

Blue birds and Christmas trees.

Friday 2 December 2022

Dear Everyone

The online safety bill, now something of a ministerial palimpsest, has ruffled almost everyone's feathers with concerns about "overcorrection" of content (*The Guardian*) leading to "censorship on an industrial scale" (*The Spectator*). Like a great many 'seems like a good idea' policies, a favourite rant of mine, the consequences are far reaching. Pull one lever and something in the system goes off the rails somewhere else.

In a conversation with senior civil servants last weekend, we discussed the sometimes ideological and lumpen approach to policy making. The civil servants berated quixotic governments in too much of a rush to push things through in an attempt to be seen to act, often in good faith, and then casting things over the fence. Some of the outsourcing of policy regulation can then be left to become unaccountable, driving a coach and horses through natural justice with impunity, ignoring Nolan standards and leaving ministers somewhat hand tied from what is actually happening on the ground.

The notion of the online safety bill does, however, come from a really good place, and we all know the potentially destructive nature of social media, not least such things as *WhatsApp* and *TickTok*. I have no doubt that Head teachers all over the country will take this opportunity to waggle fingers at parents reminding them of their responsibility over their child's use of social media. There, I've waggled mine. In simple terms, think social media/social contract. There is a sign on the back of a toilet door in our local sports club. Rather than the usual cutesy rhymes about seats and sprinkles, it just says: "You're an adult, clean up after yourself." If only the world of the internet was so simple.

At *Twitter* Elon Musk has been plucking the feathers out of his blue bird like a turkey farmer on Christmas Eve, with staff sacked or let go, and users voting with their feet. *Forbes* cautions irate users not to delete accounts, as this leaves a window open into the system for fraudsters. What then of *Mastadon*, the self-hosted social networking service built on open source software? I've signed up just to have a look around, and at the moment I'm baffled. If anyone has a simple explanation, I'd love to hear it.

Earlier this year I was introduced to someone who works with large organizations, from *Meta* to the *New York City Ballet*, helping them to improve their engagement strategies with customers. What they have started to explore is how engagement strategies in the online world might apply to teaching and learning. After all, what motivates a purchase or build on brand loyalty has some similarities to what inspires people to learn – capturing interest, encouraging curiosity and prompting change. With the growth in AI in learning platforms, which uses gamification and many of the same techniques as social media to engage and keep users on brand, we thought that this particular intersection between tech and learning would be an interesting thing to explore. We're not the first to come at this question by any stretch, but there is a lot yet to discover, and very likely a great many ethical conundrums.

To that end, we're taking a multidisciplinary approach and setting up a small and intimate symposium in the spring of 2023. If you or someone you know works in organizational or behavioural psychology, neuroscience, EdTech, Digital Arts, AI or other disciplines that help to inform this discussion and with a focus on learning as a process, I'd very much like to hear from you.

In among the AI world of online learning are adaptive assessments, now widely available to the public and some are extremely good at what they do. We have heard from some parents recently that the grubby end of tutoring is using these kinds of systems to introduce FUD (Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt, a most unsavory sales technique) to sell tutoring services. The process is simple – test your child, and then imply your school is failing them and that the tutor can and will fill the gap and magic them into the top schools in the country at an extra *ka-ching* cost. Hmm. I've never kept any secrets about my view on tutoring, notwithstanding there are occasional legitimate reasons to get extra support. For the majority, however, I also hear that there is some scalp tonic out there that cures baldness, apparently.

We'll be putting up our Christmas tree at home this weekend. It is an artificial tree that has sentimental value to us and is well travelled. Years ago, as Dawn sailed half-way around the world, I flew to Australia, met her off the boat, and asked her to marry me. Best thing I ever did. The next best thing was buying a tree that Christmas in a department store in Perth. Nothing stranger for someone born in the chillier northern hemisphere than to have Christmas on a sunny beach in 40-degree heat. That tree goes everywhere with us. We now have to make it dog proof.

Finally, we say a fond farewell to Christine McVie, musician and songwriter with *Fleetwood Mac*, one of the most successful bands ever. You will have seen the sad news of her death this week, and so we go into the weekend with *Don't Stop*, in the original music video. Go on, have a dance – I'm sure she'd approve.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QV9JmSCi8&list=RDQV9JmSCi8&start_radio=1

Have a great weekend.

Simon