

Notes & Briefs

Chocolate DNA, Prozac for Puppies, ELIZA, etc.

In Yemen, she is known everywhere as “Jane” (sometimes, “the Zionist Novak”). Her picture sells newspapers. She’s been denounced on Al Jazeera and invited to meet high-level Yemeni ministers in Washington. She doesn’t speak a word of Arabic and has never been to Yemen. Meet Jane Novak, a forty-six-year-old mother of two, who blogs on Yemeni affairs from her living room in New Jersey and has become involved in the capital trial of dissident journalist Abdul Karim al-Khaiwani.

Khaiwani has been imprisoned several times since 2004 for his coverage of a bloody uprising in Sa’ada, a province in northern Yemen near the border of Saudi Arabia. His case soon caught the attention of Novak, who started her blog, *www.ArmiesOfLiberation.com*, around the same time to speak for “freedom of the press, equality, stuff like that” in the English-language Arab media. Her outspoken defense of Khaiwani provoked the ire of the Yemeni government and the gratitude of thousands of Yemenis,

although her blog is banned inside the country. Khaiwani, who was tried this spring for reporting on the rebellion, has become fast friends with Novak, despite the fact that neither speaks the other's language and they have never met. "Some say there's no progress in the Middle East," she told the *New York Times*. "But if they could just see these people—they're really modern heroes."

Following the *Times* story in May 2008, Yemeni authorities, squirming under the unwelcome international spotlight, commuted Khaiwani's capital sentence to six years in prison. "Leaders in our region transform into gods," Khaiwani once wrote to Novak. "They even come to believe in their fake holiness, which we aim to shatter, as they know they are humans just like us. Democracy and freedom are not granted by a leader of a regime. It is a worldwide human achievement of all the free people on earth."

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In April 2008, surgeons at Johns Hopkins successfully performed the world's first six-way kidney transplant. Patients whose friends or relatives offered to donate but did not have compatible kidneys were grouped by a computerized tissue-matching program for a round-robin exchange. A five-way trade took place at the same hospital in 2006, and triple transplants are becoming more common. This "domino approach" is a godsend for people who otherwise might never make it off the waiting list, but "if someone gets sick or has a change of heart, the whole thing falls apart," as

one recipient put it. The sextuple swap took nine surgical teams ten hours to complete. "It was like musical chairs as organs were carried from one room to another," one medic described. All twelve donors and recipients have recovered with no serious complications.

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One doesn't usually expect to see a mirage while driving through the city, but things are not always as they seem in Philadelphia this summer as traffic officials experiment with faux speed bumps—flat, reflective pieces of plastic whose colorful geometric design gives the illusion of three-dimensionality. Drivers approaching them are meant to slow down at what appears to be a row of small pyramids sitting in the road. "I thought it was art," new driver Andrew Stevens told the Associated Press. At \$60 to \$80 each, they are vastly less expensive than regular speed bumps, which generally cost between \$1,000 and \$1,500. A pilot study in Phoenix two years ago indicated that they do indeed calm traffic—temporarily. "Initially they were great," one policeman said, "until people found out what they were."

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For years now, federal air marshals with names matching those on the no-fly list have been harassed or even denied boarding to the planes they are charged to protect. "In some cases, planes have departed without any coverage because the airline employees were adamant they would not fly," an anonymous air marshal told the *Washington Times*. According

to Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, one major air carrier reports a daily total of 9,000 false positives from air marshals and other innocent travelers misidentified as terrorism suspects. The Terrorist Screening Center recently announced a review of the 500,000 most frequently matched names, and Chertoff suggested that airlines create systems of limited biographical data such as passengers' birthdates to avoid some of the confusion, and to make it easier to spot genuine threats.

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The business of getting elected President of the United States looks a lot different than when former President Clinton was campaigning for reelection just twelve years ago. Former Clinton administration press secretary Mike McCurry explained, as Clinton campaigned for his wife during her failed presidential bid, that the ex-president wasn't simply rusty: "Look, the game has changed....All this stuff, the blogging and the YouTubing and the way in which everything is instantaneously available: I tell you, until you get out there and are actually dealing with the consequences—having what you just said as you were walking out the door [all over the Internet], that's brand new to him."

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Children's Medical Boston has opened a "Gender Management Service Clinic" co-directed by Drs. Norman Spack and David Diamond. The clinic is devoted to providing therapy and puberty-delaying drugs to

"transgendered" children as young as seven years old. Dr. Spack defended the necessity of this controversial treatment option in a conversation with the *Boston Globe*, arguing that there is a "high level of suicide attempts" amongst transgendered youth, and that he has "never seen any patient make [a suicide attempt] after they've started hormonal treatment." While some may be convinced by Dr. Spack's anecdotal justification, critics such as psychiatry professor Paul McHugh of John Hopkins University are not so easily swayed. Commenting on the clinic, Dr. McHugh told Fox News that "Treating these children with hormones does considerable harm and it compounds their confusion."

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In a pharmaceutical market where each new "miracle pill" renders the user prone to a laundry list of potential side effects that inevitably require a capsule cure of their own, it should come as no surprise that drug complications resulting from over-medication, especially among senior citizens, are on the rise. Research done by Dr. Jerry Gurwitz, chief of geriatric medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, indicates that "38 million older Americans suffer drug complications, 180,000 of which are life-threatening."

The compounding effects of some prescription cocktails are reported to result in side effects so severe that seniors are being misdiagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia—only to return to normal

after establishing a more moderate and regulated medication routine.

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Veterinarians seeking to relieve the plight of cats and dogs (and their owners) have begun prescribing a variety of human behavioral medications to animals, the *New York Times* reports. The antidepressant Anafranil is marketed to dog owners as Clomicalm; Slentrol is sold to combat canine obesity; and Prozac has been given a distinct beef flavor and is sold as Reconcile for dogs. While behavioral pharmacology is seeing widespread acceptance and use among veterinarians, a vocal few remain skeptical. One vet specializing in animal behavior insists on the effectiveness of training animals—such as feeding obese animals less and providing chew toys to occupy the attention of dogs suffering from anxiety disorders or hyperactivity. The vet suggests that resorting to such drugs in animals springs from a similar attitude to medicine in humans: “We lead an unhealthy lifestyle and then rely on drugs to correct it.”

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CLICK HERE FOR THE BEST BIRTHDAY EVER.” Spam, the generic name for that unsolicited e-mail that floods an estimated 90 percent of your inbox, celebrated its thirtieth birthday this May. Gary Thuerk sent what is believed to be the first electronic message *en masse* when he sent out an open house invitation to about 400 people on ARPANET (predecessor to the Internet) for a product presentation. While 400 people might be a

small number by today’s spamming standards, at the time it accounted for about 15 percent of all people with e-mail addresses.

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If the words on this page are dancing, if you can hear colors, or if you think you are a purple tree, then you might at this very moment be benefiting from the work of Albert Hofmann, inventor of LSD. Dr. Hofmann recently died in his Switzerland home at the age of 102. After accidentally ingesting some of his invention in 1943 and thereby discovering its psychoactive effects, he intentionally took it many hundreds of times in an effort to more deeply explore this state of altered consciousness. Dr. Hofmann obtained his Ph.D. at the age of 23 and then worked as a research chemist at Sandoz Laboratories in Basel, Switzerland until his retirement.

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Coming soon: the Chocolate Genome Project. In an effort to confront a number of fungal diseases threatening the cocoa industry, the chocolate company Mars has announced it will partner with the federal government’s Agricultural Research Service and IBM on a \$10 million project to develop more productive and disease-resistant cacao trees by sequencing and analyzing the entire cocoa genome. While the project is expected to take about five years, access to all the research and information will be made available for free as it is gathered through the Public Intellectual Property Resource for Agriculture (PIPRA). Executive

Director of PIPRA Alan Bennett estimates that free access to the unpatented gene sequence has the potential to “provide positive social, economic and environmental impact for the more than 6.5 million small family cocoa farmers around the world.”

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Joseph Weizenbaum, author of the conversational computer program ELIZA, died on March 5 in Gröben, Germany. He was eighty-five. ELIZA, named for the Eliza Doolittle of *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* who is taught to speak the King’s English and pass herself off as a lady, was designed to mimic human conversation by asking its interlocutors questions derived from what they had just said. “Machines are made to behave in wondrous ways, often sufficient to dazzle even the most experienced observer,” Weizenbaum explained in his presentation to the Association for Computing Machinery in 1966 (he developed the program at M.I.T. in 1965). “But once a particular program is unmasked, once its inner workings are explained in language sufficiently plain to induce understanding, its magic crumbles away; it stands revealed as a mere collection of procedures, each quite comprehensible.”

ELIZA, however, “created the most remarkable illusion of having understood in the minds of the many people who conversed with it,” he later wrote.

Weizenbaum was alarmed to discover how emotionally invested people became in the conversations—his students and his secretary would spend hours chatting with it, sometimes about intimate personal matters—and still more alarmed that some psychiatrists proposed ELIZA be employed as a clinical psychotherapist. His 1976 critique of artificial intelligence, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, ruffled more than a few feathers in the computer science world. He took pride in the controversy, happily dubbing himself a “heretic.” “Perhaps the computer, as well as many other of our machines and techniques, can yet be transformed, following our own authentically revolutionary transformation, into instruments to enable us to live harmoniously with nature and with one another. But one prerequisite will first have to be met: there must be another transformation of man. And it must be one that restores a balance between human knowledge, human aspirations, and an appreciation of human dignity such that man may become worthy of living in nature.”