

11/1/17

Obama speech: Democracy needs you, says outgoing president

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38578985>

Key points: science and reason matter; we should beware against retreating into our own personal bubbles of faith, or family, or work, or news feeds, or (so-called) social media.

12/1/17

What does post-truth mean for a philosopher?

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-38557838>

I liked this clear and succinct account of today's politics. I'm sure it applies in India just as much as the UK or USA.

13/1/17

Barack Obama legacy: The president and the tale of US jobs

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-38581768>

So the US economy has benefited from the policy paralysis at the top, resulting from the standoff between the President and Congress. Let's hope the same thing happens in foreign affairs over the next 4-8 years.

19/1/17

Viewpoint: Does democracy lead to tyranny?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38664789>

Plato said it first.

20/1/17

Trump inauguration: Full text of new president's speech

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38697653>

To me it sounds like a protectionist charter. Good luck with that! They can make a sad little club along with North Korea.

22/1/17

Moron quote

https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/H._L._Mencken

"All of us, if we are of reflective habit, like and admire men whose fundamental beliefs differ radically from our own. But when a candidate for public office faces the voters he does not face men of sense; he faces a mob of men whose chief distinguishing mark is the fact that they are quite incapable of weighing ideas, or even of comprehending any save the most elemental – men whose whole thinking is done in terms of emotion, and whose dominant emotion is dread of what they cannot understand. So confronted, the candidate must either bark with the pack or count himself lost. ... All the odds are on the man who is, intrinsically, the most devious and mediocre – the man who can most adeptly disperse the notion that his mind is a virtual vacuum. The Presidency tends, year by year, to go to such men. As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron."

H L Mencken, Baltimore Sun, 26 July 1920.

27/1/17

Trump-May press conference

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38777263>

"This was your choice of a question? ... There goes that relationship!"

I must say, he can be a charming devil when he wants to be. In fact he reminds me of Ronald Reagan, and Theresa May reminds me of Margaret Thatcher before the Iron Lady got rusty.

7/2/17

Bathrobgate

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/video_and_audio/headlines/38899342

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38893302>

Larry the No.10 cat certainly looks sassy in a bathrobe. As for Donald Trump, ridicule is the best medicine.

8/2/17

Hans Rosling RIP

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-38900572>

His 4 mins on the power of data is, as he says, "pretty neat". The data also show how all countries have benefited from the post-1945 transition from colonisation to globalisation.

10/2/17

The US Constitution saves the world

Yesterday I sent some time reading the US Constitution, and it was interesting to see what powers the President does - and doesn't - have. In particular, the President doesn't have the authority to take the nation to war. That's Congress' prerogative.

Also, the courts have considerable power. For example, see this latest news:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38927175>. President Trump: "SEE YOU IN COURT". Ummm ... he just did ... and lost ...

The president has the power to negotiate treaties, which must then be ratified by Congress. For example, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-38891210>. "To protect its farmers, Japan places an average 14% tariff on all agricultural goods imported into the country. By comparison, the US has a much lower tariff of 5%. If the Trans-Pacific Partnership had gone through, many of Japan's tariffs would have been eliminated." i.e. President Obama had already negotiated a reduction of tariffs, but President Trump has scrapped that by taking the USA out of the TTP. To quote A Fish Called Wanda, "Now, was that smart? Was it shrewd? Was it good tactics? Or was it stupid?"

17/2/17

President Trump's news conference

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38999993>

"You wonder, when does he find time to govern?"

That's the point: he isn't governing. It's all sound and fury, signifying nothing. American policy and effective power is diminishing daily.

28/2/17

Have we fallen out of love with experts?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39102840>

"As Bertrand Russell put it: "The whole problem of the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts.""

Or, as Yeats put it, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity." (And these are precisely System 1 and System 2 thinkers, see HMM chapter 3.)

2/3/17

Donald Trump and the end of American exceptionalism?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-39133677>

I found this to be quite insightful.

16/3/17

Educated women and the birth rate

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-39211144>

"Yes, I'm thinking about children every day. It's the idea of a husband I can't stand."

17/3/17

China's 'airpocalypse' linked to Arctic sea ice loss

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-39279500>

So maybe India can also blame its air pollution on global warming ... but that still doesn't take away the need to do something about emissions ... and it doesn't solve the problem!

18/3/17

The sequels that should never have been made

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-39257838>

I really enjoyed the wordplay in this article.

28/4/17

Inequality and AI

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-39706765>

I thought this was really interesting, and well-put.

29/4/17

NI 'would return to EU' in event of united Ireland vote

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-39415709>

In a nutshell, according to the Belfast Agreement, if a simple majority of people in Northern Ireland voted for the province to leave the UK and join the Republic of Ireland, then that's what would happen, and furthermore it would remain part of the EU.

Thought experiment: Supposing Scotland had another independence referendum ('IndyRef2'), and this time they voted for independence, if only by a simple majority. Subsequently they might choose to unite with Ireland (e.g. citing the fact that originally the Scots migrated from Ireland, displacing the Picts and North Britons), in which case they too might join Ireland in a new nation ('Great Ireland' maybe, with 'Great Britain' becoming 'Little England' and the 'British Isles' becoming the 'Celtic Isles'). And then they could stay in the EU. Of course, there would need to be a hard barrier between Great Ireland and Little England. Donald Trump has property interests in Scotland and Ireland, maybe he could be asked to help rebuild Hadrian's Wall. And maybe at last Scottish footballers and rugby players would be in teams capable of winning matches!

10/5/17

Air pollution in Nepal

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-39772099>

"Based on recent data, we know that Lumbini is more polluted than Kathmandu," said Shankar Prasad Poudel, chief of the air pollution measurement section at the environment department. "We plan to detect the sources of the pollution using a drone in the near future and hopefully this will help minimise the problem."

Hooray for science! Buy a drone and that will fix it. Much more effective than just sitting around with a mask on and humming 'Om'. The sad thing is, these eye-watering PM2.5 concentrations are not confined to Lumbini, but they're everywhere in Northern India.

30/5/17

Bangalore water woes

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-india-40083140/bangalore-water-woes-india-s-silicon-valley-dries-up>

27/6/17

Is India descending into mob rule?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-40402021>

10/7/17

Vladimir Putin: The president who wasn't there

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-40557907>

Spot the difference.

13/7/17

Indian mutiny: Remembering farmers who fought British rule

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-40528129>

Here's another bunch of people who haven't read 'The Last Mughal'. In particular, this person is clearly trying to give a Marxist interpretation: "An important component of the 1857 uprising were the "thousands of spontaneous peasants' jacqueries [revolt] all over northern India," writes cultural historian Sumanta Banerjee, in his book, *In the Wake of Naxalbari*. "But, the role of the peasantry in the uprising has been glossed over by bourgeois historians," Mr Banerjee elaborates." Also notable is the photo of the memorial gate in Busodh village. Look at the smog!

14/7/17

Virtual robot teaches itself to walk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gn4nRCC9TwQ>

It's really happening, Reg!

15/7/17

Cows censored from documentary about Amartya Sen

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-india-40606165/the-indian-film-where-the-word-cow-is-banned>

"India's film watchdog says that the word "cow" must be removed from a documentary about Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen."

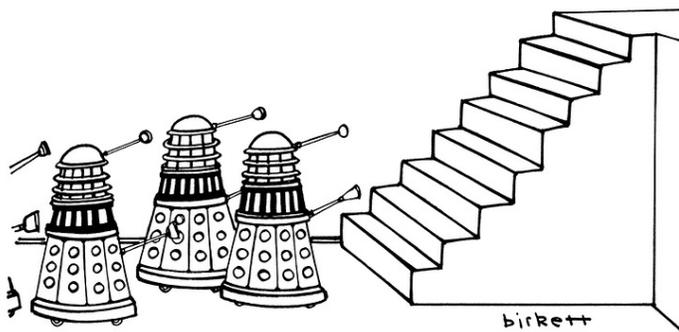
Sounds like a load of bull to me.

18/7/17

Steps are our best defence against the Robopocalypse

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-40642968>

- which reminds me of a cartoon I once saw in *Punch*:



"Well, this certainly buggers our plan to conquer the Universe."

25/7/17

Time, not material goods, 'raises happiness'

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-40703519>

"Past research has found that people who prioritise time over money tend to be happier than people who prioritise money over time."

28/7/17

Where Trump went wrong on healthcare

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-40754257>

Anti-establishment populism can get you into the White House, but it can't make the establishment do what you want. This was an excellent writeup, I thought.

29/7/17

Kasparov's view of AI

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-40761806>

In particular: "expert systems that can diagnose conditions more accurately than people do the best job when paired with nurses that can then act on that diagnosis". The point is that AI is a tool to be used (or not) by humans. It is not intended to be a replacement for humans, particularly those "with college degrees and Twitter accounts". "It's up to us humans to do what only humans can do and that's dream and dream big so we can get the most out of these amazing new tools". This is the classic optimistic perspective of someone who knows he will always have a job and enough money to afford a robot slave. But what about the vast majority of the global human population (in India, China, Africa, Latin America) who won't be in that position? For the more pessimistic perspective see HMM ch.10.

There is a technical reason why BOTH of these arguments hold, viz.:

- * What people currently call AI isn't what I (and Hawking and Musk and Gates ...) call AI;
- * With recent developments (in particular, the work at DeepMind), what I (and Hawking and Musk and Gates ...) call AI may well be realised very soon (e.g. 5-10 years).

Likewise there are social/political reasons why BOTH optimistic and pessimistic viewpoints can be sustained, viz:

- * Incompetent politicians who can't organise a piss-up in a brewery, e.g. Donald Trump;
- * Dangerous politicians who like to play with fire, e.g. Donald Trump.

Take your pick!

1/9/17

Could a new political party be on the way?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-41096500>

I especially liked some of his phrases, e.g. 'Big Ben bong ban', 'militant, muscular moderates'.

1/9/17

Brexit: UK 'must not allow itself to be blackmailed'

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41119870>

Liam Fox talks as if the UK and the EU are equal parties in the Brexit process; but they aren't. Brexit is an application by an individual (the UK) to leave a group (the EU), and the dynamics are entirely different. OK as a whole the EU may lose just as much as the UK from Brexit, but that loss will be shared between all of the remaining EU countries, so the impact on any one of them will be much less than on the UK. So why should Spain or Italy or Austria care about the overall cost? They don't; and the same will be true for most or all EU countries taken individually; and this is what determines the collective EU position. It's not blackmail; it's just the asymmetry between a group and one of its members.

11/9/17

Hurricane Irma fake news analysis

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-41224792>

The following checklist interested me:

"So whether you read, repeat or repost news, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- * Have I heard of the publisher before?
- * Is this the source I think it is, or does it sound a bit like them?
- * Can I point to where this happened on a map?
- * Has this been reported elsewhere?
- * Is there more than one piece of evidence for this claim?
- * Could this be something else?"

- i.e. Who?, Who again?, Where?, How?, How again?, and What?, respectively. So this list is incomplete, it should also ask Why? (e.g. Why is this publisher relaying this news) and When? (e.g. When did this event happen). But it's an interesting exercise in critical thinking. Maybe CMS students (and their teachers!) should try it out.

24/9/17

Separated at birth #59: Little Bonaparte and Donald Trump



<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-41376317>

"At a rally on Friday night, Mr Trump said NFL players who protested during the playing of the national anthem should be fired by their team - referencing a controversial string of protests over race relations started by player Colin Kaepernick last year. "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now... he is fired,'" he told a cheering crowd. "

cf. 'Some Like It Hot':

Little Bonaparte: Now, fellow delegates, there comes a time in the life of every business executive when he starts thinkin' about retirement. I'm lookin' around for somebody to fill my shoes. I've been considerin' several candidates. For instance, there's a certain party from Chicago, South Side Chapter. Now, some people say he's gotten a little too big for his spats. But I say he's a man who'll go far. Some people say he's gone too far. But I say, you can't keep a good man down. Of course, he's still got a lot to learn. The big noise he made on St Valentine's Day, that wasn't very good for public relations. And lettin' them two witnesses get away. That sure was careless.

Spats: Don't worry about those two. They're as good as dead. I almost caught up with them today.

Little Bonaparte: You mean you let 'em get away twice? Some people would say that's real sloppy. But I say: to err is human, to forgive divine. And just to show you what I think of you, Spats, the boys told me you was gonna have a birthday. So we baked you a little cake.

Spats: My birthday? Why, it ain't for another four months.

Little Bonaparte: So we're a little early. What's a few months between friends?

29/9/17

Jean Dreze's new book

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-41397026>

"Economist John Dreze's new book makes an increasingly necessary argument that creating a morally good, progressive society is as important as improving traditional development indexes, writes Nilanjana S Roy."

9/10/17

Electric honeycomb: Pakistani teen in scientific first

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-41548203>

I wonder if this will be reported in any Indian newspaper?

12/10/17

Jeremy Hunt: Is government on track with more GPs promise?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-41596947>

Donald Trump: Has US debt fallen since the president took office?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-41596847>

World Cup 2018: Did height hinder Scotland team?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-41549709>

Three recent BBC Reality Check gems.

17/10/17

China congress: How authorities censor your thoughts

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41523073>

Another fascinating review, highly relevant in these days of 'fake news'.

18/10/17

India Diwali: Delhi acts against pollution menace

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-41662498>

No such luck in Lucknow, of course.

23/10/17

Double-entry bookkeeping and civilisation as we know it

<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-41582244>

I particularly liked the brief synopsis of Chaucer's Shipman's Tale.

25/10/17

Einstein's theory of happiness

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41742785>

"A calm and humble life will bring more happiness than the pursuit of success and the constant restlessness that comes with it."

29/10/17

<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-41757047>

"Savitri Devi's work forms part of the history of both India's Hindu nationalists and the European and American extreme right. Her flamboyant, eccentric writings contain - unvarnished and uncensored - all their key ideas: that human beings can be divided into "races" which should be kept separate; that certain groups are superior to and more entitled than others; that these groups are under threat; and that the dark times in which we live will only end when they again take power, returning us to a mythical golden age."

To me this ideology is pure evil.

31/10/17

The role of Russia and India in generating fake news

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39419560>

"The challenge in the Cold War was getting out a story. In the case of the Aids virus, it was planted in a small journal in India which was funded by the KGB. The story - on 17 July 1983 - warned that Aids might invade India and was the product of US experiments, with an anonymous US scientist linking it to Fort Detrick. Initially, there was not much pick-up. But two years later, Soviet news outlets ran the story, citing the Indian reports. That meant they could claim they were not the source. The story then spread rapidly over the next few years and can still be found in the wilder edges of the internet."

And here's the latest: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41816857>.

'Fake news' = good old fashioned Cold War disinformation.

2/11/17

The BBC's Reality Check addresses the Taj Mahal debate

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-41813339>

12/11/17

Health effects of Delhi air pollution

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-41925067>

"There's not much Delhi's residents can do. "One is to stop breathing. That is not possible. Second is to quit Delhi. That is also not possible. Third is to make the right to breathe fresh air a people's movement," a chest surgeon told The New York Times. For the moment, doctors are recommending that people wear anti-pollution masks outdoors and when travelling on public transport. People with existing respiratory problems should carry inhalers, take flu and pneumonia jabs, and use air purifiers at home. Smokers should stop lighting up at home and outside. People should not burn waste. A new study on the impact of air pollution on life expectancy by Michael Greenstone, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, has found people in Delhi could live six years longer if India just met its national PM2.5 standards of 40 micrograms per cubic metre. They could live nine years longer if the country met the World Health Organization standard, which is 10 micrograms per cubic metre. That is a most damning indictment of India's efforts to tackle air pollution."

The suggested 'right to breathe fresh air' is an interesting way forward. This also follows from yesterday's talk by Justice Adel Omar Sherif about the prospect of environmental protection and related 'animal rights' being enshrined in a country's constitution: apparently, one of the possible devices being considered is the definition of 'the human right to a protected natural environment'. He also highlighted article 51A(g) of the Constitution of India which is the commitment "to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures". Maybe CMS could take another look at this to see whether there are grounds for a legal challenge to fight for the right to breathe fresh air?

23/11/17

The infantilisation of politics and religion

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-42083454/budget-2017-may-hands-cough-sweets-to-hammond>, "This is the bit with the long economicky words in it." For goodness sake, is nothing sacred? Manifestly not:

<http://kids.ochristian.com/Childrens-Bible/The-New-Testament.shtml>.

Maybe I should start to write philosophy for toddlers?

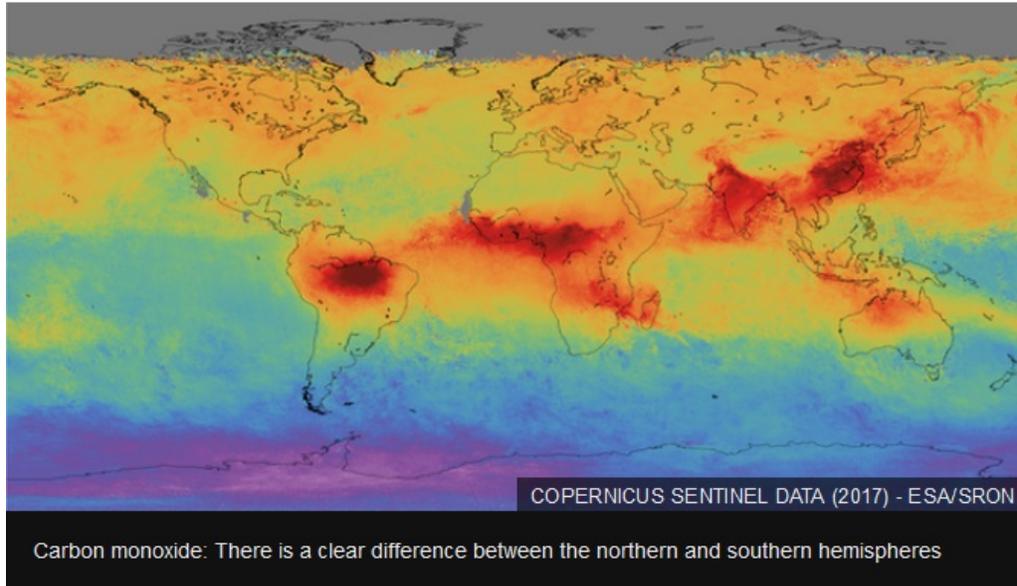
1/12/17

New earth observation pollution maps

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-42196752>

This is important, because pollution-deniers can argue with models, but they can't argue with observation data, e.g.:

Another image is a global map of carbon monoxide.



Dr Veefkind explained: "You see straight away the difference between the northern and southern hemispheres. But you also see the strong concentrations over Amazonia, central Africa and Madagascar that are the result of biomass burning. We see some fires over Australia, too. Look also at how the pollution from China spreads out over the Pacific."

3-5/12/17

Smog stops play

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/cricket/42213491>

Vomit stops play

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/cricket/42238956>

How bad does it need to get?

6/12/17

Pride and Prejudice and Brexit

Currently there is a fantastic Mexican Standoff (like in 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP9cfQx2OZY>) between Theresa May, Arlene Foster and Ruth Davidson:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-42236543>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-42236312>

This reminds me of Elizabeth Bennet's predicament in 'Pride and Prejudice':

"An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. -- Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*."

6/12/17

Google's 'superhuman' DeepMind AI claims chess crown

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-42251535>

It's really happening, Reg!

21/12/17

UK government principles of public life

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-42435007>

"I have also carefully considered the report's conclusions in relation to two statements you made on 4 and 11 November which you now accept were inaccurate and misleading. This falls short of the Seven Principles of Public Life and is a breach of the Ministerial Code ..."

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2>

The 7 principles of public life: 1. Selflessness; 2. Integrity; 3. Objectivity; 4. Accountability; 5. Openness; 6. Honesty; 7. Leadership.

This is a world away from what happens in India, and in the current White House.

22/12/17

'Fake news' blunder from US envoy to the Netherlands

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-42462190/fake-news-blunder-from-us-envoy-to-the-netherlands>

"The new US ambassador to the Netherlands, Pete Hoekstra, has denied he had ever said there were "no-go zones" in the Netherlands, calling it "fake news". He was being quizzed about comments he had made about Islamic extremism in the country. But Dutch journalist Wouter Zwart showed him a clip of the comments from 2015."