, but it most profoundly targets disabled people.”

Among Watts Belser’s observations, perhaps the one that most concisely conveys the spirit of *Loving Our Own Bones* is the concept of disability “as spiritual dissent.” She explains: “Being disabled in a world that often treats

disabled people with disdain has taught me to say no. Disability has taught me to say no to lies about who we are, to say no as unapologetically as I can. It’s a crucial lesson for all of us.”

Her ideal world is embodied in an anecdote from her book about a young deaf girl. Her teacher said that in the world to come, the girl would be able to hear. The girl countered that in the world to come, God would know sign language. ■

This article was originally published on October 4, 2023.

COMMUNITY

The Girl With the Afro

Why there was no dancing at my bat mitzvah

BY MARRA B. GAD

I have been on many stages in my life. As an actress. An author. A public speaker. But no stage was quite as big and terrifying as my bat mitzvah. I think that it is a fair assumption to say that most Jewish kids would say the same. And with the recent release of Adam Sandler’s new film, *You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah*, it’s no wonder my own big day is very much on my mind.

I grew up in Chicago and was a child of the Reform movement. I can still remember Aug. 21, 1982, as if it were yesterday, even though 41 years have now passed. My colors were lavender and pale blue. We had giant, handmade Hershey’s Kisses wrapped in foil that perfectly matched my color scheme all over the room. I wore a lavender suit and an orchid wrist corsage, which was the style of the day. I can even remember pieces of my Torah portion: Shoftim from Deuteronomy. I was less than enthused to have to write a *d’var Torah* about fruit trees, and why we should

keep them alive when waging war on a city. I couldn’t have had something like the Ten Commandments, or Noah and the ark?

But what I remember most about that time was what happened to me when the dancing began at every party that I attended. One of the hallmarks of any early 1980s bar or bat mitzvah party was the “snowball” moment: The one being celebrated would step to the center of the dance floor, the DJ would start to play the slow song of the moment, and a partner would be chosen. When the DJ said, “snowball!” the couple would part and then choose new partners until the dance floor was filled with teenagers. Slow dancing. Hands on shoulders and waists. Hoping that this might be the start of something magical.

But I was never picked to dance. Not a single time at any party. Because no one wanted to dance with “The Girl With the Afro.” And they weren’t afraid to say it—behind my back, of course, but always when I was within earshot. And always loud enough for me to hear them.

Even during the fast dancing that occurred in small friend groups, I sat off to the side; watching with my heart aching to feel as if I belonged, while kids pointed, laughed and whispered about me. Always about my hair. Born Black and Ashkenazi, and adopted by white and Jewish parents, I was the only nonwhite Jewish girl in my community. I stuck out everywhere I went. And I wore my hair in an Afro that I was tortured about for many years.

My beloved Bubbie told me that I looked like the late Harry Belafonte’s daughter, Shari Belafonte-Harper, who wore her hair the same way and was one of the world’s most famous models at the time. But I did not feel like a beautiful model. I felt like an outcast. And it hurt.

I came home in tears from party after party, crying about the things that were being said about my hair and how humiliated I was to always be the only person not included in the dancing. And so, as my own bat mitzvah approached, my parents told me that my DJ had become sick and as there wasn’t time to find another, we would not be able to have dancing at my bat mitzvah—deftly ensuring

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that I would not be left mortified on my own dance floor and protecting me, as they always did, from the cruelty of a world that too often would not open its arms to accept me as I am. I knew what they had done, but I let them think that I believed the story about the DJ's mysterious illness and said a silent prayer of gratitude for their deep and abiding love.

This isn't to say that there weren't wonderful moments from my bat mitzvah; poignant, funny, awkward moments that I treasure to this day. Like when my then 2 1/2-year-old brother stuck his hand into my gorgeous, enormous cake because he just wanted to take a bite. And who could blame him? It looked amazing! My favorite photo of my beloved father, whom we would lose to leukemia when I was 19, was taken that day. Or how my feet hurt so badly in my first pair of high heels—black Pappagallo pumps with gold trim—that I kicked them off. On the bimah. And while the rabbi was waxing poetic about what a wonderful student I was, I shrank, much to my mother's horror, 2 inches in front of the entire congregation.

It was as beautiful a day as it could have been.

But, even so, when I think of that day, my memories are always pulled back to this.

It isn't only that I was denied an awkward preteen slow dance. I was also denied the joy of dancing at my own bat mitzvah. There was no exuberant hora. I was not lifted on a chair by smiling, strong-backed men to the sound of my peers and loved ones cheering me on. And my family was denied that seminal moment, too. All because I was different from the other kids and they latched on to my Afro as the way to make sure that I knew that I would never be one of them.

They started calling me "The Girl With the Afro" at my Jewish summer camp and it would follow me to regional NFTY (the Reform movement's teen program) events in high school and through college, when they added "pube head" to the mix for additional humiliation. The taunting always came at the hands of my peers who inhabited my Jewish world, an environment so small and contained that we all pretended to be friends. Even though we weren't.

"I am still often the only nonwhite face in Jewish rooms, but today I stand tall and proud of who I am."

I know now that I was gaslit at that tender age into believing that I was ugly. Unworthy of respect and a sense of belonging. Unworthy even of dancing. Simply because I looked different from everyone else. And that horrible lie stayed with me for decades.

But perhaps far worse than being reduced to being "The Girl With the Afro" when I was 12 is knowing that, to some, I am still only that. At a recent Jewish community event, I heard a voice yell out, "Hey you! With the Afro!" And then I heard the familiar laughter. One of my peers from back in those days called out, wanting to take us both back to 1982. I turned, on sickening Pavlovian instinct, knowing that they were absolutely talking to me and wryly laughed silently because, that day, my hair was blown out perfectly straight. No longer a vulnerable teenager, I confronted my childhood bully and silenced him, which felt like a long overdue gift to myself.

While in 1982, this would have been written off as "kids being kids," today we know that this is bullying rooted in racism. More and more, it is being called out for what it is. And, for that, I am grateful.

Clearly, there are those who might still want to try to exert this kind of power over me. But they no longer

hold it. I am still often the only nonwhite face in Jewish rooms, but today I stand tall and proud of who I am. I never shrink. And I no longer live in pursuit of anyone's approval for I know that Jewish spaces should have always been expansive enough for all of us. In a Jewish world that is only becoming more racially diverse, even if the conversation about it has grown more and more quiet in the last couple of years, my heart is buoyed knowing that I am no longer alone in being nonwhite and Jewish, and the community is only more beautiful for it.

I recently posted a photo of myself from my bat mitzvah weekend on social media and semijoked to two friends that we should redo my bat mitzvah party today at our favorite spot in Los Angeles and have an '80s dance party with the hope that, at long last, I might get asked to dance.

But the truth is that there remains no guarantee that I will have a partner on the dance floor. And that's OK. For while I admit that I do still dream of a sweet slow dance with a very cute boy, I now know the joy and freedom of dancing with myself. Just like the 1980s Billy Idol anthem encourages us all to do. With nothing to lose and nothing to prove.

At 53, I'm grateful to know deeply what my heart could not believe possible at my bat mitzvah. No matter how many times those who love me tried to tell me.

I am worthy. Of respect. Of love. Of belonging. Of wearing my hair in any way that I please. Of being seen as beautiful. And, of dancing.

Cue the Billy Idol. ■

This article was originally published on October 3, 2023.

COLLECTION

Jews With Disabilities

What are the barriers preventing full participation in the community—and who's trying to overcome them?

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Tempted by the Fruit

Apples have been a sweet addition to Jewish cooking for centuries, even if they probably weren't actually found in the Garden of Eden

BY PAOLA GAVIN

Legend has it that the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was an apple, but this is disputed by historians, who speculate that it could have been a pomegranate, quince, fig, pear, or grape. Nobody knows for sure. In the Bible the forbidden fruit is called *tapuach*—but botanists and linguists claim that the word was mistranslated as “apple,” especially as the apple primarily grew wild in biblical times and was not cultivated in Israel until well after the time of King Solomon.

One of the most widely grown fruits in the world, the apple (*Malus domestica*) is said to originate in the mountainous region of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and northwest China, where forests of wild apples (*Malus sieversii*) have been growing for more than 4 million years. In fact, Almaty—the largest city in Kazakhstan—literally means “the place of apples.” From Central Asia the apple was brought to the Middle and Near East via the Silk Road, and then introduced to Europe by the Romans.

Apples have long played an important role in myths and legends around the world. In Greek mythology, the apple is associated with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who was said to revere apples. At that time, to throw an apple at someone was a declaration of love, and to catch it showed that your love was accepted. On the other hand, you were spurned if your chosen one spat out the seeds. In Islamic tradition, Muhammad was said to inhale eternal life through an apple brought to him by an angel. In Norse tradition, Idun, the goddess of eternal youth, kept a wooden box full of apples to be eaten by the gods when they grew

old; the apples were said to make them grow young again.

In Jewish tradition, the apple is a symbol of knowledge, immortality, desire, and temptation—because of its (likely mistranslated) association with Adam and Eve. Nevertheless, over the years the apple has come to symbolize sweetness, beauty, and good fortune, which is why slices of apple dipped in honey are served by Jews for Rosh Hashanah in the hope of a prosperous year ahead. Since apples are in season in Eastern Europe during the fall, they are traditionally used by Ashkenazi Jews to make *charoset* for the New Year—it's not just for Passover!—while Sephardic Jews like to make *mansanada*, a kind of thick applesauce sweetened with honey and flavored with cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom. As apples can be stored well into the spring, they are widely used by Ashkenazi Jews to make all kinds of cakes, pastries, and puddings like *apfelshalet*, *apfelkuchen*, and *apfelstrudel* that are widely served for the Sabbath.

The first apples were brought to the United States in the 17th century, when early American settlers were encouraged to plant apple orchards. This motivated the settlers to put down roots, as apple trees could take as long as 10 years to bear fruit. At the same time, planting an apple orchard was a symbol of their achievement and regarded as proof of their mastery over the primordial wilderness.

In the medieval world, apples were attributed to have all kinds of healing powers, depending on the variety of apple used. Apples were said to relieve arthritis, sciatica, and pain during childbirth. They were also said to be an antidote to poison. The Elizabethan herbalist John Gerard also claimed a poultice

of apples would relieve swelling and that “the pulp of roasted apples mixed to a froth in water and drunk by the quart” would benefit those with gonorrhea.

Today there are more than 7,500 cultivars of apples. Different types are used for different purposes, like cooking, making cider, or eating raw. One of the best-known varieties of apple is the Braeburn, which has flesh that is both sweet and tart, with overtones of nutmeg and cinnamon. It is readily available in the U.S. and is excellent for making apple cake and apple pie. Another good variety is the Fuji, which is prized for its crisp flesh; it is also very good in salads as well as puddings and pies. The Golden Delicious apple is renowned for its sweet, mild flavor that makes it good for eating raw; as it gives off little juice when cooked, it is also good for cooking, especially in apple pies and strudels. Another readily available variety in the U.S. is the tart, green Granny Smith, which is perfect for both cooking and eating fresh. Pink Lady is another good all-purpose apple with crisp flesh and a slightly sweet aftertaste. Two of the best cooking apples in the U.S. are the Gravenstein, which has a deliciously tart flavor with honey overtones and is excellent for making applesauce, and the Rome Beauty, which is good for baking as it holds its shape well when cooked.

There may be some truth in the saying “an apple a day keeps the doctor away.” Apples are rich in fiber, vitamins—especially vitamin C—minerals, and antioxidants. Recent studies show that eating apples may lower the risk of getting heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, and cancer. They are also good for the health of your gut and may help you lose weight, as they slow down digestion and keep you feeling satiated. ■

This article was originally published on October 5, 2023

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Apple Strudel

BY PAOLA GAVIN

INGREDIENTS

- 5** **Granny Smith or Braeburn apples (about 1 ½ lbs.)**
- 3** **tbsp finely chopped, unblanched almonds**
- 3 to 4** **tbsp granulated sugar, to taste**
- 3** **tbsp golden raisins, soaked in warm water for 20 minutes and drained**
- ½** **tsp ground cinnamon**
a pinch of cloves
finely grated zest of 1/2 lemon
- 3** **large sheets of fresh or thawed filo pastry**
- 2** **tbsp melted butter**
powdered sugar, for dusting

PREPARATION

Step 1

Preheat the oven to 375.

Step 2

Peel, core, and quarter the apples, then slice them thinly. Transfer to a mixing bowl and mix with the almonds, sugar, golden raisins, cinnamon, cloves, and lemon zest.

Step 3

Place a sheet of filo pastry on a clean cloth and brush lightly with butter. Lay another sheet of filo pastry on top and repeat until all the filo pastry is used up.

Step 4

Pile the filling along the length of the filo pastry closest to you, leaving about 1 1/2 inches from the edge. Carefully pick up the corners of the cloth nearest to you and let the strudel roll over, tucking in the ends as you go. Brush the top lightly with melted butter, then lift up the cloth again and allow the strudel to roll over completely. Brush the top lightly with butter. Carefully roll strudel onto a well-buttered baking sheet, seam side down.

Step 5

Bake for 40 to 45 minutes or until the apples are tender and the top is crisp and golden brown. Remove from the oven and leave to cool. Dust with powdered sugar and serve warm or at room temperature.

Yield: Serves 4 to 6

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