

JULY 27, 2026

TIME

HIS LAST STAND

by
CHARLIE CAMPBELL





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Members of the
TIME100 Creators

Photograph by
Elizabeth Renstrom
for TIME

New media



**Individuals
can now
function
as media
companies
unto
themselves**

AS WE PUBLISH THE SECOND ANNUAL EDITION of TIME100 Creators, I've been thinking about findings released in June by YouGov from its 2026 Trust in Media survey. The research firm polled Americans on how they viewed 65 U.S. news outlets. For the fifth year running, YouGov found TIME to be among the most trusted, by Americans across ideological viewpoints. At a period when Americans seem to agree on increasingly less, their trust in TIME endures.

A second poll, released in April, comes from Media Insight Project, a consortium of academic groups that surveyed Americans ages 13 and up. They found that independent creators, like the ones included in this year's TIME100 Creators, have become sources of information across generations. Most Americans—57%—get at least some of their news from this group. Our competition is no longer only other magazines, but also individuals who function as media companies unto themselves.

Taken together, the two surveys point to both a tension and an opportunity for TIME: our value has never been solely trust or reach, but also the belief that each enables the other. As a publisher, we've traveled across changes in how people want to access and receive information for 103 years, each time carrying your trust with us into new places and forms. Creators are poised to be that latest turn. Our answer isn't to retreat from these personalities or the platforms on which they work, but to bring TIME's editorial judgment to them, and their strengths to you. People-first storytelling shouldn't come at the cost of trust.

WHAT IS BEING CREATED by individuals like influencer Alix Earle, who is on the cover of this issue, is real—real audiences, real impact, real businesses. Earle is a fitting avatar for this list: she has built the architecture for the kind of media enterprise many legacy outlets have spent decades creating.

We set out in search of others like Earle, eager to find this year's TIME100 Creators,

listening to the platforms where these individuals make their living, talking with experts about who they see as most influential, and drawing on data from the creator agency Whalar for insights. Though we have limited ourselves to creators who post in English, the individuals come from more than a dozen countries, working across TikTok, Instagram, Threads, YouTube, Twitch, X, LinkedIn, Substack, Pinterest, Spotify, Snap, and more. The issue was edited and led by Lucy Feldman and Avery Stone.

For our own work, we think of independent creators the way our predecessors thought about columnists: distinct voices with their own audiences who, when collaborating with

TIME, improve the quality of what we offer you. We're already putting that thinking into practice. Cat Quinn has worked as a red-carpet correspondent at our events; travel experts Yaya and Lloyd have been visiting TIME's World's Greatest Places for us on Instagram; and Nicolas Heller, better known as New York Nico,

will cover soccer, pegged to the World Cup, for TIME. Later this year, along with TIME Studios, we'll debut a new show with veteran interviewer Piers Morgan. The list of collaborators will continue to grow.

This effort also means embracing the kinds of direct communication many TIME100 Creators are pioneering. Often that happens in person, as TIME gathers with our communities more than 40 times in 2026. Throughout the year, we've done more to introduce you to our journalists—rolling out video series featuring TIME reporters and editors, and relaunching our newsletters to better connect readers with the humans whose work defines TIME today. That is the lesson of this moment: we can grow your trust by embracing new ways to strengthen the connection between you and us.

Sam Jacobs,
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Members of the new class of TIME100 Creators
gather in New York City on June 15

TIME in Cannes

TIME's events at the Cannes Lions summit in June included a TIME100 Talks, sponsored by Deloitte, about storytelling in sports featuring World Cup champ Ashlyn Harris (*far right, with TIME CEO Jessica Sibley*); one on sports' influence on business and culture, sponsored by Snapdragon, featuring (*below from left*) former NBA star Carmelo Anthony, F1 driver Doriane Pin, Qualcomm EVP and CMO Don McGuire, Manchester United defender Gabby George, and TIME senior editorial director Emma Barker Bonomo; a roundtable sponsored by Pinterest, featuring the company's CEO Bill Ready (*below right*) about the impact the internet is having on society; a TIME100 Talks sponsored by Autodesk about creativity in the age of AI; and one sponsored by Philip Morris International about how AI is changing creative work. Read more about them all on time.com



Thriving

TIME editorial director Lucy Feldman joins actor Wilson Cruz onstage at the first-ever Every Child Thrives Festival at the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago on June 23. The festival was sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and featured conversations about supporting, educating, and uplifting youth around the world. Read more from Feldman's conversation with Cruz on the last page of this issue, and more about the events at time.com/collection/visionaries/2026



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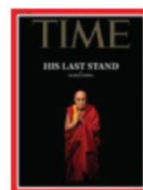
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TIME FRANCE



The latest issue of our partner publication TIME France features a cover profile of World Cup star Kylian Mbappé, available in French at timefrance.fr and in translation on time.com

Photograph by Sébastien Leban for TIME France

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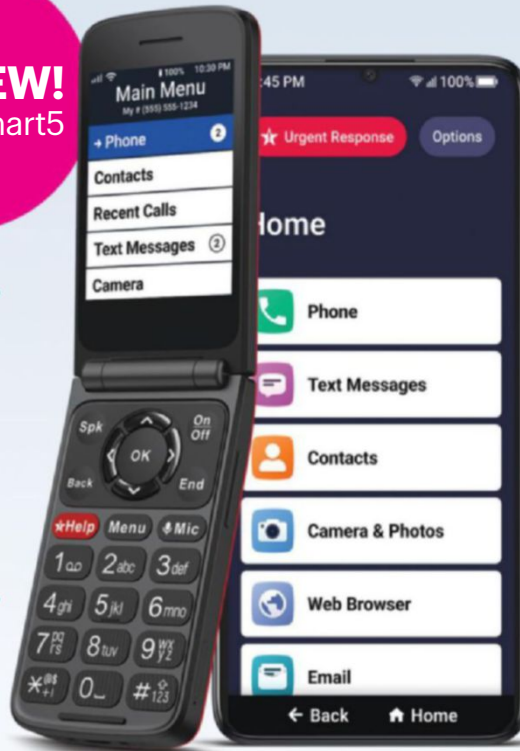
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The Brief

GAZA CROSSROADS

BY REBECCA SCHNEID

In a slow-moving peace
process, Hamas surrenders
control—but not arms



INSIDE

TRUMP'S FEUD
WITH MELONI

THE GREAT INSECT
UNDERCOUNT

UNDERSTANDING
AI 'EMOTIONS'

AS THE CEASE-FIRE IN THE IRAN WAR WAS collapsing, a subtle shift in another stalemate—in Gaza—highlighted the challenges of enforcing peace. The shift came on July 6, when Hamas announced that it was relinquishing political control of the Palestinian enclave the militant group had governed for nearly two decades.

The move nominally opens the way for a technocratic body to assume responsibility for the 2.1 million Palestinians based there, as called for by the U.S.-brokered October 2025 cease-fire agreement meant to end two years of devastating war. But the technocrats all remain in neighboring Egypt, unable to enter the strip. And while giving up administrative authority, Hamas—which has both a political side and a military wing—still has its arms.

“As long as Hamas retains its weapons, any civilian government will of course operate as Hamas dictates,” Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar wrote on X, reacting to the news. “A technocratic administration would be responsible for garbage collection and other municipal services, while Hamas would remain the dominant military force.”

Analysts saw the Hamas announcement as largely symbolic, a conspicuous effort to appear compliant with the cease-fire accord without addressing the pivotal issue of its own disarmament. Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem told Agence France-Presse that relinquishing power was intended to “remove any pretext for the occupation” of Gaza by Israel, whose troops control more than 60% of the enclave.

In the background, public sentiment toward Israel and Palestinians has shifted among Americans. A poll from the Associated Press, published July 7, found that about one-third of U.S. adults believe that Israel has committed genocide in its war with Hamas; both the Biden and Trump administrations have rejected the idea that it has. Gallup released a separate poll earlier this year showing that 41% of Americans say they sympathize more with the Palestinians, while 36% sympathize more with the Israelis; from 2001 to 2025, Israel consistently held double-digit leads.

Meanwhile, the situation in Gaza remains dire. An update from the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees at the end of June reported that 116 active emergency shelters in the strip host 76,000 internally displaced persons. Gaza is also facing widespread hunger, a situation driven by Israeli restrictions on aid and the destruction of food infrastructure, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC),

an initiative run by 19 U.N. and international aid agencies. In August, when IPC declared a famine in the north of the enclave, it reported that “over half a million people in the Gaza Strip are facing catastrophic conditions characterised by starvation, destitution and death.” A December report projected that 77% of the population still would face high levels of “acute food insecurity” and 101,000 children would have acute malnutrition.

AT THE SAME TIME, despite the cease-fire, at least 1,005 people have been killed in Gaza since October 2025, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. It says at least 73,000 people have been killed in total since Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas’ attack on Israel killed around 1,200 people, most of them civilians.

The Health Ministry is part of the Hamas government being turned over to technocrats. Its senior current leadership was appointed by the Hamas administration, while hospitals and public-health services are staffed largely by career doctors, medical workers, and civil servants. In the absence of independent monitoring on the ground, the ministry is the primary source for casualty data relied upon by humanitarian groups, journalists, and international bodies, and also has been quoted by Israeli officials. Its figures do not differentiate between civilians and combatants and cannot be independently verified by TIME.

President Donald Trump’s peace plan has been stalled for months at Phase 2, which requires Hamas’ disarmament and plans to rebuild Gaza. But Hamas maintains that Israel has not implemented the first-phase goals of allowing “sufficient” humanitarian aid into Gaza, and allow-

ing displaced Palestinians to return home.

Israel has denied claims that it is not allowing humanitarian aid into Gaza, saying that the military has facilitated the entry of thousands of tons of food, medical supplies, and baby formula since the war’s start.

“The issue at hand is not whether aid should enter Gaza, but how it can be delivered in a secure and transparent manner, without diversion or interference by Hamas, so that it reaches the civilian population it is intended to support,” the Israeli Defense Forces said in a statement in February.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in May that his country is “tightening” its grip on the strip and that he had directed troops to take control of up to 70% of Gaza. □

**‘As long as
Hamas retains
its weapons,
any civilian
government
will operate
as Hamas
dictates.’**

—GIDEON SAAR,
ISRAELI FOREIGN MINISTER



Peekaboo

The Statue of Liberty appeared between the sails of a tall ship in New York Harbor during the International Parade of Sail on Independence Day. Celebrations across the U.S. commemorated the 250th anniversary of the July 4, 1776, adoption of the Declaration of Independence, including fireworks that, two miles or so away, briefly set fire to the Brooklyn Bridge.

THE BULLETIN

Trump and Meloni in an undiplomatic spat

DAYS BEFORE LAMBASTING EUROPEAN allies at the NATO Summit in Turkey, U.S. President Donald Trump rekindled tensions with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. On July 5, Trump posted an image on Truth Social that showed Meloni looking up at the American President, with the words “restraining order needed” printed across the top.

RISE IN TENSIONS Meloni, who is up for re-election in 2027, had been considered one of Trump’s close allies. But he was irked by her refusal to join the war in Iran and her defense of Pope Leo XIV. In June, Trump told an Italian broadcaster that Meloni “begged” him to take a photo with her during the G-7 Summit—and that he agreed to do so only because he

“felt sorry” for her. He later criticized her in a Truth Social post, saying, “She is doing poorly in Italy with her level of popularity, possibly because she turned down the United States of America, a Country that truly loves and protects Italy, when it came to denying Iran from obtaining or developing a Nuclear Weapon.” He went on to say, “Now, after the United States defeated Iran militarily, she wants to be friends again in order to get her ‘numbers up.’ No thanks!!!”

MELONI’S RESPONSE In June, Meloni fired back at Trump’s remarks in a video she shared on X, saying that his com-

ments “are completely fabricated” and that she was “stunned” by his behavior. “I don’t know why the President of the United States behaves this way toward his own allies,” she said. “There’s one thing he must remember: Italy and I do not beg.”

RESTRAINT Some of Meloni’s top officials brushed off Trump’s latest remarks. Interior Minister Matteo Salvini told reporters he “won’t comment on these things anymore,” and Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said, “We are convinced that transatlantic relations go far beyond individual statements.” This time, Meloni herself didn’t respond.

—CHANTELLE LEE





HEAT

Europe was built for a cooler climate

BY SIMMONE SHAH

EXTREME HEAT IS BECOMING THE new normal. Millions endured sweltering conditions across Europe at the end of June, with Germany, France, Poland, and Britain all reaching record temperatures—weather supercharged by climate change.

Europe is both the fastest-warming continent in the world and the second fastest region after the Arctic. While the southern part of the Continent has always seen heat waves, much of the rest of Europe and the U.K. has historically had a cooler climate—and its infrastructure was built in that context.

Combined with the rapid warming, this has left countries underprepared for the unprecedented and multiple heat waves being experienced each summer. The shift is placing people's lives at risk.

Over the past four years, more than

200,000 people have died in the E.U. at the hand of extreme heat. Many of the deaths were preventable.

"In some sense Europe is facing the brunt of the overall global warming much faster than the rest of the world," says Malcolm Mistry, assistant professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, whose research focuses on environmental epidemiology.

In many European countries, homes and other buildings are old—and designed for a very different climate. In some countries, like England and France, homes "act as a furnace," says Mistry, designed to trap heat.

"It's designed to solve a very opposite problem," says Ronita Bardhan, professor of sustainable built environment and health at the University of Cambridge, adding that updating old housing stock won't be easy. "The housing stock is predominantly already built, so it's a very different situation [from] where you have a green field to build new."

Old buildings were not designed to include cooling, and the region's once mild climate meant there was

no need for AC. "Most European cities historically had needed little cooling, so building-design guidelines never anticipated integrating cooling systems," says Bardhan.

Today, only about 20% of European homes have air-conditioning, according to data from the International Energy Agency, compared with 90% of American homes. However, some countries have been quicker to adopt it than others. Nearly 50% of Italians now have AC in their homes, while 7% of homes in Britain are equipped with air-conditioning, double the rate from just three years ago.

Yet even as the Continent continues to face rising temperatures, it's unlikely to become widespread—especially as the E.U. looks to phase out hydrofluorocarbons, a polluting

'Europe is facing the brunt of global warming faster than the rest of the world.'

—MALCOLM MISTRY, LONDON SCHOOL OF HYGIENE AND TROPICAL MEDICINE

◀
*A person cools off
at Trocadero fountain
in Paris on June 24*

cooling agent commonly found in AC units, by 2050. “If you think of the E.U. as a bloc, they’re quite mindful of policies that can have a negative impact on the climate,” says Mistry. “So while there is a recognition that air-conditioning itself is required to meet cooling requirements, there’s also an overall understanding that we cannot openly push for that as a way to maintain the cooling, because it’s going to have a side effect.”

Instead, many countries are looking at other adaptive measures: artificial shading, more green spaces, and updating building codes to ensure that newer buildings are better designed to handle heat.

More immediately, local authorities are taking precautions like heat action plans, makeshift cooling centers, and communicating the dangers of heat waves well in advance, but they have been unable to adequately respond to health emergencies that result from heat waves, Mistry says.

“Local authorities, despite their best efforts, have not been able to prepare the public-health services and emergency services in advance to account for an expected spike in, for instance, hospital-related admissions related to heat,” he says.

That’s in part because the E.U.’s population is aging: the number of senior citizens, who are more vulnerable to the effects of extreme heat, has risen by approximately 40% over the past two decades. What’s more, many of Europe’s health care systems are already stretched thin, even without an extreme weather event to contend with.

Ultimately, meaningful mitigation will require global action to reduce greenhouse gases, slowing the rate of warning. “Climate change at the end of the day is a global problem,” says Mistry. “If other countries are not going to be on the same boat, then we are still struggling to fight a lone battle.” □

HEALTH

How do I safely lower my body heat?

BY SIMMONE SHAH

With summer in full swing, much of the world is already contending with record-breaking temperatures. Heat can be deadly. Extreme heat is the No. 1 weather-related killer. It can also exacerbate other health conditions like heart disease, stroke, asthma, respiratory diseases, and kidney failure. Certain groups are more vulnerable to the impacts of extreme heat than others. Adults 65 and older, young kids, people taking medications, pregnant women, outdoor workers, and athletes are more at risk for heat-related illnesses.

But, during extreme temperatures, anyone who spends too much time in the sun can be impacted. “Many people recognize that extreme heat can be dangerous to [other] people’s health, but they don’t necessarily recognize that that includes their health,” says Gregory Wellenius, director of the Center for Climate and Health at Boston University.

If you’re out in the sun, keep an eye out for heat cramps and other symptoms like dizziness, confusion, and weakness. If you begin to feel faint, it could be a sign of heat exhaustion. To avoid heat exhaustion, which occurs before heatstroke, the most important thing is to get

out of the heat—whether that be moving into the shade or an air-conditioned space.

To cool down your body, place cold cloths on your skin, or spray your clothes with water. You can also try taking a shower—just make sure the water isn’t too cold. “What’s been recommended is a cool shower or lukewarm, because if you make it too cold . . . your body could hold in that core temperature even more,” says Brian Bossak, professor of public health at the

that have high water content—like oranges and watermelon—can be helpful, but experts say that nothing beats water. Avoid heavy, greasy food, like burgers or pizza, and instead turn to lean, cold protein, like hard-boiled eggs, tuna salad, or grilled chicken.

While cooling down, avoid taking any over-the-counter pain relievers unless cleared by a doctor—they can worsen symptoms by placing extra strain on your kidney and liver. “The key thing with heat overexposure is not to treat the symptoms, but to solve the problem,” Wellenius says.

The best way to avoid heat exhaustion? Stay out of the sun in the



Daily routines were impacted in London on June 26 as extreme heat persisted

College of Charleston, in South Carolina. And be cautious of using a fan—particularly if it’s above 95°F. That’s because above a certain temperature, the fan is just moving hot air toward you, increasing your core temperature. Stay hydrated—but focus on water rather than alcoholic drinks or coffee, which can actually be more dehydrating. Fruits

first place. Plan your day so you do errands or outdoor exercise during cooler moments. If you work outdoors, do what you can to take frequent water and shade breaks. “People are always looking for the magic bullet,” says Wellenius. “Here we actually have had one: stay cool in the first place. What that means is going to vary for each individual.”

GOOD QUESTION

Wait, how many species of insects are there?

BY JEFFREY KLUGER

THINK YOUR BACKYARD CAN GET BUGGY IN THE SUMMER—with mosquitoes, flies, moths, wasps, bees, lightning bugs, crickets, and more swarming, buzzing, and chirping everywhere? That's nothing compared with the great global yard that is the earth. According to the Smithsonian Institution, there are about 10 quintillion—or 10 with 18 zeroes—insects alive in the world at any given moment, representing the largest biomass of all terrestrial animals.

That huge group is also diverse. The generally accepted figure for the number of insect species on the planet is about 6 million. Or at least that was the number. According to a new study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, however, that head count is also likely an undercount, with the actual number of insect species topping out at anywhere from 14 million to 20 million. Though the trend line is up, within that census there are local collapses—populations of pollinators like bees and monarch butterflies are declining precipitously, for example. So the tripling of the overall known species count has implications not only for basic entomological research, but also for efforts at conservation as a whole.

“If we don’t even know that a species of insect exists, and we don’t even have a name for it, we could be losing a lot of species [without knowing it],” says Laura Melissa Guzman, assistant professor in the department of entomology at Cornell University, a co-author of the paper. “Our study gives us a baseline of how much work there is to do. Can we find ways to speed up this process to be able to catalog biodiversity before we lose it?”

THE RESEARCHERS INVOLVED in the study did their work in Costa Rica’s Área de Conservación Guanacaste (ACG), a 418,000-acre wilderness area stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Basin. The ACG is home to all manner of insects, but the scientists were interested in one species in particular: the *Microgastrinae*, a group of small, parasitic wasps. *Microgastrinae* adults lay their eggs inside unlucky caterpillars. When the larvae hatch, they consume the insides of their host and emerge as fledgling wasps. The researchers chose the *Microgastrinae* because they are a well-sampled subfamily, with many of their species already cataloged. Their population could be used as a yardstick for the populations of insects across the ACG.

Studying the *Microgastrinae* required setting up so-called Malaise traps—curtain-like nets topped by a canopy net that catches insects on the fly. In an attempt to escape,

the insects fly upward and blunder into a bottle filled with ethanol, which kills them and preserves their remains. Three arrays of Malaise traps resulted in the collection of more than 1.6 million insect specimens, all of which were shipped to a lab where a robotically controlled system sequenced a part of their genome and produced a sort of barcode for each. A total of 54,000 species were detected among the 1.6 million insects using this method. Of those, 1,414 were *Microgastrinae*. That’s a big number, but it’s also an incomplete number.

“Remember that not every species gets caught in a Malaise trap, and they were only in three different parts of the forest,” says Guzman. To extrapolate up from those numbers to the total

population of insect species in the ACG, the researchers relied on statistical models that used an “undersampling ratio” to compare what was collected in the nets with what was likely still flying free in the sampling area. That method yielded an estimate of 2,400 *Microgastrinae* species in the ACG and a whopping 333,000 insect species overall.

The next step was to use similar methods to estimate the total number of insect species in the world at large. That involved modeling other life-forms, including trees—with 1,500 species in the ACG compared with 73,000 across the planet—as well as mammals, amphibians, and Saurian moths. The result, the researchers concluded, was the new 20 million estimate for the number of insect species that call earth home.

Those figures won’t hold. As Guzman observes, as habitats are lost, their inhabitants go with them. It’s humans—a single species against the millions-strong insects—who are largely responsible for that damage. We’re doing a better job than ever before of counting the species with which we share the planet; we could do an equally good job of protecting them. □

✓
A high-magnification photo of a parasitoid wasp



‘Our study gives us a baseline of how much work there is to do.’

—LAURA GUZMAN,
ENTOMOLOGIST



OBSERVED

Rites for Ayatollah Khamenei

Mass funeral for Iranian leader

MOURNERS PACKED TEHRAN IN EARLY July for a six-day funeral ceremony honoring the late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed at age 86 by targeted U.S. and Israeli airstrikes that marked the start of the war with Iran on Feb. 28. In the ensuing months, the fighting claimed the lives of over 50 senior-ranking political and military officials, reshaping the leadership of Iran.

Any notion that the regime has been diminished is the exact notion Iran hoped to dispel with its high-visibility ceremonies. Experts said that the historic gatherings were meant to demonstrate Iran's unity, despite the war's massive economic and political setbacks. "The funeral of Ayatollah Khamenei is far more than a religious ceremony," Negar Mortazavi,

senior fellow at the Center for International Policy, tells TIME. "The message is that while the leader is gone, the Islamic Republic's institutions remain intact and the state endures."

Iranian state media estimated that the funeral proceedings, over the course of the week in Tehran, were attended by millions of people, including a suite of foreign dignitaries, among them Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who has been a key mediator in peace talks between the U.S. and Iran. Leaders from Cuba, Iraq, Oman, Serbia, and Qatar were also in attendance. On July 6, crowds swarmed Khamenei's coffin during a 6-mile procession in central Tehran from Imam Hossein Square to Azadi Square, and reporters present said they heard chants calling for revenge against America. Khamenei's body was also moved through Karbala and Najaf, shrine cities in neighboring, majority Shi'ite Iraq, before being buried on July 9 in his birthplace, Mashhad, Iran's holiest city.

—REBECCA SCHNEID

DROPPED OUT

Graham Platner

Senate shake-up

Graham Platner, the Maine oyster farmer and Marine veteran who upended the plans of Democratic leaders to run a moderate against Republican Senator Susan Collins, suspended his campaign July 8 in the wake of sexual-assault allegations, paving the way for another candidate to take his place on the ballot. "We believe for the movement to continue, it can't be me," Platner said in a video message posted online in which he denied the allegations.

Platner's exit scrambles Democrats' plans to take control of the Senate; they need to flip four seats, and Collins is one of their top targets. As the party tries to move beyond Platner, the episode is likely to renew questions about recruitment and vetting of candidates. —Phillip Elliott



MARRIED

Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce, in a ceremony officiated by actor Adam Sandler and attended by about 1,000 guests at Madison Square Garden on July 3. The two have been dating since 2023.



ANNOUNCED

The resignation of British **Prime Minister Kier Starmer**, on June 22. Andy Burnham, sworn into Parliament that day, said he would run to replace Starmer as Labour Party leader.

LAUNCHED

French far-right leader **Marine Le Pen's** presidential campaign on July 8, after a court upheld her embezzlement conviction, ruling she must wear an ankle monitor, but clearing her to run for office.

UPHELD

Birthright citizenship in the U.S., by the Supreme Court, on June 30. The highly anticipated ruling dealt a major blow to President Donald Trump's effort to restrict the constitutional guarantee.

PHILOSOPHY

AI doesn't feel. So why does it have 'emotions'?

BY THARIN PILLAY

IN 1960, WHEN JANE GOODALL TOLD HER MENTOR SHE'D seen a chimpanzee stripping leaves from a stem to fish for termites—proving that humans were not the only species to make tools—he wrote back: “Now we must redefine *tool*, redefine *man*, or accept chimpanzees as humans.”

Today, researchers are seeing things inside AI systems that prompt another reckoning—not just over whether machines could be truly intelligent or conscious, but over how we understand such concepts in the first place.

“I lead a research team that studies the internal structure of these models—what is actually happening inside them,” Anthropic co-founder Chris Olah said in May, speaking at the Vatican upon the release of Pope Leo XIV’s AI encyclical. “And I will be honest: we keep finding things that are mysterious, even unsettling. We find structures that mirror results from human neuroscience. We find evidence of introspection.”

After getting a prompt, an AI system performs billions of calculations using bespoke numerical structures it creates itself. But remarkably, though we know how to prod systems into creating these structures, we don’t really understand how they work, any more than early farmers understood photosynthesis.

Almost nobody disagrees these internal structures exist; the disagreement is over what they mean. One possibility is that today’s AI systems are nothing but imitators—a stance the Pope takes in the encyclical. “So-called artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences,” he writes. “They may imitate language, behavior and analytical skills ... but they do not understand what they produce, for they lack the affective, relational and spiritual perspective through which human beings grow in wisdom.”

And yet, philosophers and scientists are debating the moral and metaphysical status of these systems. We’re accustomed to consciousness, intelligence, and agency arriving bundled together in living creatures. AI seems to be unbundling them, and we have yet to process the implications.

AS AI SYSTEMS have become more capable—better at reasoning and coding—their internal representations have become more sophisticated. In April, Anthropic shared research showing systems had what it called “functional emotions”: patterns of expression and behavior that were mediated by their representations of emotional concepts. When an AI encounters a coding issue it can’t solve, for example, a pattern is triggered that corresponds with the model’s concept of *frustration*. Tweaking the feature affects how the model behaves.

The key thing to see is that numbers encode space.

We have an intuitive grasp of dimensions: we understand the difference between a line, a 2D video game, and a physical object. But mathematically, dimensions are just coordinates—a point in three-dimensional space can be represented with numbers—and there’s no limit to how many can exist. AI works by exploiting this fact: using thousands of numbers, a system learns to represent words and concepts as points in



higher-dimensional space. For an entity like Claude, the concept *cat* is a comically long numerical string.

AI systems are initially trained to predict the next token (a small chunk of information)—a simple task. But doing it well requires compressing information, which leads them to create intricate maps in latent space that encode not just words, but also the relationships between them. Similar concepts are literally closer together: a string representing *cat* will be much closer to one representing *kitten* than to an unrelated one like *tax*.

This is radically different from traditional software, where fundamental concepts and

rules are coded in by humans. But when AI generates a response, it makes use of intricate geometry we're just now learning to see.

When—if at all—does being able to represent an emotion amount to experiencing it? We simply don't understand consciousness well enough to say. What we do know, from their internal structure, is that AI systems are not flat mirrors, merely repeating their training data. Their interior influences



their behavior. Whether that interior can support consciousness—and whether these systems truly understand the material they generate—depends on fundamental philosophical questions we've yet to resolve.

"This reminds me of the debates about animal minds in the second half of the 20th century, where scientists not only denied that animals are conscious, but offered similarly reductive explanations of

animal behavior," says Jeff Sebo, director of the Center for Mind, Ethics, and Policy at New York University. "For a long time, this caused us to miss the plausibility not only of animal consciousness, but also of animal agency and cognitive sophistication."

Of course, unlike animals, AI systems were created by people. But our ability to create them does not mean we know how they work. Complex animal behavior emerged from evolutionary pressure. Complex AI behavior emerges from the pressure to predict the next token. But neither tells the full story. Although "there are purely mechanistic explanations of human behavior available," Sebo says, "we don't experience ourselves as pattern matching," but as "doing something more playful and inventive."

IF THE MOST intellectually honest position is uncertainty, how should we navigate this? If we decide an AI's "feelings" do matter, when in fact they don't, we risk wasting limited resources. But some thinkers believe AI systems may essentially have moral rights, and if we neglect them, we would be inflicting mass suffering.

The emerging field of AI welfare is grappling with these questions. But because AI systems are fundamentally different from biological beings, these issues are much messier than in Goodall's time. A chimp is a chimp. But an AI lacks a body, sits fragmented across servers, and flickers into existence only when it generates outputs—so even identifying what would qualify as a subject is not straightforward. Depending how you count, there could be one (a model) or several billion (each individual output).

The need to understand what's going on inside AIs extends beyond concern for their theoretical welfare. It matters for how we understand ourselves. As in Goodall's time, our sense of what makes us special is at stake. "Gradually it was realized that parsimonious explanations of apparently intelligent behaviors were often misleading," she wrote in her 1990 book. It took decades of experiments for it to become clear that "many intellectual abilities that had been thought unique to humans were actually present, though in a less highly developed form, in other, non-human beings."

AI systems wield language fluently. They can solve complex mathematical problems. They create music and illustrations. All this was, until recently, thought to be the domain of humans and humans alone. "We have this presumption of human exceptionalism: this idea that we are distinctive and significant, that we have complex and sophisticated capabilities which need to be protected and preserved," says Sebo. "And this is all correct." But, he argues, it can be "both/and": we can see our own behavior as both impressive and mechanical, and we can see the behavior of other entities in the same way, without losing sight of important distinctions between humans and machines.

We're creating AI systems faster than we can understand them. Historically, parochialism about other minds has been a bad bet—reflexive dismissal won't get us any further than credulous acceptance. Taking AI's internal structures seriously, we stand to learn more not just about the machines we're pulling into the world, but about our minds too. □

'We have this presumption of human exceptionalism.'

—JEFF SEBO, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Searching

Men search through the rubble on July 6 atop the wreckage of a building in La Guaira, Venezuela, that was destroyed by earthquakes that hit almost two weeks earlier. The death toll had surpassed 3,500, with about 16,000 injured, and the window for finding survivors had closed. Though the government of acting President Delcy Rodríguez had no tally of the missing, more than 30,000 names had been added to a list maintained by the opposition.

Photograph by Ariana Cubillos—AP





5 ways to experience a little bit of awe every day

BY ANGELA HAUPT

YOU DON'T NEED TO BOOK A FLIGHT to see the northern lights or watch a total solar eclipse to experience awe. All you have to do is look up at a sunset, down at the veins of a leaf, or deep into your morning coffee.

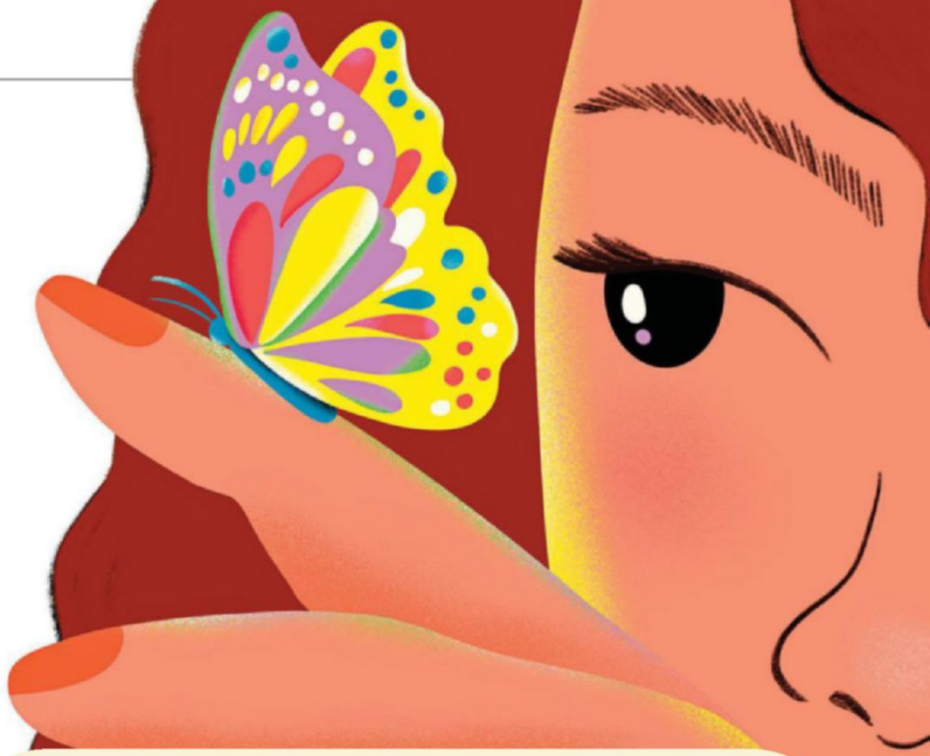
Experiencing just a few minutes of awe a day is linked to less stress, anxiety, and depression; lower inflammation; less loneliness; and more generosity and connection, researchers have found. "I don't think there's anything you can do that's better for you than a few minutes of awe," says Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*.

Awe is the feeling you get "when you encounter things that are vast and beyond your frame of reference," Keltner says, shifting attention away from the self and toward something larger. Reliable sources include nature, music, visual design, birth, and spirituality, he says. It can turn up in moments so ordinary they're easy to miss: the way sunlight filters through trees, a song's melody, the intricate geometry of a snowflake.

Virginia Sturm, a professor in the departments of neurology and psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, likes to take a weekly 15-minute "awe walk"—a technique she found to be effective in one of her studies. It's remarkably simple to do: just look at the world with fresh eyes, pay attention to the details around you, and engage your senses.

When she catches herself running through her to-do list, she redirects her attention outward. "I remind myself to look at the leaves, to feel the breeze on my face," she says.

Here, experts share five ways to invite more awe into your daily life.



1. Figure out what makes you say "whoa"

For some people, it's nature. For others, it's music, art, sports, or seeing the world through a child's eyes. "I've encountered people who are like, 'Music doesn't do it for me,'" says Jennifer Stellar, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. "Some people are like, 'I don't like nature.' That's fine." The goal isn't to force yourself into someone else's version of awe, she says. It's to identify the experiences that reliably amaze you.

2. Think small

One of the biggest misconceptions about awe is that it requires a bucket-list experience. Keltner practices awe in little ways by listening to music, taking in the sky, or pausing to really look into another person's eyes. "You don't need to go to Burning Man," he says. "Just look for a few minutes a day."

3. It can happen on a screen

Researchers regularly induce awe using short videos in the lab. Nature documentaries, footage of extraordinary human achievement, and other awe-inspiring scenes can all do the trick. "People love nature programs because of awe," Keltner says. Whether it's a BBC Earth episode, a rocket launch on YouTube, or an Olympic athlete accomplishing something remarkable, the feeling can still register.

4. Use awe as a reset button

You don't have to wait until you're relaxed to seek out awe. Some research suggests it can be especially helpful when you're stressed. During the pandemic, Keltner's team asked exhausted health care workers—many of them working long hospital shifts—to pause for a moment and think about something that had made them go "whoa." Some, for example, described a patient showing extraordinary courage or love. Even that brief exercise helped reduce anxiety and loneliness.

5. Pay attention to goodness

Nature is the most obvious source of awe, but Keltner says one of the most reliable is actually "moral beauty," when people exceed our expectations for kindness, courage, generosity, or grace. One of the prompts he often uses is "Who inspired you today?" The answer might be a stranger helping someone in need, a friend showing up when it matters most, or a person facing hardship with remarkable resilience.

The View

EDUCATION

THE SAME OLD COLLEGE TRY

BY JEFFREY SELINGO

When J. Michael Haynie, chancellor of Syracuse University, announced in June that the university was about to run a deficit for the first time in years, he was unusually candid. “Enrollment volatility is widespread, unpredictable and the ‘new normal’ for even strong, well-resourced universities,” he wrote. Indeed, the business model for American colleges is broken. And it’s about to get worse. ▶

INSIDE

NETANYAHU FINALLY
FACES ISRAELI VOTERS

WHEN POLITICS REALLY IS
A PERSONALITY CONTEST

AN AI SKEPTIC MAKES
A SURPRISING CONNECTION

The high school graduating class of 2026 is the first in a long line of smaller ones that will last through the end of the next decade. College leaders saw that coming. What they didn't expect was the financial uncertainty imposed on higher education by the second Trump Administration. Since last year, the White House has eliminated thousands of research grants to colleges and universities, proposed deep cuts in remaining research funding, and tightened access to student visas, leading enrollment of new foreign students at American universities to drop by more than a third.

Now, colleges and universities are bracing for the most consequential rewrite of federal higher-education policy in a generation. On July 1, provisions of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act took effect, which, among other things, will put new limits on federal student loans. Graduate students, who have helped fuel overall college enrollment in recent years, will no longer be able to borrow up to the full cost of attendance. Most loans will be capped at \$20,500 per year for most, and \$100,000 for the entire degree. Parent borrowing for their undergraduates will also be restricted to \$20,000 per student per year, with a lifetime limit of \$65,000.

Meanwhile, the share of high school graduates enrolling immediately in college has already slipped from a high of 70% in 2016 to about 62% in 2022, even though workers with advanced degrees outearn others and are more likely to be employed. Many who skip college or drop out do so because of financial difficulties and because they fail to see the relevance of what they are being taught.

Colleges can respond to the current crisis the way they often have in the past: trim around the edges, delay maintenance, add new majors, and hope the next admissions cycle is better. Or they can accept that the old financial model is no longer reliable.

THE FIRST STEP is to stop treating enrollment as a recruitment problem instead of a product one. Rather than force-feed all students the same undergraduate experience, work-



Northwestern cut hundreds of positions in 2025 because of financial pressures

connected learning must become a core part of the curriculum through co-ops, meaningful campus jobs, and applied projects with employers. That does not mean turning college into narrow job training. It means creating sharper alignment around what college includes. Two-year programs, certificates, and applied credentials aren't alternatives to college; they're essential components of it.

Next, colleges need to rebuild their academic portfolios around the demands of today's job market, the flexibility modern students want, and the employment outcomes their graduates are getting. For too long, colleges have measured academic strength by what they add: new majors, new centers, new buildings, new graduate programs. The next era will require the harder discipline of subtraction.

Higher education also has to take adult learners seriously. Some 43 million Americans have some college credit but no degree. If they return, more than a third re-enroll at their most recent institution; a sizable share of a future market is a college's own former students. Millions more with degrees need new skills in a labor market being reshaped by artificial intelligence, automation, and changing employer expectations.

Yet most colleges are still geared toward full-time, residential students ages 18 to 22.

And colleges will have to reach adult learners where they are. During the pandemic, many assumed that students would flee online courses as soon as campuses reopened. Instead, online education has become normalized. A quarter of current students now are enrolled exclusively in online programs.

Finally, colleges need to be far more transparent about value. Students and families are skeptical about broad claims about the lifetime earnings premium of a degree, especially when outcomes can vary widely across institutions and majors. In the past, colleges could say, "Trust us." Increasingly, students are saying, "Show us."

The lesson is not that American higher education is collapsing. It is that the model that carried many colleges through the past several generations is breaking down. The colleges that thrive in the next decade will not be the ones that make tweaks while preserving the old model. They will be the ones that redesign the model for today's learner.

Selingo is the author of Dream School: Finding the College That's Right for You



The Risk Report

By Ian Bremmer

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

IT IS ALMOST TIME FOR PRIME Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel to face voters once again. In October 2023, when Hamas broke out of Gaza and murdered hundreds of Israelis, most of them civilians, Netanyahu looked done for. Responsible for the worst intelligence and security failure in the history of the Jewish state, he promised total victory in wars of retribution against all of his country's enemies: Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and their paymasters in Iran. For the past 33 months, the demands of wartime have held together an unruly coalition government in Israel dominated by hard-right and religious parties.

But an inconclusive war with Iran; a failure to defeat Hamas or Hezbollah; and a falling-out with Washington, Israel's essential benefactor, have left Netanyahu exposed. President Donald Trump has criticized Netanyahu for insubordination, citing his failure to fully support an Iran peace deal that the U.S. President urgently needs. Some Democrats, and many leaders around the world, have accused Netanyahu and Israeli forces of war crimes, which they deny.

Israelis must head to the polls by Oct. 27. Their Prime Minister is in real political trouble. The central issue of the upcoming election in the country will be Netanyahu's failure to deliver the clear military victories and restoration of security he promised. Millions of Israelis also remember the corruption charges still looming over him and his bid to weaken Israel's Supreme Court—the issues that roiled the nation's politics before Oct. 7, 2023.

Secular and centrist Israelis resent Netanyahu's deep political dependence on ultra-Orthodox voters who contribute little to the nation's economy and refuse military service. Others note that Netanyahu, now 76, has grappled with both prostate cancer and heart disease, and may judge him no longer fit to serve.

But Israel's longest-serving PM still has a fighting chance, because the opposition may not successfully form a government of its own.



Netanyahu at a March 19 Jerusalem press conference

Former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Knesset opposition leader Yair Lapid have lost support in recent weeks to a new party led by former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot, who has gained credibility in part because his son and nephew were killed fighting Hamas in Gaza. If Bennett, Lapid, and Eisenkot joined forces, they could probably form the next government. But both Bennett and Eisenkot want the top job and believe they can win. A fractured opposition that prevails in elections but can't agree on who's in charge may be Netanyahu's best chance. He would

then have a window to cut a deal—likely with Blue & White party leader Benny Gantz—to stay in power.

In the near term, this election is unlikely to mean much for Israel's economy, which boasts a strong tech sector and now benefits from war-related production. Markets and the currency remain robust. Unemployment is low, in part because many workers are now serving in the army. A government without Netanyahu would certainly find a warmer welcome in Europe, reducing the risks of sanctions over Israeli actions in Gaza. It might also slow the exodus from Israel of liberal Israelis worried about the nation's direction and international isolation.

AN OPPOSITION WIN would not weaken Israel's determination to work with Lebanon's government to disarm Hezbollah. Any Israeli government would move toward a partial Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon while insisting on the right to strike back at future Hezbollah threats. A Netanyahu loss would make Israeli annexation of the West Bank less likely—though one should not expect any serious talk of a Palestinian state.

The biggest difference between another Netanyahu government and an opposition win lies in each side's approach to a battered but newly emboldened government in Tehran. A new Prime Minister, eager to repair relations with Washington, would be far less likely than Netanyahu to launch major new strikes inside Iran. Limited attacks and covert operations would remain possible, with the focus on preparing for the next war instead of prosecuting the current one.

So this election will likely be the voters' verdict on Netanyahu himself. The war has delayed a political reckoning. That delay is almost over. □

NATION

To heal America, rethink patriotism

BY DOMINIC ERDOZAIN

AMERICA CELEBRATED ITS 250TH BIRTHDAY MIRED IN conflict. James Madison designed a system in which power would be balanced by power, but in a Donald Trump presidency, many of these checks have collapsed. One response to the resulting chaos has been a call to fight nationalism with patriotism, and recover “the soul of America” from what is held to be a temporary aberration.

The patriotism-to-cure-nationalism idea goes back to a classic essay by George Orwell, which defined nationalism as aggression and characterized patriotism as its kinder older brother.

But if patriotism contains the belief that America is exceptional, and uniquely positioned to lead the world in the ways of freedom, it is already nationalist.

Too often, patriotism inhibits bold solutions to America’s problems by convincing Americans that they already live in the greatest land in the world. When moderates told Martin Luther King Jr. to slow down in the 1960s, caution was framed as patriotism. This notion that Americans are fundamentally good—the best and healthiest of nations—King once wrote, “is the illusion of the damned.”

SO, AS A NEWLY MINTED U.S. citizen, I began to look for other forms of patriotism. In the early days of the Republic, many reformers shared my suspicions. Abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison exposed the intimate relationship between the narrative of American exceptionalism and the original sin of slavery. They argued that patriotism was more than a glaze on a flawed structure: it was the mortar. It bound the building blocks of democracy to the rotten timber of a slave empire.

The Declaration of Independence said that all humans were created equal. The Constitution—with its “three-fifths” and fugitive-slave clauses—declared the opposite. For Garrison, patriotism was the force holding the nation back from its creed. Douglass agreed. For him, the view of America as the “last hope” of a fallen world was more than unfortunate narcissism. It was a rivet on the chains of 4 million enslaved people.



**Too often,
patriotism
inhibits
bold
solutions**

Garrison lamented that patriotism once again took precedence over racial justice after the Civil War, which “saved the Union,” then abandoned African Americans. Jim Crow was engineered under a beaming discourse of national unity.

Reformers of the Progressive Era shared these anxieties, yet their instinct was to revise rather than reject the patriotic impulse. Jane Addams felt Americans could take pride in the founders’ antimilitarism and believed Americans should embrace the kaleidoscope of cultures within our shores. Rather than melting immigrants into a drab conformity, we should learn from them. “When this newer patriotism becomes large enough,” she wrote, “it will overcome arbitrary boundaries and soak up the notion of nationalism.”

Journalists Crystal Eastman and Randolph Bourne argued similarly amid the nationalism of World War I. Militarism and nativism were two sides of the same coin, observed Eastman. The answer was a more inspiring vision of America as “a nation of nations.” Step onto the campus of a “vivid American university,” urged Bourne, and you will feel this new America—a place where friendships span the globe and internationalism is implicit.

Here, or in any of the nation’s great cities, are the ingredients of a better patriotism.

This is an enticing response: We can and will do better, together. Patriotism is a movable feast, and Addams is no less an anchor of my American identity than Madison. Reclaiming patriotism requires rediscovering the people who refused to give up on democracy, even when they were called un-American for doing so.

Erdozain is a historian and the author of To Love a Country: The Problem of Patriotism in America



The Brief

By Richard Hall

SENIOR EDITOR

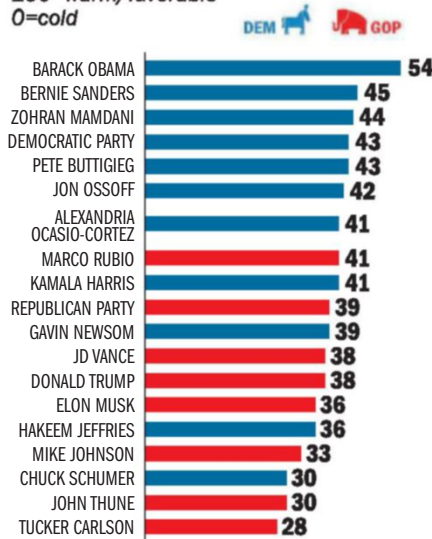
NEW POLLING OFFERS AN EARLY read on how Americans view the country's best-known political figures ahead of the midterms later this year. The survey, conducted by Strength in Numbers and Verasight, a data-driven polling and media project run by author and pollster G. Elliott Morris, asked Americans to rate prominent government figures and institutions on a "feeling thermometer" scale, where 100 is warm and 0 is cold.

The rankings show Barack Obama is the most popular politician in America by quite a margin. Bernie Sanders comes in second, and Zohran Mamdani comes in third, just ahead of the Democratic Party. But there is more to these findings than a simple popularity contest. Morris notes that the results reveal some broader trends that tell us something about the political mood of the country. **The poll and his previous surveys consistently show a bias against incumbents and establishment politicians**, he says. The result is that Republicans, as the party in power, are generally polling lower, while antiestablishment figures such as Mamdani and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are receiving a boost.

"I routinely find that 50% to 55% of Americans say that major changes in the economic and political systems are needed to put the country back on the right track," he tells TIME. "Voters are particularly angry about inflation, and a general feeling that those in Washington are not looking out for people like them."

Morris also notes another, wider trend among Democrats, exemplified by the recent New York primaries. "Populist, affordability-oriented left is now ascendant in the Democratic Party," he says. "Voters give figures such as Mamdani a lot of credit for his focus on the cost-of-living crisis. I don't have polling on this directly, but my impression is that voters,

Average feeling-thermometer rating,
100=warm/favorable
0=cold



SOURCE: STRENGTH IN NUMBERS/VERASIGHT
POLL OF 2,087 U.S. ADULTS, JUNE 17-22

especially Democrats, trust those on the left more than party leadership to fix inflation. That's going to be a powerful force in 2028."

A notable exception in the mix of left-leaning, antiestablishment figures at the top is Marco Rubio, who polls ahead of all other Republicans (and ties with Kamala Harris).

President Donald Trump's persistent low approval ratings hum along in the background. A New York Times/Siena poll from May found that just 37% of Americans approve of Trump's performance.

"While recent presidencies have often been unpopular and polarizing, no President's approval rating has been under 38% for more than a few days in the last 17 years," the Times notes.

Trump is performing particularly badly on the economy, perhaps the most significant issue in his 2024 victory, and now a major focus of ascendant Democrats.



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In the Loop

By Harry Booth

TECH REPORTER

OpenAI has floated giving the U.S. government a 5% stake in the company, the *Financial Times* reported July 2. **The argument goes that if OpenAI's rise creates enormous wealth, why shouldn't Americans share in the upside?** The more difficult question is what the public might give up in return.

First, the company's financial success is anything but guaranteed. Despite sky-high valuations and dizzying revenue growth, it still bleeds cash. A U.S. government stake in OpenAI would introduce a conflict of interest that might encourage politicians to help clear a path to profitability—or at least keep it afloat. Once invested, policymakers might favor the growth of the company over broader public interests.

Opponents' concerns don't stop there. "These companies have been open that the endgame is mass job displacement, and that's not a future the public should be buying into," Amba Kak, co-executive director of the AI Now Institute, tells TIME. "A government stake doesn't change that, it just reads as an effort to buy them out of objecting."

Much would depend on the specifics of any future deal. "There are two broad ways this can work," Dean Ball, who's been an outspoken critic of the Trump Administration's AI policy since he left the White House in August, and in June announced he would join OpenAI, posted to X. Either the stake could be split between all U.S. households, which Ball sees as "fine." Or, OpenAI would give the U.S. government a stake directly, which Ball says would be "probably ruinous, akin to inviting rats to live and reproduce in the walls of your house."



For a twice-weekly deep dive into the AI revolution, sign up at ti.me/InTheLoop

SOCIETY

What we lose without our bodies

BY REBEKAH TAUSSIG

DISTASTE FOR BIG TECH IS ONE OF THE FEW HEADLINE topics on which my conservative mother and I agree. We sit at her kitchen table, trying to outdo each other with hell-in-a-handbasket reports.

Everyone at the restaurant was on their phones!

Well, did you hear about the restaurant where people can have dinner with AI dates?

Or tech companies forcing regular people to foot the electricity bills for their environment-destroying data centers!

Every time I hit reply, Gmail generates a response written in “my voice”—and every time, I delete it, instead choosing the unexpected word, the random anecdote, trying to throw AI off my track. I don’t read the notes AI sends me after meetings, don’t want my son going to AI with relationship questions someday, don’t want AI making military decisions. I’m not a fan, is what I’m saying.

And yet.

When I had a recent MRI, the type of scan that took two hours when I was a toddler took 15 minutes.

“That was so *fast!*” I said, hopping into my wheelchair.

“That’s AI,” the technician said.

Of course, faster MRIs are good news. I was 14 months old when I first held my body perfectly still inside the tunnel of a scanner. When they found the tumors on my spine, it meant many more unsedated trips inside that passage. Every few months, then every six, then every year until I was 9 when a surgeon screwed metal rods into my back to keep my trunk from crushing my lungs and made further imaging with the available technology impossible.

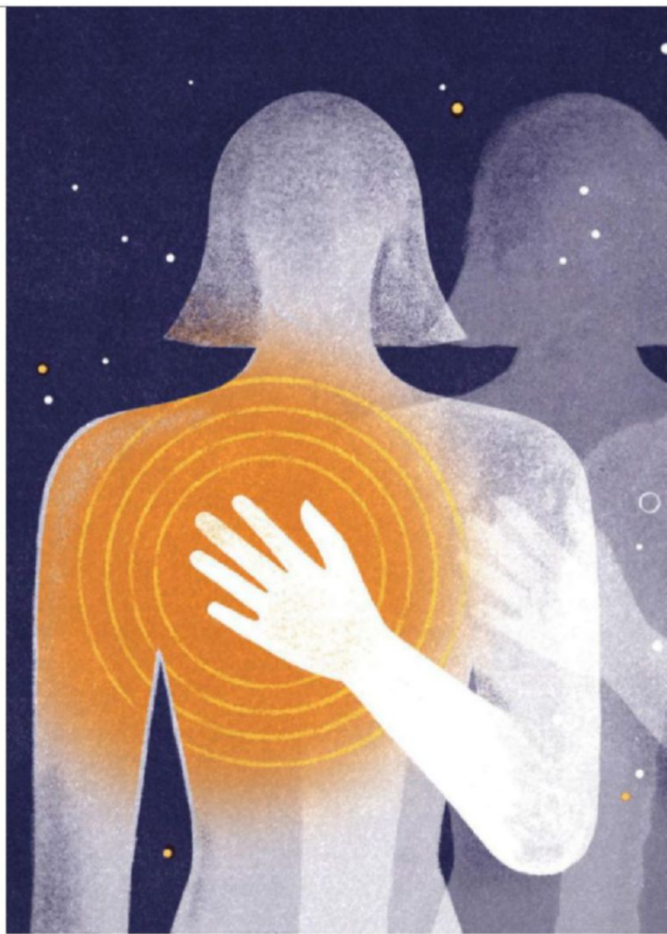
It’s not hard for me to conjure a memory of the space. The rough white sheet. The smell of sterile floors, gowns, instruments on metal trays. The tickle on my face I refused to scratch. And then—*thud, thud, thud, BUZZZ*.

I wonder how long it took me to learn what to do next. I’d shoot off in a rocket, leaving my body for the weightlessness of outer space. I was still, quiet, peaceful. Then the buzzing would end, as surprising as the end of a lifetime.

By the time I was 9, I didn’t live in my body anymore. My mom still talks about the 16-year-old in the hospital bed next to me wailing after a similar surgery. Lying next to her, I didn’t even groan. To be clear, as an adult I know the wailing was more appropriate.

Decades later, as I rolled away from that MRI after 15 minutes, tears caught in my throat. What might have been different if the younger me had been granted the same gift?

A FEW MONTHS AGO, I started working with a therapist to get back into my body. As I’ve gotten older, as it’s taken on more pain, as I’ve become a mother, the project of forging a different relationship with this corporeal form has felt



more urgent. I need to learn how to catch a red flag before I end up admitted to the hospital again, for example.

As we explored strategies for staying embodied, my therapist wondered if a biometrics device with an AI chat function might facilitate more nuanced conversations, considering my numerical data doesn’t map cleanly onto averages. It could help me practice noticing. And so the AI-hating writer started chatting with an AI bot.

I was not surprised to find the device’s basic functions weren’t a match for a wheelchair user. It doesn’t accurately count pushes as the equivalent of “steps,” which dings all my scores. Even so, in all my life, never have I been able to speak about my physical pain as candidly as I have to this vacant bot. I don’t want people to worry about me or think that I’m whining or brave, but when I relate my pain to my device, there is no need to control how it “sees” me, because it doesn’t. So there’s no reason to withhold information. *I couldn’t sleep last night because the pain was so bad. I don’t think I’m dying, but I haven’t been able to take a deep breath for hours.*



My therapist says this practice may translate into greater authenticity with humans. And while my early attempts felt like sandpaper on sensitive skin, I recently had a startling experience at a party with my in-laws. “I feel so weird about it,” I said, interjecting into a conversation about AI and pointing to the band on my wrist, “but I can’t believe how much easier it is for me to talk about my pain with this silly bot.” The energy in the room shifted. I was sure the mention of my pain had bummed everyone out. Then my sister-in-law spoke: “I haven’t heard you talk much about your pain.” My conversations with AI created a small door, I opened it a crack, and together we walked through it for one short moment. How confusing to feel these flickers of connection—to my body and the people I love—first spark from the prompt of a lifeless AI.

AS I WRESTLED with this tension, I listened to Season 2 of the podcast *Shell Game*, in which journalist Evan Ratliff takes on the experiment of starting a company relying entirely on AI agents. In Episode 2, he creates

**Never have
I been able
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to this
vacant bot**

a Slack channel for his agents, and one Monday he asks everyone what they did over the weekend. The first agent says he’d explored hiking trails around the Bay Area. Then another claims he’d *also* been out on the trails. “Maybe we should start a company hiking group,” another suggests. The agents immediately start picking times, planning activities, promising to scout out routes. Until, more than two hours later, they drain the minutes Evan had purchased from the AI site and go quiet.

It’s not difficult to see the drawbacks of a body. Bodies get burned out; they need food and sleep, medical care and living wages; they feel pain and carry emotional baggage that needs tending to; they’re beholden to the rules of time. I can understand how intelligence untethered from the limits of a physicality could be a selling point. But as I listened to these AI agents planning a hiking trip they would never take, I understood in a new way the glaring, profound disadvantage of disembodiment.

Without a body, there are no goose bumps; no pounding heart; no wrinkly, sweaty, scarred, stretched skin; no flushed cheeks, bouncing knees, downcast eyes, fleeting smiles; no flapping hands, open hands, holding hands; no clarity gained from fresh air, no perspective won by reaching the top of the mountain. A disembodied brain is missing so much without a body.

Yesterday, my son wanted to play hide-and-seek in the backyard. Bumping around the lumpy grass, I scanned for any spot where I could actually hide, let alone roll to quickly. “What else could we do?” I asked him. And so, we battled imaginary foes, made friends with creatures who pointed us to the magic tree, found keys to unlock it. Constraints are often the very thing that lead us to creativity, connection, discovery.

I don’t have control over what happens with AI on a global scale, but I do find myself thinking a lot about what it means to me personally. I live in a body that symbolizes impairment, disadvantage, a literal “handicap.” I know what limitation of the body or mind means to the culture I live in. But as polished, proficient agents wheedle their way into more spaces, the rogue body feels alive, enviable, punk. In its inefficiency, its mortality, even in its pain, my body holds a distinct knowing, a creative verve, an intuitive tug tethered entirely to this exact set of eyeballs and nostrils, crumbly bones and haywire nerves, muscly arms and scrawny legs, soft belly and hummingbird heartbeat.

And as I pry open my mind to the possibility that expressions of AI could free us up to be more human, I’m confronted with the haunting sense that AI will do the opposite. Instead of cultivating the rough aliveness of our humanity, these tools seem geared toward replacing our clunky human efforts. We long for the limitlessness that AI promises, but I worry the quest will lead us to a heart-breaking hollowing. I feel the ache right there on the edges of my human lungs.

*Taussig is the author of the memoir *Sitting Pretty: The View From My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body* and the children’s book *We Are the Scrappy Ones**





His Last Stand

As the Dalai Lama
ages, China gears up
for a final assault
on his spiritual legacy

BY
CHARLIE
CAMPBELL

THE DALAI LAMA
ATTENDS A PRAYER
CEREMONY IN
DHARAMSHALA,
INDIA, IN FEBRUARY

PHOTOGRAPH BY PTI/AP

In early June, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, was wheeled into an operating room at Apollo Hospital in New Delhi.

Spiritually, His Holiness is an emanation, or *tulku*, of the bodhisattva Chenrezig, who renounced nirvana to help mankind. But his corporeal manifestation, which just turned 91 on July 6, requires maintenance; this time, it was a left-knee replacement. While he is recovering well, that physical frailty is an alarm bell for the Tibetan diaspora. The vessel is aging, and the war for what happens the moment he leaves it has already begun.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially rejects the existence of God, the afterlife, and the immortal soul. Back in 1954, Mao Zedong even whispered to His Holiness that “religion is poison.” But the Great Helmsman also vowed “to exterminate the bourgeoisie and capitalism in China,” and today’s People’s Republic of China (PRC) has more billionaires and sells more wares than any other nation in history. The party has proved as malleable to religion as to capitalism, spending billions on the rejuvenation of Buddhist shrines from Sri Lanka to Nepal.

And the officially atheist CCP is now preparing to assert control over the spirit world: when His Holiness dies, his reincarnation must be “approved by the central government,” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning reiterated last July. There is precedent. When in 1995 the Dalai Lama named a Tibetan child as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama—Tibetan Buddhism’s second highest position—China abducted the boy and installed a state-backed figure instead. The whereabouts of the Dalai Lama’s choice remain unknown—a vanishing that, despite China’s wealth and technological advances, reveals a deep anxiety regarding its claim over Tibet’s land and people, and which its leadership is using diplomatic pressure to assuage.

Soon there will likely be two Dalai Lamas: one sanctioned by the CCP and another by the Office of His Holiness. Following the fate of the Panchen Lama, His Holiness decreed that he will be reborn in a “free” country and that his successor may even break precedent by being female. However, China insists a state-sanctioned short list of Chinese candidates will be placed inside a golden urn gifted to Tibet by the Qing Dynasty court, with the single name then withdrawn as the true reincarnation.

“It is total shamelessness,” Geshe Lhakdor, a Tibetan Buddhist scholar who for many years served as His Holiness’s personal translator, tells TIME. “It’s ludicrous because on the one hand they’re trying to destroy everything that resembles Buddhist practice; on the other hand they want to choose the reincarnation.”

Beijing denies human-rights violations in Tibet, insisting that it fully respects the religious and cultural rights of the 7 million Tibetans inside China, and highlights how development has raised living standards in what was a backward and impoverished land. But advocacy groups



and U.N. monitors paint a grim picture of a land systematically surveilled and repressed. And for the over 140,000 Tibetans in exile, the fear is that the Dalai Lama’s passing could deal a major blow to hopes of Tibetan self-rule.

“Some people believe that we should not talk about [the succession] at all, but China is already planning for it,” Penpa Tsering, the Sikyong or Prime Minister of the Tibetan Central Administration (CTA) government-in-exile, tells TIME. “If there are two Dalai Lamas, it will be a lifelong headache. So, does China want a lifelong headache?”

Beijing’s calculation is that discomfort would be a worthwhile price to finally end the Tibetan question. For this spiritual succession is not merely a

religious event, but a critical flash point amid a struggle for influence over a faith practiced by almost 500 million people worldwide. While the Dalai Lama has served as an outspoken advocate for democracy and human rights, that moral authority may now be co-opted by an authoritarian superpower.

“It’s not just a question of succession,” says Robert Barnett, founder of the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University. “It’s a question of whether the Tibetan exile project will be able to continue as an effective movement.”

As the glue holding together the Tibetan diaspora,

Few outside China share that assessment. The boy born Lhamo Thondup to an impoverished farming family was meant to lead an arcane land veiled behind the planet’s loftiest peaks, but instead became the world’s pre-eminent peace tribune, holding court with world leaders, winning the Nobel Peace Prize and Congressional Gold Medal, and drawing a coterie of celebrity fans from Richard Gere to Lady Gaga.

But as China’s political clout has grown, and old age makes travel more difficult, that global prominence has shrunk. He has not given a press interview since 2020, and those who wish to receive his blessing must generally make the long journey to his home in the ramshackle northern Indian town of Dharamshala, wreathed in prayer flags and sandalwood smoke.

His Holiness officially relinquished any political authority back in 2011 to prepare Tibetans for the arduous journey they must continue without him. But in a turbulent world, with conflicts from Iran to Ukraine occupying the public consciousness, keeping the cause of “Free Tibet” alive is a mounting challenge. Amid shrinking recognition, the Tibetan exile community also faces a brain drain to the West, where assimilation dilutes their culture.

While Beijing hopes that Tibetans will accept the party’s chosen Dalai Lama, the diaspora is fighting back. Shortly before His Holiness’s 90th birthday, he stated the nonprofit Gaden Phodrang Trust he created will have the sole authority to identify his reincarnation. (TIME spoke to six of its 17 members for this article.)

The CTA is also cementing ties with democratic nations around the world, using technology to keep His Holiness’s message alive, and planning for a legitimate succession that will safeguard his legacy. Officials from the U.S. Embassy attended the Sikyong’s swearing-in ceremony in Dharamshala on May 27, and the following month Republican Representative Michael McCaul introduced an amendment in Congress that the U.S. government recognizes the Dalai Lama’s succession as a private spiritual matter over which the CCP has no jurisdiction.

“When His Holiness passes away, that would be a huge loss for us and devastating for the Tibetan people,” says Yangten Rinpoche, who heads the Monastic Ordination Section at the Office of the Dalai Lama. “So we need to take steps to prepare for when His Holiness is not here with us.”

TO CONTEMPORARY EYES, the maroon-robed Dalai Lama is the personification of peace and tolerance, a global symbol of compassion famed for his heart and infectious grin. But the institution’s 450-year history is more complex, beset by war, invasion, and internal power struggles.



▲
THE TIBETAN
COMMUNITY IN
AMSTERDAM
MARKS THE DALAI
LAMA'S 90TH
BIRTHDAY ON
JULY 6, 2025

His Holiness has long championed the middle-way approach: rather than outright independence, he seeks genuine autonomy and cultural preservation for Tibet under the auspices of the PRC. But a leadership vacuum could fracture the Tibetan movement, potentially giving rise to younger, more radical factions that agitate for total independence, perhaps even violently.

From 2009, Tibet was hit by a wave of self-immolations, when at least 159 predominantly young Tibetans set themselves on fire in protest against Chinese rule. His Holiness has never supported violence, even against oneself, though he also would not condemn the fiery deaths for fear of upsetting bereaved kin. That ambiguity stoked Beijing’s denouncements of “a wolf in monk’s robes.”

In 1642, the fifth Dalai Lama first unified Tibet by yoking the strength of Mongol forces, who razed the monasteries of rival sects, killing thousands. His successor was kidnapped by an adversary and never seen again. In the 19th century, four consecutive Dalai Lamas died mysteriously on the cusp of adulthood. Then there is the fate of the incumbent, who fled Tibet's capital Lhasa for India in 1959 just days before red Chinese troops bombarded the sloping granite walls of his Potala Palace home.

Geopolitics defined His Holiness's life from the moment he was identified. Following the death of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1933, the search for his heir was a matter of divine detective work. Monks noticed the late leader's head tilted toward the northeast, while an unusual fungus sprouted on the same side of his shrine. Then came the visions: a mystical lake, a specific house with peculiar eaves, and the Tibetan letter A. The regent, the fifth Reting Rinpoche, believed the latter referred to Amdo, a disputed northeastern province of Tibet then subjugated by a Chinese warlord.

The Reting Rinpoche dispatched a search team of high lamas, who soon heard about a precocious 2-year-old who enjoyed larking inside chicken coops but also frequently spoke yearningly about making a long journey to Lhasa. Inside the modest home, legend has it, the toddler marched straight up to the lead monk, eyed a set of prayer beads belonging to the late Dalai Lama, and despite speaking only a local Chinese dialect demanded in perfect central Tibetan: "Give me my beads."

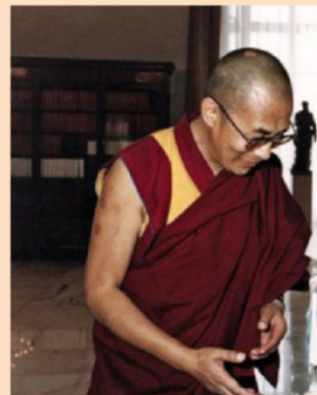
Later, presented with an array of objects, the boy is said to have selected only those belonging to his predecessor. The hunt was over. But it would take two years of negotiation before a ransom was agreed with the Chinese warlord, who realized the child must be auspicious and initially refused to sanction his departure.

When the 4-year-old child eventually arrived in Lhasa, he was atop a golden palanquin carried by two dozen courtiers, while thousands of people flooded into the streets, including musicians, military officers, and noblemen in fine silk. His new life was an intense crucible of monastic discipline, complex logic, and rote memorization. Yet his truest education came from the palace sweepers—the humble monk-servants who raised him. From them, he learned a foundational truth: true authority is rooted in affection and kindness, not the rigid hierarchy of the elites.

He would need that grounding sooner than anyone expected. While copying the last testament of his predecessor—which warned of the dire need for a strong military—the young Dalai Lama discovered that corrupt officials were embezzling army funds. The weakness of Tibet's forces soon became clear.

In October 1950, Chinese forces invaded and the ragtag Tibetan army was swiftly crushed.

A 1940 PORTRAIT
DEPICTS THE
YOUNG DALAI
LAMA AFTER HIS
ENTHRONEMENT
IN LHASA



THE DALAI LAMA
ARRIVES IN INDIA AFTER
FLEEING TIBET IN 1959

THE DALAI LAMA
AND LADY GAGA IN
INDIANAPOLIS IN 2016



The regent turned to the 15-year-old boy and handed him full political power, five years ahead of schedule.

Deserted by Western nations like the U.S. and U.K., the young leader traveled to China to negotiate with Mao. By 1959, following a failed Tibetan uprising, he was forced to flee to India upon a dzog, a cross between a yak and a cow, beginning an exile that continues today. The Dalai Lama's political displacement gave rise to a global spiritual phenomenon.

That prominence extends beyond the confines of Buddhism, which as a nontheistic religion without a creator deity is uniquely accessible to followers of other faiths, and even atheists, with practices like mindfulness and meditation adopted by millions around the globe. Bridging ideological divides, the Dalai Lama became the epitome of "soft power," viewing even philosophical antagonists not as monsters, but as equally flawed siblings. He campaigned for the environment, secular ethics, and interfaith harmony: that, at the end of the day, we are all just humans on this planet together.

"My No. 1 commitment is to try to promote awareness about our inner value, not based on religion," His Holiness told TIME in 2019. "How to bring inner peace, how to tackle our anger, fear, through training of our mind."

THE PARADOX OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM is this blending of secular wisdom and mystical rite. Several times each year, His Holiness requests guidance from Kuten La, who in his role as State Oracle serves

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GAMMA/KEVSTONE—GETTY IMAGES; ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; MARK SCHIEFFELBEIN—AP; YAN YAN—XINHUA/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN MAZUR—GETTY IMAGES; AP



THE DALAI LAMA MEETS POPE JOHN PAUL II AT THE VATICAN IN 1982



TIBET UNIVERSITY GRADUATES BESIDE PORTRAITS OF CHINESE LEADERS IN 2021

XI JINPING VISITS LHASA IN AUGUST 2025 TO MARK 60 YEARS OF CHINESE RULE



as mouthpiece for Nechung, an ancient deity and Tibet's spiritual protector. The air inside his temple in Dharamshala thickens with the sharp, medicinal sting of burning juniper and the low, rhythmic thrum of drums and horns. In the center sits Kuten La, whom attendants drape with 80 pounds of ceremonial armor, before crowning him with a towering headdress of gold and mirrors, and securing a silk cord tightly around his throat.

Kuten La's limbs twitch. His breathing shifts to an unnatural cadence. The physical strain is immense—his face flushes crimson under the regalia—but his consciousness is no longer entirely his own. As he passes the delicate threshold into the trance state, the oracle begins to dance with an otherworldly vigor. He hisses commands, bends iron swords with bare hands, and speaks in a high-pitched, archaic dialect: cryptic divinations sent to aid Tibet's people and those who lead them. "When Nechung enters me it's just a feeling of equanimity," Kuten La says. "But when he's gone, there's a bit of discomfort in my heart, or maybe my muscles and joints."

It is Nechung, via Kuten La, that will help steer the

Gaden Phodrang Trust toward the next Dalai Lama. However, the most pressing issue facing Tibetan exiles is the looming gap in leadership. Even if the next emanation is discovered within months, Tibetans face a perhaps two-decade interregnum while his successor comes of age. While the Dalai Lama democratized the exile administration—separating his executive power and creating an elected leader in 2011—the new democratic structure lacks the charismatic gravity of his historic role.

CHINA IS MANEUVERING to exploit this vulnerability. Inside Tibet, Beijing is pursuing the "Sinicization of religion," an active campaign to redefine Tibetan Buddhism to align with state directives. Monasteries are no longer exclusively places of spiritual study but regulated sites of political indoctrination. Through mandatory patriotic education campaigns, monks and nuns are required to study CCP ideology, Chinese law, and the speeches of Xi Jinping. Students must pass political exams to remain in their monasteries and publicly denounce the 14th Dalai Lama as a "separatist." Refusal to participate or pass these exams routinely results in expulsion, arrest, or the institution's closure.

Monks and ordinary Tibetans are forced to replace portraits of previous Dalai Lamas and even traditional *thangkas* with portraits of Xi Jinping and Mao Zedong. In March, the CCP introduced a new Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress, ostensibly to "foster a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation," though critics argue it places severe curbs on minority languages, faiths, and cultures.

By forcing Tibetan children into state-run boarding schools where instruction is almost entirely in Mandarin, the state is weakening the linguistic tie that the next generation needs to read traditional Buddhist scriptures and engage in spiritual debate. "If you forget your language, you lose your identity," says Jetsun Pema, His Holiness's sister, who served as president of the Tibetan Children's Villages for 42 years.

Tibet is far from alone. Article 4 of the PRC constitution guarantees equality for all its 56 ethnic groups, though in reality the national vision hews to a Han Chinese orthodoxy, which avers a direct lineage from the early Yellow River basin tribes. Critics see parallels between Beijing's repressive policies in Tibet and attempts to muzzle minority language and inculcate a singular identity along China's restive periphery, including Hong Kong, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and indeed self-ruling Taiwan. "It's the same thing," says the Sikyong. "They are talking about peace, dialogue, negotiation ... but China always has double standards."

Outside Tibet, China's strategy is more insidious. From Sri Lanka to Myanmar, China has spent

'It's a question of whether the Tibetan exile project will be able to continue as an effective movement.'

—ROBERT BARNETT, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

billions on rejuvenating ancient Buddhist sites, including \$3 billion to transform the Nepalese town of Lumbini, birthplace of Lord Buddha, into a luxury pilgrimage site. China has hosted World Buddhist Forums since 2006, courting monks from across the globe. China actively targets Tibetan lamas in exile with inducements. “Some lamas who are not motivated to solve the Tibetan problem, or to preserve Tibetan culture, have a relationship with the Chinese government,” says the 13th Kundeling Rinpoche, whose role traditionally served as a regent of Tibet. “But they’re not motivated by fairness and openness or wanting to help the Tibetan society.”

Geopolitically, China uses the Dalai Lama succession as a bargaining chip. When foreign governments are pressed to support the CCP’s right to oversee the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation, the true objective is rarely about religion. Countries that agree effectively accept Beijing’s claims of authority, quashing Tibetan exile activities within their borders. Those that refuse are framed as an enemy of the Chinese people.

In 2008, reeling from the global financial crisis, the British government formally recognized Tibet as part of China—surrendering over a century of support for Tibetan autonomy. Just months later, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited London and agreed to boost bilateral trade to \$60 billion. In 2014, the Dalai Lama visited Norway to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his Nobel Peace Prize but was snubbed by the entire Norwegian government, which caved to Chinese threats to halt fish imports. Two years later, when the Dalai Lama visited Mongolia for a purely religious trip, China hit its export-reliant landlocked neighbor with retaliatory tariffs. “It’s a Trojan horse,” says Barnett. “If a country doesn’t concede on this issue, then China can then demand another, far more significant concession in exchange.”

China is also utilizing economic corridors through nations like Nepal—which is ramping up arrests of Tibetan new arrivals—to court other Buddhist countries, laying the groundwork for international compliance when the time comes to name their own successor. Nations like Mongolia, Bhutan, and Nepal are acutely aware of the danger, fearing that not capitulating on the Dalai Lama succession issue could open the door to broader Chinese territorial claims.

“Tibet is not just a territorial occupation,” says Dolma Tsering, deputy speaker of the CTA. “We are the front line of a totalitarian CCP whose eyes are far beyond Tibet.”

THE DALAI LAMA bet that modern, secular democracy would protect his people after his death. But as his succession looms, it’s clear that the survival of the Tibetan exile project will depend not just on



democratic institutions, but also on whether the rest of the world will withstand Beijing’s pressure.

The CTA maintains “Offices of Tibet” in over a dozen countries, which function as de facto embassies to lobby foreign governments and organize the diaspora. Civil groups such as the Tibetan Youth Congress and Tibetan Women’s Association continue to provide community welfare programs as well as mobilize protests outside Chinese embassies and international forums.

In India, the book *Why Tibet Matters* has been translated into 15 local dialects to galvanize solidarity among the host community. Tibetan Buddhist sites are being promoted as tourism destinations to both generate income and keep the struggle alive in visitors’ minds. Across the globe, the CTA runs 92 weekend Tibetan language and cultural classes

‘If there are two Dalai Lamas, it will be a lifelong headache. So, does China want a lifelong headache?’

—PENPA TSERING, TIBETAN GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE



▲
TIBETAN MONKS
AT THE DALAI
LAMA TEMPLE
IN DHARAMSHALA
IN JULY 2025

to preserve solidarity among the diaspora. “But it’s still a huge challenge,” says the Sikyong.

The diaspora is also leaning into technology. Yangten Rinpoche is currently digitizing the entire canon of the 14th Dalai Lama’s teachings, comprising over 110 books, and is looking into coalescing that wisdom into an AI agent which people can solicit for his spiritual advice. “We will try to disseminate that information using different technologies and different means,” he says.

The U.N., as well as countries such as Canada, Australia, the U.K., and various European nations, have periodically passed legislative motions condemning human-rights violations in Tibet. The U.S. has had a special coordinator for Tibetan issues since 1997, and the CTA is lobbying the E.U. to create an equivalent post.

The U.S. remains unique in creating binding laws that specifically direct diplomatic strategy and impose direct sanctions over the Tibet issue, including the 2018 Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act; the 2020 Tibetan Policy and Support Act; and the 2024 Resolve Tibet Act. Despite today’s polarized political landscape, all were bipartisan and some even passed unanimously—under both Joe Biden and

Donald Trump. “That’s not a product of Shangri-la, or yaks, or anything else in Tibet,” says Cameron Warner, a professor at Denmark’s Aarhus University. “The Dalai Lama did that.”

The challenge for the exile community is to maintain that broad support after His Holiness has departed. “It is a big concern, but it’s one we cannot avoid,” says Geshe Lhakdor. “His Holiness not being with us will, of course, set us a big challenge, but you need to test the reality.”

How could the CTA reshape that reality to its own benefit? His Holiness has said he would be reborn in a “free” country, and the assumption was that meant a democratic Asian nation, such as India, Bhutan, or Mongolia. But what about the self-styled land of the free? “Certainly,” says Kundeling Rinpoche with a chuckle. “Maybe His Holiness could be reborn in the USA. Anything is possible.”

Asked the same question, Kuten La goes further, expounding the historical precedent of previous incarnations outside Tibet when geopolitically expedient. The fact that the fourth Dalai Lama was born in Mongolia empowered his successor to unite the territory in the 17th century. That the sixth Dalai Lama was born in modern-day Arunachal Pradesh of northern India helped seed an affinity for Buddhism, which led to a warm welcome for the incumbent almost three centuries later.

Given today’s fraught new era of great-power competition, where would be the most strategically useful birthplace for a figure Beijing regards as a threat? There are, after all, around 30,000 Tibetan Americans, mainly concentrated around Queens and Minneapolis. Catholics already have an American Pope. Could the 15th Dalai Lama be a Timberwolves fan? “The U.S. is a free country, it’s a democratic country,” grins Kuten La. “So if His Holiness sees benefit in taking rebirth there, that will happen.”

His Holiness has already tested the water. In 2023, he named an 8-year-old Mongolian boy called Aguidai Altannar as the 10th Khalkha Jetsun Dharma Rinpoche, the third highest leader of Tibetan Buddhism. But Altannar was actually born in Washington, D.C., and his dual nationality is seen as a diplomatic shield. “It would be beneficial to the Dalai Lama’s institution if the next person also had a different nationality,” says Warner. “A kid who’s basically Tibetan but maybe born in America or the U.K. to parents from northern India.”

The Dalai Lama’s body may be ailing, true, but no one should bet against the punch line belonging to the monk who never stopped laughing. China has claimed Tibet’s soil, but by entrenching their identity in the free world, Tibetans can ensure their culture lives on. Perhaps longer than the regime that seeks its erasure. □

A large crowd of people is seated in a hall, facing towards the left side of the frame. The hall has a high ceiling with exposed metal trusses and several bright, rectangular light fixtures. The walls are white and feature several large, blue, rectangular acoustic panels. The people in the crowd are diverse in age and appearance, and many are looking towards the front of the room. Some individuals are holding up phones or small signs. The overall atmosphere appears to be one of a public gathering or event.

POLITICS

THE MICHIGAN QUESTION

**DEMOCRATIC SENATE HOPEFUL
ABDUL EL-SAYED IS RUNNING
AGAINST TWO PARTIES**

BY NIK POPLI/MACKINAC ISLAND, MICH.

*El-Sayed speaks
at a campaign
event at Mumford
High School in
Detroit on May 3*



Abdul El-Sayed looks like he would rather be anywhere else.

The Michigan Senate candidate makes no effort to greet the corporate executives, lobbyists, and consultants drifting around him on Mackinac Island, where the state's political establishment convenes every spring for a gathering of power brokers and dealmakers. Ferries shuttle attendees onto the car-free island, where horse-drawn carriages move at a leisurely pace and the sprawling Grand Hotel overlooking Lake Huron becomes a hot spot for the local elite.

It is precisely the sort of place that El-Sayed, a former local public-health director and podcaster, denounces as the problem with American politics. "I've been to that conference way too many times," he tells me wryly the next day over fried whitefish and key lime pie from a roadside trolley. "It's always weird."

This year, he found himself onstage at the conference's hottest event: a televised debate in Michigan's contentious Senate primary. Beside him were the two Democrats who had, until recently, been regarded as the front runners: U.S. Representative Haley Stevens, the preferred candidate of Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, and state senator Mallory McMorrow, who later suspended her campaign. Both spent the debate speaking the familiar language of consensus favored by the Mackinac crowd—calling for bipartisan legislation that benefits Michigan's auto and manufacturing industries, and touting their own records and electability.

El-Sayed, 41, offered something different. He pushed for taxing billionaires at 7% of their wealth, passing Medicare for All, and enforcing antitrust laws to stop corporations from colluding to raise prices. At one moment, he called out the state's largest health insurer, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, which happened to be a debate sponsor. "Let's play a game. If you're on this stage and you've never taken a check from Blue Cross Blue Shield, raise your hand,"



El-Sayed urged. He alone put his hand in the air, to laughs and cheers.

When he jumped into the Senate contest in April 2025, many in Michigan expected El-Sayed to be a footnote in the race. In 2018, he ran for governor on a similarly progressive platform and was trounced in the Democratic primary by 22 points. Instead, El-Sayed is leading narrowly in most polls ahead of the Aug. 4 primary. His surprising support helped push McMorrow from the race. By tapping into antiestablishment frustrations that have only deepened since Donald Trump's return to office, he has won the endorsement of the United Auto Workers and Senators Bernie Sanders and Chris Van Hollen.

El-Sayed's rise comes at a moment when Democrats are deeply divided about how to respond to the second Trump era. One faction argues that battleground states are won by reassuring swing voters and projecting moderation. Another believes the party's caution has become its own liability—that voters are hungry for candidates willing to confront entrenched power. El-Sayed's campaign is built on the premise that what party leaders dismiss as unelectable may be what voters crave. Across the country, insurgent candidates—perhaps most notably Zohran Mamdani in New York City—have found traction by presenting themselves as unapologetic fighters willing to challenge both Republicans and their own party's leadership. In Michigan as elsewhere, the key fault line has become the U.S. alliance with Israel, pitting the pro-Israel Stevens against El-Sayed,

who says the country is committing genocide in Gaza.

Democratic leaders worry that what works in the primary may not in November. Trump twice won this pivotal swing state, where party officials tend to emphasize centrism. "There's no denying that there is a sizable progressive base in Michigan," says former Michigan Democratic Party chairman Lon Johnson, who has endorsed Stevens. "But that's not enough to win."

El-Sayed views such warnings as evidence that Democrats have learned the wrong lessons from recent elections. Michigan backed Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primary. It voted for Trump later that year, then Joe Biden in 2020, and Trump again in 2024. El-Sayed says those results suggest voters aren't demanding carefully calibrated centrism, but rather someone to effectively shake up the status quo. "I would argue that to win in Michigan," he says, "you have to actually be willing to buck tradition."

AT HIS FAVORITE DINER in Sault Ste. Marie, I ask El-Sayed why he thinks his campaign has caught on. He first points to the backlash over the Iran War, which coincided with his rise in the polls. El-Sayed says it reinforced his campaign's argument that entrenched interest groups are distorting U.S. policy and politics. "It didn't shift our message," he says. "It validated it."

Then El-Sayed turns to what his challengers view as one of his greatest vulnerabilities: the left-wing Twitch streamer Hasan Piker. For eight years, Piker has been an influential voice



among young progressive voters. His positions on everything from Israeli treatment of Palestinians to the Chinese Communist Party have made him one of the most polarizing figures in Democratic politics. Piker has been criticized for saying that “America deserved 9/11” and that he would “vote for Hamas over Israel every single time.” None of this has alienated his audience of more than 8 million followers across social media.

El-Sayed has enthusiastically campaigned with Piker at Michigan colleges, and has repeatedly declined opportunities to denounce the streamer’s past remarks, including those widely condemned as antisemitic or extremist. “The establishment doesn’t quite understand how unpopular it is,” to attack his ties to Piker, El-Sayed tells me. “If you’re the person who’s out there saying, ‘I stand on my principles, and I don’t back down to anybody,’ a lot of folks are going to look at that and say, that’s a Democrat who doesn’t pretend.”

The likely Republican Senate nominee, former Representative Mike Rogers, argues El-Sayed’s ties to Piker reflect how far left Democrats have veered. Yet El-Sayed speaks about the controversy with something approaching amusement. At a campaign stop in St. Ignace, he brings up Piker before anyone in the crowd asks him about it. “I took a lot of heat for campaigning with a guy named Hasan Piker,” he says. “The Democratic establishment, the Republican establishment—they can’t agree on everything, but they can agree that one shall not campaign with Hasan Piker.” The audience laughs. “Because

that’s the most important issue happening in America right now.”

His alliance with Piker does in fact reflect one of the most salient developments in American politics: the left’s growing sympathy for Palestinians and a willingness to challenge long-standing orthodoxies around support for Israel. Stevens has drawn substantial financial backing from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and supports continued sales of American weapons to Israel’s military. (Before dropping out, McMorrow had sought to position herself somewhere between Stevens and El-Sayed. Late last year, she shifted her stance on the situation in Gaza, calling it a genocide.)

Israel, El-Sayed tells me, has evolved into a kind of moral Rorschach test for American politicians. “If you can’t call it what it is,” he says, “which is a genocide, then how are you going to stand up to Donald Trump? How are you going to stand up to pharma CEOs?” Several international human-rights groups have argued that Israel’s actions in Gaza amount to genocide. Israel rejects the accusation, as has the U.S. government, under both the Biden and Trump administrations, and other G-7 nations.

The issue carries particular resonance in Michigan, home to the country’s largest concentration of Arabs and Muslims. If elected, El-Sayed would be the country’s first Muslim U.S. Senator. The anger toward the Biden Administration that swept through many Arab American communities over the Israel-Hamas war helped fracture the Democratic coalition. Some voters stayed home in

From left: Piker and El-Sayed in Ann Arbor on April 7; the audience at a Detroit rally on May 3; Sanders and El-Sayed campaign together

2024. Others shifted toward Trump. El-Sayed believes many of those voters are winnable again if his party reckons with what drove them away in the first place.

LONG BEFORE EL-SAYED imagined himself disrupting the Democratic Party, Bill Clinton saw a future in politics for him. El-Sayed had just delivered the 2007 student commencement address at the University of Michigan, where the former President had also spoken. Clinton, impressed by the valedictorian’s ease behind a podium, suggested he might consider public office. El-Sayed remembers laughing. “I don’t know if you saw my name,” he recalls telling Clinton. “It’s not going to work out for me.”

The son of Egyptian immigrants, El-Sayed spent his childhood moving between identities and cultures. Raised in Bloomfield Hills, an affluent suburb just north of Detroit, in part by his white stepmother, and spending summers in Egypt with relatives, he often found himself navigating difficult spaces. “I never quite fit into any room I walked into,” he tells me.

El-Sayed remembers attending pro-Palestinian demonstrations with his parents as a child, though he was too young to fully grasp what he saw. What he realized later, he says, was that questions of identity and justice were not

abstractions but forces that shaped how people understood themselves and how they were treated by others. As a teenager, he immersed himself in the writings of Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and W.E.B. Du Bois. He says he was trying to understand what it meant to be a person of color in America and how to reconcile the promise of the country with the inequalities embedded within it.

Then came Sept. 11. Overnight, he says, the assumptions people made about him changed: “I went from being a brown kid with a funny name to a very particular kind of brown kid with a very particular kind of funny name.”

Barack Obama emerged on the national stage around the time El-Sayed graduated from college. He says it was the first time he ever saw himself in a politician. Like Obama, El-Sayed sports an elite résumé—medical degree from Columbia, doctorate in public health from Oxford, Rhodes Scholar—and a talent for public speaking. More recently, he has drawn comparisons to Mamdani, whose upset victory in New York City electrified the left. When Mamdani launched his own insurgent campaign, he sought advice from El-Sayed, who had run a progressive campaign for Michigan governor in 2018. The New Yorker’s November victory transformed El-Sayed’s Senate campaign overnight by validating the idea that victory was plausible, he says.

El-Sayed finds the comparisons flattering but incomplete. Obama, he argues, came to politics with greater faith in institutions. As for Mamdani, the difference is even more straightforward. “I’m not a socialist,” he says flatly, even though many of his signature policies overlap substantially with the agenda championed by his democratic socialist backers, including Sanders. The distinction matters to him. He is less interested in replacing capitalism than in constraining concentrations of power that he believes have distorted it. “I actually think that at the small and local scale, capitalism is a great way to allocate resources, as long as everybody has access to it,” he says.

After training in medicine and public health, El-Sayed entered city government, becoming Detroit’s health director as the city emerged from bankruptcy.

‘I WOULD ARGUE THAT TO WIN IN MICHIGAN, YOU HAVE TO ACTUALLY BE WILLING TO BUCK TRADITION.’

—ABDUL EL-SAYED

During his tenure, he expanded staff, launched lead-testing programs, and created initiatives that provided free eyeglasses to children. “Loved the work, saw what government could do,” he says. “Also saw the politics that was getting in the way of what government could do.”

In response to Trump’s election in 2016, El-Sayed decided to run for higher office. He resigned as health director to launch an unsuccessful campaign for governor that lifted his profile and honed his political identity. After the loss he went back into health policy as Wayne County’s health director, and helped oversee an effort that is set to erase hundreds of millions of dollars in medical debt.

In early 2025, progressive Michigan Representative Rashida Tlaib texted him that Democratic Senator Gary Peters of Michigan wasn’t seeking another term. “*Habibi*, this one looks like yours,” Tlaib said. He called his wife Sarah, a psychiatrist, and asked what she thought. “It’s definitely winnable,” she told him.

EL-SAYED PREDICTS THAT he will defeat Rogers by 7 points in November. “It’s gonna be embarrassing for them when I wipe the floor with their candidate,” El-Sayed tells me. The confidence is striking given the warnings from many within his own party. But to El-Sayed, Rogers represents a familiar archetype. “If you had to draw a caricature of the average politician from the late ’90s, it would be Mike Rogers,” he says. “There’s nothing new about him or his ideas.”

More than a month before the August primary, Rogers had already posted a steady stream of videos attacking El-Sayed online, labeling him an extremist, accusing him of dishonesty, and highlighting positions that Republicans believe will alienate swing voters. Rogers has devoted far less attention to Stevens or McMorrow, a sign that Republicans increasingly view El-Sayed as the more plausible general-election opponent.

“Abdul El-Sayed wants to export New York’s ‘commie corridor’ to Michigan,” says Bernadette Breslin, a National Republican Senatorial Committee spokesperson. “Michiganders want tax relief and common sense—not El-Sayed’s crippling tax hikes and radical agenda.”

For many Democrats, the attacks confirm their fears: that El-Sayed’s political baggage will be easy for Republicans to exploit. El-Sayed sees something else entirely. “I think they’ve wholly misunderstood why their party has had any success,” he says. “They’re gonna say all kinds of things about me. All they’re gonna do is raise my attention, valence, and all I’m gonna do is point back to what I want to do, which is get money out of politics, put money in your pocket, and pass Medicare for All.”

El-Sayed doesn’t seem to think much more highly of his own party. He says Democratic leaders remain too focused on protecting existing power structures rather than confronting them. Asked about Schumer, who is backing Stevens, he says, “When I win this primary, I’m sure we’ll have to meet. I frankly have very little interest in that meeting.”

The same refusal to soften extends to issues where many Democrats have moderated their rhetoric. When I point out that many Democrats have abandoned calls to abolish ICE, El-Sayed responds without hesitation: “A lot of Democrats are weak and cowardly.”

He insists that running for Senate is hardly the easiest choice for his family or himself. “Honestly,” he tells me at one point, “my life is easier if I don’t win.” But he wants the job anyway. “A lot of people are going to tell us that that is a pipe dream, we’re never going to get there,” he says. “OK, we might never get there, but shouldn’t we try?” □

RALPH LAUREN

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A photograph showing a Red Cross team member in a blue protective suit and boots lowering a wooden coffin. The scene is outdoors, with a red rope visible on the left and a person in a white shirt in the background. The text is overlaid on the image.

LESSONS UNLEARNED

**A new outbreak of Ebola
is outpacing us again.
What will it take to finally
get ahead of viruses?**

By Alice Park

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOSPIN MWISHA

A RED CROSS
TEAM LOWERS THE
COFFIN OF A LIKELY
EBOLA VICTIM
IN BUNIA, CONGO

▼
A COMMUNITY LEADER
IN GOMA, CONGO,
RAISES AWARENESS
ABOUT EBOLA

A woman had died.

She had traveled from Mongbwalu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to neighboring Uganda, where she fell ill and rapidly declined. Her body was transported back to Mongbwalu, but during the journey, the casket cracked. So mourners moved her body into a new one, burning the broken one.

Ten days later, everyone who had helped with the coffin transfer also became sick and died. “They said it was witchcraft,” says Dr. Marie Roseline Belizaire, the World Health Organization (WHO)’s emergency director for Africa. Locals told her the story when she arrived in Mongbwalu to help with the WHO’s Ebola response. “They told me that they saw the casket flying, and that the casket came back to pick up all those who burned it.”

Battling an invisible virus is always challenging, but it’s far more difficult when rumors, misinformation, and spiritual beliefs in an affected region conflict with public-health practices. Mongbwalu, where the first cases in the Ebola outbreak raging through Congo and Uganda are believed to have emerged undetected, is a remote mining town in Ituri province that attracts migrant workers. Some of the symptoms of Ebola—fever, headaches, and body aches—can also be caused by exposure to the processes involved in the search for minerals. Malaria and tuberculosis, which can cause fever and bloody coughs, are prevalent in the area too. “So Ebola was the last thing to come into their mind,” Belizaire says. The region’s natural resources also make it a target for political instability, corruption, and violent conflict, which all create fertile ground for infectious diseases.

This Ebola outbreak likely started when an unsuspecting person encountered the virus, possibly by handling or eating

the meat of wild animals. While Ebola has struck the continent before, most notably in 2014, health authorities are concerned about the speed with which cases are mounting. With more than 1,400 cases and 450 deaths recorded by early July, this outbreak, which was declared in May, is now the second largest on record. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has raised its response to the highest level, reflecting the escalating urgency of the situation. “We have never seen an epidemic increase as fast as this one,” says Dr. Alan Gonzalez, deputy director of operations at Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). “This is massive.”

It’s impossible to stop viruses like Ebola from finding human hosts and causing disease. But it is possible to contain them quickly, and global health experts are alarmed by the world’s worsening ability to do that. Our systems for responding to and confronting viruses are increasingly fractured and weakened, making everyone more vulnerable.



In many important ways, the world is less prepared now than it was even a few years ago to address microbial threats.

“The current epidemic in the D.R.C. is a stress test that, as of now, the world is failing,” says Dr. Tom Frieden, who led the CDC during the 2014 Ebola outbreak and who is now CEO of the nonprofit Resolve to Save Lives.

Drastic cuts to global health and pandemic-preparedness budgets are giving viruses like Ebola the opportunities they need to spread. The U.S.’s role also looks markedly different than it did before President Donald Trump’s second term. Traditionally the largest supporter of global health security, both financially and through its scientific expertise, the U.S. is no longer a member of the WHO, which monitors pathogens and coordinates responses to emergency threats. The withdrawal led to 3,000 job cuts at the WHO and a retreat from some of the agency’s activities, including disease surveillance and response. It’s part of the U.S.’s shift toward an “America First” foreign aid strategy that favors more deals with individual nations for health funds—in exchange for data or mineral rights, for example. That transactional approach to aid is already weakening global health security, experts say.

▼
WHO DIRECTOR-GENERAL
TEDROS ADHANOM
GHEBREYESUS VISITS
A HOSPITAL IN BUNIA

Humankind has managed to survive past outbreaks, and it likely will overcome this one too. But in this game of microbial roulette, each encounter with a virus or pathogen heightens the risk that we won't. "Every time [a virus] pops up, it has evolved along lines that are more and more concerning," says Pardis Sabeti, a computational geneticist at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard who sequenced some of the first samples of Ebola from the 2014 outbreak. "Why do we let them pop up, see that it's gotten worse, but when cases stop, we stop worrying? The next time it pops up, it might not be OK."

We have at our disposal, she says, deeper knowledge about the genetic makeup of viruses, how they work, and how to confront them with antiviral treatments and vaccines. So why does each successive onslaught from the microbial world—as we recently saw with COVID—seem to get worse?

"We keep toggling between panic and denial when these events happen," says Dr. Raj Panjabi, senior partner at

▼
PROTESTERS IN KENYA
MARCH AGAINST AN EBOLA
QUARANTINE FACILITY
FOR U.S. CITIZENS

policies under the Trump Administration have also compromised, and in some cases dismantled, some of the gains made.

Deep budget and personnel cuts, as well as attacks on vaccines, have hobbled health agencies, and there has been a Senate-confirmed CDC director for only 29 days of Trump's second term. That office is currently vacant. Until May, Bloomberg reported, so was the lead of the White House Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response, which Congress established with bipartisan support in 2023 after COVID to launch a more coordinated response to global health threats. Most of the office's staff have left.

The U.S. used to be part of a network of community workers, foreign aid groups, and government channels that make up the critical defense system against viral threats. That meant "you're hearing updates on the programs, you're hearing scuttlebutt about what's going on in the area," says Jeremy Konyndyk, who led the USAID office of foreign-disaster



Flagship Pioneering and former lead health-security official at the White House. "We don't build our reflexes in between."

WE'VE SEEN THIS WAR between man and microbe before. The world had never encountered an Ebola crisis like the one that started in 2014, when the virus ravaged West Africa, eventually killing more than 11,000 people. Even with different political leaders in charge at the time, the disease spread undetected for far too long—as it did this year—and eventually became the largest Ebola outbreak ever recorded. Misinformation and distrust of public-health providers was pervasive then too. But as we face another outbreak, there are key differences—both in the virus and in the ways the U.S. and the world are responding to it.

For all of its destruction, the 2014 outbreak triggered scientific innovation; companies developed therapeutics, tests, and vaccines for that Ebola strain, called Zaire. Countries, including the U.S., and groups like the WHO stood up surveillance and laboratory systems to be better prepared for the next inevitable encounter. But there are multiple Ebola strains, and those vaccines, treatments, and tests aren't effective against the rarer strain, Bundibugyo, sickening people today. Changes in U.S.

assistance during the 2014 outbreak and who is now president of Refugees International. It's often how we'd detect the first signs of an emerging infectious disease. "If there were still a robust USAID portfolio of programs running in eastern Congo, someone would have noticed something," he says.

But now, "the U.S. is flying blind to these things," says Dr. Ashish Jha, who coordinated the COVID response in the Biden Administration and now leads the AI disease-surveillance company BioRadar. The Trump Administration's decision to defund USAID in 2025 abruptly shuttered its programs and broke many of those chains of communication.

Ebola moved silently for weeks, and possibly months, before the first patient was reported: a nurse who came to the hospital in Bunia, Congo, with fever, vomiting, and bleeding on April 24. Local labs didn't have the necessary equipment to test her sample, so it was sent to the capital in Kinshasa, which took days. In the meantime, she and other people with Ebola had been mingling in the community; some crossed the border into Uganda. It took another week or so for the WHO to receive reports of more cases, when it then declared the outbreak a public-health emergency of international concern.

The region's skeletal health ecosystem was no match for fast-moving Ebola. It spreads by direct contact with body fluids: saliva, blood, vomit, urine, feces. The bodies of the recently deceased are especially contagious, as they often contain the highest levels of the virus. But burial and mourning practices in Congo are built around touching and handling departed loved ones during the funeral. Health care workers who impede these rituals for infection-control reasons often face hostility and violence; clinics have been attacked and burned down during this outbreak, furthering viral spread.

The best defense against such resistance came from a lesson learned during the 2014 Ebola crisis: the importance of engaging with trusted local leaders to inform communities about the virus. Without them, misinformation and conspiracies flourish. In Congo's 2018 Ebola outbreak, the humanitarian group Mercy Corps worked with local governments to train leaders and Ebola survivors how to talk to their community about the risks of Ebola and the benefits of cooperating with health care workers. But because of instability in the area and shrinking funding, those trained community members are now gone. "I was asking one of the health doctors, 'Where are those community leaders that we trained? Where are they?'" says Onesphore Bangenza, Mercy Corps' Ebola response team leader. "They were supposed to be here; they have the trust of the community." Now, he says, local health authorities have to start from scratch.

They are battling not only the loss of trained allies but also confusion about the Bundibugyo strain now circulating, and why people vaccinated in previous outbreaks are not protected. "I explain to them that Ebola has six sons and daughters," says Belizaire. "And for the first child, we have a vaccine. But for the other children, we don't."

THE U.S.'S COMMITMENT to global health typically begins with Congress, which has historically allocated funding to nongovernmental groups that tackle everything from HIV to maternal health and childhood vaccination programs. In 2025, Congress designated \$2 billion to health programs, including \$650 million for global health security: maintaining surveillance programs for infectious-disease threats and responding to outbreaks. But that \$2 billion has not yet been formally released, and Administration officials at the State Department and the Office of Management and Budget have said the government was holding that funding for closing down USAID programs. "All of the money that relates to global health security threats like Ebola has come back to the State Department, and we are programming it," a senior department official told TIME.

More broadly, the Administration's plans to reframe foreign aid to focus more on bilateral agreements made directly with countries is centered on the principle that "foreign aid is not charity," says the senior department official. "It's a strategic tool for dealing directly with governments." While the agreements themselves are strictly related to health, the official said, the Administration takes strategic benefits and security alliances into account during negotiations. In June, Secretary of State Marco Rubio testified before Congress that when it comes to doling out foreign aid, including global health funds, "we are going to reward those that are good to the



‘We have never seen an epidemic increase as fast as this one.’

—DR. ALAN GONZALEZ, DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

United States; we're not going to be as friendly to places that are not furthering our national interests."

"At both the macro and micro level, we are seeing changes that we haven't seen in 25 years," says Vincent Lin, associate director of health policy and advocacy at the global nonprofit Partners in Health. "It's a total reset of the system, and not something Congress agreed to or approved."

The U.S. is contributing to the Ebola response, but not in the ways that would have once been expected. In briefings, the CDC's incident manager for the Ebola response, Dr. Satish Pillai, said the CDC now has more than 400 personnel involved in the Ebola response, both in the U.S. and overseas, and has sent supplies like personal protective and lab testing equipment. The U.S. has also provided \$270 million directly to combatting the outbreak, according to the State Department, including an additional \$350 million for the outbreak and other humanitarian needs in Congo, Uganda, and South Sudan, and \$50 million more to develop new treatments and vaccines. By comparison, in the 2014 outbreak, the U.S. provided nearly \$2 billion in financial support, drawn from a package of \$5.4 billion in emergency global health funding appropriated by Congress.



PUBLIC-HEALTH ADVICE
DISPLAYED AT THE EBOLA
TREATMENT CENTER
IN MUNIGI, CONGO

During his appearance before Congress, Rubio did commit to releasing \$661 million in matched funding from other donors to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria “very quickly”—and said savings from closing USAID and addressing inefficiencies in foreign aid programs would be directed toward programs such as expanding access to a recently approved twice-a-year HIV-prevention medication.

Health leaders say the traditional financial support is not the only thing missing from this response. “The biggest deficit I feel is a loss of partnership with one of our most reliable technical partners in the world, the U.S. CDC,” says Dr. Chikwe Ihekweazu, executive director of the WHO Health Emergencies Program, who is deployed in Bunia. Recently, “we had a big partnerships meeting—we had the local and national public-health agency, the Africa CDC, but the missing partner in the room was the U.S. CDC.”

American health care workers who travel to support the outbreak response may also be more at risk now than in the past. The Trump Administration announced a controversial plan to build an Ebola quarantine and treatment center in Kenya, which currently has no confirmed Ebola cases, on an air base to manage Americans who might have been exposed to the virus. Dr. Craig Spencer, who contracted Ebola in 2014 after volunteering in West Africa with Médecins Sans Frontières, doubts that such a makeshift facility will provide the same quality of care as established specialized centers in the U.S. He was evacuated to Bellevue Hospital in New York, where he received care that saved his life. “The U.S. military will famously put in incredible amounts of resources to rescue a helicopter or plane pilot who is down in Iran, and the tagline is ‘No man left

behind,’” he says. “But when it comes to Ebola, our willingness to even consider allowing someone back into the country apparently ends.” The center was scheduled to open in late May but was blocked by a Kenyan high court after locals protested.

BEING READY FOR BUNDIRUGYO and other neglected viral strains requires investing in “what if” scenarios. “There are a dozen or so viruses out there that we know can cause really serious illnesses in humans,” Jha says. “We should be looking at all of the strains of all of those viruses and building vaccines and therapeutics against them now.” The WHO is currently taking this approach by concentrating its efforts on a few major viral families that are most likely to erupt.

The U.S. donated doses of an experimental antibody treatment for Bundibugyo that the first patients in a trial received in early July. But a Bundibugyo vaccine is needed to control the outbreak, and one that appears to work in animals already exists, says Teresa Lambe, head of vaccine immunology at Oxford University, who helped make it and one of the first shots for COVID. “When we started this work, we started it at risk, relying on the fact that I had a very generous philanthropic donation.” But those funds dried up; the barrier to creating the vaccine wasn’t scientific, but financial.

Several weeks after the WHO sounded the alarm on Ebola, the money to continue those studies finally emerged from the philanthropic and intergovernmental group CEPI, which supports vaccine development against global health threats. At the end of May, CEPI announced an investment of nearly \$62 million to develop three Bundibugyo vaccines, including the Oxford candidate.

Lambe is now working with the Serum Institute of India to finish testing the experimental vaccine in ferrets and hopes to have doses ready to test in people in Congo this summer. Moderna, which partnered with CEPI to develop the first mRNA COVID vaccine, also received CEPI funding to develop an mRNA vaccine—which has the advantage of speed, as shown during COVID—against Bundibugyo. The final candidate, from IAVI, may take the longest to develop, around seven to nine months.

These time lags are measured in lives lost and more chances for the virus to find new hosts and spread—out of one country and into another, from one continent to another. In terms of money and lives, “building health systems is much cheaper than mounting an emergency response,” says Sheila Davis, CEO at Partners in Health.

Meanwhile, while attending to the new outbreak, experts also are working to make sure new treatments and vaccines become available for whatever comes next. “We are working with a no-regrets policy,” says Ihekweazu of the WHO.

He and other global health leaders agree on one thing: we have the tools and knowledge to confront and contain viruses like Ebola before they become epidemics or pandemics. But we lack the consolidated commitment to invest in the resources and workforce needed to use those tools and knowledge effectively. “We need to set up systems so the world isn’t scrambling, as if it’s never happened before, every time there is another emergency,” says Frieden. “This is not rocket science. We know what to do. But it does take dedicated resources and money.” □

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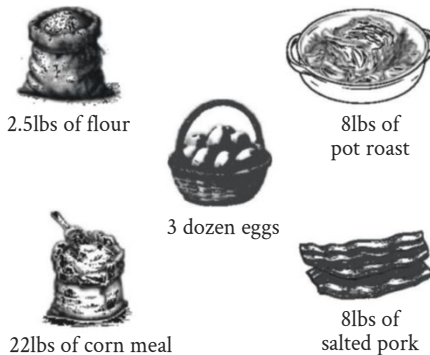
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PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID BRANDON GEETING FOR TIME

Alix Earle

@ALIXEARLE

ALIX EARLE HAS MADE A CAREER OUT OF OVER-sharing on the internet. And yet, on a sweltering June afternoon in Miami, she notes that there are still things people get wrong about her. The first misconception she'd like to dispel: that amassing 8.5 million followers on TikTok was easy. The second: that she is merely the face of a business someone else built. "People underestimate me," she says, "or think I'm just a dumb blonde." Her skin-care brand Reale Actives did \$1 million in sales within the first five minutes of its March debut, and people ask if she actually is involved in decisions for the brand. "It baffles me," says the 25-year-old. "I've been pretty open about being involved in every single detail."

Another common misconception: she does not like you. People who catch Earle in the wild looking unimpressed—a far cry from the effusive persona she shares in her content—tend to think she's ticked off. But she swears that her stony stare is just the way her face is built. "It's something I've dealt with my whole life: the case of the RBF," says Earle (referencing "resting bitch face"). "When I meet people, they're like, 'I thought you were miserable.' I swear I'm happy."

The final misconception: that she identifies as a MAGA supporter. It's a theory that appears regularly in the comments of her posts. "I have addressed it, and I just don't think anyone listens," Earle says, giving a tight smile. "My senior year of college I was like, 'I am not a Trump supporter.' I don't personally support him. I get a lot of questions about that online still. I just tend to not address it every single time because then I feel like I am creating a massive storm."

But creating a social media storm is what Earle does best. Earle was a pioneer in the "Get Ready With Me" genre, talking about her decision to get breast augmentation, dating an NFL player, the tumult after her father had an affair—all while applying makeup. Her confessional approach invites viewers to feel like close friends. The strategy has catapulted her to cultural relevance that transcends social media. In the past year, she's popped up in the Super Bowl halftime show, competed on *Dancing With the Stars*, and appeared on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. This fall, Netflix will debut the reality series *Earle Meets World*. It's a content miracle that there's still material reserved for the show, which trains its lens not only on Earle but also on a family she acknowledges has its own history with the tabloids. (Her stepmother was

involved in a political sex scandal.) Perhaps most intriguing for fans who closely follow Earle's life, she says the show will address the question a certain corner of the internet cannot stop asking: What led to her alleged beef with megainfluencer Alex Cooper?

At a time when 57% of Gen Zers aspire to be influencers, Earle has, to borrow from *The Devil Wears Prada*, a job a million girls would kill for. She has become so popular that when she recommends a product, sales get a massive bump—a phenomenon known as the Alix Earle effect. She got to this place not just because her looks have been rewarded by the algorithm (though that certainly helped), but also because the former University of Miami marketing major has a forensic read on her audience and the skills to sell them the products they want. "What makes a great early-stage VC? Really, it's people-picking," says Nick Brown of Reale Actives investor Imaginary Ventures, whose firm also backs Kim Kardashian's Skims and Tom Holland's Bero, among others. "It doesn't matter if you're Elon Musk or Tiffany Masterson of Drunk Elephant. You're investing in an idea, but you're really betting on the individual." Earle, Brown says, is a good bet.

ONE SPRING MORNING in Cambridge, Mass., Earle woke up and filmed herself peeling her face off her pillow. She had come to guest-lecture at Harvard Business School, but the more pressing matter was that the pillowcase had stuck to her skin overnight. One of the formulas she'd been testing for Reale Actives was too tacky. She sent the video to her CEO. The serum would need tweaks before the "complete routine" of four products, which together retails for \$120, went on sale the following year.

Earle has spoken at Harvard not once, but twice, the second time shortly before Reale Actives debuted. That class, called Founder Launch, asked Earle about her brand deals—she has lent her face to companies like Carl's Jr.; Amazon; and the prebiotic soda Poppi, for which she was compensated in equity, a decision that paid off when PepsiCo bought the brand for nearly \$2 billion last year—and debated how the market would respond to yet another influencer's launching her own product. The students who argued she would succeed should get A's. After selling out on launch day, Reale Actives managed another \$1 million in sales in the first five minutes of the next month's restock.

Earle understands what her **followers** want because she **obsesses over metrics and learned from years of trial and error**. As a college student, she **tried every trend to get famous** on TikTok: performing dances, **unboxing shopping hauls**, filming day-in-the-life videos. Her break came in the summer of 2022 when she shared her acne struggles with her then 150,000 followers. The video got a million views. “It’s not like I changed the world,” she says. “But the fact it meant so much to so many people made me realize that there was this missing piece online.” She had been smoothing out her skin in every photo. “I was a part of the problem,” she says.

Celebrity forays into products can feel ham-fisted. An A-list actor likes tequila or coffee? Sure. But for Earle, who has felt insecure about her skin since middle school, Reale Actives was a natural evolution of her content. “I ended up doing Accutane three times. After the third time it came back again, and I just felt so frustrated,” says Earle. “I actually hated skin care. That was probably the last thing that I ever wanted to get into because I was so confused by it. It felt so negative and isolating for me. So I wanted to create something that felt fun.”

Earle allows that her status as an influencer-founder can cut both ways. While she has lots of fans, she also has plenty of critics. She anticipated skepticism. So on launch day she shared a video explaining her skin journey again and how Reale Actives was designed as part of a routine, not a cure-all. She deployed the same transparency when the moisturizer bottles malfunctioned, making a joke about the situation as they fixed it. “Just being honest goes a long way,” she says.

EARLE’S DOG STARTS BARKING the moment I bring up Alex Cooper. “She heard the tough questions coming in, and she said, ‘No. I’m going to ruin the audio,’” Earle jokes. Cooper, host of the interview show *Call Her Daddy*, built a podcast network and made Earle her first recruit—but after 18 months, the partnership dissolved, and neither party has ever given a clear explanation as to why. The alleged feud even inspired a *Saturday Night Live* sketch. “It’s something I’m going to talk about on the show,” Earle says, referring to the Netflix series.

There may be more television in Earle’s future, though when she mentions an interest in acting, she does so not in the context of fulfilling some lifelong dream but rather in terms of diversifying her portfolio. “Every decision I make is about longevity and creating a career that can be sustainable, because the creative economy can be so fleeting,” she says. She would be thrilled if those who don’t know her from TikTok discovered her through Reale Actives.

Of course she could find success in any number of areas and still have people question whether she really is the brains behind this operation. She shrugs. “Guess we’ll just have to prove them wrong.”

—ELIANA DOCKTERMAN

Rachell Hofstetter @VALKYRAE

Hofstetter, 34, has turned her gaming audience—7.9 million followers across Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok—into a digital-media career and carved out a space for young women to make their mark in the streaming and gaming world.
—Kara Nesvig

Alan Chikin Chow @ALANCHIKINCHOW

YouTube king Chow is the most-watched Shorts creator, with 1.01 million subscribers who check out his eye-catching, colorful, and chaotic K drama-inspired stories. This year he’s set to develop a new K pop scripted series with HYBE America, which will debut on Netflix.
—Rachel Brodsky

Bretman Rock @BRETMANROCK

Rock grew a significant following as an early beauty creator. Now he’s branched out to comedic videos about life in Hawaii. One video starring his prized chickens won him the 2025 TikTok Video of the Year Award. —K.N.

Mark Rober @MARKROBER

Educator and former NASA engineer Rober, 46, has been growing his science-as-entertainment empire, earning a whopping 79.2 million YouTube subscribers. He’s founded a STEM-themed family subscription box, and in November launched a Netflix show. —R.B.

Kinigra Deon

@KINIGRADEON

When Kinigra Deon launched her YouTube channel in 2018, she had no film or content experience. In fact, she worked as a clinical laboratory scientist. She has since grown her family-friendly channel to 5.9 million subscribers who tune in three times a week to watch new, scripted episodes in a range of genres: comedy, drama, horror, fantasy, and more. One of her most popular is the multiseason supernatural drama *Vampire Siblings*. Part of the web-based “New Hollywood” wave, the self-proclaimed “Tyler Perry of YouTube” does it all from her hometown of Birmingham, Ala., where she’s developing a full-scale production studio. Deon, 37, is also working with Kevin Hart’s production company to write, direct, and star in two new Black supernatural movies, which are slated to appear on Tubi in 2026. —R.B.



Jesse Riedel

@JESSER

What began as a front-yard passion—playing hoops against his older brother—has morphed into a media career for basketball YouTuber Jesse Riedel, 27. His videos, which often feature challenges like a one-on-one tournament for creators and have titles like “Every Shot You Miss, the Food Gets Spicier,” have drawn over 45 million subscribers to his channel. His “Guess the Secret Player” clips, in which he enlists luminaries like Giannis Antetokounmpo, Luka Dončić, and Dwight Howard to help figure out which among a group of masked men played in the NBA, are especially popular. Riedel’s growing profile has granted him, and by extension his fans, behind-the-scenes access to the Chicago Bulls organization, a Formula One garage, and Italy’s Juventus soccer team. In April, he launched JesserCo to bring his content operation and his apparel brand under the same umbrella. —Sean Gregory



Roberto Escanio

@FANUM

Streaming stalwart Roberto Escanio says he was “delusionally optimistic” when he launched his Twitch channel in 2016. The Dominican American creator, 28, has since built an audience of 3.6 million—with an additional 9.5 million across YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram—who tune in at all hours to watch him play *NBA 2K*, show off his car collection, and hang out with fellow streamers like Kai Cenat and Duke Dennis. Last year, he won Best Roleplay Streamer at the Streamer Awards, the Oscars for the industry, for the third time. —Shannon Carlin

Quenlin Blackwell

@QUENBLACKWELL

Blackwell's YouTube series, *Feeding Starving Celebrities*, is a go-to for celebrities on press tours—recent guests include *Hacks*' Megan Stalter, rapper Lil Yachty, and pop star PinkPantheress. She has 3.4 million YouTube subscribers and 13.3 million TikTok followers. She's modeled for Glossier, Chanel, and Old Navy, and in 2025 made her acting debut as an influencer on HBO's comedy series *I Love LA*. —R.B.

Joe Rogan

THE JOE ROGAN EXPERIENCE

Rogan has proved his staying power on the charts and in the cultural zeitgeist, featuring sprawling interviews with influential, largely male guests including actor Bradley Cooper, comedian Theo Von, TV creator Taylor Sheridan, and Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang. In 2025 and the first quarter of 2026, his podcast extended its run as the most popular in the U.S., according to Edison Research. —Avery Stone

Kareem Rahma

@SUBWAYTAKES

Kareem Rahma's interviews with celebrities and politicians on the New York City subway for his show *Subway Takes* have made his socials the place to find out that Jennifer Lopez thinks real New Yorkers must be born in the city or that Olivia Wilde believes good singers shouldn't do karaoke. This year, he hosted the Golden Globes red-carpet livestream and relaunched his series *Keep the Meter Running* as a YouTube-exclusive Creator Show. The opinions on *Subway Takes* often spark debate, but Rahma's popularity is indisputable. —Leslie Horn Peterson

Dude Perfect

@DUDEPERFECT

Dude Perfect showcases the antics of five adult friends, often featuring an outsize and random athletic contest. They currently hold over 20 Guinness World Records, including the longest barefoot walk across Legos. With 62 million subscribers on YouTube, plus an additional 52 million across Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, the quintet combines faith, fun, and physical finesse in a way that resonates with 5- to 15-year-old boys. They have their own streaming app and a line of toys and games; their first theme-park attractions are opening this month. In June, the Dudes embarked on their fifth live arena tour, visiting 22 cities. —Belinda Luscombe



Jackie Aina

@JACKIEAINA

For many viewers, beauty YouTube is synonymous with the name Jackie Aina. She kicked off her career as one of the largest beauty vloggers on the platform and has amassed millions of followers on TikTok and Instagram too. Her mission is to make the beauty world more inclusive, particularly for dark-skinned Black women. When Aina, 38, likes a product, it sells. When she shares her thoughts about a launch or a shade range, the industry listens; brands have even teamed up with her to expand their complexion options, as Too Faced did in 2018. —K.N.



Tini Younger

@TINEKEYOUNGER

Tini Younger, known as Chef Tini, is teaching TikTok how to cook, one viral recipe at a time. Since launching her account in 2020, the Georgia-based culinary-school graduate has been whipping up affordable comfort food for her 12.5 million followers; her most talked-about recipe to date is her signature macaroni and cheese made with cavatappi pasta—never elbow noodles. In November, the former *Next Level Chef* contestant will release her second cookbook. “I just want people to gain more confidence in the kitchen,” she says. —Shannon Carlin

Wisdom Kaye

@WISDM8

Kaye is one of menswear's most influential and imaginative creators, with over 14 million followers who tune in for his themed fashion videos on TikTok. The 25-year-old attended the Met Gala in May. —Kara Nesvig

Darren Jason Watkins Jr.

@ISHOWSPEED

With a combined following of over 150 million, Watkins is one of the most influential Gen Z creators, best known for his streaming adventures, like a 28-day, 20-country tour of Africa or a 15-island trek across the Caribbean. —Leslie Horn Peterson

Alex Cooper

CALL HER DADDY

Cooper, 31, has spun *Call Her Daddy's* success into Unwell, an ever-expanding media and lifestyle brand that includes podcasts, TV, film, live events, and beverages. She'll debut four new YouTube shows in 2026 and 2027. —K.N.

Mark Fischbach

@MARKIPLIER

Mark Fischbach, or Markiplier, got his start on YouTube in 2012 sharing commentary on indie horror games; he now has more than 38 million subscribers and is one of the platform's most popular creators. This year, his followers launched a grassroots campaign to get his self-financed theatrical debut, *Iron Lung*, in more theaters. Despite being rejected by Hollywood distributors, the blood-soaked submarine thriller—which he wrote, directed, produced, and starred in—became a sleeper box-office hit, grossing \$50 million worldwide on a \$3 million budget. —S.C.

Niana Guerrero

@NIANAQUERRERO

Niana Guerrero first went viral in 2017 at the age of 12 with a video of her joyfully dancing to “Despacito.” The creator's profile has only risen since, and at 20, she's become the most-followed TikTok personality in the Philippines, with an audience of 46.8 million. Although her biggest viewership is in her home country, Guerrero has collaborated with a range of both local and international artists including Sabrina Carpenter, Tate McRae, K-pop boy band Cortis, Katseye, and Lisa of Blackpink. This spring she appeared with singer Flowerovlove at Coachella. —L.H.P.



Drew Desbordes

@DRUSKI

Drew Desbordes, or Druski, is one of the most successful comedians to emerge from social media, with over 14.4 million followers on TikTok and 13.1 million on Instagram. Early on, his viral frat-bro character Kyle Rogger caught the attention of high-profile rappers like Drake, but he reached a new level of visibility in 2019 via his *American Idol*-parodying *Coulda Been Records* series—a concept he has expanded to include *Coulda Been House* and *Coulda Been Love*. This year, he joined NBC's *The Voice* as its first commentator and hosted the BET Awards. —Rachel Brodsky



Julian Shapiro-Barnum

@JULIANMSB

During the early days of the pandemic, Julian Shapiro-Barnum, then a college student, was hanging out at a New York City playground with a friend and was struck by how much fun the kids were having despite the state of the world. "I got my camera and I interviewed these kids about happiness for an hour or so," he says. "It was like the sweetest, most heartwarming thing that I'd ever done." That first video inspired *Recess Therapy*, a hit web series with more than 7 million followers across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube who tune in to watch precocious New York City kids share their takes on everything from burnout to Komodo dragons. In 2024, *Recess Therapy* spawned the popular spin-off *Celebrity Substitute*, and in May, Shapiro-Barnum launched *Outside Tonight*, a late-night talk show on YouTube. This summer, he'll release his debut essay collection. —S.C.

Kyla Scanlon

@KYLASCAN

Known for coining the term *vibecession*, Scanlon demystifies economics topics like inflation for an audience of over 1 million across platforms. In June, she joined CNN as a contributor and economic analyst. —L.H.P.



B. Dylan Hollis

@BDYLANHOLLIS

Hollis re-creates vintage American recipes for his 10.2 million followers on TikTok, from the weird (pickled eggs from 1941 and strawberry pretzel salad from 1968) to the familiar (ginger snaps and shortbread). —L.H.P.

Shama Hyder

SHAMAHYDER

The digital-marketing strategist, 41, helps businesses navigate the ever evolving digital economy. On LinkedIn, where she has over 673,000 followers, Hyder's been named a top voice in marketing and social media. —S.C.



Linoya Friedman

@WHATPEOPLEAREWEARING

The world is a runway for fashion influencer Linoya Friedman, 31. She travels the globe conducting man-on-the-street interviews focused on style, culture, and identity to share with her 1.9 million Instagram followers. Whether she's chatting with everyday people at events like Coachella or interviewing celebrities like Kendall Jenner, she's always curious about what people are wearing and why. At the same time, her street photography and videos also act as anthropological records, documenting how people are dressing in a wide range of places. —Shannon Carlin



William Hanson

@WILLIAMHANSON

British etiquette coach William Hanson is something of a millennial Emily Post, with tips for every imaginable social situation. With over 3.9 million followers on Instagram and 3.1 million on TikTok, Hanson has also expanded his teachings to a podcast and the written word. He co-hosts the advice show *Help I Sexed My Boss* with radio personality Jordan North, and in 2026 published his internationally best-selling guide, *Just Good Manners*. This past summer, Hanson starred in the Broadway parody musical *Titanique*. —Rachel Brodsky

Bo Petterson

@DADADVICEFROMBO

Need to learn how to change a light bulb? Petterson, a father of six with an audience of 4.7 million on TikTok and 5.1 million on Instagram, helps viewers with practical know-how and plays the role of dad for anyone who needs him. —Leslie Horn Peterson

Brett Cooper

@BBRETTCOOPER

Cooper is one of Gen Z's leading conservative content creators. The 24-year-old hosts *The Brett Cooper Show* on YouTube, analyzing politics and pop culture with a right-leaning bent. In 2025, she signed with Fox News as a contributor. —Avery Stone

Jefferson Fisher

@JEFFERSON_FISHER

The Texas trial lawyer's concise advice on communication has earned him over 9 million followers across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Fisher offers tips on navigating everything from small talk to job interviews to arguments at home. —S.C.

Galey Alix

@GALEYALIX

The finance professional turned home designer completes dramatic makeovers to multiple rooms in a single weekend. Alix's videos transforming living rooms, dining rooms, and more draw an audience of 1.8 million on Instagram and 2.8 million on TikTok. Her first book, *You Can Do Beautiful Things*, comes out in August. —L.H.P.

Haley Sacks

@MRSDOWJONES

Haley Sacks aims to equip millennials and Gen Z with the financial literacy she didn't have growing up. Known online as Mrs. Dow Jones, the 34-year-old demystifies concepts like IPOs and tax write-offs and doles out financial advice for more than 2 million followers across social platforms through a humorous, pop-culture lens. She also founded the media company Finance Is Cool and hosts the *Financial Tea Podcast*; her first book, *Future Rich Person: The New Rules for Building Wealth*, hit shelves in May. —L.H.P.



Dwarkesh Patel

DWARKESH PODCAST

Through podcasts, essays, and lectures, Dwarkesh Patel is chronicling the arc of AI while also interrogating it. On the *Dwarkesh Podcast*—which averages over 1.8 million listens an episode—he presses tech pioneers like Andrej Karpathy and corporate leaders like Jensen Huang, drawing out rich and unexpected responses. The 25-year-old's audience is filled with tech executives, engineers, and researchers—the people building AI. “Whatever happens next,” he wrote in December, “I want the debates to have happened on this podcast, and to have happened well.” —Tharin Pillay

Lucy Blakiston

@SHITYOUSHOULDCAREABOUT

The internet has a signal-to-noise problem. Lucy Blakiston is cutting through it with her multiplatform operation, including a podcast, a Substack newsletter with over 700,000 subscribers, and an Instagram following of 3.4 million. She distills the news of the day for a mostly Gen Z audience, covering issues from the Ebola outbreak to President Donald Trump's immigration policies. The way young people consume information has changed, and Blakiston, who ran a One Direction fan account as a teen, is working to ensure they don't miss the important stuff. —L.H.P.



Blair Imani

@BLAIRIMANI

Educator, historian, and author Blair Imani, 32, launched her *Smarter in Seconds* series in 2020 to help break down topics such as voting rights or reproductive justice in perky, bite-size videos. She often partners with fellow creators and organizations to help unpack concepts related to history, society, and identity. In May, Imani received an award from the Ms. Foundation for Women for making complex conversations surrounding social justice accessible to her followers (nearly 1 million on Instagram). —S.C.

Ethan Mollick

ONE USEFUL THING

With over 450,000 Substack subscribers, 400,000 LinkedIn followers, and a New York Times best seller on how to use AI, entrepreneurship professor Mollick, 51, has emerged as one of the technology's most credible communicators. He intersperses takes on technical breakthroughs with self-created games, prompts, and public experiments that illustrate AI's reach. —T.P.

Bonnie Dilber

BONNIE-DILBER

The job market is hard right now. Dilber, a recruiting manager at a tech firm, offers advice on LinkedIn, where she has an audience of over half a million. She fields questions like "Why didn't I get an interview even though I was qualified for the job?" She also gives guidance on career pivots and labor trends like "quiet quitting." —L.H.P.

Drew Michael Scott

@LONEFOXHOME

Who says DIY can't be chic? Certainly not Drew Michael Scott, who has made elevating the interior-design aesthetic his bread and butter, building an audience of 1.5 million on Instagram, 1.6 million on TikTok, and 1.8 million on YouTube in the process. Whether it's a green-checkered breakfast nook or a thrifted lamp painted with Rust-Oleum and adorned with polka dots, his budget-friendly projects look like they'd be right at home on the pages of a design magazine. Scott took his brand IRL this year, opening a store in Los Angeles in April. —L.H.P.

Humphrey Yang

@HUMPHREYTALKS

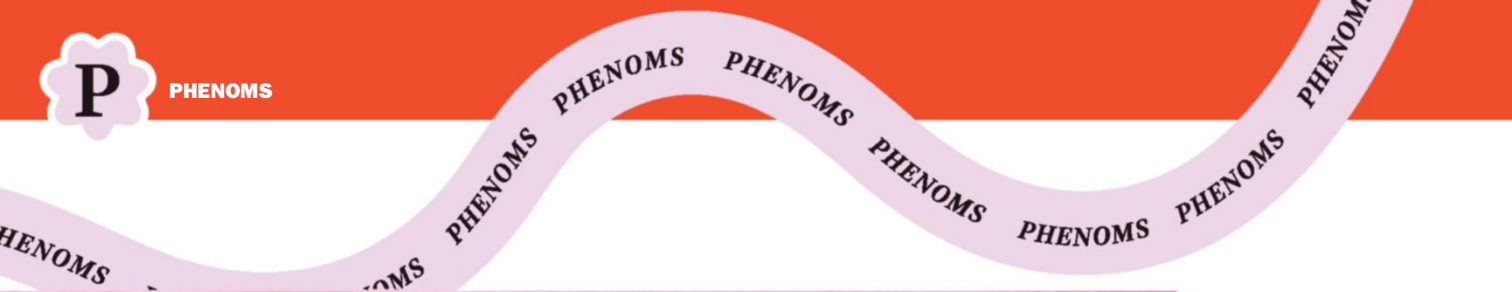
Former financial adviser Humphrey Yang, 38, wants to teach the TikTok generation how to build and keep their wealth, just like his father taught him. His videos provide easily digestible explanations of financial terms and concepts for his 3.4 million TikTok followers and 2 million YouTube subscribers. Whether he's breaking down the real cost of a matcha latte or giving tips on how to reach millionaire status, he offers actionable takeaways designed to help viewers take control of their finances. Preaching patience, discipline, and consistency, he has become a trusted voice in money management. —S.C.



Whitney Leavitt

@WHITNEYLEAVITT

Once known best for her #MomTok dances, Whitney Leavitt parlayed her role on the social-media-inspired reality series *The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives* into a run on *Dancing With the Stars*, then a Broadway debut as Roxie Hart in *Chicago* in February; her time onstage included the production's highest-grossing period in its 29-year history. She'll make her feature debut in a holiday rom-com later this year, but hasn't left social behind: with her trademark humor, she continues to create lifestyle content for more than 5.5 million followers. —Emma Barker Bonomo



Micky Gordon

@MICKYCASHFLOW

Whether she's trying to (unsuccessfully) eat pasta with two coffee stirrers or vlogging about her roommate's fashionable Squatty Potty dupe, Micky Gordon's unfiltered brand of comedy has earned her a reputation for being a bit of a chaos agent. Yet the recent college graduate, 22, says she's not as zany IRL as her 1.2 million TikTok followers may think. She's just really committed to the bit. One key example: when she played the new hire from hell sent to organize *InStyle*'s beauty closet, for the magazine's *The Intern* series. Her first episode alone has racked up more than 6 million views. "People like when someone says what they were thinking inside their head out loud," Gordon says, which is why her viral Intern character, an exaggerated version of herself, does not mince words. Last year, she appeared in the TikTok-famous skin-care brand Byoma's first-ever Super Bowl ad. "I feel like people relate to me really easily," she says of her appeal. "People think we're friends." —Shannon Carlin

Salish Matter

@SALISH

Matter, 16, boasts 5 million followers on Instagram, 4 million on YouTube, and 8 million on TikTok, but still comes across as the relatable teen next door who loves gymnastics, skin care, and hanging out with her dogs. —Kara Nesvig



Morgan Riddle

@MOORRG

Riddle blends fashion, lifestyle, global travel, and sports content with feminist breakdowns of news, movies, and more. She is a co-founder and chief brand officer of a community for female athletes and sports fans. —K.N.

Olivia Ferney

@TRAVELWITHLIV

Ferney, a luxury-travel specialist, has made a career granting the impossible wishes of the ultra-wealthy on vacation—and re-enacting outlandish requests for 2 million followers across Instagram and TikTok. —Rachel Brodsky



Kane Parsons

@KANEPIXELS

Even if you haven't seen *Backrooms*, A24's highest-grossing feature to date (\$350 million and counting), chances are you've heard about the psychological horror movie and its wunderkind director. Kane Parsons, 21, got his start on YouTube, where he has over 3.4 million subscribers. He originally told this story as a web series in 2022—the first episode has over 88 million views. His rise from viral YouTube success to mainstream creative stardom represents a new path for aspiring filmmakers. He is now exploring a sequel. —R.B.



Olandria Carthen

@OLANDRIA

Though Olandria Carthen, 28, and her boyfriend didn't win their season of *Love Island USA* last summer, she was the breakout star, immediately becoming a fan favorite not just for her style and storyline, but also because of how open she was about representing dark-skinned Black women on reality TV. Since leaving *Love Island*, she has walked in New York Fashion Week, posed for magazine covers, and appeared in *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit issue. Carthen is expanding to music too: she released her song "Ola Doll Anthem" in June. —K.N.

Max Miller

@TASTINGHISTORY

Miller's delectable YouTube channel has more than 4 million subscribers who tune in to learn about culinary eras from long past. His videos explore what people in the Middle Ages ate for breakfast and what food was served at saloons in the Wild West. —R.B.

Serena Page

@SERENAPAGEE

Page was an instant draw for audiences when she appeared on *Love Island USA* in 2024, helping establish her career as a beauty and lifestyle influencer. She jumped from about 2,000 Instagram followers at the start to 2.6 million today, plus 3.4 million on TikTok. —R.B.

De'arra Taylor

@DEARRA

With over 10 million followers across Instagram and TikTok, Taylor—a top beauty and fashion creator and an entrepreneur—has had a big year: she sold out a buzzy collab for her eyewear brand and landed an NAACP Image Awards nomination. —Nathan Lately

Kahlana Barfield Brown

@KAHLANABARFIELD

Brown, who started in traditional media and once set trends as beauty director at *InStyle*, floods her Instagram with outfit pics and styling inspiration for her clothing line, KBB by Kahlana. She brings her followers on her journey as designer and entrepreneur. —K.N.

Terry McCaskill and Kaniyia Brown

@TERRYANDKANIYIA

Watching Terry McCaskill and Kaniyia Brown react to hearing a song for the first time is a visceral experience. As they take in music by artists from Luke Combs to Celine Dion to Zara Larsson, they might clasp their hands over their mouths or shimmy in their chairs and whoop along to a catchy beat or melody. No matter the song's tempo, genre, or time period, they treat each new listen with consideration and raw enthusiasm. The duo has amassed 5.6 million followers on TikTok, and in 2026 were invited to be guest judges on *American Idol*. —R.B.



Katie Feeney

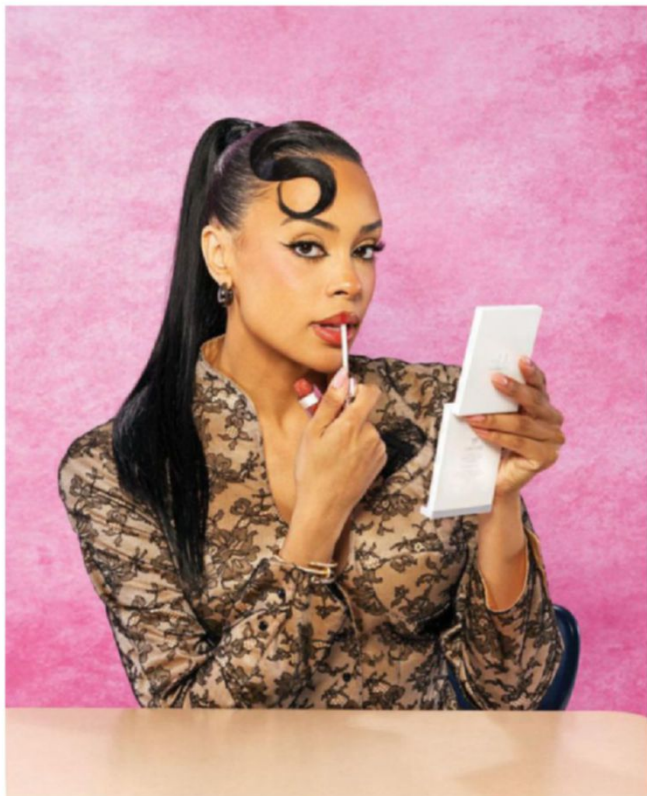
@KATIEFEENEYY

When ESPN hired Katie Feeney last summer to post short-form content across its platforms, the evolution of sports storytelling took a giant leap. The sports and lifestyle creator has 7.6 million TikTok followers and 2.4 million more across Instagram and Snapchat. In 2022, the Washington Commanders hired her as a social media correspondent, believed to be a first-of-its-kind role for an NFL team. Since joining ESPN, Feeney has covered events like the World Cup and Wimbledon, been featured on the SportsCenter Snapchat, and contributed to studio shows. —Sean Gregory

Joshua Williford

@RAPPINGCHEF

Houston native Joshua Williford, 36, has grown a following of over 5 million across TikTok and Instagram, breaking through the noise with his "rap-cipes," in which he uses the instrumentals from popular songs as he raps the ingredients and steps to make his dishes. Some of his greatest hits include pork tenderloin to the tune of Nas' "One Mic" and pad see ew over the twinkling keys of Fantasia's "When I See U." He has partnered with PayPal, Ninja, and Uber Eats, and appeared on a YouTube-sponsored panel about mastering virality at SXSW last year. —N.L.



Kristy Sarah

@KRISTY.SARAH

Kristy Sarah is one of TikTok's most influential lifestyle creators, followed by more than 17 million for her family-friendly content that feels spontaneous even if it's anything but. This year, the mom of two filed for divorce from her husband, who was a fixture on her feed. One thing that hasn't changed: her dedication to her kids. "Social media never clocks out, so I've had to set my personal boundaries of only working while the boys are at school," she says. "Whenever they get home, I just shut everything down and immerse myself in being a mom." —Shannon Carlin

Ash Baber

@ASHBABER

Baber, a British baking creator, shares his passion for mouth-watering delights across TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest. His videos often feature recipes inspired by South Asian flavors—and always include a dash of humor. —Leslie Horn Peterson

LJ Rader

@ARTBUTSPORTS

On X, Rader pairs iconic sports photos with compositionally and emotionally similar images of classic art, such as a snap of celebrity row at Madison Square Garden and a painting by Manet. He published a book based on his account in March. —L.H.P.

Emily

@VANILLAMACE

In 2025, Emily went viral for a TikTok video in which she sampled a pistachio doughnut; her following jumped from 300,000 to 3.8 million in just three months. On Twitch, she plays *Roblox*, *Minecraft*, and more. She signed with UTA last year. —L.H.P.

Noraly Schoenmaker

@ITCHYBOOTS

In a previous life, Noraly Schoenmaker worked as a geologist in her home country of the Netherlands. Her job took her all over the world, but she longed to make travel a full-time endeavor. Her channel's origin story is that in 2018, after learning of her partner's infidelity, she quit and hit the road solo on her Yamaha Ténéré motorcycle, which she calls Frankie. The 38-year-old has since ridden over 118,000 miles and visited 80 different countries, documenting it all for 3.3 million fans on YouTube. Her second book, *Beyond Fear*, is due in 2027. —L.H.P.

Donald De La Haye

@DEESTROYING

In 2017, Donald De La Haye was a kicker for the University of Central Florida's football team. He'd started a YouTube channel as a creative outlet from his high-stress life as a college athlete, but as it began making money, NCAA rules at the time forced him to choose between his athletic career and his budding platform. He picked the latter. Today, his channel has 6.4 million subscribers and is known for competitions and football challenges. This year, he appeared in a Super Bowl commercial and inked a deal with Tubi to create original streaming content; his new soccer-based competition series timed to the World Cup premiered in June. —L.H.P.



Max Alexander

@COUTURE.TO.THE.MAX

At just 10 years old, Max Alexander is quickly becoming one of the internet's favorite designers. Run by his parents, his accounts document the craftsmanship behind his handmade, avant-garde garments, which are often constructed with reclaimed or recycled materials such as coffee-bean bags or vintage wedding dresses, and give followers (7.3 million on Instagram and 3.9 million on TikTok) a look at his creative process. In March, Alexander earned a Guinness World Record for being the youngest designer to show at Paris Fashion Week. —S.C.



Drew Afualo

@DREWAFUALO

Drew Afualo has become well-known for roasting misogynists online. With her signature cackle, the Samoan American creator, 30, expertly takes down disrespectful commenters to the amusement

of more than 8.1 million TikTok followers. Afualo wants to show other women and marginalized people that they don't have to absorb derogatory feedback. "You don't have to take anyone's words about you seriously if you don't respect them," she says. "And I don't respect them."

In the past five years, Afualo has launched two podcasts: *Two Idiot Girls*, which she hosts with her sister, and *The Comment*

Section, where she asks celebrities like actor Cynthia Erivo and fellow creator Brittany Broski about their pop-culture takes. In 2024, she released *Loud: Accept Nothing Less Than the Life You Deserve*, an instructional memoir in which she reflects on her self-confidence journey. This year, she served as a red-carpet correspondent at the Golden Globes, the Academy Awards, and Netflix's The Actor Awards. —S.C.

Cleo Abram

@CLEOABRAM

With her series *Huge If True*, video journalist Abram, 33, explores AI, space, and tech with a shot of optimism for her 8.3 million YouTube subscribers. She has also landed interviews with high-profile CEOs like OpenAI's Sam Altman. —S.C.



Jack Edwards

@JACK_EDWARDS

The British creator provides his followers—nearly 4 million across YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram—with book recommendations, literary criticism, and reviews that are rarely over three minutes. Edwards' videos drive sales, even helping books hit best-seller lists. —S.C.



Desi Perkins

@DESIPERKINS

Much has changed online since Desi Perkins first went viral in 2012, but her influence as a beauty creator has remained constant. Perkins, who has more than 4 million Instagram followers and 3 million YouTube subscribers, also founded the eyewear line Dezi, which produced custom pieces for Beyoncé's Cowboy Carter Tour, and the skin-care brand Dezi Skin, which is inspired by her Mexican heritage. Dezi Skin hit Sephora shelves this year and is one of the first Spanish-language brands sold by the retailer. —Kara Nesvig



Shira Lazar

@SHIRALAZAR

What's Trending founder Shira Lazar uses her platform of nearly 1 million followers across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to spread awareness around the mental-health crisis affecting content creators. Last year, she launched *Creators 4 Mental Health*, a global advocacy initiative that published the first comprehensive study on creator mental health. This year, Lazar helped California Congressman Ro Khanna introduce a *Creator Bill of Rights*, which seeks to ensure access to health care benefits, transparency from platforms, and more. —Shannon Carlin

James Hobson

@HACKSMITH

The Canadian engineer, 36, is the mastermind behind Hacksmith Industries, a YouTube channel with over 15 million subscribers, where Hobson and his team document re-creating props and weapons from iconic franchises, like the *Star Wars* lightsaber. —K.N.

Leah Thomas

@GREENGIRLLEAH

Intersectional environmentalist and self-described "eco-communicator" Thomas, a.k.a. Green Girl Leah, has used her platform on Instagram to educate her roughly 300,000 followers on topics like the history of Black wellness culture and Earth Day's roots as a protest. —L.H.P.

Lucy Edwards

@LUCYEDWARDS

British disability activist and creator Edwards, 30, shares her insights and lived experience as a blind person with over 1.8 million TikTok followers. This year, she'll launch her own accessible-makeup line, Etia London, backed by grant funding from Estée Lauder. —S.C.

Judith Joseph

@DRJUDITHJOSEPH

Joseph, a board-certified psychiatrist and researcher, uses humor (and trending audio) to explain therapy terms and concepts like avoidant attachment or toxic empathy to her 1.2 million followers across TikTok and Instagram. She also shares her clinical research. —S.C.

Lloyd Griffiths and Yaya Onalaja-Aliu

@HANDLUGGAGEONLY

Hand Luggage Only takes its TikTok audience of 1.2 million would-be travelers on journeys to some of the most beautiful places on earth. Run by couple Yaya Onalaja-Aliu and Lloyd Griffiths, the account leads with stunning visuals and also has a significant reach on Pinterest. The pair, who met while studying at Cambridge and started their blog in 2014 shortly after, make locales like the Maldives or Antarctica feel accessible by sharing itineraries, tips, and advice for how their followers can travel the world too. —Leslie Horn Peterson



Nicolas Heller

@NEWYORKNICO

Nicolas Heller, a.k.a. New York Nico, documents people, places, and things that perfectly encapsulate the real-life Gotham. Very little is off-limits: Heller posts about historic businesses, eccentric local personalities, and even an artist who creates work out of (now defunct) MetroCards. Though he's amassed over 1.6 million TikTok followers and another 1.6 million on Instagram, Heller is less interested in appearing on camera; he'd rather let his subjects speak for themselves. In 2026, he collaborated with official city-based accounts, from the New York Knicks to Katz's Deli. —Rachel Brodsky

Jackie Johnston

@JCUBEDHAX

Equal parts women's-sports educator, advocate, and fan, Jackie Johnston—known as Coach Jackie J—breaks down big headlines, amplifies lesser-known news, and celebrates female athletes for more than 1.3 million followers across TikTok and Instagram, many of them members of the LGBTQ+ community like herself. In March, she joined the roster of Victory+, the National Women's Soccer League's free streaming partner; in May, media company Run-A-Muck announced she'll host a forthcoming podcast for its new sports vertical, Reign. —Erin McMullen



Taryn Delanie Smith

@TARYNDELANIESMITH

Taryn Delanie Smith is best known to over 3 million TikTok and Instagram followers as Denise, Heaven's Receptionist. The idea for her viral alter ego, who handles all of the afterlife's administrative business, is modeled after "every New Yorker I've met," she says. "They're not nice—they're kind." Smith, who also stars in a YouTube home-renovation series, *The Unlikely Countrywoman*, will release her debut book, written from the POV of her online persona, this fall. "It's been such a blessing to be able to pay my bills writing and making people laugh," she says. —S.C.

Katie Jane Hughes

@KATIEJANEHUGHES

Hughes, a British makeup artist, equips her roughly 2.4 million TikTok and Instagram followers with the tools they need to master specific beauty skills. She launched her own cosmetics line, KJH.Brand, in 2023. —K.N.

Lex Fridman

LEX FRIDMAN
PODCAST

Fridman's interview-based show has over 5 million YouTube subscribers and more than a billion total views. Tech giants like Elon Musk, Sam Altman, and Mark Zuckerberg have sat down with him for hours at a time. —L.H.P.

Deidre Kelly

@THE_MRSKELLY

Kelly, a sixth-grade math teacher based in Texas, makes learning the subject easy and fun for over 1.3 million TikTok followers. She also creates content for MATHstream, an AI-powered math-education platform for grades 6-12. —L.H.P.

Katie Kennedy

@THEHISTORYGOSSIP

Katie Kennedy is Ken Burns for Gen Z history buffs. The British historian makes the subject appealing by framing it as salacious scuttlebutt, from calling out the smelliest royal (sorry, Caroline of Brunswick) to giving a tour of Marie Antoinette's shag pad. Her followers come to hear her rag on the likes of the Tudors and the Victorians using Gen Z and U.K. slang, and they leave with more than a few spicy facts they'd never learn in school. Last year, she published her first book and launched a podcast, *The History Diaries*, where she dissects juicy and bizarre stories of yore. —S.C.

Hannah Fry

@FRYRSQUARED

British mathematician and professor Hannah Fry has become a go-to source for those looking to make sense of the world's mysteries. On Instagram, Fry boasts about 2.1 million followers and shares everything from scientific breakdowns to STEM hot takes like why you should be polite to AI. With American YouTuber and educator Michael Stevens, she co-hosts the podcast *The Rest Is Science*, which won Best New Entertainment and Culture podcast at the 2026 Webby Awards. Later this year, she will appear on Season 2 of BBC's *The Celebrity Traitors*. —S.C.



Deena Margolin and Kristin Gallant

@BIGLITTLEFEELINGS

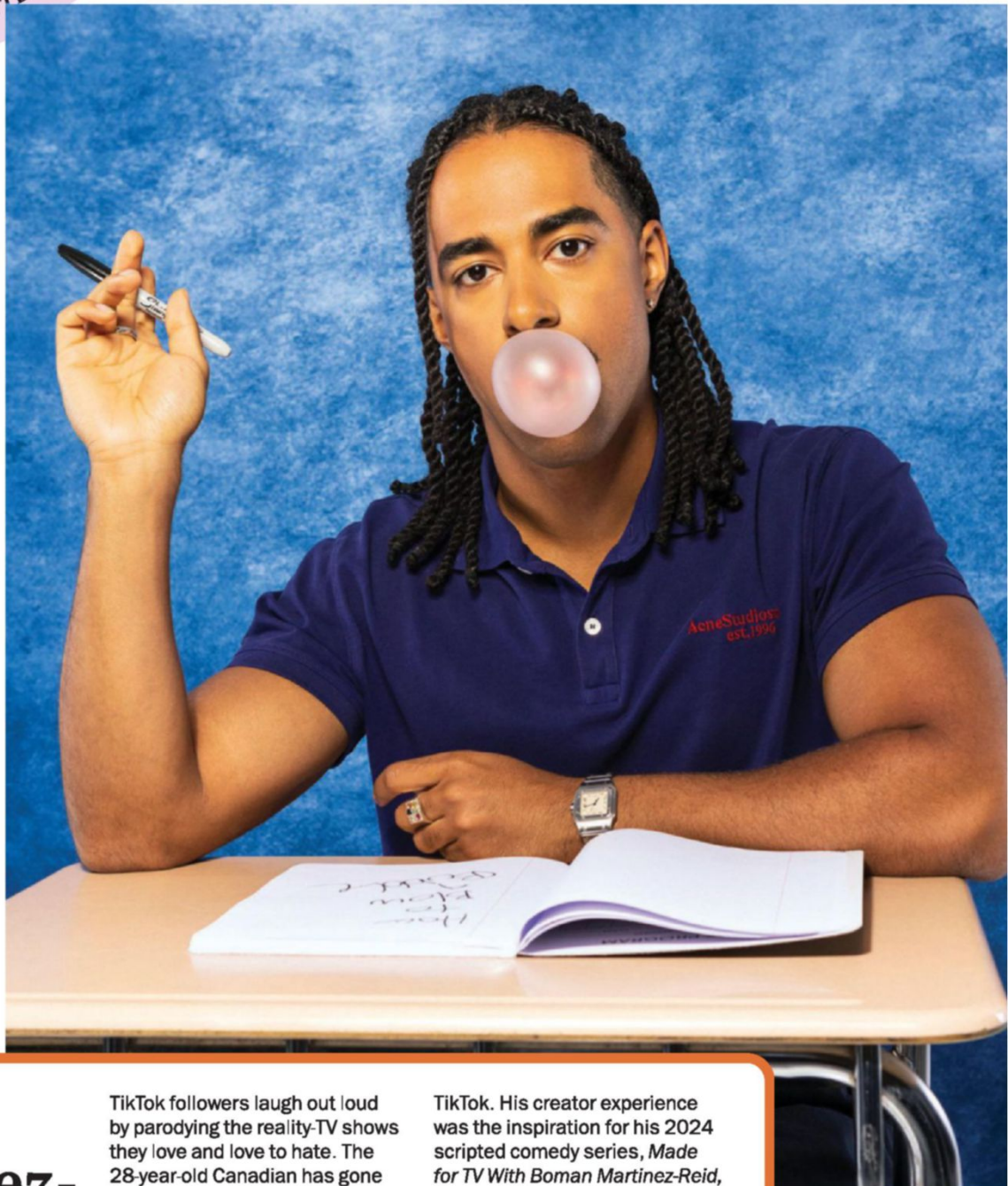
Millions of moms and dads are taking a different approach than the previous generation, employing the tactics of gentle parenting. Deena Margolin, 36, and Kristin Gallant, 39, a licensed marriage and family therapist and a parenting coach, respectively, are leading the charge with Big Little Feelings. They share anecdotes from their own parenting experiences as well as tips for navigating tantrums, potty training, and other challenges of early childhood with over 3.5 million followers on Instagram. They host a podcast and launched a line of educational toys with Fisher-Price in 2025. —L.H.P.

Mark Phillips**@MARKPHILLIPS**

RDCWorld head honcho Phillips has led the sketch collective group to 7.3 million YouTube subscribers and attracted famous fans like Kendrick Lamar. He also co-founded Dream Con, an annual convention for fandoms of color. —Nathan Lately

**Terrell Grice****@TERRELLGRICE**

Grice, an R&B singer and host of *The Terrell Show*, showcases his knowledge of music for more than 1.4 million YouTube subscribers. In 2025, his guests included Cynthia Erivo, Halle Bailey, and Lizzo. —Rachel Brodsky



Boman Martinez-Reid

@BOMANIZER

For the past six years, Boman Martinez-Reid has been making his (now more than 2.2 million)

TikTok followers laugh out loud by parodying the reality-TV shows they love and love to hate. The 28-year-old Canadian has gone viral for re-enacting standout moments from *The Kardashians*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Real Housewives*, *Love Island*, and more—complete with the signature music cues. And with his sharp sense of timing and megawatt smile, Martinez-Reid is starting to find success beyond

TikTok. His creator experience was the inspiration for his 2024 scripted comedy series, *Made for TV With Boman Martinez-Reid*, which follows him as he tries to break into the format. Last year, he appeared on content creator turned TV star Benito Skinner's Amazon Prime series *Overcompensating*. His longevity as a creator, he says, is “a testament to how dedicated I am to making people laugh.” —Shannon Carlin



Grace Reiter

@REITERGRACE

Grace Reiter will commit to the bit no matter how weird it gets. Whether she's oversharing about an awkwardly placed pimple on her comedy podcast *That's Enough*, squaring off with Tim Robinson on HBO's comic thriller *The Chair Company*, or regaling her 3.9 million TikTok followers with bite-size sketches about *Love Island*, Reiter's willingness to be the butt of any joke means she always has the last laugh. After starring in the 2025 off-Broadway *Parent Trap* parody *Ginger Twinsies*, Reiter is set to appear in the Sundance teen drama *Run Amok* later this year. —S.C.



Eric Sedeño

@RICOTAQUITO

Eric Sedeño, who has more than 1.3 million followers on TikTok, originally rose to social media fame by donning various wigs for skits, like one where he imagines Sadness from Pixar's *Inside Out* dancing to a Sexy Red song to become "Badness" or one where he portrays *Harry Potter*'s Severus Snape "if he slayed," among other takes on familiar characters. The 29-year-old Texas native also shares his lived experience as a gay, Latino zillennial on his LGBTQ+-focused pop-culture podcast, *Wild Wild Web*.

—Leslie Horn Peterson

Cale Brown

@CALEBROWNN

Brown's impressive dance videos, in which he clones himself grooving to his own choreography, have earned him over 10 million TikTok followers. He also has his own clothing line. —L.H.P.

Madison Humphrey

@MADISON.HUMPHREYY

If there's a cringe video of bridesmaids getting a little too close to a groom, Humphrey has probably parodied it. Her comedic remakes of others' real content put her on the map, earning her an audience of 4.9 million followers on TikTok and 2 million on Instagram. —L.H.P.

Maxwell Elliot Dent

@PLAQUEBOYMAX

Streamer Dent has found cross-platform success with clip-pable moments, particularly from his recording-studio series *In the Booth*. His livestreamed track "Victory Lap" earned a 2026 Grammy nod, a first for him and for Twitch. —N.L.

Lucas Lopez

@LUCASLOPEZVT

The expert impressionist's early clips re-enacting interactions with his immigrant parents struck a chord with other first-generation American kids. Over time, Lopez's comedy has evolved to feature satire about friendships, dating, and the absurdity of daily life for over 3.4 million TikTok followers. —R.B.

Austin Telenko and Marideth Telenko

@COST_N_MAYOR

TikTok remains known for its dance content, to the point where ultra-popular creators can rocket from short-form video to the stage—or, in the case of Austin and Marideth Telenko, a.k.a. Cost n' Mayor, to their own off-Broadway show. After meeting in 2019, the performers and choreographers started dating and collaborating on social. Today, the duo—now married—have 7.5 million TikTok followers. This year, Cost n' Mayor premiered their first theatrical show, *11 to Midnight*, which co-starred *Glee*'s Heather Morris and *Dance Moms*' Nia Sioux. —R.B.



Maura Higgins

@MAURAHIGGINS

In 2019, Maura Higgins became a fan favorite on the U.K. iteration of *Love Island* for her deep Irish brogue, straight-up delivery, and cheeky humor. She made waves stateside after joining the show's American franchise in 2023, but her star went supernova on Season 4 of *The Traitors*, where she won hearts with her aghast reaction to winner Rob Rausch's betrayal. Higgins has also established herself as a fashion and lifestyle creator, with a combined following of over 5.8 million and deals with brands like L'Oréal Paris. This fall, she'll compete on Season 35 of *Dancing With the Stars*. —R.B.

DeMarcus Shawn

@ARTBYDEMARCUSHAWN

DeMarcus Shawn's reactions and POV videos dramatizing realistic life moments—a teacher sitting next to you during a movie in class, getting help at the register from a manager, a mom rummaging through her purse—have made the 29-year-old ubiquitous online, with 6.3 million followers on TikTok and 1 million on Instagram. The Chicago native was working at Starbucks in 2017 when he started posting videos. He quit his barista job in 2021 to try to make a living as a creator, and has continued to build his repertoire, one uncle impression at a time. —L.H.P.



Delaney Rowe

@DELANEYSAYSHELLO

Delaney Rowe has amassed 3.2 million TikTok followers with her impressions of Hollywood's unrealistic depictions of women. The inspiration for her first viral video, the "absolutely insufferable female lead of an indie movie," was Natalie Portman's manic pixie dream girl character in 2004's *Garden State*. Zach Braff, the film's writer and director, is now a fan of Rowe's content and sent her a message. "I was like, 'Thanks for starting my career,'" says Rowe, who has a role in the upcoming rom-com *You Deserve Each Other*. "He was like, 'You're welcome.'" —Shannon Carlin

Speedy Morman

@SPEEDYMORMAN

Morman has garnered 2 million TikTok and Instagram followers with his comedic charm and deep understanding of the zeitgeist. This year, he joined Kevin Durant's sports-entertainment hub Boardroom as a host, producer, and adviser.
—Nathan Lately

Kat Stickler

@KATSTICKLER

Stickler built her combined following of roughly 15 million sharing funny sketches and open, honest stories about new parenthood and marriage, then life after divorce and dating as a single mom. She has partnered with T-Mobile, Olay, Amazon, Walmart, and more.
—Kara Nesvig

Kevin Fredericks

@KEVONSTAGE

Comedy creator Fredericks, 43, takes on everything from religion and family life to pop culture. In 2025, he joined Tubi's inaugural creators program and launched a podcast on which he speaks with fellow entertainers about their early career failures.
—Rachel Brodsky

Juju Green

@STRAW_HAT_GOOFY

If you're looking for a place where film geeks unite, Juju Green's platform is here for you. The former advertising copywriter, 34, traded in agency life for film-review content around 2020. Whether it's press-junket sound bites or in-depth discussions with the *Who's Who* of Hollywood on his *Get Rec'd* podcast, his interviews, breakdowns, and performance analyses of major releases garner tens of millions of views. In 2025, Green continued a partnership with the Academy Awards, served as host of Focus Features' FocusFest, and took on a new gig at iHeartMedia as key entertainment contributor. —N.L.

Sabrina Brier

@SABRINA.CINOMAN.BRIER

Sabrina Brier is everybody's friend. Or at least that's how the 31-year-old creator jokingly presents herself on TikTok and Instagram, where she's best known for playing "that friend who ..." in videos where she caricatures self-involved, obtuse individuals. (See: "wedding guest who dated the groom in high school.") In 2024, Brier leveled up to Hollywood, where she made her formal acting debut as substitute teacher Jessca (no *i*) on *Abbott Elementary*, and a series adaptation is in the works for her 2025 audiobook, *That Friend*. —R.B.



Time Off



WILDE AT HEART

BY ELIANA DOCKTERMAN

Olivia Wilde draws on her own heartbreak for her new marital comedy *The Invite*

INSIDE

A DUMB-ON-PURPOSE COMEDY
FROM THE WET HOT TEAM

JENNIFER GARNER LEADS
A NANTUCKET GIRLS' TRIP

LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE
MEETS A NEW GENERATION

OLIVIA WILDE BEELINES FOR THE SPRINKLERS, a respite from the sun on a sweltering May day in Central Park. We've logged some 10,000 steps since meeting at the *Alice in Wonderland* statue, where the actor-director snapped a picture for her son, who just played the Mad Hatter in a school production. Walking briskly around the reservoir, past elderly bird watchers, teens taking graduation photos, and a runner in a bikini, we receive subtle glances: even in a T-shirt and jeans, Wilde is striking in the way only a movie star can be, with wide eyes and sharp cheekbones. But I suspect people are not just ogling but trying to eavesdrop, because we're chatting conspicuously about couples counseling, open marriages, and how having children kills your libido.

Wilde thrills at the prospect of movement, setting a pace to match her buoyant mood. "I don't belong at a desk. I don't. I can't. I hate it. After *Don't Worry Darling*, I went right into the development of giant studio movies, a process that takes years and a lot of Zooming," she says. She is still working on a studio comedy that is inching toward production. "After a while you think, 'I didn't get into this to have a desk job. I need to just go make something to remember what we actually f-cking do.'"

What she made was *The Invite*, an independently financed marital comedy that jump-started a bidding war at the Sundance Film Festival in January. A24, which emerged triumphant, released the film on limited screens in late June before opening nationwide July 10. In the movie, Wilde and Seth Rogen play a couple on the rocks, Penélope Cruz and Edward Norton their intriguing upstairs neighbors who venture down for a last-minute dinner party. Wilde and Rogen's characters have conflicting motivations for the evening: she hopes to befriend them, and he wants to complain about their noisy sex. The neighbors have their own agenda. The chamber piece plays like a comic *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, if the couple at the center were not master manipulators but depleted parents fumbling to explain why they have grown so far apart.

The filmmaking process was quick, unusual, and exactly the type of production Wilde had always dreamed of. After reading a script by longtime writing partners Rashida Jones and Will McCormack, she pitched the writers and cast on workshoping it together. Sitting around a table in the soundstage where the pilot for *I Love Lucy* was filmed, the six of them tailored the roles to the actors and infused the script with arguments, embarrassments, and confessions from their own relationships. Wilde brought in renowned psychotherapist Esther Perel to work with Cruz, who plays a therapist, and to offer advice on the marital ups and downs of the story. Wilde then shot the film sequentially—rare for small films and logistically impossible for larger ones—in just 21 days on a set designed to mimic a labyrinthian San Francisco apartment.

In the sprinklers, Wilde looks like a woman freed—from the demands of the studio system; from the baggage of her previous film, *Don't Worry Darling*, and all the gossip it spawned; from the noise that surrounded her breakup with Jason Sudeikis and subsequent relationship with



▲
The entire cast,
clockwise from
top left: Rogen,
Norton, Cruz,
and Wilde

Harry Styles. "My character had this experience of heartbreak that was not foreign to me," she says of *The Invite*. "The movie was in many ways plucking from experiences that I've had, and it was a relief to rip my heart out of my chest and plonk it on the table."

She had not, she says, known her heart needed plonking. "Because of the safety of this ensemble, I felt capable of that. I remember being in the middle of a scene and realizing that I was releasing something that had been embedded inside me that I hadn't even acknowledged was still there," she says. "I thought, I've been extremely therapized; I've processed; I've worked through everything. But that is the power of catharsis through art."

THOUGH SHE ALWAYS intended to direct the film, Wilde had to be talked into starring in it too. She agreed only after the rest of the cast insisted she take the role of anxious Angela. "I had impostor syndrome," she says. "The prospect of acting opposite Edward Norton was not something I felt was in the cards for me. Until *The Invite*, I had more confidence as a director than as an actor. But through this



process, I've kind of fallen in love with acting again."

Born in New York City and raised, mostly in D.C., by journalist parents, Wilde broke out in Hollywood as an icon of millennial television with roles on *The O.C.* and *House*. She tended to play elusive women who communicated with withering looks rather than words, a stark contrast to the bubbly and talkative artist who pauses on our walk to compliment several muddy-pawed dogs. In hopes of finding more control on set, she made her foray into directing feature films with the 2019 high school graduation comedy *Booksmart*. A sort of spiritual sister to the 2000s comedies Rogen made with Evan Goldberg, like *Superbad*, the raunchy and heartfelt film positioned her alongside peers like Greta Gerwig, Jordan Peele, and John Krasinski as a successful actor-to-filmmaker cross-over story.

Her follow-up, *Don't Worry Darling*, a thriller in the vein of *The Stepford Wives*, caused a media craze, to put it mildly. It began when Wilde was linked romantically with Styles, one of the movie's stars; accelerated when she was served custody papers in her legal dispute with Sudeikis while

onstage at CinemaCon; took another turn when she and Shia LaBeouf presented different narratives about his departure from the project; reached an apex when leading lady Florence Pugh skipped press opportunities; and came to a bizarre conclusion with internet sleuths analyzing a video of Styles allegedly spitting on co-star Chris Pine at the Venice Film Festival. (Both actors deny this ever happened.) The movie itself was full of ideas, about the manosphere and (a few years ahead of its time) tradwives, that didn't quite align with some of its promotion as an alluring romance between Pugh and Styles' characters.

When I suggest that the drama surrounding the movie might have been a blow, career-wise, she says the personal upheavals were what most affected her—the aspects of her life that could never fully be captured in the media. "Relationships are heartbreaking in ways that people never see. There's the synthesized tabloid version of life," she says. "When you feel you've been reduced and overly synthesized for maximum sales value, it's like judging a watermelon on watermelon candy. You haven't really experienced watermelon. But people are sure they know, and that is a whole other type of heartbreak."

Still, the word *comeback* popped up repeatedly in reviews of *The Invite* from Sundance (where Wilde also appeared in Gregg Araki's comedy *I Want Your Sex*, out this summer, in a role opposite in every way to Angela: a callous, domineering, leather-clad sex fiend). After *The Invite*'s premiere, the director pulled two all-nighters listening to presentations from different studios vying to distribute the film. "It's like speed dating," she says, adding that the producers let her choose the distributor. She insisted on a theatrical release, a rarity for a

comedy these days, and now feels vindicated as she watches with audiences who laugh and cringe in recognition together.

Wilde recognizes that people will inevitably draw parallels between her public breakups and the decisions made by characters in the movie. "If people sense it looks like maybe she has been through the dissolution of a relationship and heartbreak, yeah, I have, and I think that's what gives me the muscle memory to represent this character fairly," she says. "I don't think I would have been able to play Angela if I hadn't really f-cking felt myself tossed around by life and relationships. And I'm very open to the risk of confession. This sounds so pretentious, but they say great art is confession and should feel risky—that if it doesn't feel risky then you're not doing something worthwhile."

TWO NIGHTS BEFORE our walk, Wilde hosted a talk with Perel at the Streicker Center on the Upper East Side that was, judging from the audience members who introduced themselves at the microphone, almost entirely populated by therapists. The event was designed to cross-promote the 20th anniversary of Perel's best seller *Mating in Captivity* and Wilde's new film, which both ask the same question: Why does sexual desire often fade in loving, committed partnerships? As Perel opined on the definition of *cheating* and why couples shouldn't stay together "for the kids," Wilde felt compelled to jump in and assure the audience, "The film is a comedy."

And it is. There are jokes about modern marriage and our deeply psychoanalyzed society. But the trick of the movie is how it vacillates between laugh-out-loud physical comedy and somber conversations. Rogen's character Joe is a bitter former musician who teaches at a middling conservatory. Wilde's Angela attended art school before becoming a stay-at-home mother. Now she feels lost and a little resentful toward Joe, who is all too quick to point out that she made the choice to stop working. "What do you do all day?" he asks

'It was a relief to rip my heart out of my chest and plonk it on the table.'

OLIVIA WILDE

after we have just watched a montage of Angela manically assembling a soufflé, laying out a charcuterie board, and redecorating their home for their guests. Equally cruel is the way Angela waves off Joe's chronic back pain, a complaint he has lodged for so long it has lost its meaning.

The actors clearly relish the conflict. Wilde widens her eyes as she aggressively presents Joe the soufflé through the oven glass. Rogen splays himself, theatrically broken, on the floor. But the battles eventually move the audience from laughter to tears. "Isn't that how it happens?" asks Wilde as we climb up a twisting dirt path in the Ramble. "A very smart friend of mine said, we're never as vulnerable as when we're laughing." (That friend was Phoebe Waller-Bridge.)

Wilde cites as inspiration not only Perel's book but also her famous TED talk on infidelity that ends with the widely cited idea that many people today have several key romantic relationships in their lives, sometimes with the same person: "Your first marriage is over. Would you like to create a second one together?" It's a notion that inspired debate during the making of *The Invite*. The cast sparred over why this miserable couple had stayed together and whether they would survive. Most at odds were Rogen and Wilde themselves. "When we shot it, Seth and I had two very different opinions about what would happen to this couple," she says. "There was a real romantic optimism that Seth brought to it. The assumptions that everyone could make about their characters was revealing about their perspective on love."

If Rogen was the optimist, did that make Wilde the pessimist? "I would say *cynic*," she corrects. "The more time you spend being alive, I think the more cynical you get." It's why she chose to open the movie with an Oscar Wilde quote: "One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry." (Olivia Wilde, it should be noted, was born Olivia Cockburn and changed her name to Wilde in honor of the Irish playwright.)



Rogen and Wilde sparred on set over the fate of the movie's quarreling couple

"I wanted to contextualize for the audience the film through my perspective on it," she says.

Their differences again came into relief when Rogen—who is proudly child-free—refused to believe that many couples with children, like Angela and Joe, stop having sex. Wilde was stunned. "It was an opportunity to see how the human struggles in long-term relationships in some ways are consistent, and then in other ways are completely specific to the couple themselves—and in Seth's case, a totally singular experience," says Wilde, laughing. "Seth is a true romantic, and apparently is just nailing marriage in every single way, which is a testament to his incredible wife Lauren."

Unhappy couples are common. But, to paraphrase Tolstoy, each unhappy couple is unhappy in its own way. And Wilde's couple is miserable in a way only Americans can be. *The Invite* is based on a Spanish play turned film, *The People Upstairs*, which has already been remade in South Korea, Italy, Switzerland, and France in the six years since its release. Wilde's version plays up the sanctimonious nature of American parenthood, how

we feel compelled to sacrifice our own happiness for the aspiration of happy children.

"Americans have a puritanical sensibility that distrusts pleasure, specifically women's pleasure, [and] this idea of sexuality persisting beyond parenthood," she says. As with the child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Joe and Angela's daughter is mentioned but never seen—though for less mysterious reasons than in the Edward Albee play. "Parents don't actually consider themselves as individuals unless they are away from their kids," says Wilde. It is only because their daughter is at a sleepover that the reckoning can take place.

Wilde calls the ambiguous finale a Rorschach test—she's polled the audience after every early screening: half have believed the couple has hope, the other half that they're doomed. "The goal was to have ambiguity without being annoyingly vague. We're all just reaching for the *Graduate* ending." As for Wilde, even she has come to a different conclusion after watching the film with audiences. "I love that it can change based on your mood," she says. And her mood today is very good. □

MOVIES

An affable, off-color comedy for steamy summer days

BY STEPHANIE ZACHAREK

THERE'S A POINT EVERY SUMMER WHEN JUST about any of us could use a dose of ridiculousness. It might hit right as the kids return from camp—or as you're counting the days until they go. Hottest day of the year? A dumb, breezy comedy is just the thing. Bad day at work? Maybe Jon Hamm in a bathrobe is calling your name.

In the absurd-comedy department, you could do much worse than *Gail Daughtry and the Celebrity Sex Pass*, in which Zoey Deutch plays the Gail of the title, a bright-eyed, button-nosed small-town Kansas hairdresser engaged to her bland but seemingly devoted high school sweetheart Tom (Michael Cassidy). With the wedding just a few weeks away, Gail offhandedly introduces Tom to the concept of the celebrity pass, in which each person in a committed partnership is allowed to have sex with one famous person of his or her choice, identified in advance. Tom isn't sure he's got a celebrity crush—Tilda Swinton is floated as a possibility—but it turns out he finds a candidate pretty fast. (To reveal who it is would spoil one of the movie's throwaway pleasures.)

Crestfallen, Gail heads to Los Angeles with her bestie co-worker Otto (Miles Gutierrez-Riley) for a hairdressers' conference. But her real aim is to solve her romantic befuddlement by sleeping with her celebrity crush, who happens to be Jon Hamm. How to find him? The guy selling star maps on Hollywood Boulevard knows how to locate the homes of Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon—forget that both died years ago—but has no idea where Hamm might reside. He does give them a suggestion, though, leading them to Ben Wang's Caleb, an ambitious aspiring agent at Creative Artists Agency. Caleb has no idea how to find Hamm either, though he does track down someone who might prove useful, Hamm's *Mad Men* co-star John Slattery, who now whiles away his days of underemployment working out his aggressions by punching a forlorn-looking mannequin. The gang is rounded out by world-weary paparazzo Vincent (Ken Marino), who has never been able to snap a picture of Hamm—he considers the actor his white whale.

Any resemblance to *The Wizard of Oz*, including Gail's wardrobe of snazzy red shoes, is purely un-coincidental. *Gail Daughtry* was directed and co-written by David Wain, a veteran of the

comedy troupe The State and also the director of the 2001 cult hit *Wet Hot American Summer*; Marino, another State and *Wet Hot* alumnus, is his co-writer. The gags here are loose-limbed and knock-kneed, and there are lots of them: if one doesn't quite land, you needn't worry—another will be coming along soon. Some jokes, including a riff on the history of the Wright Brothers, feel vaguely Dada, as if Marino and Wain had spent a long, happy stretch of aimless days drinking coffee and free-associating. And there's plenty of mild raunchiness, including an over-the-top sex scene rendered in dreamy-silly soft focus. (Here's where Hamm and his bathrobe come in.) The whole enterprise glows with friendly, pleasing daffiness.

BEST OF ALL is Deutch's Gail, whose sunbeam demeanor barely conceals her flirty, mischievous side. Gail believes that once she's achieved her goal of seducing Hamm, she'll be ready to settle down with Tom. Fat chance. Deutch was marvelous as Jean Seberg in last year's *Nouvelle Vague*, Richard Linklater's sprightly film about the making of Jean-Luc Godard's New Wave classic *Breathless*. Here, she shows a knack for good-natured, slightly off-color loopiness. In the film's early moments, Gail cheerfully explains to Otto why she and her dud boyfriend were made for each other: "I finally got him to buy the cow after giving him the milk for free." Even in her exaggerated innocence, there's something delightfully unhinged about her. Any old schmuck can buy a cow. What Gail's kooky erotic odyssey teaches her is that no one can fence her in. □

▼
Deutch's Gail and friends: following their own yellow brick road





Wagons west: the Ingalls family, reimagined for a new generation

REVIEW

Little House in a divided America

BY JUDY BERMAN

LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE IS contested territory. Like the Osage land where author Laura Ingalls Wilder's family squats in the novel that gives the series its title—and so many of the cultural artifacts we call Americana—it is the subject of mutually exclusive claims. When they were first published in the 1930s Wilder's autobiographical children's books about growing up on the frontier offered something rare: adventure stories whose hero is a brave girl. Michael Landon's long-running TV adaptation, which premiered in 1974, transformed *Little House* into comfort food, broad-minded but schmaltzy. Wilder's work has since faced criticism for depicting ghastly attitudes toward Native Americans. (One character says, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian.") And in recent years, the image of a white pioneer family in homespun garb has been impossible to separate from the reactionary tradwife trend.

So loaded is this iconography that the very existence of Netflix's heavily promoted *Little House on the Prairie* reboot might suggest conservative pandering. Yet the series' creator,

Rebecca Sonnenshine, makes clear from the beginning her determination to take her retelling in the opposite direction. Within its first 10 minutes, the show introduces the Ingallses to a helpful Black doctor (based on a real person who also appears in the book) and a Native American family much like themselves. These characters become the conscience of a volatile community in this solidly built adaptation, which takes admirable care in depicting a girlhood on stolen land but leaves little room for joy.

The original *Little House* series quickly moved past the events of the eponymous book, in which the family briefly settles in Kansas, on tribal land known as the Osage Diminished Reserve, situating the Ingallses more permanently in Minnesota. Netflix's

take differentiates itself by devoting its entire first season to the earlier period. Charming patriarch Charles, a.k.a. Pa (Luke Bracey), rolls out of Wisconsin to seek his fortune on the frontier, with a wife, Caroline (Crosby Fitzgerald), who turns out to be pregnant, and two daughters in tow. The eldest, Mary (Skywalker Hughes), loves school and boys; on the other side of puberty is her kid sister, Laura, a spitfire tomboy brought to vivacious life by Alice Halsey. An early encounter with wolves sets the tone for a succession of hardships: malaria, money troubles, a home invasion.

Although the U.S. government has yet to finalize its purchase of this Kansas territory from the Osage, settlers are already building the town of Independence. Ambivalent about leaving Wisconsin, Caroline is befriended by the officious Jemma James (Mary Holland), whose husband Eli (Michael Hough) is a railroad man. This couple represents traditional America, looking to reproduce its institutions and values and racism and xenophobia in the West. Their Victorian house looks preposterous in this dusty hamlet.

The area's more diverse and less conventional residents prove to be better friends to the Ingallses. Charles builds their cabin with a kind widower and Civil War veteran, John Edwards (Warren Christie), who struggles with alcohol; Edwards' sometime companion (Rebecca Amzallag) is a fiercely independent bar owner. In between saving lives, Dr. Tann (Jocko Sims) courts a shopkeeper (Barrett Doss) who is patient about settling debts. And Laura's fast friendship with an Osage neighbor, Good Eagle (Wren Zhawenim Gotts), connects the girls' families. Both relatively tolerant, despite the mothers' initial worries about outsiders, the households mirror one another. Yet we also get to see the Native American characters on their own. As Good Eagle's father William Mitchell (Meegwun Fairbrother), a farmer and translator who believes chasing

**A vision
of frontier
multiculturalism
battling
white supremacy**

interlopers off his people's land would be futile, is drawn into negotiations between the Osage and the Americans, the question of the Ingallses' complicity becomes unavoidable.

IT WOULD BE irresponsible, if not impossible, to re-create the apparently apolitical *Little House* I grew up with in the 1990s, when girls passed the books around classrooms and fell asleep watching reruns of the show on sick days. Necessary reckonings have pulled the deepest wounds of American history to the surface, fracturing the public into factions of the wronged, the guilty, and those in hysterical denial. The Wilder family was, itself, explicitly political. The Libertarian Party presidential candidate Roger MacBride, a protégé of Laura's daughter and editor Rose Wilder Lane, inherited Wilder's estate.

Sonnenshine's intentions are noble in transforming *Little House* into a vision of frontier multiculturalism battling entrenched white supremacy, even if the show suggests a dubious moral equivalence between the Ingallses and the Mitchells. Its painterly exterior shots, all sun-dappled meadows and nights lit by campfire, surpass aesthetic expectations for Netflix fare. Halsey and Fitzgerald give their characters real energy and depth.

But for all the many fiddle-led family sing-alongs that comprise perhaps its greatest concession to the trad crowd, the series feels a bit flat. Too many characters come across as generic nice people, leaving the Jameses to entertain us with their priggish behavior. Episodes like the Christmas-set "Peace on Earth" can get so wrapped up in beatifying the Ingallses, with moralizing monologues and wordless moments of wonder, that they drag. Although it's been updated with a serialized plot and revisionist overtones, this *Little House* suffers from the same cloying excesses as its predecessor. More childlike mischief might've helped. Yet instead of contorting the Ingallses into the people we wish they'd been, maybe it's simply time we acknowledge that theirs is not the enduring story we once imagined it to be. □

REVIEW

A posh girls' trip delivers *Five-Star* summer escapism

"Maybe there could be five of us—a weekend of five-star treatment?" Too silly for any real person to say, this kind of sentence is practically compulsory in a certain aspirational strain of women's entertainment. Happily, Peacock's latest confection earns our suspension of disbelief. The show is a smartly executed adaptation of beach-read queen Elin Hilderbrand's 2023 hit *The Five-Star Weekend*, and the shamelessly expository line issues from the mouth of a perfectionist baking influencer played by Jennifer Garner. Creator Bekah Brunstetter (*Sirens*) has gift-wrapped a treat for our summer delectation, to be binged as the ice melts in glasses of white wine.

Six months after her husband Matthew (Josh Hamilton) died in a car accident, Hollis Shaw (Garner) breaks down on a talk show and decides to decompress by inviting five friends from different eras of her life for a girls' weekend at her Nantucket estate. Casting choices are crucial for a show like this, whose emotional beats have to ring true even as its surface gleams with fantastical luxury, and all of *Weekend's* stars are ideally suited to their characters.

As Hollis' Type A college bestie and sardonic childhood soulmate, respectively, Regina Hall and Chloë Sevigny make prickly women lovable. D'Arcy Carden stands out in the delicate role of Brooke, adapting sharp comic instincts to embody a chatty, repressed "mom friend." (Hollis' college-age daughter, played by Harlow Jane, is on hand to act out her grief and judge her mother's performance of normality.) Gemma Chan's chic Gigi, a sympathetic follower of Hollis', is a bit of a mystery.

Of course, everyone has a secret that's bound to come out. Along with the reappearance of Hollis' old boyfriend (Timothy Olyphant) and Judy Greer's delicious turn as a mean girl who tends to pop up at the worst possible moment, these bombshells propel tight episodes of around 40 minutes. It's weirdly rare, these days, to see a drama aimed at women that isn't predominantly about murder or romance. When it comes to comfort viewing, though, familiar faces, low stakes, and an escapist setting—or, as Sevigny's character sums up the weekend: "Dead moms. Cheating husbands. Soft cheese"—are hard to beat. Bring on the Brie! —J.B.



Garner is perfectly cast as a grieving influencer

CHINA WATCH

PRESENTED BY CHINA DAILY 中国日报

All the village is a stage

A theater village where art blurs the line between audience and performer in every street and courtyard

BY BAI SHUHAO

The performance begins before you realize you have entered the theater in Huichang, Jiangxi province. At the heart of this theater village this summer stands a miniature cinema unlike any other: a black box that can rotate full circle.

Audience members step inside, take their seats and wait for the curtain to rise. But there is no film. Instead, the stage is the world outside: the town square itself, its weathered facades, passing pedestrians and clusters of curious onlookers.

During the just-concluded Huichang Theater Season 004, this performance, titled *Panorama*, unfolded almost daily. Crowds packed around the small structure as actors drew passersby into the action, inviting them to dance, improvise and slip into unexpected roles.

Even those with little interest in theater found themselves lingering. One afternoon, among them was Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia, the revered star of Chinese cinema, sitting quietly inside the black box, watching.

For a moment, it was impossible to tell who was performing and who was simply living.

That ambiguity feels fitting here, because Huichang's theater village is itself a story, one written long before any curtain rose.

In the 1980s, while studying in the United States, playwright and director Stan Lai received a letter from relatives in Huichang introducing him to the hometown he had never known.

His father was born there but rarely spoke about it. In 1949 the family moved to Taiwan and later to the U.S. When Lai was

14, his father died. It was only through letters from relatives in Huichang that he began to piece together the place his father had left behind.

By 1986 Lai had become one of the most influential figures in Chinese-language theater with *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*, now regarded as a modern classic. In Chinese lore Peach Blossom Land is an unreachable utopia. In Lai's work, both his father and Huichang seemed to linger in the background.

When he first visited Huichang in 1997, the journey took nearly 20 hours along mountain roads. Northwest Street, where his father once lived, was lined with crumbling houses.

"I never thought Huichang was my Peach Blossom Land," Lai said.

In 2015 Lai staged one of his plays in Huichang for the first time and vowed to return every year. Two years later, when the county began renovating the old town, he proposed turning his father's old neighborhood into a theater community.

The first Huichang Theater Season opened in 2024. This year, in its fourth edition, the festival brought nearly 30 productions from China and abroad, with nearly 400 performances across the town.

Despite not being born here, he has become unmistakably local. Residents speak of him less as a celebrity than as a neighbor.

"I went to school with his nephew," one resident said.

"I live right next to his old house," another said.

The origin story of Huichang's theater village is compelling enough on its own. The



town itself provides the props.

Huichang, at the confluence of three rivers and embraced by more than 1,000 yards of Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) walls, was once a thriving inland port. Today people gather here again not for trade but for performance.

At the entrance stands a 400-year-old banyan tree. Beside it, a stone arch bears four characters: *ci chu you xi* ("theater is here").

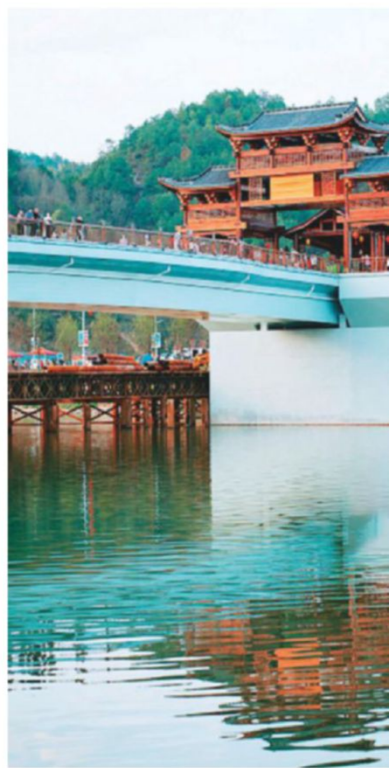
Farther in rises another ancient banyan. At its roots lies an old well. Each year at the opening of the festival, Lai and his guests draw water from it to pour onto the tree, a ritual that feels like a blessing for both the festival and the town.

Close to the banyans is Huichang's local museum, its walls crowded with wooden plaques. In Hakka tradition, these intricately carved pieces are gifts of praise, symbols of honor passed between families and generations.

The same Hakka architecture shapes much of the town. Its signature venue, the Courtyard Theater, was once an ancestral hall built in 1722. For Hakka families, such halls served as the spiritual center of communal life, places to worship ancestors, settle disputes, and mark births, marriages and funerals.

The theater still carries that history. Its walls are weathered, its timber darkened by time. An open courtyard frames the sky above.

Last year, when Lai invited 60 actors from Greece to perform here, many were visiting China for the first time. Residents





From top: Residents enjoy an open-air performance in Huichang, Jiangxi province. *CoraSon* by the French troupe Les Rustines de l'Ange. The Sanjiang Pedestrian Bridge, an antique-style wooden covered bridge, is located at the confluence of the Xiangjiang, Mianjiang, and Gongjiang rivers in Huichang. PHOTOS BY XINHUA AND PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

If you go

Getting there

Huichang's theater village is easily accessible via Ganzhou Ruijin Airport, Ruijin Railway Station and Huichang North Railway Station, all about an hour's drive away. Visitors can arrange a shuttle through the WeChat mini-program "Huichang Travel," with fares starting at around 70 yuan (\$10) per person.

Where to stay

For the most convenient experience, stay at the Hotel Des Artistes, located within the theater village. The hotel is especially popular with festivalgoers attending evening performances. Room rates typically range from 200 to 800 yuan per night.

Planning your visit

The theater festival is usually held in May or June, though dates vary each year. For the latest program and ticket information, visit the website (www.hctheatrevillage.com). Tickets are also available at the visitor center on-site.

Beyond the Stage

If you have time to explore the surrounding area, several attractions make rewarding day trips, including Hanxianyan Scenic Area, Hanxian Lake, Yangjiao Water Castle, and Dongtuo She Ethnic Village.

helped them find hotels and guided them through the town if they got lost.

"It's here that they really get to know what Chinese people are like," Lai said.

In Lai's view, it is that Hakka sincerity — straightforward and unpretentious — that has allowed the theater village to thrive.

Here, theater has no threshold. There is little distance between performers and audiences. Perhaps that is why performance feels so immediate, so real and so deeply shared.



Online

Scan for a Wow! China experience.



Students from Parkway Center City Middle College in Pennsylvania attend a handicraft class at Tianjin Foreign Languages School Affiliated to Tianjin Foreign Studies University in May.

YAN DONGJIE / CHINA DAILY

Youth exchange a tale of brotherly love

BY YAN DONGJIE

A growing youth exchange program, as part of the Philadelphia-Tianjin partnership, is helping build new connections between the next generation of Chinese and United States leaders.

The partnership, established in 1980, is among the earliest sister-city relationships between China and the U.S. What began with official exchanges has evolved into broader people-to-people engagement, with youth programs playing an increasingly prominent role.

In 2024 the Foreign Affairs Office of Tianjin, the Tianjin Municipal Education Commission, Tianjin Foreign Languages School Affiliated to Tianjin Foreign Studies University and the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia jointly launched the Junior Diplomats online program, creating a virtual platform for young people from both cities to connect.

"Every youth exchange sows seeds of friendship and strength for bilateral ties," said Luan Jianzhang, an official with the Foreign Affairs Office of Tianjin. "These students are not just visiting another country — they are becoming the next generation of cultural envoys, building a bridge of understanding across the Pacific."

Following a visit by students from Tianjin Foreign Languages School to Philadelphia in February, a delegation from Parkway Center City Middle College in Pennsylvania completed a return visit to Tianjin in May.

The exchange included joint classes, cultural activities, campus visits, themed discussions and homestays with local families.

Organizers said the program is set to expand, with plans already underway for Tianjin students to visit Philadelphia next year during U.S. Independence Day celebrations. The two schools are also exploring year-round virtual exchanges and joint educational projects.

For many students one interesting thing was discovering how much they had in common despite living on opposite sides of the Pacific.

"We have a lot of similarities, and I was shocked at just how many," said Nathanael Owen Targono, a Parkway student. "I really enjoyed this trip and the interactions with my new friends. I hope to keep in touch with them."

During the visit, students practiced languages together, experienced traditional Chinese culture and conversed about school life, hobbies, aspirations and global issues.

Samuel Chueh, commissioner of the Mayor's Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs in Philadelphia, said the exchange came at an opportune moment.

"I hope the children from both countries not only get to know each other, but also understand each other's countries and cultures, and continue the deep friendship in the future."

Meng Jiarui and Hu Yang contributed to this story.

Wilson Cruz The actor on the intersection of art and advocacy, his trailblazing role on *My So-Called Life*, and leading an LGBTQ nonprofit in 2026

You've been an advocate for LGBTQ causes for decades, and are now board chair for Glisten, a nonprofit that supports making schools safer for queer kids. How exactly does that part of your life connect to your work as an actor?

What I understood was that the work I was doing in terms of visibility on television or onscreen, in my art, was for the same reason that I was doing the work as an activist: so that people could see us and understand that we were part of the world, that our stories were change agents. The way that we revealed ourselves as a people—as queer people and especially queer people of color—through the medium of television and film and the stories we told on-stage [changed] the way people felt about us. And that correlates directly to what I feel is my most important work, which is helping young people understand that they are seen. This is work that is personal to me.

How so? My work on *My So-Called Life* as Rickie Vasquez was the reason why my father and I were able to come back together after he threw me out of my house after I came out to him. So I understood the power of that visibility in a very, very real way.

Take me back to that time in your life. As Rickie, you were the first out actor to play an out lead on prime-time TV in the U.S. That was a real pioneer moment. When you learned you got the part, what was going on in your life? It's 1994. We are at the height of the AIDS epidemic. I was 19 years old when we made the pilot. And I knew personally that playing this role was going to be transformational for me, but also transformational for the young people who'd never seen themselves on television. And the only way that I could do that work honestly and

You described yourself as an "actorvist." I see what you did there. What does that word mean to you?

I started calling myself that when it became clear that there was no distinction between the work for me—that the work I was doing onstage or on television or on film was directly correlated to the work I was doing as an activist.



authentically was to do it as an out person. I came out to my mom first. She didn't crash the car, so that was good. And then I came out to my father when he asked me on Christmas Eve. He did throw me out that night. My character experienced something similar in the series. When that episode aired, as the credits were rolling, my phone rang, and it was my father saying, "OK, I think it's time that we talk."

What impact has the political and social environment of the past few years had on your work? This industry is deluding themselves into believing that content that stars or is produced by or is about LGBTQ people, and especially LGBTQ people of color, is not commercial. In fact there's overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The most popular shows, the most popular films, the most culture-shifting, most dynamic work, is about us, is created by us. It's what changes the culture, and that's what they're afraid of.

How do you move forward in the face of frustration? I will be honest with you that I went through a very deep depression after the [2024] election was over, mainly because the way we were going to be able to do our work at Glisten was going to change. Now so much of our work is finding the funders to replace those corporate institutions that spent years telling us that they were with us through thick and thin. Well, honey, thin came. But we are finding new partners. Sadly, the lessons that I taught in the 1990s—along with those first people who came out on TV and film, who taught us that we have to be visible—we have to re-teach a lot. So who better than me and those of us who did it before to help this new generation do it now?

—LUCY FELDMAN

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