

Notes & Briefs

Live Earth, Mr. Wizard, Solving Checkers, etc.

Zheng Xiaoyu, the head of China's State Food and Drug Administration between 2003 and 2005, was executed on July 10, 2007 for gross malfeasance. During his time in office, Zheng took hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of bribes in exchange for approving tainted drugs and turning a blind eye to shoddy food products. In one instance, forty people in Panama died as a result of using Chinese-made cough syrup; in another, thirteen Chinese babies died after being fed fake powdered milk. Zheng's execution was clearly intended by the Chinese Communist regime as a signal of its concern about the country's growing reputation for dangerous products—a reputation only worsened in early 2007 by the deadly contamination of thousands of pet food products made with gluten from China.

Al Gore's global-warming-awareness mega-concert, Live Earth, was held on July 7, 2007. It was a massive publicity stunt featuring over 150 acts, including Madonna, Snoop Dogg, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. There were performances on all seven continents; an amateur band of British researchers in the Antarctic stood shivering in several inches of snow and performed before a live audience of all seventeen of their colleagues. Despite the hype, Live Earth was, in some ways, underwhelming: it garnered poor TV ratings in the United

States and the United Kingdom. And as Bob Geldof, the Irish musician and impresario who organized similar multi-continent concerts in the 1980s, complained, Live Earth lacked “a final goal...it's just an enormous pop concert” lamely boasting of spreading awareness: “Everybody's known about that problem for years. We are all [expletive] conscious of global warming.”

Don Herbert, television's Mr. Wizard, died on June 12, 2007 after a lifetime of bringing science experiments into American living rooms—on the NBC show *Watch Mr. Wizard* in the 1950s and 60s, and Nickelodeon's *Mr. Wizard's World* in the 1980s. In a 2004 interview with the *New York Times*, he explained his infotainment technique: “perform the trick, as it were, to hook the kids, and then explain the science later.” Herbert was 89.

Thousands of people who seek escape from the jungle of social conventions are now employing AnimalAttraction.com—an online community for pet lovers—to socially network and find dates. The site seeks to connect users who “share common interests, characteristics, and values (warm, caring, and responsible, just to name a few).” And for pet owners less romantically desperate but still interested in social networking, sites like

MyDogSpace and MyCatSpace host profiles for individual pets. On these sites, pets “discuss” their traits, their lives, and whether they are interested in mating. Silky the Silky Terrier’s profile says that she is a “princess, spoiled brat, HUGE Red Sox and Patriots fan”—and that when “mommy leaves for long periods of time I purposely weewee on her clothes.” Apparently, despite these long absences from home, mommy still has too much time on her hands.

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The Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People published a list of the “Ten Commandments for Drivers” in June 2007 as part of a document entitled “Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of the Road.” “The road shall be for you a means of communion between people and not of mortal harm,” urges one commandment. “Cars shall not be for you an expression of power and domination, and an occasion of sin,” orders another. In addition to the commandments, Catholic drivers are encouraged to make the sign of the cross before driving, perhaps in lieu of that other gesture commonly seen after one driver cuts another off.

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Former U.S. Poet Laureate Joseph Brodsky once said, “There are worse crimes than burning books; one is not reading them.” Tom Wayne and Will Leathem of Prospero’s Books in Kansas City, Missouri, took this to heart in May 2007 when they set ablaze hundreds of under-read books from their warehouse to show contempt for

society’s decline in reading, calling their protest an “act of art—a wake-up call to all who value books and ideas.” Just five blocks away, a volunteer from Books for the Planet—a nonprofit group that builds “libraries in poor communities, overseas and in the U.S.”—bemoaned on a blog that the bookstore owners chose the fiery publicity stunt over an effort to donate the books.

The same month, *LA Weekly* revealed that *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury’s 1953 novel about a book-burning society, was actually not intended as a story about censorship. Although that is how his classic novel is often described, Bradbury now says that his book was intended as a criticism of the vapidness of television programming: “I wasn’t worried about freedom, I was worried about people being turned into morons by TV,” Bradbury said in a video clip on his website, RayBradbury.com. “See, we’ve never had censorship in this country, we’ve never burned books... *Fahrenheit’s* not about censorship, it’s about the moronic influence of popular culture through local TV news, and the proliferation of giant screens, and the bombardment of ‘factoids.’”

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The *Big Donor Show*—a reality television program in the Netherlands featuring a terminally-ill woman choosing a recipient for one of her kidneys—was revealed in June 2007 to be a hoax. The supposedly sick donor was actually an actress, and while the three potential transplant recipients were real kidney patients, they were in on the prank all along,

and agreed to participate so as to raise awareness about kidney donations.

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One in ten messages posted by teenagers on online forums are inquiries on “how to take illicit drugs ‘safely’ and without being caught,” according to an analysis of 10.3 million such messages conducted by Caron, a nonprofit provider of alcohol- and drug-addiction treatment. The study, released in June 2007, also said alcohol, hooking up (“romantic/sexual activity with little to no emotional attachment”), and having sex under the influence of alcohol were runners-up for conversational fodder on message boards, discussion forums, and blogs.

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The American Society of Plastic Surgeons reports that about 14,000 young men between the ages of 13 and 19 underwent surgery in 2006 to treat gynecomastia—enlarged breasts. Seventy percent of all male breast-reduction patients in 2006 were teens. “The sad thing is that it’s a fairly common problem among young teenagers, which is usually resolved

by the latter stages of the testosterone rush that finishes off adolescence,” David Zinczenko, editor-in-chief of *Men’s Health*, told the *New York Times*. “But add some fat in there, and a cut-happy approach to body oddities, and you’ve got teens under the cosmetic knife.”

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Checkers has been solved. Jonathan Schaeffer, a computer science professor at the University of Alberta, published a paper in *Science* magazine in July 2007 proving that perfect play by both sides always results in a draw. Schaeffer and his colleagues have worked since the 1980s on a checkers-playing computer program, which they have improved to the point that it now cannot lose a game. “We’ve raised the bar—and raised it quite a bit—in terms of what can be achieved in computer technology and artificial intelligence,” Schaeffer said. His program is named Chinook, after the Chinook winds that bring warm air into Alberta—a pun on “draughts,” the British name for checkers. The computer might be unbeatable, but it won’t ever get the joke.