

The generations game

Bobby Duffy on the limits of defining ourselves by age group

Olesya Khromeychuk sites Ukraine's location on the map and in our minds

Wangui Kimari discusses the upcoming youth demographic swell in Africa



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Andy Haldane



“There is mounting recognition of the way the pandemic and other trends have particular impacts on young people”

Of course, it has been the older generation that have been most obviously and tragically impacted by the pandemic, with death rates much higher among older people. However, there is mounting recognition of the way that the pandemic and other trends – including climate change, the iniquitousness of social media and changes in schooling and the economy – have particular impacts on young people. The damage done to young people from these issues, especially in the last five years with all these overlapping crises, has been intense, profound and will be long-lasting

This edition of *RSA Journal* explores some of these challenges, shifts and practical innovations around young people or, as Bobby Duffy explores in his piece, what is referred to as ‘Generation Covid’. Duffy questions how useful these labels – whether Generation X, Y or Covid – are in understanding what shapes us, arguing that ‘period effects’ are more significant regardless of age. Drawing on her work in Kenya, Wangui Kimari also highlights how language can be unhelpful, arguing that what lies beneath the common use of the term ‘youth bulge’ to describe demographic shifts in Africa are pessimistic and biased ways of thinking about young Africans.

The composition of the RSA Fellowship is changing and – as our round-up of projects outside of the UK shows – increasingly, Fellows’ activities concentrate on engaging young people and making a practical difference to their lives. RSA research and innovation informs Mehak Tejani’s and Hannah Breeze’s question of whether exclusion from school is ever justified and what can be done to minimise its use and impact, while Colin Hopkins, Executive Director of RSA Academies, shares his insights into the academies’ mission and accomplishments over the last decade.

We also hear from Don McLaverty, a trustee of the RSA and the outgoing chair of the RSA’s Fellowship Council, about what he has learned serving on the Council, his perception of the role of Fellows in the future of the RSA, and how the Society needs to reach out to younger people.

Last year, research from Imperial College, London warned that eco-anxiety among children was growing. Climate activist and RSA Fellow Charlie Hertzog Young writes about how eco-anxiety impacted seriously on his mental health, highlighting the need for collective action and support, while another young activist, Mya-Rose Craig – aka ‘Birdgirl’ – shares her experiences and ideas for how young people generally can best use their (often limited) resources to effect change. From the US, activist farmer shakara tyler tracks some of the developments in America around ‘Afroecology’, exploring how the food sovereignty and climate justice movements intersect, particularly for Black youth.

As the world debates the implications of Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter and the benefits and harms of social media – including amplifying our fear of missing out (FOMO) – Kate Eichhorn explores the role of the influencer, particularly in relation to girls and young women, while Indian illustrator Kaveri Gopalakrishnan shares her own creative take on the joy of missing out (JOMO).

As ever, the journal covers current issues outside of its core theme. With the war in Ukraine now in its third month, Ukrainian Institute London’s director Olesya Khromeychuk’s piece challenges us all to think about how we got here and why so many of us know so little of Europe’s largest country, its culture and history. Closer to home, Claudia Baldacchino of People Know How explores another gap in our knowledge – data poverty – and shares how her organisation is tackling this widely misunderstood social problem. ■

Andy Haldane is
Chief Executive
Officer at the RSA

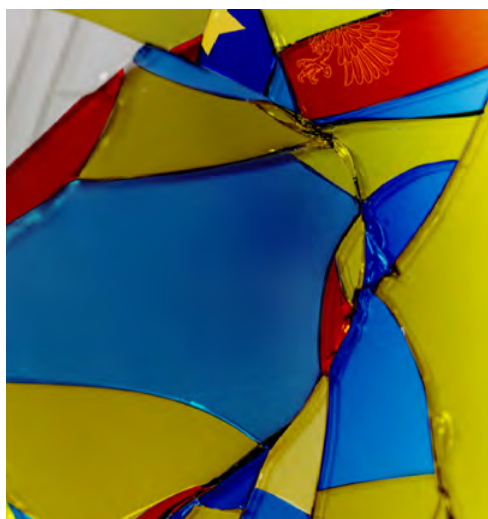
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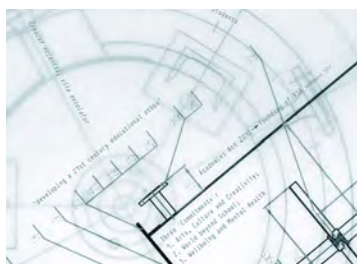
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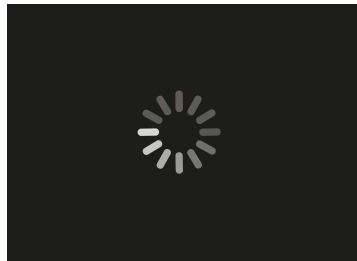
Colin Hopkins reflects on the end of a decade-long RSA programme

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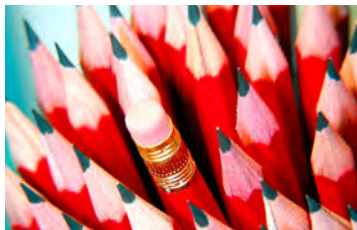
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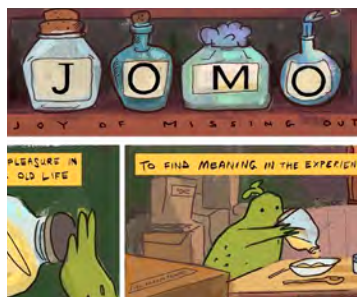
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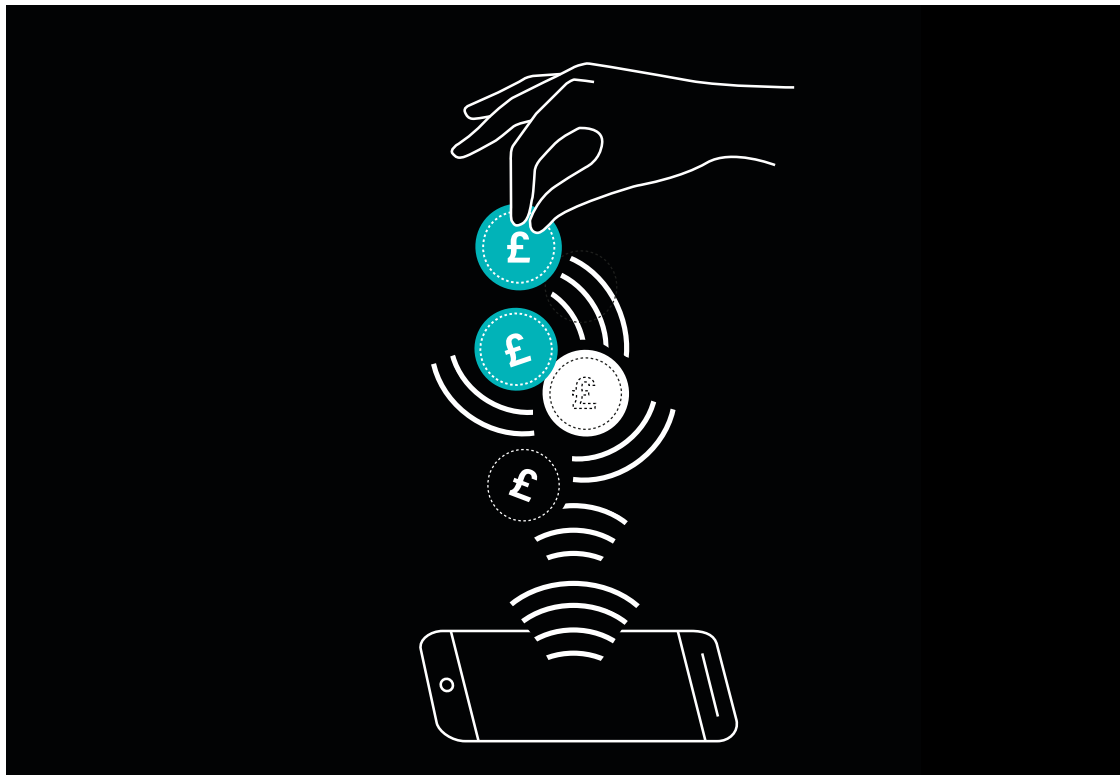


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Illustrator Kaveri Gopalakrishnan dreams of missing out

Periscope

- 1 Socrates lamented youth's "bad manners, contempt for authority, disrespect for elders" all the way back in 400 BC (page 12).
- 2 Baby boomers owned 40% of all wealth in the US when in their mid-40s. Generation X, when they reached the same age, owned just 15% (page 13).
- 3 Scholar and filmmaker Raj Patel cites 'four Cs' as the key culprits of global hunger: conflict, Covid-19, climate change and capitalism (page 18).
- 4 Approximately 10% of the RSA Fellowship is based outside the UK (page 22).
- 5 Taras Shevchenko is a 19th-century Romantic poet considered the father of modern Ukrainian literature (page 31).
- 6 Africa is facing a demographic pattern in which a dominant share of the population comprises children and young adults (page 32).
- 7 Darnella Frazier was awarded a 2021 Pulitzer Prize Special Citation for "courageously recording" the murder of George Floyd at the age of just 17 (page 38).
- 8 During the pandemic, Connecting Scotland initially offered 20GB a month to those unable to afford data; it now offers unlimited connectivity for a fixed two-year period (page 45).
- 9 Permanent exclusions within primary schools increased by a staggering 21% between autumn term 2018 and autumn term 2019 (page 47).
- 10 Shifting to a four-day work week could reduce the UK's carbon emissions by about 20%, according to an RSA report (page 49).



Cash convertors

A sudden shift to a cashless society would leave around 10 million people in the UK struggling with their finances, according to *The Cash Census: Britain's relationship with cash and digital payments*, a new RSA report published in March 2022. While a significant number of people across Britain rarely use cash and are embracing a digital future, almost half the population (48%) say a cashless society would cause problems, highlighting concerns around the ability to control finances and debt, digital fraud and increased isolation.

Covid-19 turbocharged the switch from cash to contactless and mobile payments. At the same time, digital transactions such as cash withdrawals fell significantly and traditionally 'high cash use' places such as pubs and restaurants were temporarily closed. The report shows that, while cash use has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, the percentage of the population wholly reliant on cash is unchanged, at roughly 10 million people.

The report also identified five distinct segments within the UK population based on attitudes and behaviours around cash and digital payments: 'Cash dependents' (10

million people); 'Cashless sceptics' (12 million); 'Cashless keepers' (12 million); 'Cash occasionals' (9 million); and 'Cashless converts' (11 million).

The RSA believes there is an urgent need to introduce legislation, overseen by the Financial Conduct Authority, to ensure everyone can continue to access cash near to where they work and live. In the interests of fairness and access, essential government services such as school dinners, council tax and utilities should not become entirely cashless. The RSA report also argues for advancements in digital education that allow young people to develop the skills to manage their money.

■ To download the report, visit www.thersa.org/reports/the-cash-census

Action

Levelling up – where next?



Andy Haldane, RSA Chief Executive, now firmly installed at the Society after his secondment to government to work on its national levelling up strategy, has written an essay, *Sizing the prize, seizing the prize*, as a companion piece to the Levelling Up White Paper.

In September 2021, Andy was appointed by the Prime Minister to define and develop the flagship strategy, a

decade-long moral, social and economic cross-government, cross-society programme established with the goal to spread opportunity and prosperity to all parts of the UK.

“Levelling up is about unlocking potential in individuals,” Andy writes. “It is about correcting not one, but two distinct and significant market failures.” The first, he argues, arises in places such as former industrial towns and cities, where incomes, activity and wellbeing are low. The second emerges as a side-effect of too much activity, rather than too little, in some locales, which causes pressure on housing, transport and the natural environment.

“Levelling up is the economically efficient, socially just and politically expedient thing to do,” he writes. “The prize could scarcely be larger.”

■ To read the entire essay, visit <https://bit.ly/3y1fNpU>

Arts in the spotlight

Smashing Shakespeare

Penelope Solomon FRSA has created *Smashing Shakespeare*, an interactive workshop and performance piece aimed at children in Key Stages 2–4. The workshop centres around use of a portable wooden trolley, which ‘magically’ transforms itself into a pop-up theatre complete with props and costumes. According to Penelope, the resulting whirlwind blitz through Shakespeare “enables children to access the language of Shakespeare through storytelling, interactive theatre and a bit of analysis to keep the parents and teachers happy”. *Smashing Shakespeare* aims to help counter the stress of the pandemic and other world events on children by bringing fun and humour into the learning space. *Smashing Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet*, the live show, will also be playing at Pleasance as part of Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2022.

■ To find out more, email penelopesol@hotmail.com or tweet @aHackneyMum

RSA Insights

15K

The estimated number of pupils brought into contact with the RSA Academies programme between 2011 and its conclusion at the end of the 2020–21 academic year. The project sought to improve the life chances of young people in various communities in the West Midlands. Today, its work is being continued by the Central Region Schools Trust. A review of the project has just been published.

■ To find out more, visit thersa.org/reports/rsa-academies-vision-and-distinctiveness

40%

The average fall in cash withdrawals across the UK in February 2022. By contrast, the figure in some of the most deprived areas was just 20%. A new RSA report shows that all five of the parliamentary constituencies that saw the lowest fall in number of withdrawals during the first year of the pandemic are in the top 10% most deprived constituencies in England.

■ To find our more, visit thersa.org/blog/2022/04/card-or-cash-patterns-of-cash-use-in-the-uk

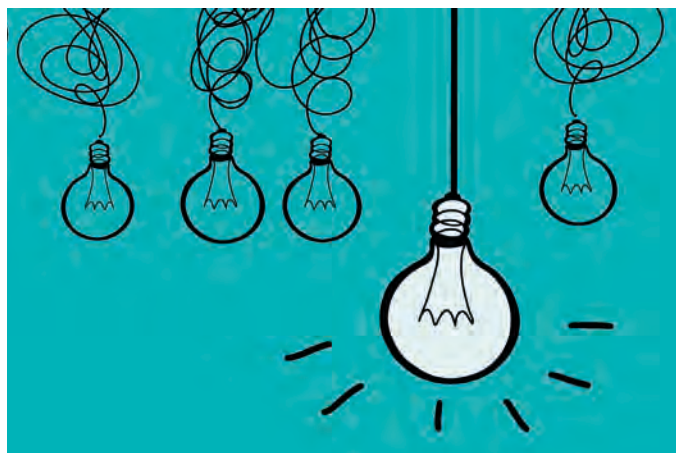
130

Number of years (estimated) it will take to end global gender inequality if we continue at current rates. This figure comes from research by the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership and was the topic of this year’s President’s Lecture, delivered by former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who urged policy and law makers to “put gender and other forms of discrimination at the centre” of their work.

■ To download the lecture as a podcast, visit thersa.org/podcasts

Agenda

Pupil Design Awards



This year, RSA's Pupil Design Awards asked secondary school and sixth-form pupils and teachers to take on three challenging briefs linked to sustainability and belonging. These included: Food for thought (on how our current food system could be redesigned to eliminate waste); Learning to belong (on how schools could become places of belonging for all pupils); and Green streets (on restoring nature to urban spaces).

The 2021–22 awards are currently entering the judging phase, a two-stage process scheduled for June 2022. Students will present their ideas to panels made up of Fellows, designers, academics and other professionals. As part of the Awards process, the RSA provides schools with lesson plans, design mentors and training to support the development of bold, original ideas.

The goal of the Awards is to engage young people through design thinking, a process which has been shown to develop students' creative confidence, and research and problem-solving skills.

The submissions window for the 2021–22 Awards closes in May 2022, and registration for the 2022–23 Pupil Design Awards is currently open.

■ To find out more about the Awards, visit thersa.org/pupil-design-awards

Experimental approaches to public dialogue

In partnership with UK Research and Innovation, the RSA is excited to announce a new fund to support pilot projects in the research and innovation sector. Launching in late May 2022, the fund will see the RSA support up to eight pilots to deliver new and experimental approaches to dialogue, deliberation and participation.

■ To receive updates upon launch, email publicdialogue@rsa.org.uk

Fellowship

New Fellows

Oxford University Global Surgery Group academic doctor **Soham Bandyopadhyay** is a founding member of the Global Health Research Group on Children's Non-Communicable Diseases. He is currently running a study to evaluate the mortality and morbidity outcomes of paediatric cancer patients across countries and income levels during the pandemic and is passionate about amplifying the voices of patients and the general public in his research and advocacy efforts.

Catalina Kim is the only female Asian football agent in Europe. She is also the founder and CEO of C&P Sports Group, an international football agency that brokers deals between Asian corporations and European football clubs. She is the author of bestselling memoir *Agent Lady*, published in her native Korea, and has collaborated with the Real Madrid Foundation to bring educational football programmes to South Korean schoolchildren.

Make the most of your Fellowship

by connecting online and sharing your skills.

Search the Fellowship at thersa.org/fellowship.

While you're there, don't forget to update your own profile: thersa.org/my-rsa.

■ Follow us on Twitter @theRSAorg

Our Instagram is [instagram.com/thersaorg](https://www.instagram.com/thersaorg)

Join the Fellows' LinkedIn group

[linkedin.com/groups/3391](https://www.linkedin.com/groups/3391)

Some Fellowship events have moved online;

to find out more and connect with Fellows in

our global community visit

thersa.org/events/fellowship

Grow your idea through RSA Catalyst, which

offers grants for Fellow-led and new or

early-stage projects with a social goal.

■ To find out more, visit thersa.org/fellowship/catalyst-awards

Events



Catch up online

Leading public thinkers, innovators and changemakers take to the RSA Great Room and digital stage to share and debate the ideas, events and movements that are shaping the future of our societies, our economies and our world.

■ *Subscribe to our YouTube channel and 'like' us on Facebook to catch up on the latest content*

▶ youtube.com/thersaorg

▶ facebook.com/rsaeventsofficial



Rites, rituals and contradictions of eating meat

The recent surge in vegetarianism and veganism has brought the question of meat-eating to restaurant menus, supermarket shelves and family dinner tables. Author and expert in the history of meat consumption Rob Percival considers what role meat should play in our future diet as he examines the politics of meat, from hunter-gatherer origins to the industrial scale of modern consumption.

■ *Watch now: <http://bitly.ws/q28J>
#RSAeatingmeat*

The cost of living precariously

How do work, welfare, and housing affect how people can build their futures? Exploring recent RSA findings, journalist Anoosh Chakelian, community activist Nairn McDonald, Claire Reindorp from the Young Women's Trust and the RSA's Fran Landreth Strong and Hannah Webster discuss strategies to better support young and financially precarious people to flourish.

■ <http://bitly.ws/q28p>
#RSAcostofliving

Ambition, success and deceit in the influencer economy

Becoming an 'influencer' is now a sought-after career choice for many young people. Journalist Symeon Brown shines a light on the darker side of the influencer economy, examining the social, cultural and economic trends that have made this new model possible and how these inform modern work, digital capitalism and online culture.

■ *Watch now: <http://bitly.ws/q28x>
#RSAinfluencereconomy*

A people's history of fashion

Writer and artist Sofi Thanhauser talks to Josie Warden about how we have gone from weaving our own fabrics to relying on a mass-produced clothing system that is costing the earth. She considers how our clothing habits should change to respect the boundaries of our planet, revive the art of making, and validate the rights of consumers and workers.

■ <http://bitly.ws/q28F>
#RSAclothing



THE GENERATIONS GAME

The stereotypes that limit us when we think about age groups

by Bobby Duffy
🐦 @BobbyDuffyKings

Generational thinking is a big idea that has been horribly corrupted by endless myths, stereotypes and fake battles between ‘snowflake’ Millennials and ‘selfish’ Baby Boomers.

Our understanding of generations has become so laughable that it is mocked in satirical social media posts. The hashtag #millennialproblems collects fake tweets that play to the absurdity of the cliches, and includes gems such as: “I cut my finger slicing open an avocado and now I can’t fix my topknot.”

Two American 20-year-olds set up a Facebook ‘group where we all pretend to be boomers’, which has nearly 300,000 members, with content that is a mix of capitalised political rants (“MY GRANDSON FORGOT TO CALL ME ON MY BIRTHDAY. THANKS OBAMA”), disgusting medical queries (“Good home remedies for anal tremors?”) and inappropriate use of graphics (“I’M LOSING CUSTODY OF THE KIDS” above an image of party balloons).

These examples, mostly just good fun, are merely a side-effect of the much more destructive grip of generational stereotypes, focused on four key generational labels: Baby Boomers (born 1945–1965), Generation X (1966–1979), Millennials (1980–1995) and Generation Z (1996 to the early 2010s).

This dominance of lazy myths in generational discussions is a real shame, as a more careful understanding of the true differences between generations is one of our most powerful tools to understand change and predict the future.

Some of the great names in sociology and philosophy believed that understanding generational change was central to understanding the dynamics of society. For

example, in the early 1900s, the French philosopher Auguste Comte identified the generation as a key factor in “the basic speed of human development”, arguing that “we should not hide the fact that our social progress rests essentially upon death; which is to say that the successive steps of humanity necessarily require a continuous renovation...from one generation to the next”. Generations do differ from one another, and that is a good thing. It prevents society turning into a “stagnant pond”, as Canadian demographer Norman B. Ryder argued in the 1960s.

Tracking generational differences is one of the most powerful tools we have to help us understand major societal shifts of the past and anticipate those on the horizon. Since I started analysing these differences around 20 years ago, I have found that this perspective provides unique and often surprising insights into how societies and individuals develop and change.

That is because generational changes are like tides: powerful, slow-moving and relatively predictable. Once a generation is set on a course, it tends to continue, which helps us see likely futures. That is true even through severe shocks like war or pandemic, the kinds of events that split time and separate our lives into before and after. Instead of diverting our course, they tend to accentuate and accelerate trends that were already under way. Existing vulnerabilities are ruthlessly exposed, and we are pushed down paths we were already on, just further and faster.

Because we tend to settle into our value systems and behaviours during late childhood and early adulthood, generation-shaping events have a stronger impact on people who experience them while coming of age. It is crucial that we start to understand what this pandemic ▶

Bobby Duffy is Professor of Public Policy and Director of the Policy Institute at King’s College London, and author of *Generations: Does When You’re Born Shape Who You Are?*

“To see the true value of generational thinking, we first need to identify and discard the very many myths that surround it”

will mean for the generation at their most malleable when Covid-19 sent the world grinding to a halt. The pandemic is still unfolding, painfully slowly, but there are already vital lessons – and warnings – we can draw by understanding generations that came before.

Yet, in place of this big thinking, today we get clickbait headlines and bad research on Millennials “killing the napkin industry” or how Baby Boomers “ruined everything”. We have fallen a long way.

To see the true value of generational thinking, we first need to identify and discard the very many myths that surround it.

For example, Gen Z and Millennials are not lazy at work or disloyal to their employers. It is true that younger generations work fewer hours than young people did in the past, but that is because we all do, as working weeks have seen a long-term decline. It is nothing peculiar to this generation of young, despite the headlines claiming otherwise.

It is also the case that younger generations move jobs more than older people, but that has always been true, and young people today are no more flighty than in the past, in contrast to claims they mark the ‘Death of Loyalty’. In fact, it is older workers who are moving more frequently than in past generations and, if anything, the young are holding on to their jobs tighter than in the past, given the tougher economic environment.

There is also an endlessly repeated narrative of today’s young being particularly obsessed by material concerns: the ‘Generation Me’ memes for both Millennials and Gen Z highlight how today’s young “are very interested in becoming well-off and less focused on meaning than previous generations”, as US author Jean Twenge puts it. And this has stuck with the public: in a global survey of 20,000 people conducted by Ipsos for my book, the second most popular adjective picked out to describe Gen Z was ‘materialistic’ (behind ‘tech-savvy’).

But this misreads the reality. It is true that young people are around twice as likely as older people to say it is important to them to be rich, but that is more a feature of youth than a true generational difference. As Millennials have aged, they have attached less importance to material ambitions, just as Gen X did before them, and Gen Z will next. We are mixing up lifecycle and generation effects to create lazy headlines based on fake differences.

Our generational stereotypes are also riven with contradictions. While one group of myths claims the

young only care about cash, another (equally wrong) set of assertions paints them as an entirely new breed of ‘social justice warriors’ who are obsessed with equality and ‘brand purpose’.

It is true that young people are always at the leading edge of change in cultural norms, around race, immigration, sexuality and gender equality and identity. As Comte understood, that is how societies avoid going stale: young people are less set in their ways and more comfortable with change than older people.

But the key point is that the gaps between young and old on emergent cultural issues are no larger than gaps in the past. Indeed, in many cases there were bigger gaps between Baby Boomers in their youth and their parents than we see between young and old today. It is true that the issues have changed, for example, moving from sexual orientation to gender identity, but the size of the gap between generations is entirely unsurprising.

Again, we are mixing up effects. We do not have a particularly unusual cohort of young people. What has really changed is the more fractious political, media and social media context. Older people have always denigrated young people for their different cultural norms: in 400 BC, Socrates moaned about the youth of his day and their “bad manners, contempt for authority, disrespect for elders”. But now we have the tools to communicate these constant human biases at scale.

It is not just young people who are swept up in this tidal wave of stereotypes. Indeed, of all the myths I examine, none are more dangerous and destructive than the claim that older generations do not care about climate change.

It has crept into so many discussions about climate concern that it has become an accepted truth. For example, when *Time* magazine named Greta Thunberg their person of the year in 2019, they called her a “standard bearer in generational battle”. The singer Billie Eilish was more direct: “Hopefully the adults and the old people start listening to us [about climate change]. Old people are gonna die and don’t really care if we die, but we don’t wanna die yet.”

But these stereotypes collapse when you look at the evidence. For example, in a survey conducted for the release of my book with the *New Scientist* magazine, around six in 10 Americans say that climate change, biodiversity loss and other environmental issues are



big enough problems that they justify significant changes to people's lifestyles; and this is utterly consistent across generations.

In fact, it is younger generations, rather than older generations, who are most despondent about the impact they themselves can have in tackling climate change: Baby Boomers are most likely to disagree that changing their behaviour is pointless, with 53% feeling that way, compared with 41% of Gen Z and 34% of Millennials.

The clichés are just as far from the truth when we look at how the different generations act. Claims about that Millennials and Gen Z are 'purpose-driven' consumers, only supporting sustainable or socially responsible brands. But it is actually Baby Boomers who are most likely to have boycotted a company in the last 12 months, with Gen Z about half as likely.

The unthinking ageism that has crept into much of the discussion about climate change is a serious problem. It ignores the growing demographic weight and financial power of the older population. Creating or exaggerating differences between generations on climate is, then, a particularly self-defeating approach to a potentially existential challenge. If we want a greener future, we need to act together, uniting the generations, rather than actively trying to divide them.

The real tragedy of this mess of generational myths,

however, is that it distracts us from some vitally important, truly generational changes.

Many of these flow from the undeniably tougher economic circumstances facing younger generations. Wage growth has reversed in the last few decades. Baby Boomers enjoyed significantly improved incomes in middle age compared with the Silent Generation, up around a quarter. But Gen Xers had 5% lower real incomes than Boomers when they were both 45 to 49, while Millennials earned 5% less than Gen Xers at 30 to 34.

And that is not even the main economic change, as private wealth has boomed and become much more important to our economic success than in the past, mainly to the benefit of older generations. For example, when they were in their mid-40s, Baby Boomers already owned an astonishing 40% of all wealth in the US, but when Gen X reached the same average age, they only owned around 15%.

A large part of this wealth gap is down to the long house price boom and the changing profile of home ownership, where the probability of owning your own home has been hugely affected by when you were born. US Millennials, for example, are around half as likely to be a homeowner than generations born only a couple of decades earlier.

At the start of the pandemic, there were real fears that the crisis would crash the housing market. ▶

“Another of the key reasons we are so susceptible to simplistic generational cliches is the increasingly separate lives young and old are living”



But that ignores a generation-defining reality: that governments in countries like the UK will do almost anything to avoid significant house price falls, given how central they now are to economic sentiment among a core (high-turnout) segment of the electorate.

In the UK, this took the form of a stamp duty holiday to encourage continued demand. Analysis since has suggested this had little direct effect, as house prices rose to even greater heights under their own steam: it seems extraordinary that, during a once-in-a-generation global crisis, house prices jumped 13.4% in June 2021, compared with the same month in 2020. We cannot, therefore, count on a price correction to open up ownership to generations who are currently locked out.

Without significant intervention from governments, inequality will get worse, Generation Covid will set new lows of home ownership and face all the knock-on effects this brings: lower wealth, private renting housing costs that take a much greater proportion of their income, and less security.

This reaches way beyond the ‘bank of mum and dad’ providing deposits and mortgage guarantees: it has also been seen in the impact on Generation Covid’s education during the pandemic. In the first lockdown in the UK, for example, one survey found that 74% of children in private school were receiving full, virtual school days, compared with just 38% in state schools.

The projections for the future impact of this lost learning are frightening. By the time the pandemic is over, most children across the UK will have missed

over half a year of normal, in-person schooling. That is more than 5% of their entire time in school. Estimates from a recent review show that, in high-income countries, each year of schooling increases an individual’s earnings by 8%. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, just in the UK this equates to an astronomical £350bn in lost lifetime earnings across the 8.7 million schoolchildren.

The long-run negative effects seem increasingly likely to be concentrated amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds, further widening inequalities and impacting on economic growth for the country as a whole. In our survey, three-quarters of respondents across generations said they expect inequality to grow in the years ahead. How we support Generation Covid is not just about helping the kids, but about shaping our collective future.

All of this has resulted in only a minority in developed countries thinking that the future for young people today is going to be better than for their parents. As far as we can tell, such pessimism for coming generations is a new trend: the proportion of Brits who think the future will be better for their children halved between 2003 and 2019, and the proportion of Americans who think it unlikely their kids will have a better future has nearly doubled.

It is not just economic factors at play here in our gloomier assessment. There is also a real cohort effect in experience of mental health disorders, particularly among recent generations of young women. A 2019 study shows that the proportion of US adolescents reporting symptoms consistent with major depression

in the last 12 months increased from 8.7% to 13.2% between 2005 and 2017. Given that there were no corresponding increases among other age groups over this period, this looks like a pattern that has emerged among the current generation of young, rather than a more general trend affecting us all. And early signs are that the Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced this gap: younger generations are more likely to report increased mental distress than older groups.

It is impossible to understand how society is changing and what might come next on these issues without a generational perspective. But when there is such richness in the realities, why are there so many myths? It is partly down to bad marketing and workplace research, which has become its own mini-industry. In 2015, US companies spent up to \$70m on it, according to *The Wall Street Journal* analysis, with some experts making as much as \$20,000 an hour. Over 400 LinkedIn users describe themselves solely as a 'Millennial expert' or 'Millennial consultant'. Of course, you may also call it, as a contributor to the article on the phenomenon suggested, "a racket" built on "pseudo-expertise, playing to executives' anxiety that they don't have their fingers on the pulse".

Campaigners and politicians also actively play to these fake differences, where the focus on 'culture wars' often involves 'taking campus politics national' to score political points. Maybe less obviously, politicians such as Barack Obama repeatedly lionised coming generations as more focused on equality, when the evidence shows they are often not that different. These assertions are not only wrong but do help to create false divides.

Another of the key reasons we are so susceptible to simplistic generational clichés is the increasingly separate lives young and old are living. Before 1991, there was little difference in the age mix between town and country in Britain. But since then, villages and smaller towns have become much older and cities much younger. This mirrors similar trends in the US. As Cornell professor Karl Pillemer says, "We're in the midst of a dangerous experiment. This is the most age-segregated society that's ever been."

This separation not only fuels stereotypes and tension, but strips away the benefits that study after study shows intergenerational connection provides. The short-term impact of the pandemic has been to separate the age groups more.

But this is one area where the longer-term impacts of the pandemic may help, as the greater incidence of homeworking is leading to early signs of a reversal in the long-term trend towards cities getting younger and everywhere else older. Joel

Kotkin, a professor of urban studies at Chapman University, points out that, as the US population disperses, economic, cultural and generational gaps between coastal cities and inland communities may start to shrink.

This slow reversal of long-standing trends is still uncertain, however, and is working against powerful forces pushing us apart, including the use and abuse of generational labelling itself. Some academics have had enough, calling on the Pew Research Center in the US, who have been a champion of generational analysis, to stop. The thinking is that analysis of these generational groups from reputable organisations gives them a legitimacy they do not deserve.

Despite all the terrible myths my work has uncovered, I think that misses the point: it is how these generational labels are applied rather than the idea itself that is wrong. And these groupings have become so ingrained, the bad research and commentary will not stop.

We should defend the big idea and call out the myths, not abandon the field to the Millennial consultants. ■

RSA Fellowship in action

Kilifi Menstrual Health Project

Tina Leslie, FRSA, received a £10,000 Catalyst Grant to fund her project, Freedom4Girls, which provides free washable, reusable period products and menstrual health management (MHM) education to girls and women in Kenya's coastal Kilifi District.

Almost 60% of females in Kenya do not have access to safe period protection, according to Leslie, who notes that not having period products can put girls' health at risk and drive them to truancy, impacting their educational trajectories severely.

Freedom4Girls employs seamstresses in Kilifi to make period pads and waterproof liners from local materials, so creating job opportunities. Before the Catalyst Grant was allocated, sewing workshops produced 750 pads, and to date over 1,000 girls in four schools have received MHM tuition. Since receiving the first instalment of its grant last August, Freedom4Girls has delivered an additional 500 period pads along with MHM instruction.

Seamstresses also create 'period pods', earning a salary for them and income for Freedom4Girls (which reinvests profits back into production). Each pod contains one waterproof shield, four liners, one wet bag, one carry bag, two pairs of pants, a calendar and washing instructions. In total 300 period pods have also been produced.

"We would love to reach out to other RSA members for support and even to purchase pods on behalf of the charity to support more people," says Leslie.

■ Find out more at www.freedom4girls.co.uk

FARMING OUT LOUD

A Black food sovereignty movement in the US promotes healing and justice

by shakara tyler

“We need a r/evolution of the spirit. the power of the people is stronger than any weapon. a people’s r/evolution can’t be stopped. we need to be weapons of mass construction. weapons of mass love.” Assata Shakur, ‘We Need A 21st Century Revolution’

The question that James and Grace Lee Boggs, Detroit labour activists and organisers, would often pose to our revolutionary social movements was, “What time is it on the clock of the world?” Ecocide and genocide, 500 plus-year global colonial projects; these create a world on fire, literally and metaphorically. According to a 2021 Brookings Institute paper, even before the pandemic, economic inequality in the US had already cost \$23tn over the last 30 years. Land subsidies to white settlers, one of the initial catalysts of societal inequalities enacted almost 160 years ago, reverberate to unconscionable land access and ownership realities today. Over 12m acres of Black-owned land has been stolen in the last century. Based on the 2017 US Census of Agriculture, approximately 48,000 Black farmers own 4.7m acres of farmland in the US, about 0.5% of the country’s total farmland. Of the 3.4 million US ‘producers’, Black farmers comprise 1.4% of that population.

Covid-19 has both exposed and exacerbated these issues. Local economies are continuing to recover from the 22m jobs lost during the pandemic, while Black farmers received approximately 3% of the \$9.2bn

in Covid relief federal farm bailouts. This remains a grave injustice considering the remaining 97% was disbursed to mostly white-owned, large commodity-crop farms that already receive substantial government subsidies, among other resources. Such processes conserve inequities rather than dismantle them. These realities impact not only the pandemic of Covid-19, but the pandemic of systemic racism. Both violently prey upon Black communities in unremorseful ways.

How do we build Black food sovereignty on Turtle Island (the Indigenous name for North America prior to colonisation) when Black people own less than 1% of the land and comprise about 1% of all food producers? How do we organise in this accumulated pandemic era of food and environmental oppressions? What do we do with escalating land prices, ongoing supply chain disruptions, decline of work conditions for factory and field workers, wage thefts, job loss and the precariously inequitable health (physical, mental and emotional) conditions of our people?

We mobilise and organise against anti-Blackness and for self-determining Black life; to define ourselves, for ourselves and exert greater control over how we live our lives. We claim our indispensable role of being returning-generation farmers in an unbroken food system that is working exactly the way it was designed. To be Black and to be youth, on this time on the clock of the world, means to rebel. Systems change, from the economic to the cultural, feels possible in ways ▶

shakara tyler is a returning-generation farmer, educator and organiser who engages in Black agrarianism, agroecology, food sovereignty and climate justice as commitments of abolition and decolonisation. She serves as Board President at the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, board member of the Detroit People’s Food Co-op and co-founder of the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund, and is a member of the Black Dirt Farm Collective



“Divesting from an extractive economy and investing in a regenerative one is the mandate of this ‘critical decade’. Transition is inevitable. Justice is not”



that it has not felt before. As systems of oppression become more visible, collective consciousness is becoming contagious. Social movements are growing in numbers as the world becomes more aware and more motivated to fight the bad and build a new decolonised future of the planet and humanity.

To be a returning-generation farmer means to revalorise our cultural identities and spiritual consciousness in service to our visions of a liveable planet. As we work to capture carbon from the atmosphere and return it to the soil, we cool the planet. It is never just about growing food. Black land work is, in a dynamic intergenerational manifestation, about growing our souls to build the collective power and beloved community for our ‘survival pending revolution’, as the historical Black Panther Party articulates. We are deeply engaged in both the struggle to resist the dehumanisation of our lives and to reimagine new ways of living together in our communities. After centuries of global plunder, the profit-driven industrial economy is severely undermining the life support systems of the planet. Divesting from an extractive economy and investing in a regenerative one is the mandate of this ‘critical decade’. Transition is inevitable. Justice is not. Race, gender, class and sexuality – those most affected by the crises – must be at the centre of the solutions equation in order to make it a truly just transition. We know, as youthful students of our elders, anything ‘just’ is made possible through ceremony. We forefront ceremonial reverence of multi-species life forms (tangible and intangible) that seed the revolutions on which our very lives depend.

This is the call of the land. This is the time on the clock of the world.

Building a Black ceremonial land ethic

The British Indian scholar and film maker Raj Patel cites ‘four Cs’ as the key culprits of global hunger: conflict, Covid-19, climate change and capitalism. In these times, the ‘C’ of ceremony also becomes significant to our survival, bringing the reverence needed for full revolution. We steward the land and grow food to feed our bodies as well as our starving souls. For many of us, to be Black in the world today means to be in a constant state of spiritual warfare. And, for many of us, to be Black and stewarding land is a form of spiritual worship to our Creator, our ancestors (the dead) and the earth. We (re)build topsoil and save seeds not only for biodiversity and eco-regeneration, but for the growth of our souls. It is a *homegoing* and *homecoming*, simultaneously. An unbroken circle where the call of the land is a returning to spirit that is a quintessential piece of building power.

Unlike mainstream community food systems ideologies, which assert local and sustainably-grown foods as the pinnacle to systems change, we position climate-resilient community development as a tool to build community self-determination so that we can define ourselves (our work, dreams, ideas and so on) for ourselves and exist in relative opposition to the systems that exploit and extract our people. Eating kale and going to farmers’ markets can be useful for greater health and wellbeing. But these actions do not directly build the power necessary to transform the oppressive systems at hand. We are at a pivotal point in world history where power must shift from the white and wealthy to the poor and people of colour who are most affected by systemic injustices and who have the solutions to practically transition the world so that everyone can thrive in dignity and self-determination.

Black Dirt Farm Collective

The Black Dirt Farm Collective (BDFC), a group of which I am a founding member, is a collective of mostly young agrarians guiding a political education process. Through our cultivation of an agrarian education ('Afroecology'), we ground our work on how agrarian communities' personal, cultural and technical capacities can be activated and used as a socially and ecologically transformative organising tool. Our collective mission is to facilitate and support socio-cultural trainings rooted in the wisdom of nature, foster intergenerational exchanges, and bridge the rural-urban generational divide. We coined 'Afroecology' as a process of social and ecological transformation that involves the re-evaluation of our sacred relationships with land, water, air, seeds and food while valuing the Afro-Indigenous ways of knowing and centring the struggles of the Black experience in the Americas. Mutual aid, grower cooperative marketing formations, climate-resilient infrastructure development, political trainings and radical social entrepreneurship are our weapons of mass construction and mass love that Assata Shakur proclaims as the necessity of a 21st-century revolution.

BDFC recently purchased 9.7 hectares (24 acres) of rural land in Maryland which we envision as an engine for Black cooperative economic development. We are currently building out this space into a farm, recreational and educational event space, and private residence. In addition to building out this central site, we operate small urban farms and community gardens throughout the US Mid Atlantic, South Atlantic and Deep South regions. Given our cultural centring, we focus heavily on farming Afro-diasporic crops that illuminate our cultural histories and remain in high demand for consumption by our communities. Providing high-quality, affordable, organically grown okra, watermelon, callaloo and sweet potatoes is an important piece to the work. If we are not feeding ourselves our culture, who will? We also create value-added products to increase our profit margins, as we work to become more economically sustainable. Throughout various locations along the Atlantic coast, members of our collective sell at farmers' markets, operate Community Supported Agriculture programmes (commonly known as 'CSAs'), organise community food donations and collaborate on farm-to-table dinners.

Due to the enormous racial wealth gap that positions Black economic standing at stark depths compared with others, among the most effective strategies to support our work is donating money and infrastructure

supports so that we can, not just survive, but thrive. We encourage our customers to pay a premium, when possible, for our products and services as an act of solidarity and working towards reparations for the multi-century theft of Black labour in the building of the US empire and accompanying colonies. We believe in transforming our agrarian work cultures by paying ourselves and our collaborators liveable wages for work that is often undervalued and denigrated by industrial society.

This is the (re)cultivation of Black agrarian politics. It begins with the study of African diasporic spiritualities and nature, Black agrarian history and various political ideologies that inform how we reframe the narrative around land and agriculture within Black experiences. Ongoing evolutions of Black exploitation has led us to confuse "what happened on the land, with the land itself," as Leah Penniman from Soul Fire Farm states. Violent white terrorism against Black farming communities has strategically strangled our connection to and physical presence on the land. Creative cultural expressions such as hip hop, spoken word, visual arts, and various dance forms are all imaginative modes we use to decipher and heal our relationship to land, and our imaginations are grounded in 'the spirit' that sustained us throughout centuries of cultural disruptions, geographical displacements and social dispossessions.

Youthful possibilities

As the Black writer and activist James Baldwin says, "the least we can demand is the impossible." According to Afrofuturist fiction writer, Octavia Butler, "we can...do the impossible as long as we can convince ourselves that it has been done before." This is the youthful mandate of our times, to ensure there is a liveable planet for us and future generations. In this 'critical decade' we have no more time to waste. We build our collective power through the construction of deep accountable and trusting relationships to one another. We do it through working in reciprocity to sustain authentic democratic structures. We do it through reviving kinships with Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. And, of course, we do it through growing food and the infrastructure needed to thrive in a Black self-determining reality. A Black ceremonial land ethic pollinates our multi-generational survival and power. It ensures the possibilities of youth now and yet to come. ■

■ *To find out more, visit*
facebook.com/blackdirtfarmcollective

“If you want to make that difference, you’ve got to get involved and work towards evolving the organisation”

Rachel O’Brien speaks to Don McLaverty, outgoing chair of the RSA’s Fellowship Council

🐦 @racobrien

Rachel O’Brien: For those who have not met you, tell us a little bit about your background.

Don McLaverty: My parents came to the UK from Jamaica in the 1950s. Their mission was the same as for many immigrants: they wanted a better life. I feel fortunate, because their aspirations and focus for me and my siblings were on getting a good education. At the age of eight, I remember being told that I would be going to university when I got older. When I asked what that meant, my father’s response was: “I don’t exactly know, but you’re going!”

I was born and grew up in London and understood why my parents were here. One of the responsibilities I carry as I get older is how to pass the baton on to the next generation. I knew what I wanted for my own children, and my hope is that they leave the world a better place for the generation that follows them.

I studied mathematics at university and secured a role in the strategy team of a large industrial corporation at the age of 21. This was unusual for someone of my age and background in the mid-70s, especially as I must have stood out with my large afro and tinted aviator

glasses! I did an MBA at London Business School a few years later, then went on to follow a career in business. Six years ago, I decided to pursue a portfolio work-life, and moved from a full-time senior management role running a specialist advisory firm that provided services to start-up and scale-up businesses and worked with entrepreneurs; now I enjoy a variety of non-executive and advisory roles with universities, scientific institutions and, of course, the RSA.

O’Brien: When did you become a Fellow and the Chair of the Fellowship Council?

McLaverty: I first became an RSA Fellow 20 years ago, when living in London. There were many demands on my time, and it was difficult to attend meetings; in the end I let my Fellowship lapse. Years later, my family and I moved to Oxfordshire and, by a happy coincidence, the RSA made contact around the time I left full-time employment and invited me to rejoin the Society.

In the first year, I turned up to the occasional meeting and met with the local Fellows. Eventually I became ▶

Don McLaverty is an experienced adviser to high-growth businesses and scientific research institutions. He is also a lay member of Council (non-executive), and a member of the Finance Committee and the Commercialisation Executive Board at University of Bath



more involved and helped to organise a major event in Oxford. Shortly after that, four of us got together to run the Oxfordshire Network as a team, with the support of staff at RSA House. As a starting point, we carried out a survey focused on what the local Fellows said they wanted from the RSA. The majority wanted to meet other Fellows to discuss ideas and activity. We organised monthly local 'Network and Learn' sessions that covered a wide range of topics, from homelessness to clean energy, all of which were well attended.

In 2020, I was elected Chair of the RSA Fellowship Council, and a Board Trustee. The Council is an advisory group to the Trustee Board and executive management. The current cohort of 29 Fellowship Councillors comprises 15 men and 14 women, of which 22 are white and seven are people of colour. I am serving my second two-year term as a Programmatic Councillor, which is a new role aimed at building stronger connections between RSA Programme staff and the Fellowship.

O'Brien: As you prepare to leave, what have you learnt about how the role of the Fellowship has changed and what needs to continue to do so?

McLavery: The RSA is all about the Fellows! What is so special about the RSA is the Fellows' experience, knowledge and wisdom, and the global nature of the network.

One of my great hopes for my second term was to support the RSA in becoming a much more global organisation. There are roughly 2,000 to 3,000 people – approximately 10% of the Fellowship – based outside the UK, which is a start, but requires more focus. However, we need to be realistic about what being global means, our expectations and how to make the best use of our funds at this challenging economic time.

We are working on better ways to engage with the Fellowship. My message to Fellows who might read this is: please be active – you're only going to get out of the RSA what you put in. Consider standing for Council elections in your area and do things locally, big or small, that make a difference in your community. You don't have to be a Fellowship Councillor to make an impact. I was an active Fellow in Oxford for two or three years before I even knew there was a Fellowship Council!

We are in an ever-changing world: the war in Ukraine, the impact of pandemic, but also the technological, environmental and social changes taking place. The RSA and Fellows need to ensure that we remain relevant and make a difference.

When I joined the Council, some expressed the view that the RSA is too London-centric. My challenge to

all Fellows is, if you want to make that difference, you've got to get involved and work towards evolving the organisation.

O'Brien: What are your greatest achievements as Chair of the Fellowship Council and what further changes would you like to see?

McLavery: I am most proud that the voice of the Fellowship Council is being heard and valued at Trustee Board level. I am very proud of all the work individual Councillors do with the Fellows and staff. This is particularly pertinent as we all had to quickly adapt to working online due to restrictions and lockdowns over the last two years.

Some personal highlights include the Council's role in co-designing the May 2022 Fellows Festival; participation in the Catalyst Fund programme; our COP26 presence and enthusiasm; and the great work being done in the US, Oceania and elsewhere by our global Fellows.

It's important that individual Fellows are better enabled to make a bigger impact. We need a strong, effective new Council cohort for 2022/24 to support Fellows' activities. This is particularly important as we emerge from the pandemic. It is vital that there is a strong team of Fellows to work with Andy Haldane; to support him, but also to offer advice and scrutiny. This means recruiting Councillors who have the skills, experience, energy and time available to be supportive of the new strategy.

So, for the longer term, I'm very pleased that, at the 2021 Annual General Meeting, the Fellowship voted to allow the Trustee Board to extend the Fellowship Council term from two to three years. This should make it possible for the Council to have greater continuity between election cycles to get more things done.

I hope that in the future there will be further discussions around how we can restructure and better resource the Fellowship Council so that it can more fully represent the Fellowship.

O'Brien: I take your point about Fellows engaging in practical action. But one of the challenges for any organisation like the RSA is, 'to what end?' What does impact look like and how is it achieved?

McLavery: We need to be clear that it is not enough to 'feel good' about what we're doing. Fellows are typically very bright people who want to make a difference, and the RSA also has a dedicated team of staff to help make that difference. That said, if there are 30,000 Fellows, sometimes it feels as if there are 30,000 different opinions about how things can be



“I believe that the RSA should make sure everything we do looks at the wider impact of our work”

done! That’s marvellous, but also difficult to manage. There’s a difference between having a pleasant time talking shop, with lots of interesting ‘intellectual’ discussions, and getting stuff done in a way that can be evidenced and measured and, most importantly, one that makes society a better place.

I believe that the RSA should make sure everything we do looks at the wider impact of our work. For example, every RSA project proposal and every Board paper should note how it is going to make an impact on the environment, what it means for diversity, and what financial impact it will have on the organisation.

O’Brien: Given your background in business, what role do you think the RSA should have in working with the private sector?

McLavery: If you were to ask me what success at the RSA looks like, it would be where we are making positive change in collaboration with a variety of partners, including business and corporations. The issue is not whether we embrace business as a partner but rather how we do that. Universal basic income and artificial intelligence are not just ‘RSA issues’, but are also of huge importance to businesses, particularly those investing in developing new and technology businesses, such as angel investors, family offices and venture capital firms. Understanding the impact of societal changes, and how people respond to these, influences investment and impacts how people design their businesses and the way they work. This is a good

time and opportunity for the RSA to develop new partnerships and relationships.

O’Brien: As you continue to be a Fellow and as Andy Haldane settles in as the new CEO, what are your hopes for the future?

McLavery: During my term as Chair of the Fellowship Council, the pandemic has been a huge challenge. It changed our whole world, including the economics of the RSA, and my sense is that most Fellows really do understand this.

Andy’s arrival provides a great opportunity for the RSA. We have a new, energetic CEO who is committed to working with the Fellows. He’s ready to make the changes that he feels are needed, and the Fellows Festival is an important event for signalling this.

There are also major plans and work being done in relation to the RSA’s digital platform, which will be tested at the Fellows Festival. This should give us a stronger online presence and a new tool which will enable us to work in collaborative and different ways. This is great; being imaginative about how we engage with Fellows – particularly younger people – through the use of social media will keep us relevant in the future.

We should continue to take forward the great work the RSA has done historically and over the last few years. I would say to all Fellows: please be active, be engaged – it’s your RSA! ■

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

The importance of forging strong relationships
between visible minority ethnic youth and nature

by Mya-Rose Craig

🐦 @BirdgirlUK

I am visible minority ethnic (VME) and a very lucky one. Living in the countryside, I can step outside my front door straight into fields and woods. My parents have always loved birds, so when I was growing up, I went out birding regularly. Having a 'cool' older sister who also loved birds meant that I loved them, too; this shows how important it is to have role models who look like you. As a VME child, seeing mostly older white men in the countryside had a huge negative impact, reinforcing the sense that my family did not really belong.

When we visited family in Bangladesh, people were bemused by our birding; I think they thought it was an odd thing that British people did, as my dad was English. In my granddad's village, people had been hunting birds in recent years with nets and guns, decimating bird populations. When we talked about 'looking for birds', the assumption was that we wanted to kill them.

As I grew older, my British-Bangladeshi cousins would tease me, saying that birdwatching was weird and nerdy. They had no idea what they were talking about, so how could they understand why others might love it? It wasn't until my family and I were featured in a BBC Four programme called *Twitchers: A Very British Obsession*, that things started to change. It was filmed in 2009 when my family and I were trying to spot as many different species of birds as possible

in one year, a pursuit known among birders as a 'Big Year'. Everyone we knew watched the programme, and for many this was the first time they had any idea what we did when birding.

Eventually, these experiences, combined with never seeing anyone who was VME out in the countryside or birding, made me think that most VME people had no interest. But, when I was 13, I had a lightbulb moment. I realised that, although VME young people might believe that, as 'urbanites', they were simply choosing not to go out into nature, there were structural barriers, including racism, that made them feel that nature was not for them.

I had already organised a birding camp for summer 2015, but there was no ethnic diversity among those who had booked. I decided to seek out local community leaders and eventually found five inner-city VME boys to attend. In 2016, I ran a larger nature camp, followed by a conference on Race Equality in Nature attended by conservation NGOs and community leaders from 30 different communities. I set up Black2Nature camps that same year.

My goal in creating nature camps for marginalised inner-city VME children and teenagers was to give them a connection with nature that they could hopefully nurture. Many parents later told us that their children subsequently took more notice of birds and wildlife and were much more likely to want

Mya-Rose Craig is a British-Bangladeshi environmental and race activist who campaigns for equal access to nature and saving the earth. She is a first-year student at Cambridge University and her memoir *Birdgirl* will be published in June 2022



to go outdoors. Black2Nature became a charity in 2020 and now runs 10 camps and many events each year. Some of those same cousins who teased me have been attending for years and now even volunteer themselves.

Interacting with nature is essential for better physical and mental health, but also for getting young people engaged in environmental activism. If you do not know anything about the planet and are not connected to it, then you have little reason to work towards saving it. It is only by experiencing its beauty and preciousness that you will want to do something about saving it and start fighting to stop climate change.

When, in 2020, I became an ambassador for Survival International, a human rights organisation that campaigns for the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, I became much more aware of the human rights abuses against these groups in the global south in the name of conservation, as well as of the lack of diversity in the climate and environmental sector. During lockdown, I decided to interview and highlight the work of 30 young environmental activists of colour from around the world who are fighting to save the planet; this became my book *We Have a Dream*. Many are fighting for change on behalf of their communities at a grassroots level. What was most striking was how young they were when they

started campaigning to protect their local environment from a range of threats, including polluted water, bleaching of reefs, and lands being taken or used by governments and huge corporations.

These young people are inspiring. My hope is that VME young people in the global north, after reading this book, will be inspired to act. In my experience, young people of my generation (and much younger), are more engaged with all types of issues globally because of the internet. The pandemic took away our ability to socialise in person. We were isolated and lonely, and the internet provided social interaction, support and knowledge. Even as the pandemic recedes, we still spend more time on the internet to find out about what is going on in the world. One of the outcomes of this is that we are much more concerned about the planet compared to two or three years ago.

Like most young people, I feel a sense of hopelessness about what our future planet will look like. I worry about the impact of climate change, biodiversity loss, air and plastic pollution, deforestation and issues such as genetically modified organisms and fracking. But we can all take steps to create change by using social media and talking to people in our communities. Choose one or two areas in which to campaign, in which to raise your voice, and believe you can make a difference. Then you will. ■



WHERE IS UKRAINE?

How a western outlook perpetuates myths about Europe's largest country

by Olesya Khromeychuk

🐦 @OKhromeychuk

Let's perform an experiment, the same one I do with my students of modern European history at the start of the academic year. Visualise the map of Europe. And now visualise the easternmost border of what you think of as Europe. Where is this border? Will it stretch as far as the Urals? If it runs along the eastern side of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, what does it do when it reaches Belarus? Is Belarus in, or is it out? Once the line gets to northern Ukraine, where does it go from there? Does it go farther east to encompass the whole of Ukraine? Kharkiv? Donbas? Will it run along the western border of Ukraine, leaving Lviv and Uzhhorod outside of Europe? Or do you visualise the easternmost border of your mental map of Europe, as do most of my students of modern European history, running along the Dnipro River, splitting Ukraine in half? And, if so, what does it do when it gets to the Black Sea? Where does Crimea fit on the map inside your mind?

Our mental maps are formed from the places we visit, the languages we understand, the literature we read, the culture we appreciate, the people we meet and care about. Our mental maps are just as important as those used in classrooms and war rooms. Ukraine has existed on the official map of Europe for at least 30 years. Placenames were misspelled, the definitive article added before the

name for no good reason. But it was there, printed and coloured. The largest country in Europe. Yet it was mostly missing from our mental maps.

Are we able to name a 'Ukrainian Shostakovich', a 'Ukrainian Solzhenitsyn', a 'Ukrainian Akhmatova'? Can we tell when someone presented as a Russian avant-garde artist, or a Russian filmmaker, or a Russian playwright, is actually Ukrainian? Did we spot that Degas' 'Russian Dancers' were actually wearing Ukrainian outfits before the National Gallery renamed the drawing in April 2022, finally releasing them from the Russian imperial embrace? The gallery itself seems only to have spotted it in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the pressure to decolonise its art collection.

Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 demonstrated that understanding of the region among politicians, journalists and societies more widely was lacking. As the Director of the Ukrainian Institute London and a historian, I received numerous requests for commentary in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. Most began with a question asking me to elaborate on the actual difference between Russia and Ukraine. The question was well meant; it was intended to debunk Putin's weaponised mythology. But the interviewers were oblivious to their own entrapment in the imperialist framework even as they attempted to give Ukraine a ▶

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voice. This framework has been cultivated by years of uncritical reading of Russia and, more recently, aggressively propagated by Putin. Weary of giving a ‘proper’ answer (starting with Volodymyr the Great and ending with Volodymyr Zelenskiy) for the umpteenth time, I asked one journalist a question in return: “What, exactly, is the difference between Ireland and England?” Instead of an answer, I heard a nervous giggle. We have mostly figured out the inappropriateness of asking such questions related to western empires. But we are not yet as skilled at seeing the same inappropriateness when it comes to other empires.

It soon became obvious that, even in the middle of a full-scale attack, western observers viewed Ukraine simply as a pawn in a geopolitical game being played by Russia and the collective West. Some were beating their chests and saying “Yes, Ukraine’s agency has been overlooked. We will have no more conversations about Ukraine without Ukraine.” And yet, many panels went ahead with no in-house Ukraine experts or no Ukraine experts at all.

The question we need to ask ourselves in the curatorial rooms of galleries and museums, in academia, in think tanks, on political advisory boards, is why, until Ukraine was attacked, had we not thought of securing mandatory in-house expertise on the largest country in Europe? Why had we thought of a nation of over 40 million as small and insignificant? Why had we chosen to dismiss its culture as minor? Why had we decided that learning the Ukrainian language was pointless because ‘they all speak Russian there anyway’? The answers to these questions are likely to be uncomfortable. They are likely to speak to our own prejudices, and conscious and unconscious biases.

The uncritical reading of Russian history and culture made many observers blind to Putin’s neo-imperialism. They were thus shocked by the invasion, by the fabricated reasons the Kremlin chose to justify the attack, and the brutality of the Russian military campaign, including war crimes of which we are learning more and more every day. The experiential knowledge of Russian imperialism and resistance to it possessed by Ukrainians and others in the region – for instance, the Baltic States, Poland and Finland – if taken seriously, could have better prepared 21st-century Europe for Russia’s full-scale invasion of a sovereign state. Maybe it could have

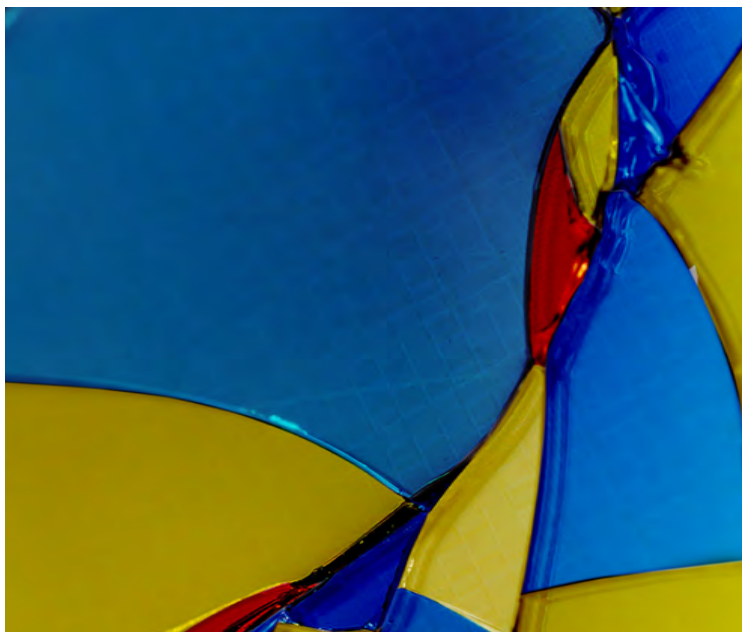
even prevented it altogether. At the least, it might have awakened us from our slumber of inaction in 2014, when Crimea and Donbas were occupied.

In 2014, we watched the ‘Russian world’ brought to life in Crimea, where Crimean Tatars were targeted en masse, in a way reminiscent of the persecution they suffered in 1944. The ‘Russian world’ where all, including ethnic Russians, could be sent to jail on fabricated charges simply for disagreeing with the occupation. We watched the ‘Russian world’ unfold in Donbas, too, where a gallery was overtaken by the Russian proxies, modern art executed, literally, with guns, and the space turned into a concentration camp where civilians were illegally kept, tortured and deprived of all rights.

How many of us responded to the creation of this ‘Russian world’ by introducing a discussion on the culture of Crimean Tatars and its repression by Russian imperial or Soviet power? How many proposed to curate an exhibition or a talk by the artists exiled from Donbas? How many, after visiting one of numerous exhibitions on the centenary of the Russian Revolution, left a critical entry in the visitor’s book about a Ukrainian filmmaker presented as Russian? How many reviewed a book by an author who witnessed war crimes in the Russian-occupied territories of eastern Ukraine for an English-language outlet? And as we reviewed the growing number of books on what was termed the ‘Ukraine crisis’ penned by western scholars, how many commented that such books should really try to reference Ukrainian sources?

Scholars of Ukraine have been doing all this for years. And, for years, we have been viewed as killjoys spoiling the party. Being a vocal Ukrainianist meant being perceived like an angry woman who will not stop screeching about the patriarchy. Suddenly, though, there is a desire to hear Ukrainian voices, even if just to figure out how to pronounce the name of the capital of Ukraine: we all now know it shouldn’t be ‘Kiev’, but how on earth are you meant to say ‘Kyiv’?

Hearing Ukrainian voices is good, but it is not enough. Just as it is good, but not enough, to set up emergency funds for Ukrainian scholars and artists. ‘Emergency’ implies temporary. For the duration of the war only. A systemic change would require setting up centres for the study of the region, including Ukraine. And if the funding was



“I have seen Russian experts who wish to improve their understanding of Ukraine lament that they cannot become Ukraine experts overnight. But that is not what they are asked to do”

to be found for such a centre, some imagination would be required when coming up with a name for it. ‘Russian and Eurasian’ will no longer work if the centre wishes to study the entire region in a meaningful way. Here is a suggestion: how about the Lesia Ukrainka Centre for the Study of Europe? After all, Ukrainka is one of Ukraine’s foremost writers; best known for her poems and plays, she knew nine languages in addition to Ukrainian and translated works from English, German, French and Greek. What better patron for a new centre than a fin-de-siecle modernist, feminist writer who rewrote European classical myths from the point of view of a woman in the language of the subaltern?

What we need is a permanent alteration – de-colonisation, de-imperialisation – of our knowledge. We need to equip ourselves with appropriate terminology to discuss the region not just as ‘post-Soviet’, but in ways that will reflect the different trajectories taken by the former republics in the three decades since the collapse of the USSR and how each tackled the legacy of the Russian as well as Soviet empire over this time.

Knowledge is not only about power; it is also a matter of security. The mental maps our students form in their classrooms will be carried with them into galleries, newsrooms, boardrooms, parliaments, military barracks and, of course, back into classrooms by the next generation of educators. If Ukraine does not exist on these mental maps,

its existence on the actual map of the world will continue to be at risk.

Self-reflection and the expansion of our knowledge is a good start. But that, too, is not enough. I have seen Russia experts who wish to improve their understanding of Ukraine lament that they cannot become Ukraine experts overnight. But that is not what they are asked to do. In fact, they are asked to do the opposite: to not try to explain Ukraine. To not speak on panels on Ukraine unless those panels have Ukraine experts. And not just one expert tucked on at the end to tick the box of a ‘Ukrainian voice’, like a woman scholar who discusses gender on the last panel scheduled on the last day of a conference. Inclusivity is not about adding all subjects to the list. It is about making sure that the discussion is fair. And that means using our expertise in a politically responsible way.

It is the Russia experts who were well placed to warn us that widespread support of Putin’s annexation of Crimea meant that the Russians could be expected to show the same widespread support, and not condemnation, of Putin’s so-called ‘special operation’ of shelling civilians, looting and pillaging in Ukraine. It is these experts who could have warned us that annual Victory Day parades – which included driving around in cars with stickers that said, “To Berlin for German women!” or “We can do it again!” – were not just a peculiar Russian way of commemorating the Second World War. That ▶



“The sudden appearance of Ukraine in the limelight has not yet brought about a better understanding of the country”

there was a chance that they would do it again. Not taking seriously the Russian *pobedobesie* – a violent Victory Day frenzy complete with rape culture, hate speech and glorification of violence – is the result of our acceptance of the vision of Russia not as a perpetrator, but as an ally of the West, a victor in and a victim of the Second World War, and thus not obliged to face up to the crimes committed by its own government and its own army.

The Russians’ choice to reject the term ‘Second World War’ in favour of the anachronistic ‘Great Patriotic War’ should have set off alarm bells, as it highlights that, for Russia, the war began in 1941, when Hitler attacked the USSR, not in 1939, when the USSR attacked Europe together with Hitler. The Russian army continued the legacy of the Soviet armed forces with its cult of violence, bullying, acceptance of war crimes and disregard for human life, not only that of the enemy – whether military or civilian – but of its own personnel. It perfected this criminal behaviour in Chechnya and Syria and, for the last eight years, in Ukraine.

Yet, somehow, it is the Ukrainian armed forces that are being dissected by journalists and scholars today: does the Azov regiment hold far-right views or does it not? This discussion is being had in a great many articles I have read about Russia’s war in Ukraine. However, few of these texts point out that, in 2019, after Putin had already attacked Ukraine and long after the formation of Azov and its incorporation

into the National Guard, all the Ukrainian nationalist parties put together received just above 2% of the vote in Ukraine, meaning that they did not meet the 5% threshold for admission to parliament. Few point out that, at the same time, in France, Italy and Germany the far right won between 10% and 17% of the vote. Not to mention the popularity of a certain presidential candidate who delivered the biggest ever share of the French vote to the far right in her race against President Emmanuel Macron in France’s recent (April 2022) general election.

Even fewer contemplate what ideology drives the Russian soldiers who are sent on the mission to ‘de-nazify’ Ukraine and kill the very Russophone civilians they are meant to ‘liberate’ from their Jewish, Russophone president. The same ideology that drives them not only to kill Ukrainians by shelling their cities, claiming they had been aiming to kill the Azov fighters, but by shooting civilians with their hands tied behind their backs in the back of their heads.

Could the ‘great Russian culture’ have anything to do with this ideology? Have we done enough to critically examine the imperialism inherent in the often-aggressive attitude towards Ukraine that we find in poets from Pushkin to Brodsky? But surely it is the fault of Putin, not Pushkin. Many in the West are reluctant to boycott Russia, especially Russian culture. It seems too violent a move to many.

Let me make a different suggestion: let us boycott the remnants of our own imperialist view of the world and focus our energies on getting to know the culture that doesn't seem to be there: Ukrainian culture.

Where is the 'Ukrainian Pushkin' after all? If he doesn't exist on our bookshelves, does it mean that he doesn't exist at all? And if he is to be found on our bookshelves, is he there by accident? I once got excited in a London bookshop when I spotted a book with Taras Shevchenko, the 19th-century Ukrainian Romantic poet, the 'father of the nation', on the cover. I thought a badly needed new translation of Shevchenko's *Kobzar* must finally have been published. When I picked it up, it turned out to be Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. The publisher must have thought that any moustached man in a big coat and furry hat would do for the cover of a book about the mysterious Russian soul.

Taras Shevchenko. Lesia Ukrainka. Ivan Franko. Olha Kobylianska. Maik Iohansen. Mykola Kulish. Vasyl Stus. Lina Kostenko. Oksana Zabuzhko. Boris Khersonskiy. Serhy Zhadan. Olena Stiazhkina. Iryna Shuvalova. The vast majority of those reading this will not know these names. This literature is absent from our shelves not because it is not worthy, but because its existence has been systematically undermined through political repression, as well as scarce linguistic knowledge and chronic lack of funding for translations. Another uncomfortable truth is that these authors do not live on our shelves because our cultural appetite for the whole of eastern Europe is easily satisfied by Dostoyevsky.

The sudden appearance of Ukraine in the limelight has not yet brought about a better understanding of the country. Paradoxically, western admiration of and surprise at Ukrainian bravery in the face of Russian aggression merely emphasise the limited knowledge we possess about Ukraine. When we admire the resilience of Ukrainians, let us think of what turns ordinary people into heroes. What would it take for us, civilians, perhaps pacifists, to pick up arms or at least to donate all we can to the army? I do not know what drove my brother, Volodya, a civilian, an artist, a reader, to enlist in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2015, but I know it was not the desire to become a hero. Especially a dead hero.

Glorifying Ukrainian resilience without understanding its roots is another form of

misunderstanding the country and its people. The root of that resilience is the intolerance of imperialist oppression, both historic and recent. It is the knowledge that, although Ukraine is the largest country in Europe, people still do not see it and might not even notice if it disappeared from the map. It is thus up to Ukrainians, all 40 million of them, to make sure that their country stays on the map with its borders intact. It is up to all of us to make sure that it appears on our mental maps. And that it stays there. With its borders intact. ■

■ *A version of this text was delivered as the keynote speech at the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies Conference, Cambridge, 8 April 2022*

RSA Fellowship in action

Tackling Covid-19 in Cambodia

Thanks to a £2,000 Catalyst Grant, education charity United World Schools (UWS) delivered a Covid-19 community awareness campaign in Cambodia that reduced the spread of the virus. The money enabled UWS to support teachers in disseminating life-saving health information to hundreds of people in 10 communities via posters, social media, meetings and radio broadcasts. The programme extended to ethnic minority groups that are usually beyond the reach of the Cambodian government and NGOs.

UWS expanded the campaign with the assistance of local teachers and leaders, benefiting almost 100,000 people in 116 rural communities with up-to-date information about the virus and advice on social distancing and hygiene. The programme significantly restricted the movement of Covid-19 in remote regions with very limited access to medical care.

"Communicating these public health messages is the most effective and, in some highly remote areas, the only tool available to combat Covid-19," says UWS Founding Chief Executive Tim Howarth, FRSA. "As the programme scaled up, UWS education officers also utilised socially distanced community visits to train teachers and disseminate accurate Covid-19 information to local community leaders. This allowed schools to safely reopen in 2021 and strengthened local leadership networks for the long term."

All donations received by UWS from the public between 21 April and 20 July 2022 are being matched by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

■ *Find out more at www.unitedworldschools.org*

TOMORROW'S CHAMPIONS

How the fastest-growing African demographic is defying negative assumptions

by Wangui Kimari

🐦 @huma_africa @MathareSJustice

Over the last decade, an increasing amount of writing has emerged about Africa's 'youth bulge'. These narratives are circulated by African governments and regional and global multilateral institutions, including the World Bank, the African Development Bank and even think tanks such as the Brookings Institute in the US. Too often in these missives, African youth – over 226 million of them – are considered a surplus population amounting to either a 'demographic dividend' or a 'ticking time bomb'.

What problematic imaginaries and practices are occasioned by a calling into being that, while demographically real, is qualitatively (de)limiting?

As a demographic feature, the youth bulge is understood to arise when infant mortality lowers – something that should be celebrated – but also where a 'high' fertility rate endures, prompting an unprecedented number of young people proportionate to a nation's population. It is important to note that what is considered a 'high' fertility rate (more than five births per woman) is never defined from within the geographies where this occurs, but rather remains an index created in global north regions of 'below-replacement-level fertility' (fewer than 2.1 births per woman).

While these two non-complex and highly limiting trajectories – demographic dividend and ticking time bomb – are offered as the only possible pathways for the youth bulge in Africa, the tenor of most narratives hinges on fears of a coming 'explosion'. Or, according

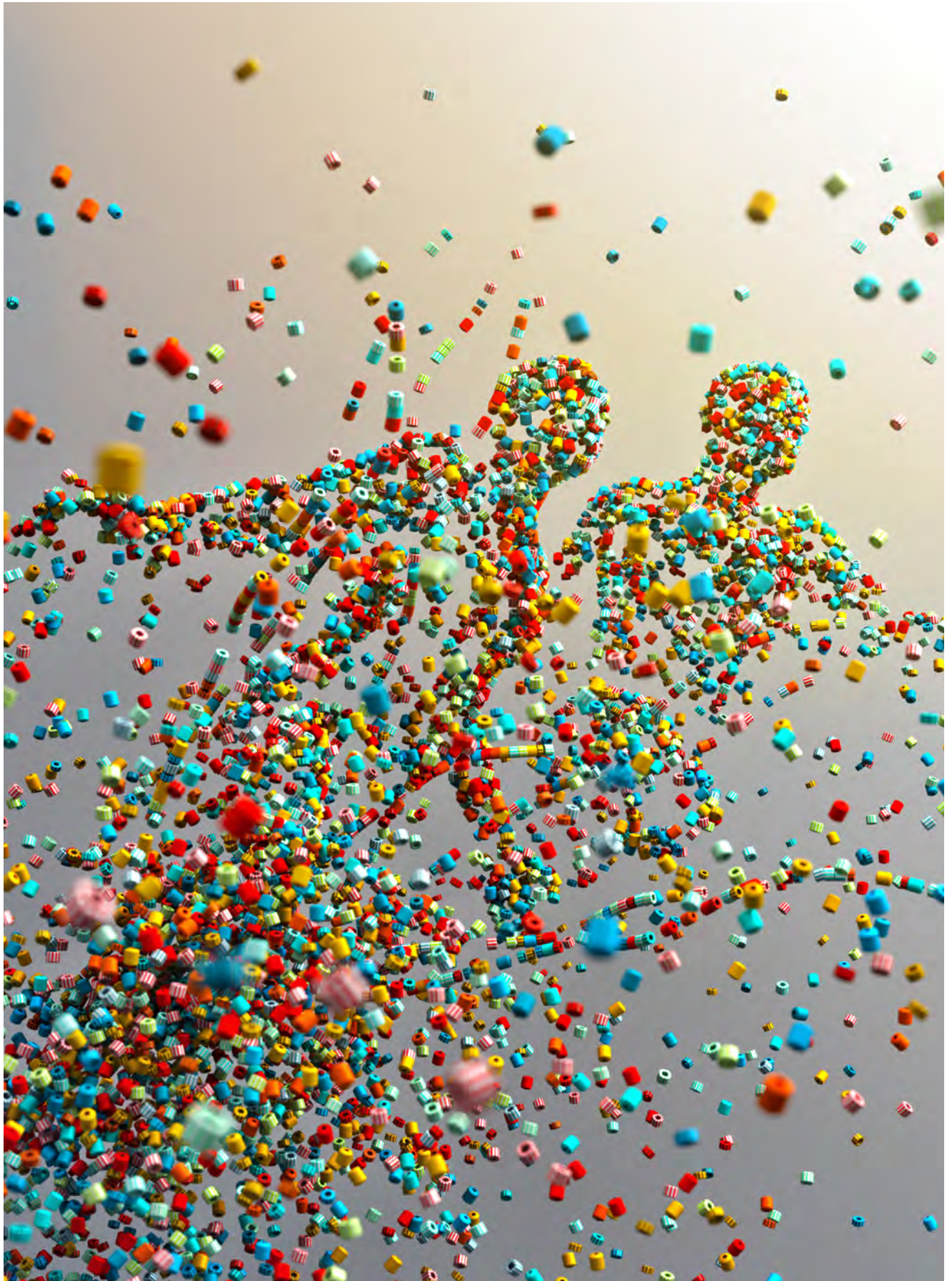
to the infamous 1994 essay by conservative American author and political analyst Robert Kaplan, "the coming anarchy". I have long argued that these fears of African youth build on a racialisation that relentlessly perpetuates the continent as a place of war and disease. This is coupled with a perceived lasciviousness and resultant 'over-fertility' – both stemming from a colonial gaze – even though the continent remains less densely populated than both Asia and Europe.

In perpetuating these narratives of a 'ticking time bomb', African youth are seen as a homogenous, threatening and invisible entity rather than – as some describe themselves – resilient, vibrant survivors. Or, in the *Sheng* lexicon of Nairobi where I am from, *mamorio machampee*: ordinary champions.

The youth bulge narrative conceals these important situated self-descriptions and everyday struggles in favour of a blanket term whose connotations merge with those already circulating about Africa (described by *The Economist* in 2000 – and not for the first time – as "the hopeless continent").

The implications of these portrayals are diverse: from Prince William decrying "overpopulation" as the challenge for conservation, to international aid projects focused on a family planning model that explicitly links smaller families with future opportunities for employment, to the hyper-policing and surveillance of youth activities across the continent. There is also the proliferation of market-driven 'fixes' promoted

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“The reality is that all of our tomorrows will be shaped by young people”

by both governments and NGOs, which posit that unemployed African youth should be entrepreneurs (often ‘agripreneurs’), without seeking to address the structural barriers to these livelihoods, such as land and education.

These are but a few examples of what happens when youth bulge discourses hit the ground: they result in parachuted interventions that ultimately do not benefit young people, since they are remedial and not transformative of the material realities that lead to their exclusion in the first place.

Unfortunately, the failure of these interventions is often attributed to youth themselves. Certainly, older populations often target this grouping (ages 15–35 in the African Union definition) for their perceived laziness against the significant unemployment rate of this demographic. This, in a context where the youth did not invent the economic system and where material conditions are controlled by an older generation who own and control land, institutions and the ability to triple university fees (as happened in Kenya in 2020). What is more, despite the reality that 70% of the Kenyan population are below 35 years of age, only 6.5% of those in the Kenyan parliament are under the age of 40, and this statistic may actually be higher than in many other countries in the region.

The pandemic

The realities facing young people in Africa have been worsened by the pandemic. The many and differentiated effects of this period on the continent and across the

globe have been well rehearsed: the heartbreaking costs to life, economic immiseration, unequal access to quality healthcare and vaccines, and even the policing of lockdowns and curfews. However, more needs to be said about the ways communities, overwhelmingly populated by youth, came together to forge a way forward in conditions no one could have foreseen.

Many young people, including those I meet in Nairobi’s poor urban settlements, have long distrusted the government, a sentiment that deepened in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of pandemic regulations in Kenya. “We are on our own”, was a frequent declaration, even more so than previously. And, despite the desperation, the hunger and the millions rendered unemployed, young people led many grounded interventions to make sure their communities could stay safe amid both government and international neglect.

While youth bulge discourses would have predicted violence – a perfect storm of ‘surplus’ youth plus desperation – they do not account for the vast number of young people across the continent who, even as they were reduced to eating one meal a day, sought to entrench more care labours for their community in the many intentional and even imperfect ways they could. Though many commentators, both local and global, predicted devastation and possible violence, this did not come to pass. Instead, people shared what little they had.

In Kenya, older youth acted as free informal teachers for those children who were out of school, the vast

majority of whom were not in the kinds of schools that had online classes and did not belong to families who could acquire smartphones, internet bundles or laptops, or even, at many times, consistent electricity.

Across the continent, public murals in local languages emphasised the need to wear masks and the dangers of the disease. In Senegal and Nigeria, youth innovated creative sanitation interventions, for example, the solar-powered hand washing station developed by the Kayy Rakhassou Youth of Guédiawaye in Senegal, who also distributed masks. In Tunisia, youth co-organised vaccination drives, and in Congo they used vernacular languages and modes of expression to alleviate Covid-19 fears and misinformation.

In Mathare, Nairobi, where most families need to buy water for their daily use, since there is no extensive networked system for this resource in the area, representatives of a youth group called Pirates significantly lowered the price of water they were selling to residents. This is not a perfect tactic, but one that was symbolic of a youth group, and youth broadly, seeking to contribute to making sure their community was safe while also working to guarantee their livelihoods. This water provision was coupled for months with basic food distribution by a number of youth-led organisations, as well as the courageous efforts of community health workers who were the first responders in contexts where quality healthcare was both distant and unaffordable.

Much has been said about the digital innovations that emerge from Kenya, which is sometimes referred to as the ‘Silicon Savannah’, from M-PESA, the mobile money transfer service first launched in 2007, to the Ushahidi platform, a crowdsourcing technology that informs humanitarian actions. Ultimately, though, it was offline practices co-anchored in sociality, a community ethic, and what some young friends call a youth ‘daring’ or ‘hard-headedness’, that contributed to the endurance of many African communities in the two-plus years of the pandemic.

The conditions for the youth bulge that preceded the pandemic were already challenging and essentially amounted to a material divide between adults and young people, as the grave youth employment rates across the region illustrate. Certainly, Covid-19 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and precarities, particularly in relation to race. But, as the events of the pandemic have shown, youth – these vibrant, ‘resilient survivors’ – continue to both create and reach for possibilities.

The possibilities

What becomes possible when African youth self-narrations are foregrounded? What futures are

enabled when a demographic reality is described by those whom it references?

In early April 2022, I asked a diverse group of young Kenyans to describe how they see themselves. Unsurprisingly, not one referenced the term ‘youth bulge’ or any terminology that mirrored the negative associations in which they are habitually entrapped. Instead, I was told, in Kiswahili, English and *Sheng*, of ‘go-getters’, ‘daring’ subjects, intellectuals and knowledge producers, individuals who belie the many colonial and racialised narratives told about them (such as that they are a looming threat) despite the precarity that many of them endure and which has worsened over the last two years.

One does not need to reach far to see how African youth understand themselves: in the dynamism of Afro-beat and genge music, in the proliferation of youth organisations across the region demanding change and envisioning alternatives to present orders, in the situated feminist movements, and in the everyday calls by diverse young people for transformations in education, politics and ecology.

These self-descriptions are ubiquitous and accessible through digital and offline means. Through the very many ways they convey their senses of self, this continental demographic makes evident the heterogeneity, industry and even defiance of Africa’s youth, who think of themselves not as a surplus population, but as the very people on whom tomorrow depends.

The reality is that all of our tomorrows will be shaped by young people. By the young Africans leading social justice centres across Kenya and Uganda, voluntary people-centred formations that are engaging in powerful praxes for equal rights. By the young people in Burkina Faso who brought down, a generation later, the government that killed Thomas Sankara. By the Nigerian youth whose bodies and ideas are the #EndSARS movement. By the Somali youth in refugee camps in Kenya organising for a peaceful, just and educated future for their country.

These young people have never been an amorphous demographic phenomenon, and African states, in particular, will have to listen and create substantive space for, and eventually transition to, the visions these youth are creating. The first step is the recognition of the diverse self-narrations of this 226 million-strong population, and the auto and collective biographies that belie the limiting ‘dividend’ and ‘bomb’ constructions. Instead, we must recognise their potential, as was described to me earlier, as *mamorio machampee*: ordinary champions. ■

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Does the online world really offer young women and girls more power than ever before?

by Kate Eichhorn

Sidelined on the basis of gender and age, girls and young women historically held little influence in society at large. On the surface, social media has changed this. On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, gender and age no longer appear to be barriers to gaining influence and may even be an advantage. But does influence online translate into increased power in the world?

The influencer as activist

On 11 March 2020, just days before cities like London and New York went into lockdown for the first time, 17-year-old Swedish climate change activist Greta Thunberg called on young people worldwide to abandon their plans for in-person school walkouts to mark the first anniversary of the Climate Strike. As an alternative, she urged them to engage in an online protest using her newly launched hashtag #ClimateStrikeOnline. A year earlier, Emma Grey Ellis, a staff writer at WIRED, had described Thunberg as “evidence of a changing culture of digital activism, one that’s skewing younger and younger every time adult-run institutions get stuck in political gridlock.” Still, in the end, it wasn’t Thunberg’s activism that would dominate headlines during the Covid-19 lockdown, but rather the activism of another 17-year-old girl, bolstered by

little more than a cell phone, Instagram account, and her own tenacity and courage.

In March 2020, Darnella Frazier was unknown to most people outside her immediate community. Her life could not have been more different from Thunberg’s. While Thunberg was travelling around the globe (on a yacht, to avoid contributing to climate change) meeting with world leaders, Frazier was attending Roosevelt High School, a public school serving the Powderhorn Park neighbourhood in Minneapolis. Then, two months into the pandemic, Frazier’s life took a sudden and dramatic turn.

On 25 May, Frazier took her nine-year-old cousin to a local convenience store to purchase a treat. Outside, Frazier spotted the police restraining a man on the pavement. She started filming the incident on her phone. Twenty seconds into the recording, the man – who the world would soon come to know as George Floyd – said, “I can’t breathe.” The video, which lasted 10 minutes, clearly showed Derek Chauvin, then a Minneapolis police officer, kneeling on Floyd’s neck until he stopped breathing. Frazier kept filming the incident until Floyd’s dead body was carried away on a stretcher. When Frazier got home, she uploaded part of the video to her Instagram account. The video went viral and, over the coming weeks, people across the United States and eventually worldwide took to the streets in protest. ▶

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Social media has not given girls like Frazier or Thunberg a voice; girls have always had a voice. But these platforms have offered a convenient – and free – way to amplify their voices, which until recently have all too often been muted. The difference is especially striking in Frazier’s case. Given that the terrain upon which knowledge claims are assessed is structured by gender, age and race, without the benefit of video documentation Frazier’s eyewitness account would likely have been met with scepticism, if not outright hostility. Armed with a mobile device and Instagram account, Frazier had the proof she needed to influence the perspectives of people around the world. Social media is not responsible for the Black Lives Matter protests that took place globally following the death of George Floyd but, without such platforms, Frazier’s ability to intervene and subsequently spur this action would have been unlikely.

For every girl like Frazier, who was awarded a 2021 Pulitzer Prize Special Citation for “courageously recording” George Floyd’s murder, and Thunberg, already a two-time Nobel Prize nominee at 19, there are also hundreds of thousands more whose names we may not recognise but who are also using social media to wield influence on the world. One of the most notable interventions being spearheaded by girls and young women on social media platforms, which was emerging pre-pandemic but expanded considerably during lockdown, are peer-led movements to address young people’s mental health. These girls and young women seem to intuitively understand that they no longer need to wait for adults to fix systemic problems or build services on their behalf since they now have a platform to do this work themselves.

Still, Frazier, Thunberg, and their lesser-known counterparts who are using social media platforms to drive social change may not be the majority. Most girls and young women who have influence online or aspire to have it are not spearheading political movements or tackling mental health issues. More often than not, girls’ and young women’s quest for influence seems to take a very different form.

The influencer as entrepreneur

I recently read a feature-length article about a former student of mine who I’ll call Lily here. I learned that Lily had just purchased a loft in Manhattan and hired an interior designer to furnish it with unique items, including a \$20,000 sofa. I also learned that this loft was not only Lily’s first real estate purchase but might ultimately serve as her retirement home; flush with cash, she plans to retire in five years. I would be surprised to read this story about any of the students I’ve taught since the late 1990s. What made

this story even more remarkable is that Lily is part of Generation Covid.

Like many of her peers, Lily spent over a year and half studying on Zoom, which is where I met her in early 2021. But unlike most of my students, who generally introduce themselves by identifying their major and clarifying their preferred gender pronouns, Lily introduced herself to the class as “a rising influencer on TikTok”. What I did not know at the time was that Lily, who often spent my Zoom classes frantically tapping away on her phone rather than engaging in class discussions, was on a mission. She wanted to become a ‘verified influencer’ (achieved when a social media platform confirms that you are who you claim to be) and a ‘mega-influencer’ (someone with over 1 million followers) before her graduation in May. To achieve this goal, during her final semester of university, she committed to posting 20 to 30 videos a day on TikTok. Unlike many influencers who have a specific focus (make-up tips, fitness and so on), Lily posts videos about whatever she happens to be doing at any given time. As a young, thin, white woman, Lily – or more specifically, her body and the things she does to maintain this body – is the content. Still, it would be remiss to diminish her success. If Lily has turned her life into a reality TV show, she is more than its starring actor; she is also the director, editor, producer and publicist.

Lily’s online influence is also having a clear material impact on her life. After all, what says ‘I’ve made it’ more than a \$20,000 sofa sitting in a spacious loft in one of the world’s most expensive cities? But do girls and young women like Lily who amass incredible influence online also have more power offline? Is their influence fundamentally changing their status in the world at large or just within the sphere of influence they create, at least temporarily, on specific social media platforms?

The pursuit of influence and its cost

Thunberg, Frazier and ‘Lily’ are a study in contrasts. These young women, now between the ages of 19 and 22, have very little in common beyond the social media platforms they have each successfully deployed. They are also living proof of how these platforms are transforming girls’ and young women’s lives. There has been no other point in history when this demographic has been so easily able to influence politics and culture or obtain wealth. Focused on these achievements, it is tempting to conclude that this is a sign of girls’ and young women’s growing influence and power in the world, both as changemakers and as producers and consumers. Unfortunately, while influence is theoretically something one can



“Online influence is acquired on platforms where girls and young women are welcome as guests but still not welcome as owners”

acquire for free or at least with little overhead (all you need is a phone and WiFi connection), it does come at a cost, one which may be especially high for young women.

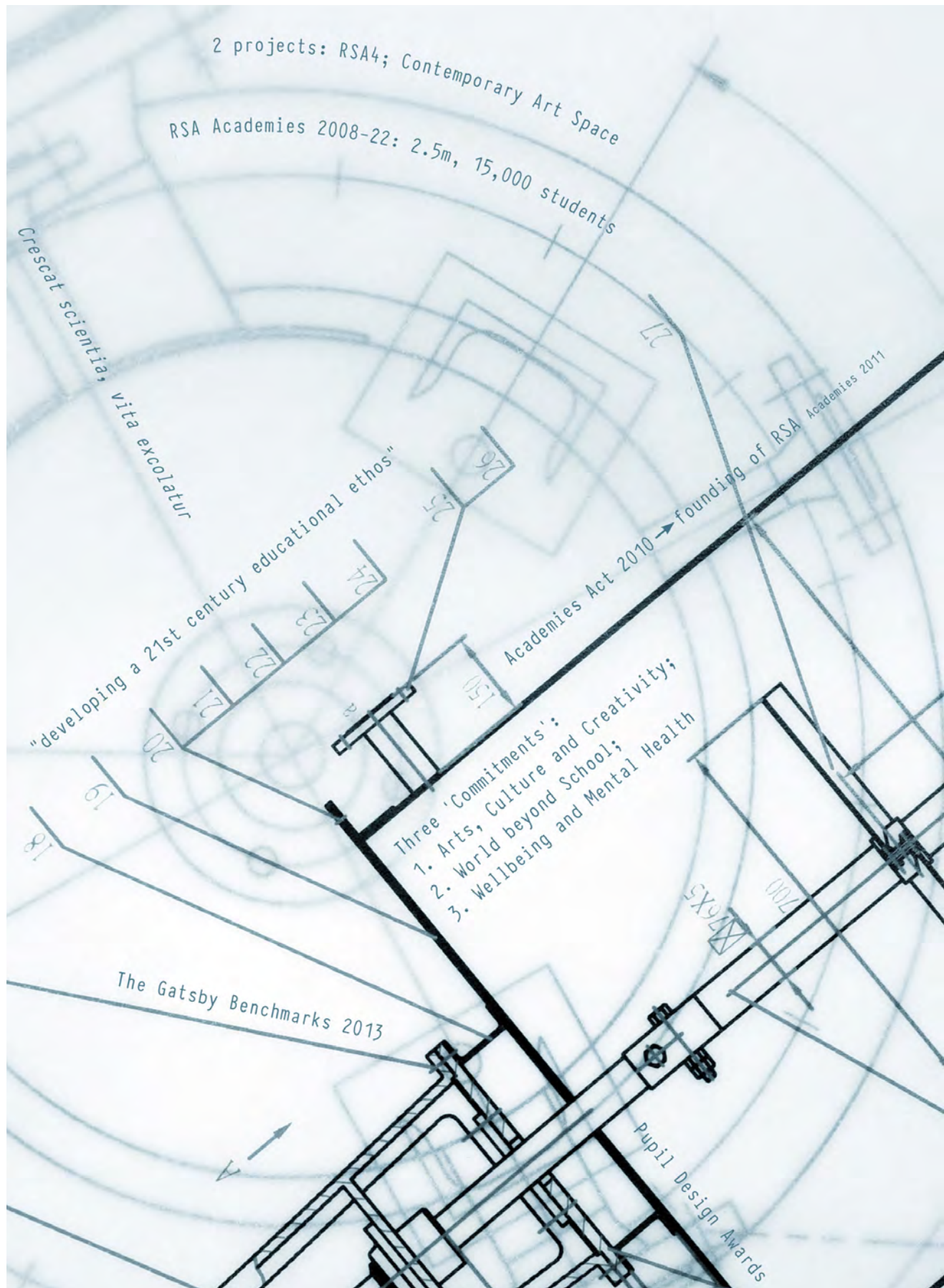
Like anyone who posts online content, girls and young women inevitably sacrifice their labour, time and privacy. Often, they give up much more. In Lily’s case, acquiring influence has required her to expose nearly every part of her body and most details of her life to more than 1 million followers. But the sacrifice does not appear to be a deterrent to the pursuit of influence. One recent US study found that, given the opportunity, over half of young Americans would become an influencer.

In May 2021, Frances Haugen, a product manager at Facebook (recently rebranded as Meta), quit her job, but not before downloading thousands of internal documents. Among the documents was damaging evidence that the company has known for years that its apps, including Facebook and Instagram, are negatively impacting young people, particularly girls and young women. Haugen’s trove included a Facebook study that found that 66% of teen girls (compared with 40% of teen boys) experience negative social comparison while using Instagram. As Haugen explained in her October 2021 testimony to the US Congress, Facebook has long known that its algorithms are likely contributing to the problem since they are designed to expose users to content to which they are already latching on, and in the case of girls, this is often “more and more content that makes them hate themselves”.

The girls and women of Generation Covid, though, are particularly exceptional. They appear to have acquired a level of influence in the spheres of politics, culture, and business that would have been difficult, if not impossible, for previous generations to acquire or even fathom. Yet, this doesn’t necessarily mean that their overall social status is better than that of previous generations.

Social media has enabled girls and young women to gain visibility beyond the bedroom cultures and mall cultures to which they once seemed confined. In this context, visibility is conflated with ‘influence’. The problem is that online influence isn’t necessarily tantamount to influence offline, where influence and power have generally been viewed as synonymous. Online influence is acquired on platforms where girls and young women are welcome as guests but still not welcome as owners. They are guests who are encouraged to linger because they happen to create great content – the type that fosters engagement and is frequently reposted, which is precisely what fuels social media companies’ profits.

Translating this influence into power in the world at large – and ensuring it extends to all girls and women, not just those who users want to look at – will not happen automatically. It will be contingent on moving from the highly visible role of content creators to the much less visible and more integral role of platform builders and owners. Until then, the girls and young women of Generation Covid may have influence online, but in the world at large, their influence and power will remain tenuous. ■



RSA ACADEMIES: A CELEBRATION

by Colin Hopkins

Academies, originally introduced in England in the early 2000s to address educational underperformance, became a more common feature of the education landscape after the Academies Act 2010. This extended opportunities for good and outstanding schools to convert to academy status with the aim of increasing innovation and raising standards.

Quickly spotting this new world of opportunity, the RSA sought to become an academy sponsor early on, aiming to provide a truly distinctive educational experience for pupils, one mediated through formal curriculum and enrichment activities that reflected the RSA's history and dedication to the arts, manufacturing and commerce. The golden thread of the RSA's ambition in sponsoring academies was to "further social justice by improving schools and the life chances of hundreds of young people".

The guiding principles of the project aimed to address social inequality, creating a sense of 'family' through real collaboration between schools and a genuine commitment to creativity in the classroom. Instead of the widely adopted centralised model of academy-trust organisation, the RSA chose a more democratic approach, developing a commonwealth of autonomous institutions in which strong and weak schools both gave and received support.

Early engagement

The RSA's involvement with the academies programme began in 2008 when it sponsored the RSA Academy, Tipton. This work embodied the RSA's dedication to educational innovation in the form of its Opening Minds framework, whose three hour-long lessons combined the transmission of knowledge with the development of life skills or 'competencies' through a multi-disciplinary approach to learning. Students also enjoyed enrichment activities such as Chinese for beginners, gardening, digital photography and sport.

Following the early promise of the Tipton project, the RSA extended its influence in education. It founded RSA Academies in 2011, aiming to establish a community of practice with the vision and values of the RSA acting as the guiding lights for pupil experience and school improvement.

RSA Academies began its contribution in a modest way, working with one 'outstanding' school in the West Midlands (Whitley Academy, Coventry) and supporting two schools in Worcestershire – Arrow Vale RSA Academy and Ipsley Church of England RSA Academy – both in the Redditch three-tier system and in need of improvement at that time. Arrow Vale and Ipsley originally formed the Redditch RSA Academies Trust. Now comprising 11 academies, the renamed Central Region Academies Trust ("founded by the RSA") personifies the vision and values of RSA Academies by pledging "social justice through exceptional schools".

Inspirational experiences

The academies' initial adherence to the Opening Minds philosophy was later replaced by a more conventional approach to the curriculum (driven in part by the government's educational priorities). In other respects, much of the RSA's vision for developing a distinctive experience of education has been carried through to fruition. Over time, many academy-based projects provided the context and opportunity for pupils and staff to connect and network with like-minded peers. Inspirational events such as Artsfest, Takeover Day (at RSA House) and access to the Pupil Design Awards (originally an RSA Academies project) all provided pupils with an experience of being part of the RSA community, raising awareness of the Society's mission and fostering a sense of belonging.

RSA Academies' early priorities included strengthening arts provision and careers education, the latter requiring the adoption of the 'Gatsby Benchmarks' (a framework developed in 2013 on ▶

Colin Hopkins was Executive Director of RSA Academies from 2019–21. He is currently a trustee of St. Bart's Multi-Academy Trust and a member of the John Taylor Multi-Academy Trust and the Staffordshire Schools Multi-Academy Trust, all in the West Midlands

behalf of the Gatsby Foundation by Sir John Holman, comprising eight benchmarks intended to highlight the features of “good careers work”) long before they became statutory. RSA Academies’ proactive, forward-thinking mindset is further exemplified by its encouragement of large-scale research projects such as *A whole-school approach to mental health* (2017–18) funded by the Pears Foundation, now a priority for all involved in education following the pandemic.

The various academy-based projects led by RSA Fellows and Royal Designers for Industry (RDIs) gave pupils unique access to the cultural and intellectual capital epitomised by the RSA. A long-standing partnership with the University of Warwick aimed to raise aspirations, while the ambition of promoting teacher creativity found expression in the establishment of the RSA Academies’ Teaching School Alliance, which offered high-quality teacher training and professional-development opportunities for staff.

Thematic approach

Over time, as RSA Academies’ activities increased, they coalesced into three broad themes or ‘Commitments’: Arts, Culture and Creativity; World beyond School; and Wellbeing and Mental Health. Further work was carried out to define the unique qualities of an RSA school as inclusive, networked, ‘green’ and mission-led, with a detailed framework setting out the nature of the relationship between the RSA and the academies and a methodology for evaluating the impact of the RSA’s ethos on each school.

The first ‘distinctiveness review’ took place in one of the academies just before the pandemic disrupted RSA Academies’ programme of work. The ensuing limitation on school-based activities (when many children were required to learn at home or pupils were confined to ‘bubbles’ or closed groups) created a substantial challenge, since many of these activities brought pupils and colleagues across the family of schools together in a common pursuit. Projects like RSA4 (a social-action project for Year 4 pupils) and the Contemporary Art Space initiative had to be re-imagined, re-designed and delivered in virtual format.

Project legacy

The decision to close the RSA Academies project at the end of its planned funding review on 31 March 2022 reflected various structural challenges in relation to finance and governance, but also recognised the fact that the academies had matured and become strong enough to find their own way, building creatively on the heritage of which they have been part.

Over the lifespan of its work with academies, the RSA has been brought into contact – to a greater

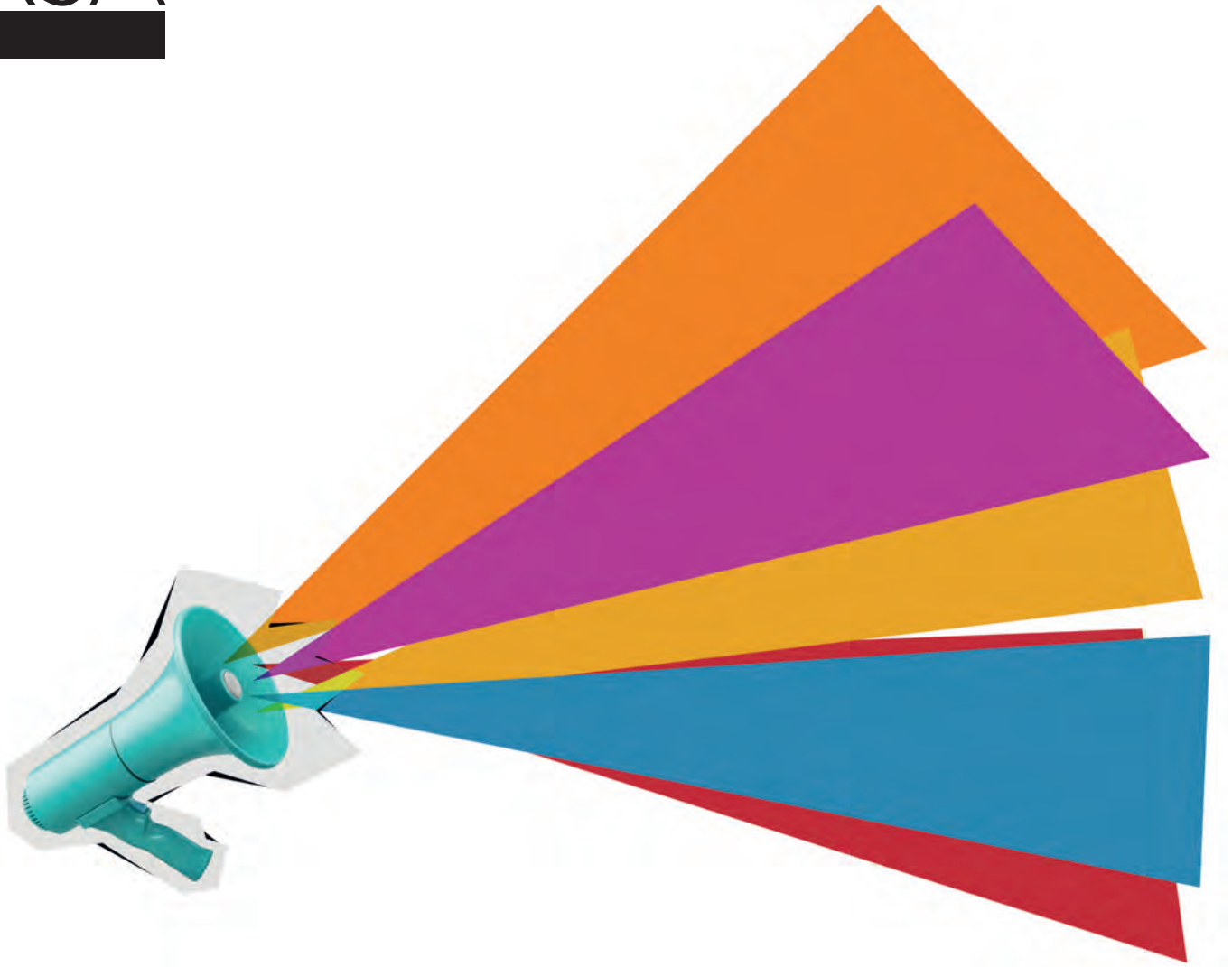
or lesser extent – with some 15,000 students. The Society offered an anchor for purpose and values, a compelling narrative as an organising principle, and its own pantheon of heroes as role models. It gave the communities in the West Midlands and Worcestershire in which it operated the sense of recognition that comes from belonging to a larger enterprise that has a history and a presence.

Over time, the RSA has invested at least £2.5m into the academies project, as well as a huge injection of time and effort by RSA and academy staff, Fellows, RDIs, trustees and advisers. Through its commitment to this initiative, spanning the period from 2008–22, the RSA has demonstrated that it is not simply an organisation for generating ideas, but also one that is prepared to turn ideas into action. RSA Academies has been one of the most substantial initiatives undertaken by the Society in recent years. This was no abstract research project, but a hands-on, practical contribution to developing new approaches to education.

From its early vision, and through the experience of managing its various projects, RSA Academies was able to evolve an entire ethos derived from the culture and values of the Society. Few academy chains would have the cultural and intellectual capital to make such a bold and imaginative contribution to developing a truly 21st-century educational ethos. It is unique and should be celebrated. Everyone involved in this ambitious programme of work understood themselves to be part of a common purpose: to improve the life chances of young people.

The soul of the RSA is its enduring commitment to the progress of human knowledge and culture and its mission to unite people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time. The academies project embodied these aims. It was a unifying force binding the RSA community into the task of opening worlds of opportunity for young people in their own communities.

There is now a strong foundation on which to evolve the RSA’s plans for creating a wider network of schools and educators. This network hopes to build a movement of practitioners, young people, researchers and entrepreneurs aligned to education’s threefold purpose: to develop broad learner capabilities; to encourage individual agency; and to strengthen communities. As schools look to the future following the disruption of the last two years, the RSA’s commitment to promoting social justice and its experience, through the academies’ project, of developing a complete, distinctive and generous approach to education, will illuminate the way for more schools to benefit from a close association with the mission and values of the RSA. ■



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YOU'RE OUT OF DATA

Tech poverty creates real barriers to daily life for many across the UK

by Claudia Baldacchino

🐦@PKHinnovation @claudiabaldacc

Technology continues to play an ever-more significant role in all our lives, from the growing amounts of data we can hold between our fingertips, to the ability to automate repetitive tasks, to the power to connect across the globe. But while technology opens doors for some, for others, it locks them firmly shut, creating a barrier of expensive devices, complicated skills and inaccessible connectivity.

Highlighting digital exclusion

Over the course of multiple lockdowns, many businesses and organisations moved services online to continue supporting their users. Doing so had the unintended consequence of cutting off many of those unable to access the digital world from essential services, resources and support that was suddenly only available online.

Digital exclusion is by no means a new phenomenon, but the pandemic highlighted it across demographics, postcodes and sectors. Whether young people only able to access schoolwork on a parent's mobile phone, adults struggling to access essential services or pay bills, or older people isolated from family, lack of access for many was exacerbated by the closure of libraries, schools, offices and shops. Even as restrictions have eased, this heightened state of digital exclusion remains, as many organisations continue to postpone a full return to in-person work.

Devices, digital skills and connectivity

Here at Scottish social innovation charity People Know How, we also embarked on a digital transformation in March 2020. Our two core services, Positive Transitions (supporting children and young people

in the transition to secondary school) and Reconnect (improving wellbeing by increasing digital and social inclusion) both moved to online and distance service delivery, as did our events, networking and collaboration programmes. With over six years of championing digital inclusion under our belts, we knew we would need to support the people who use our services every step of the way. We strategised a remote hybrid service delivery model targeted at bolstering our service users' digital confidence through varied communication methods, creative resources and an ethos centred on patience and understanding.

This model led to the development of our three-pronged approach to digital inclusion: devices, digital skills and connectivity. We believe that these three tools can best support people to combat digital exclusion. Over the last two years, we have delivered almost 3,000 devices and provided digital support to over 4,000 individuals, winning a Scottish Charity Award in the process.

Recognising that other organisations were going through similar experiences and facing similar challenges, in November 2020 we held Connect Four: Digital Inclusion. Our event invited key voices in digital from across the academic, public, third and business sectors to participate in online discussions and facilitate tangible change towards digital inclusion. A key finding of this event was that the biggest obstacle to digital inclusion was connectivity.

Living without connectivity

Those living without connectivity can be described as living in 'data poverty'. This means that they cannot

Claudia Baldacchino is the Communications and Digital Manager at Scottish social innovation charity People Know How



afford sufficient internet data to meet their essential needs such as shopping for food and maintaining finances, staying connected with family members, and finding employment or education. Data poverty can have far-reaching and damaging effects on the mental, physical and social health of households.

There are currently some connectivity solutions available, but all are temporary. For example, the Scottish government scheme Connecting Scotland offers unlimited connectivity through mobile data for a fixed two-year period. This is a huge step up from the initial offering of 20GB per month, but it still comes with an expiration date. What is needed is a long-term, sustainable solution to data poverty that will continue after the pandemic. That is why we launched Connectivity Now, a campaign to end data poverty in Scotland.

The campaign manifesto outlines three main actions that we believe can end data poverty in Scotland. First, regulate connectivity by offering better packages to people on low incomes and viewing internet as a basic utility alongside gas, electricity and water. Second, link connectivity to shared spaces. If done securely, sharing and subsidising data through community hubs and social housing can substantially widen access to data. Third, 'zero-rate' essential service websites. 'Zero-rating' is the act of allowing access to certain websites for free, or in other words, without spending any additional data, a concept similar to freephone numbers.

Connectivity Now is a call to action for all sectors to unite our experiences from the pandemic and do something about data poverty. We believe that, through cross-sectoral collaboration, these three action points

can eliminate data poverty and bring about connectivity for all. Since launch, we have campaigned for pledges of support from organisations and community groups to back us as we lobby the government to implement policy change that can make the campaign goals a reality.

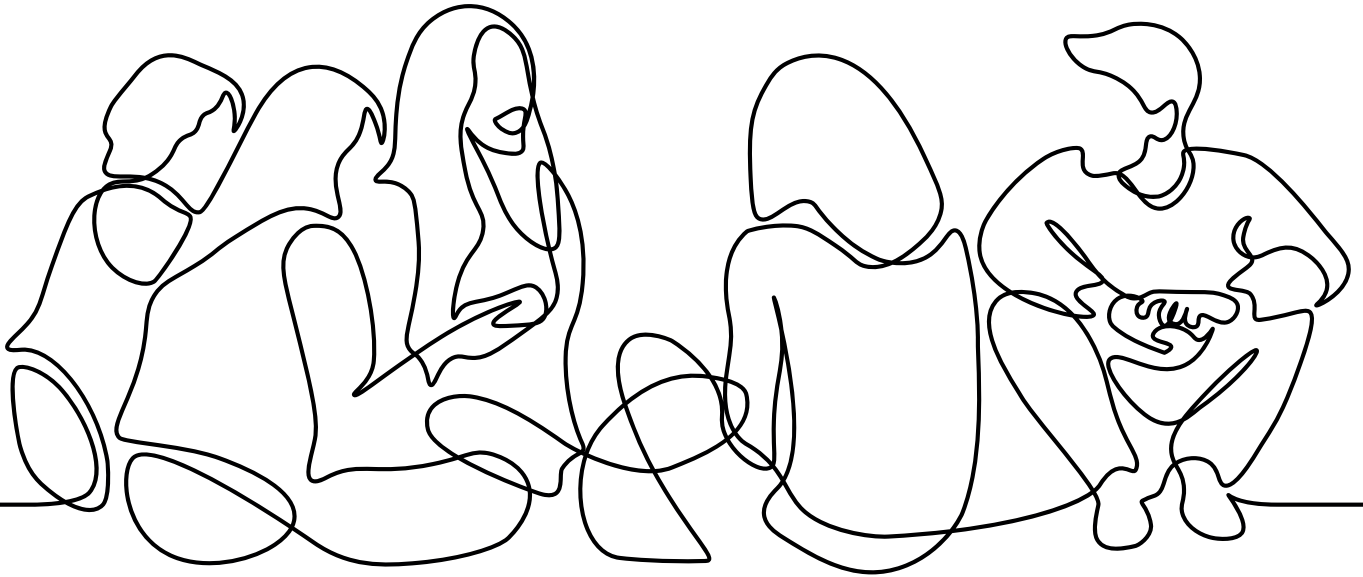
Data poverty is just one aspect of poverty, but it is one that causes numerous additional challenges, reducing access to education and employment, heightening the cost of living, and negatively impacting wellbeing. We are calling on policymakers to recognise the impact that data poverty has on people. We want them to action our manifesto points, engage in conversations with organisations working directly with the people affected by these issues, and embed digital inclusion in policies, strategies and plans for future development. Together, we can implement lasting change across Scotland.

The road ahead

As we continue to run Connectivity Now, the support for our campaign and our growing list of pledgers has facilitated talks with local government and partner organisations about creating a new digital inclusion strategy for all ages. We also continue to shape this programme on the national stage using findings from our work supporting the local community with digital.

People Know How encourages organisations and community groups from all sectors to pledge their support to Connectivity Now. By uniting our voices and collaborating across sectors, we can make ourselves heard as a voice for all those affected by data poverty. ■

■ *To find out more and pledge to Connectivity Now, visit peopleknowhow.org/connectivity-now*

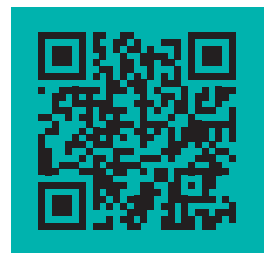


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SCHOOL'S OUT

Does linking exclusions to critical services fail young people at risk?

by Mehak Tejani and Hannah Breeze

🐦 @MehakTejani @hannahbreeze9

Research shows that being excluded from school can leave a young person feeling demoralised, undervalued and isolated. Permanent exclusion can severely impact a young person's life outcomes and cause intergenerational trauma and disengagement from the education system.

Between autumn term 2018 and autumn term 2019 (the last term unaffected by Covid-19), permanent exclusions and suspensions increased by 5% and 14%, respectively. Permanent exclusions within primary schools increased by a staggering 21% during the same period. The RSA's *Pinball Kids* report, published in 2020, shows that pupils who are more likely to experience exclusions have complex needs and vulnerabilities, often at the intersections of special educational needs and disabilities, trauma and adverse childhood experiences related to poverty and home-life disturbances.

But what happens when an exclusion is seen to be the only option to access appropriate provision for a young person at risk?

Emergent findings from the RSA's ongoing action research in Oldham, East Sussex, and Worcestershire show that, under certain circumstances, exclusions are a cry for help from school leaders who feel they have exhausted the parameters of the support they can otherwise offer to pupils. Numerous factors contribute to the decision to exclude a pupil, including: rising pupil mental health needs combined with a 9% cut to per-pupil spending in 2019-20 (the largest since 2009-10, per the Institute of Fiscal Studies' 2021 spending report); limitations on space, staff resourcing and capabilities; and fragmented, limited, and often bureaucratic referral pathways to access specialised and timely support for the pupil and staff members (largely due to the £1.7bn yearly reduction in local authorities'

early intervention services as noted in the Public Services Committee's *Children in Crisis* report). When deciding to initiate an exclusion, school leaders often face a tension between balancing the acute needs of pupils at risk with the wider needs of other pupils and staff.

Adopting a no-exclusion policy, while it may be morally justifiable, is challenging to achieve in practice. Nevertheless, given the dire impact of a school exclusion on a pupil's educational and life outcomes, as well as on their social, emotional and mental health, not to mention the economic cost to society, exclusions should cease to exist as an option as much as possible. This aspiration, however, requires the correct structures in place to provide schools with the necessary resources to support pupils at risk of exclusion early and appropriately, resources that are currently only mobilised when an exclusion has already taken place.

The RSA's three-year action research is testing one such structure: preventative multi-agency collaboration across education, health, social care, alternative provision, youth justice and the voluntary sector. Through local working groups in Oldham, Worcestershire, and East Sussex we will be co-designing the ambition and action plan for effective multi-agency collaboration to reduce preventable exclusions. Over the next two academic years, supported by the RSA, local partners will pilot, monitor and evaluate, and adapt their action plans to ensure the greatest and longest-lasting impact towards meeting the needs of their communities' most vulnerable populations through timely and effective multi-agency collaboration. ■



Mehak Tejani is a Senior Researcher in the RSA's Education team and leads the team's work on school exclusions; **Hannah Breeze** is a researcher at the RSA



YOUTH WORKS

How three RSA Fellows are fighting global inequalities standing in the way of young people

by Leah Clarkson
 @LK_Clarkson

Many young people, repeatedly told they cannot look forward to the security of jobs, home ownership, or a functioning planet on which to procreate, were struggling even before the pandemic. This issue's Global profiles the projects of three young RSA Fellows all focused on improving the quality of life for young people by rectifying inequality of access, of representation and of information. Or, put another way, each seeks to rectify the inequality of hope.

Sharmi Surianarain, FRSA, is Chief Impact Officer at the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, a not-for-profit social enterprise creating solutions for youth unemployment in Rwanda and South Africa. Johanssen Obanda, FRSA, is the Executive Director of Jabulani Youths for Transformation (JAY4T), where he works to co-create social enterprises with young people in Kisumu, Kenya. The Green Line, a Toronto-based online news source with a unique core editorial model, is the brainchild of Canadian journalist Anita Li, FRSA.

Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator works with government, the private sector, civil society and more than 1.5 million youth partners to support opportunities for young people in Rwanda and South Africa. During the pandemic, it was forced to find innovative ways to use technology to bridge the gap between youth and earning opportunities. After shifting online, Harambee developed multiple channels of support for youth to engage with its work, including radio shows, WhatsApp chatbots, traditional landlines, and learner management systems. In 2021, it launched SAYouth, a 'datafree' website (its content is available to users without mobile data costs) connecting young people across South Africa to local earning and learning opportunities.

Meanwhile, in Kenya, JAY4T helps young people to navigate the economic and environmental challenges present in Kisumu, where six out of 10 youth are unemployed, homeless, involved in criminal activity or problems at school, or abusing substances due to increasing socioeconomic uncertainties, including the impact of Covid-19. JAY4T uses a 'Positive Youth Development' approach, which optimises the constructive development of young people within their communities, with an emphasis on co-creating ways of working. The project is hosting a series of 'mind-shift camps', which help young people to engage in skills learning with an overall goal to "transform Africa and live up to their lives" and enable young people to work together to take action and create sustainable solutions.

The Green Line is an online news source dedicated to serving "Gen Zs and Millennials, as well as other underrepresented communities". After two decades in journalism, founder Anita Li set out to create a more self-aware, inclusive, equitable and community-driven local and solutions-oriented outlet in Toronto. The Green Line approaches issues with an innovative four-step editorial process: the 'explainer' sets up the problem or issue in clear, easy-to-understand language; the 'feature' provides a deep dive into the issue; the 'event' brings together writers, sources and community members to connect and brainstorm 'solutions', which are then published in article form. The Green Line focuses on hyper-local reporting and the use of nuance and bridge-building to combat polarisation. It seeks to empower people, particularly younger people, with knowledge as a means of generating actionable ideas and solutions. ■

■ To find out more, visit harambee.co.za; [facebook.com/jay4t/](https://www.facebook.com/jay4t/); and thegreenline.to

Leah Clarkson
 is the Editor of
 RSA Journal

MIND MATTERS

Challenging embedded beliefs can benefit mental and planetary health

by Charlie Hertzog Young
 @utopianrealism



I have been campaigning on climate change since I was 14, propelled to act by a seemingly paradoxical twinning of abject terror and a scintillating utopianism built around the kind of future we could create from the ashes of the old order. I got involved in direct actions (including when my friend superglued himself to then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown), community organising and lobbying world leaders at Davos and the United Nations.

Eventually, the terror caught up with me and I felt woefully unable to do what I thought was needed of me to stop the world catching fire. At 19 I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. At 28 I jumped off a building and spent a month in a coma. I am now a double amputee.

I have learnt through my recovery that mental health and climate change are deeply intertwined. Disordered climate = disordered minds. The RSA is championing three ideas that benefit both elements.

The first is basic income. Countless studies from trials on four continents tell us that the economic security a basic income provides is transformative for mental health. Linking basic income to climate change could go one step further, instituting a tax on carbon and redistributing revenue to citizens. This would be a progressive redistribution of wealth (requiring some tweaks to make sure the poor do not lose out) and reduce inequality, poverty and precarity, while giving recipients a desperately needed source of hope that we are actually tackling climate change.

Second, participatory and direct democracy is key for devising and implementing climate solutions, while empowering citizens. In 2020, Climate Assembly UK, commissioned by six House of Commons select committees, generated transformative proposals and

boosted participants' self-reported feelings of agency and wellbeing. Opening routes into the corridors of power can address people's feelings of powerlessness around the climate crisis. Successful examples include the participatory budgeting system in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where residents vote on a significant portion of local spending, or the UK town of Frome, which has localised its politics and its economy.

Finally, the RSA's Future of Work Programme is world class. Relevant issues include flexible working patterns (including working from home), reforms to precarious contracts and a four-day-week. A report last year found a four-day-week could reduce the UK's carbon emissions by about 20%. Such interventions would give people more time, security and autonomy to pursue non-work-related passions, volunteer, and spend time with loved ones. I know from experience that the RSA is working hard on these issues, and could further pursue integrating them into their own working practices. Healthier and more sustainable norms are needed across the policy entrepreneur space as a whole, and the RSA could stand to gain a great deal by pioneering culture shift.

The RSA could also make it easier for members of the public to get involved. There is potential to move beyond sharing information and building networks between Fellows, however laudable, to support people outside the traditional spaces in which third-sector outfits operate. Many want to spread the kinds of ideas the RSA champions in their neighbourhoods, workplaces and organisations. This builds community. This builds purpose. But most importantly, it is how systemic change happens: by wrestling it out of the academy and into the messy fabric of real-world impact. ■

Charlie Hertzog Young, FRSA, is a researcher and writer focusing on the intersections of climate change, mental health and new economics. He writes for the *Ecologist* and consults for several organisations, having previously worked for the RSA on basic income.



THERE IS A SECRET PLEASURE IN BOTTLING UP YOUR OLD LIFE



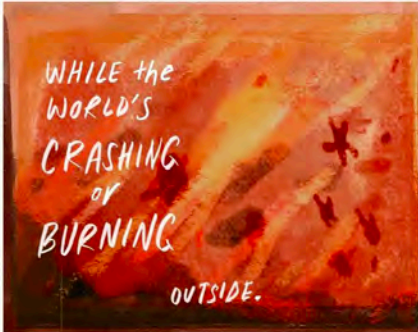
TO FIND MEANING IN THE EXPERIENCES



YOU ONCE TOOK FOR GRANTED

WHILE THE WORLD'S CRASHING OR BURNING

OUTSIDE.



A BITTERSWEET FEELING

OF COLLECTING THE MEMORIES OF WHO YOU ONCE WERE



CAREFULLY CURATING ONLY THE BEST VERSION OF YOURSELF

THINGS YOU ONCE LOVED OR LIKED FEROCIOUSLY



OR THOUGHT THAT OTHER PEOPLE DID.

CONFRONTING OLD VERSIONS OF YOURSELF IN DUSTY CORNERS AND SAYING

SHOO!

YOU'RE BURSTING MY BUBBLE!

YOU'RE FLIPPING MY PLANS! WOW!



THIS IS NICE.

THIS IS OKAY.

THIS IS PERFECTLY ACCEPTABLE.

RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW.



Kaveri Gopalakrishnan is a Goa-based illustrator and art director

RSA

WHERE MEMORIES ARE MADE

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