

**TRULY  
PECULIAR**

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# TRULY PECULIAR

*The Economist Explains*

FANTASTIC FACTS  
*that are*  
STRANGER THAN FICTION

*Edited by*

**TOM STANDAGE**

The  
Economist

Published in 2021 under exclusive licence from The Economist by  
Profile Books Ltd  
29 Cloth Fair  
London EC1A 7JQ  
[www.profilebooks.com](http://www.profilebooks.com)

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Typeset in Milo by MacGuru Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78816 896 0  
eISBN 978 1 78283 893 7



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# Introduction: in search of the truly peculiar

HERE IS A PECULIAR FACT: the title of this book was suggested by an algorithm. It sounds like something out of a science-fiction story or an avant-garde novel, but it is true. And it seems appropriate for this book, which rounds up fantastic facts and extraordinary explanations that are true, yet are peculiar enough to be stranger than fiction. For example, how can football reduce civil wars? Why are Corsican number plates suddenly so popular in France? And how can Big Macs measure the true size of China's economy? And, for that matter, how can a book be named by an algorithm?

Previous books in this series, all of which present collections of explainers and charts from *The Economist*, have been called *Seriously Curious*, *Uncommon Knowledge* and *Unconventional Wisdom*. Each title is a play on words that combines a word that means “facts”, “factual” or “factually” with a word that means “unusual” or “unusually”. There are three distinct combinations: “unusual facts”, “unusually factual” and “factually unusual”. The three preceding titles correspond to one of these combinations: “*Seriously Curious*” means something similar to “factually unusual”, while “*Uncommon Knowledge*” and “*Unconventional Wisdom*” are both equivalent to “unusual facts”. Once this underlying formula has been identified, writing a program to generate more titles in a similar vein is a simple matter.

I wrote the program in Python, a popular language that helpfully has a powerful add-on library called Natural Language Toolkit,

or NLTK. One of NLTK's features is the ability to generate a list of synonyms of a particular word. Starting with a list of synonyms for "unusual", my program expanded it by adding all the synonyms of those synonyms. It then did the same for "unusually", "facts", "factual" and "factually". It then generated random book titles by picking synonyms from these lists to produce variations on the formulae "unusual facts", "unusually factual" and "factually unusual".

Many of the resulting suggestions, it must be said, were not suitable book titles, possibly because the synonyms-of-synonyms approach had the effect of casting the net rather wider than anticipated. That is why you are not holding a book called "Disadvantageously Drunk", "Oddly Elucidate", "Unknown Brainstorm", "Extraneous Sapience", "Unfeignedly Foreign" or "Amazingly Honourable". But among the avalanche of awful suggestions were some good ideas: "Oddly Informative", "Strangely Instructive", "Surprisingly Enlightening", "Unusually illuminating", "Truly Unusual", "Remarkably True" – and "Truly Peculiar". I sent a shortlist of the most promising algorithmic suggestions to the publisher, and *Truly Peculiar* was the title we chose.

As you can see, the story of how an algorithm came to name this book is slightly technical, but can be explained in a way that is easily grasped by a non-specialist. It highlights something going on in the world today, namely that computers are becoming more capable of manipulating language. Understanding it can give you insight into a field or a topic that you might not be familiar with – and may well cause you to raise your eyebrows. It is, in other words, a good example of the kind of truly peculiar explanations you will find more of inside this book. We hope you enjoy reading them.

Tom Standage  
Deputy Editor, *The Economist*  
April 2021

**Truly peculiar: fantastic facts that  
are stranger than fiction**

## How football can reduce civil wars

Could a missed penalty kick really have helped bring peace to Ivory Coast? In 2005 its national football team was on the brink of qualifying for the World Cup for the first time. Having won its final qualifying match, Ivory Coast just needed Cameroon to lose or draw the match it was playing against Egypt. The awarding of a late penalty set the Cameroonians up for a win. But Pierre Womé hit the post. The ball flew wide. Ivory Coast was in.

Listening to the match on the radio, the Ivorian players erupted in cheers. Then they pleaded for peace in their war-torn country. “We proved today that all Ivoirians can coexist and play together,” said Didier Drogba, the captain. The team knelt. “We beg you on our knees... please lay down your weapons and hold elections,” said Mr Drogba. The clip was played again and again on Ivorian television. In the months that followed, the warring parties began talking and, eventually, agreed to a ceasefire. In 2007 they agreed to peace.

There were, of course, factors in play other than Ivory Coast’s win, Mr Womé’s missed shot and Mr Drogba’s impassioned plea. But, according to a study published in *American Economic Review* in 2020, the outcomes of important football matches can have a dramatic effect on national unity and, thus, civil wars.

The study’s authors, led by Emilio Depetris-Chauvin of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, looked at how Africans identified themselves and how much they said they trusted each other in the days after important national-team matches. They found that people surveyed after their national squad had won were 37% less likely to identify primarily with their ethnic group, and 30% more likely to trust other ethnicities, than those interviewed just before. “This is entirely driven by national-team victories, whereas defeats have no discernible impact on that self-identification,” the authors noted.

The bigger the match, the bigger the boost to national solidarity and trust. This does not merely reflect a general post-victory euphoria, according to the study. Incumbent politicians and ruling

parties got no bounce in approval from a win. Nor was there any impact on respondents' optimism about the economy.

Victories also lead to a reduction in violence. The authors compared countries that narrowly qualified for the African Cup of Nations in recent years with those that narrowly missed out. The countries that squeaked in experienced almost 10% less conflict in the next six months than those that did not. The make-up of the squad probably matters, too. Mr Drogba noted that his team hailed "from the north, south, centre and west" of Ivory Coast. "The effect of victories is stronger the more diverse the ethnic composition of the national team," the study's authors wrote.

So could more football reduce conflict in Africa? Perhaps. But the positive results hold only for high-stakes matches, not friendlies (matches unrelated to a competition). And the bonhomie can be fleeting. A second civil war broke out in Ivory Coast in 2010 – though calm returned in 2011, after Mr Drogba and many others once again appealed for peace.

## **Are overweight politicians less trustworthy?**

In the southern English town of High Wycombe, the local member of parliament, mayor and councillors are weighed publicly every year in the town centre, in a self-described attempt to deter them from “gaining weight at taxpayers’ expense”. Cheers erupt if a lawmaker has shed a few pounds; boos await those who have put any on. The centuries-old tradition is conducted largely in jest. But the townsfolk might be on to something.

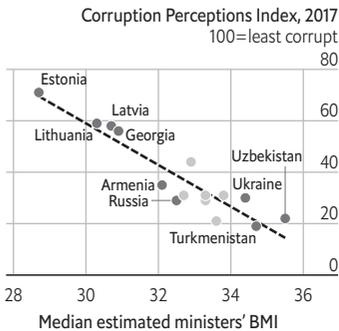
The more overweight the government, the more corrupt the country, according to a study of 15 post-Soviet states published in July 2020. The study’s author, Pavlo Blavatsky of Montpellier Business School in France, used an algorithm to analyse photographs of almost 300 cabinet ministers and estimate their body-mass index (BMI), a measure of obesity. He found that the median BMI of a country’s cabinet was highly correlated with its level of corruption, as measured by indices compiled by the World Bank and Transparency International.

According to these measures, the least corrupt post-Soviet countries were the three Baltic states – Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia – and Georgia. These four countries also boasted the slimmest cabinets. Meanwhile, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan ranked worst for corruption. The latter two countries also had the chubbiest ministers, according to Mr Blavatsky’s estimates, along with Ukraine. Obesity is surprisingly common among the upper ranks of government in the former Soviet Union. Nearly one-third of ministers across all 15 states were rated “severely obese” by Mr Blavatsky’s algorithm, including 54% of Uzbek and 44% of Tajik ministers. Only 3% were estimated to be in the normal weight category. Despite Vladimir Putin’s carefully cultivated reputation as a powerful, healthy strongman, his cabinet was just as flabby as those in neighbouring countries. Perhaps, like Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, he prefers to have about him men that are fat, fearing the “hungry” look of the lean men. He is wrong, Mr Blavatsky’s data suggest. The tubby may look content, but appear to be more grasping.

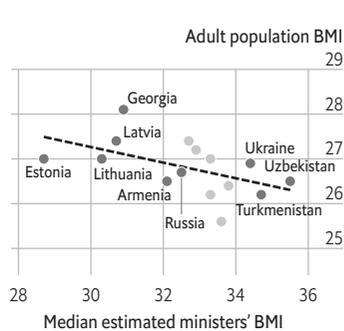
## Centres of gravity

Post-Soviet countries

### Ministers' BMI and corruption



### Ministers' BMI and population BMI



Source: "Obesity of politicians and corruption in post-Soviet countries", P. Blavatsky, *Economics of Transition and Institutional Change*, 2020

Corruption is notoriously difficult to quantify. Most measures rely on the perceptions of the public, which tend to change slowly. Thus, a proxy variable – like ministers' BMIs – can prove useful, especially in the short term. Mr Blavatsky notes that despite undergoing a revolution that set it on the path to democracy in 2018, Armenia's score in Transparency International's corruption index remained unchanged from the previous year. And yet the estimated BMI of ministers in the new Armenian government was slightly lower than its pre-revolution value – a sign, in this analysis, that the country may have begun to root out corruption.

Might not fleshier politicians simply come from places with heavier people? In fact, the opposite is true: countries with more-obese ministers tend to have less-obese people (see the right-hand chart). Indeed, the post-Soviet countries deemed most corrupt by Transparency International also have the poorest and most underweight populations.

Of course, correlation is not causation. Obese politicians are not necessarily more dishonest than their slimmer counterparts. But it

might be wise for officials in the former eastern bloc to slim down all the same. Studies show that voters are less likely to plump for candidates who are, well, plump. Even if most politicians manage to avoid having to step on the scales before their subjects, like those in High Wycombe, the link between health and electability should weigh on their minds nonetheless.

## **How Nigeria's love of fancy wigs fuels a global trade in hair**

"My outfit for the day determines what hair I will be wearing," says Olayinka Titilope, a Nigerian wigmaker. She has a different peruke for each day of the month. The weather also influences her choice. On cooler days she might opt for long, thick locks. During the summer she tends towards lighter bob-cuts. Ms Titilope hopes her hairdos will inspire the customers who visit her wig gallery in downtown Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital. She sells wigs for \$60-800. The most expensive ones are made of human hair from Cambodia, she says.

Some African feminists argue that to wear a long, straight-haired wig or hair extension is to grovel to Western ideals of beauty. Yet wig-buyers in Nigeria seem to enjoy variety. Sellers advertise hair from everywhere. Brazilian hair is praised for its sheen and durability; Vietnamese, for its bounce; Mongolian, because it is easy to curl. One seller in Lagos offers "Italian posh hair", which is supposedly odour-free. Whatever the label says, much of the hair really comes from elsewhere – often China, a source some buyers deem downmarket. It is hard even for the most conscientious hair-traders to determine or trace where their wares came from. Most of the hair that reaches Africa travels via factories in China, where it is sorted and often treated, dyed or curled. Bundles of human hair may be bulked up with horse mane or goat thatch. Chinese locks are sometimes packed into boxes labelled "Peruvian hair", which is coveted in Nigeria. Responsible shopkeepers must pick a good supplier and hope for the best. Those with fewer scruples rebrand the hair once it arrives.

Demand in Nigeria is huge, but not everyone wants to pay Nigerian tariffs. Benin, a popular route for goods smuggled into its much bigger neighbour, sucked in 11% of the world's fake-hair imports in 2018 – some 50 times what might be expected, given its tiny population. Nigeria itself shipped in more than 3,600 tonnes of hair (including human, animal and synthetic hair, as well

as ready-made hair pieces). If even half of that was from human scalps, it would amount to the waist-length locks of more than 10m people. “The demand for hair generally exceeds supply, fuelling an almost constant sense of scarcity,” writes Emma Tarlo in her book *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair*.

In the past decade hair exports from Myanmar have quadrupled in volume, making it the world’s fourth-largest exporter. Nay Lin, a hair-trader in the former capital, Yangon, says he knows when the economy is bad because more women turn up at his shop to sell their tresses. “Today I have had ten heads so far,” he says, a lot for one day. A pile of dark bunches glistens on the floor beside him. Clients earn around \$18 for their hair, though prices vary according to weight. Most of it gets shipped to China, but he is unsure where it goes after that. Mr Lin exported duck feathers until he discovered that hair was more lucrative. Meanwhile, some 500km north of Yangon, in the town of Pyawbwe, farmers who once harvested onions and chillies now spend their days unpicking hairballs. These are often gathered by door-to-door collectors, who buy hair from people’s combs and bathroom plugs. Some hairballs arrive in sacks from India and Bangladesh. Workers in Pyawbwe (which has earned the nickname “Hair City”) make about \$1.20 a day untangling them and removing lice or white strands. This hair is so common in Chinese factories that it is referred to as “standard hair”. It costs more than the fake stuff, but less than locks cut straight from a head.

“We call that stuff factory trash,” scoffs Ms Titilope, who insists that none of it goes into her products. She does not like using Indian hair, either, because much of it is shorn off pilgrims and some customers think it is cursed. Most Hindus will have their heads shaved at a temple at least once as a symbol of surrendering their egos to Vishnu, a god. The temples then sell the tresses. But in Nigeria some believe that snakes may have slithered over the hair. To Ms Titilope’s customers, hair is an important status symbol. Women with silky locks tumbling down their backs stroll past others with coarse, synthetic threads. On the streets of Lagos, wigs reflect wealth.

## **How the pandemic has changed illegal-drug habits**

When Seth Rogen, an actor, was asked in April 2020 how he had been passing the time in lockdown, he replied, true to character, “I’ve smoked a truly ungodly amount of weed.” A report published in September 2020 suggests he was not alone. According to the Global Drug Survey, an annual study of global drug-use trends, as covid-19 left millions stuck indoors, anxious and bored, many people turned to psychoactive substances.

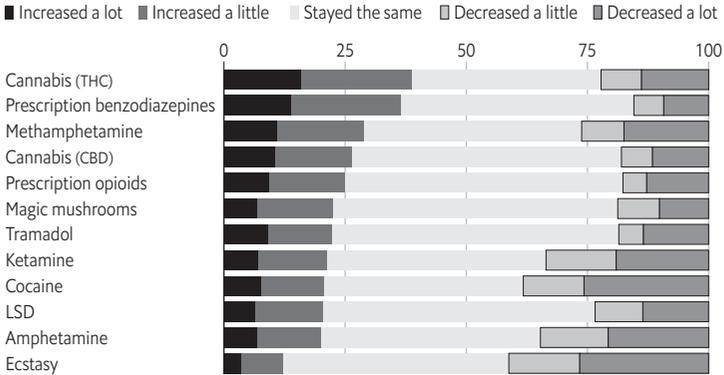
Mr Rogen’s drug of choice saw the biggest rise in usage. According to the online survey, which polled some 55,000 people in 11 mostly rich countries, almost two in five respondents had increased their use of cannabis since the start of the pandemic. Australia saw the greatest increase, at 49%, with America (46%) and Britain (44%) close behind. Respondents largely ascribed their greater use of the drug to the extra free time and boredom of lockdowns. But pre-existing mental-health conditions also played a role: among those with mental illnesses who upped their toking, 41% cited stress and 38% cited depression (among cannabis users without those conditions, the figures were 20% and 15%, respectively). Unsurprisingly, respondents in countries hit hard by the pandemic, such as America, were more likely to say they got stoned more often because they were depressed.

Party drugs, meanwhile, were found to have fallen out of favour, in large part because of the abrupt disappearance of nightclubs and festivals, as well as the difficulty of meeting dealers during lockdown. The survey found that ecstasy usage was down by 41%, while cocaine was down by 38% and ketamine by 34%. Few seemed to miss their habits. Nearly a third of cocaine users said their mental health was better as a result of taking less of the stuff; a quarter of ecstasy enthusiasts said the same. Around two-fifths of those who used one or other drug said they didn’t feel like taking them during a pandemic.

Whether these changes in drug habits will outlast the pandemic

**Easing the pain**

Change in frequency of drug use since the start of the pandemic, % responding\*



Source: Global Drug Survey

\*Online survey of 55,811 adults polled May-June 2020

remains to be seen, but illegal party drugs are likely to bounce back when nightclubs reopen and festivals resume. In the meantime, experts have warned against self-medicating with cannabis. Sharing drugs can help spread the virus, and heavy smoking can increase the risk of complications from covid-19. Perhaps Mr Rogen should avoid passing his spliffs around.