RSA JOURNAL

Issue 1 2025

ESTABLISHED 1783

Rebuilding trust
Artist Beth Cavener's sculptures explore the power – and fragility – of what connects us

CONTENTS

TRUST

Trust
Cover artwork by **Beth Cavener**, a Montana-based artist known for her detailed, expressive clay sculptures that explore human emotion and psychological tension. Her work often features animals or hybrid forms. This edition's cover image showcases the sculpture *Shards*, the centrepiece of her recent exhibition, *Trust* (for more on Cavener, go to our profile on p. 27).

To read *RSA Journal* online, visit *www.thersa.org/rsa-journal*

The RSA (The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce),
8 John Adam Street,
London WC2N 6EZ
Tel +44 (0)20 7930 5115
www.thersa.org
Registered as a charity in England and Wales, no. 212424 and in Scotland no. SC037784

RSAJOURNAL

Editor
Leah Clarkson
(editor@rsa.org.uk)
Head of Editorial
Mike Thatcher
Managing Editor
Jasmin Southgate
Design Director
Hayden Russell
Head of Production
Jack Morgan
Distribution
Mark Jaeger
Agency Founder, Wardour
Martin MacConnol

The RSA Journal is published for the RSA by Wardour,
2nd Floor, Kean House,
6 Kean Street,
London WC2B 4AS
Tel +44 (0)20 7010 0999
www.wardour.co.uk

RSA Journal, Volume CLXXI
No. 5600 Issue 1 2025
ISSN: 0958-0433

Advertising Sales
Bourne Media - Mark Toland
mark@bourne-media.co.uk
Tel 07771 881251

The **RSA Journal** is printed on paper that has been carbon offset through the World Land Trust.

The journal is printed on FSC-certified Mix paper. The Forest Stewardship Council is an international non-profit organisation that promotes sustainable forestry for environmental and social benefits. Working with approved partner organisations, the FSC inspects forests and supply chains and tracks timber through each stage of the supply chain.

The FSC Mix designation indicates the paper is made from a combination of recycled materials and materials from FSC-certified or controlled forests, meaning the wood in these products must be responsibly sourced.

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper | Supporting responsible forestry FSC® C007810

WORLD LAND TRUST™
www.carbonbalancedpaper.com
CBP020501

Starting in 1783, the RSA published *Transactions of the Society*, which became *The Journal of the Society of Arts* in 1852 ('Royal' was added to the title in 1908). The publication assumed its current name, *RSA Journal*, in 1987.

COMMENT

Andy Haldane

A question of trustworthiness

Access to information has never been greater, the world never more of an open book. Transparency has become a watchword for the good governance of communities, governments, businesses and civil society organisations. Yet knowing so much more, how is it we appear to trust so much less, including our communities, governments, businesses and civil society organisations?

One explanation is that familiarity can breed contempt as well as trust. The more we see, the less we might like and respect. The contents of some sausages – and institutions – are best kept secret. Another explanation is that the drive for transparency may itself be a reflection of failures in trust. A truly trustworthy person or organisation is one whose word, rather than the small print in their contracts, is their bond.

Whatever the explanation, the pattern over the past half-century is clear enough: while technology has increased the *quantity* of our connections to distant ties – our Facebook 'friends' – this has come at the expense of the *quality* of connections to our closest ties – our real friends and communities. Rachel Botsman explores this paradox in the lead article of this 'Trust' issue of the *Journal*.

Nowhere is the haemorrhaging of trust greater than in politics – a topic I explore in my discussion with Britain's leading pollster Professor Sir John Curtice. Why have populist insurgents stolen a march over mainstream parties in their trust among the public?

Are we witnessing a rupture in political systems, with looser ties among the electorate generating a political landscape more fluid than solid?

"A truly trustworthy person or organisation is one whose word, rather than the small print in their contracts, is their bond"

In such a dynamic and uncertain environment, optimism and imagination are sorely needed, yet are often in short supply. As Sumit Paul-Choudhury discusses in an article based on his new book *The Bright Side*, collective optimism has always held the key to human innovation and progress. When we have collective belief in a better future, even the toughest global challenges can morph into opportunities.

Yet building trust remains elusive, perhaps, in part because the concept is itself multifaceted. To that end, the other articles in this issue examine trust from different disciplinary angles – including Caitlin Looby on trust in science, Professor Raj Chetty on trust and social mobility and Beth Cavener's wonderful animal sculptures exploring trust and human emotion.

Some of our articles offer solutions, while others reflect on the trust dilemma and how best to understand it. As ever, they are meant as a prompt for debate, and action, in the Fellowship and beyond. These issues are particularly relevant in this the RSA's year of 'Connection' and against a backdrop of increasing division at the geopolitical, national and local level.

In her Reith lectures in 2002, philosopher Onora O'Neill drew the important distinction between trust and trustworthiness. She argued it is the latter that really matters. Her words have rarely been more prescient. In a rudderless world, leaders will need to rediscover their humanity, humility and humour to re-establish trustworthiness and rise to O'Neill's challenge. ■

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA.

RSA NEXTGEN

Social entrepreneur **Bianca Tavella** brews up change at the Fair Shot cafe

Where did you grow up?
I was born and raised in London to Italian parents in a tight-knit Italian community. Though many of the friends I grew up with have moved back to Italy, whenever we see each other, that bond remains.

What did you want to be as a child and what are you now?
I went through a lot of phases, but mainly a dolphin trainer or a vet, a human rights lawyer or a social worker. Now, I am the founder and CEO of Fair Shot, a registered charity and unique social enterprise cafe in London's Covent Garden. A dream of mine ever since I was 13 years old, Fair Shot is my response to the staggeringly high unemployment rate among adults with learning disabilities in the UK. Via our year-long training programme and follow-on employment programme, we provide a secure pathway into paid, sustainable employment for young adults with learning disabilities.

What is one thing the world needs to know about you?
My aim is to create a society where adults with learning disabilities have an equal and fair chance of obtaining and maintaining employment.

What's your favourite way to spend a Sunday morning?
Sleeping in, Mass or a walk, and then a big lunch. I don't really eat out a lot, but a big pasta like spaghetti with crab and cherry tomatoes or rigatoni with zucchini is my favourite Sunday lunch!

What are you most passionate about and why?
I grew up in a community with many children my age with learning disabilities. It became my absolute goal to create a tangible, realistic solution to the fact that people with learning disabilities are not fully welcomed into our society. I started my Fair Shot journey at the age of 21 when I left a job in NGOs, and after six years working in hospitality, creating a business plan in my spare time and fundraising the initial £350k needed for launch, we finally opened the doors to our very first cafe in Mayfair in 2021.

My deep passion to level the playing field for people with learning disabilities has led me to where I am today. I am so proud to have created a community where customers, staff and trainees feel like they belong.

If you couldn't be yourself, who would you be?
I don't think I would want to be anyone else – I have worked too hard on myself!

What is the one thing every person should be doing to help the planet?
Educate yourself about something, especially around the opposite of your point of view, before you form an opinion. If people were a little bit more open-minded, led with kindness (not judgement) and gave people the benefit of the doubt, then we could break the cycle of mistrust.

What is the most important work the RSA could be doing right now to create change?
Hire a Fair Shot graduate :). ■

Scan the QR code to learn more about the Fair Shot cafe – and plan your visit!

Photo: Courtesy of Bianca Tavella

NEW FELLOWS

Ashok Gupta

Ashok Gupta is Chair of New Capital Consensus, a coalition of Chatham House, the Financial Systems Thinking Innovation Centre (a working group within the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries), University of Leeds and Radix Big Tent. The project aims to identify how the UK investment system could be rewired to better address the country's societal and environmental challenges. As Chair of a Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association Taskforce, he led a review of UK defined benefit pensions, and has played key roles in building several financial services businesses including The Phoenix Group, Quilter and St James's Place. Previously, Ashok was Joint Deputy Chair of a Bank of England Working Group on Procyclicality and Treasurer/Trustee of the Ethical Journalism Network.

Leisha Beardmore

Leisha Beardmore is the Global Senior Specialist on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support and Gender Based Violence at the International Medical Corps. They are the Founder of Art House Collective, a global residency programme for interdisciplinary art and creative practice, and Founder and CEO of Cadre, a non-profit organisation focused on trauma recovery and healing after human rights violations. Leisha is also a Research Fellow and Senior Researcher at Stanford University working across the Department for Psychiatry and the Center for Human Rights and International Justice, and volunteers in New York City at Bellevue Hospital Program for Survivors of Torture.

Fiona Curran

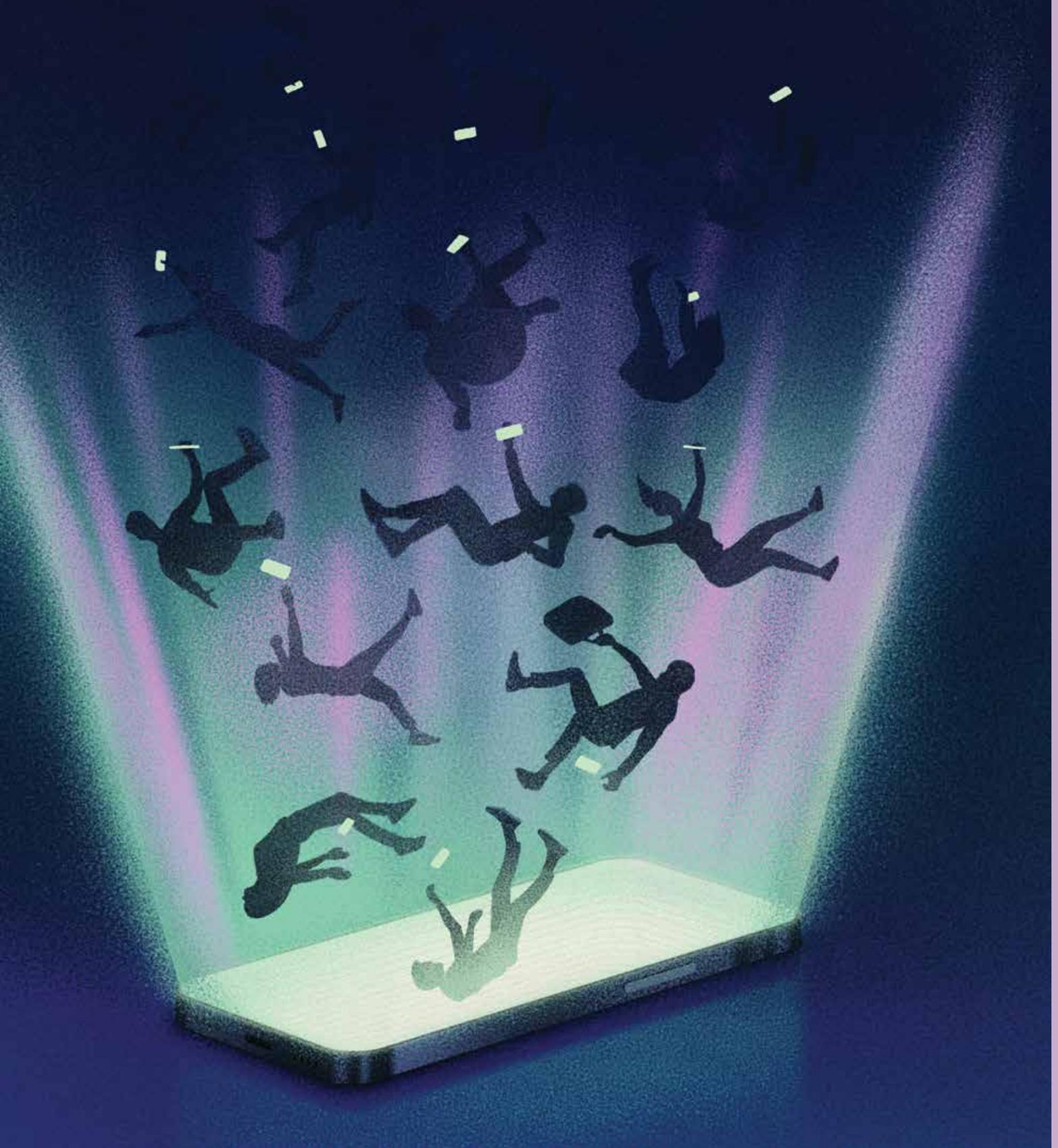
Fiona Curran has been Chief Executive of prison arts charity Koestler Arts since June 2023, having been its Director of Arts, responsible for awards and showcasing, from 2009 to 2023. Koestler Arts brings together artists, the criminal justice system and arts organisations, so that thousands of people in challenging settings such as prisons and high-security hospitals can access the benefits of the arts. In 2024, the charity's ongoing partnership with London's Southbank Centre produced its 17th exhibition, entitled *No Comment*. The charity's yearly awards programme, the Koestler Awards, receives submissions that span 53 art forms.

Adrian Kuah

Adrian Kuah is Professor of Strategy and Sustainability at James Cook University Australia, Singapore Campus, where, in 2017, he founded its Circular Economy and Sustainability programme. In a career spanning three decades, he has overseen several infrastructure projects, including Singapore's Deep Tunnel Sewerage System. Adrian has also served on Singapore's National Committee for Circularity of Materials and as Head of Delegation at several of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) circular economy meetings. In 2024, he was appointed an ISO International Expert, helping developing countries in Asia transition towards the circular economy.

Nina Nannar

Nina Nannar is currently Arts Editor of ITV News, having originally joined Independent Television News (ITN) in March 2001 as the media and arts correspondent. Additionally, for the past three years Nina has hosted the ITV News podcast *Unscripted*, in which she speaks to guests from the world of arts and entertainment. Among many other appointments, Nina is a member of Bafta and the Brit Awards Voting Academy, voting for both awards programmes, and serves as an Ambassador for the King's Trust and the British Asian Trust and is a mentor to fellow journalists from ethnic minority groups.



TRUST FALL

Technology has enabled our retreat into increasingly homebound lives of frictionless convenience – but at what cost?

Words: Rachel Botsman **Illustrations: Marcin Wolski**

A young man sits on his sofa, glances at his phone, and smiles. Celine Dion's *A New Day Has Come* starts playing. He wraps a grey fluffy blanket around himself, cuddles his cat, then dances around the room, delighted. *When Millennials cancel plans* appears at the bottom of the screen, accompanied by hashtags such as #lookafteryou and #self-care. The video, just one of countless memes featuring people revelling over cancelled plans, has been viewed more than three million times on TikTok, and illustrates a profound shift currently happening across generations.

Last year, Princeton University sociologist Patrick Sharkey published a paper titled *Homebound* which charted an "astounding change" in the time spent at home for every subset of the population and across virtually all daily activities. In the past two decades, time spent at home has risen among American adults by more than 690 minutes in a typical week. In the UK, the average time spent inside our homes daily is 18 hours and 43 minutes. Technology is shifting us away from the communal activities we once enjoyed outside our homes, leading us to an increasingly insular, home-based experience.

In recent years, I've experienced the pull of wanting to stay home far more. Not only in myself, but in my family and friends and society at large. We used to go to the movies to watch a film – now we flop on the sofa to stream an entire series. Restaurants were places to enjoy meals together, but now, on-demand delivery services bring anything to our doorsteps. We used to go to dances, clubs and bars to meet people, but now dating apps and flirting with flame emojis mean you don't have to leave the house to find a partner or to have sex (the virtual kind). We used to go to offices to meet and interact with colleagues in person, but today, 25% of all global employees work fully remotely. Even worshipping rituals have become more homebound, with a quarter of Britons watching religious services online.

Hijacking an ancient need

Our innate instincts to leave the house, explore and take risks together in person are being rewired and numbed. But our minds and bodies were not designed to be self-contained, on-demand, homebound individuals. We're social animals meant to live in groups and *depend* on others for wellbeing. In modern culture, though, where the bias is to overemphasise competition and individualism, dependency has become almost a dirty word. When I help someone down at my local allotment and they give me some fresh vegetables as thanks, it allows for reciprocation – and those small, simple moments of cooperation are needed for trust to flourish.

In this light, technology can be seen as an evolutionary trap for collective trust, a modern invention hijacking an ancient need. My children, ages 11 and 13, have never known a world where they can't get almost everything without ever needing to interact with another human. Gaming, shopping, scrolling, studying or working from home have undoubtedly brought their comforts, conveniences, and ready-made entertainment, but it's not good for us. According to Sharkey's research, increased time on home activities is tied with a "strong reduction" in self-reported wellbeing and happiness.

There are no Covid lockdowns to blame any more – we're *choosing* to spend more time at home and by ourselves than in any other period since the 1960s, when official 'Time Use' surveys began across Europe, the UK and the US. Compared to 2003, people today spend 240 fewer hours a year connecting in-person with family, friends and co-workers. A decade ago, research showed the average British adult had 5.1 close friends. Now, it's down to just 3.7 – a 27% drop. Even more worryingly, nearly one in 10 individuals say they now have no close friends at all. That's a staggering 50% rise in a decade. The problem is so systemic that, in 2024, the World Health Organization founded a new Commission on Social Connection, calling it a "global health priority".

"Our minds and bodies were not designed to be self-contained, on-demand, homebound individuals"

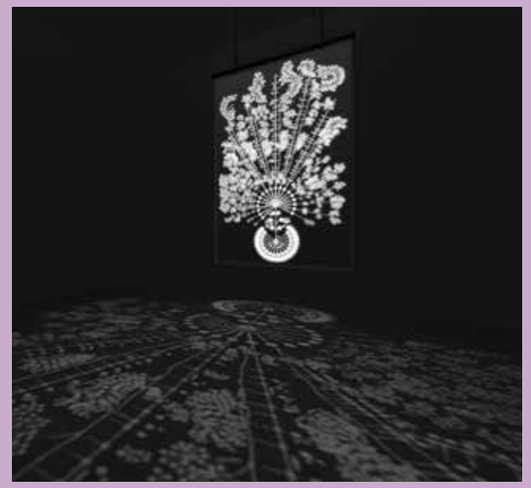
Anti-social society

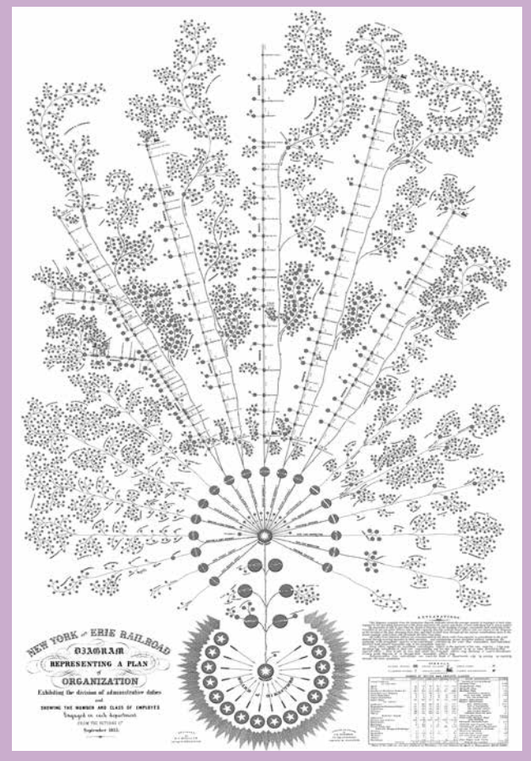
We are the most hyper-connected group in human history, with the lowest levels of trust – in ourselves, others, our communities, information and institutions. So, what factors are driving this more insular, home-based way of life? And why are the consequences to human trust so essential to understand?

For the first time in human civilisation, more people – of all ages and across demographics – are living alone, some by choice, many not. The shift in living arrangements has implications in how people come together inside and outside their homes. It also shapes whether individuals perceive themselves as a self-contained unit or part of a wider interconnected whole.

Roots of Trust exhibition

Rachel Botsman will show a new art installation called *Roots of Trust* at the London Design Biennale at Somerset House in June 2025. The piece illuminates and reimagines a historical design artefact that forever changed people's working lives – the first known organisational chart, created in 1855.





Financial anxiety is also playing a significant role. It is harder to buy your own place, earn a decent wage, pay off crushing student debt and even retire at 65 – or, in some instances, ever be able to afford to stop working. If the price of a meal out, alcohol, a club and a taxi or train home has increased beyond your means, what choice is there but to stay home?

Unsurprisingly, changes to our daily patterns and behaviours during the pandemic accelerated shifts already underway. With tech as a mediator, it became easier to avoid the complexities and messiness of real-life interactions, and many of these habits of the pandemic have stuck. If you're not interested in what's being covered in a virtual meeting, just put it on mute. If you don't agree with what's being discussed in an online class, leave; nobody is likely to notice. If you don't approve of exchanges on social media, delete the account. All these actions allow us to reduce or even remove friction in our relationships – but they also reinforce the illusion that, somehow, we can make the world more manageable and controllable through clicks alone.

The more technology eliminates friction from our lives, the more intolerant of friction we become. Frictionless design removes kinks, speed bumps and anything that slows us down. It helps us accomplish tasks with minimal cognition and effort and contact with each other. That might be wonderful for commerce, but not for social relationships. Soon, any interaction that requires waiting, patience or exertion becomes, well, annoying, and that's why we ultimately become less forgiving of human friction. And I don't just mean of outbursts on social media. I mean the healthy doubt, disagreement, disappointment and discomfort which are more likely to happen when interacting with real human beings in-person. In real life, conflict can't be avoided by switching people off like an Alexa.

Lockdowns offer only a partial explanation of why we've become more anti-social. Like a sourdough starter that has slowly been fed over time, the homebound, phone-bound dynamic has been growing and responding to the environment for decades. In his book *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam argued that technological advancements, notably the car and television, had led to decreased face-to-face interactions, a disintegration of communal ties and a more individualistic society.

Putnam also warned us about what happens when the shared spaces in which unrelated people convene and those organisations that anchor community life disintegrate – an erosion of social capital. In England today, local ▶

authorities spend nearly £330m less per year on parks and open spaces than a decade ago, which has led to the rapid deterioration of those spaces. According to the YMCA, investment in youth services in England and Wales has been cut by 70% in less than a decade, resulting in the closure of 750 youth centres. One library closure here, one local swimming pool there, another community hall closed… each of these many individual cuts breaks the lives and ties of an entire neighbourhood.

When we let our public spaces degrade, it's a natural progression that social relations will follow. If there is nowhere to hang out, where do you stay? Home. Spatial isolation leads to social isolation, which leads to declining trust.

Broken, apart, in pieces

How did we create a culture where people feel intensely lonely yet hide from genuine human connections?

Beyond the causes we can see – costs, closures, solo living arrangements, pandemics – there are underlying forces that push us apart in ways we don't quite fully appreciate until the impacts become visible. To understand the seismic shift happening to our lives, it's helpful to observe these patterns through the lens of atomisation.

Imagine a large unit of something – your workplace, a family structure or a local neighbourhood. Atomisation is when that unit is continually broken down into smaller and smaller pieces. As the units get smaller, they gain more individual clarity, but their relationships with each other become weaker and eventually disintegrate. It's difficult for trust, our social glue, to hold us together when it's been stretched so far apart. Moreover, when we live in these atomised, individual units, it literally creates gaps – a dangerous trust vacuum that is open to being filled with catchy conspiracy theories, comforting biases and sleights of hand. A trust free-for-all, in other words. And so, we end up with what we can all feel: a society more detached, more divided and even more delusional.

All kinds of technologies – from cars to televisions, Walkmans to smartphones – have unintentionally made our lives more atomised and less intertwined. We're constantly encouraged to focus more energy on optimising ourselves, to turn inwards and fix ourselves. While the positives of putting ourselves first can be significant, it risks framing #self-care as opting out. Don't get me wrong, as a working parent with two full-on tweens, I know the restorative relief of a quiet evening home alone. But when we're constantly bombarded with messages to retreat and to improve ourselves – whether through therapy, cold baths, green smoothies, meditation or makeovers – it can be easy to turn too far inwards. Gradually, we become outwardly unconnected, indifferent and even hostile towards each other. When Abraham Maslow placed 'self-actualisation' at the top of his famous hierarchy of needs, he did not mean 'selfish' or 'self-centred'. When we get lost in the mirror of our gaze, we can forget who we are without those grounding relationships.

"Get out. Generate some social electricity. We can transform communities and trust in our lives through the simple act of doing things together"

The rise in a seemingly more insular home-based life is a byproduct, even a crisis of atomisation, caused by the 'progress' of technology. It's happened so fast that we almost don't realise how much we've broken up and separated ourselves from the larger units – the compounds and cultures, the families and communities – that make up a healthy society.

Is it too late to change course? I don't know, but I'm still hopeful.

Going against the herd

In St James Church in West Hampstead, London, a group of youngish people sit around talking, laughing and playing board games. But something noticeable is missing. There is not a single phone in sight. It's one of many events held by the rapidly growing Offline Club, founded in the Netherlands in February 2024. What started as a local initiative has quickly become a global movement, with more than 1,000 cities worldwide asking for similar events to come to their area, according to co-founder Ilya Kneppelhout. These events radiate a longing for something communal, something simple, that has been lost. Across the UK, book clubs and board game cafes have reported a similar boom, reflecting a renewed interest in tangible social experiences that offer people a chance to make meaningful connections. There are even signs of shifts in online dating: the likes of Bumble and We Met IRL ('In Real Life') are hosting events from tennis tournaments to cooking classes to chess nights, marketed on the promise to "meet up, chat and make moves in person".

Research shows we experience the greatest joy when we do things collectively in-person together. Those feelings of communion we get at a music festival or a wedding, marching in a protest or, my personal favourite, sliding into the beguiling beat of *oontz, oontz, oontz* on the dance floor. Pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim described these experiences as "collective effervescence", that is, the social electricity generated when we come physically together through shared action or engage in a shared purpose.

Part of fixing the problem is simply reminding ourselves of the benefits we feel when we're communally together. Don't shut the door at home and pretend you're happier this way. Don't text a friend at the last minute to cancel because it's easy to do so. Don't switch in-person for Zoom because it feels more convenient. Don't say something in an online comment you wouldn't dare to face-to-face. Don't avoid the messiness and discomfort of being with friends in person. Don't let young kids switch playgrounds for a PlayStation. Don't let the precious empty spaces of life become filled with solitary apps and algorithms. Don't let your communities become purely virtual. Don't only trust people because they are just like you. Don't let your outside physical world regress into a homebound one. And don't let life's friction be wholly mediated by 'seamless' technology.

For most people, these things are largely within their control. So, if you can, go! Get up. Get out. Generate some social electricity. We can transform communities and trust in our lives through the simple act of doing things together outside our homes. ■

Rachel Botsman is a leading expert on trust in the modern world. She lectures at Oxford University and is the author of three critically acclaimed books, *What's Mine is Yours, Who Can You Trust?* and *How To Trust and Be Trusted.*

Marcin Wolski is an illustrator and graphic designer working in media, advertising and editorial illustration for clients around the globe. He lives and creates in Sopot, Poland.

Open future

Collective optimism isn't just about hope – it's about believing we can tackle global challenges together. When we trust in each other's ability to act, even the toughest problems become opportunities for change

Words: Sumit Paul-Choudhury

"It was a sickening sensation to feel the decks breaking up under one's feet," recounted Ernest Shackleton, "the great beams bending and then snapping with a noise like heavy gunfire." After more than nine months stuck fast in the Antarctic ice, his expedition's flagship, *Endurance*, had finally succumbed.

And so, on 27 October 1915, the great Anglo-Irish explorer reluctantly abandoned ship – leaving his crew stranded in perhaps the planet's most hostile location, with only the supplies they'd salvaged from the wreck. Yet, 10 months later, Shackleton had led every one of his men to safety. They had voyaged in their tiny lifeboats to barren Elephant Island, where most of the crew remained, while a skeleton crew braved the raging Southern Ocean to seek assistance from a whaling station on South Georgia. Once there, Shackleton enlisted a ship and returned to rescue the castaways – but it took him five attempts.

Other polar expeditions, when they ran into similar difficulties, had collapsed into anarchy, their leaders deposed or even murdered, their supplies squandered and, eventually, their crew starved or frozen to death. Why didn't Shackleton's expedition succumb to this fate? He had a quixotic approach to picking crewmen, considering everything from sense of humour to physical appearance, but with one overarching concern: "The quality I look for most is optimism," he said. "Especially optimism in the face of reverses and apparent defeat. Optimism is true moral courage."

Above top: John Vincent of *Endurance* mending a net

Above bottom: Chick of the wandering albatross

Right: *Endurance* under full sail, held up in the Weddell Sea

The collection of images presented here were taken by Frank Hurley, who was the official photographer on board *Endurance*. These 1915-1917 images showcase the very beginnings of colour photography

Unreasonable expectation

There are many ways of considering optimism. In everyday use, we might think of it as a naive tendency to put the best possible spin on things. The more precise definitions used by psychologists describe it in terms of unreasonably positive expectations – expectations which cannot be justified on the basis of the available evidence. As it turns out, such expectations are more like the default state of humanity than the exception – at least when it comes to our own lives. We expect good things to happen to us more often than the statistics, or our peers' experience, suggest is plausible; and we expect bad things to happen less often.

This might seem counterintuitive: how can holding a mistaken belief be helpful? And sometimes departing from reality in this way can indeed be problematic. Excessive optimism about specific risks – those of smoking, say, or gambling – can be associated with unhealthy or unwise behaviour. But a *generally* positive outlook is associated with longer lives, better health and greater success in life. That seems to be because optimists persist in seeking solutions to challenges even when they don't know what those solutions might be – which also helps us to bounce back when we encounter a reverse or an apparent defeat.

It would seem that Shackleton knew what he was doing. At every stage of his troubled expedition, he reminded his men that, as long as they were alive, they had choices to make and options to explore. Not many of us will have our mettle tested as they did. But we all have our reckonings with adversities that make us reappraise how we expect the world to treat us. It's at such times that optimism can be hardest to secure, but also most valuable.

Social attraction

There's another lesson we can learn from the experience of Shackleton ▶

Photos: Frank Hurley from the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

“Shackleton’s men not only had to be optimistic about their chances of survival and eventual escape; they had to trust that their comrades would be similarly optimistic”

and his crew. Optimism is most often considered a personality trait, shaping how an individual thinks and behaves. But it also has a social dimension. We extend our optimism to those close to us: we also believe our family and friends will do better in life than the evidence or experience suggests is likely; and we can extend it to those who aren’t as close to us, but whom we consider to be likeable and capable.

That works both ways. If we exude optimism, people are more likely to want to hang out with us, whether socially or professionally: after all, would you rather live or work with someone who says things are looking up, or someone who’s continually down in the dumps? The psychologist Suzanne Segerstrom argues that optimists’ attractiveness, coupled with their innate perseverance, makes them better at amassing social and economic power – and the more they do so, the more optimistic, and attractive, they become.

Politicians have long appreciated this: candidates for the presidency of the US, for example, have loudly proclaimed their optimism for decades, sometimes to good effect. “We choose to go to the Moon,” John F Kennedy told the American people in September 1962, when the US had only just put its first astronauts into orbit. That was an unreasonable expectation if ever there was one, but it was achieved, and the Apollo programme had the desired effect of boosting the nation’s collective spirits, at least for a time.

And optimism still holds its power. Donald Trump might have described his country as descending into chaos while campaigning, but his promise to voters was to ‘Make America Great Again’. The same is true for populists all over the world, who claim that their simplistic, often divisive policies will secure a brighter future. To the extent that they can maintain their followers’ belief, they’ll benefit from self-fulfilling prophecies. Even if they don’t actually change anything, people who had little reason to feel discontented in the first place will find it easy to declare themselves better off now.

Above top: Crew members of *Endurance*

Right: *Endurance* sinks slowly beneath the ice

Far right top: Dog teams scouting a way to the land

Far right bottom: Relieving of marooned men by Chilean tug *Yelcho*

Photos: Frank Hurley / Pictorial Press Ltd / Royal Geographical Society / Alamy stock photo, Frank Hurley from the collection of the State Library of New South Wales

Collective action

But reality has a way of asserting itself. On Covid, climate, Brexit and more, such claims have proven to be not so much unrealistically as pathologically optimistic: the substitution of reality with wishful thinking and self-serving cant. And many of today’s challenges are collective action problems. We’d all be better off, for example, if we tackled the climate together: as rampaging wildfires in Los Angeles this January demonstrated, natural disasters care little for wealth or privilege. But such action is stymied by the actions of individuals pursuing just that wealth and privilege. To make a difference, we all have to act together, collectively and systemically.

That means being optimistic not just about own our actions, but about those of others. Shackleton’s men not only had to be optimistic about their chances of survival and eventual escape; they had to trust that their comrades would be similarly optimistic, and thus also strive to seek out those possibilities – even when camped on the ice through the long Antarctic night, even when separated by hundreds of miles of stormy seas from those seeking succour on their behalf.

In this instance, collective optimism triumphed – but it is harder to secure. Once people become unknown to us personally, we become more primed to heed negative signals, whether that takes the form of alarming news or xenophobic fears. It’s hard to trust that others are doing the right thing when we can’t see into their hearts or minds. Rebuilding that trust may take new forms of democratic participation and new kinds of institutions. Citizens’ assemblies, for example, can help communities to find common cause and consensus; renewed localism in civics and governance could return much-needed agency and control to those they affect.

The philosopher Karl Popper echoed Shackleton’s sentiments when, in 1992, he said “Optimism is a duty. The future is open. It is not predetermined. No one can predict it, except by chance. We all contribute to determining it by what we do. We are all equally responsible for its success.” Ultimately, we need to learn not to blindly follow the optimism of our self-declared leaders, but to forge our own – and trust that others will forge it with us. We have to not only do the right thing, the optimistic thing, but act as if others will too.

You could say, in fact, that we have to be optimistic about optimism. ■

Recommended reading

This article is extracted and adapted from Paul-Choudhury’s book *The Bright Side*, an exploration of the psychology, philosophy and practice of optimism. Published in January 2025, this manifesto for optimism shows how, by embracing action, imagination and possibility, we can find a path to the bright side, even – perhaps especially – when the future seems dark.

Sumit Paul-Choudhury, FRSA, a former editor-in-chief of *New Scientist*, writes, thinks and dreams about science, technology and the future.

Journaling through time

Looking back at the visual history and key milestones of *RSA Journal* – and to the exciting future ahead

The RSA was founded in 1754 as The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Since its beginnings, the Society's journal, in whatever form, has been a way to communicate its purpose, mission and actions, and to showcase leading voices for progress, all in the service of creating meaningful societal change. Viewed through the lens of its covers, it's clear to see how the publication has proactively evolved along with the times, embodying changing design inspirations alongside significant cultural shifts.

It's also served as a loyal companion to its readers through times of upheaval. At the advent of World War II, the opening message in the September 1939 edition of *The Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, as it was then known, read: "For nearly two hundred years, in peace and in war, the Society has continued its unique work... and in the present conflict it will endeavour to maintain to the utmost its position of usefulness in the life of the country."

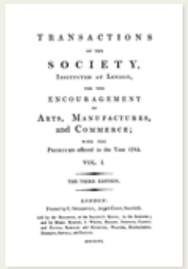
Visually, the *Journal* has gone through many evolutions. It began as purely typographical and evolved into a publication known (and awarded) as much for its design as its words.

In 2024, the *Journal* underwent its most substantial redesign in decades, breathing new life into its pages and positioning itself at the centre of a broader content universe, with the goal of continuing the important conversations started within its pages off into the digital sphere. In 2025, we continue this evolution, and we look to the Fellowship for input. Scan the QR code below (or visit the URL) to fill out our Reader Survey and be part of *RSA Journal*'s next century of progress! ■

Reader Survey: we want to hear what you think!

Scan the QR code or visit www.research.net/r/YDG6Z55 to fill out our Reader Survey and be part of the *Journal*'s continuing evolution. Your answers and opinions will help inform critical decisions about the future direction of *RSA Journal.*

RSA Journal TIMELINE 1783–2025



1783

The *Transactions of the Society* comprised notes from meetings and transactions, and was the Society's first formally published communication

1852

The first *Journal of the Society of Arts*. It was designed to record the work of the Society, and contained the formal proceedings, notices and the appointment of various committees and their areas of interest

1908

The 'Royal' prefix was added to the title, becoming the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*

1939

The *Journal's* message at the beginning of World War II shows commitment to its values

1952

The RSA was a key player in the creation of the 1951 Festival of Britain. This exhibition showcased British achievements in art, science and technology

1970s–1980s

The *Journal* takes on a new style, with block colour backdrops and an illustration of RSA House on the front

1980

1988

The late 1980s sees the publication's name change to its current title, *RSA Journal*, and heralds the advent of the Royal Designer for Industry (RDI) initiative

1990s

The *Journal* shifts to image-led covers that differ for each edition, from the abstract to the illustrative

1990

The *Journal* has featured the work of many notable artists, including this cover, by illustrator, cartoonist and RDI Quentin Blake

1990

1991

An anniversary edition, celebrating 40 years since the Festival of Britain

1993

1994

Late 1990s

Editor Imogen McEvedy spearheads a major design change for the *Journal*

1999

This cover image highlighted the Fourth Plinth Project, an RSA initiative (spearheaded by then President Prue Leith) to bring a revolving series of artworks to the empty plinth in London's Trafalgar Square

2001

2001

2013

2022

2024

The first edition of the year celebrated the 270th anniversary of the Society and the *Journal's* redesign, undertaken in collaboration with its longtime agency partner, Wardour

2025...

“If you want to improve trust, you need to improve the performance of government. Focus on this. Trust will largely follow”

The RSA’s **Andy Haldane** speaks to Fellow, political analyst and polling guru Sir John Curtice about the growing crisis of trust in the political landscape, and how changing social demographics are complicating the forecast for future elections and government in the UK and beyond

Photos: Francesca Jones

Andy Haldane: John, welcome to the RSA. I wonder whether we might start with the Donald Trump presidency. How are pollsters making sense of the Trump phenomenon? From the last US election, it looks like the polls are still playing catchup.

John Curtice: No, fundamental misconception. People described Trump’s success, including Trump himself, as a landslide. Point one about Trump is the relationship between rhetoric and the truth is not necessarily one-to-one. But it’s also something that journalists themselves said... and this is basically people being confused by, or misinterpreting, the result of the electoral college for the result of the outcome.

The average lead for Kamala Harris in the final opinion polls in terms of the overall national vote was estimated by most of the aggregating websites as one point over Trump. In the end, Trump had a one and half point lead over Harris. So, an error in the lead of two and a half points – that’s pretty good by standards. ▶

Oh that the pollsters in the UK had been anything like as accurate as the polls in the US. The error on the lead in the polls in the US was about two and a half points, the error on the lead here [in the UK general election] was of the order of seven points.

Haldane: How is voter behaviour changing both in the US and UK?

Curtice: There has been a change in the character of support for the Democrats and Republicans, which is not dissimilar to the changes we've seen here in the wake of Brexit. We have seen Brexit being supported by people who are older, more socially conservative, and who have less in the way of educational qualifications.

It's a division that is arguably the product of globalisation, and the fact that education is now so much more important in labour markets. That creates two groups in society: educated young graduates, who can benefit from freedom of movement and who love living in a diverse society; and older people with fewer educational qualifications for whom immigration is something that happens to them, rather than something that they're likely to profit from.

In the US, Trump is articulating similar division. But there wasn't a big change in the character of support for the Republican Party in 2024 as opposed to 2020 or 2016. The big change kicks in really with 2016. So, the truth is the polls aren't entirely accurate, but they do provide a basis for understanding how, both here and on the other side of the water, the demography and sociology of voting behaviour has changed.

The late Peter Pulzer, former Gladstone Professor of Government, famously said, in the late 1960s, "Class is the basis of British politics; all else is embellishment and detail." There is now basically no significant relationship between social class and how people vote, or if there is, it is the obverse of what Pulzer was talking about. The core Labour vote, insofar as there is a core Labour vote, is the young middle-class professional living in London. It's not the Durham miner.

Haldane: Help us make sense of that. If class has become less of a differentiator across the political spectrum, what is going on there?

Curtice: Globalisation has created new divisions. These are partly about economics, but they're also about culture. They're about the difference between those who are comfortable living in a place like London, and those much less comfortable about a diverse society. It becomes a debate about the extent to which society needs to impose certain moral codes, to require people to learn a language, to acknowledge a flag, etc, all things that, some argue, will create the social cohesion that's essential for society to function.

When we talk about the cultural wars… the argument is about values in our society today. It's not just about equality. The traditional divide, where social class was the demographic division, was an argument about equality and inequality. Now we have a second divide, between those who essentially are social liberals and who feel that people should be able to make their own moral choices and are much more concerned about the ability of individuals to express themselves – and social conservatives, who are looking for protection, both from cultural and economic change.

Our politics now in terms of voting behaviour is shaped as much by that second division – it was always there, but now it's become as important as the argument about equality. It's not that the old divisions have disappeared, it's that another layer has been added, and, to some degree, that layer cuts across existing divisions. Therefore, you end with the class division disappearing.

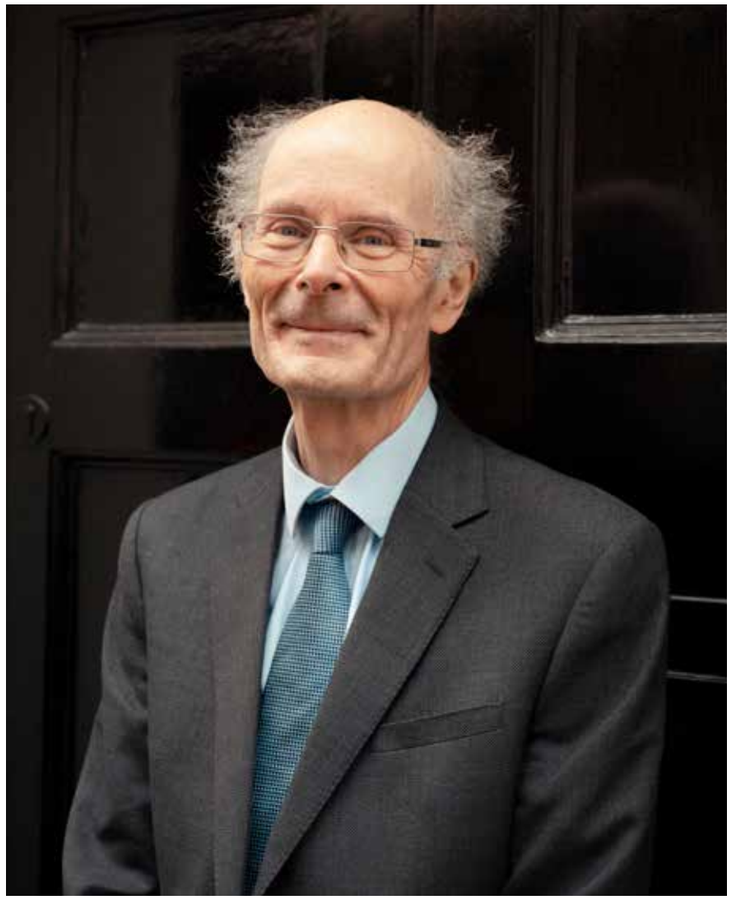
Haldane: It's early days, but the rise of Reform in the UK looks like a real thing. If you speak to constituencies in the north of England, where Reform came second in the last election, there has been a cratering of support for the government – and Reform has been the big beneficiary.

Curtice: At the moment, it's no more than a possibility that the British two-party system may finally be on its last knees. One of the fundamental failures of the Eurosceptic right, has been to develop a stable party structure to articulate the Eurosceptic point of view. The challenge that Reform needs to meet now is, can they become a party on the ground everywhere?

Haldane: We hear a lot about 'the cult of the strong leader' and how that is on the rise. Is that true? Is there a sense that personalities may trump (small 't') policies or parties when it comes to how people vote?

Curtice: It's very difficult to disentangle the two. Leaders who have an ability to reach charismatically towards the public are certainly a valuable asset and are largely in short supply and arguably in shorter supply than they have been historically.

Jeremy Corbyn had a certain kind of charisma. Boris Johnson was never that popular as a national figure, but he was popular with the Brexit side of the country, and he was hated by the other side. Margaret Thatcher was highly charismatic, but some people didn't like her.



"There is now basically no significant relationship between social class and how people vote"

Tony Blair, highly charismatic, brilliant speaker. Then you come to today's crop: Rishi Sunak, no charisma, no narrative; Keir Starmer, no charisma, no narrative; Ed Davey, no charisma, no narrative; John Swinney, nice bloke, no charisma; and you have Nigel Farage. Nigel Farage – has charisma.

Farage is brilliant at articulating that deep pessimism that many people feel. He says in 'human speak' how people feel and what their problems are. He's then able to articulate a story about where he wants to take the country. Now, you may not like that story, but there is a story – he can do narrative and people listen.

The one thing that politicians have to be able to do is to defend their party and articulate their party's messages to the broader public. We are relatively weak, I think, particularly in the mainstream parties, of people who have that quality.

Haldane: So, we have, in many countries, a relatively politically untethered blue-collar working class. In the UK, historically, they have swung to Labour. Some of them will have come back to their homelands, but with no real conviction. So, if Nigel Farage becomes the tribune for the working classes, wouldn't this suggest we could be in for a rupture?

Curtice: We could. It depends on what you mean by rupture. In a sense, we already had a rupture. I think one thing to say is that Reform are exploiting a niche market. It's a fairly large niche market, but virtually everybody who votes for Reform is somebody who's willing to back Brexit.

Now, that's still just over 40% of the British public, but it is equally only just over 40% of the public, and there's probably a limit to what proportion of that Reform can pick up. The government's difficulties over the economy and over the NHS are crucial. If the economy does start to take off, this side of 2028, 2029, and if the waiting times have gone down, then Labour may well be able to recover.

The problem is that arguably some of the most important decisions Labour made, they made in opposition. These were the decisions to rule out rejoining the single market and customs union, and the decision to say there'd be no increases in direct taxes on individuals. They are both now proving very considerable constraints.

Haldane: I'd love to do a bit of crystal ball gazing about where we might be going. If we are in a 'democratic recession', which I take to mean trust in the political process is not as we would wish – let's say that's true…

Curtice: It's certainly true. One of the things that the British Social Attitudes survey did in the last election campaign was to lob this grenade that said levels of trust in politics and politicians are at an all-time low in the UK.

But it's not a continuous trend. It does go up and does go down. Elections are always good for trust. The fact that people have been able to go to the polls helps to renew their trust and confidence, but the post-election measures we have are the lowest we have had. This is partly to do with the failure of Brexit in the eyes of leave voters. Brexit was good for trust because the people who voted for Brexit were historically the people who tended to be less trusting. People with degrees always tend to be more trusting of politics and politicians.

Younger people always tend to be more trusting than older people. When you get older, ▶

“Younger people always tend to be more trusting than older people. When you get older, you get a bit more cynical”

you get a bit more cynical. In the wake of Brexit, people who voted leave, you saw their trust become markedly higher in 2020, but then that’s all gone. So, the failure of Brexit in the eyes of leave voters, their disappointment with it, has undermined their trust. Remain folk are still unhappy. The fact that there were issues of integrity about the last administration also added to it.

Scan the QR code to watch the expanded interview and others in our ‘In conversation’ series

Haldane: If we are in some mini or maxi depression, how do we get out of this politically?

Curtice: The first thing we should not do is try to regulate our way out of it. Basically, our political class are unable to think collectively. So, whenever a politician makes a personal mistake, something that’s deemed to be improper or unethical – their opposition will criticise them and say, “he should resign” or “she should resign”. The truth is, if you look at the reasons for resignations, politicians are much more likely to be brought down because of personal failure than because they screwed up on policy.

We don’t hold our politicians to account for the job that they do. We hold them to account for their personal behaviour, but the political class have created that environment, and, because we now have more regulations, more regulation means more trip wires for people to fall over. So, if politicians want to improve trust, they need to stop attacking each other when it comes to issues of trust.

If you want to improve trust, you need to improve the performance of government. Focus on this. Trust will largely follow so long as you don’t create trip wires to engage in political warfare.

Haldane: In terms of repairing this trust deficit, hauling us out of political depression, it’s often the case that things the public dislikes nationally, they quite like locally. Is decentralisation part of the answer?

Curtice: There is a fundamental difference between the debate about devolution in Scotland or decentralisation in England. In Scotland it’s a question about the legitimacy of the UK union, and it is about the extent to which governmental decisions might be fundamentally different, might be pursuing a different narrative, a different strategic objective from the government in London. That’s also partly now true of Wales.

I regard the debate on devolution [in England] as a debate essentially about local government change. And then you get into an argument about whether reducing the number of councils and councillors and seemingly concentrating powers in the hands of mayors... whether that’s really devolution or centralisation. Certainly, the current government is looking to mayors to implement their strategy. They are not looking to mayors to say that, well, Liverpool can do one thing and Manchester can do another.

It’s about decentralisation as an operational strategy for saying, well, the implementation of a broad strategy might be done more effectively if the micro-level decisions are made at a lower level. There’s some argument for that. But it isn’t about making fundamentally different political choices, which, of course, is what the Scottish government did.

Haldane: You’ve been a Fellow here for 32 years. What can we, as RSA Fellows, do? How can we make a contribution to improving the lot of the UK, either economically or socially or maybe politically? Because we’re an apolitical institution, obviously. What is the role of social change organisations?

Curtice: All political systems need civil society organisations that will provide them with analyses and ideas, particularly once you’re in office for a while.

Whereas most think tanks have a particular orientation, and therefore have a particular network of people whom they might talk to, the RSA has a large Fellowship and, therefore, ought to be able to tap into diverse expertise in a way that other organisations can’t. You are adding to the mix of evidence-based policy analyses and looking forward. The RSA has expertise from a whole wide range of professional fields.

Have I got the job? Can I be your successor?

Haldane: You absolutely can. The job is yours. ■

Sir John Curtice is Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde and a Senior Research Fellow at the National Centre for Social Research; he also serves as President of the British Polling Council and is a regular media commentator on both British and Scottish politics. He has been a Fellow of the RSA since 1993.

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA.

Francesca Jones is an editorial and commercial portrait photographer based in Cardiff, Wales.

PHOTO ESSAY

BEYOND REPAIR

The artist Beth Cavener’s clay animals are caught in the throes of emotions – fear, suspicion, disdain, despair – that humans would often rather avoid. Her staggering new exhibition *Trust* forces us to confront these instincts in ourselves, and asks if we have the empathy needed to rebuild what’s been lost

Words: Leah Clarkson

“Cavener’s animals are almost unsettlingly appealing. Many exude a vulnerability that makes the viewer want to save them”

Previous page: Cavener at work sculpting *In Bocca al Lupo* (2012)

Left: *Smoke and Shadow* (2024) resin infused refractory material, paint, steel base

Right: *Trust Me* (2024) stoneware, burned wood, mixed media

It was the height of the pandemic, and Beth Cavener was locked in a tiny studio apartment with her six-year-old son. Amid the fear and isolation, with vaccines still on the distant horizon, and watching riots and insurrection unfold across the United States, her need to protect (especially as a single parent) overrode rationality.

Cavener was trying, she says, to be a pillar of trust for her son at precisely the time she was feeling its “complete breakdown” all around her. She wondered “How do I teach him what the world can be while watching with despair what the world is becoming?” As the months wore on, she clung to the hope that the world would return to normal post-pandemic, but ultimately arrived to find life “on the other side” irrevocably changed.

Theory of evolution

Cavener is the daughter of a microbiologist and an artist, and these dual influences are evident in her body of work. After graduating from Haverford College in Pennsylvania with a degree in fine art – having switched her focus, midway through, from physics and astronomy – she gave herself four years to use art to “find a narrative that would provide a connection between the mundanity of everyday life and the intangible and beautiful truths” about the world that surrounds us.

Though classically trained, Cavener soon became restless with traditional methods of sculpting and casting. To achieve her vision, she experimented with new ways of handling clay, including the construction of intricate armatures that allowed her to create more ambitious pieces, in both form and scale.

These frameworks helped Cavener to manipulate massive (think, more than 1,000kg) amounts of clay, moulding each figure by hand before cutting it into pieces to be hollowed out, fired, reassembled and finished.

Scientific method

“I try to divest myself of judgement when I’m looking at a problem or an interesting set of behaviours,” says Cavener, pointing out that this approach is crucial to creating pieces that are able to engage viewers from a wide swathe of backgrounds, beliefs and experiences. Indeed, confronted by the six animal figures that make up *Trust*, it’s clear the viewer is in the presence of an artist with a profound sense of empathy and more than a passing familiarity with the varied contours of solitude. The techniques she has honed over decades, including the construction of the bespoke armatures on which she sculpts, demand the rigour of time and, as Cavener herself admits, prolong the creative process.

Cavener’s animals are almost unsettlingly appealing. Many exude a vulnerability that makes the viewer want to save them; they are caught in traps or trapped in sleep or inviting a caress. But then comes a hitch of recognition: there is something about them too human, too knowing, too suspicious or sexual to be disturbed. They command their own space.

This push and pull is carefully orchestrated by Cavener, whose style has developed precisely to engage the viewer in this way. She humanises her animals anatomically, using ▶

“The [US] election showed how divided everyone is, and everyone is still very much centred on their own needs, which is what happens when there is no trust”

Beth Cavener

Scan the QR code to learn more about Cavener, her artistic process and her work

Left:
Shards **(2024) stoneware, mixed media**

Right:
Shadow Partner **(2024) stoneware, steel-reinforced rope, wood**

“small details, just enough to slide past your consciousness” such as a belly button, or a human ribcage. The effect is slightly disorienting for most viewers: something is different, but what?

Natural selection

As Cavener commenced her explorations for *Trust*, “I could not find a real definition of what trust was,” she says. “People would refer to it sideways, like ‘trust in this system’.” What she was certain of, however, was that ‘trust’, whatever it meant, was eroding. The exhibition eventually evolved to comprise six “major characters that embody where trust is decaying or where we are destroying it” and which, as Cavener writes in her exhibition statement, explore “the arduous journey of rebuilding it”.

Knowing it would serve as the “first piece and the centrepiece… the main narrator of this body of work”, Cavener sculpted *Shards*, a life-size male lion, from almost 1,300kg of clay, working over many months. To the Western gaze, the lion is an icon of power and majesty, and of those institutions (libraries, courts of justice) in which we place our collective trust, and which represent the common belief systems upon which our society relies in order to function. When the lion was done, she smashed it to pieces with a hammer.

It took her *four years* to glue it back together.

But why? To make it “even more beautiful because it’s been resurrected and cared for and lovingly preserved”, an approach that echoes a technique admired by Cavener, the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, in which broken ceramic or glass pieces are repaired with gold lacquer, creating a new object even more precious than the unbroken original.

Shards, says Cavener, asks, “What if we were to rebuild something from the broken fragments?” What if that something was our collective trust? Having worked to rebuild it, she wonders, could we end up with something even more beautiful?

Uncertainty principle

Cavener isn’t entirely sure if we can get that trust back or not. Given recent events in the US, she says, it “will be tough. The election showed how divided everyone is, and everyone is still very much centred on their own needs, which is what happens when there is no trust.” The latest exhibition is just one way for Cavener to grapple with all that’s been lost in recent years. So much so that she plans to continue this exploration into her next body of work, *Trust II*.

“How do I get people to say that such an integral part of what it means to be human is that we can trust each other? That apathy is the cause of undoing in the world and empathy is our hope for rebuilding?” Someday, she believes, we can all be “comfortable enough to disagree on things and not have them feel threatening”.

But for now, says Cavener, that’s a future in which we’ll just have to trust. ■

Leah Clarkson is Editor of *RSA Journal*.

CAPITAL GAINS

For Raj Chetty – Harvard Professor and recipient of the RSA's Benjamin Franklin Medal in 2024 – social capital is the bedrock of economic mobility. So how can we revive it?

Words:
Helen Lock

Illustrations:
Michelle Mildenberg Lara

Can taking steps to increase social capital be the key to improving trust in society? It's well documented that trust in governments has declined globally in recent decades. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found that in 2023, 44% of populations had "low or no trust in public institutions". Since 2007, the percentage of Americans saying they trust the government has stayed consistently at 30% or below, from highs of more than 70% in the 1950s. And according to the National Centre for Social Research in the UK, trust in government was at a record low in 2024.

For Raj Chetty, William A. Ackman Professor of Economics at Harvard University and Director of Opportunity Insights, declining social capital is a key factor in these trends. Access to social capital helps drive the upward mobility needed to improve people's outlook and trust in society, yet it tends to be overlooked in policymaking, he argues. "Social capital is a piece that's particularly relevant and that is something we've spent less time on," he says. He notes that while social scientists have often cited social capital as being crucial to upward mobility, "it's challenging to measure, therefore making it difficult to study its impact and how it can be increased".

Opening up opportunity

It's a challenge that Chetty and his colleagues at Opportunity Insights, the Harvard-based research organisation he leads, have embraced. They use big data analysis to understand how social capital and, more specifically, economic connectedness (defined as the degree of interaction between low- and high-income people) help people's chances of improving the quality of their lives, then identify patterns.

It was access to educational opportunity, as well as social connections, that helped spur Chetty's own success and his lifelong interest in widening access to opportunity. "There are numerous instances in which social connections have changed my and my family's trajectory... numerous high school teachers and advisers at Harvard who fundamentally changed and shaped my interests in pursuing social science," he says.

Chetty moved to the US from New Delhi, India as a nine-year-old and saw "the tremendous contrast and difference in opportunity between the two countries". A generation back, Chetty's own parents happened to be the only children in each of their families afforded the chance to get a higher level of education, and that cascaded down the generations. "It always struck me that there are many other talented kids out there, including my own cousins, who have not had the same opportunities [as himself and his sisters]."

The ultimate goal of Opportunity Insights, therefore, is simple: to understand and widen access to opportunity.

Untapped potential

Opportunity Insights' work reveals the consequences of an entrenched lack of social mobility. For example, its 2017 research into "lost Einsteins" looked at economic status in conjunction with the rate of invention. By linking US patent data to income tax records, they found that people from lower-income backgrounds invent at a much lower rate. "In fact, if women, minorities, and children from low-income families were to invent at the same rate as white men from high-income families, the rate of innovation in America would quadruple," the study states. "We also found that exposure to innovation, seeing examples of it, substantially raises the ▶

chances that children become inventors," says Chetty.

In a similar vein, Chetty's team have also studied what they describe as the fading American Dream, so-called because the defining feature of the American Dream is upward mobility – and now, the notion that anyone can achieve success in the US has stalled. They found that 90% of children born in 1940 in the US went on to earn more than their parents by age 30, but only 50% of children born in the 1980s did (at the time the findings were published, in 2017).

It's only by first identifying these trends and barriers, though, that real progress can begin. "We believe there are things that can be done to reverse this trend [of low economic mobility] and our research seeks to support the development of scalable solutions," says Chetty.

Paths to progress

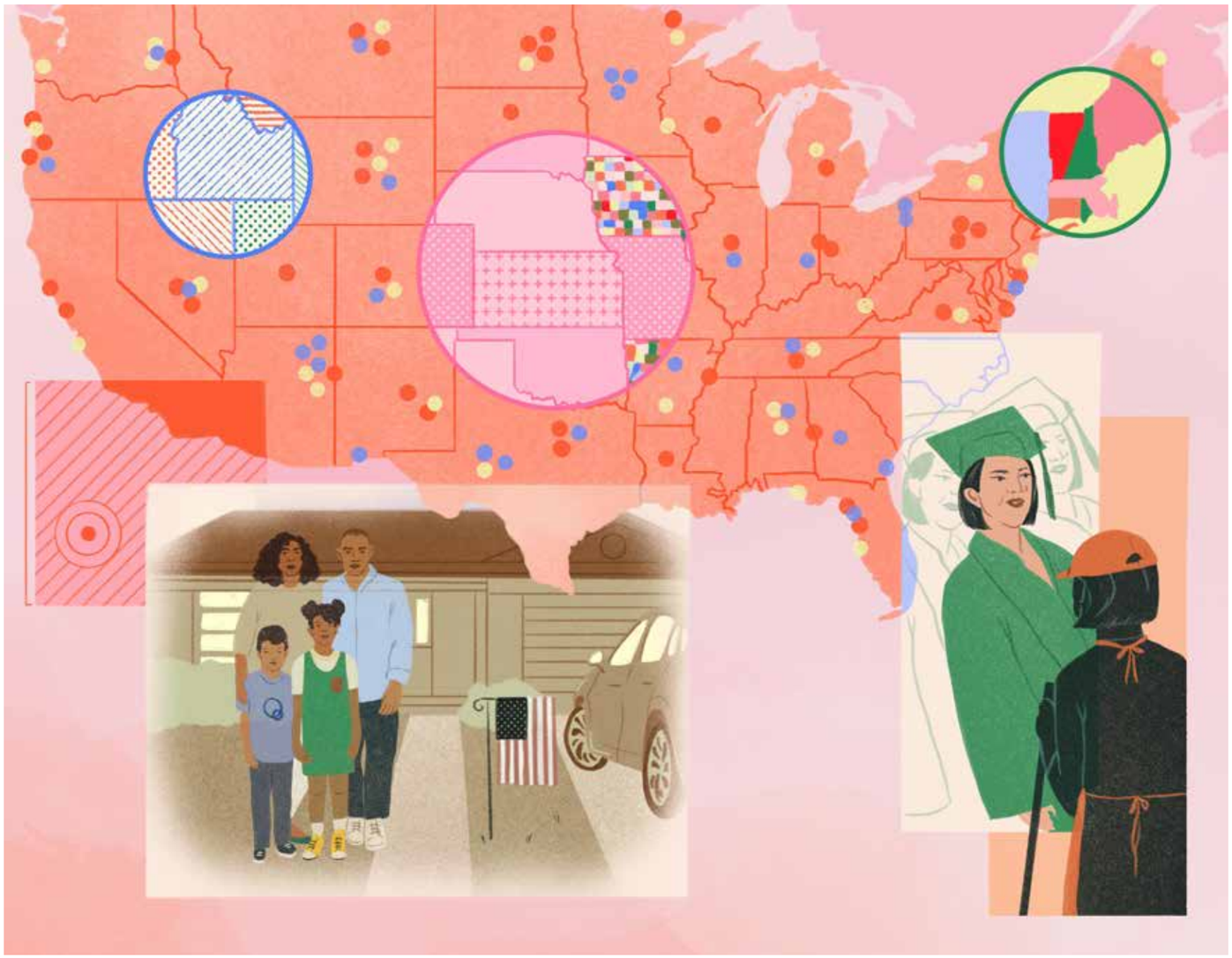
With populist leaders gaining power globally, there are no shortage of explanations (including declining trust in public institutions) as to why voters are turning to divisive politicians. Lack of economic mobility is connected to that lack of trust, Chetty says. "Interestingly, that link is stronger with measures of economic mobility than it is with measures of inequality. So, it's not just about places where some people earn a lot and others don't, it's about places where people are not getting ahead – not having opportunities to get ahead."

The first step in the process of rebuilding trust is to acknowledge this reality, Chetty says. The data shows that even groups who have traditionally been more advantaged are now struggling to move forward. "Low-income white Americans, for example, are experiencing some of the greatest declines in economic mobility... even in parts of the country where traditionally you'd have pretty good chances of rising up."

"We should be interested in figuring out how we can improve economic mobility for groups who have been experiencing the biggest declines recently, but also for Black Americans and all the other folks who've traditionally had less opportunity – and for whom opportunity gaps remain quite large."

"... it's not just about places where some people earn a lot and others don't, it's about places where some people are not getting ahead – not having opportunities to get ahead"

Raj Chetty



Power of integration

Chetty argues that "social capital interventions", where policymakers and leaders take action specifically targeted at improving access to social capital, could help in these neighbourhoods where people feel stuck.

Through their research mapping social capital, which included analysing 21 billion Facebook friendship connections, his team have identified three aspects of social capital as a phenomenon. These are: "economic connectedness" (the level of interaction between low-income and high-income people); "cohesiveness" (the extent to which social networks are fragmented into cliques of a similar background); and "civic engagement" (the rate of volunteering and participation in community organisations).

The impact of even small improvements across all three areas could be huge. "Relative to other measures such as poverty rates or the quality of K–12 education [primary and secondary school] we find economic connectedness, so, cross-class relationships, is the strongest predictor for understanding where children have the greatest chances of rising out of poverty."

Is it possible to get people from low-income and high-income groups to socialise more though? Chetty says that some steps can address what he describes as "friending bias" and "exposure".

"Policy leaders can explore strategies to increase it, such as mixed-income housing, shifting zoning laws to permit higher-density development, and changing the composition of high school or college classes." Smaller class sizes in schools are beneficial because they make it easier for students and their families to get to know one another. Leaders might also consider other ways to foster connection, such as looking at the design of public spaces, he adds.

Chetty also suggests that education and skills institutes could do more to connect people to an employer who's looking to hire, while universities could provide mentors that help, for example, a first-generation student navigate higher education.

Reversing the trajectory

Working directly with policymakers to hash out real-world policies is a major part of Opportunity Insights' mission, and Chetty says there's interest in taking action from both the right and the left. Opportunity Insights has begun to pilot ways to improve access to "higher-opportunity neighbourhoods" for people from lower-opportunity neighbourhoods, for example, and they are helping community nonprofits to use their data in a way that more effectively informs their organisational decision-making.

"While it might be hard to say we can implement a policy to create a more cohesive community, there are things we can do. We're finding that in many different contexts, pairing social capital support with traditional interventions – economic or education – is much more effective."

Chetty says that the next stage of the research is to dive deeper into their analysis of communities with high economic connectedness and establish more causal relationships. "For example, we're analysing if students with more cross-class friendships are more likely to go to college."

Ultimately, Chetty wants to see the power of this research unleashed. "I want to see a society where people are able to achieve their purpose... doing good things for themselves and society, and not wasting talent." ■

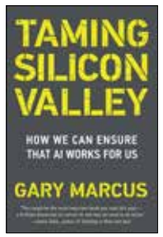
Helen Lock is a freelance journalist covering education, technology and social affairs for publications including *The Guardian*, *WIRED*, *Times Higher Education* and the *TES*.

Michelle Mildenberg Lara is an Amsterdam-based illustrator originally from Bogotá. She works digitally, with a focus on figurative drawing. Clients include UNESCO, *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*.

To learn more about the work of Opportunity Insights, scan the QR code

BOOKS

What RSA Fellows are reading



Taming Silicon Valley: How We Can Ensure that AI Works for Us

Gary Marcus

Reviewed by Tania Duarte

If you need a succinct, digestible primer on the background and performance of generative technologies within wider artificial intelligence (AI) research and development, this is it.

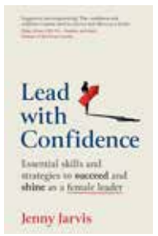
Gary Marcus's blog commentary on the mind-boggling series of events in the two years since the launch of ChatGPT has been an invaluable source of information and sanity. He has pulled no punches in calling out overinflated claims about the promise of generative AI, and his position as a tech entrepreneur, cognitive scientist and researcher has given credibility to his warnings on the risks and harms caused by the inappropriate and unchecked use of generative AI.

This book distils many of his blogs on a wide range of topics such as disinformation, market manipulation, misinformation, nonconsensual deepfakes, accelerating crime, cybersecurity and bioweapons, bias and discrimination, privacy, intellectual property taken without consent, overreliance on unreliable systems and environmental costs.

Marcus places these risk examples in the context of how we arrived at this "perfect storm of corporate irresponsibility, widespread deployment, lack of adequate regulation and inherent unreliability". He also pithily documents a playbook of big tech manipulation techniques, which should be required reading for anyone involved or invested in democratic processes, which Marcus shows are being replaced by techno-authoritarianism. "Already some of the big technology companies are making some of the most important decisions humanity ever faced – on their own without consultation with the rest of us."

Marcus concludes by laying out steps to a "positive tech future", including reminding us that we are not all passive passengers on the journey. It left me wondering, though, if, given his analysis, it is really possible to 'tame' Silicon Valley without first tackling the economic systems and ideologies which support and sustain it.

Tania Duarte is a leader of the RSA Responsible Artificial Intelligence Network.



Lead with Confidence: Essential Skills and Strategies to Succeed and Shine as a Female Leader

Jenny Jarvis

Reviewed by James Watson-O'Neill

Somehow, Jenny Jarvis has managed in her book not only to bring together most of the modern intelligence on leadership, but to make it universally digestible in just 200 pages. While there is some theory here from others, Jarvis is a formidable and experienced leader in her own right, and she doesn't stint on sharing the lessons she has learned, bringing a unique dimension to the points she makes in this excellent book.

I found the focus on women's journeys in leadership fascinating. I've heard many people discuss, for example, the pros and cons of 'servant leadership' versus 'transformational leadership', but I have never been prompted to consider what it's like for women, specifically, to adopt these different approaches and how the hurdles or considerations might be different for them. I doubt I'm alone in not having had that experience or being nudged out of my patriarchal comfort zone, and it's an experience I hope many others will have while reading.

Jarvis offers her own practical advice, including a brilliant toolkit of 40 individual tools for readers to dive into. Guidance from other leaders is also peppered throughout, including these wise words from Helen Roberts, co-founder of Talented Women, "... avoid the curse of comparison, find the unique strengths that you bring into the world and harness those. When we see the world through that lens it's amazing the opportunities it opens up."

There is a humility and strength that shines through in the writing, and I hope Jarvis writes a lot more. I'll be reading every book she publishes, and I'll be giving copies of this important book to many of my friends and colleagues.

James Watson-O'Neill OBE is Chief Executive of the disability charity Sense and a Non-Executive Director at South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust.

Many of the books featured in *Journal* reviews are available to borrow at the RSA Library. As a Fellow, you can check out up to five books at a time for a three-week loan period.

INCLUSIVE GROWTH COMMISSION

The elusive goal of inclusive growth

An RSA-led initiative aims to help craft long-term solutions to address the challenges of (and create lasting positive change for) communities across the East Midlands

Words: Claire Ward

From the moment it was formed – and well before my election as its first Mayor in May last year – the new East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) set its sight on one overarching goal: to drive inclusive growth. It's a goal that is hard to argue with: to grow our economy in ways that include and value the contributions of people and places across the region, while benefiting those same people and places.

So many of my conversations with partners highlight the ways in which communities within the EMCCA region feel let down and not able to realise their potential, and living and working in the region for many years I've seen this myself at first hand. Yet, unsurprisingly, inclusive growth has proved a tough nut to crack. And the cost of failing to realise this goal appears to be rising, as communities that feel locked out from the benefits of growth are drawn to populist promises and polarising narratives.

Photos: Alex Cantrill-Jones/ACJ Media, Matthew Jones Photography

Critical questions

That's why I asked the RSA to set up an Inclusive Growth Commission to tackle a series of critical questions: What do we think inclusive growth really means for this area and how will it look and feel 10 or 15 years from now if we get it right? How well do we understand the assets that we have which could make us stand out and bring new investment? What are the root causes behind many of our challenges? How do we realise the opportunity that a Mayoral Combined Authority offers the region, particularly given the commitment to further devolution set out by the new government?

The RSA is uniquely placed to help us with these questions. As chair of the commission, RSA CEO Andy Haldane has given extensive thought to these challenges and has seen how previous programmes have fallen short. He is supported by a first-class team who can reach out to a wealth of talent, knowledge and experience across the Fellowship and beyond. Between us we have assembled a strong body of commissioners bringing a breadth and depth of thinking to the task and offering us a real prospect of transformative change.

Fresh thinking

As well as answering our questions, there are three key objectives that I'm expecting from the commission. First, I have encouraged them to think long term and not to get hung up on the latest cycle of policies and programmes. We are not going to see quick fixes to many of our underlying challenges, though of course I am keen to create momentum and EMCCA is already investing in the region in ways that will support a future Inclusive Growth Strategy. But we need to be realistic about the time it will take to provide our communities with the agency they need to contribute to and benefit from growth. And so the commission has a deliberately long time horizon within which to set its recommendations.

> **"I am not interested in a Whitehall view or responses that are cut and pasted from other regions"**

Second, I want to see an independent and challenging view. It's clear that some of our current approaches are simply not delivering for many of the communities I was elected to serve. So we desperately need fresh thinking and informed experts who are prepared to take us beyond the status quo. EMCCA was set up to do things differently and I am looking forward to recommendations that spur us and our partners to be innovative and drive lasting system change where it is needed.

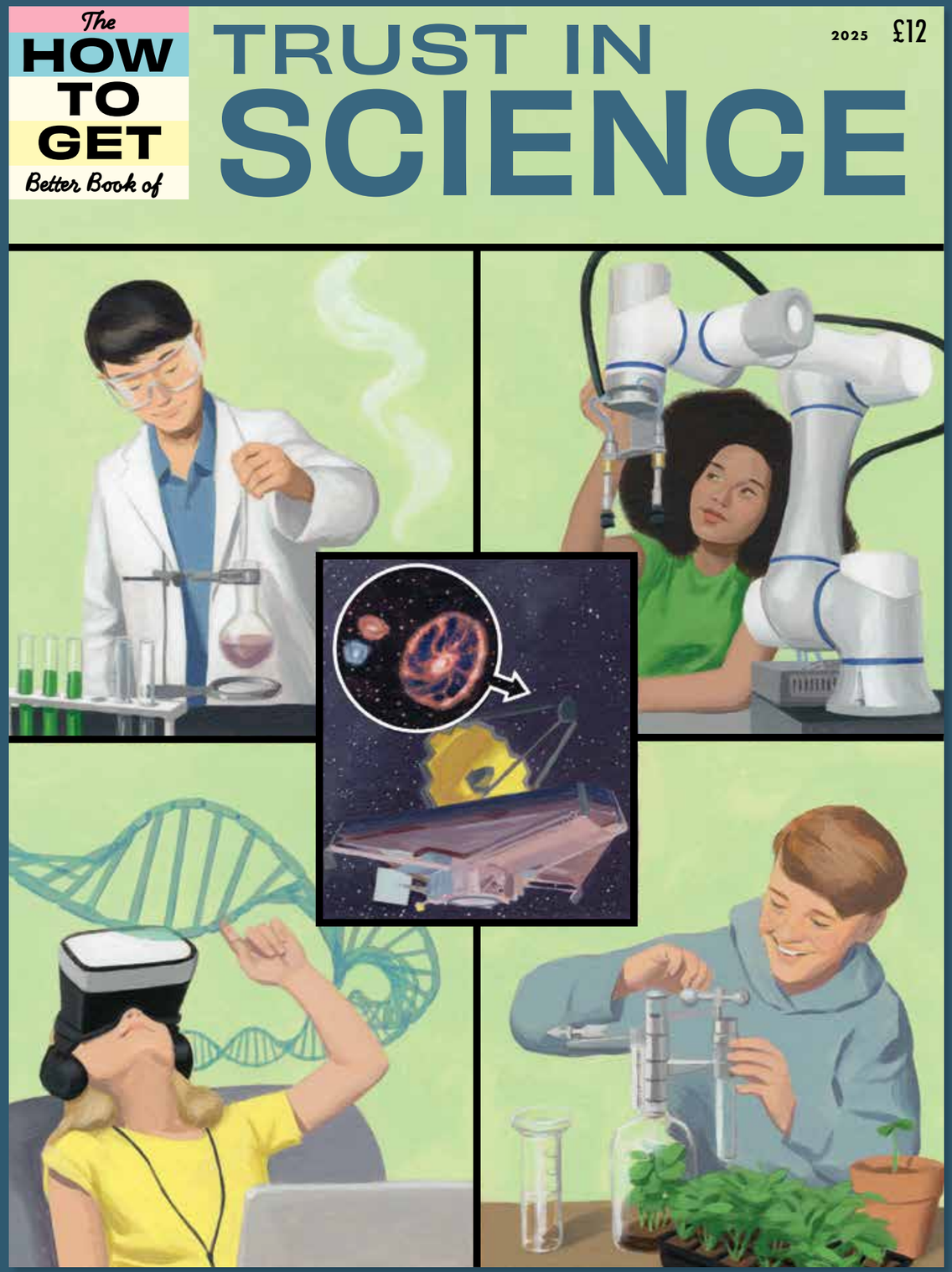
Finally, it's critical that the work of the commission is rooted in and speaks to our people and places. I am not interested in a Whitehall view or responses that are cut and pasted from other regions. EMCCA covers a diversity of towns, cities and villages, each playing their part in the rich economic, natural, social and cultural fabric of our place. I want our communities and stakeholders to recognise the picture the commission paints, and to work with us to take ownership of the recommendations. This is why I'm so encouraged that the commissioners are prioritising an understanding of lived experiences and gathering those stories of what it's really like to live, work and do business here.

The commission is due to deliver its initial thoughts mid-March, with a full report expected later in the year. I am excited to hear what it says and how EMCCA can use its work to shape a groundbreaking strategy to bring about that elusive goal of inclusive growth for our region. ■

Left: Chesterfield, East Midlands

Below: Claire Ward, Mayor of the East Midlands

Claire Ward was elected Mayor of the East Midlands in May 2024. From 1997 to 2010 she served as MP for Watford.



To engage the public meaningfully, scientists need to get better at communicating. How? Get local, ditch the jargon and find the story in the data

Words:
Caitlin Looby

Illustrations:
Graham Samuels

During my first of more than a dozen trips to Costa Rica, I embarked on an 8km hike through the jungle, winding my way to the remote beach of Playa Llorona in Corcovado National Park. I was in my early 20s, standing at the threshold of my first career – as a tropical field ecologist – but also at a turning point.

For children, science can be the subject that sparks the most excitement and wonder; it captures imaginations and fuels boundless curiosity. But as they grow older, this subject of fantastic revelations and real-world experimentation often transforms into one that many students dread or even fear. Complex topics, challenging concepts and pressure to perform academically can make science feel intimidating and overwhelming, something from which to disengage.

On my hike that day, I realised that I had lost touch with the sense of curiosity, a revelation that was to become a guiding principle for me. Since then, I have let curiosity drive my choices and careers in science, science communication and journalism. By embracing wonder, I approached scientific research with an open mind, asking the questions that genuinely intrigued me.

The same curiosity allowed me to evolve as a scientist and, later, a journalist, not only shifting the questions I asked but also committing to those I felt it was most important to engage (and re-engage) with – the public.

Language barrier

At its core, science is about finding connection. It's about uncovering patterns, putting together pieces of a puzzle and linking small details with a bigger picture – but these connections are often lost when it comes to translating big ideas for the general public. Building trust in science is about figuring out how to preserve and amplify that connection, and fostering a sense of belonging, participation and shared purpose in scientific endeavours.

Public trust in science is not what it used to be. In the US, surveys show that only about a quarter of Americans express a great deal of confidence in science. The reasons are complex, involving misinformation, cultural divides and misunderstandings about how science works. Perhaps most profoundly, less than half of Americans see scientists as good communicators. Globally, though, there is a desire to see scientists engage in both science communication and policymaking. A language barrier exists between scientists and the public, as scientists rely on confusing jargon and struggle with communicating complex topics, often alienating the very public they are so desperate to reach.

Dividing lines

Public trust in science hasn't always been this fragile. Historically, breakthroughs such as vaccines, antibiotics and space exploration united societies in wonder and gratitude. These moments were celebrated as victories for humanity, transcending individual politics or beliefs. Today, whether it's the debate over vaccines, scepticism about climate change or the politicisation of public health measures, scientific findings are often weaponised to reinforce existing divides – or make divisions appear greater than they actually are.

The internet and social media are key aspects in this fractured connection, since they have enabled the rapid spread of misinformation. Social media algorithms, designed to maximise engagement, amplify sensationalist or misleading content. This content is often what feels comfortable and already fits within a person's worldview.

Meanwhile, scientists communicate in probability and uncertainty, using words like 'could', 'may' and 'likely'. To the public, this language sounds unconvincing, especially when presented as an antidote to misinformation. The pandemic highlighted how the rapid spread of the virus outpaced science, leading to shifting guidance on masks, distancing and more. While scientists understood this as evidence evolving in real time, the public often saw it as indecision, fuelling conspiracy theories that scientists had hidden agendas.

For years, science and academia have been seen as elitist and out of touch with everyday life. I've often encountered this attitude before explaining that my research involved more than a decade of gruelling fieldwork – hiking in extreme conditions, covered in mud, dodging killer bees – while working more than 80 hours each week for a wage that could not even cover basic expenses. ▶

The academic 'ivory tower' that most people think of is not the science I know, and not the one that most early-career scientists know. And while younger generations of scientists are working hard to dismantle this perception, scientific institutions (perhaps inadvertently) reinforce this perception by prioritising publishing journal articles over engaging with the public, and creating an environment in which publication, overwhelmingly, is the means to obtaining funding, resources and coveted university appointments.

Fractures between science and society have real consequences because, without trust inciting collective action, addressing crises such as climate change becomes nearly impossible. The question then, is: how can science, and those who communicate science, better connect with the public to build back that trust?

"Fractures between science and society have real consequences because, without trust inciting collective action, addressing crises such as climate change becomes nearly impossible"

Global problems, local realities

My careers in science, science communication and journalism have taken me all across the US. These moves not only shaped my perspective of how to talk about science but also highlighted the importance of tailoring communication so that it resonates with local audiences.

Climate change, for example, is often framed as a global-scale problem – and it undoubtedly is – but this can feel distant and abstract to people whose daily lives, and issues, are rooted in a specific place. What is often missed is that climate change is profoundly local. It manifests itself in the floods that devastate a neighbourhood, the wildfires that consume homes and the drought that destroys a field of crops. Today, most people either have experienced an extreme weather event themselves or know someone who has.

Scientists need to seek out opportunities to connect with those communities, specifically, but they often lack understanding about how science becomes news, thus prioritising national platforms over local outlets. But local media offers a chance to build personal relationships (leading to community trust) by having a presence in the community, addressing issues that are relevant to the community, highlighting local successes and giving a face to the science by including local experts.

Common ground

To achieve this, though, we first need to change what it means to be successful in science, and that requires buy-in from academic institutions. As it stands now, the 'publish or perish' culture actively disincentivises science communication, trust building and efforts to engage with the public on both a local and global level.

Institutions should embrace the hiring of 'science communicators' – people educated or trained in communicating science to the public – to train faculty and students, rather than relying solely on faculty for these efforts, recognising that scientists simply do not have the capacity to do everything it takes to be a successful scientist, teacher, mentor, grant writer, communicator and engaged citizen.

Another vital connection to foster is between scientists and journalists. Both professions share a mission to answer society's important questions, albeit on different timelines. Yet the relationship between scientists and journalists remains complex – and sometimes fraught – as scientists and journalists are quick to blame each other when information is sensationalised, or not quite accurate. It's a blame game that I, too, have taken part in.

Media organisations have a role to play, too. Journalists must be given time and resources to report scientific issues responsibly by providing context and depth. Stories should not be fear-driven and should emphasise solutions where it makes sense. Partnerships between scientists and journalists can help bridge gaps in understanding and ensure that stories are both accurate and accessible.

Storytelling can also humanise science. Sharing anecdotes about the challenges and joys of research – whether it's the exhilaration of a breakthrough or the frustration of failed experiments – can make scientists more relatable. I noticed that when I led with stories about what my science 'looked like' – mountains, mud, sweat and killer bees – that people were much more likely to inquire about what I found and what it means.

The public is more likely to listen to what scientists have to say when they see them as individuals with passion, curiosity and humility rather than as distant, infallible experts.

Embracing curiosity

The public also has a role to play. This means seeking out reputable sources of scientific information, asking questions and staying curious. People must recognise that science is a process with no real endpoint.

We don't need to wait for society to achieve perfect consensus before taking action. Small pockets of trust can lead to meaningful change. If we commit to fostering curiosity, emphasising shared experiences and breaking down barriers, we can transform science into something that feels personal, inclusive and worth trusting again. ■

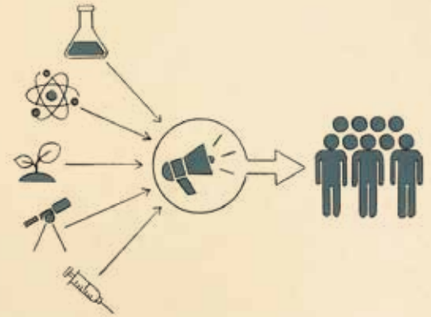
Caitlin Looby is a scientist-turned-journalist based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She spent more than a decade studying climate change in tropical forests and now covers the Great Lakes for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

Graham Samuels is an illustrator and animator living in Stockholm, Sweden; his work is entirely handmade 'from the beginning'. He works with clients in advertising, publishing, fashion and television, as well as musical artists.

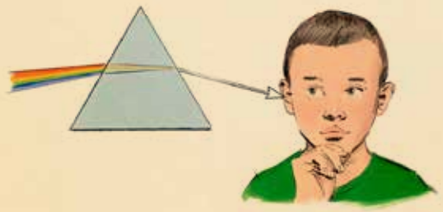
How can we rebuild trust in science?

You will use:

- Clear communication
- Local media
- Engaging storytelling
- Shared human experiences
- Data



Do this:



1. Speak in clear, everyday language to make complex topics approachable

2. Use local media to make science more relatable and relatable to specific communities

3. Humanise science by telling the stories behind the data

4. Employ trained science communicators to translate research for the public

5. Encourage people to ask questions, explore ideas and understand science as an evolving process, not a fixed body of knowledge

Why does it work?

When people see how science impacts their lives, they're more likely to trust and support it. By making science personal, relatable and accessible, we can transform scepticism into curiosity – and curiosity into meaningful action.

Voices carry

Streetwise Opera harnesses the transformative power of music and theatre to help those experiencing homelessness rebuild confidence, restore purpose and reclaim identity

While you might believe that opera (often unfairly accused of being an elitist art form) and social cohesion are not natural bedfellows, history would prove you wrong. Opera, thanks to its unique emotive strengths, is an art form that has frequently been used as a means of rallying people behind a cause. To ignore the social and political context in which any given opera was written is to ignore its power and capacity to effect societal change.

One very notable example is *Fidelio*, the only opera composed by Ludwig van Beethoven, which debuted in 1805. An idealist and a hero of the Enlightenment, Beethoven was influenced by Republicanism and the early ideals of the French Revolution, including a desire to bring an end to class-based justice and oppression – so *Fidelio* is as close to a political pamphlet as he ever wrote. Almost 100 years later, in October 1989, *Fidelio* was performed to mark the 40th anniversary of East Germany and, just four weeks later, the Berlin Wall fell. Deemed too politically powerful, it was not allowed to be performed in China until 2008.

It is not simply from the stage, however, that opera has the power to exact social change. British opera company Streetwise Opera, founded in 2002, enables people who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness to participate in the creation of the art, finding inspiration and empowerment while they rebuild their lives and identities.

While partner organisations provide essentials such as shelter and advice, Streetwise's focus, critically, is on rebuilding confidence and self-esteem, purpose and hope. It does this by offering life-changing creative opportunities for some of the most vulnerable people in society. This includes the opportunity to co-create award-winning productions with world-class artists, take part in weekly singing and creative sessions, pursue skills development and gain access to cultural organisations in London, Manchester and Nottingham.

Over the last 20 years, Streetwise has collected evidence, via a robust evaluation system, that participation in the arts plays an important role in recovery from homelessness. The ability to discover and embrace a new identity as an artist gives participants the opportunity to define themselves by something other than their experience of homelessness.

In 2022–23, Streetwise engaged with 352 individuals and delivered more than 5,000 hours of creative workshops: 87% of participants reported increased self-confidence and 83% improvements in their overall wellbeing. One participant commented: "This is the one moment in my week when I feel like a human being again, and that keeps me alive."

Streetwise's work sends a very clear message: opera and classical music should not be elitist. Everyone deserves access to these art forms, and everyone should be able to claim their place as a creative person in a cohesive society. ■

Above: Streetwise Opera performing *Whirlwind*

Scan the QR code to learn more about Streetwise Opera

Jennifer Johnston, FRSA, is a British mezzo-soprano and RSA Performing Arts Network Lead.

We would like to thank our corporate partners for their support across the RSA's work

ANTHROPY™ Inspiring a better Britain

BT

COMINO FOUNDATION

East Midlands Combined County Authority

Institute and Faculty of Actuaries

THE J J CHARITABLE TRUST

the Land Trust

MARKETINGTRUST

COMMUNITY FUND

NetworkRail

Nuffield Foundation

Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre
Led by Newcastle University Business School with RSA

The Rayne Trust

RMIT UNIVERSITY

THAMES FREEPORT
GLOBAL OPPORTUNITY. SHARED FUTURE.

ufi VocTech Trust

If you are interested in becoming a strategic partner or corporate member, please contact partnerships@rsa.org.uk

Fellowship

CEO LECTURE

Haldane: "We are talking about a new model of capitalism – social capitalism"

RSA CEO Andy Haldane used his annual lecture in January to set out a vision to tackle the 'Great Division' in society that communities and countries are facing.

The Great Division has cleaved apart communities, he suggested, leading to a "rising tide" of disconnection and mistrust among citizens and communities. This can be seen globally through wars, both real and trade-related, nationally through recent polarising elections worldwide, and locally in the loss of pride in place.

Haldane attributed the division to a depletion in social capital – the set of relationships and trust within communities and societies – and called for a national programme of social cohesion. The Great Depression of the 1930s necessitated an economic policy revolution, he said, and the Great Division requires a similar level response, but this time in social policy.

"A revolution in how we build social capital gives us the best chance of local, national and international renewal. What we are talking about is a new model of capitalism – social capitalism," he told a packed Great Room and online audience.

The depletion in social capital has shown up "social scourges" from low growth to stalled social mobility, from the epidemic of loneliness to crumbling (and sometimes rioting) communities. "That makes the malign neglect of social capital by policymakers all the harder to explain," Haldane said.

We are at a "dangerous moment", he suggested. "At the very point the world is more connected than ever, the social glue binding it together has rarely been weaker. Today's connected economies are nested in increasingly disconnected societies. Neither can flourish in this setting. And recent research has shown just how large are the costs."

In his lecture, entitled 'Counting the Costs of Bowling Alone', Haldane referenced the work of economist Raj Chetty and political scientist Robert Putnam. Chetty's recent US research, using data from Facebook/Meta, found that social networks help explain patterns of social mobility.

Back in 2000, it was Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*, that famously highlighted the decline in social capital over the previous 50 years. According to Putnam, this led to a rise in individualism, isolation and anti-social behaviour.

Haldane argued that a cross-cutting national programme of social cohesion should involve policies covering education, housing, citizen governance, work and business, and media, as well as the very machinery of government itself.

"This I think is what the economy needs, this is what society needs, and this is what the RSA will lead over the next few years."

The RSA will be publishing the results of its own Revealing Social Capital research, mirroring Chetty's work but with UK Facebook data, later this year. ■

OBITUARY

Jan Floyd-Douglass: force of nature, force for good

Tributes have been paid to Jan Floyd-Douglass, a much-loved, longstanding and committed Fellow of the RSA who died in January this year.

Jan was a former senior executive in the banking industry, Co-Founder of The 9 Situations (T9S) corporate growth, governance and transformation consultancy, and a passionate advocate for women's rights and equality.

She also made significant contributions to the RSA's Fellowship over many years, including as a member of the Fellowship Council from 2018 to 2022. From 2023, Jan was chair of the RSA's Fellow-led Economy and Business Network.

"Jan had a very rare gift – she was both a force of nature and a force for good. She brought energy, optimism, passion and compassion to the RSA, and we will all miss her hugely," said RSA CEO Andy Haldane.

Ian Stobie, Jan's husband, described her as a "protector". He told the *Journal*: "Jan had a huge heart, warmth and wisdom, but always clarity on values and principles, and fearless in protecting all."

He said, "fairness was everything to Jan", especially concerning the treatment of women. She had been a Commissioner of the Women's National Commission, a member of the UK board of the International Women's Forum, Vice President of UN Women UK and past-Chair of Rosa, the UK Fund for Women and Girls.

Jan had a difficult childhood with interrupted schooling, which limited her academic progress. Despite this, she rose to senior roles in the world of finance, including as Head of Zurich Corporate Pensions, Global Sales Director at Barclays Private Bank and Resident Vice President for Consumer Lending at Citibank.

"She had a gift for simplifying chaos in business. Making it simple and clear for others to grasp. She was empathetic, in a smart way, always focusing on getting the job done with the right results and impact," Ian said.

A memorial service for Fellows and staff to celebrate the life and impact of Jan will take place later in the year. ■

RECRUITMENT

Unlocking the power of Fellowship

The Fellowship Promotion Guide is a powerful new resource designed to help current Fellows and staff share the value of the Fellowship with others. This is a go-to guide for inspiration, practical tips and the information needed to advocate for the RSA, feel empowered to spread the word and attract new Fellows who share our mission.

Fellows are the best ambassadors for the RSA community, and word of mouth is one of the most powerful tools for growing the Fellowship. This guide includes:

- **Clear, simple and concise messaging to explain the value of the Fellowship**
- **Answers to frequently asked questions about our offering**
- **Practical tools to help spread the word**
- **Tips and tricks for starting meaningful dialogues**

By promoting Fellowship to a wider audience, we can strengthen our ability to drive social progress. Whether you're hosting an event, mentoring a colleague or sharing ideas online, the guide helps you articulate what makes the Fellowship special. ■

Harriette Hickey is the RSA's Head of Development and Services (Acting)

Scan the QR code to download your copy of the Fellowship Promotion Guide from Circle

FEEDBACK

How we are enhancing the Fellowship experience

For more than 270 years, the RSA has been a community from all walks of life. Diverse in interests, perspectives and lived experiences, we are united by a belief that solving the biggest challenges of our time requires connection and collaboration.

Feedback has been crucial to how we have developed the Fellowship experience over the past few years. I want to focus on three themes that have emerged and how we are addressing them:

1. You said: "I want to connect directly with other Fellows who have the same interest as me/live in my area."
We did: We have developed Circle, our global, online community enabling Fellows to chat, connect and collaborate seamlessly. Circle is our online home with more than 5,000 members worldwide. Available on desktop and via mobile app, it is breaking down geographical barriers and strengthening our global community. It enables Fellows to:

- Find, connect and collaborate directly with each other locally and internationally either in shared spaces or via direct messaging
- Join and learn from interest-based networks and micro-communities
- Contribute insights and participate in discussions

2. You said: "I love RSA House but wish there were something similar where I live."
We did: In 2024, we partnered with 11 UK organisations to provide access to co-working hubs. We hope to more than double the number of locations this year, and will start by prioritising the areas with the largest concentration of Fellows.

3. You said: "I receive too many emails that aren't relevant to me/I don't receive enough communication relevant to my interests or needs."
We did: We introduced tailored monthly updates in October 2024. These highlight events and opportunities aligned with Fellows' interests and activities. By summer 2025, we'll offer tailored email preferences based on interests and activities nearest to you.

My ask of you: Please continue to complete our quarterly Pulse Survey and Annual Survey, email us at fellowship@rsa.org.uk or join an RSA Connect event near you. We review all feedback, and it informs how we enhance your experience and help Fellows to connect, learn and contribute. ■

Line Kristensen is the RSA's Director of Fellowship

Photos: Miodrag Ignjatovic / iStock

EVENTS

Book now for the 2025 Fellows Festival

The 2025 Fellows Festival is set to be the biggest yet.

Join us to celebrate new voices, fresh ideas and optimism for the future, as the theme of connection takes centre stage this year.

Events will take place in Bath, Birmingham, Brighton, Cardiff, Dublin, Edinburgh, London, Manchester, Osaka and Toronto. The London event will take place at RSA House on Saturday 17 May, with the other events scheduled from 15 May to 17 May.

The Fellows Festival is the highlight of the RSA's global programme, and celebrates the most imaginative and optimistic new thinking. Speakers include Patrick Hurley, MP for Southport, and Baroness Claire Fox, founder of the Academy of Ideas (both London); and Peter Kyle, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Brighton), artist John Costi (London) and ITV's Julie Etchingham.

At the London event, there will also be a focus on the RSA's Playful Green Planet intervention – with presentations from community stewards in the two pilot areas of Hull and Dundee.

Early bird tickets are now on sale. Visit the RSA website for more details. ■

HONOURS

Knighthood awarded to RSA Chair

Loyd Grossman, Chair of the RSA's Board of Trustees, was one of several Fellows to receive awards in the King's 2025 New Year Honours list.

Grossman, who received a knighthood for his services to heritage, became RSA Chair in October 2024, having previously been chair of the Royal Parks, Gresham College, the Heritage Alliance and the Churches Conservation Trust. He is also an author, broadcaster, musician and entrepreneur.

"It's terrific to be honoured for something that I have enjoyed so much. Helping to protect and promote our country's wonderful heritage, and working with so many talented colleagues to do so, has been both a pleasure and an inspiring experience for which I am profoundly grateful," he said.

Other Fellows recognised in the New Year Honours include:

Professor Julia Buckingham, former Vice Chancellor of Brunel University and President of Universities UK, damehood, for services to higher education.

Patricia Hewitt, Chair of NHS Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board and former Health Secretary, damehood, for services to healthcare transformation.

Stephen Fry, President of Mind, Vice President of Fauna & Flora International, actor, writer and broadcaster, knighthood, for services to mental health awareness.

Andrew Haines, Network Rail CEO, knighthood, for services to transport and the economy.

Sandy Powell, costume designer and Royal Designer for Industry, Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), for services to costume design.

Professor Richard Susskind, President of the Society for Computers and Law and former technology adviser to the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, CBE, for services to IT and the law. ■

LEGACIES

RSA to launch recognition society

Throughout the RSA's history, the generosity of Fellows has been critical to our success. Donations have allowed us to spearhead initiatives, expand impact and improve facilities. We are particularly grateful to those who have committed to making gifts through a legacy, as these donations allow us to plan for future needs and opportunities.

To acknowledge Fellows who have pledged a legacy, we will be launching a recognition society. The Henry Cole Society will be open to Fellows (and non-Fellows) who have confirmed plans to make a gift to the RSA in their will. Members will receive special communications and event invitations throughout their lifetime and will be publicly recognised (should they desire) in our Annual Report.

We would be extremely grateful if Fellows who have already made plans to support the RSA in their will can get in touch, so that we can invite them to become one of the Society's founding members. ■

GOVERNANCE

Call for candidates for Fellowship Council

Could you be a future RSA Fellowship councillor? In coming months, the RSA will be inviting Fellows to consider standing for election to the Fellowship Council – with opportunities across the UK, Ireland, Oceania, the US and globally.

Councillors play a key role in the RSA as it seeks to further engage and widen the Fellowship worldwide. Our role is three-fold:

1. Our primary role is to lead and drive local activity for Fellows in partnership with RSA staff, making connections, forming networks and being a key conduit to the work that the RSA is undertaking.

2. We use our expertise to consult on and support the delivery of relevant projects and interventions.

3. We have a secondary governance role to be the pool from which some governance positions are drawn (including two trustees) and to act as an informal conduit of Fellow opinions.

The term of a Fellowship councillor is currently two years; it is possible to stand for election for one additional term.

If you are interested in being actively involved in RSA work (or already are) and believe you could make a difference by contributing your skills and experience to these roles, please look out for the call for nominations in June and consider applying.

These important positions are directly elected by Fellows, providing a vital link between staff and our unique global network of changemakers. So, even if you do not wish to stand, please do use your vote in the elections this summer to choose your councillors. ■

Neil Beagrie is Chair of the RSA Fellowship Council

For further information on the Fellowship Council scan the QR code or visit *thersa.org/about/governance/fellowship-council/*

Photo: Charlie Surbey

Photo: Mikael Schilling

EXHIBITION

Animal magic at the House

An exhibition of hyper-realistic animal paintings by contemporary artist, environmentalist and conservationist Sophie Green will take place at RSA House from 1 April to 31 May 2025.

Green's work, described by *National Geographic* as a "bridge between photography and reality", aims to raise awareness of animal welfare and environmental issues. Seven paintings will be on show in Vault 2 of the House as part of the 'Commodities' exhibition.

This provocative body of work unpacks themes of consumerism, exploitation and environmental despair. Each painting is said to serve as a "mirror to our shared complicity".

According to Green: "A world in which we exhibit the most beautiful creatures on this planet like exhibits in a museum is sadly not too far removed from the world we currently live in." ■

RECOGNITION

Double award win for RSA House

RSA House has won two awards in the prestigious London Venue & Catering Awards 2024, which recognise and reward outstanding achievement in London-based venues and catering companies.

The House, along with its in-house catering and hospitality partner Company of Cooks, achieved top prize in the 'Best Venue for Customer Service' category and took silver in the 'Best Event Venue (up to 300 Attendees)' category.

The judges highlighted client happiness and our flexibility in their feedback, adding: "Their attention to customer requirements clearly results in positive outcomes and repeat business. The overall teamwork to ensure a great end result is very apparent." ■

FELLOWSHIP CONNECT

Explore opportunities to connect online:

- @thersaorg
- @theRSAorg
- @thersaorg
- Fellows' LinkedIn group linkedin.com groups/3391

■ **Email the Fellowship Services team at fellowship@rsa.org.uk or call +44 (0)207 451 6939**

CIRCLE OF FELLOWSHIP

Join Circle today and get your conversation started:
To activate your Circle account, log in through My RSA via the RSA website. Your global community awaits.

To get started, scan the QR code or visit *thersa.org/fellowship/community-platform*

FREE CO-WORKING SPACES AVAILABLE

There are 12 co-working locations available across the UK where non-London-based Fellows can work for free – and we regularly add new venues.

For the latest information, please scan the QR code

Belong

Artwork by Ben Jones for the RSA. Ben uses a mixture of drawing, printmaking and collage to create his artworks, and is influenced by the work of the early 20th century avant garde and the legacy of Polish poster art. Based in Manchester, UK, Ben has worked with clients including *The Economist*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Mother Jones* and *The New Republic*. Since 2018, he has illustrated the 'Behind the Times' column for *History Today*.

YOUR FOREVER STARTS **HERE**

Photographer: Lottie Topping

Exclusive use of our award-winning Georgian townhouse for your wedding day.
To enquire, email the wedding team quoting 'RSA Journal 25'.

RSA House was recognised in the 2024 London Venue & Catering Awards, winning for Best Venue Customer Service and attaining Silver for Best Event Venue Up To 300 Attendees.

020 7451 6855 | weddings@rsa.org.uk | thersa.org/rsa-house/events/weddings | @thersaorg @rsaweddings
Charing Cross and Embankment

RSA

LONDON VENUE & CATERING AWARDS 2024 WINNER BEST VENUE CUSTOMER SERVICE

LONDON VENUE & CATERING AWARDS 2024 SILVER BEST EVENT VENUE - UP TO 300 ATTENDEES RECEPTION STYLE