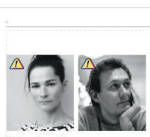
#001

the long good read

#guardiancoffee

Articles algorithmically picked by readers, writers & robots



Introduction

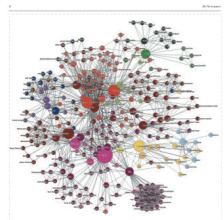
Ten reasons to love winter

3D mini-me statues: 'This must be what Z-list celebrity feels like'

Neil Gaiman on Lou Reed: 'His songs were the soundtrack to my life'

Arcade Fire: Voodoo rhythms, dance music and David Bowie

Relate: 75 years of marriage guidance



The week in tags

Some British people can't afford to heat their food. Aren't we ashamed?

Britney Spears' music used by British navy to scare off Somali pirates

Man buys $27 of bitcoin, forgets about them, finds they're now worth $886k

Berlin and the tech startup scene – 10 things to know before making the move

A word from our developer team

Exploring The Gender Balance Of Bylines On The Guardian

How Spotify and its digital music rivals can win over artists: 'Just include us'

How to make perfect french toast

Nigel Slater's pine nut recipes

How to eat: biscuits

Introduction

Welcome to the Long Good Read. This is an experimental, almost entirely automated newspaper that uses an algorithm to pick the week's best long-form journalism from the Guardian. The idea was started by developer Dan Catt, print-your own newspaper service Newspaper Club, the design team at Mohawk and the technology editorial team at the Guardian. We've put this together for you to read with your coffee. Enjoy! And please do tell us what you think - what else should we include in our experimental, automatic newspaper?
@thelonggoodread or
hello@thelonggoodread.com

Spend time listening to anyone in the media industry, you might think newspapers are dead. In fact it's just pulse of the big media businesses around the newspapers that is growing weaker, with readership and advertising revenues falling and increased competition from new technology just a part of that.

But newspapers themselves are a delightful, tactile, luxurious technology in their own right. The success of Newspaper Club, which lets anyone cheaply print their own newspaper, shows that newspapers have been reclaimed in a way.

Its success is partly down to our curiosity about being able to professionally print in a format that used to be hard for an individual to access, but it is also part of a wider craving for tangible, physical products to compensate for our digital dependency. Our screen lives make much of our life feel overwhelming, yet at the same time we have nothing physical to show for it. And there's a real human pleasure in being able to make and hold something in your hands.

Editorially, we get enormous satisfaction in exploring and playing with new projects. It's not about finding a future for paper, but a future for the stories that deserve telling. Where shall we go next?

Jemima Kiss
Head of technology - editorial
The Guardian
theguardian.com/tech

This newspaper is in beta. It's an experiment in combining the Guardian's readers, writers and robots with Newspaper Club's short-run printing tools, to produce a newspaper that's completely unlike the daily Guardian.

We're only printing 500 copies, and it's just for #guardiancoffee, so it needed to be quick and easy to produce. 'One person, one hour' was the goal, and achieving that required automating as much as possible, while still retaining an editorial eye.

First, the team at the Guardian wrote a small tool to sift through the most popular and interesting long form content, as driven by website analytics, comments and social media.

A selection of these are then imported into Newspaper Club's browser based tool, ARTHR, and they're quickly laid out into templates designed just for this project.

Then, it's onto one of Newspaper Club's printing presses, where it's printed, packed, and delivered straight to #guardiancoffee and into your hands.

Of course, this isn't designed to replace the daily Guardian paper. It's an experiment to see what's possible at the other end of the spectrum, using new technology and techniques to produce a newspaper as quickly as a webpage.

And if you like it, wait a little while and maybe we'll be able to generate one tailored just for you.

Tom Taylor
Co-founder and head of engineering
Newspaper Club
newspaperclub.com/longgoodread

Ten reasons to love winter

Winter is coming. But don't be glum about the short days and cold winds. There's so much to celebrate, from big coats to bonfires
By Stuart Heritage

1 The drama of saying 'Winter is coming'

Say it out loud now. It feels good, doesn't it? It makes you feel powerful and prophetic. Now try saying it about the other seasons. "Spring is coming." You sound like Kate Humble. "Autumn is coming." A weird conker fetishist. "Summer is coming." Boots advert. But "Winter is coming" is sexy. It's full of drama and foreboding. You're predicting death, essentially. You sound deep. And Game Of Thrones has only enhanced this. Now you're not just declaring that you know the order of the seasons, you're alluding to the fact that you watch good drama. You're telling people you can differentiate between a dizzying number of identically named characters. This means you're cleverer than them. Remember that.

2 Being able to see sunrises

A few weeks ago the only people who saw the sun rise were bakers, night workers and the chronically sleep-deprived. In the dead of winter, the sun doesn't rise until at least seven. Everyone sensible's awake by then, and the first thing they see is a gorgeous pastel explosion: a sky-sized swirl of reds, pinks and yellows that makes them awed to the point of tears to be living on such an impossibly beautiful planet. Then they Instagram it, and it may as well be someone's dinner or a cat's face. Seriously, people are idiots.

3 Carbohydrates are a viable diet option again

The tyranny of summer eating is over. No longer must we force ourselves along to barbecues and picnics to swat wasps and check bits of chicken for blood. Now we get to eat like civilised people: by munching on lumps of meat and potato in a hot brown sauce indoors, while covered in a duvet, drinking red wine and watching The One Show. We can eat hot pies, not cold Ginsters pasties bought from a 24-hour garage because we didn't have time to prepare anything for a picnic. We're allowed to eat hibernation food, gorging on carbs to the point of catatonia, until we become so filled with self-loathing that we buy the first celebrity fitness DVD we see in January, and leave it unopened because we can't believe we've sunk so low.

4 Winter is not summer

It isn't summer, when you can't hide your wobbly belly under a big coat. Summer, when men wear socks with sandals or begin marauding topless so everyone can see the badly spelled prison tattoo tribute to their ex. Heatstroke. Discomfort. Summer is the worst. Now, the air is getting crisper. It becomes impossible to breathe amid pints of vaporised commuter sweat on trains. There are log fires. There are ruddy-faced shopkeepers welcoming you with a hearty chuckle. There are hog roasts on every corner. There are probably lots of things I haven't just ripped off from Dickens. Either way, we can all stop pretending to like summer for another nine months. What a relief.

5 Halloween

This one's harder to explain than most, but stick with me. Now, Halloween is horrible, however you look at it. Trick or treating is institutionalised bullying, the sort of activity that teaches children how to be Apprentice candidates. And if you're over the age of 14 and you're thinking about going outside dressed as a slutty ghost pirate, it's probably time to spend a full hour standing in front of the mirror repeating the word "Why?"

But look what we'd miss without Halloween. The Simpsons Treehouse Of Horror episodes. Jedward's shambolic X Factor Ghostbusters performance. The Monster Mash. Heidi Klum's annual Halloween party, which I treat as a reminder that, however bad my life may be, at least I don't have to go to Heidi Klum's Halloween party. The wilful destruction of pumpkins. The boost it provides to the ailing £14.99 nylon slutty ghost pirate costume manufacturing industry. Halloween is a good thing. You just have to think hard about it.

6 Bonfire night

I'm talking about bonfire night here, not firework night. Firework night is abysmal. It's not even a night any more, as far as I can tell. The first fireworks of the year are set off at about 3pm on the first Thursday of October and continue intermittently until the middle of January. And they're rubbish. Fireworks are try-hard and samey. They get boring after about three minutes. To my knowledge, nobody has ever witnessed a full firework display without entertaining the thought of self-immolation. But bonfire night is the bee's knees. It has a romance that fireworks can't replicate. Holding a foil-wrapped jacket potato in the mistaken belief that it will ever be cool enough for you to eat. Seeing how close you can edge to the fire without being so overwhelmed by heat and smoke that you pass out. Becoming so hypnotised by the dancing flames lapping at the cold, autumnal sky that you convince yourself you're an obscure pagan god-figure. Trying to eat chips with gloves on.

7 Films stop being about exploding skyscrapers

Summer is when Hollywood tries to make everyone so nauseous from motion sickness that they're able to normalise widespread murder. Take this year's Man Of Steel: a classic summer movie, in that hundreds of thousands of people die, but we were all too busy whooping at a flying superhero to pay attention. But now it's getting cold, films start to be about people again. People from this planet, who barely ever have pitched battles with armies of exploding robots on abandoned oil rigs. Admittedly it's also awards season, so the people I'm referring to are actors and what they're doing tends to be overblown emoting. This all culminates in the Oscars, a 20-hour parade of self-importance and false sincerity, where performers try to convince us that acting is a form of social justice and not just something they did to kiss girls.

8 That bit between Christmas and New Year

Christmas is fine, if being uncomfortably full and trying to make polite conversation with your semi-estranged family is your thing. And New Year, too, if you enjoy overpriced clubs full of whooping idiots. But the real lure of the festive season is the bit between Christmas and New Year. Festive perineum, as I wish it was called. Time slows to a crawl and days lose all meaning. Your entire life becomes one of exquisite boredom. It's a time for watching that box set you never got round to. For never getting properly dressed. For eating nothing but cold meat and Quality Street. For feeling superhumanly smug about not being a nurse, or a shop worker, or one of those bargain-obsessed lunatics who queue outside Next in the freezing rain at 3am on Boxing Day. It's like a sick day where you're not drowning in mucus. It's what being kept in a Matrix-style amniotic battery pod would be like if the robots had been thoughtful enough to provide onesies and Matchmakers. It's the greatest leveller in the land. I'm already excited.

9 Pop-up calendar shops

I'm bewildered as to why pop-ups are so trendy. Queueing for three hours to eat an overpriced burger in a dilapidated shed (even though there's a McDonald's right there) isn't new or revelatory. Calendar shops have been doing this for years. Calendar shops invented the pop-up, and it's time they got the recognition they deserve. They dictate the thing you'll spend an entire year looking at. Footballers? Airbrushed drawings of cars? The woman who came fourth in Celebrity Big Brother? It's all there. I'm looking at a picture of Jason Statham right now. Would I be if a pop-up calendar shop hadn't caught my eye last December? Perhaps, but maybe not this specific picture.

10 The first snow of the year

When I was a primary school teacher, lessons would come screeching to a halt when it snowed. "SNOW!" the kids would scream. They'd smoosh their grinning faces against the windows to take in the wonder. This, it turns out, is something everyone does. Magistrates, funeral directors, brain surgeons, members of Cobra; at the first glimpse of snow, they'll all yelp with delight, mash their faces against the nearest window and wonder what they're getting for Christmas.

When the first snowflake hits the ground, everything transforms. Trains seize up. Schools close. Everybody gets a day off, even if they work from home. The naysayers might whine that snow never stops anything in Canada, but that's because they're genetically opposed to fun. For the rest of us, the first snow of the year - and the chaos it creates - is perfect. (Please note that this applies only to the very first snowfall, and for a maximum of 24 hours. Once it turns to slush and freezes into a rock-hard grey slab of death, or gets deep enough to go over your shoes and make your socks wet, or stops me from doing anything I want to do, I'm done with the wonder.)

3D printing has already shaken up the world of design. Now you can get a figurine made of yourself in the time it takes to do your shopping. So how does it feel to meet your double? Five Guardian writers find out
By Guardian staff

3D mini-me statues: 'This must be what Z-list celebrity feels like'

Oliver Wainwright

In the northwestern region of the Amazon rainforest, the Jivaroan tribes used to shrink the heads of their slaughtered enemies and mount them on sticks as triumphant hunting trophies. Sliced open to remove the skull, the flesh was boiled and mixed with hot gravel and sand, in the belief that the spirit of the victim would now serve the victor.

Latterday head-shrinkers can now be saved all that mess and bother by heading to Selfridges, where similar kinds of black magic are being practised in the pop-up iMakr store: there you can get yourself shrunk down and 3D-printed as a six-inch figurine. First launched in Tokyo's Harajuku district last year, in the cradle of teenage novelty trends, the phenomenon of the 3D photo booth has quickly spread around the world: the service is now offered in Walmart and will soon be rolled out in Asda stores, so you can pick up a self-portrait with your groceries, for around £40.

In Selfridges, iMakr's portraits will set you back £159 and up. "Ours is the latest technology," says Sylvain Preumont, founder of iMakr, as he ushers me into an octagonal Tardis, where 48 cameras await to capture my soul in 360 degrees.

Standing in the brightly lit booth, hearing the surround-sound of SLR shutters snapping simultaneously, feels like being in the middle of a paparazzi scrum, but one that might end with you being beamed to another dimension. Thankfully, you just end up on the computer. The photos are then mapped and joined together using software that generates a "point cloud" of your body, a kind of three-dimensional map of dots, before creating a polygonal mesh, like a digital chicken-wire model. After a few hours of processing and manual fixing - creating voids beneath skirts and inside jackets, where the cameras can't see - the model is sent to a printer the size of an industrial chest freezer.

In a similar process to ink-jet printing, a print head shuttles back and forth, spitting out microscopic dots of ink and binder, only instead of a sheet of paper, there is a bed of plaster dust. Each time the printer passes, another layer of powder is dragged across the bed, 0.1mm thick, until the model is built up - at a rate of 28mm per hour, taking around five hours to build a six-inch figurine.

Just like those rubber-moulded models beloved of craft shops, the printed figures are essentially just made of plaster of Paris, water and ink, the finished objects then dunked in a bath of super-glue to fix the colour and make them a bit more durable. Seeing yourself being extracted from a bed of powder is a surreal sight, like watching an archaeological excavation, knowing that you are the embalmed mummy lying beneath the sand. Your little body comes out looking like a snow-encrusted yeti, before an airbrush and paintbrush are employed to dust away the excess powder and reveal the multicoloured mini-you in all its disturbing glory.

Colours are still to be perfected - flesh tones verge on the corpsey, while my blondish locks came out black. But other details are remarkable, from the knot of my shoelaces to the moth-eaten hole in my jumper. Now all that remains is to work out what to do with this slightly sinister, staring miniature of myself, frozen in an eternal grin. It's freaking me out, standing watching me on my desk. I just hope there's some space on my granny's mantlepiece.

Sophie Heawood

The question of what to wear perplexed me. Should I test the printer and dress up like Leigh Bowery? Or turn up wearing nothing but a feather boa and a thong, as a friend suggested? I tried to invent an outfit that would both maintain my modesty and reveal my caesarean scar, as I was curious to see what the 3D printer would make of that red line of which I have grown so fond. Until it dawned on me that I was really just having my photograph taken, not auditioning for reality TV, so I went in my normal clothes. Which turned out to be the biggest mistake of all.

"Would you tie your hair back," said the Frenchman in charge of the studio, looking at my dark scruffy bob with a concerned face, "as hair that looks like - like yours ... well. It will come out looking like a helmet. And your outfit! This is going to be interesting." Given that his prior instructions had said the computer liked details and pattern and colour, rather than solid black, I thought my candy-striped pink shirt would be perfect. And the trousers printed with little hieroglyphic people all over them. And the leopard-skin shoes and the wodge of red lipstick and gold chains.

It turns out, when he had told me to wear patterns, something had got lost in translation. What he meant was texture, like denim jeans or a knitted sweater. Still, they managed to make my mini-me, and it's certainly a fun thing to have. It must be, as everybody I've shown it to has burst out laughing. "You look so GRUMPY!" they say. (I was told to cross my arms!) "You look kind of sallow and DIRTY," they add, as my face is yellow and the clothes are all sort of washed in grey. "I can only tell it's you from the clothes, not the face," said a member of my own family.

I love the physicality of it, though: her tummy curves in just the way that mine does, the slight bulge in the calves is exactly right - the shape of it is me. My plan now is to get my little girl to pose for one every year of her life, and line them up on the mantelpiece like Russian dolls, to see how the technology improves as she grows. Although I worry that in about five years' time we'll have done away with these statues altogether, and my mantelpiece will be crowded with 3D holograms.

Stephen Moss

"Why would anyone want to have a statue made of themselves?" a friend asked me. "I can understand why *you* would want to have one made" - she is all too aware of my overweening self-regard - "but why would anyone else want to do it?"

It was a fair question, and one I put to mini-you guru Sylvain Preumont when I pitched up for my statue-making session. "Children will want to get one for their grandmother for Christmas," explained Sylvain, an effortlessly stylish and articulate French-born entrepreneur, "and then there are the people with a little bit of an ego."

I am definitely part of the second market. But there is a problem. I have turned up with a col-

league from the Guardian - young, dynamic, smiley. He would easily pass for a member of One Direction. I feel ancient and dishevelled in his company. And there is a second problem. I have in part ignored Sylvain's instructions on what to wear. "Avoid plain, uniform colours, especially black," he told me in an email. "The software likes details and remarkable points." I have made a point of wearing a ridiculous pair of green trousers, but kept on a black jumper - supposedly slimming, you see. He makes me take it off. Now I look truly absurd: green trousers, red T-shirt, battered black hiking boots. I also have a cold and suddenly realise this is going to be a fiasco.

It doesn't help that I am too tall for the booth, so the top of my head will be sliced off. Sylvain and his assistant, Pankaj Raut, say they will rectify this by adding in the top of my head. I suggest superimposing the head of George Clooney on the body of Brad Pitt, but this doesn't find favour. "Perhaps we could give you a hat or a crown," says Sylvain, who is considering making a set of chess pieces from the 3D Guardianistas.

I try three poses, all hopeless: hands in pockets, arms folded, hand on chin to suggest deep thought. My cold is getting worse. Why did I agree to do this? A few minutes later, Pankaj shows me the pictures. They say the camera does not lie, so the evidence is unendurably brutal. My self-image is of a saturnine figure: tall, athletic, dangerous. So who is this grey, shambling old bloke dressed like a dustman?

I have seen enough. What on earth is the statue going to look like? Can I take out an injunction to stop the Guardian using it? I make my excuses and leave. "Perhaps you should have done it naked," says my friend when I relate my depressing experience. "Like Michelangelo's David after he's eaten all the pies."

Stuart Heritage

I've been in this position once before, and it was just as awkward. I'd returned from Seoul, where I'd been teaching, to find that the mother of one of my students had sent me a framed A3 pencil drawing of my face that she'd copied from a yearbook. It was a perfectly good drawing but what was I supposed to do with it? I could keep it, but that'd be an act of incredible vanity. In the end, I gave it to my mum. Which is just as vain. Perhaps more so. "You know what you need, mum? A massive picture of my great big face hanging on your wall for ever." She's still got it, to the eternal chagrin of my little brother, forever annoyed that a Korean woman didn't draw his face a decade ago.

So this gives me a feeling of deja-vu. I've got a little 3D-printed figurine of myself, and it is extraordinary. You can see tiny details, like the outline of my phone in my pocket. It's not perfect - my head seems proportionately very tiny, plus I don't appear to have any eyes at all - but it still looks a thousand times more like me than my Guardian byline photo.

But what to do with it? Put it on my desk as part of a larger shrine to myself? Give it away to someone whose life I wrongly assume will be improved by a tiny me forever blindly gurning at them from the fireplace?

It doesn't help that in both the drawing and the figurine I'm pulling the exact same pretending-to-think-with-your-fingers-on-your-chin pose that photographers apparently delight in forcing me into. Both times I've tried to subvert things by pulling a slightly funny face, and both times the end effect has been one of such colossal smugness that even I want to punch myself in the face.

Reluctantly, I think I'm going to keep it. If nothing else, in years to come it'll be a handy reminder of how terrible my dress sense was when I was 33. Perhaps it'll make a nice stand-in on a nativity scene - the Three Wise Men could temporarily become the Two Wise Men and That Eyeless Bell-End Doing the Annoying Thing With His Face.

Lucy Mangan

Here I go, stepping into the future. You make sure you are standing on your mark - the lenses are essentially focused on a column of space in the middle of the booth, so you can't pose with your arms out to the side or your mini-me will emerge partially limbless - and the cameras click. This must be what Z-list celebrity feels like. For a "civilian", as Brigadier General celebrity Elizabeth Hurley refers to normal people, it's an unsettling experience. I don't want a picture of me taken from any angle. I wonder who will actually take up the opportunity in a department store when they have to pay for the privilege of having their every flaw rendered in plastic for posterity? The aesthetically fortunate? The supremely self-confident? The tragically deluded?

I watch the computer screen as my "point cloud" is generated. Do you remember reading reading the bit in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory when Mike Teavee gets sent, in millions of tiny pieces, through the air to emerge on the TV screen at the other end? The mental image that conjured up is what I'm looking at now.

Gradually, a familiar figure takes shape. It's six inches high and has a slightly rough surface that, together with the fact that the colour of my green top seems to have bled into my face, neck and arms, makes me look as if I'm covered in a light layer of mould. As symbolic representations of the ultimate truth of existence go, it's not bad, but I'm not sure it's what I would be expecting had I got this done as a Christmas present for a loved one.

Apart from that - well, the figure looks five months pregnant even though it isn't and slightly melted. The back view is horrendous. Which is to say, it is completely accurate, a triumph of modern technology and it went straight in the bin.

● iMakr and My Mini Factory will be hosting a pop-up 3D printing store from 24 October at Selfridges, London W1

Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

Neil Gaiman on Lou Reed: 'His songs were the soundtrack to my life'

Photo by Phil King http://flic.kr/p/9ZoZ36 Creative Commons attribution 2.0 licence

Sandman would not have happened without Lou Reed – and I named my daughter after Warhol's Holly Woodlawn, from Walk on the Wild Side. I am sad today

By Neil Gaiman

'There are certain kinds of songs you write that are just fun songs - the lyric really can't survive without the music. But for most of what I do, the idea behind it was to try and bring a novelist's eye to it, and, within the framework of rock'n'roll, to try to have that lyric there so somebody who enjoys being engaged on that level could have that and have the rock'n'roll too." That was what Lou Reed told me in 1991.

I'm a writer. I write fiction, mostly. People ask me about my influences, and they expect me to talk about other writers of fiction, so I do. And sometimes, when I can, I put Reed on the list, and nobody ever asks what he's doing there, which is good because I don't know how to explain why a songwriter is responsible for so much of the way I view the world.

His songs were the soundtrack to my life: a quavering New York voice with little range singing songs of alienation and despair, with flashes of impossible hope and of those tiny, perfect days and nights we want to last for ever, important because they are so finite and so few; songs filled with people, some named, some anonymous, who strut and stagger and flit and shimmy and hitch-hike into the limelight and out again.

It was all about stories. The songs implied more than they told: they made me want to know more, to imagine, to tell those stories myself. Some of the stories were impossible to unpack, others, like The Gift, were classically constructed short stories. Each of the albums had a personality. Each of the stories had a narrative voice: often detached, numb, without judgment.

Trying to reconstruct it in my head: it wasn't even the music that sucked me in, initially, as much as it was a 1974 NME interview I read when I was 13. The opinions, the character, the street smarts, his loathing of the interviewer. He was in the Sally Can't Dance phase, drugged out, the most commercially successful and most mocked album of his career. I wanted to know who Reed was, so I bought and borrowed everything I could, because the interview was about stories, and stories that would become songs.

I was a Bowie fan, which meant that I had bought or borrowed Transformer when I was 13, and then someone handed me an acetate of Live at Max's Kansas City and then I was a Lou Reed fan and a Velvet Underground fan. I looked for everything I could. I hunted through record shops. Reed's music was the soundtrack to my teenage years.

I saw him at the New Victoria when I was 15, on the Rock'n'Roll Heart tour. He kept stopping to tune his guitar. The audience cheered and yelled and shouted "Heroin!" At one point, he leaned in to the mic and told us all to "shut the fuck up. I'm trying to get this fuckin' toon right."

At the end of the night, he told us we'd been such a crummy audience we didn't deserve an encore, and he didn't do one. That, I decided, was a real rock'n'roll star.

I was 15 and playing Transformer in the art room at school. My friend Marc Gregory came over, with a request. His band covered Perfect Day, but he'd never heard the Reed original. I put it on for him. He listened for about a minute, then he turned around, puzzled, looking uncomfortable.

"He's singing flat."

"He can't be singing flat," I told him. "It's his song."

Marc went off disgruntled, and I still believe I was right.

When I was 16 and had my first break-up with a girlfriend, I played Berlin over and over until my friends worried about me. Also, I walked in the rain a lot.

I was willing to sing in a punk band in 1977 because, I decided, you didn't have to be able to sing to sing. Reed did just fine with whatever voice he had. You just had to be willing to tell stories in song.

Brian Eno said that only 30,000 people bought the first Velvet Underground album when it came out, but they all formed bands. That may have been true. But some of us listened to Loaded over and over and we wrote stories.

I would see Lou's songs surface in the stories I read. William Gibson wrote a short story called Burning Chrome, which is his take on a Velvet Underground song called Pale Blue Eyes. Sandman, the comic that made my name, would not have happened without Reed. Sandman celebrates the marginalised, the people out on the edges. And in grace notes that run through it, partly in the huger themes, Morpheus, Dream, the eponymous Sandman has one title that means more to me than any other. He's the Prince of Stories too, a title I stole from I'm Set Free ("I've been blinded but now I can see/ What in the world has happened to me?/ The prince of stories who walked right by me").

When I needed to write a Sandman story set in hell, I played Reed's Metal Machine Music (which I've described as "four sides of tape hum, on the kinds of frequencies that drive animals with particularly sensitive hearing to throw themselves off cliffs and cause blind unreasoning panic in crowds" all day for two weeks. It helped.

The things he sang about were transgressive, always on the edge of what you could say: people pointed to the mention of oral sex in Walk on the Wild Side, but the easy gender changes were more important in retrospect, the casual way that Transformer took nascent gay culture and made it mainstream.

Lou Reed's music stayed part of my life, whatever else was happening.

I named my daughter Holly after Warhol superstar Holly Woodlawn, who I'd discovered in Walk on the Wild Side. When Holly was 19, I made her a playlist of more songs she had loved as a small girl, the ones she'd remembered and the ones she'd forgotten, which led to our having the Conversation. I dragged songs from her childhood over to the playlist - Nothing Compares 2 U and I Don't Like Mondays and These Foolish Things, and then came Walk on the Wild Side. "You named me from this song, didn't you?" said Holly as the first bass notes sang. "Yup," I said. Reed started singing.

Holly listened to the first verse, and for the first time, actually heard the words. "Shaved her legs and then he was a she ...? He?"

"That's right," I said, and bit the bullet. We were having the Conversation. "You were named after a drag queen in a Lou Reed song." She grinned like a light going on. "Oh Dad. I do love you," she said. Then she wrote what I'd said down on the back of an envelope, in case she forgot it. I'm not sure that I'd ever expected the Conversation to go quite like that.

I interviewed Lou in 1991, over the phone. He was in Germany, about to go on stage. He was interested, engaged, smart. Really smart. He'd published a collection of lyrics, with notes. They felt like a novel.

A year or so later, I had dinner with him and my publisher at DC Comics. Lou wanted to make Berlin into a graphic novel. He was hard work: prickly, funny, opinionated, smart and combative: you had to prove yourself. My publisher mentioned that she had been a friend of Warhol's and faced a third degree from Lou to prove that she had been a real friend. Before he talked to me about comics, he gave me something approaching an oral examination on 1950s EC Horror comics, and challenged me on using a phrase of his in an issue of Miracleman I'd written. I told him I'd learned more about Warhol's voice from Lou's lyrics in Songs for Drella than I had from all the biographies I'd read, all the Warhol diaries, and Lou seemed satisfied.

I passed the exam, but wasn't interested in taking it twice. I'd been around long enough to know that the person isn't the art. Lou Reed, Lou told me, was a persona he used to keep people at a distance. I was happy to keep my distance. I went back to being a fan, happy to celebrate the magic without the magician.

I'm sad today. Friends of his are sending me brokenhearted emails. The world is darker. Lou knew about days like this, as well. "There's a bit of magic in everything," he told us: "And then some loss to even things out."

Arcade Fire: Voodoo rhythms, dance music and David Bowie

Reflektor, the band's new James Murphy-produced double album, combines dance music with Haitian roots, lyrics that speak of disillusionment – and a guest appearance from David Bowie
By Laura Barton

A low, sullen warehouse building, 299 Meserole Street sits in a straggle of industrial units not far across the Williamsburg Bridge in Brooklyn. This afternoon, the cool, dark space within is in the process of being transformed with palm trees, portable toilets and a makeshift bar. Mirrorballs spin out over the empty room as three men scatter handfuls of multicoloured paper – tiny flickers of pink and blue and silver cellophane – on to the concrete floor. When they are finished, they scrunch up red plastic drinking cups and throw them on to the ground too. The effect is of a party recently ended, of a room still ringing with merriment, laughter and dancing.

Up on a small stage, Arcade Fire are soundchecking, running through their potential set for the night to come: a selection of new songs – Reflektor, Supersymmetry, It's Never Over – as well as a couple of steady favourites: Neighbourhood #3 (Power Out), Sprawl II, Wake Up. The preparations here today are part of the band's album launch extravaganza, two semi-secret shows for 3,000 people, that will be replicated in Los Angeles and Miami, with attendees requested to dress up in their finery, and for which tickets have been swapping hands for up to a rumoured $5,000 (£3,100).

It was 2004 when Arcade Fire emerged out of Montreal with their extraordinary, mysterious debut album, Funeral. A loose circle of musicians orbiting husband and wife duo Win Butler and Régine Chassagne, over the past nine years and two more albums – Neon Bible (2006) and The Suburbs (2010) – they have built a reputation for both the intrigue and intelligence of their songwriting, as well as for live shows that can seem ecstatic, desperate and electric all at once.

Across those nine years, much has changed about the band: members flitting in and out, the focus of their songwriting shifting to accommodate other talents — Butler's brother Will, multi-instrumentalist Richard Reed Parry, and bassist Tim Kingsbury among them – and with each album a musical turn that has at times unsettled their devoted following.

On Monday they will release Reflektor, a double album that has already startled many who have heard it, with its sheen and its unabashed splendour: there are shades of Studio 54, of disco and glam rock, as well as Talking Heads, Blondie and ska. There is the obvious influence of David Bowie, who guests on one of the new songs, and of LCD Soundsystem, whose James Murphy produced the record, along with the band's long-time collaborator Markus Dravs. And beneath it all, lyrics that speak darkly of a relationship in disarray, of disappointment and disillusionment and sudden flares of hope; of falling apart and coming back together, of two lives that can never quite unravel. "And now you're older, Butler sings on one track, "you will discover, it's never over."

"When Régine and I met, I was 19 years old," says Win Butler, lying back in what he refers to as a "therapy pose", with his long legs draped over the arm of the sofa. "We spent so much of our life working on records, working on music, and it was the idea of putting all of this life on to a little piece of plastic." Now 33, Butler has seen not only his own life alter, but the music he makes physically change, from the records, tapes and CDs of his teenage years to the world of iTunes and MP3s. "If [The Beatles'] Revolver is about the LP, and Reflektor is about the end of the CD era," he says, "it was feeling: 'If we were making the last CD, how would we make it?' Because the medium of something kind of always impacts on it a little bit. And it was also kind of a way of understanding the times, and life, and how I feel about myself, men, women, relationships, you know … all the different things."

Many hearing the album for the first time have been preoccupied by its musical volte-face, and have drawn comparisons with U2's 1991 album Achtung Baby, noted on its release for its defiantly experimental sound. Yet Butler dismisses the comparison. "With Achtung Baby, they have these characters that have been created of themselves and they were making an effigy about culture," he explains. "And I don't think that is what we're really trying to do. I think what we're driving at is a little bit different. I think [Reflektor] was more about allowing ourselves to be transformed, musically, allowing ourselves to be changed, trying to connect in a new axis."

It began with rhythms, with the influence of Haiti – the country Chassagne's parents had fled during the dictatorship of Papa Doc. These rhythms had been tangible even from Funeral, but in recent times, particularly since the devastating earthquake of 2010, the band had begun to explore the country's musical heritage, performing there at festivals and playing with Haitian musicians. In the summer of 2011, Chassagne, the Butler brothers and some of the drummers from the Haitian band RAM spent two weeks in New Orleans working specifically on rhythm. "We just recorded beats," says Chassagne, in her slow, sing-song voice. "We were interested in doing hybrid beats that could translate stuff that I know from my family background in Haiti. I was always interested to try to find rhythms that mean something, to communicate emotion through rhythm and music. Because rhythm is almost like a vocabulary."

The rest of the band could not replicate Chassagne's more primal relationship with Haitian rhythms, but their response was nonetheless instinctive. "To understand or to feel them is immediate," Win Butler says. "It's like putting you finger in an electric socket." It also offered rich new ground for musical exploration. "They are very different from the rhythms I grew up with," says Kingsbury. "You see the historical sweep from Africa, but African-American music from North America is also very different. The emphasis is very different. So it does put you in a different headspace and it does make you engage with the music in a different way."

Will Butler recalls the particular delight of working with the RAM drummers and overcoming their mutual linguistic hurdles. "My French is not very good," he says sheepishly, "and my Creole is even worse than my French, but it was actually very good for my musicianship to be in a room with people I couldn't really communicate with except through music. Most of us are pretty heady most of the time, we love talking about music, everyone's an ethnomusicologist at some time, so it was very good to only have hand gestures, to play what you meant. It was very valuable."

Wrapped around what Chassagne refers to as "voodoo rhythms" were other influences too. Reed Parry mentions Fela Kuti and James Brown before describing the finished record as in no way resembling James Brown and "not sounding anything like Fela Kuti". Will Butler explains how some of the sounds that in many ways fired the album didn't even make it to the final cut. "On The Suburbs we said that Depeche Mode and Neil Young were approximate poles of the album, and this album too has poles," he says. "One of those poles was the Haitian rhythms. Synth string drones is another. But we also recorded a ton of punk rock stuff that isn't on the album, that is just abrasive like nobody's business, so that is actually a core of the album too." There are remnants of it still, he points out, on tracks such as Normal Person and Joan of Arc. "Just a bit in some of the edginess of it, it's still there."

But for the most part, the roughness is counterbalanced by sheen. "I think in order to realise some of the songs fully, we realised we had to really polish them," Will explains. "That rough form was really powerful, but the back of your eyeballs were dry after you'd listened to it. And it was actually really fun to go down that road, to get out the really sharp-skinned sandpaper and make everything shine again."

The tension between the scuffed, crackling side of the record and glistening keys is one of the many dualities on Reflektor. It is there also in the mirroring of the album title, of course, something also alluded to in the track Supersymmetry, and as on previous albums, some tracks appear to sit in pairs, and there are retakes of earlier songs – in this case Here Comes the Night Time. "I think every album we write about what's happening to us at that time," Chassagne says. "And sometimes there's a lot [to say], and there's like a second wave … the same idea, and so then you get this," she holds one palm up, "and that," she raises the other. It is often, Will adds, a case of "just attacking the same concept over and over".

The duality of the album's title track is broken, oddly enough, by the presence of David Bowie. "He

just needed the work," Kingsbury says soberly. "It's really sad actually." In truth, Bowie was roped in while visiting the Electric Lady studio where the band were working in New York. "The song is better for having a third voice in it," says Will. "So it's not just these two voices talking to each other, so it's not just Islands in the Stream, there's a third voice at the end, an outside perspective."

Working with Murphy had been a hope for Arcade Fire since as far back as Neon Bible, but it was only for this album that their schedules aligned. Will recalls with amusement that, in the early years of their careers, they danced around one another with some scepticism. "I always imagined he and LCD would be kind of insufferable," he says. "And he actually said the same about us - that people were talking so much about Arcade Fire before he had heard or seen us that he was like: 'Oh goddamnit … why are these stupid bands doing stuff with xylophone?' And then he saw us and thought: 'Wait, that's Arcade Fire?' And I did the same: 'Wait, that's the guy that I thought would be this hipster douchebag that I wanted to punch in the face and the balls at the same time? Great!'"

For Chassagne, Murphy's role was to help realise the great dance record she believed the album could be. "I really wanted to get the right feel to the songs and be able to dance, *really* dance to them," she says, suddenly lit up. She talks passionately about dancing in Haiti: "When Win and I were staying in this place that had windows but no real doors and some drummers started playing, and more drummers came and more drummers came, and they were playing these roots, voodoo rhythms, and we just danced til 5am, and when we were too hot, we just ran and jumped in the ocean."

And she remembers with a sudden tenderness the sight of her mother dancing: "I always have this memory of my Mom dancing in the kitchen all the time," she says and starts to laugh. "We had a really bad radio - so bad you had to put your finger in it to change the music, so you were always at risk of being electrocuted every time you went to change the channel. And the songs would come on in the kitchen and my Mom would just dance, and she was always sad. I suppose it's the experience a lot of people have as immigrants. She loved to dance so much and was so sad because she always thought people didn't dance enough. She was a Haitian woman. She was round. So I don't exactly dance like that, but not completely different either."

She is not, she insists, the band's greatest dancer. "I think Will," she says. "Ritchie as well. Everybody! Everybody can dance!" But the problem with going out dancing these days, says Will, is that it's hard to find a place that plays the music that makes you want to dance. Chassagne agrees: "I don't get it, because dance music, sometimes it's so dumb! Why does it have to be that dumb? The thing is I find either it's danceable and really stupid, or it's brave and artful and thoughtful, but you can't dance to it. But I want to have both!"

Photograph: Guy Aroch

The aim of the evening ahead, with its dress-up code, short, hour-long set of new songs, and a DJ set from Murphy, is that it might just lure people into dancing. They have even invented an alter ego band named The Reflektors, in which they perform wearing giant papier-mache heads of themselves, to add to the levity, and perhaps also to relieve the weight of what it means to be one of the world's biggest bands.

The party, in all its bright fun and silliness, is in some way an extension of the record. "It's hard not to get people out of their comfort zones and just alienate them," says Will. "I think a lot of art and a lot of the stuff we make, we get people out of their comfort zones by being extremely confrontational. And it's great that art's really confrontational, but there's something to be said about lifting people out of the day-to-day, that makes them excited about dancing instead of just feeling horrible about the government. But it's also valuable to feel horrible about the government." He laughs. "You want people dancing and being like 'The government sucks.'" He shoulder dances as he sings a little ditty: "The government sucks."

Shortly after 9pm, I am sitting in a white limousine at the back of the venue, wearing a papier-mache head of Chassagne. Win has implored the driver to find the worst kind of bass-heavy chart dance music he can on the limo's radio, to wind down the windows and turn it up loud. It is to this soundtrack that we all make the short journey round to the front of the building, to where the crowd has assembled and a red carpet has been rolled out.

We climb out to shouts, whistles and cheering, and the rush of it is faintly terrifying - through the head's giant nose holes, I can see little, breathe less, and wonder quite what my feet are doing. Win takes my hand and leads me along the queue, posing for photographs with fans as we go. Ahead of me, he is just a blur of sequinned jacket that I follow into the venue to where the rest of the band, in their wild suits and giant heads, have occupied the dancefloor. As I watch them dancing, I see how it liberates them, how charged they seem by rhythm and music and anonymity, and how thrilling it is to watch them caught in this sudden flare of hope.

Relate: 75 years of marriage guidance

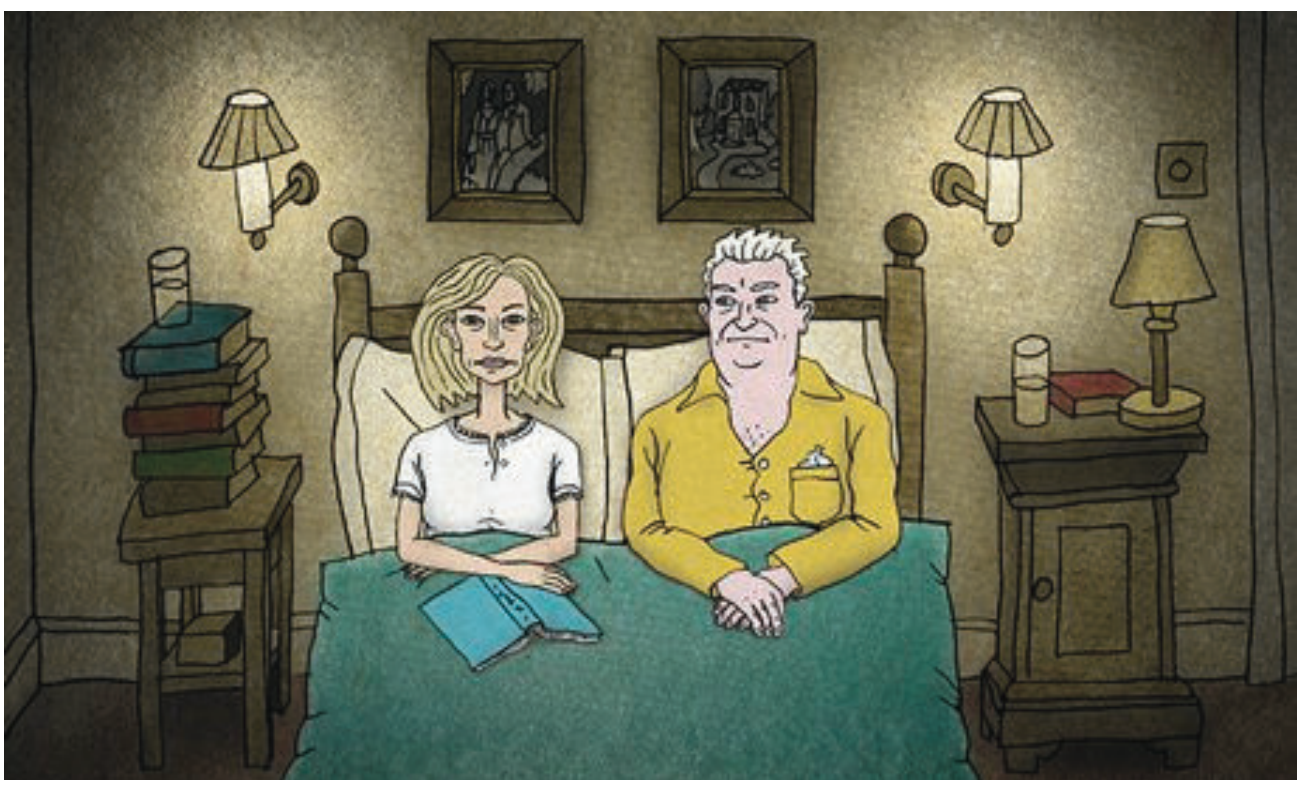


Illustration: Jonathan Hodgson/BBC

The National Marriage Guidance Council has been helping couples for 75 years. Stuart Jeffries reports on how it's changed more than just its name – to Relate – and talks to Susan, who let her counselling session be recorded for a BBC film
By Stuart Jeffries

The National Marriage Guidance Council was founded in 1938 by Dr Herbert Gray and it's a safe bet that the Presbyterian minister could not have imagined what it would become 75 years later. In his day, you couldn't LiveChat with your counsellor about whether it was acceptable to masturbate as part of a loving relationship. You couldn't Skype your fury about your uncommunicative life partner or email for therapeutic assistance about the minimal activity in your conjugal bed. Sex therapy was rudimentary, while counselling for families, children or young people was not on offer.

"If you were gay, forget about it," says Annie Wimbush, Relate's senior practice consultant. "Until 1967, homosexuality was illegal so the sufferings of gay couples were not our concern. Cohabiting couples would not have been acceptable clients either. And mixed-race couples probably wouldn't have sought help from us."

The National Marriage Guidance Council, which became Relate on its 50th anniversary in 1988, has changed more than its name.

Technology and the liberalisation of social mores and laws have made Britain very different from the way it was in 1938. One example: "Today 17% of couples met on internet dating sites and there is no stigma attached to it – at least for younger people," says Ruth Sutherland, CEO of Relate. "In fact, my children say to me how complicated, hit and miss it must have been to meet in the way we used to. And they have a point." A counterintuitive thought: how much simpler romantic life is now compared with the pre-internet age.

But let's not overstate the differences between then and now. The journalist Katharine Whitehorn, who is Herbert Gray's granddaughter, says: "Marital stresses increased during the 1930s depression. By 1938, married couples were more likely to be financially insecure, working harder, coming home depressed and anxious. A rise in marital misery was the inevitable consequence."

Sound familiar?

Gray, who in 1922 wrote the million-selling book Men, Women and God: A Discussion of Sex Questions from the Christian Point of View, became a focus for letters from suffering spouses. "They came to him with their marital miseries and he realised that there needed to be a single organisation they could go to for help. He was a compassionate man, and visionary in that sense," says Whitehorn.

But he also argued that masturbation was a perversion, homosexuality a sin and couples had a duty to bear children.

He also had more liberal views. Gray railed against the widely accepted idea that healthy women don't become sexually excited or have orgasms. He also argued that husbands should share the burden of housekeeping and childcare.

This last point may have seemed outrageous in 1938, but it makes his views topical today when the British couple is fast changing in an unexpected way. In August, it was revealed that one in three working mothers is now the main earner at home – a remarkable 70% rise in the last 15 years. The report by the Institute for Public Policy Research, supported by Relate, found that during that time, the proportion of breadwinner mothers in couples increased from 18% to 31%, the number of co-habiting breadwinner mothers has doubled and the employment rate of single mothers has increased from 43% to 58%.

For Ruth Sutherland, the report demonstrates that government policy has not kept pace with the changing nature of family life. "The family is the foundation of our society and it's no longer enough to suggest that the spheres of home and work do not overlap. In a society where both partners are working, it makes no sense for our leave allowance to only make room for maternity leave." Dr Gray, you might well think, would have agreed with that – even if his organisation never had to tackle that particular pressure on relationships.

But the biggest changes to British relationships in the past 75 years – and the most radical challenges to the National Marriage Guidance Council – were those unleashed during that liberal, purportedly libidinous decade the 1960s, when newfound sexual freedom, if that's what it was, provoked an upsurge in divorce. There were 50,000 divorces in 1971 and 150,000 a decade later. True, the number of divorces has fallen steadily since the early 1990s, but that is probably because fewer couples are getting married in the first place. Today, there are just two marriages for every divorce each year – an unimaginable ratio in 1938. Cohabitation is up: 4.25% of children in 1938 were born to unmarried parents compared with 47% in 2011.

And Relate is currently dealing with a divorce problem unthinkable in 1938. There has been a 20% rise this year in divorce rates for same-sex couples who entered into civil partnerships. As civil partnerships were only introduced in 2005, this statistic quite possibly reflects that traditional bane of the formalised relationship, the seven-year itch.

In such a context, Relate has its work cut out – not least because its philosophy is not to shore up the sacred if embattled institutions of marriage and family (as was Dr Gray's hope in 1938) but to encourage us to value all kinds of relationships. "The Department for Education is always talking about the three Rs," says Ruth Sutherland. "We think there's a fourth R that gives value to the other three: relationships."

But what does that mean? "Think of work. People don't leave their jobs. They leave their managers because they're sick of them. Managers learn about emotional literacy in MBAs but don't use that knowledge practically. We have to be more proactive in valuing relationships. There's a premium on helping work relationships work."

It's an intriguing point and one a million miles away from the thinking that underpinned the foundation of the National Marriage Guidance Council 75 years ago. It was conceived as an institution to help one particular kind of troubled relationship – between married heterosexual, and most likely Christian and white, couples. Now Relate's remit is to work on any human relationship that is in trouble.

"That said, much of our counselling today involves straight married couples," says Annie Wimbush, "but it has changed. Our counsellors were originally middle-class women of a certain age, probably in twin set and pearls – the kind of person who might well have squirmed if you told them about your sexual problems."

She argues that one of the biggest changes to her organisation in the past 75 years is the greater pro-

fessionalism of its counsellors. ”Our counsellors are trained to speak confidently about sex, in order to give clients confidence. In fact, the main change is that people are more willing to talk about sex problems than before. A very high proportion of our clients who go through sex therapy have a positive outcome - it’s one of the most successful services.”

But not the only one. Relate now offers face-to-face relationship counselling, family counselling, counselling for children and young people. Some of its centres around the country also offer domestic violence prevention programmes, mediation, counselling for people with severe illness or mental-health issues. ”One of the big changes is technological,” says Wimbush. ”We offer telephone, email and LiveChat - which is online chat with a trained counsellor.” Today there are 1,700 Relate practitioners in more than 60 centres, helping at least one million Britons each year.

Among them are Susan and Iain, a couple in their 50s who separated after 27 years of marriage. ”We’d known each other since we were 16, but for the previous 15 years had had problems,” says Susan. ”We had rows and so on, and it came to a head. We slept apart and then eventually separated. I went to live in Surrey and he had a flat in Chelsea.

”I missed him terribly and he missed me, but there were still rough edges. We thought about divorce briefly but the impetus wasn’t there to do that.”

Why did they decide to have counselling? ”It was difficult not to express ourselves in confrontational ways. But we never really talked about our problems directly. We would mention things in passing or make sidelong remarks.”

Did they have a goal - to divorce or to end the separation, for instance? ”I was open minded. My husband didn’t want it to be a means by which we could separate and feel good about it. We have three grownup children and they were very supportive of our efforts to work out things for ourselves. Well, actually they were ambivalent because they thought we would always be together.”

Susan and Iain had 10 to 12 counselling sessions at Relate and allowed one to be recorded for an animated film broadcast on the BBC a couple of years ago (see below).

In the film, they discuss with the counsellor the affair Susan had, shortly after she and Iain separated. There’s a lovely moment where Iain complains that she moved out after his property business collapsed and suggests she decided to have an affair with the richest man they knew because she wanted her BMW lifestyle back. Cut to: cartoon Susan shaking her head vigorously, and the counsellor inviting her to give her side of the story. The affair wasn’t about that, she says. Then the session continues, with the counsellor encouraging each of them to express perspectives and resentments hitherto locked away.

Susan says now: ”Probably the most enlightening, rewarding and positive aspect of it was that it provided room where we were about to open up in a safe environment,” says Susan. ”We were prompted by a very skilful counsellor. It opened up the floodgates. We saw aspects of each other we hadn’t seen before - that was incredibly liberating.

”I’ve had experiences of counselling and sometimes it hasn’t worked because you don’t gel with the counsellor. But from very early on with [the Relate counsellor] we recognised his talent. We were confident of confiding in him from the first few minutes and we respected his motives. He was allowing us to drive and set the agenda. I think the film shows that - even though it looks a little like Family Guy.”

What did she make of the film? ”I think it’s terrific. It’s funny and poignant. It’s about all the things you’d expect - love, sex, problems - but it’s entertaining.”

After their last session they were offered more but with a different counsellor. ”We didn’t take up the offer because we thought we could work it out. We were still separated but seeing each other at weekends and holidays. He would call me every night.”

In fact, after they finished couple counselling, Susan and Iain began to collaborate on a book about their relationship called Darling, We’re Fucked. ”We wrote four chapters together. I remember one weekend in 2010 trudging through the snow and my husband said, ’How are we going to end this book?’ Then he said, ’Normally in love stories one of the buggers dies.’”

It was a fateful remark. Three and half years ago - six months after their Relate counselling ended - Iain died of a heart attack. ”I feared something was wrong because he didn’t call me that night,” recalls Susan. Iain was only 51 and Susan, now 56, has tried to make a life - including a love life - as a widow.

Since then she has completed the book, which she plans to self-publish and this week launches her blog darlingwearefucked.com, which, she says, ”is all about the love life of a widow”.

The counselling Relate offers and from which Susan and Iain benefited is, argues Ruth Sutherland, undervalued by the government - at the very moment when all kinds of relationships, thanks to Britain’s prolonged economic downturn, are under unprecedented stress. ”Relationships are at the heart of every big issue that the government faces,” she says.

”Think of people with dementia or Parkinson’s - most of the care is provided by the spouse or family members because private care is unaffordable. Those relationships have to work if they’re to be successful.”

According to the Relationships Foundation, the cost of family breakdown to the public purse this year is £46bn - up £2bn on last year. ”Family breakdown hits tax revenues, housing benefits, education,” says Sutherland. ”But family policy, which could save us billions at a time when the government is all about saving money, is ignored by No 10.”

And, no doubt, No 11.

She likes the idea touted by an Australian politician recently that couples could be given state-funded counselling vouchers and redeem them when the need arises. ”People could use them at those key transition points in their lives. At Relate, we want to move more upstream than we have been in the past and equip people in a proactive way to protect their relationships.”

But isn’t the truth that we’re much less socially cohesive than in 1938, that we value freedom over commitment? That marriages are no longer regarded as the sine qua non of human relationships?

That collapse in the allure of long-term relationships, at least, is what Leeds University sociologist Zygmunt Bauman took to be characteristic of our age in his book Liquid Love. He argued that durable ties of family, class, religion and marriage involved investments whose return rarely warranted the outlay. Instead, we liquid moderns - as he called them - minimise kinship ties and instead create provisional bonds that are loose enough to stop suffocation, but tight enough to give a sense of security. Marriage in that context simply doesn’t make sense. It’s a duff investment.

”I’m sceptical about that,” says Ruth Sutherland. ”People do still aspire to long-term relationships. That may not involve marriage any more. In 2013 there’s no such thing as the average family, and the sooner the policy makers catch up with that reality the better. But the human aspiration to have long-term relationships remains. In that sense we aren’t all that different from how we were in 1938.”

● *Names have been changed. relate.org.uk*

Counsellor Tell me a little bit, if you would, Iain, about employment at the moment and how that’s affecting you currently?

Iain Well, OK [raises both hands]. Well, to be perfectly honest, I am not employed at the moment.

Counsellor Right, still not working.

Iain Not working, um, and the reason we have ended up at this point is largely financial, I think [shrugs, looks sideways at Susan]. A year and a half ago, we were basically heading for no income, no home. You know, nothing, and Susan turned around and tried to, well, actually, did initiate an affair with a chap who happened to be the richest bloke we knew in the area ...

Susan [Looks to the sky]

Iain ... So there was me, you know, ended up with nothing and Susan immediately appearing to try and jump ship.

Counsellor Susan was following the money - is that what you are saying?

Iain Well, it certainly felt there was an element of that.

Susan [closes eyes and shakes her head]

Counsellor I noticed how vigorously you were shaking your head there, Susan, when you were hearing it.

Susan Absolutely. I feel so angry.

Counsellor From your perspective at that point, how was it?

Susan Well, it started about two thousand and ... 2002. We started to have increasingly, sort of, separate bedrooms and so on, and we got on with our lives emotionally poles apart. That was, the sort of, trigger that made me think, actually, you know, I, I’ve got to, to just, just go.

Iain [looks stern, glancing sideways at Susan]

Susan I thought, well, OK, I will have some fun and I hooked up with this guy.

Iain [shakes head with deep frown]

Susan ... which was not particularly serious, but it was, it was a, brief affair.

Iain [glances directly at Susan]

Counsellor Iain, is that pretty much your recollection of what happened?

Iain [laughs, shakes head] No! I mean, I perceive this entirely as ’I want my BMW back, I want my big house in Surrey back.’

Susan [interrupts] That is *so* not true [hits fists on arms of chair]. It was in no way driven by my need for material possessions that you dictate.

Iain [interrupts] I’m talking about my interpretation of what is going on.

Susan Yeah, I know, but the thing is, your interpretation is so far removed from my real feelings about it and what actually happened that I think, well, if you are gonna interpret my behaviour like that then, cor! [raises both hands] So we’ve got a lot of work to do.

Iain [folds his arms]

Counsellor I am really glad you said that Susan because so much conflict between couples usually [pauses, raises eyebrows] arises from the differences in interpretations and it’s at that point that we start negotiating and working.

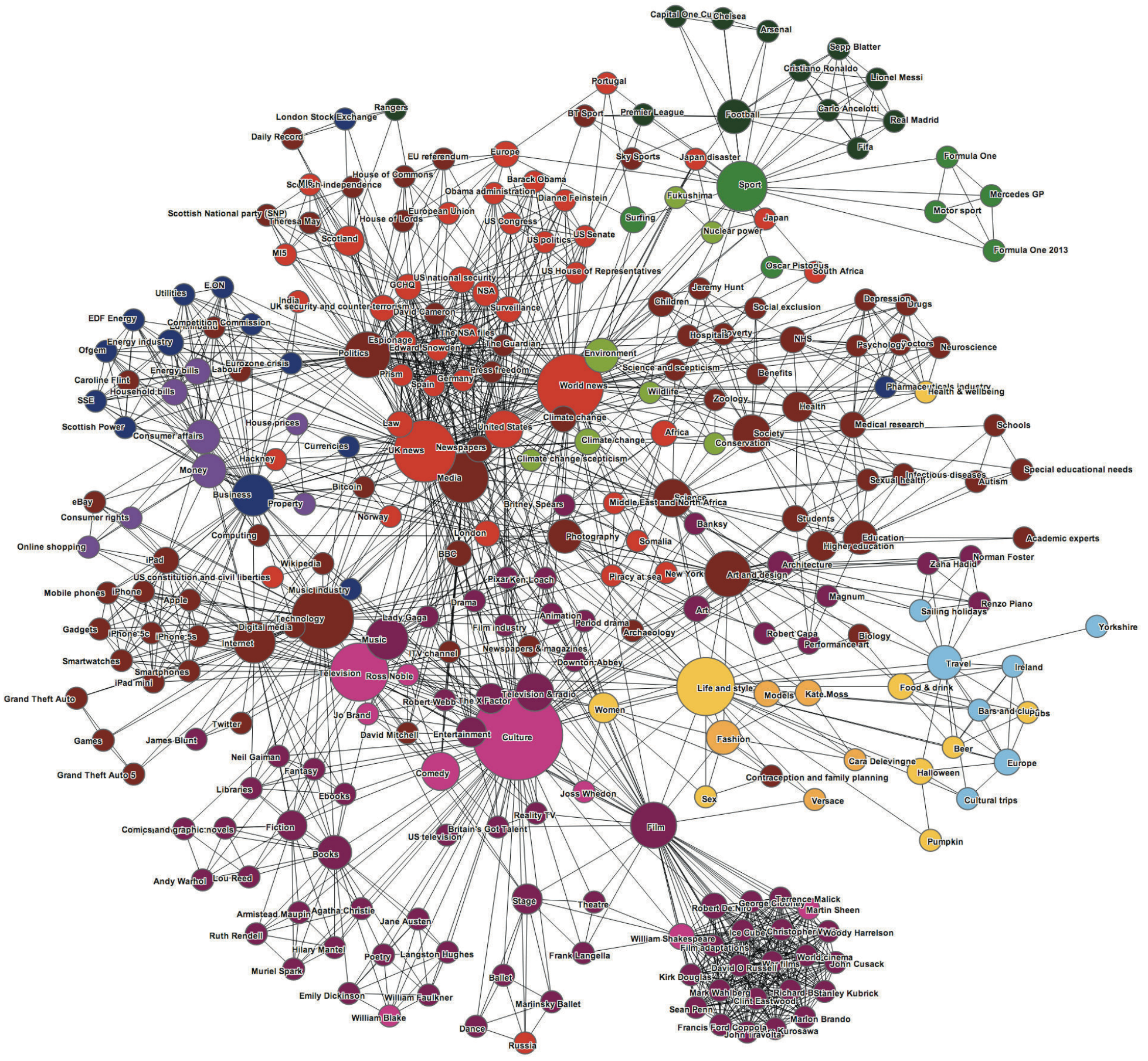
Susan [eyes wide, nods twice]

Counsellor You’re nodding vigorously, Susan, and I’m not entirely sure how you are hearing this, Iain.

Iain I think you’ve put your finger right on the button, to be perfectly honest.

Counsellor OK.

Transcript of a real Relate relationship session featured in the BBC animated documentary The Trouble With Love and Sex, produced by Zac Beattie, with illustrations by Jonathan Hodgson, for the BBC Wonderland series, 2009.



The week in tags

fiction
books
hilary-mantel
murielspark
armisteadmaupin
agathachristie
ruth-rendell
culture
langston-hughes
poetry
williamfaulkner
emilydickinson

william-blake
janeausten
neilgaiman
libraries
ebooks
technology
internet
fantasy
stage
dance
ballet
mariinsky-ballet

russia
theatre
frank-langella
shakespeare
film
ross-noble
comedy
television
media
bbc
jo-brand
david-mitchell

robert-webb
academicexperts
higher-education
education
specialeducationneeds
autism
schools
society
artanddesign
students
performance-art
art
japan
fukushima
world
nuclearpower
japan-earthquake-and-tsunami
environment
wildlife
children
uk
climate-change-scepticism
science
scienceofclimatechange
climate-change
politics
ireland
bars
europe
travel
beer
food-and-drink
pubs
lifeandstyle
halloween
cultural-trips
yorkshire
property
hackney
houseprices
london
money
consumer-rights-money
online-shopping
consumer-affairs
ebay
ipad
computing
photography
lou-reed
popandrock
comics
andywarhol
music
james-blunt
twitter
britneyspears
somalia
middleeast
africa
piracy
downton-abbey
tv-and-radio
period-drama
women
newspapers
pressandpublishing
entertainment
reality-tv
britains-got-talent
the-x-factor
us-television
robertdeniro
ken-loach
pixar
animation
drama
usa
film-industry
war-films
richard-burton
clinteastwood
world-cinema
christopher-walken
david-o-russell
georgeclooney
icecube
mark-wahlberg
akirakurosawa
terrence-malick
film-adaptations
john-travolta
john-cusack
seanpenn
woody-harrelson
stanleykubrick
kirkdouglas
francis-ford-coppola
martin-sheen
marlonbrando
us-constitution-and-civil-liberties
law
wikipedia
zoology
conservation
science-scepticism
infectiousdiseases
medical-research
sexual-health
health
archaeology
banksy
new-york
architecture
magnum
robert-capa
sailing-holidays
zaha-hadid
norman-foster
renzo-piano
daily-record
rangers
scotland
londonstockexchangegroup
itv1
lady-gaga
bt-sport
sport
premierleague
sky-sports
football
energy-industry
edmiliband
energy
household-bills
labour
eon
utilities
business
competition-commission
eu-referendum
eu
europe-news
houseofcommons
lords
scottish-independence
theresamay
uksecurity
mi5
mi6
gchq
snp
musicindustry
digital-media
caroline-flint
edf
scottish-power
scottishandsouthernenergy
ofgem
india
debt-crisis
apple
ipad-mini
iphone
iphone-5c
iphone-5s
smartphones
mobilephones
gadgets
smartwatches
grand-theft-auto-5
grand-theft-auto
games
kate-moss
cara-delevingne
models
fashion
versace
biology
joss-whedon
pumpkin
pharmaceuticals-industry
doctors
nhs
drugs
neuroscience
psychology
depression
health-and-wellbeing
poverty
socialexclusion
benefits
hospitals
jeremy-hunt
oscar-pistorius
southafrica
surfing
mercedes-gp
formula-one-2013
formulaone
motorsports
ronaldo
realmadrid
sepp-blatter
carlo-ancelotti
lionel-messi
fifa
the-nsa-files
nsa
prism
edward-snowden
us-national-security
surveillance
espionage
spain
germany
davidcameron
theguardian
press-freedom
congress
us-politics
house-of-representatives
dianne-feinstein
obama-administration
barack-obama
us-senate
capital-one-cup
arsenal
chelsea
contraception-and-family-planning
sex
portugal
bitcoin
currencies
norway

Some British people can't afford to heat their food. Aren't we ashamed?

I don't suppose any of the big six energy bosses has wrapped a toddler in a fleece, dressing gown and jumper of an evening

By Jack Monroe

Reports that recipients of food bank parcels are returning products that need to be heated up came as no surprise to me. Neither did the news that various energy companies were putting their prices up, again by an average of over 9%. Gas prices and train fares seem to be the two commodities for modern British life that base their prices on a whim, or numbers plucked out of thin air, without a thought to the real cost to those for whom those price hikes mean unimaginable sacrifices in their day to day lives.

I don't imagine the chief executives of any of the big six called before MPs on Tuesday has ever had to unplug their fridge because they simply can't afford to run it, or wrap their toddler in a fleece all-in-one and a jumper and a dressing gown of an evening.

It wasn't too long ago myself that I was sitting with my back to my front door, hissing at my toddler to be quiet because there was a man on the other side of it hammering with his fist. I owed Eon £390 in unpaid electricity bills, and they were shouting that they knew I was in there. Every new morning brought red-topped letters, final demands and pairs of men peering through the windows - but as I told them time and again, I couldn't give them what I didn't have.

Food bank in Coventry. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

I couldn't take advantage of the "cheaper bills if you pay by direct debit", because my finances were so chaotic that the direct debits often bounced, leaving me with a £25 charge from my bank and a £12 late fee from the energy company for my troubles. If you haven't got a tenner to get them off your back for a week, you certainly don't have an additional £37 for charges.

I was unemployed, applying for every job that I came across, and mistake after mistake with housing benefit payments meant that I was struggling to get by. The £10 a week food shop has been well documented by now, but I don't really talk about the Christmas day that I sent my son to his father's house to spare him the misery of yet another day in a freezing cold flat, with no television to entertain us, no tree, no presents and nothing that even slightly resembled a Christmas dinner. The furniture was parked in front of the radiators because I didn't use them anyway, and I slept in the kitchen-cum-living room, because it was the warmest place in the house. Some days I barely moved from the day-bed, sitting applying for jobs curled up in my duvet, with Small Boy playing with his toy cars beside me.

Eventually, I was told by one of the men hammering on the door that I would be put on a key meter, another bitter irony, as those with the least money pay the highest rates and tariffs for their gas and electricity.

Sitting at my desk now, in a pair of jumpers rather than turn the heating on, old habits die hard. I work these days and have an income, but I still only turn the lights on if I absolutely have to, keep the water lukewarm and haven't yet turned the heating on.

I spent 18 months with the furniture parked in front of the radiators, cooking as quickly as I possibly could to use the least amount of gas and electricity. I unscrewed the lightbulbs in the hallway, unplugged everything at the wall so not even the LCD display was blinking away on the oven. I eventually turned the fridge and freezer off - they were empty anyway - and the boiler, desperate to save money, shocking myself awake in the morning with the shortest, coldest showers, and boiling a kettle of water twice a week to bath my young son.

But still, there are some corners that can't be cut. The clothes still need washing, especially when potty training a toddler. You debate every cup of tea, wonder how much it will really cost, and put another jumper on to try to keep warm. You go to bed when it gets dark in the evenings, because it's warm in bed and you can't see anything anyway.

You go to a coffee shop where the staff are friendly, early in the morning when they're unlikely to be busy, and plug your mobile phone and the small notebook computer you borrowed from a friend into the wall to charge it. Anything to save a little money, anywhere you can.

I'm not the only one. I visited a single parents' support group in Bristol a few weeks back as part of an Oxfam project, and the mothers I met there all told the same story. How gas and electricity bills were one of their biggest outgoings. How they don't quite understand how it can cost so much, when they don't put the heating on, or luxuriate in hot baths every evening. An £18 standing charge to be connected to the mains might not sound a lot to some people, but to others, spending almost a fiver a week without so much as turning a tap on is the difference between eating and missing meals.

We hear time and again what a prosperous, affluent country Britain is, the sixth richest in the world. But aren't we ashamed that people who need emergency food handouts are eating cold beans and stewed steak from the tin, or handing it back, because they can't even heat it up? The Trussell trust and some Tory peers have called for an inquiry into poverty levels in the UK today, and it can't come quickly enough.

Britney Spears' music used by British navy to scare off Somali pirates

'As soon as the pirates get a blast of Britney, they move on as quickly as they can,' says merchant naval officer

By Tim Jonze

In an excellent case of "here's a sentence you won't read every day", Britney Spears has emerged as an unlikely figurehead in the fight against Somali pirates.

According to reports, Britney's hits, including Oops! I Did It Again and Baby One More Time, are being employed by British naval officers in an attempt to scare off pirates along the east coast of Africa. Perhaps nothing else - not guns, not harpoons - is quite as intimidating as the sound of Ms Spears singing "Ooh baby baby!"

Merchant naval officer Rachel Owens explained the tactics to Metro: "Her songs were chosen by the security team because they thought the pirates would hate them most. These guys can't stand western culture or music, making Britney's hits perfect. As soon as the pirates get a blast of Britney, they move on as quickly as they can."

Britney is currently preparing to release her eighth album, Britney Jean, in December. It follows the single Work Bitch, although producer Will.i.am claimed the sound of this track is not indicative of the rest of the record. No doubt the record's eclectic sound has been designed to keep any potential pirates on their toes.

Britney Jean will be Spears' first album since 2011's Femme Fatale. When it's released, perhaps the British military can stockpile copies down a bunker in Norfolk in preparation for the third world war.

Man buys $27 of bitcoin, forgets about them, finds they're now worth $886k

Bought in 2009, currency's rise in value saw small investment turn into enough to buy an apartment in a wealthy area of Oslo

Samuel Gibbs

The meteoric rise in bitcoin has meant that within the space of four years, one Norwegian man's $27 investment turned into a forgotten $886,000 windfall.

Kristoffer Koch invested 150 kroner ($26.60) in 5,000 bitcoins in 2009, after discovering them during the course of writing a thesis on encryption. He promptly forgot about them until widespread media coverage of the anonymous, decentralised, peer-to-peer digital currency in April 2013 jogged his memory.

Bitcoins are stored in encrypted wallets secured with a private key, something Koch had forgotten. After eventually working out what the password could be, Koch got a pleasant surprise:

"It said I had 5,000 bitcoins in there. Measuring that in today's rates it's about NOK5m ($886,000)," Koch told NRK.

Silk Road fluctuations

In April 2013, the value of bitcoin peaked at $266 before crashing to a low of $50 soon after. Since then, bitcoin has seen large fluctuations in its value, most recently following the seizure of online drugs marketplace Silk Road, plummeting before jumping $30 in one day to a high of $197 in October.

Koch exchanged one fifth of his 5,000 bitcoins, generating enough kroner to buy an apartment in Toyen, one of the Norwegian capital's wealthier areas.

Two ways to acquire bitcoins

Typically bitcoins are bought using traditional currency from a bitcoin "exchanger", although due to strict anti-money laundering controls, the process can can be tricky. A user can then withdraw those bitcoins by sending them back to an exchanger like Mt Gox, the best known bitcoin exchange, in return for cash.

However, bitcoin is gaining more and more traction within the physical world too. It is now possible to actually spend bitcoins without exchanging them for traditional currency first in a few British pubs, including the Pembury Tavern in Hackney, London, for instance. On 29 October, the world's first bitcoin ATM also went online in Vancouver, Canada, which scans a user's palm before letting them buy or sell bitcoins for cash.

A small group of hardcore users also generate extra bitcoins by "mining" for them - a process that requires computers to perform the calculations needed to make the digital currency work, in exchange for a share of the built-in inflation.

Mining is a time-consuming and expensive endeavour due to the way the currency is designed. Each subsequent bitcoin mined is more complex than the previous one, requiring more computational time and therefore investment through the electricity and computer hardware required.

Berlin and the tech startup scene – 10 things to know before making the move

Europe's hippest city has a thriving startup 'scene', but beware, it's not quite as wonderful as the media make out

Lauren Ingram

I moved to Berlin in January this year and lived there for eight months, in which I gained and lost three jobs, two boyfriends, and one flat. Clearly, I had a whale of a time. Nonetheless, it's not quite as wonderful as the media would have you believe. Here's what I wish someone had told me beforehand:

1. The Berlin startup scene is a total bubble

It is without a doubt a 'scene': people value being part of it, they socialise within it, use startup buzzwords like UX and MVP, and in the process they cut off access to outsiders. Some people don't actually know what startups are. Seriously. When I first got a whiff of the startup scene, I was intrigued, and I think I started emitting some kind of hormone and was quickly dragged into its orbit.

2. Wearing a tiger onesie to work isn't necessarily a smart plan

This one I should have been able to work out for myself. Morale was low in the office as the future of our startup (Gidsy) was uncertain, and a tiger suit seemed like an excellent idea at the time. As it turns out, that was the day I was made redundant. So that was awkward. Lesson learned.

3. Nobody has a real job

Admittedly, people tried to warn me. Like a relationship with a dodgy new boyfriend, I said: "Oh but it'll be different with me". It's not different. Proper, full-time jobs are few and far between, everybody else works weird hours for low pay, has various "projects" on the go which never materialise, and goes out on Sunday nights until 5am. It's a totally unsustainable (if highly enjoyable) lifestyle.

4. It's possible to fall down the party hole

Clubs stay open from Friday until Monday, so it's no wonder that people don't have real jobs. In fact, from my tireless field research, I've concluded that clubs are open all week too. Sometimes you find yourself coming home at 7am on a Wednesday, wondering what you're doing with your life. Spotting a man with a syringe doesn't help.

5. It's incredibly inward-looking

Everyone living in it is very Berlin-centric. They talk about the city, they love it, they live and breathe it and they complain about it. They follow Berlin blogs, they post about Berlin on Facebook, they share Berlin moments like in-jokes. The very act of writing this is hypocritical because it's all about Berlin. "Oh, how meta," the hipsters would say.

6. Getting paid is a luxury not a right

There's no minimum wage in Germany (land of plenty, yes, that economic superpower). Luckily, it's possible to live even on the princely sum of €491 (£418) per month. Expats love to complain that rent is no longer cheap due to the flood of expats (!) driving up prices. However, my rent was €225 per month including bills. It wasn't even a crack den.

7. Fail culture rules

Talk of failure is everywhere, and to be honest I would rather be winning. Startups choose to 'fail fast, fail hard, embrace failure', and so on. Sometimes this probably means: "We have no idea what we're doing, but when we get it wrong it doesn't matter because we're a startup, and failure is awesome. The internet told me so."

8. The independent bars and cafes are surprisingly similar

When I was a tourist in Berlin, I bemoaned the lack of indie cafes in London and preached to the uninitiated about the myriad places in Berlin. Living there made me realise that 90% of them have identikit mismatched vintage furniture, candles, and possibly the same playlist audible in the background. Still rather lovely though.

9. Nobody speaks German

That's a slight exaggeration. However, despite spending time, money and effort grappling with the unwieldy German language, I found that I was surrounded by people from Spain, Italy, Israel, the Netherlands, everywhere. So English is what you hear in the streets and the office, and Germans I met spoke it fluently. So all this "ich habe eine Schwester" business was frankly embarrassing.

10. Your circle of friends will be ever decreasing

Berlin is amazingly transient. When I arrived, I went to lots of networking events, and a friend who had been there for two years asked if I could take her along as many of her friends had already left the city. Fortunately, the constant shift means that people are very open and friendly, and you might leave with a different batch of pals than the ones you started with.

Ok, so it goes up to 11 ... Hey, it worked for Spinal Tap.

11. The streets are not paved with gold

They are strewn with graffiti and crack-addled weirdos, but don't let that stop you from visiting. A whirlwind weekend break in the city will leave you a little breathless and wanting more. I made the decision to break up with Berlin. We were in love, we fought a lot, and it was exhilarating for the most part, but I'm getting back together with London, my long-term love.

Photograph: Lauren Ingram

A word from our developer team

A developer I work with has been at the company for a decade. His argument for that longevity? He says it takes five years for code you wrote to come back and bite you once it needs replacing. This reminder of our role in the half-life of technology is something I find fascinating: what does it mean that we're not futureproof?

Every developer has to work with a legacy system of some kind, which means cursing that system daily and point out with glee to newbie developers how awfully implemented the search feature is; how laughably broken the application looks in Firefox; how many disparate JavaScript libraries are jumbled into the page. But these decisions weren't made by idiots, cobbling together rushed web products. They were made by you, or your peers, half a decade ago.

It's a humbling experience to have that realisation, that moment of clarity. To know that your decisions which were once sound, once best practice, are today the examples shown to fledgling hackers to scare them into avoiding monolithic codebases or teach them why modular programming is important. But if it takes five years for this process to happen, why bother building things for the future in the first place?

As software developers we're taught to architect our work with an eye on scalability - not just in terms of traffic and speed, but in terms of feature growth and expansion. Every simple problem becomes a complex challenge to solve. It's smart to be multiple steps ahead of what your users want today.

Why bother with any of this? We're building systems trying to anticipate every problem or change and then throwing them all away again a couple of years later. How many projects have you been involved with where the agreed solution is to chuck out the old, legacy code, and start afresh? All those architectural decisions have been learned from, updated, but ultimately dropped.

The first company I worked for was a small magazine with a dozen staff. The owner had a bit of a tech background and had gone all-out when preparing the company's IT systems. In a dedicated room in the basement there was an enormous server rack complete with multiple RAID setups and copious air conditioning. There was a six-way monitor switch allowing you to view output from any of the machines and a steel cupboard full of cables, accessories and tools.

The office was running Windows 2000. In 2010.

Sometimes it's easier to focus on future-proofing things and building with flexibility in mind than it is to work out what's valuable and how to get there quickly. In practical terms, nobody at that company cared how many redundant disk backups there were - they were just annoyed that they were still stuck using IE6.

Do I really believe we should code by the seat of our pants? Perhaps not. Anyone can hack together a quick PHP/MySQL fix which solves a problem temporarily, but the skill of analysing the problem domain and being several steps ahead of it is one that takes real practice - and adds real value. But perhaps there's something in the idea of accepting the length of your tech half-life - and embracing it. You're going to be wrong, one day. And that's fine.

Matt Andrews
Web developer
The Guardian
theguardian.com/profile/matt-andrews

Exploring The Gender Balance Of Bylines On The Guardian

As a side project I decided to have a look at how many articles on the Guardian were written by women compared to men. In an ideal world this would be about 50/50 across all sections of the Guardian, and I had a hunch that it wasn't, I'll get onto the tech details and methodology in a moment.

For the month of September there were **7,862** articles written with **8,927** bylines, some articles have more than one byline. There were **2,617** female (**29.3%**), **6,030** male (**67.6%**) and **280** "other" (**3.1%**) bylines, just under a third of all bylines are by women. As it turns out there are only **5** sections where female bylines outnumber male bylines: **Fashion, Education, Life and style, Money** and **Travel**. That's **5** sections out of **26** in total.

But more than that, if we look at the top 10 sections with the most articles; **World News, Comment is free, Sport, Football, Music, Business, Politics, Media, Technology** and **Film**, not a single one has more female bylines than male. If we look at the top half of sections, 13 out of 26 then just 1 female majority section creeps in **Life and style** with **57.3%** female bylines. The same is true if we look at the sections with above the average number of articles (**302.4** per section), meaning the remaining 4 sections where women outnumber men; **Travel, Money, Education** and **Fashion** all sit in the minor sections.

Naturally nothing beats the data so here it is:

Of course, this is just a month sitting in isolation and as such can only tell us so much.

But as I mentioned this is currently just a side project and I wanted to make a note of where I was upto, a monthly snapshot seemed a good place to start. I expect it'll get more interesting when we start to compare this month to previous years and also watch the numbers over time. Will there be a trend towards more female bylines and if so in which sections, or will we find some sections where the female voice is slowly disappearing. Hopefully this is something else I'll start teasing out of the data over the next few months.

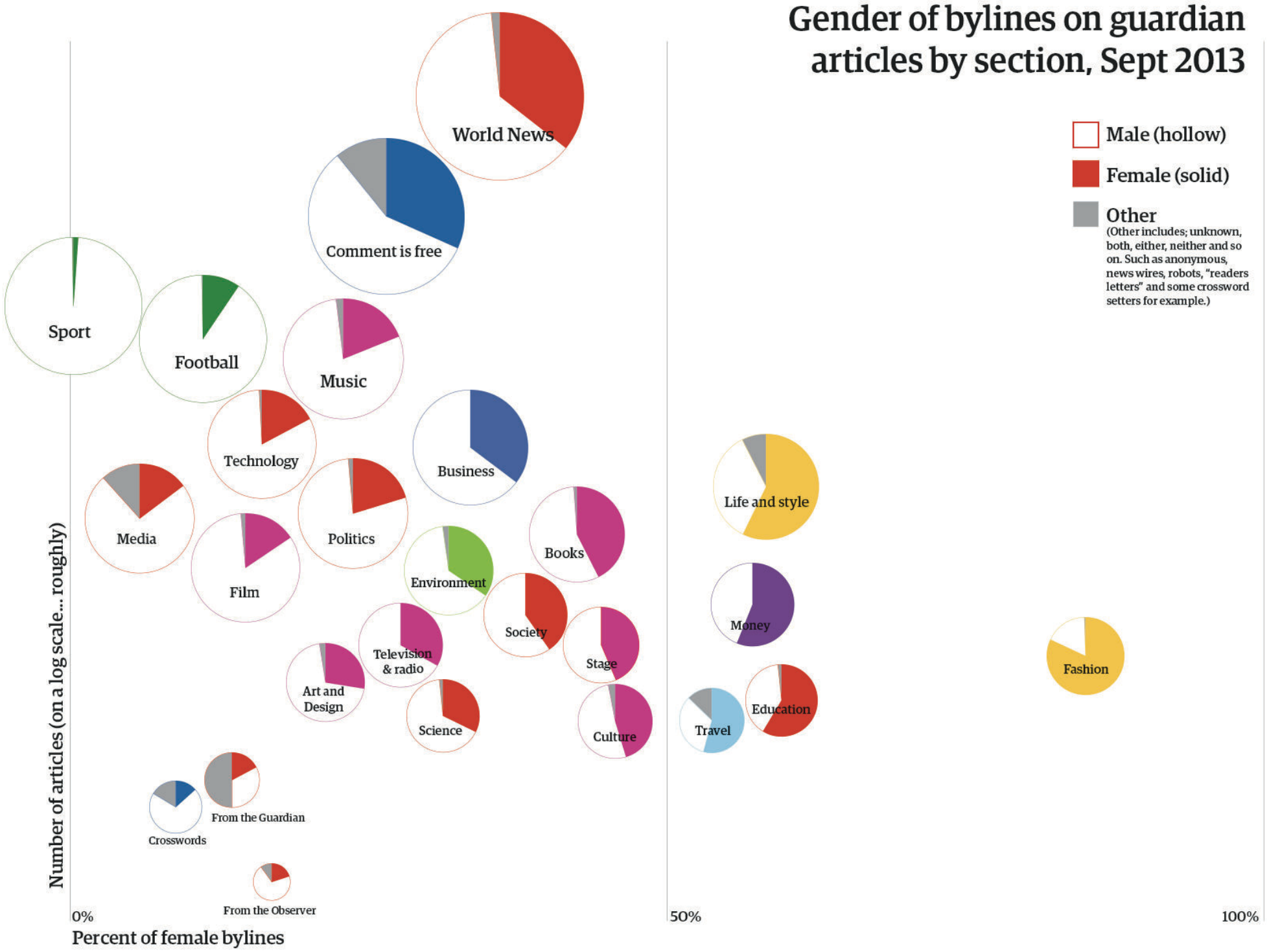
For a slightly different angle and further reading there's also: Women's representation in media: readers preferences for online news revealed and UK News Gender Ranking: What They Publish vs What Readers Share.

Methodology

Data is only as good as how it's gathered so a quick explanation of where I'm getting my numbers from.

To start with I measured **7,862** articles from **26** sections for the month of September 2013. The Guardian currently has **61** "sections", which include things like "Better Business", "Guardian Government Computing" and "Guardian Professional". I chose to include just the sections that *also* appear in the print newspaper, which I consider to be the "Newsy" sections. If something's published in a section that's on the web and the paper then it's in. While messing around with the Guardian API and

Section	Articles	Female		Male		Other	
Sport	627	8	1.17%	675	98.68%	1	0.15%
Football	567	65	9.63%	609	90.22%	1	0.15%
Crosswords	37	5	13.51%	26	70.27%	6	16.22%
Media	368	60	14.93%	296	73.63%	46	11.44%
Film	361	63	15.79%	331	82.96%	5	1.25%
From the Guardian	51	9	17.31%	17	32.69%	26	50.00%
Technology	363	70	17.37%	330	81.89%	3	0.74%
Music	466	100	19.12%	414	79.16%	9	1.72%
From the Observer	10	2	20.00%	7	70.00%	1	10.00%
Politics	370	90	20.41%	346	78.46%	5	1.13%
Art and design	159	49	27.68%	124	70.06%	4	2.26%
Comment is free	855	291	31.94%	523	57.41%	97	10.65%
Science	127	46	32.39%	94	66.20%	2	1.41%
Television & radio	179	110	33.23%	221	66.77%	0	0.00%
Environment	222	85	34.55%	156	63.41%	5	2.03%
Business	410	155	35.55%	281	64.45%	0	0.00%
World news	1065	445	35.74%	782	62.81%	18	1.45%
Society	182	79	40.51%	116	59.49%	0	0.00%
Books	280	128	42.67%	169	56.33%	3	1.00%
Stage	141	64	43.84%	82	56.16%	0	0.00%
Culture	129	78	45.35%	89	51.74%	5	2.91%
Travel	87	56	54.37%	34	33.01%	13	12.62%
Money	194	121	56.28%	94	43.72%	0	0.00%
Life and style	345	211	57.34%	130	35.33%	27	7.34%
Education	116	77	58.78%	52	39.69%	2	1.53%
Fashion	151	150	81.97%	32	17.49%	1	0.55%
Totals	**7862**	**2617**	**29.32%**	**6030**	**67.55%**	**280**	**3.14%**



data over the past few years I've found numerous reasons why including all the sections can throw data of fairly badly and find it safer just to stick with the **26** *proper* ones.

So, anyway, in the month of September the Guardian actually published **12,925** articles across all it's sections, **10,935** of which (**84%**) are in the **26** sections I picked. Of those **10,935** articles **3,073** (**28%**) had no byline (this often happens on videos, podcasts and so on), giving us the remaining **7,862** articles with bylines.

The next thing is to work out is if those bylines are male, female or "other" (I'll explain that in a second), the Guardian API doesn't give us that information and to be honest I just don't trust any magic "automatic" programming libraries to do it for me. Without checking I have no idea if **Chris, Charlie, Robin, Tola, Jo, Kim** and so on are male or female, I certainly don't trust a computer to get it right. Throw into the mix that the Guardian has writers from all countries and cultures and my Shropshire centric upbringing throws all ability to spot the gender of names out the window.

And so the solution was to build a tool that checks the Guardian API throughout the day for newly published articles, checks to see if it's never seen the byline before and if so chucks it up into this interface for me to identify.

On the first day it obviously picked up *all* the bylines, about 320 or so (the Guardian publishes around 430 articles a day), the next day was still quite a lot to go through, but after about a week it settled down. Once I've identified all the Jemima Kiss, Charles Arthur and Andrew Sparrows then I don't have to do them again. After doing this for just over 6 weeks there's now about 15-20 new bylines per day to identify which takes a few minutes to keep on-top of.

Finally...

What and who are actually male, female and "other"? The data isn't exactly male & female bylines, but rather bylines that *I* have identified as being one gender or another which may not match the gender the writer identifies as. With names like "Martin" and "Anna" I make an assumption that they are male and female, while with names I'm not sure about, such as "Chris" or ones I don't recognise then I click through to look at their photo and bio. If they have a bio photo then I make my guess based on that, if there's no photo then I read the bio to see if it references gender.

If all that fails then I google the person and often their twitter icon helps me identify the gender. At the end of all that, if I'm still not certain then I pick "unknown".

Then there are other bylines, sometimes "Anonymous" which can be "either", sometimes "Readers Letters" which can be "both". There's the odd robot and animal in there that write now and then, I think I've identified most of the crossword setters but some I can't figure out and so on.

But on the whole I think I get it pretty much right, but I'd apply a standard **3**% margin of error.

So there we have it, I've been collecting data for the last 11 weeks, September is the 1st full months worth of data I have. Soon I'm going to start "back-filling" and making the system look for bylines by slowly scanning back in time at which point I should be able to graph a years worth of data. Should be fun :)

Dan Catt
Developer
revdancatt.com

How Spotify and its digital music rivals can win over artists: 'Just include us'

Zoe Keating says the internet's potential for musicians 'is not just an excuse for services to replicate the payment landscapes of the past'

Musician Zoe Keating in debate with Amanda Palmer, Imogen Heap and will.i.am, Spotify, Songkick and Vevo
By Stuart Dredge

How can digital music services win praise from musicians, rather than the kind of attacks recently aimed at Spotify by Thom Yorke and David Byrne?

For cellist Zoe Keating, its simple. "Just include us," she said last night during a debate organised by Virgin that brought musicians, managers and technology firms together for a discussion of music/tech disruption.

Keating was joined by fellow artists Amanda Palmer, Imogen Heap and will.i.am, Justin Bieber's manager Scooter Braun, Songkick chief executive Ian Hogarth, Spotify's Trevor Skeet (also a musician in his own right) and Vevo's senior vice-president of international Nic Jones.

Heap, Skeet, Hogarth and Jones were in a London venue for the debate, while Palmer, Keating, Braun and will.i.am joined the conversation via video-chat.

"An artist like me couldn't exist without technology: I can just record music in my basement and release it on the internet. And it's levelled the playing field: an obscure artist like myself who makes instrumental cello music can just get it all out there," said Keating.

"But this is not just an excuse for services to replicate the payment landscapes of the past. It's not an excuse to take advantage of those without power … Corporations do have a responsibility not just to their shareholders but to the world at large, and to artists."

Keating renewed her previous call for streaming services to share more data with musicians, as well as forging more links to other startups that help artists to connect directly with fans.

"Half of my income is from sales, but I don't feel like streaming is the evil enemy," she said. "I think it's a good positive thing to get music out there. All I'm asking is make a direct deal with me, let me choose my terms."

She was backed up by Palmer, who questioned whether technology companies like Apple, Google and Spotify should be investing more to fund the creation of music.

"As bad and clunky as the major label system was, you still had a constant influx of capital back from those giant, sometimes soul-sucking systems, back into content creation," said Palmer, who famously raised $1.2m on Kickstarter to fund her last album, book and tour.

"One weird thing is that iTunes, Apple, Spotify, Google, whatever … all of the people who are profiting off the artists from the small level to the huge levels aren't really feeding very much back into the creation of new content. And that's actually one of the largest problems."

Scooter Braun suggested that it's partly the responsibility of artists and managers to demand more of a role in guiding the strategy of digital music services, but also said that they shouldn't forget that it's fans who are driving new music consumption models, not artists or technologists.

"Here's the deal: we can say we want things to be better, we want things to change, and we'll get there. But we have to realise that the consumer and the listener dictates what happens," said Braun.

"You get what you negotiate, and the only way you have innovation in the industry is if you demand it… The last time things changed dramatically, which was iTunes, the labels had a voice at the table and the artists did not … As Spotify comes out and Beats comes out, iTunes Radio and all those things, the most important thing is that all artists have a voice."

Several of the artists in the Virgin Disruptors debate found a voice to criticise Vevo, with Heap, Keating and will.i.am all attacking the fact that artists don't have a say in which brands their music videos are associated with on the ad-supported service.

"It's very disheartening to go onto my Vevo channel and find some awful advert I have to sit through," said Heap. "I don't know exactly the deal that you have with the label that I license to, Sony, but I would like to. But it's not easy to get that information."

will.i.am went further, pointing out that artists foot the bill to make their music videos, but are powerless to control the ads shown around them.

"At what point in time does Vevo pay for the content that gives you the ability to put commercials that we don't want before our content?" he asked. "And if we did want it, can we choose what brands come before or after our content when I'm the one paying for the video? It's a very very very very touchy subject which is not being talked about."

Tech companies may be justified in pushing back against some of this criticism. Vevo said in November 2012 that it had paid $200m out to music industry rightsholders since its launch in 2009, while Spotify paid out $500m between 2008 and 2012, and expects to pay another $500m in 2013 alone.

Apple, meanwhile, is estimated to be generating $6.9bn of annual music sales through its iTunes Store. All of this is money that in theory is "feeding very much back into the creation of new content" in Palmer's words.

The key caveat: it's being paid to labels and publishers, not directly to artists and songwriters. How big a share they see depends on their contracts, which was a theme addressed by will.i.am. "Our contract is all based on old technology. An album is 12 songs, because that's how much information fit on a record … If you're complaining about this music industry, let's go back down to the contract," he said.

Imogen Heap Imogen Heap: 'It's very disheartening to go onto my Vevo channel and find some awful advert I have to sit through' Screenshot: Stuart Dredge

The Black Eyed Peas star also suggested that musicians should be collaborating more with coders and hardware engineers. "I Gotta Feeling is still the number one downloaded song of all time in iTunes, but I made more money from the equity I own in [headphones maker] Beats. That tells you hardware is the place," he said.

"If you're going to complain about somebody else's system, you need to sit down with somebody who can create your own system. It's not hard to create systems nowadays."

Palmer later pointed out that this isn't a strategy that can suit all musicians. "There are a lot of artists out there that don't wanna be technological warriors … they don't want to create a whole new fucking platform, they just want to make music," she said. "For the many, many, many artists who don't necessarily want to delve into the tech business and engage in this way, my question is what about them?"

Will.i.am suggested that those artists should ensure they have people around them who do want to get to grips with new technology and services. But the overall theme was of collaboration between musicians and technologists, which is where Keating made her point about inclusion. "I'd like to work with music services to try to make the ecosystem of the future, so call me up!" she said.

Keating has already been working with Hogarth and Songkick through the latter's Detour programme, which helps fans band together to request gigs by favourite artists in their cities, and pledge to buy tickets - making it effectively a crowdfunding service for live music.

"A ticket over the last 40 years hasn't really changed: it's a way of figuring out if someone should be allowed into a building, and a way to add additional fees," he said, before outlining an alternative born from collaboration with musicians.

"A ticket should be an expression of what it's like to be in that room. It's a connection: an economic connection between you as a fan and the artist that you love. That's what we're trying to do with Songkick and Detour," he said. "Let's look at the first principles of this industry and try to reset them all."

Three degrees of separation: breaking down the NSA's 'hops' surveillance method

You don't need to be talking to a terror suspect to have your communications data analysed by the NSA. The agency is allowed to travel "three hops" from its targets – who could be people who talk to people who talk to people who talk to you. Facebook, where the typical user has 190 friends, shows how three degrees of separation gets you to a network bigger than the population of Colorado.

How many people are three "hops" from you?

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
1
or more than no friends

ACTUAL: 1

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
163
or more than the capacity of a Concorde

ACTUAL: 100

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
26,634
or more than the capacity of Madison Square Garden

ACTUAL: 19,763

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
3
or more than the capacity of a motorcycle

ACTUAL: 2

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
490
or more than all members in the United States House of Representatives

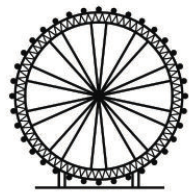
ACTUAL: 435

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
80,066
or more than the capacity of Beijing National Stadium

ACTUAL: 80,000

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
5
or more than the capacity of a taxi

ACTUAL: 4

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
817
or more than the capacity of the London Eye

ACTUAL: 800

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
133,497
or more than the population of Topeka

ACTUAL: 124,331

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
12
or more than all the members on the Supreme Court

ACTUAL: 9

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
1,960
or more than the capacity of the Apollo Theater


ACTUAL: 1,506

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
320,264
or more than the population of Toledo

ACTUAL: 316,179

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
32
or more than the capacity of a limousine

ACTUAL: 16

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
5,228
or more than the capacity of the Metropolitan Opera House

ACTUAL: 3,975

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
854,255
or more than the population of San Francisco

ACTUAL: 815,358

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
64
or more than all U.S. presidents

ACTUAL: 43

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
10,457
or more than all New York City firefighters

ACTUAL: 10,227

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
1,708,673
or more than the population of Barcelona

ACTUAL: 1,620,437

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
111
or more than the capacity of a Concorde

ACTUAL: 100

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
18,137
or more than the capacity of Wimbledon Centre Court

ACTUAL: 15,000

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
2,963,585
or more than the population of Arkansas

ACTUAL: 2,915,918

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
361
or more than the capacity of an express train

ACTUAL: 304

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
58,987
or more than the capacity of the colosseum

ACTUAL: 50,000

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
9,638,475
or more than the population of North Carolina

ACTUAL: 9,535,483

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
558
or more than the capacity of a Boeing 747

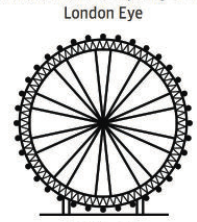
ACTUAL: 524

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
91,177
or more than the capacity of Wembley Stadium

ACTUAL: 90,000

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
14,898,321
or more than the population of Illinois

ACTUAL: 12,830,632

1ST DEGREE: FRIENDS
1,000
or more than the capacity of the London Eye

ACTUAL: 800

2ND DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
163,400
or more than the population of Sioux Falls

ACTUAL: 158,008

3RD DEGREE: FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS
26,699,560
or more than the population of Texas

ACTUAL: 25,145,561

How to make perfect french toast

Eggy bread, pain perdu, poor knights of Windsor … whatever you call it, french toast makes a simple and delicious breakfast. But do we over-egg it on this side of the Atlantic?
By Felicity Cloake

French toast, despite the saucy-sounding name, is an eminently practical dish, designed to transform an elderly loaf into a delicious dessert; hence the French – and for many centuries, English – term pain perdu.

As well as the rather more homely "eggy bread", it is also known in English as "poor knights of Windsor": similar names in Danish, Swedish and German have been explained by the fact that, back when sweet foods were a sign of wealth, this thrifty pudding saved the bacon of many an impoverished crusader.

Whether or not this lovely vignette is true, the idea certainly predates the knights: Apicius, a cookery book from the last days of the Roman empire, has a familiar recipe for fine white bread soaked in milk, fried and coated with honey, which just goes to show that good things never date – although fashions change, and french toast is now more commonly eaten at breakfast. But, whenever you eat it, what is the best recipe?

Bread

Of paramount importance. From Apicius onwards, french toast recipes have made clear that the bread should be fine (ie soft) and white; medieval recipes tend to call for manchet – the paler, lighter loaf that was a great status symbol at a time when the common herd subsisted on bread coarse enough to break a tooth on.

As a substitute when trying Gervase Markham's recipe from his 1615 book, The English Hus-Wife, I use a good-quality, yeast-raised white loaf. Ambrose Heath calls for a sliced French roll in his 1937 book Good Sweets, Martha Stewart suggests brioche, and my trusty Cook's Illustrated New Best Recipe book, which has tested the matter with characteristic thoroughness, strongly recommends using challah (a braided Jewish bread made with eggs) for "flavour and richness", as well as the fact it stays "generally crisp outside and somewhat moist inside".

The French roll, despite soaking, stays too chewy for my liking. Brioche and challah both have some degree of historical authenticity, given that the finest manchets would have been made with an enriched dough. The soft texture responds well to soaking, with the interior dissolving into a rich gooeyness, but, frankly, I don't think either bread needs any more in the way of egg, milk or butter, and I prefer the plainer, more savoury flavour of the simple white bread, which provides a pleasant contrast to the sweet crust. It must be good quality, and somewhat stale, however, or it will fall apart in the pan. Chunky slices of just under an inch will ensure a satisfying contrast between inside and outside.

Mixture

Because the bread is stale, it requires soaking to make it palatable. Markham and Heath keep things simple with a straightforward egg coating – yolks alone for Heath, who soaks his bread in sherry before cooking. The other recipes all use a more complicated mixture: cream and eggs for the Joy of Cooking; milk, eggs and orange juice for Stewart; and milk, eggs, flour and melted butter for Cook's Illustrated, which is curiously keen to prevent the dish from being "too eggy". The flour is apparently deployed to maximise the exterior crispness, while butter softens this batter-like coating.

I'm sensing a transatlantic divide here: those of us who also know it as eggy bread like to taste a bit of egg (though Heath's version reminds me of a sherry trifle), while American recipes seem keen to bury it in other ingredients. Personally, the custardy aspect so beloved of the Cooks Illustrated editors doesn't appeal to me at this time of day, though their recipe is well worth a look if you have a sweet tooth in the mornings. I do like the crispness the flour gives the outside, however, so although I won't be adding milk or cream, I will be stirring in butter and flour to help it form a crust.

Soaking

Soaking times range from none at all – from Markham, who pours his egg mixture on the bread while it's in the frying pan – to an overnight soak from the Joy of Cooking, via a minute for Cook's Illustrated, and 20 in Martha Stewart's recipe, which leaves my brioche almost disintegrating under the spatula. By the time I get the Joy of Cooking slices out of the fridge, it's all I can do to reshape them into bread form.

I'm a fan of the shorter soak; the mixture should penetrate the interior of the bread, but there shouldn't be enough time for it to begin dissolving it into a mush. Thirty seconds feels about right, though times will vary according to your particular loaf and its degree of staleness: the crumb should be soft, but still with structural integrity.

Flavourings

Vanilla essence is a popular addition, especially in the American recipes, but I prefer the fierier sweet spices used by Markham, finding mace, nutmeg and cloves a more interesting complement to the ubiquitous ground cinnamon. Although I'm not sure Stewart's fresh orange juice comes through in the finished dish, I also quite like her lemon zest, though if you don't happen to have one in need of using up, it's no disaster.

Salt, however, is mandatory: as Cook's Illustrated observes, it gives the flavour "a big boost". Sugar, which Heath only adds in the form of a sherry butter sauce after cooking, is another must in the soaking liquid, although I haven't gone overboard with it, because I love the crunch of the granulated sugar Markham finishes off his dish with. The Joy of Cooking and Stewart go for maple syrup, which is nice for a north American flavour, but results in a less interesting texture.

Stewart uses cognac in her soaking liquid: as with Heath's sherry, it's not a bad combination, smacking slightly of a festive eggnog. If I were cooking french toast for a special occasion, I might indulge in a drop of sweet sherry too – the brandy itself is overpowering.

Cooking

The Joy of Cooking suggests baking the french toast, which leaves it a bit dry. Frying is the only way to do it – but not in ordinary butter, which has an annoying tendency to burn before the second side is toasted. Stewart recommends a mixture of vegetable oil and butter, but this doesn't solve the problem: butter still burns, whatever it's mixed with. The problem is resolved by Jane Grigson, who handily points out in English Food that clarified butter is the secret to *pain perdu* perfection. It's easy to make yourself, but, as a curry fanatic, I'm never without a tin of ghee in the fridge, which speeds up the process considerably. And, even on a lazy Sunday morning, that's got to be a good thing.

Perfect french toast

(Serves 2)
2 tbsp clarified butter (ghee), melted
2 large eggs
2 tsp granulated sugar, plus extra to sprinkle
¼ tsp salt
Pinch of ground cloves
Pinch of ground mace
Pinch of ground nutmeg
¼ tsp ground cinnamon
Finely grated zest of ½ lemon (optional)
2 tsp plain flour
2 x 2cm-thick slices of stale, good-quality white bread

Melt one tablespoon of the clarified butter and set aside. Beat the eggs in a wide, shallow bowl, and then whisk in the melted butter, the sugar, salt, spices and zest, if using. Stir a little of this into the flour to make a paste, then beat back into the egg mixture until smooth.

Heat the remaining butter in a frying pan over a medium-high heat. Meanwhile, soak the bread in the egg mixture for about 30 seconds a side until soft but not floppy. Put in the hot pan and allow to cook undisturbed for about two minutes until golden and crisp.

Turn and cook for about a minute or a little more on the other side, then put on to plates, sprinkle with sugar and serve with indecent haste.

Nigel Slater's pine nut recipes

Pine nuts are usually confined to pesto, but bake them with sardines or stir them into a chocolate cake and you'll find this useful golden nugget is a real treasure

By Nigel Slater

There is more to the pine nut than pesto. Botanically, the slender, torpedo-shaped nugget is a seed. In a culinary sense, however, it is considered a nut. Extracted mostly from the cones of the Stone Pine tree, the pine nut has a waxy texture and crunchy, almost spiky quality. Rich in oil, this nut has a high oil content and a short shelf life. They are best stored in the dark.

The finest quality is the most slender, from the European Stone Pine. The chubbier, round-ended version, mostly from northern Asia, is more common and cheaper in price. Neither is what you might call a bargain. The cost is around £3 per 100g and can be more, depending on their provenance. The most expensive contain more protein and are less fatty to eat.

Heaven knows I have burnt enough nuts in my life, but these little chaps are the easiest of all to blacken. Their high percentage of oil means they go from a delicate, toasty brown to charred in a matter of seconds. But toasted they must be. Like the almond and the hazelnut, their real flavour only comes to the fore when the nut is nicely browned, toasted over a low heat without any extra oil.

I use a dry, heavy, cast-iron pan, slowly shaking the pan over a low to moderate heat, ignoring the tempting ping of texts and phone calls until the nuts are deep honey coloured, fragrant and out of the pan.

Their uses go way, way beyond pesto. Scattered in a leaf salad they provide a welcome crunch; chopped and stirred into a dressing they bring a nutty bite to coleslaws and green salads; they can be introduced into a romesco sauce instead of almonds or treaded through the pistachio filling of a baklava.

I like to scatter them through a spinach salad, add them to a rice pilaf and use them to top a rice pudding with honey and rosewater. I use them with pasta, toss them over a pizza (especially one with wild mushrooms and fontina cheese) or tip them into the filling for a calzone.

In a baking sense, the possibilities are almost endless. This week I stirred toasted nuts into a chocolate marzipan cake, but they can be just as much fun when added to a cheesecake, where they provide a welcome change of step among the clotted curds. You can, of course, toast them, salt them and eat them with a cold beer, but that might become an expensive habit.

Baked sardines with pine nuts and parsley

You need boned and flattened sardines for this. Don't even think of boning them yourself. That's what your fishmonger is for. But ask them when they aren't too busy, or order them in advance. Boning a little fish is a time-consuming process.

Serves 3-4
sardines 10, butterflied
For the paste:
fresh white bread 100g
parsley 20g
garlic 3 cloves
pine nuts 100g
clementines 2
olive oil 4 tbsp, plus a little extra

Turn the bread into coarse, soft breadcrumbs using a food processor or a hand-held grater. Pluck the leaves from the parsley and add them to the crumbs. (Drop the stalks into a stockpot or keep them for soup.) Peel the garlic and drop the cloves into the crumbs together with the pine nuts, then blitz briefly, leaving the pieces of garlic and pine nuts slightly larger than the crumbs. Finely grate the zest of the clementines into the mixture, season with salt and ground black pepper, then pour in the olive oil and mix to a thick and knubbly paste.

Set the oven at 180C/gas mark 4. Put the paste into a shallow pan and let it cook for two or three minutes over a moderate heat, then set aside. Place the sardines, skin side down, on the work surface, then spread thickly with some of the pine nut and parsley paste. Roll up each sardine and secure with a cocktail stick or two to stop them unravelling, then place them in a baking tin, open end up and trickle with a little more olive oil. Bake the sardines for 20 minutes until sizzling. Serve two or three per person.

Chocolate pine nut marzipan cakes

I made these shallow cakes in two small cake tins, about 18 x 12 x 7cm deep. Use two 20cm round cake tins if you prefer. The inside of the cake should be moist and sticky. It will keep very well for a few days in a cake tin.

butter 180g
caster sugar 180g
eggs 2, lightly beaten
plain flour 80g
almonds 150g, ground
marzipan 100g
pine nuts 100g
dark chocolate 100g
icing sugar a little

Line the cake tins with baking parchment, so that it comes 1-2cm above the rim. Set the oven at 180C/gas mark 4.

Using an electric mixer or hand-held blender, beat the butter and caster sugar until pale, soft and fluffy. Break the eggs in, one at a time, and continue beating. Then add the flour and the almonds. Once they are mixed, stop the blending immediately.

Tear the marzipan into small cubes about the size of a halved walnut. Chop the chocolate into small pieces, no larger than a postage stamp. Drop the lumps of marzipan and two-thirds of the nuts and chopped chocolate into the cake mixture then divide it between the cake tins.

Drop the remaining pine nuts and chocolate on to the surface of the cakes then bake for 40-45 minutes. The cakes will be still be a little wet in the centre at this point; they will firm up a little on cooling, but should remain moist and gooey when cut. Slice each cake into 10 or 12 small pieces.

Email Nigel at nigel.slater@observer.co.uk. Follow Nigel on Twitter @NigelSlater

Photograph: Jonathan Lovekin for the Observer

How to eat: biscuits

What is the point of fig rolls? Is a Club really a biscuit? To dunk or not to dunk? Tony Naylor puts the kettle on, sits down and has a biscuit (or three)
By Tony Naylor

Biscuits. Tea and biscuits. It is arguably Britain's most significant food and drink ritual, and so it is only right that How to Eat addresses it. Put the kettle on, settle down and prepare for the kind of dust-up not seen since Garibaldi took on the Bourbons.

The Jaffa is a *cake*, that's settled in law. So let's leave that. Instead, I'd like to talk about Britain's shared, intuitive understanding of what a biscuit is and isn't. It is an understanding which transcends technical definitions (cakes go hard when stale, biscuits soft), and what you will find stacked, erroneously, in the supermarket biscuit aisle.

A biscuit is some form of baked flour, sugar, fat and water, potentially covered in one layer of chocolate or sandwiching a jam or cream filling, but I'm sure we can all agree that it is not:

● Fig rolls. Remember when you were about eight, and you were round a friend's house, and his or her mum asked if you wanted a biscuit, and she gave you a fig roll and, internally, you went: "What the bleedin' 'ell is that?" That still stands.

● Anything individually wrapped and entirely covered in chocolate, eg Penguins, Clubs, Wagon Wheels, Viscount. They aren't biscuits, they're biscuit bars or even chocolate. Or not chocolate exactly, but certainly chocolate-led. Ask yourself this, has anyone ever said: "Mmm, this Club is lovely, but what would make it even better is if they just put a little less chocolate on it?" Of course they haven't. In this case, the biscuit is merely a vehicle for the delivery of chocolate, which you nibble off, before begrudgingly eating the biscuit. Next you'll be claiming that Twix, Kit Kats, Time Outs and Tunnock's caramel wafers are biscuits. Which they're not. Did your "biscuit box" contain all of the above when you were growing up? You know what you were? Spoiled.

● Oatcakes. Talking of Little Lord Fauntleroys, David Cameron told Mumsnet that his favourite "biscuit" was an oatcake with butter and cheese. That's not a biscuit, Dave, that's the cheese course.

● Cookies. Big, brash US interlopers. They're oversweet, over here and utterly dysfunctional. Why do I want random nuggets of chocolate when I could have one efficient layer, evenly spread across the whole biscuit?

● Rich Tea. Why do that to yourself, unless you actually live in a monastery? Rich Tea are solely eaten by people who are either a) scared of flavour, or b) in a painful phase of delusional, dieting self-denial. They are notoriously rubbish dunkers, too.

● Bourbons. Cocoa and dark chocolate? That's what they're supposed to taste of? Seriously? Because all I'm getting is an artificial tang of something indistinguishably dark and a bit cheap.

● Jam rings. Theoretically, this should work, but most high street versions are hard work: two brittle pieces of dried-out biscuit encasing a nugget of jam so chewy it threatens to have your fillings out.

● Hobnobs. Prima facie evidence of how capitalism perpetuates itself by creating artificial demand for unnecessary products. In the 80s, was anyone crying out for a flapjack-digestive hybrid so sweet it literally glistens with sugars? No. Yet this OTT, bastardised biscuit now has the nation in its grip. The Hobnob is, of course, famed for its dunkability, for its ability to take on moisture and retain its integrity, but bite in and you will find that dunking turns those oats into an unedifying, gritty slurry.

● Shortbread. Only the most patriotic Scots *pretend* to like shortbread. It's like Runrig. And Rab C Nesbitt. Too rich and buttery, and yet somehow dry, one-dimensional and, bar that sugary coating, a bit parsimonious, they are unpleasantly contradictory, and so claggy it's difficult to eat one (never mind three; see below) without finishing your cup of tea. No biscuit should require that level of lubrication.

● Iced rings: Is this a five-year-old's birthday party? No? Then what are they doing here?

Sting has tantric sex, I have biscuits: a sublime pleasure that should be drawn out for as long as is humanly possible. In essence, there are two mains methods specific to dunking biscuits (ginger snaps, digestives, malted milk etc), and non-dunking sandwich biscuits, such as the custard cream and Oreo.

For dunkers, it's a three-step process: 1) dunk half the biscuit, suck/eat that dunked section; 2) dunk half of the remaining piece (a quarter of the original biscuit), and eat that; 3) dunk final triangle of biscuit, whilst pinching one corner. If the biscuit is chocolate covered, you dunk but then lick off the chocolate at each stage before eating the biscuit underneath. It is a process fraught with danger, in that you may apply too much pressure with your tongue and/or overdunk, but persevere and, in time, you will achieve a level of biscuit Zen where, just by looking at it, you can gauge what stress or how much liquid a biscuit can take.

For sandwich biscuits, you must carefully prise off one layer of biscuit with your front teeth (do not use a knife!), and then lick the fondant clean off, until the final layer of biscuit is - oh, gastronomic joy! - nicely softened with your own spit. Heaven.

There are people who consider dunking declassé, rude even. Pity them and their joyless, frigid lives. For only in dunking (obligatory Peter Kay link here) do Britain's two greatest biscuits, the ginger snap and the milk chocolate digestive, achieve perfection. After dunking, the ginger biscuit becomes a multilayered sensory adventure, its now soft outer pulp encasing a still hard core that has achieved an almost toffee-like texture and a new sharper, gingery intensity. The chocolate digestive, meanwhile, turns from dry, rudimentary snack, into a sweet, yielding embrace of molten chocolate and manly, reassuring wholemeal huskiness. Dunked, it is possibly the ultimate British comfort food.

Optimum number of biscuits at each sitting

Three. The first is a pure hit of pleasure, which the second extends. By the third, however, that arc has begun to plateau. A fourth biscuit will leave you feeling a little sick, guilty, somehow soiled.

Time

Biscuits are what you eat between meals if you do want to ruin your appetite. They punctuate the day, these baked uppers, edible between 10.30-11.30am, 3.30-4.30pm and 9.30-11pm.

Essential, and critical (as you're dunking) that it's served in a wide-mouthed mug, and preferably (as you're eating three biscuits) a pint mug at that. Beyond a whistle-whetting first slurp, do not actually drink any of the tea until you've finished dunking, as that will dilute the biscuit flavour. After three biscuits, though, you will need a full pint to clear your palate and quench your thirst.

Note: if you do suffer a dunking mishap and drop a piece of biscuit in your tea, stop immediately, park your biscuits and put the kettle on again. Otherwise that "session" will be ruined, right down to the last disgusting, bitty mouthful. People say that you can fish the piece of rogue biscuit out, but by the time you've found a teaspoon, it will already be disintegrating and (particularly if you don't take sugar in your tea) your brew will be ruined. Accept it and start over.

In my house, you don't have to take your shoes off, you can smoke a pipe, leave the loo seat up, I don't care. But if you walk around eating a biscuit without a plate, then we will have words. You are clearly failing to catch the crumbs in your hand, and it looks far too precarious balanced on the rim of your mug. I have plenty of plates: use one, you barbarian.

So, biscuits, how do you eat yours?