

WELCOME TO THE INSTITUTE, CLASS OF 2028!

Institute sees precipitous decline in racial minority enrollment for incoming class year

Schmill: “The class this year is not different in academic preparedness: it’s just less racially diverse.”

By Alex Tang, Ellie Montemayor, & Vivian Hir
EDITORS

MIT’s incoming Class of 2028 is the least racially diverse in recent memory. In the Institute’s first admitted class following the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that struck down affirmative action, 16 percent of students are Black, Hispanic, Native American and Pacific Islander, a significant decrease from the 25 percent in an aggregated profile for the previous four classes.

Institute officials double down on commitment to talent and diversity

The numbers for the class of 2028 are in stark contrast to the class of 2027. The percentage of Black students is down three-fold to 5 percent. Hispanic and Latino students dropped to 11% from an earlier 16%. In an interview with The Tech, Stu Schmill ’86 stated that such percentages were calculated on a numerator that subsetted for U.S. citizens or permanent residents only and a denominator of the entire class. Schmill stated that “the class is more diverse than it shows.”

MIT president Sally Kornbluth released an announcement earlier in the day acknowledging the impact of the Court’s ruling on the admissions process, noting that the “impact is clear, and it is concerning.” She affirmed MIT’s commitment to preserving a diverse and talented Institute, stating that the Institute “need[s] to seek out new approaches” while following the law.

In a blog post on the MIT admission’s website, Schmill wrote about his experiences as alumnus of the Institute: the shared passion for science and technology with peers drawn from across the country and the globe, the hope of bettering the nation and humanity, and the value of learning with and from the best and brightest. Schmill also highlighted the legacy put forth by former MIT president Paul Gray ’54 SM ’55 ScD ’60, as one of making the Institute a “stronger, more effective place as it draws on the full range of human talent and experience.”

Schmill spoke to The Tech just hours following the release of the composition of the 2028 class and the corresponding public messages from Kornbluth and Schmill.

With the use of race in the admissions process now banned, Schmill stated that the admissions decisions were made in the context of “opportunities in high school” and similar factors. With regards to

qualitative aspects of the application, particularly essays, Schmill stated that “we’ve been reviewing the essays in the same way we ever have,” noting that MIT admissions looks for “the personal qualities that we think align with good MIT students.”

Schmill emphasized the qualifications of the incoming class, stating that “every student that we admitted and we’re enrolling are exceptional.” He said “the class this year is not different in academic preparedness: it’s just less racially diverse.” Furthermore, Schmill cited improving academic outcomes in recent years, including graduation rates and retention rates, even as MIT grew increasingly diverse. Schmill stated that “diversity and excellence coexist,” and that there’s “not trade-off” between the two.

Schmill noted a dramatic increase in the enrollment of students in the class of 2028 who were part of Questbridge, a program for low-income, high-achieving students. Over 100 were enrolled, the highest ever, and Schmill highlighted that “more than 50 students” were admitted through the match process, an increase of approximately five-fold compared to prior years.

Following reports of declining enrollment in admitted student programs such as Sin LiMITe and Ebony Affair, Schmill acknowledged that such programs faced “similar kinds of restrictions on the selection process” as undergraduate admissions. Nonetheless, Schmill said that all associated costs with the programs are covered for any student who receives financial aid. Additionally, Schmill stated that such programs, as well as the general Campus Preview Weekend, had “widen[ed] the eligibility” for participation.

Schmill highlighted numerous efforts by the admissions team to expand outreach to potential applicants. He noted a joint effort with other institutions known as the Small Town and Rural Student (STARS) College Network, to “not only recruit students for MIT, but to ensure that students in those communities are fully aware of opportunities for higher education outside their local area.” Schmill also stated that MIT admissions has increased visits to Title 1 schools as well as community colleges. Schmill affirmed an institutional commitment to maintaining and expanding ties with organizations that “connect us to high achieving students that haven’t had the same opportunities as others.”

The Class of 2028 will begin its first day of classes on Sept 4. The

early action deadline for the Class of 2029 is Nov. 1.

Students respond to a markedly different freshman class

In multiple conversations with The Tech following the release of the admissions data, many students pointed to growing or ongoing concerns about maintaining culture and safety for minority populations on campus. Most conversations trended towards a single term: “isolation.”

“I just really feel we need this critical mass of students on campus so they can as an entire community take up space instead of having to carve out a space for themselves,” Kyle Williams ’27 said. “You kind of feel isolated, as you know, being the minority here.”

Some students highlighted that the racial makeup of a class year was not by itself a concern, but that allowing for “diversity in general”—whether in nationality, religion, upbringing, or beliefs—was a key point in pursuing a more unified Institute. To Peyton Bryant ’27, who resides in Juniper House, the cuts in racial diversity at the Institute represented a more broad threat that was “to the detriment of all students,” not just those who identify within a particular impacted minority group.

Bryant participated in the 2023 cohort of Interphase EDGE and was a residential advisor for the program in its 2024 cohort; Bryant is also a member of the MIT Council for Advancement of Black Students (CABS).

For others, just the presence of individuals with the same race or ethnicity contributes to a sentiment of safety and belonging, which may be lost as the makeup of future class years may continue to trend against minority representation.

“It definitely is sometimes disheartening—when you are in a lecture... and it’s like, ‘Hey, Kyle, you should take a look around and count how many Black people are in the room,’” Williams said. “And then I do it. And it’s like only five people in this lecture hall of like 120, 150 people.”

Williams participated in Ebony Affair as part of its 2023 cohort.

A growing concern that has been widely spread among students is in the continued existence of minority-supporting programs and cultural groups in the wake of the affirmative action ruling. The Tech previously reported on declined enrollment statistics in several admitted/incoming student programs for their Class of 2028 cohorts, such as in the case of Interphase EDGE and Sin LiMITe, as well as large-scale organizational changes in the minority-supporting Office of Minority Education (OME).

“What brought me to MIT was the strong visible presence of the Black community and tangible support for Black students through the admissions programs,” Niko Odhiambo ’25 said. “It will be harder and harder to bring Black into MIT if administrative mishandling dilutes our presence.”

Willow Carretero Chavez ’24 held a different stance on the Institute’s numerous diversity-promoting programs.

“It’s clear to me that these programs are not instituted out of a genuine desire for diversity. Though the vast majority of the people involved in implementing the policies genuinely care, the reason why these departments are afforded funding is to avoid legal and reputational liability,” Chavez said. “Now that the SCOTUS ruling made it a legal liability to implement affirmative action programs, of course they’re immediately going to cut it. These initiatives weren’t put in place to protect students, they were put in place to protect MIT and its image.”

Regardless of the impetus behind them, many noted their veritable impact on generating a sense of belonging within the members of an identity group. “Even before [the Supreme Court ruling], we put a lot of effort into this culture and making a space for students to feel welcomed. It’s really important. If there are few people in a community like you, you don’t feel welcomed,” LU-CHA vice president and Latino Cultural Center (LCC) member Diego Caballero ’27 said.

Caballero lives in La Casa, a house within the New House community, and previously helped organize Sin LiMITe 2024.

Odhiambo participated in the Weekend Immersion in Science & Engineering (WISE) in 2020 and since coming to the Institute has participated as a mentor or host for several campus programs like Ebony Affair.

“I think campus is already a self-segregated place, by virtue of students gravitating towards people with similar experiences... Without Black community, and diversity within the Black community, the campus climate will revert to centering whiteness alone,” Odhiambo said.

Still, as with Schmill’s assertion of the Institute’s continued commitment to promoting diversity as new data revealed striking takeaways of the incoming class year, students remained hopeful.

“Although numbers decreased, that’s not going to make a marked decrease in strength and unity. Just because we are fewer doesn’t mean we are weaker,” Bryant said.

Zesiger pool assault under investigation as new facility policies enacted

On July 25, a Timely Warning notice was made public following five reported incidents of indecent assault and battery on a child under the age of 14 at the Zesiger Sports and Fitness Center.

The assault is said to have occurred on July 24, 2024, between 7:30 a.m. and 8:50 a.m. while the victims were swimming in the lap pool. The suspect, described as a male around 30 years old with a mustache, was last seen wearing a lime green shirt and carrying a duffel bag.

“On July 24, MIT’s Department of Athletics, Physical Education and Recreation (DAPER) received a report that a number of minors who were visiting MIT to use the Zesiger Center pool were touched inappropriately by another patron while swimming in the pool,” Director of Athletics Anthony Grant wrote in an emailed statement to the Institute community the following day.

MIT Police are actively investigating the case and urge anyone with information to come forward. They are equipped with specially trained officers who handle sexual assault cases with sensitivity and confidentiality. MIT provides various resources for those affected by sexual assault, including the Violence Prevention and Response (VPR) team and the Institute Discrimination and Harassment Response Office (IDHR). The community is encouraged to remain vigilant, utilize campus safety resources like SafeRide and Blue Light emergency phones, and report any suspicious activity to MIT Police.

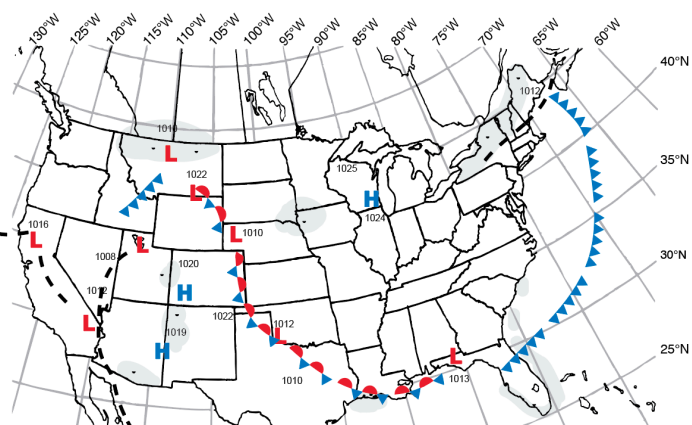
The notification was made in compliance with the federal Jeanne Clery Act, which mandates timely warnings about crimes that pose a threat to the safety of the campus community.

Grant’s email the following day also announced a set of new procedures and policies to be implemented by the facilities staff for the safety of pool-goers. Among these changes were the implementation of an empty buffer lane between groups of minors and other patrons; enhanced signage for incident reporting; staff protocol review; and increased observation of the area.

—Jayashabari Shankar & Ellie Montemayor



WEATHER FORECAST



Weather Systems

High Pressure

Low Pressure

Hurricane

Weather Fronts

Trough

Warm Front

Cold Front

Stationary Front

Precipitation Symbols

Snow

Rain

Light

Moderate

Heavy

Other Symbols

Fog

Thunderstorm

Haze

By Adrienne Lai

CHIEF METEOROLOGIST

Boston is rolling out the red carpet for the class of 2028 with sunny skies shining overhead for the start of Orientation! Temperatures are not too warm either - high 70s - so be sure to explore MIT and its surrounding areas! I like to walk along the Charles river or in Boston Commons when it's nice out! If it's getting warm in the dorms, take shelter where there is AC (dorm dining hall/stud) and crack open a window at night! Welcome home to MIT!

AUGUST 22

SITUATION FOR NOON (ET)

Extended Forecast

Today: Sunny Day! High of 74°F (23°C) with 9 mph west winds.

Tonight: Mostly clear skies with a low of 59°F (15°C) and west winds 9 mph.

Friday: 8 mph west winds with a high of 78°F (26°C) and sunny skies.

Friday Night: Low of 61°F (16°C) with clear skies. 7 mph west winds.

Saturday: West winds 8 mph. High of 81°F (27°C) and low of 65°F (18°C). Sunny skies.

Sunday: Sunny day with 8 mph southwest winds. High of 83°F (28°C) and low of 66°F (19°C).

Course 6-7 curriculum restyled as explosive rise of machine learning takes hold in academia

The changes reflect the growing importance of machine learning in biology and computer science.

By Ellie Montemayor & Vivian Hir
EDITORS

Early this month, the Registrar's Office published an updated MIT Bulletin for the 2024-2025 academic year and introduced significant modifications to course curricula for numerous departments, including Course 6-7 (Computer Science and Molecular Biology).

6-7, the Institute's 13th most popular major and one of four interdisciplinary majors jointly administered by Electrical Engineering & Computer Science (EECS), has around 20 students enrolled in each class year. (In the 2023-2024 academic year, 73 students were declared 6-7 as a primary or secondary major as of the beginning of that fall semester.) The changes outlined in the course bulletin involve new departmental program updates for introductory and foundational classes, as well as restricted electives.

The 6-7 curriculum, since its establishment ahead of the '11-'12 academic year, had not been—aside from minor updates such as in response to individual class alterations (the 12-unit class 7.09, for example, was split into the 6-unit classes 7.03 and 7.094 ahead of the '20-'21 academic year) and new course offerings—significantly altered up until this point. The revision process for this bulletin's change reportedly began around a year and a half ago and consulted several MIT-based researchers in the Biology and EECS departments, along with a more rigorous appraisal by an internal review committee, according to Education Officer for EECS and Professor

of EECS Dennis Freeman.

For the introductory classes, the new curriculum requires Linear Algebra and Optimization (6C.06[J]). (Linear algebra as 18.06 was most recently included in the major curriculum in '16-'17, as a potential satisfier for the mathematics requirement alongside 18.03.) Other modifications include no longer requiring Introduction to Computational Thinking and Data Science (6.100B).

Furthermore, the updated degree chart replaced Mathematics for Computer Science (6.1200) with Discrete Mathematics and Proof for Computer Science (6.120A). 6.120A is a 6-unit class, whereas 6.1200 is a 12-unit class. The changes also include removing Thermodynamics II and Kinetics (5.602), a 6-unit class, for the chemistry requirement.

The major change to the Course 6-7 curriculum is the replacement of Design and Analysis of Algorithms (6.1220) with Introduction to Machine Learning (6.3900) for the "foundational subjects" component of the degree. Prior to the publication of the updated Course 6-7 curriculum, some Course 6-7 students successfully petitioned 6.3900 in place of 6.1220 in the 2023-2024 academic year. An alternate option to 6.3900 is Modeling with Machine Learning (6C.06) and Machine Learning in Molecular and Cellular Biology (7C.06), as 6C.06 and 7C.06 are 6-unit classes that are designed to be taken concurrently in the spring semester, according to the MIT Schwarzman College of Computing website.

Besides changes to the introductory and foundational courses, the new cur-

riculum also revamped the restricted electives component. Previously, the restricted electives component required one class from the biology restricted electives listing and one class from the computational biology restricted electives listing; the new restricted electives track requires one computational biology class and two additional classes from any of the following lists: biology restricted electives, computational biology, or Artificial Intelligence and Decision Making (AI+D) advanced undergraduate subjects.

"The current revision was motivated primarily by faculty who work in this area and have directly witnessed the explosive importance of machine learning," Freeman said in an emailed statement to The Tech. The committee replaced 6.1220 with 6.3900 and added 6C.06 as the department saw it as "essential for using machine learning effectively," said Freeman.

The new major curriculum was not reflected on the primary EECS website by the time of publication; the EECSIS Online Portal has a checklist of completed requirements, which is available to each student in a Course 6-administered major, and that has been updated to reflect the 2024 bulletin.

Representatives for the Course 7 department did not comment by the time of publication.

"I think the new changes were a welcome addition to the 6-7 Major," David Kwabi-Addo '25 said. "It seems to push an emphasis on machine learning, which seems to be where the field of computational biology is slowly shifting towards in the future."

State police respond to road rage shooting near Sailing Pavilion

On August 18 at around 5 p.m., state and city police swarmed an intersection of Memorial Drive near the MIT Sailing Pavilion in response to an incident that has since been labelled a "road rage shooting."

The incident allegedly occurred after 30-year-old Kevin Osorio was struck by 65-year-old Cesar Gutierrez with a blunt object before drawing a gun and firing multiple times. Authorities say the two men did not know each other until the time of the altercation.

"After absorbing the blow, Osorio drew his firearm and fired several rounds at Gutierrez," State Police said in a statement.

Both men have been charged in connection with the incident and were both transported to Massachusetts General Hospital with serious injuries.

Memorial Drive is overseen by the state, so the investigation has fallen to the hands of the Massachusetts State Police.

Both men were arraigned in Cambridge District Court. There is no active threat to the public at this time, according to police.

MIT Police was not involved in the response nor the ensuing investigation as the incident occurred outside of Institute property.

The area around the Sailing Pavilion was soon reopened, and access to the Sailing Pavilion was unaffected by the incident.

— Ellie Montemayor

News in Brief

A bite-sized digest for this month's happenings in 300 words or less.

MIT commits to upholding anti-discrimination, harassment policies

As the fall semester draws near, MIT is reaffirming its dedication to fostering an inclusive and safe environment for all members of its community. In a recent emailed announcement on August 19, Sarah Rankin, Director of the Institute Discrimination and Harassment Response Office (IDHR) and MIT's Title IX and VI Coordinator, emphasized the importance of understanding and adhering to the Institute's anti-discrimination and harassment policies.

The emailed reminder, which was sent in accordance with state law, outlined MIT's strict prohibition against discrimination or harassment based on various protected identities, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. It specifically addressed the issues of sexual harassment, assault, dating

or domestic violence, and stalking, reinforcing MIT's zero-tolerance stance on such behavior.

MIT encourages any community member to report experienced or witnessed discriminatory conduct to IDHR. The office provides a range of resources, including supportive measures, informal remedies, and both restorative and investigative resolution pathways.

The annual reminder underscores MIT's ongoing efforts to create a campus environment where everyone can thrive. Community members are urged to familiarize themselves with these policies and to contribute actively to maintaining a respectful and harassment-free environment at MIT.

— Jayashabari Shankar

Division of Student Life to introduce new free expression policies

MIT is set to introduce new policies and clarify existing ones aimed at balancing free expression, respectful dialogue, and safe campus operations, as announced in an August 15 email from the Student Organizations Leadership & Engagement Office. Vice President and Dean for Student Life Suzy Nelson announced that the finalized policies, developed with significant input from students, were to be shared in the coming weeks as the fall semester approaches.

One major update the emailed announcement previewed is the introduction of residence hall poster- ing across campus. Additionally, in response to feedback from last year's campus demonstrations, MIT has revised its Institute Bulletin Board/Posting/Display Spaces Policy and the Rules for Campus Protests and Demonstrations. These revisions aim to clarify points that were previously confusing to students and to clearly define acceptable behaviors during protests and demonstrations.

The updated policies reflect a collaborative effort among students, faculty, and staff to enhance the clarity and effectiveness of campus regulations. As the new academic year begins, students can expect more information and links to these finalized policies, ensuring they are well-informed and prepared for a successful and engaging year at MIT.

— Jayashabari Shankar

MIT launches Philippe A. Embiricos fellowship to drive maritime innovation

MIT has introduced the Philippe A. Embiricos Fellowship in Ocean Engineering, with help from a substantial \$500,000 donation from Libra Philanthropies. This fellowship is specifically designed to encourage and support Greek talent, fostering the next wave of leaders in maritime innovation.

This fellowship honors Philippe A. Embiricos, a pioneering figure in the global shipping industry who dedicated his career to reducing the environmental impact of maritime operations. The fellowship was initiated by Embiricos' daughter, Nitzia Logothetis, Founder and Clinical Director of the Seleni Institute, alongside her husband, George Logothetis, Executive Chairman of Libra Group.

Embiricos, known for his significant contributions to international shipping, served on several industry boards and committees, including the Panama Canal Authority and the Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO). His academic achievements, with degrees from the University of Durham and MIT, underscore the relevance of the fellowship to his life's work.

Housed within MIT's Center for Ocean Engineering, the Philippe A. Embiricos Fellowship aims to cultivate future leaders and promote innovative practices in maritime engineering. This initiative is part of Libra Philanthropies' Rising Global Leaders program, which is committed to nurturing emerging talent through education and career development opportunities.

— Jayashabari Shankar

Duane Boning appointed as the new Vice Provost for International Activities

The professor in EECS will oversee the institute's global engagements.

By Jayashabari Shankar & Vivian Hir
EDITORS

MIT has announced the appointment of Duane Boning as the new Vice Provost for International Activities (VPiA), effective September 1 of this year. Boning, a long-standing member of the MIT community and the Clarence J. LeBel Professor in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, will oversee the Institute's global engagements and policies. Boning's appointment is seen as a continuation of MIT's commitment to fostering international partnerships that address global challenges.

According to the MIT Organization Chart, the VPiA is responsible for developing new international initiatives across many MIT departments. The role also consists of overseeing the International Advisory Committee and the International Coordinating Committee. Furthermore, the VPiA is a member of the Senior Risk Group and works with other executives like the Vice President for Research to review international engagements "that may pose elevated institutional risks for MIT."

Boning succeeds Richard Lester, the Japan Steel Industry Professor who served as VPiA for nine years and will now take on the role of interim Vice President of Climate at MIT. Before becoming VPiA, Lester was the head of the Department of Nuclear Science and Engineering from 2009 to 20015.

Lester's tenure was marred by the 2018 Saudi Arabia-MIT controversy because his report rec-


ommended against the termination of MIT's engagements with private Saudi donors and sponsors. The report drew criticism from people in the MIT community because of MIT's support of Saudi Arabia despite the country's human rights violations and authoritarian regime.

The new Vice Provost Boning's career at MIT spans over four decades, beginning as an undergraduate in 1980. He earned his SB, SM, and PhD degrees in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at the Institute and joined the faculty in 1992. His research focuses on modeling and control for circuits and nanofabrication. From 2001 to 2011, Boning was the editor in chief of IEEE Transactions on Semiconductor Manufacturing. Throughout his tenure, he has been recognized for his leadership and teaching excellence, including receiving the Burgess and Elizabeth Jamieson Prize for Excellence in Teaching in 2024.

In his new role as VPiA, Boning will be responsible for guiding MIT's international collaborations and ensuring they align with the Institute's mission. His previous leadership roles include faculty director of the MIT-Masdar Institute Cooperative Program and co-director of the Leaders for Global Operations program. Boning also previously served as the director and faculty lead of the MIT Skoltech Initiative.

Provost Cynthia Barnhart praised Boning's appointment, noting his "exceptional record of accomplishment" and expressed confidence in his ability to lead MIT's international activities into the future.

Capture the Moment



Join Photo at The Tech

join@tech.mit.edu

101 THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU GRADUATE



32. Take a stroll through Little Italy in the North End

Join the Arts department at The Tech and write restaurant reviews.

(And get reimbursed for your meal!)



Do you think YOU can fit the page better than we did?

Join Production, Get Paid, Eat Dinner!

THE TECH STAFF

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

PUBLISHERS

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

MANAGING EDITOR

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

ARTS

ARTS EDITOR

SPORTS

SPORTS EDITOR

SCIENCE

SCIENCE EDITOR

ENTERTAINMENT

ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

OPINION

OPINION EDITOR

PHOTO

PHOTO EDITOR

NEWS

EDITORIAL

WEATHER

CHIEF METEOROLOGIST

CAMPUS LIFE

CAMPUS LIFE EDITOR

PUBLISHING

PRODUCTION

PRODUCTION EDITOR

COPY

COPY EDITOR

ADMINISTRATION

ADMINISTRATOR

ADVISORY BOARD

ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

WORLD & NATION is a two-page column featuring news articles syndicated from a selection of major newspaper outlets, covering topics of public interest and critical information which extend beyond the bounds of *The Tech's* coverage as centered around the MIT and local community. Ownership of syndicated content is retained under their original respective publications, and is republished in this format to serve as an easily-accessible, printed digest for *The Tech's* readership.

The column consists of two pages, with Side A focused on US news and politics and Side B on topics of international concern. The articles featured here are abridged as to contain only their most essential points; readers are directed to read more about an article from its original publication.

Biden approved secret nuclear strategy refocusing on Chinese threat

President Biden approved in March a highly classified nuclear strategic plan for the United States that, for the first time, reorients America's deterrent strategy to focus on China's rapid expansion in its nuclear arsenal. The shift comes as the Pentagon believes China's stockpiles will eventually rival the size and diversity of the United States' and Russia's. The White House never announced that Mr. Biden had approved the revised strategy, called the "Nuclear Employment Guidance," which also newly seeks to prepare the United States for possible coordinated nuclear challenges from China, Russia and North Korea. The document is so highly classified that there are no electronic copies.

— David E. Sanger, from THE NEW YORK TIMES
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 20, 2024

House Education Committee subpoenas Columbia officials in antisemitism investigation

Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-N.C.), the chair of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, said Wednesday she is issuing six subpoenas for Columbia University officials amid her panel's antisemitism investigation. "Columbia should be a partner in our efforts to ensure Jewish students have a safe learning environment on its campus, but instead, university administrators have slow rolled the investigation, repeatedly failing to turn over necessary documents," Foxx said.

— Lexi Lonas, from THE HILL
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 21, 2024

RFK Jr. expected to drop out of race by end of week, plans to endorse Trump

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is planning to drop out of the presidential race by the end of this week, sources familiar with the decision tell ABC News. Sources tell ABC News that Kennedy plans to endorse Donald Trump -- but when asked directly by ABC News if he will be endorsing the former president, Kennedy said, "I will not confirm or deny that." Sources cautioned the decision is not yet finalized and could still change, with one source adding that Kennedy's hope is, in part, to finalize things quickly in order to try to blunt momentum from the Democratic National Convention.

— Aaron Katersky, Jonathan Karl, Will McDuffie, Olivia Rubin, and Katherine Faulders, from ABC NEWS
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 21, 2024

Vance and Walz set for vice presidential debate on October 1

Republican vice presidential nominee JD Vance and his Democratic counterpart, Tim Walz, are set to participate in a debate hosted by CBS on October 1 after the Ohio senator accepted the invitation Thursday, a day after the Minnesota governor did the same. Vance also accepted CNN's invitation for a vice presidential debate this fall, but the Kamala Harris campaign declined a second onstage showdown between the two running mates. "The debate about debates is over. Donald Trump's campaign accepted our proposal for three debates -- two presidential and a vice presidential debate," Harris campaign spokesman Michael Tyler said in a statement Thursday.

— Kit Maher, Aaron Pellish, & Jeff Zeleny, from CNN
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 15, 2024

Top US oilfield firm Halliburton hit by cyberattack, source says

U.S. oilfield services firm Halliburton (HAL.N), opens new tab on Wednesday was hit by a cyberattack, according to a person familiar with the matter. Halliburton said it was aware of an issue affecting certain systems at the company and was working to determine the cause and impact of the problem. The company was also working with "leading external experts" to fix the issue, a spokesperson said in an emailed statement. The attack appeared to impact business operations at the company's north Houston campus, as well as some global connectivity networks, the person said, who declined to be identified because they were not authorized to speak on the record.

— Liz Hampton, from REUTERS
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 21, 2024

DNC speakers accuse GOP of curtailing peoples' freedoms

Will Weissert & Jonathan J. Cooper
FROM ASSOCIATED PRESS
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 21, 2024

Vice presidential nominee Tim Walz and former President Bill Clinton are headlining the Democratic National Convention's third day on Wednesday, as the party hopes to build on the momentum that Kamala Harris has brought since joining the race a month ago. Walz, the Minnesota governor who has become known among supporters as a folksy, Midwestern teacher, football coach and dad, will introduce himself to the rest of the country. He's also been the target of Republican criticism over how he's portrayed his National Guard service and his personal story. Organizers have dubbed Wednesday night "a fight for our freedoms," with the programming focusing on abortion access and other rights that Democrats want to center in their campaign against Republican nominee Donald Trump. Speaker after speaker argued that their party wants to defend freedoms -- especially abortion access and voting rights -- while Republicans want to take them away. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis used a prop that has become a staple at the convention, an oversized book meant to represent the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, a sweeping set of goals to shrink government and push it to the right, if Trump wins. Polis even ripped a page from the ceremonial volume and said he was going to keep it and show it to undecided voters. The former president has distanced himself from Project 2025, but its key authors include his former top advisers. His running mate, JD Vance, wrote the foreword for the Heritage Foundation CEO's new book. Florida Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz told the story of a woman in her state, which enacted

new abortion restrictions after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, who was forced to carry to term a child with a fatal illness, only to watch the newborn die just hours after birth. Dana Nessel, Michigan's attorney general, and an openly gay woman, declared, "I got a message for the Republicans and the justices of the U.S. Supreme Court: You can pry this wedding band from my cold, dead, gay hand." And Stevie Wonder implored the crowd, "We must choose courage over complacency" before performing "Higher Ground" as a troupe of dancers grooved nearby. Country music star Maren Morris sang her ballad "Better Than We Found It." Trump bashed the convention as a "charade" and noted the fact that he has been a frequent topic of conversation. He also singled out his predecessor, Barack Obama, for a highly critical convention speech Tuesday night, saying Obama had been "nasty."

Judge strikes down FTC rule banning noncompetes

Julian Mark
FROM THE WASHINGTON POST
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 20, 2024

A federal judge in Texas on Tuesday struck down the Federal Trade Commission's ban on noncompete agreements, finding that the agency exceeded its authority with a rule that would have voided contracts that bar workers from moving to rival employers. In a 27-page opinion, U.S. District Judge Ada Brown found that the FTC lacked the statutory authority to issue the rule, which would have taken effect Sept. 4. In reaching her decision, Brown wrote that the "FTC's promulgation of the Rule is an unlawful agency action." An estimated 30 million U.S. workers in a wide range of fields are subject to noncompete agreements. The FTC in April voted 3-2 to issue the rule, pointing to evidence that the agreements suppress wages, stifle entrepreneurship and gum up labor markets. If it had gone into effect, the rule would have made it illegal for employers to include the agreements in employment contracts and would have invalidated existing clauses for most workers subject to them. "We are disappointed by Judge Brown's decision and will keep fighting to stop noncompetes that restrict the economic liberty of hardworking Americans, hamper economic growth, limit innovation, and depress wages," FTC spokeswoman Victoria Graham said in an email. "We are seriously considering a potential appeal, and today's decision does not prevent the FTC from addressing noncompetes through case-by-case enforcement actions." Brown, who was appointed by President Donald Trump, hinted at her thinking last month, when she temporarily blocked the non-compete rule. Brown wrote in her opinion Tuesday that, in addition to exceeding its authority, the FTC issued the rule based on "inconsistent and flawed empirical evidence," while failing to consider evidence supporting noncompete

clauses. She also wrote that the agency failed to find alternatives to the rule it issued. Brown's opinion stands in contrast to a Pennsylvania judge's ruling last month that rejected a similar challenge. In denying a Pennsylvania-bias tree-care company's bid for a preliminary injunction against the FTC rule, U.S. District Judge Kelley Brisbon Hodge, who was appointed by President Joe Biden, found that the FTC agency was well within its authority to issue it. In a third case, a federal judge in Florida last week blocked the FTC rule for the plaintiffs in that specific instance. Islam and other student protesters lobbied the army to put Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Prize-winning, 84-year-old microlending pioneer, in charge of the interim government. They got the leader they wanted, along with two seats in his cabinet. Islam was a natural choice for a post. While pursuing a master's degree he had honed his organizing skills in university politics and became one of the most visible faces of the protests over weeks, gaining

Columbia's president steps down after months of pressure

Matt Egan & Elisabeth Buchwald
FROM CNN
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 15, 2024

Columbia University President Minouche Shafik is stepping down months after protests over the Israel-Hamas war gripped the campus, Shafik announced in a letter sent Wednesday to the Columbia community. Shafik -- an Egyptian-born economist and former high-ranking official at the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Bank of England, and former president of the London School of Economics -- has faced pressure for her handling of Columbia campus encampments protesting the war between Israel and Hamas. Shafik in her letter cited progress during her tenure but said it has "also been a period of turmoil where it has been difficult to overcome divergent views across our community." "This period has taken a considerable toll on my family, as it has for

others in our community," Shafik said in the letter. "Over the summer, I have been able to reflect and have decided that my moving on at this point would best enable Columbia to traverse the challenges ahead." Pressure was building for Shafik to step down after months of student-led demonstrations at the school's New York campus that spread to colleges across the country. Shafik came under criticism after authorizing arrests on campus and for her testimony to the House Education Committee over the university's handling of antisemitism. "I have tried to navigate a path that upholds academic principles and treats everyone with fairness and compassion. It has been distressing... to find myself, colleagues, and students the subject of threats and abuse," Shafik said. The Ivy League listed Katrina Armstrong as interim president, according to the university's website. Armstrong, a doctor of medicine, has served as executive vice president for the health and biomedical sciences department at Columbia

Israeli, Hamas officials see little chance for ceasefire success

Ronen Bergman, Aaron Boxerman, & Adam Rasgon
FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 20, 2024

The Biden administration is again putting its diplomatic heft behind an effort to dislodge the logjam in negotiations between Israel and Hamas over a cease-fire to end the 10-month-long war in Gaza, and American officials have voiced optimism over the potential for a breakthrough. Israeli and Hamas officials are striking a different tone. Both sides have poured cold water on the idea that a deal could be imminent, saying that mediators' efforts -- and the latest American proposal aimed at bridging gaps between the two sides -- have failed to resolve some of the most substantive disputes in the talks. On Monday, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, making his ninth visit to Israel since the war began, emerged from a three-hour-long meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and announced that the Israeli leader had assented to the new U.S. proposal intended to bridge the differences between the two sides, introduced at talks in Qatar last week. But Israeli and Hamas officials familiar with the talks said the U.S. plan left major disagreements mostly unresolved. Hamas quickly dismissed the American-led framework as conforming to Mr. Netanyahu's conditions, which he has stiffened in recent weeks. On Tuesday, as Mr. Blinken traveled to Egypt and Qatar to continue pushing for an agreement, Hamas issued a statement criticizing the latest American proposal as "a reversal" of what Hamas had agreed to in early July and that U.S. officials had called a breakthrough. Hamas officials have said they welcome President Biden's framework for a cease-fire, although they too have requested

prominence after he was detained and beaten by the police in July. His job hasn't been easy, as the new government faces a flood of pent-up demands. "It is a very big responsibility on my shoulders," said Islam, who had deep bags under his eyes and said he was working 16-hour days. "People are coming with their problems--so many." On a recent afternoon, cries of "One-point One point" wafted from the streets below up to Islam's seventh-floor office at the technology ministry. It was a reference to the students' successful rallying cry--their "one-point demand" for Hasina's resignation. Now other groups are repurposing the slogan for their own demands. Islam sees the protests that just happened as a battle of generations--on one side, those who fought for independence from Pakistan in 1971 and their children, on the other, those born in the 1990s and later. "Now, a new generation representing the new middle class, rising middle class, they want to come to power," he said. In her government's final days, Hasina, who had ruled since 2009, shut off the internet and blocked the social-media platforms the students were using to organize protests, which began over an unpopular quota system for government jobs. Despite her efforts to repress the often violent protests, they grew into a broader uprising against her increasingly autocratic rule. More than 500 people died after the demonstrations intensified in mid-July, though the situation has calmed in recent days. From his new perch overseeing the country's communications--he is in charge of broadcasting as well as the internet--Islam signaled that the new government would be different. Previously, police often used internet-communications laws to round up journalists and opposition figures on charges of defamation and spreading false information.

Iran hacked Trump campaign, US intelligence confirms

Ana Faguy
FROM BBC
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 19, 2024

Iran was behind the recent hack of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, US intelligence officials have confirmed. The FBI and other federal agencies said in a joint statement that Iran had chosen to interfere in the US election "to stoke discord and undermine confidence in our democratic institutions." The Trump campaign pointed the finger at Iran on 10 August for hacking its internal messages. Iranian officials denied it. Sources familiar with the investigation told the BBC's US partner, CBS News, that they suspect Iranian hackers also targeted the campaign of Democratic presidential contender Kamala Harris. "The [intelligence community] is confident that the Iranians have through social engineering and other efforts sought access to individuals with direct access to the Presidential campaigns of both political parties," US intelligence officials said in the statement. "Such activity, including thefts and disclosures, are intended to influence the US election process." The Trump campaign was reportedly sent a spear-phishing email -- a message designed to look trustworthy in order to get the target to click on a malicious link. The Harris campaign said last week it had also been the target of a spear-phishing attack, though it was unsuccessful. The agencies that released Monday's statement, including the FBI, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, said the tactics were "not new" and noted that Russia and Iran had employed such methods during previous US elections. It remains unclear what information, if any, was stolen during the hack, Trump said the hackers were only able to obtain publicly available information. The New York Times, Politico

Ukraine attacks Moscow in one of largest ever drone strikes on city

Ukraine attacked Moscow on Wednesday with at least 11 drones that were shot down by air defenses in what Russian officials called one of the biggest drone strikes on the capital since the war in Ukraine began in February 2022. The war, largely a grinding artillery and drone battle across the fields, forests and villages of eastern Ukraine, escalated on Aug. 6 when Ukraine sent thousands of soldiers over the border into Russia's western Kursk region. For months, Ukraine has also fought an increasingly damaging drone war against the refineries and airfields of Russia, the world's second largest oil exporter, though major drone attacks on the Moscow region - with a population of over 21 million - have been rarer.

— Guy Faulconbridge & Lidia Kelly, from REUTERS
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 21, 2024

Iran signals promised strike on Israel may not be imminent

Iranian officials are signaling this week that an attack against Israel may not be imminent, tamping down some of the more urgent rhetoric around threats to avenge Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, who was killed last month in a blast at his guesthouse in Tehran. Iran had warned early on of a "devastating" reprisal to "punish" Israel for the assassination -- but it later adjusted its language, and, in a statement Wednesday, the Iranian mission to the United Nations reinforced the government's position that any response "must be carefully calibrated" to avoid affecting a potential cease-fire in the Gaza Strip.

— Susannah George, Karen DeYoung & Leo Sands, from THE WASHINGTON POST
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 21, 2024

Philippines to host a US visa processing center for up to 300 Afghans resettling in America

The Philippines has agreed to a request by the United States to temporarily host a U.S. immigrant visa processing center for a limited number of Afghan nationals aspiring to resettle in America, the treaty allies announced Tuesday. The Philippine government's approval of the request, which initially faced local concerns over potential security and legal issues, reflects how relations between Manila and Washington have deepened under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who took office in 2022.

— Jim Gomez, from ASSOCIATED PRESS
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 20, 2024

US-Russian dual national jailed for 12 years on treason charges for \$52 donation to Ukraine

U.S.-Russian dual national Ksenia Khavana was convicted Thursday of treason in a Russian court and sentenced to 12 years in prison on charges stemming from a donation of about \$52 to a charity aiding Ukraine. Khavana, identified by Russian authorities by her maiden name of Ksenia Karelna, was arrested in the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg in February and pleaded guilty in a closed trial last week, news reports said.

— FROM ASSOCIATED PRESS
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 16, 2024

U.S. Embassy denies accusations of role in Ukraine incursion

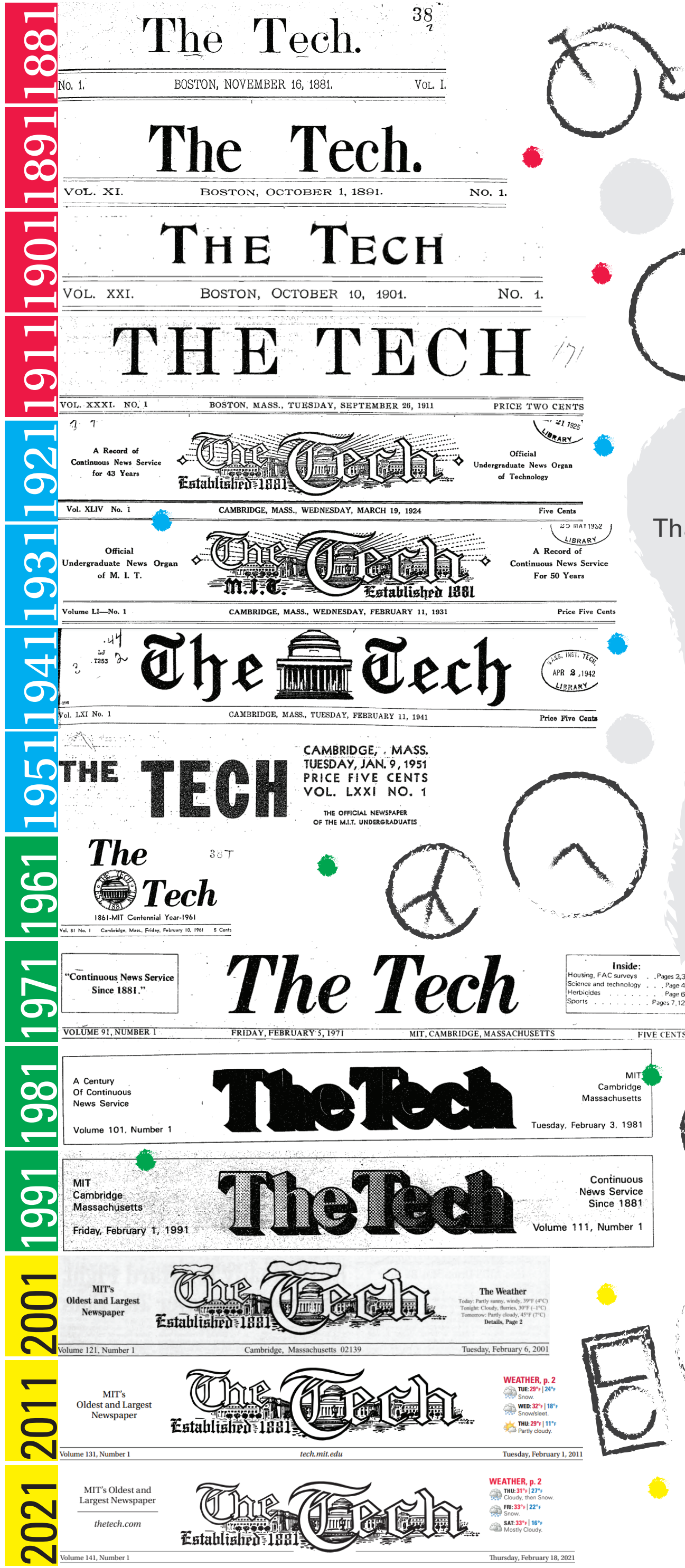
The U.S. Embassy in Moscow on Wednesday rejected Russian accusations of U.S. involvement in Ukraine's Kursk incursion, after the Foreign Ministry summoned Chargé d'Affaires Stephanie Holmes to protest the "provocative actions" of American journalists who reported from the Russian region of Kursk under Ukrainian control. The ministry condemned the actions of American journalists who reported from Kursk after Ukrainian forces took control of the region and complained that an American private military company was operating there as well. In response, the embassy said that independent news organizations "make their own operational and personnel decisions," in a statement Wednesday.

— Robyn Dixon, from THE WASHINGTON POST
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 21, 2024

Indian medics refuse to end protests over doctor's rape and murder

Thousands of Indian junior doctors on Monday refused to end protests over the rape and murder of a fellow medic, disrupting hospital services nearly a week after they launched a nationwide action demanding a safer workplace and swift criminal probe. Doctors across the country have held protests and declined to see non-emergency patients following the Aug. 9 killing of the 31-year-old medic, who police say was raped and murdered at a hospital in the eastern city of Kolkata where she was a trainee. A police volunteer has been arrested and charged with the crime. Women activists say the incident has highlighted how women in India continue to suffer from sexual violence despite tougher laws brought in.

— Subrata Nag Choudhury, from REUTERS
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 19, 2024



Hello!

Thanks for reading *The Tech*.
It's readers like you who
made it possible to keep
The Tech running for
the past 140+ years.

Newspaper is dying!
Help extend its life!
Be part of history!

No experience needed
We have a wide array
of departments - writing
and non-writing - for
all interests!

join@tech.mit.edu

THREE QUESTIONS

Prof. Steven Flavell on researching neural circuits in *C. elegans* and being named an HHMI Investigator

C. elegans is a little roundworm, about a millimeter long and barely visible to the naked eye. And it only has 302 brain cells.

By Karie Shen
SCIENCE EDITOR

Steven Flavell is an associate professor at MIT in the department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, as well as an investigator in the Picower Institute for Learning and Memory. He was recently named an Investigator of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), along with three other MIT professors. Approximately 25 new HHMI Investigators are named every three years, and they are awarded \$11 million in support for their research over seven years. The Tech sat down with Flavell to discuss his path to MIT studying neural circuits in *C. elegans*, his lab's research plans moving forward, and what they look for in undergraduate researchers.

TT: What did your path look like to researching neural circuits?

I grew up in a science family. My mom was in math and computer science, and my dad was a molecular biologist. Naturally, as a teenager, I wanted to do the opposite of what my parents did. I tried—at college, I started off as an English major. English led to psychology, and psychology led to neuroscience and biology.

In graduate school, I was fortunate to work with an amazing mentor, Michael Greenberg, at Harvard Medical School. I studied the signaling mechanisms that allow neurons to change how they're wired based on experience during postnatal development. After graduate school, I wanted to continue to study very basic aspects of neural signaling and function, but I became interested in the way that the nervous system doesn't just wire, but that wiring allows neurons to talk to one another and ultimately generate behavior.

That's a pretty complicated thing. A behaving animal with a complicated

brain is very hard to have very precise mechanistic control over in your experimental preparation. I wanted to study this, but to do so, I decided that it would be best to be doing this in a very simple animal model: a roundworm called *C. elegans*.

TT: What does your lab research today, and how will HHMI fit into that picture?

My lab is interested in trying to understand the neural mechanisms that generate the internal states of the brain—arousal, motivation and mood. Our interest is trying to understand the neural mechanisms that generate these states in the brain, and also trying to understand how these states then impact neural activity and ultimately the animal's behavior.

All the work that I did as a postdoc at Rockefeller with my amazing mentor, Cori Bargmann, and now do in my own lab, is in this very small animal model where we have exquisite experimental control. *C. elegans* is a little roundworm, about a millimeter long and barely visible to the naked eye. And it only has 302 brain cells. We can find them in every animal and we know how they're wired up with one another, so we have the full blueprint of the animal's brain. To put this in perspective, the total number of synapses in the roundworm's brain is less than the total number of synapses that form onto one neuron in our human cerebral cortex. But this animal can go to sleep, it can wake up, it can make memories. Using the amazing experimental control that's possible in the system, we can record the activity of every brain cell at the same time while the animal is behaving. We can use genetics to perturb genes and individual neurons, change things such as signaling pathways, and therefore really probe deeply into the

mechanistic features of the brain cells in the nervous system and how they ultimately control behavior.

One of the amazing things about HHMI is that their philosophy for funding is that they fund "people, not projects." That means that, with this funding, we can be pretty ambitious and take on directions that might be a little too risky for traditional funding. There's lots of things that we're excited about doing. We've been studying the neuromodulatory systems within the brain that give rise to internal states: think serotonin and dopamine. We're interested in scaling up to try to understand these systems better, to visualize the flow of serotonin through extracellular space, and to map out where the receptors are. That's going to require innovation on the technology and computational models that we've been building.

The roundworm is great because it gives us experimental control to study how one nervous system can be modulated to allow an animal to generate many different behaviors. However, it doesn't give us the ability to look at what happens when the wiring of the brain is different. So another thing that we're excited to do is to start studying other animals and use a comparative approach on different species of animals to ultimately see how nervous systems function differently when the wiring is different. That's a long-term goal of ours that's going to require developing some technologies to be able to study these different animals and then make the biological discoveries.

TT: For our incoming students and researchers who are interested in your research, what does a day in your lab look like?

My lab is very multidisciplinary; we really run the gamut from molecular bi-

ology to systems neuroscience to computational neuroscience.

The animals that we examine are commonly animals where we've perturbed genetic pathways or inserted transgenes that allow us to turn neurons on and off remotely, so we do a lot of genetics and molecular biology in the lab. We clone plasmids, make transgenic animals and mutant animals, and do genetic crosses that allow us to ask very specific questions about causality and which features of the brain give rise to which features of neural activity and behavior.

We measure activity across the animal's brain through optical recordings of neural activity, and we make these optical recordings on microscopes that we engineered to move around with the worm so that we can keep imaging its brain while it's freely behaving. There's a lot of computation that's required to extract all of the interesting information from the imaging data and ultimately analyze it. All these brain-wide recordings and behavioral data require a lot of modeling, so we do a lot of computational modeling using statistical approaches as well as machine learning approaches.

It's always amazing to have undergraduate students involved in our research, especially students who are passionate about research and really want to get into the lab and make discoveries. That's going to be what makes it exciting for them, and will also propel them forward through the highs and lows of scientific research to do something interesting in the lab.

We're happy to host students with molecular backgrounds, systems neuroscience interests, and computational machine learning backgrounds. There's many ways to contribute to our research. Curious and motivated to participate in scientific discovery are the main things we look for.

EVENT REVIEW

Jessica Shand G performs Transmutations at the MIT Media Lab

an eclectic mix of flute and electronics

Transmutations

Jessica Shand

Cecilia Lopez on electronics

MIT Media Lab

August 13, 2024

By Vivian Hir
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

On August 13, 2024 on the sixth floor of Building E14, Media Lab master's student Jessica Shand G premiered *Transmutations*, her master's thesis performance that explores the intersection of flute and electronics. The performance featured Cecilia Lopez, an electronics guest artist. Coming from a background in flute instrumentation and mathematics, Shand is interested in using musical technologies that push the boundaries of sounds through methods such as warping and layering.

What made the performance memorable was Shand's creative playing of the flute to generate sounds that aren't associated with the instrument. In orchestral music, the flute is known for playing passages that are on the gentler and graceful side. In *Transmutations*, however, Shand breaks down these assumptions by employing difficult lip techniques that demonstrate the flute's versatility. In one instance, she plays a sudden, piercing outburst that sounds like a bird's high-pitched shriek. In another, she plays a repetitive sound that is uncannily similar to the plucking of a string instrument. In short, Shand's experimental approach towards flute playing helped produce a wide range of onomatopoeias that the audience otherwise would not have considered beforehand.

In the latter half of *Transmutations*, the sounds started to enter a more improvisational and chaotic state. Although there seems to be some call and response between Shand and Lopez, it was challenging to hear the individual sounds come together as one overarching theme. But the inherent entropy may be the point of the performance: the world is made of a collection of sounds, and a lot of them aren't necessarily meant to sound melodious.

After the passage of dissonance, the cacophony came to a sudden end, transitioning from jumbled noises to the single note of A. The monotone was reminiscent of the prologue in the piece that also began with a single note, except in D. Closing the piece by returning to the prologue's minimalistic nature was pleasant because the fermata had a zen-like quality. The tiny bells further contributed to this meditative atmosphere because their bright timbre made the concept of time and cycles feel more tangible amidst the empty

space. *Transmutations* concluded with Shand singing musical intervals, but they are oddly dissonant—two sounds a note apart instead of the traditional major third.

The performance ended with a warm round of applause from the audience; afterwards, Shand had a Q&A session with the audience about the work behind *Transmutations*. The live music performance was based on the selection of three études from Shand's collection of 12 études. As the name *Transmutations* suggests, what connected these 12 études together was the theme of "progressively mutating sounds into something else." Shand chose these three études in order to have each étude convey a different sound from one another: nature, explosions, and meta flute.

The event wrapped up with Shand leaving the audience with some inspiring words about the importance of instrumental music, especially for those who aren't comfortable listening to this genre. She suggested that people should simply think about how these sounds "make them feel and what sorts of thoughts these sounds conjure for them." If there was one main takeaway listeners got from *Transmutations*, it was immersing themselves in the rich soundscapes and letting their minds drift off to another world.

CONCERT REVIEW

The subliminal mindf**k America: Green Day and the pitfalls of anti-establishmentarianism

A commentary on the Saviors Tour, the punk ethos, and selling out. They were right: the Jesus of Suburbia was a lie.

The Saviors Tour

Green Day

Fenway Park

August 7, 2024

By Ellie Montemayor

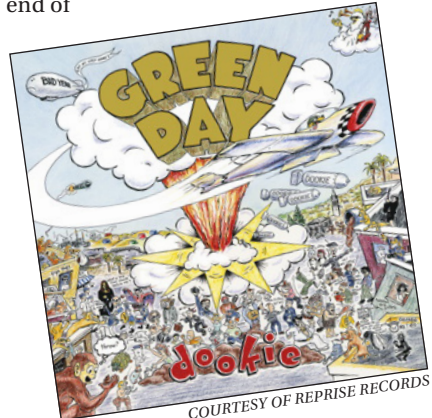
PUBLISHER

"This is not a party... *This is a celebration.*"

Please check your bag with security. Scan your ticket at this scanner. Go through a scanning machine. Your seats are on grandstand 24, row 11, seats 9–10. Form an orderly line as you make your way to your seats. Please wait patiently as the next act comes to the stage.

On Wednesday, August 7, a spirit of delinquent rebellion descended upon Boston as a sea of red and black tore through the streets to converge in Fenway Park. Plaid skirts, studded leather, and cigarette smoke overran the cramped rows of the so-called "Cathedral of Baseball" in attendance for a sermon from the punk scene's biggest preachers: worldwide phenomenon and punk-rock elder statesman Green Day.

The band, a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee and a veteran of the '90s Bay Area punk scene, is currently on a world tour to support the release of their most recent album *Saviors*, which premiered in January earlier this year to general acclaim. Their tour, which celebrates the 20th and 30th anniversaries of albums *American Idiot* (2004) and *Dookie* (1994), began in Spain at the end of



COURTESY OF REPRIS RECORDS

May, with the United States leg ongoing through the end of September.

Boston's concert was opened by newcomer all-female group The Linda Lindas, fellow punk veteran Rancid, and underground alt-rockers The Smashing Pumpkins. The five-hour-long concert began at 5 p.m. with the three opening acts, though Green Day did not make their much-anticipated appearance until nightfall.

Following two interludes, the first with a stadium-wide singalong to Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" and the second with what essentially amounts to a drag performance of the Ramones' "Blitzkrieg Bop" by longtime costumed mascot Punk Bunny, the main act was finally set to perform.

After a hedonistic minute-long musical introduction—via a recorded remix-mashup of iconic rock themes like instrumental leitmotif "The Imperial March" and Queen's "We Will Rock You," played on speaker alongside wild '90s-type graphics that echoed themes from the band's numerous albums—Green Day came to the stage with a piercing metallic riff and opened their act with *Saviors*' lead single "The American Dream Is Killing Me," immediately setting the rapid fire pace that would headline the rest of their two-and-a-half-hour set.

And on cue to

the band's hotly awaited appearance, the entire audience rose in a reverberating wave across the stadium—as if to pledge allegiance to God and country. Instead, fealty was sworn unflinchingly to the anthem of revolution.

"I want to see everybody jumping up and down," frontman Billie Joe Armstrong screamed in the middle of the song and ahead of its iconic guitar solo, as the audience of thousands erupted into an unrelenting frenzy.

The setlist opener would be one of only five songs the band played from *Saviors*, all of which were pulled as singles ahead of the album's release. Three ("Look Ma, No Brains!," "One Eyed Bastard," and "Dilemma") were placed squarely in Act II of the concert between *Dookie* and *American Idiot*, with punchy love song "Bobby Sox" reserved for the encore. (My favorite part of the *Dookie* era-esque song is in the chorus-switching notes between "girlfriend" and "boyfriend" as sung by Armstrong, who identifies as bisexual.)

On a deeply vacuous, cosmetic level (more on that later), the concert was an absolute blast. *Dookie* and *American Idiot* are my two favorite Green Day albums, absolute staples of both herds in the punk scene: one a pissed-off breed of self-centered brooding hoodlums sick of their bland life, and the other an anarchist movement of anti-establishment rebels actually doing something about it.

And the band absolutely delivered. Throughout the setlist's 37 songs—the majority of the concert's runtime was dedicated to playing in full *Dookie* and *American Idiot*, successfully—and the many dizzying visuals that accompanied their frantic playing, I was stood up, flailing around and screaming wildly for the entirety of their set.

The band blasted off song after song with barely a pause. It was an exhilarating experience, one that was manifestly grounded on the synergetic relationship between act and audience. I was blown away by

the sheer energy of the stadium that night, with the band's bewitching personality magnetizing each and every minute of the set. (I particularly recall the impassioned transition between "Brain Stew" from *Insomniac* (1995) and the opening riff of the band's magnum opus "American Idiot," where the crowd—myself included—went absolutely berserk.)

In keeping with Green Day's eclectic musical style and the extensive amounts of copyright infringement already committed on-set even before they went up on stage, Armstrong intros snippets from other rocker spaces to hype up slower-starting songs like "Pulling Teeth" from *Dookie* (introduced by Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline") and "Brain Stew" (introduced by Black Sabbath's "Iron Man").

In the same vein, I also commend the sped-up run of *Warning's* "Minority" (2000) near the beginning of Act II—Armstrong has previously said that he prefers live playings of the song to its original stu-

Idiot's "Holiday" goes, swapping out the original "California" line with the Bay State). Singalongs, motion commands, and ad-libbing were peppered through the set to keep the crowd running alongside the band's heart-racing pace. And Armstrong commented on the crowd's phone use in the middle of his set—"Put the phone away. Let's be here right now!" he says during a rendition of "Longview." But phones at times still littered the crowd, and they were warmly held aloft towards the end of the set, flashlights shining through the thick sea of people, as power ballad "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" (*American Idiot*) was sung.

At one point, Armstrong even brought up an audience member to assist with their playing of *21st Century Breakdown's* "Know Your Enemy" (2009), giving up the reins for part of the song to a fan who effortlessly excited the crowd with an energy much like his own. (The impromptu invitation, which has gone both quite well and quite poorly from venue to venue, was astoundingly well-delivered in the Boston showing—which I was unsurprised by with the person pulled on stage dressed head-to-toe like Armstrong, black-and-red costuming and frazzled rocker hair and all.)

But honestly, as with all the band's attention-grabbing antics, the visual production made half the show: the entire set, as per standard operating procedure from a mainstream rock act, was plastered with a phantasmagoria of flashing lights, budget-slashing practical effects, and epilepsy-inducing color changes.

In both the on-set effects (from the blow-up mushroom cloud ripped from *Dookie's* cover art and the corresponding inflatable bomber plane that made a lap around the field, to the ambient smokescreens and pyrotechnics) and the messy '90s-era hyper-edited visuals blown up on the stadium jumbotrons, my senses were blown thrice-over.

For *American Idiot's* part, a blow-up of the album's iconic grasped hand grenade and accompanying Russian constructivism-influenced war propaganda predicated the punk rock opera's onslaught of political imagery.

When the energy of the day died down and the smoke evaporated away, Armstrong was left alone onstage with an acoustic guitar and one more song left in him. "For what it's worth, it was worth all the while," he sang alongside the crowd, ending the band's show with their staple closer "Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)" from *Nimrod* (1997).

Were this a standard review and were I a standard arts and culture reviewer, the poetic goodbye and the climactic curtain call is where I would leave off. But my interest in Green Day pushes further than what a press ticket and complimentary drinks could buy. (I did not, in fact, get press tickets for this show; I, instead, shelled out \$366 pre-tax for two crap grandstand seats by home plate, somewhere in the ballpark of 400–500 feet away from the stage.)

So first, I put the spotlight on the leading man himself: Billie Joe Armstrong. The 52-year-old who founded Green Day nearly forty years ago has developed a rather eccentric onstage persona for himself over the years, blending his underground punk roots with the personality of

a classic rock act.

Armstrong has appropriated a necessarily Beate-esque persona to fuel his onstage presence, evident in his various mannerisms that at times feel almost airlifted from John Lennon's Fab Four years. (I mean—hell, Green Day literally reinvented themselves to be the Beatles reborn.) Armstrong fundamentally feels like a born-again Beatle with the babyish face of a Paul McCartney pulled from the promo clip of "Hey Jude" (1968) and the soul of a Vietnam War-era John Lennon... and I'm not sure if that's a good thing.

(Other aspects of Armstrong's image are also pulled from Queen frontman Freddie Mercury, whose iconic "Hey-Oh!" riffs and unique onstage charm find their way in Armstrong's concert persona.)

But this enormous personality big enough to fill a stadium, while easy to be mesmerized by, silently kills the "band" out of the band. The invitation was never extended to Armstrong's bandmates, whose limelight presence—both onstage and elsewhere—have always been deeply overshadowed by his headstrong, controlling (and at times McCartney-esque) persona.

The name Billie Joe Armstrong, though rationalizable to an extent as the band's frontman, is synonymous with the name Green Day; and I can barely even recall his bandmates' names. (The band's co-founder Mike Dirnt acts as its bassist and backing vocalist, and longtime member Tré Cool acts as its drummer.) It's evident in the Boston concert when neither bandmate is allowed a single spoken line or piece of banter throughout the show, aside from their drowned-out backing vocals in some songs and Cool's forgettable ditty ("All by Myself") at the end of *Dookie*.

Armstrong is the irreverent symbol of Green Day's cultural revolution. And here's the thing: punk has a long history of iconoclastic morality. I suppose that was just lost in translation for Green Day fans when the group went mainstream.

Case in point: *American Idiot's* "St. Jimmy," quite possibly the most autoerotic three minutes in the entire setlist. The song itself is emblematic of classic punk themes of drugs, crime, and sex and musically harkens back to old-school Green Day, but what makes its appearance in the concert so peculiar is how self-important it feels. Bits of the operatic story in *American Idiot* already seep into various parts of the concert's second act, but this song is where Armstrong's personal relationship with the album manifests true to form.

The song's live rendition is cued in with Armstrong holding aloft a mock-up of the heart-shaped hand grenade in a startling recreation of the album cover—all while the hand grenade blow-up remains set behind the band. Red streamers exploding in the air, gratuitous amounts of pyrotechnics, and exalting fans chanting along to the manic defecation of the self-described "patron saint of the denial" rock an increasingly frenzied atmosphere. And in a jolting end to what essentially amounts to a three-minute episode of bipolar psychosis, Armstrong lifts his arms halfway to the sky, amidst a sea of cheers and praise, as the white lights dim to leave only him illuminated in a smoky haze. (Thematically, and given the album's and the song's over punk-prophetic themes, I am more than passingly reminded of Christ the Redeemer.)

(Armstrong, by the way, literally plays the character St. Jimmy—a psychic manifestation of a psychotic drug-dealing crusty punk—in the rock musical adaptation of *American Idiot* for 76 of its 422 performances. In the album's narrative, Jimmy acts

And well outside of the concert, there's something deeply uncomfortable about the band's unexpected Keurig collaboration on an *American Idiot*-themed coffee brewer kit that's touted by the mainstream media as "the

and additionally declares the night as "about love and joy and hope," but the overt messaging I had come to expect from the band felt absent and lackluster.

There have been moments where Armstrong has generated



ELLIE MONTEMAYOR / THE TECH

Green Day held a concert on Fenway Park that attracted thousands, Wednesday, Aug. 7.

as the wayward split persona of the disaffected protagonist Jesus of Suburbia and guides him to a self-destructive life of deviant hedonism; Jimmy's

most punk rock thing [they've] ever seen" (which was randomly announced early this month in the midst of the Saviors Tour's North American leg). The product went live on the company's digital storefront on August 20 for a cool \$160, only the most recent drop against years of random corporate collaborations. And I just have to ask: why?

In the midst of all this, I paid over \$400 to see Green Day in concert, including a \$45 *American Idiot* t-shirt I just had to get—all-in-all, that's in the ballpark of three limited edition *American Idiot*-themed Keurig brewer kits!—which essentially means that I coughed up a week's worth of full-time minimum

wage to the corporate regime to scream my heart out against the corporate regime. The mark of corporate greed is splattered all over Fenway Park as we make our half-hearted attempts to reclaim the storied establishment, all to put the establishment on blast.

Idolism, essentially, is the name of the game. I hark back to "Know Your Enemy," where a teenage rocker-to-be giddily crushed it onstage while in a very thorough cosplay of Armstrong. I can only assume that more fans riding the rail and in varying degrees of costuming collectively balked at their missed opportunity for brief stardom. (Although I'm not hoping to sour what was a greatly liberating event for many in attendance, I was at times perturbed by the avid waves of subscription to this one group and their one message—and I will suitably appropriate the following phrase from *American Idiot's* "Holiday" here: "Hear the dogs howlin' out of key / To a hymn called 'Faith and Misery'"—from people who are supposed to espouse against idolatry and influence.)

Part of me also finds fault with the very idea of a sold-out, big-ticket concert in the punk scene. A necessarily underground, incendiary, anti-establishment cultural movement that is drawn out from the forgotten nooks and crannies of the big city like moths to a flame—Fenway Park's 40,000-seater stadium, VIP package options, and Ticketmaster surge pricing is just not what we are supposed to stand for. There is a level of validation in seeing thousands like me all pledging fealty to the anthem of revolution, I will acknowledge, but I still can't help but feel affronted by the idea of fealty itself.



COURTESY OF REPRIS RECORDS

("Everyone's so full of sh*t," Armstrong sings in Part III of *American Idiot's* "Jesus of Suburbia." I'll have to agree, B.J.) "The American Dream Is Killing Me," since its debut as a single just under a year ago, quickly took on as one of Green Day's most iconic and anthemic protest songs alongside "Know Your Enemy," "Minority," and pretty much the entirety of *American Idiot*. Here is where I was almost immediately enthralled by the fantasies of political dissent, and here is where I was summarily disappointed.

"I'm so sick—we are sick of the propaganda and the lies and the algorithms that we have to witness every single day," Armstrong evangelizes in a spoken interlude in the middle of "Letterbomb" from *American Idiot*. "Because tonight... Tonight is the truth!"

But what is that "truth" exactly? I'm not sure. Armstrong makes brief mention of the concert's opening acts as "the truth!"

controversy onstage in the past for his human rights sentiments as well as anti-conservative and anti-Trump messaging alongside the band's anarchist-leaning protest songs—and Armstrong to his credit does follow suit for the Boston set with a switch-up of "American Idiot's" "redneck agenda" line with "I'm not part of a MAGA [Make America Great Again] agenda," which has been a frequent lyrical variation of the song since 2019.

Another major line frequently switched up from venue to venue hails from a verse in Part III of the nine-minute *American Idiot* musical suite "Jesus of Suburbia"; the original line reads, "We are the kids of war and peace / From Anaheim to the Middle East." (The line is meant to link groups of disillusioned youths from vastly different experiences—for example, residents of Anaheim, California, home of the Disneyland Resort, and the war-torn Peninsula—who all inevitably turn to the same themes of political dissidence.) I was quite disappointed to hear the line sung in the Boston concert only as, "From Boston to the Middle East."

(Also hand-inspected live renditions of the line via fan recordings of around two dozen concerts from October 2023 through the middle of this month, finding several variations that highlight diverse political themes—which I quizzically noted were all absent coverage or mention by every mainstream media outlet that reviewed each cor-



COURTESY OF REPRIS RECORDS

responding concert. A mid-October 2023 show in Vegas sees Armstrong singing "From Vegas to Palestine," followed up with two pre-Saviors Tour April 2024 concerts as "From Gaza to the USA" (San Francisco and Los Angeles) and two June tour sets in France sung "From UK to Gaza" and "From Gaza and the Middle East," in clear references to the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

An early August set in Montreal also has him sing the line as "From Israel to the Middle East."

Other venue variations may be references to their host areas, such as "From España..." for the June 1 concert at Caja Mágica, "From Dublin..." for the June 27 concert at Marlay Park, and "From New York..." for the August 5 concert at Citi Field. But the most frequent variation that I was able to pick up on relates to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with around a third run as "From Ukraine to the Middle East.")

Lyrical variations in Green Day's already abrasive punk ethos anthems only point to the next target of the band's scathing political indictments. So why bury the lede and let it remain unnoticed? Isn't the point of a political message to broadcast it to the world, to call out the groveling lunacy of "Idiot America"? For a passing moment, as I dug through recordings of recent concerts to track down the various renditions of "Jesus of Suburbia," I felt somewhat more receptive to Green Day's particular brand of political dissidence—yet I doggedly remain irritated at their refusal to turn to more direct and visible means of pushing their interpretation of punk anti-establishmentarianism.

Green Day had sweet-talked me into an image of them as the working class heroes of a new anarchist generation—but as someone whose politics runs quite leftist, much of the meta-messaging in the concert fell quite flat. Yes, *American Idiot* and the band's early 21st century "leftism" may have made waves among the masses of 2004, but today, it's par for the course. Yet mainstream

reviews and appraisals continue to rave about protest and politics. (And I know this quite well: I analyzed countless articles, news snippets, and memoir-biography entries on the concert, the band, and their history while preparing my own critique on the matter.)

By and large, I am disappointed in the lack of present-day political messaging and theming to current events infused in the concert. The set, in all its sell-out glory, feels today like a dolled-up memorandum of vague and unspecified demurring from the status quo in an artificial attempt to reach the most diluted branches of the punk scene.

The world of today is in a turning point; we're in the midst of a real revolution. What purpose do Green Day and their money-making machine have to people who need a real rallying cry?

Don't get me wrong: I loved the concert. I love Green Day. I love their music, and I love what they stand for—I want to espouse nothing but adoration for the band that brought me into this brave new world of wrathful anti-establishmentarianism. But as I write the final words of this commentary, I'm confronted with the conflicting morals of the punk underground and the corporate machine that Green Day has long since attached itself to. And it feels laughable attempting to reconcile the band's working-class roots and their current multi-millionaire status.

I'm glad to have "met" my idol, in a very loose sense of the word. But maybe I'm my own person, and I don't need to be a black-shirt, red-tie, bleached-blonde caricature of him. Maybe I can be part of this movement in my own way.

"It's something unpredictable / But in the end, is right / I hope you had the time of your life."

AN ELLIE FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

Radio Silence

There’s a certain *je ne sais quoi* to feeling so deeply nothing at all that’s difficult to put into words.

By Ellie Montemayor
PUBLISHER
Content Warning: This piece contains mentions of substance use and explicit descriptions of mental illness.

In the midst of the chaos and the theatrics that predicate my daily goings-on, some of the most truly terrifying moments in my life are when I come across dead silence—simply purposeless, meaningless nothingness.

12:02 p.m. *Tick.* 12:03 p.m. *Tick.* 12:06 p.m. *Tick.* 12:10 p.m. *Tick.*
It’s a pretty bustling day on campus. Groups of people flock in and out of the Student Center as I sit at a table staring at my screen.

I’m listening to some old-school punk. I have a Green Day shirt on and a maroon-red flannel tied around my waist; camo pants, black-and-orange boots, and my newsboy cap. I’ve just come back from a meeting for a story I’ve been working on for a month and a half at this point, and this past week has been an incredibly packed and unrelenting sprint.

By all accounts, the energy should be coursing through my veins right now—the energy that would normally propel me into that enigmatic, frenzied being capable of anything. But I can’t summon it. It’s not there.

Tick.
Pulse check. It’s not quite depression: I’m not getting the pangs of self-harm nor the spiraling feeling of worthlessness I normally have. It’s not quite overwhelming fear; I’m not shaking with anxiety and dread. And it’s not quite self-loathing; I’m not scrutinizing every single thing I’ve ever done ad nauseam.

I call it the dead zone.
Tick.
This state of being truly, truly terrifies me. And a lot of things about myself scare me. But what’s so disturbing about this is how it’s not “terrifying” at all—I can’t even muster the “fear” I need to fight-flight-freeze myself out of this spell.

Tick.
Instead, I feel like an elephant tied to a fence. *Siri, define “learned helplessness.”* My current condition doesn’t strike me as worth fighting back against. My brain doesn’t register this as a hostile condition. My body doesn’t know how to combat this unseen combatant. How does one identify that which does not exist?

As I sit blankly, struggling to diagnose this terrible condition, I find that I can’t lock on a concrete sight of what it actually is. Its existence sits right at the edge of my periphery.

And I don’t even know how to write about it. The words escape me; the feelings, the thoughts, the liveliness all escape me. There’s a certain *je ne sais quoi* to feeling so deeply nothing at all that’s difficult to put into words.

And so I just go about my day, with a thousand-yard stare as I’m entirely sapped of feeling and motivation. Ask me how my day has been, and I’ll answer; it just won’t be a real answer. Talk to me about your problems, and I’ll empathize with your situation (but I won’t—can’t—really). Bring me to an event, and I’ll say I enjoyed it—all the while being unreserv-

edly, unfathomably unfeeling.
I’d put on a false smile and pretend to care about the world around me. Walking by the people I’m supposed to care about while not being really there, sometimes I feel (as if I’m supposed to feel) guilty for the deceit. It’s disgraceful, having to lie to the people close to me, but what else am I supposed to say—“oh, sorry, I just can’t bring myself to care”?

The “tells” that people say you have when you play pretend in this way? They don’t really exist. Not when you play it well, at least. I’m talking to somebody, and they say something to me, and it doesn’t register. But somehow, I know just what to do; I know what they want me to say, where they want me to go, how they want me to react. No real feeling, but I play pretend. A fake smile or a compensatory frown or a nod of recognition. But behind the mask, nothing. It’s easier that way.

At this stage, I’m a robot that can pass the Turing test with flying colors.

The way I act is a complete and utter performance, all while my psyche is trapped in a sea of unending darkness. Trying to figure my way through the dead silence, is shining a flashlight into a black hole. Nothing. Just nothing.

And I go to bed that day uncaring. There are no memories to unpack from the day; I didn’t make any. I just go to bed, close my eyes, and find myself back in that sea of darkness. No light, no sound, no me. Just floating, drifting along.

Underneath me, endless depths of water. Maybe unfathomable creatures that have never revealed themselves inhabit this subconscious space miles and miles below, but I would never know.

Above me, the night sky. No stars, just darkness. Nothing to let me know where I came from or where I’m going.

Surrounding me is more and more of the cold and uncaring void to no end. I could scream and yell and plead for help all I want, but I will never get a response. All I will be met with is radio silence.
Fast-forward, 48 hours later. Mother Mother concert shirt, maroon-red flannel, black lined cargo pants. About a thousand different things to finish by the end of the day, including this damned article.

I still can’t summon the energy. It’s not there. Sometimes I wonder if it ever really was there. I know deep inside it’s been here before, but the silence is drowning it out from bringing me back from the dead.

How do I even begin to try pushing back against this... *thing* that takes hold of me with such random and indiscriminate malice?

What do I even do, sleep it off? How does submitting to the cold, dark void and drowning in it breathe any semblance of life back into me? I could do a little dance and sing a little jig, if that helps ease the hold it has on me. Something tells me it won’t.

But let’s try something: I introduce to the reader my foolproof three-step process to un-F**king my (and your!) brain.

Step One: Identify to the minutest detail the source of your problems. For me, when I’m bogged down by the silence, it helps to understand the what and the why and the how. I think one of the biggest knots that keeps

me trapped in the dead zone is not understanding. It may take a while, but eventually, the knot will unravel and—

Step Two: Okay, it’s been two hours and I’m still trapped in a cycle of intrusive rationalization and I—

Step Three: ...
Give it another four days and a bottle of Malibu.

And still, no dice. God, how I would kill to hear any of my worst demons made manifest right now. When I actually want them, when I actually need them, they’re nowhere to be found. (See: Voices, Voices, another column from “An Ellie For Your Thoughts.”)

My phone buzzes with notifications from friends and workmates, but I can’t be bothered to respond. I tap my foot mindlessly to the tune of my music, without feeling. I talk to my housemates, blankly, algorithmically. I have the perfect script for every occasion.

I’m scrolling back and forth up and down my word editor as this column remains unfinished, staring at unfinished sentences and random two-word phrases and meaningless word vomit.

And I’m trying, I’m really trying, but I don’t know how to write the conclusion to a story that doesn’t F**king exist—

And then it hits me.
If the story doesn’t “exist,” then why don’t I just make all of this up? *I* control the story, not the other way around.

Why should I give that *je ne sais quoi* that haunts my waking hours peace of mind by just rolling over and taking it?

I start to realize that part of my issue is not allowing myself to make mistakes in my process of recovery. Eureka or bust, I’d tell myself, and it almost always ends in bust. But there’s no script, no rules I have to adhere to. My story, not anyone else’s.

I always feel like the knight in shining armor to break me out of this spell needs to be perfect, that I need to *feel* “perfect” when I’m pulled out of the void, that I need to escape it entirely unharmed. But... why? What’s so wrong with inelegance?

Honestly, perfect is passé.
(One example: that metaphor, “rolling over and taking it”? I wrote it out and realized—huh, what a deeply uncomfortable metaphor that is. And yet, I laugh.)

Sure, not all is right with the world, but at least I’m reminded that the world exists in the first place. And that in itself is enough to pull me out of the dead zone.

So once more, with feeling. I introduce to the reader my bigger and better fool-proof three-step process to un-F**king my (and your!) brain.

Step One: Channel that emptiness. Yes, *channel* it. Don’t try to “understand” it because you can’t—just accept it, let it be part of you. (A first note for the reader: what I find often pulls me into the dead zone is the intrusive need to rationalize my condition *ad nauseam*. Oftentimes, it helps to just shut that part of my brain off and accept when things just can’t be fully explained.)

Step Two: When an opportunity for strong emotion or social connection comes your way, pounce on it. Find

a way to break the spell and fill the void, regardless of what it may represent. This may come in the form of calling a friend, going out for a run, or reminiscing on memories long past. Whether good or bad, the point is to trigger an emotion and latch onto it. (A second note for the reader: what keeps me trapped in the dead zone is the shunning of less perfect options in search of the one feeling that brings me from “zero” to “perfect.” It’s a multi-step process; the hiccups are part of the journey.)

Step Three: Let go of control and perfection. You can’t get out of the dead zone by forcing your escape; let it come naturally, and fluidly, and authentically. Sometimes—oftentimes—you may not have the most “graceful” reaction, per se. Let yourself be disgusted at something and laugh about it; let yourself cry at a romantic scene in a rom-com; let yourself be flustered and angry and disturbed and anything else that may come. Let the feelings flow freely without interruption. (A final note to the reader: what makes this step most effective is to connect, really connect, with your humanity. It’s in there somewhere.)

So, I complain to my housemates about school and work and everything in between. I ask my friends about their days and prod more into the many things they’ve been up to. (Let’s talk about those Netflix shows we’ve never gotten around to watching and recommend each other more shows we’ll never watch!) And I wonder to myself why artificial strawberry flavors taste more like “pink” than “strawberry.”

And magically, it works.
Not all at once. But slowly. The life comes back to me, and the clouds part to give way to sunlight. It’s not quick nor painless, but it works. And sometimes the radio silence is filled with throbs of heartache, or it is filled with pangs of fear, or it is filled with pricks of exasperation. But once it’s filled, then the real work can actually start. And once it’s filled, I feel even just a little bit of energy start to flow through me once again. It’s baby steps, going from dead silence to even just radio static; the fixes and the repairs I need to get myself back to normal can go from there.

And I realize that sometimes the story behind it all doesn’t matter one bit. Sometimes it doesn’t matter “why” I’m feeling cold and empty inside, especially when there is no “why” to even behold. What I should start caring about, then, is what I’m going to do about it.

Sadness, frustration, grief: all normal parts of life. They help one identify what needs to change, what needs to grow. But “hollowness,” that *je ne sais quoi* of directionlessness and—not even despair or depression, but—the engulfing sense of senselessness don’t make sense at all.

The silence will still, at times, fill my mind and my heart and try to bind me down with all its will. I know it.

Tick ... Tick ... Tick.
But maybe the next time I tune into the radio and get nothing, maybe I’ll be able to fill that void all by myself.

ANONYMOUS PERSON

(A Bit Of) Attention Is All You Need (To Give)

The author talks about his experiences confiding—both the good and weird.

Signed Anonymously
cw: disease/death

Well, here we go. In 2023, I was diagnosed with cancer. I’m good for now (yay!)

Today, we’re talking about my immediate first reactions. Did I have some grand epiphany? Nope. Embarrassingly, my first priority was figuring out who to tell and how to tell them. See, I tend to over-analyze social relationships. I worried about what could happen if I told X, and it leaked to Y, and spread throughout the whole network. Would people feel bad if I didn’t tell them directly? How would I manage all that? I had no idea.

Fast-forward to 2024—a wild time for multiple other reasons, including, but not limited to, a cancer radiology appointment. I was off campus for a while, so I had plenty of alone time to formulate a cancer-update-sharing strategy.

So, I did what seemed natural at the time: made an exact list of whom to tell. Even now, if I scroll too far back on my Notes app, I’ll rediscover this artifact of paranoia gathering dust, complete with checkmarks and Xs.

Phase 1: The Warm-Up

All this thinking coalesced into a pretty clear game plan: first, I’d just text group chats of non-MIT people. Easy, right? All I need to do is just:

Draft a text
Panic
Edit said text
Copy paste it into group chat
Press send
Panic again
Silence the group chat for next 3-4 hours

Needless to say, this phase of the plan went OK, especially since Step 7) ensured that I didn’t get overwhelmed. Phase 1 was a success.

Phase 2: The Practice Run

Next: texting (a subset of) MIT friends individually, who I’d see on campus in spring. This was kind of scary, but it went as well as it could’ve. Honestly, I think I’m lucky to have friends who are active listeners.

They were conscientious, but not insincerely positive in their responses. They expressed concern while also asking the scary questions about medical leave and S^3 appointments and a bunch of other things. It was refreshing to be engaged with on a peer level, intellectually and emotionally.

Notably, some of these friends hadn’t necessarily gone through something like this—which speaks highly of their empath skills. I also attribute the success of Phase 2 to the good ol’ practice of writing stuff down: simply put, when people

text, they’re forced to think more critically about what they say.

Phase 3: The Real Thing

Fast forward again to February, and I’m on campus. This is the hard part: telling people in person. There’s no “send” button here to force people to think twice, no barrier protecting me from the “ums” and confused stares. This is the real thing.

I remember the first 2 friends I told. We went to a dorm stairwell—arguably a very unprivate place, I know—and told them. Me being me, I talked in circles around the entire cancer situation and explained it horribly. My explanation was so bad and awkward, it was hilarious. After I explained everything, giggles and roasts echoed through the entire stairwell. After this incident, I learned to be a lot more direct.

The next few interactions were definitely more awkward, but not awkward-funny, like the whole stairwell incident. Just awkward-awkward. It was unfortunate because I tried setting myself up for success. For example, I waited when the time was right—I didn’t blurt it out randomly at a party, for example. I was conscious of who was around. I was aware of the state of mind that everyone was in. I thought I did everything right.

For example, one time in early February, a friend and I were out by the Stud late at midnight and they asked how I was. I thought the circumstances aligned, so I was honest. I got “hmm” and “oh no!” and the typical friendly wishes. It felt good. Not great, but good. I know I’m bad at immediately processing big pieces of news, so I can’t blame other people for short, generic responses. I told a few more people, with similar reactions.

The thing is, I thought things would get better afterward. Maybe when we bumped into each other in person, they’d ask how I’m handling things. Or just a quick DM at some point. But, no, a lot of the time, it didn’t happen.

I’m not sure what I expected. I don’t blame people for forgetting—my life is just mine, not theirs—but I was kind of confused. I tried to forget about it, about this bubble around me that seemed to keep friends an arms-length away. Was it my fault?

Suddenly, in late March, an MIT alum (who I was vaguely in contact with) messaged me out of the blue:

“...! i’ve been meaning to message you but i saw ___ about remission. how are you doing? i’m so sorry to hear but also glad that you’re holding up and doing better. i’m also super sorry if this is intrusive and you don’t want to talk about it! but

always here for u hehe”

After seeing this, my gears started turning. After weeks of ignoring this weird bubble around me, I couldn’t anymore. Obviously the bubble had to exist...it’s just that some people (like the alum above) weren’t afraid to pop it! With each pop, I tasted the fresh air of unexpected kindness and sympathy.

To this end, I realized that there were people I had lived with, asked for help from, vented to, pranked, and so on that not only:

1) cared about me, even if we didn’t talk that often, but

2) weren’t afraid to reach out (and break the bubble).

Now I understood why some people reached out while others didn’t. Simply put: different people just weighed the pros and cons differently. To some people, popping my bubble and connecting wasn’t worth the risk of, well, popping my bubble. And while I wish that wasn’t their thought process, I don’t blame them for it.

This was kind of an obvious thing to realize...but I’m glad I finally did. To be clear, my community here at MIT has fostered many, many more wholesome moments that crossed the bubble barrier. Here’s a few:

1) Person 1, who thought I was talking about zodiac sign cancer, and not the disease. Notably, I’m an Aquarius. This was extremely fun, even though everyone else witnessing this interaction was simply in a state of shock. Dark humor always wins for me.

2) Person 2, who noticed a cancer-themed shirt I randomly wore once. I told him about the list I made, and he hugged me after he learned he was on it.

3) Person 3, who walked along with me randomly across Stata and got it into my head to stop caring so much about how people would react. Also, they sent a really cool card!

Each of the above interactions reinforced one main thing for me: the importance of reaching out to friends who received big, bad news. Obviously, there are exceptions. But I think a safe default mindset is to reach out, through the bubble, just once. Maybe you’ll feel bad being left to read. But that means your message was well, read, processed, and hopefully appreciated. Worst case, forgotten about.

On another note, I never did get through my list of people to tell, even in Phase 3. Some important people were left out, and I doubt they know, even now. That’s OK, since there are still a decent number of people in my support network—both the ones described above, and some others. Bit by bit, my bubble is finally breaking.

Now, onto Phase 4: Just Living Life.

ADVICE

The Matter Family is Back!

Auntie Matter is still on break—but her family will pick up the slack.

For those of you who are wondering where Auntie Matter went, she’s doing great. She graduated in 2019, dabbled a bit in 2023, but has been disappointed that none of you ever volunteered to pick up where she left off... Anyways, after scrolling through last semester’s MIT Confessions, she started to get worried.

So, she invited us, her family, to give advice on her behalf. After she showed me some of your guys’ confessions...some of y’all really need some advice. Not in an insulting way, though! We’ll never replace Auntie, but we’re here to lend a listening ear.

Here are our biographies—we’re all very different, you see. Fill out our form online and choose which one of us you want to give you advice. Because one perspective is never enough!

Gray Matter

Hello, my name is Gray Matter (he/him). In relational terms, I suppose I am legally married to Auntie, which would make me your uncle. I don’t particularly have many likes or dislikes; I think just about anything can be advocated for if you try hard enough. However, I am a fan of mahjong, golfing, and kongiang (soy-braised soybeans).

I’ll keep this brief. I was invited here after being told that the people need to hear a practical perspective, whatever subtle dig that may be implying to you all. I will, however, be brutally honest and address all confessions with the same degree of scrutiny, so please be forewarned. Especially since I’ve noticed that people have a tendency to over-dramatize situations, painting depictions as starkly black or white. Also, as cliché as it may sound, I have a knack for finding middle ground.

I look forward to hearing what you all have to say.

No Matter

Hello, I’m No. As in, No Matter. No one seems to know who I’m related to. I’m a hardcore devil’s advocate, so expect poignant advice with sprinkles of goofiness that push you to do things “for the plot.” I’m honestly bitter, yet not vengeful. What else do you want me to say? I don’t like saying a lot because it dilutes the impact of my words.

Doesn’t Matter

I’m Doe, also known as Doesn’t Matter—despite my name, I actually care a lot about your problems.

Everything Matter

greetings! i am everything— wow i never realized my self-intro sounded so narcissistic. anyway, i’m auntie’s niece! my specialty lies in telling you exactly what you want to hear!

is it a good idea to stay up binge-watching the new season when you have a midterm at 9:05 am? (we love MIT time!) i say yes.

is it a good idea to text that person who has ignored all your previous initiatives, called you annoying, and stomped on the birthday card you spent 5 hours writing for them? i say for sure, definitely.

and hypothetically, if you’re wondering if it’s a good idea to try the mystery concoction labeled soup in maseeh dining right before your quant interview, i say... let’s not go that far.

but no concern is too crazy for me. bring them all! i’ll give you the empowering, maybe-not-so-practical-or-good-for-your-sanity, but satisfying advice to scratch that itchy “i need to be enabled” ear of yours! i look forward to hearing from you all!

The Matter Hatter

Call me the Matter Hatter
I’m ready to unpack your chatter
In hopes that a rhyme
Will help you realize—with time
Which things—to you—really matter
Borrowed the Mad Hatter’s name
Although it’s not quite the same
Mine’s a smooth epithet
Rolls off tongues, I bet
In comparison, Carroll’s seems quite lame
If you’re curious, I’m Auntie’s son
My age tends to confuse everyone
“You’re so young!” they say,
“Your advice works? No way!”
But—hey—they always clap when I’m done

DID YOUR MIT ESSAYS GET YOU IN?

The Tech is collecting successful application essays (**hint:** yours!).
Email your pieces to cl@tech.mit.edu!

Are you a font friend? Do you like making presentations SHINE?

We’re looking for people to help us design infographics to highlight writers’ content!

The Production Department of The Tech might be just the place for you!

GUEST COLUMN

Linguistics for liberation or for domination?

The battle at MIT over a linguistics course on Haiti, Palestine, Israel and the war on Gaza

Preamble

This essay is part of a complex and multilayered personal story unveiling rising fascism in higher education. My working title for the book-length version of this essay is “MIT Linguistics Notebooks,” to echo Antonio Gramsci’s “Prison Notebooks.” Here I demystify some of the marginalization of voices criticizing Israel’s propaganda about the war on Gaza. My story is a microcosm of a deeply entrenched power struggle in higher education which conspires to undermine the foundations of academic freedom and freedom of expression—all for the sake of shoring up geopolitical complicity in hegemony against those whom Frantz Fanon called “the wretched of the earth.” Here I unveil political repression in the august linguistics department that Institute Professor Emeritus Noam Chomsky helped bring to fame. So this piece, rooted in my personal experience as a Haitian-born linguist/activist facing political repression from Academia shows the illusion of morality among those who proclaim to uphold scholarly integrity and intellectual diversity.

By Michel DeGraff

The MIT Linguistics department is widely regarded as one of the premiere Linguistics departments in the world, setting the highest standards for the pursuit of linguistic knowledge for over 50 years. It is, however, the saddest irony that some MIT linguists claim they do not understand what it means for language to be used as a weapon. Myriad examples abound which demonstrate such linguistic realities, but a very early one comes at the onset of Spain’s conquest of the Americas, as Spanish linguist Antonio de Nebrija offered his grammar of Spanish as “consort of empire” to Queen Isabella in 1492.

In 2024 at MIT there’s a campaign unfurling which similarly supports empire-building, a campaign which is disguised as concerns about “curricular fit,” “integrity,” “expertise,” and “intellectual and professional standards.” Such censorship is all the more troubling amid widespread support among US political and intellectual leadership for Israel’s genocide of Palestinians. Such censorship is more than coincidental as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — an MIT graduate — received a standing ovation from Congress on July 24th upon claiming that “Israel got the civilians out of harm’s way” during its bombing of Rafah, a city in Gaza.

As a senior tenured full professor of linguistics at MIT with decades of research and teaching on the politics of language and linguistics and on the role of language in society, I experienced this censorship upon proposing a seemingly innocuous elective “Special Topics” seminar. This course proposal, in the context of the war on Gaza, has exposed deep divisions between myself and nearly all my MIT Linguistics colleagues, raising fundamental questions about academic freedom, political dissent, intellectual and racial discrimination, and about the role of linguistics to help understand how language shapes our society and our understanding of the world.

The course title is: “Language and linguistics for decolonization and liberation and for peace and community building from the river to the sea in Palestine and Israel to the mountaintops in Haiti and beyond.”

OPINION POLICY

Editorials are the official opinion of THE TECH. They are written by the Editorial Board, which consists of Publishers Jyotsna Nair and Ellie Montemayor, Editor-in-Chief Alex Tang, Managing Editor Kate Lu, Executive Editor Vivian Hir, and Opinion Editor Srinidhi Narayanan.

Dissents are the signed opinions of editorial board members choosing to publish their disagreement with the editorial.

Letters to the editor, columns, and editorial cartoons are written by individuals and represent the opinion of the author, not necessarily that of the newspaper. Electronic submissions are encouraged and should be sent to letters@tech.mit.edu. Hard copy submissions should be addressed to THE TECH, P.O. Box 391329, Cambridge, Mass. 02139-7029, or sent by interdepartmental mail to Room W20-483. All submissions are due by noon four (4) calendar days before the date of publication.

Letters, columns, and cartoons must bear the authors’ signatures, addresses, and phone numbers. Unsigned letters will not be accepted. THE TECH reserves the right to edit or condense letters; shorter letters will be given higher priority. Once submitted, all letters

The Course Proposal

On December 5th, 2023, I submitted a brief preliminary description (as is customary) for a Fall 2024 elective “Special Topics” seminar. The proposed course falls squarely in my main area of research, examining:

“... issues in and related to the book that I’m working on during my sabbatical to be published by MIT Press. It’s a book on the use of language and linguistics in (de) colonization and liberation struggles and strategies. ...”

More specifically, the course aims to explore the profound impact of language on political discourse and power dynamics, particularly in regions such as Haiti, Palestine and Israel — whose histories are marked by protracted conflict and injustices where language plays a key role in perpetuating said conflicts and injustices. “Explore” is an operative term here because this is the very raison d’être of MIT Linguistics’ “Special Topics” courses which, like “special subjects” in other departments, are meant to “cover topics not offered in the regular curriculum.”

Drawing on my extensive research on the politics of language and linguistics in society — and in the context of teaching previous courses such as Black Matters, Creole Languages and Caribbean Identities and Linguistics and Social Justice — I envisioned a seminar critically examining how language has been weaponized for oppression and, conversely, how it can be harnessed for decolonization, liberation, peace and community-building. The course is designed to equip students, staff and faculty with linguistic tools to critically analyze how colonial and neo-colonial power is embedded in and aided by language. I received a grant from MIT’s Mind-Hand-Heart initiative to host a superb cast of scholars in a speaker series to be embedded in the seminar, and to equip the entire MIT community with a view of linguistic inquiry as a means for positive social change, and to provide a forum for safe and open-hearted discussions toward community building.

However, this course proposal immediately encountered doublespeak and, eventually, rejection. As we’ll see below, the doublespeak from the unprecedented ad hoc committee that reviewed the course is reminiscent of George Orwell’s novel 1984 for “the defence of the indefensible” ... “where there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims,” as in the label “Ministry of Truth” for the government agency responsible for propaganda. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman’s book Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media is a close study of doublespeak such as “humanitarian interventions” for brutal US occupations and “collateral damage” for the killing of civilians in war.

TO REACH US

The TECH’s telephone number is (617) 253-1541. Email is the easiest way to reach any member of our staff. If you are unsure whom to contact, send mail to tt-general@mit.edu, and it will be directed to the appropriate person. You can reach the Executive Committee by emailing tt-exec@mit.edu, and the Opinion Editor through tt-opinion-editors@mit.edu. Please send press releases, requests for coverage, and information about errors that call for correction to tt-news-editors@mit.edu. Letters to the editor should be sent to tt-opinion-editors@mit.edu. THE TECH can be found on the World Wide Web at http://thetech.com.

niscient of George Orwell’s novel 1984 for “the defence of the indefensible” ... “where there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims,” as in the label “Ministry of Truth” for the government agency responsible for propaganda. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman’s book Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media is a close study of doublespeak such as “humanitarian interventions” for brutal US occupations and “collateral damage” for the killing of civilians in war.

As far as I know, never before had any proposal for a Special Topics course been rejected by MIT Linguistics. In my 28-year history at MIT, such proposals are typically approved in a couple of days, with very few (if any) questions asked. My colleague Prof. Michael Kenstowicz has recently confirmed via email dated July 31, 2024, that he

“... voted to allow the course to be so scheduled (as per our usual procedure) when this matter was first discussed at a faculty meeting last winter. I continue to believe that it should be so offered—for many of the reasons you have mentioned in your messages over the past nine months.”

In our department’s “usual procedure,” which I’ve participated in for decades now, there’s never been a course proposal voted down, and there’s never been the sort of ad hoc review process that my course proposal was subject to, for any reason whatsoever.

The pushback started soon after December 5th, the date when I submitted the course proposal. December 5th is also the date when Rep. Elise Stefanik in the US Congress hearing on antisemitism on US campuses caricatured the core linguistic notion of “meaning” by categorically defining “Intifada” as a “call [...] to commit genocide against the Jewish people in Israel and globally”—tendentially distorting the actual history and semantics of this Arabic word for “shaking off,” “uprising,” “resistance” in Arabic. This was one among many examples of Orwellian weaponization of language that can be cited as motivation for my course proposal. A few weeks after my proposal, an unprecedented ad hoc review was launched, after my department head had strenuously objected to key terms in the course title. The ensuing debate, which has now played out over seven months of email exchanges and public statements in the periodicals Le Monde Diplomatique and The Tech (both by myself and my colleagues), has exposed a clash of perspectives on the role of linguistics, the boundaries of academic freedom, and “the responsibility of intellectuals” (à la Chomsky) to engage with pressing social issues.

This essay will delve into the complexities of this debate, demystifying Orwellian linguistic distortions in my colleagues’ key arguments against my course proposal, and the power dynamics at play there. In doing so, I will also unveil the various layers of intellectual and racial discrimination in my colleagues’ responses, ranging from not-so-subtle microaggressions to vile racist jokes.

The Politics of Language and the Language of Politics at MIT Linguistics

The heated debate about my course proposal began on a December 8 Zoom meeting with my department head, three days after I submitted the preliminary description of my “Special Topics” course. The proposal I submitted contained key terms familiar from my previous teaching and research over decades exploring “the use of language and linguistics in (de)colonization and liberation struggles and strategies.” For this particular course, the key terms also include “settler-colonial Zionism,” “genocide,” and “antisemitism.” During our Zoom, my department head disagreed so vehemently with my use of these terms that at some point he started shouting profanities in the earshot of my 6-year-old daughter who was with me at home. (He eventually apologized to me and my daughter, toward the end of the meeting.) Note that linguists’ investigation of these terms — particularly public and private disagreements around their meaning and usage — are all germane to the course’s objectives.

My department head appealed to his positionality as an Israeli Jew to counter my views, making it crystal clear that he fundamentally disagreed with me about my interpretation of the political realities of Israel’s war on Gaza and the appropriate language to describe them. Instead of recognizing my course as an opportunity for linguistic and metalinguistic analyses of terms like “antisemitism,” my department head accused me

of being “antisemitic.” He compared what he considered my antisemitic use of the phrase “fear of losing access to the checkbooks of Jewish donors” in an October 17, 2023, letter to former UPenn president Liz Magill with what he would consider as racist in his hypothetically using the phrase “fear of Black protesters” in a letter to MIT President Sally Kornbluth about a #BlackLivesMatter protest or about MIT’s Coalition Against Apartheid students. He explicitly connected his argument to his being Jewish and to my ethnicity as a Black man, expecting a similar outraged reaction on my part to his hypothetical mention of “Black protesters.” I pointed out that my letter to Magill did not include any comment on the Jewish people as a whole. I countered his “Black protesters” example by stating that his hypothetical letter about Black protesters would not engage with the same relation of power and (in)justice — Black people vis-à-vis police brutality — as my statements about the mistreatment of pro-Palestinian protesters by authorities at UPenn and other campuses, many of which are endowed by pro-Israel donors who identify as Jewish. That same day (December 8), I further questioned Fox’s accusation by emailing him links to a variety of articles in mainstream media in the US, Europe and Israel that also use “Jewish donors” and related phrases, thus showing that such phrases cannot be taken prima facie, without reference to context, as evidence of antisemitism.

This incident laid bare the deep political divisions that undergird the subsequent rejection of my course proposal. But that same incident also convinced me how crucial my course proposal was toward creating a space where we all at MIT could constructively confront, on firm scientific foundations, these conflicting definitions, metalinguistic attitudes and strategies at the core of empire building.

Here’s a partial list of other disagreements as they surfaced in that conversation with my department head on December 8, 2023:

- Disagreement over my characterization of Israel as a settler-colonial project. He argued against my use of “decolonization” in my social-media postings about Palestinian resistance to Israel’s occupation. He said how uncomfortable he, as a Jewish person, felt about these social-media posts. He took the position that Israel could not be considered a colony since the Zionists had no “colonial base” to rely on. (NB: “Colonization” is a key term in the very title of the course.) In response, I called attention to the current role of the US in support of Israel’s war on Gaza. In retrospect, I should have recalled Theodore Herzl’s own writings, his Jewish Colonization Agency and his invitation to Cecil Rhodes of Rhodesia to help colonize Palestine. I should have also recalled the history of assimilated Jews in Europe. I should have asked whether his “motherland” argument would hold in the alternate possible worlds that Herzl had initially sought—a Zionist colony either in Argentina or Uganda...

- Disagreement on my use of the term “genocide” to describe the war on Gaza — he would have preferred “ethnic cleansing,” and he argued that there are degrees of crimes against humanity, and that it’s not “politically effective” to conflate these two categories.
- Disagreement over whether Israeli leaders have expressed genocidal intent towards Palestinians and over the significance of Israeli leaders’ use of the biblical term “Amalek” in reference to Palestinians — he compared Israel’s stance toward Palestine to Iran’s stance toward Israel, claiming that genocidal intent is absent in both cases.
- Disagreement on whether Netanyahu’s hate-filled language against Palestinians can at all be compared to that of Hitler against Jews — and whether the genocide of Palestinians by Israel can at all be compared with the genocide of Jews by the Nazis. This is the point at which my department head started shouting profanities such as “You’re out of your f**king mind.”
- Disagreement over the interpretation of anti-genocide students’ chants like “Intifada” and “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” I reminded him of the linguistic and historical dimensions of these phrases while he argued that such phrases are “politically ineffective.”

Linguistics Course, Page 13

Linguistics Course, from Page 12

These disagreements are not merely a matter of semantics. They reflect a clash of political perspectives and underscore that power defines the narrative in any war, a linguistic phenomenon visible in the present as the narrative of the war on Gaza takes shape. Though controversial to various degrees, the terms that I used (and that my department head strenuously objected to) have been widely employed by scholars, activists and human rights organizations to describe the systematic dispossession, displacement and violence inflicted upon Palestinians by the Israeli state for decades, long before October 7. By objecting to these terms and refusing to dispassionately look at their history, by evoking his positionality and his trauma as an Israeli Jew, and by accusing me of antisemitism, my department head, in effect, attempted to delegitimize a critical framing of discourse around the war on Gaza. He attempted to silence me. Discussion of such issues should inevitably trigger intellectual discomfort, though not causing any threat to anyone’s safety. Here, MIT President Kornbluth judiciously reminds us that “learning is not always pleasant.”

Until this debate began I had assumed, perhaps too naively, that linguists would feel comfortable — even enthusiastic — using tools from our trade to shed light on these complex problems. This is MIT. After all, where we aim to solve global challenges—Mens et Manus et Mundus. The politics of language is inherently related to struggles where different interest groups compete to control the meanings of words and the narratives they construct. We saw such semantic wrangling most clearly in the US Congress on December 5. Recall that this is the date when—just 3 days ahead of the heated exchange with my department head, a semanticist—we heard Representative Elise Stefanik blatantly engage in linguistic distortions about the “meaning” of the Arabic word “Intifada.” In the context of the ongoing war on Gaza, the struggle over meaning is particularly acute, as the language used to describe the conflict has profound implications for how it is understood, debated, and ultimately resolved. That is why the “Special Topics” seminar I’ve proposed is so timely, even urgent. Challenges to academic freedom often occur when intellectual topics overlap with deeply held political convictions. It was my hope that by exposing these divisions, we can foster a more honest and transparent dialogue, one where academic discourse is not stifled by political agendas.

Be that as it may, my MIT Linguistics colleagues responded in The Tech that the decision to reject my course was not at all influenced by the department head’s nationality and political beliefs. This leaves me incredulous in light of my department head’s own statements.

In their response to my June 13th opinion essay, my colleagues also state:

“... we do think it is important to clarify that the decision concerning the proposed seminar has been the result of a course approval process involving a proposal, a committee, and discussion by the department as a whole.

This statement suggests that the “course approval process” unfolding in relation to my proposal is a standard procedure within our unit — one that previously was uniformly applied to all course proposals. However, this could not be further from the truth. As I already detailed, this process has been anything but ordinary. My colleagues have acknowledged this as well, citing the current “atmosphere” on campus as a contributing factor to this exceptional review. In fact, this ad hoc process, which has never been applied to any other course proposal during my 28 years at MIT, appears to have been instituted with the specific intention of rejecting my proposal. This suspicion is further supported by the fact that this unprecedented ad hoc committee was assembled by the very department head who had already vehemently expressed strong political opposition with my views on Palestine and Israel. Consequently, it seems that this “course approval process” was fundamentally flawed from the outset, tainted by a conflict of interest arising from his political disagreements with the faculty proposing this course.

Consider these questions: Is it likely that the department head’s strongly expressed political beliefs in conversations that started soon after October 7 in person, via email and on Zoom played no role in the rejection of my course, especially when the course aims to analyze the same key terms that triggered his anger, and especially when he was the first to appeal to his nationality and his political allegiance to Israel as a non-colonial homeland, then he manifested uncontrollable rage against me because of divergences on definitions of “colonization,” “genocide,” and so on? Is it plausible that his nationality and beliefs had no influence, given that he also was the

first to reject my proposal on January 10 for a statement from MIT Linguistics about the crimes against humanity in Palestine and Israel, modeled after our February 2022 Facebook statement about the war in Ukraine? And is it purely coincidental that he rejected, on the same day, my proposal for this statement before any other colleague could offer their opinion? And the reason given for his rejection of my proposed statement was his “personal evaluation” and his “personal sense” that, unlike for Ukraine, there was no “feeling of joint purpose among students and faculty” about Gaza. Please note the phrase “common humanity” in the MIT Linguistics Facebook posting in February 2022 to elicit sympathy about the victims of the war in Ukraine...

The Battle for the Definition of “Linguistics” at MIT

Just a few weeks after that heated disagreement with yelling and profanities by my department head, a committee he formed with himself and two other colleagues (the directors of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies at MIT Linguistics) raised concerns about the course’s title (the original title was “Language and linguistics in decolonization and liberation struggles”) and lack of fit within the linguistics curriculum. This was a rather unexpected set of concerns for two reasons: firstly, this was the first of a long series of Orwellian doublespeak in response to my proposal: given that the explicit objective of “Special Topics” (24.S96) courses is to “cover topics not offered in the regular curriculum,” how can my proposal be rejected because of “lack of fit” in said curriculum. Secondly, given my teaching history to date, for decades now, on these very topics related to the weaponization of language in society and to liberatory linguistics, does that mean that my teaching at MIT Linguistics has, so often and for so long, been unfit for the unit that hired me back in 1996?

When I shared additional details about the course, with a longer title that included “from the river to the sea in Palestine and Israel to the mountaintop of Haiti and beyond,” my colleagues began raising concerns about my “expertise” in the subject matter, even proposing that the course be taught in Political Science or History instead of Linguistics and possibly be cross-listed in Linguistics. This was a rather surprising suggestion given the linguistic content of the course, far more extensive than, say, some of my own previous courses.

Furthermore the proposed course directly addresses the linguistic dimensions of social and political issues, a topic well-established in the field of linguistics under the labels “Language in Society,” “Sociolinguistics,” and “Postcolonial Linguistics.” These labels are the titles of peer-reviewed scientific journals. I myself have been researching, teaching and publishing on language in society for decades, and my work has been published in the corresponding peer-reviewed scientific journals and recognized internationally, including by the foremost and largest professional organization in linguistics, the Linguistic Society of America, which has awarded me “the highest honor in the field.” All of this seems unknown or irrelevant to the three-person committee (Danny Fox, Sabine Iatridou and Donca Steriade). Not only do they keep repeating the slander disguised as “concern[is] about [my] lack of expertise,” but they also insist that they don’t understand “what [I] call the ‘weaponization of language’ and ‘how [my course proposal] relates to any field of linguistics’” (quoting Iatridou and Steriade’s email dated July 19). Yet, in 1492 already, Antonio de Nebrija, author of “Gramática de la lengua castellana,” explained to his Majesty Queen Isabella that “language is the consort of Empire.” This is one central aspect of linguistics that I’ve engaged in as one major thread of my career as a linguist looking for ways to counteract the hegemonic use of language in society and the ways in which are indoctrinated through linguistics to believe in hierarchies of humanity — or “grades of man” in historical linguist August Schleicher’s phrase.

It’s also instructive to examine my colleagues’ stance about what counts as “fit” with our curriculum, as defined (say) in MIT Linguistics’ overly narrow mission statement, in the context of visiting faculty Maya Honda “Special Topics” course on Linguistics and Education—a course which the department head himself invited Professor Honda to teach and which is now on its second iteration. Late Professor Wayne O’Neil, former MIT Linguistics department head, taught a similar course for years as part of the departmental curriculum. The current department head recently called this “Special Topics” course on Linguistics and Education a wonderful opportunity for our students—and he promised to attend as much as his schedule allows. Is it not strange that the head of MIT Linguistics would invite a “Special Topics” seminar by visiting professor Maya Honda on linguistics and education into our program, yet exclude this topic in our

“mission” as MIT linguists?

It’s particularly instructive to compare these courses on language in society with what the department has included in its mission statement which makes no mention whatsoever of the social aspects of linguists’ work (a core concern in my own research and teaching agenda). Such silencing invisibilizes important work on language in society, like it invisibilizes MIT Linguistics’ own Indigenous Language Initiative, with the latter becoming a stepchild in our academic unit, outside our mission statement proper. In effect, MIT Linguistics’ definition of “linguistics” is extraordinarily narrow and exclusionary, focusing solely on formal aspects of language and neglecting its social and cultural dimensions. In this mission statement, it’s as if both language and linguistics happen in a total social vacuum. This gatekeeping approach to our field creates artificial barriers or marginalization against scholars like myself who work and teach on critical issues of language, power, justice, identity, etc. By excluding these perspectives, MIT Linguistics perpetuates an incomplete and biased understanding of language, failing to acknowledge its complex role in shaping social structures and perpetuating inequalities.

In any case, given my documented expertise on issues related to the politics of language and linguistics and to language in society and given the rationale and history of “Special Topics” seminars in our unit (to explore “topics not offered in the regular curriculum”), this rejection and the reasons presented for it are, in Orwellian mode, a smokescreen for the real issue at hand: the suppression of dissenting views that challenge the dominant narrative about Israel and Palestine. The suggestion that I lacked the necessary expertise to teach a course on linguistics and language for decolonization and liberation, despite my decades of research, publishing and teaching on the subject, is not only insulting but also indicative of a narrow and exclusionary understanding of linguistics, in keeping with MIT Linguistics’ mission statement. Furthermore, the insistence that the course be co-taught or relegated to another department reveals a deeply troubling assumption that the study of language and its social and political implications, in this particular case, must be subordinated to other disciplines.

My colleagues’ suggestion that my course proposal is somehow outside the bounds of legitimate academic inquiry in MIT Linguistics is particularly ironic given the well-documented role of language in social-justice struggles and given MIT’s stated commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive intellectual environment. The institute’s mission statement for a #BetterWorld emphasizes the importance of “advancing knowledge and educating students in science, technology, and the humanities that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century.” This mission, I believe, necessitates a critical examination of the historical and contemporary injustices that continue to shape our world, as well as the role that language plays in perpetuating or challenging them.

My course proposal is not only consistent with this mission but also directly addresses some of the most pressing challenges facing our society today, in keeping with MIT’s mission to solve “global challenges” (the now familiar Mens et Manus et Mundus). The “Question of Palestine,” for example, like the history of linguistic apartheid in Haiti, is one of the most intractable and complex challenges in the world, with far-reaching implications for global peace and security. The ongoing violence and human rights abuses in Haiti, a country with a long history of colonialism, imperialism, and political instability, also demand our attention and engagement. By exploring the linguistic dimensions of these conflicts, my course would provide students with a unique and valuable perspective on these complex issues, as well as the analytical tools to critically examine the dominant narratives and discourses that often obscure the root causes of these conflicts.

The Battle for Academic Freedom at MIT

The attempt to censor my course proposal, based on some alleged lack of “fit” and “expertise,” also represents a clear violation of academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) defines “freedom to teach” as:

“... the right of the faculty to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student academic performance in teaching activities for which faculty members are individually responsible, without having their decisions subject to the veto of a department chair, dean, or other administrative officer.” [emphasis added]

This freedom is essential for the functioning of a democratic society, as it allows scholars to challenge conventional wisdom, explore

controversial ideas, and contribute to the public good through their research and teaching.

However, I understand that academic freedom is not absolute. It is subject to limitations, such as the requirement that faculty members teach within their areas of expertise and adhere to professional standards of scholarship and pedagogy. As MIT’s Report of the MIT Ad Hoc Working Group on Free Expression explains,

“Regarding freedom of teaching, faculty do not have total discretion over their course content. For example, a class titled “Beginning Chinese” cannot be taught as an advanced calculus class. And department heads would be within their rights to consider faculty members’ expertise in the process of making or adjusting teaching assignments.” [emphasis added]

Of course “Beginning Chinese” and “Advanced Calculus” are distinct fields. In contrast, my proposed seminar directly aligns with my areas of expertise, as documented by my publications, previous courses and my overall work as a linguist for the past couple of decades, continuing in the present. And the AAUP explicitly recognizes that faculty members have the right to address controversial issues in their teaching, so long as they do so in a manner that is germane to the subject matter of the course, and it asks university administrators to:

“... recommit themselves to fully protecting the academic freedom of their faculties to teach, conduct research, and speak out about important issues both on and off campus.”

In light of all the above, it’s now clear that the attempt to censor my course proposal represents a blatant violation of academic freedom. It seems part of a larger politically motivated campaign that seeks to silence critical perspectives about the war on Gaza and to stifle intellectual inquiry into the role of language in shaping social and political realities. Given MIT’s commitment to upholding rules, regulations and faculty rights, the administration should support my course proposal. This would ensure that my freedom to teach is protected from undue interference by colleagues with differing political views.

The Battle for the Definition of “expertise” at MIT Linguistics

Recall my 2021 “Special Topics” seminar on Linguistics and Social Justice. Here is a semantics-related question: can one assume that “social justice” in that seminar’s title subsumes “decolonization and liberation”? If so, then it seems unlikely that my MIT Linguistics colleagues’ concerns in 2024, about the original title of my course (“Language and linguistics in decolonization & liberation struggles”), were at all related to expertise or lack thereof. If I had enough expertise to organize a seminar on linguistics and social justice in 2021, then such expertise can certainly apply to an exploration of linguistics in decolonization and liberation struggles in 2024. All of these themes related to the politics of language and linguistics and to language in society are recurrent topics in my teaching and research for more than two decades now. These themes were also at the core of my plenary lecture for the Linguistic Society of America Summer Institute in 2017. This lecture, on the role of linguists in “un-silencing revolutions across space and time,” was introduced by none other than my long-time MIT Linguistics colleague Norvin Richards. These laboratory-linguistics themes are also fundamental to the MIT Press book that I’ve been working on for my sabbatical—to finally be published next year or so! Will that make me the first ever professor in MIT’s history who, in effect, is prevented by his colleagues from teaching a seminar on topics related to a book he’s writing?

Is it not ironic that, on the topic of my expertise on language in society, my department head himself, in an MIT News article just two years ago,

“... celebrated [DeGraff’s Linguistic Society of America Fellowship] honor as recognition of [his] multifaceted, socially-minded approach to his field, as well as recognition of his outstanding scholarship. ‘It is good to see a professional organization like the LSA promoting scientists not just for their research, but also for the kind of activism that might accompany it: battling prevalent misconceptions about the nature of the world, identifying their detrimental consequences, and fighting for change. Michel has been involved in all these activities, mostly through the MIT-Haiti initiative, which he was instrumental in establishing. We are all very proud.’...”

In this vein, there is a larger and deeper philosophical and pedagogical point to raise about the discriminatory allegation of lack of “expertise” in the context of my “Special Topics” seminar.

Linguistics Course, Page 14

Linguistics Course, from Page 13

In previous seminars at MIT Linguistics, it was explicitly stated that the goal was to increase expertise in the area of inquiry in question — “to make it up as we go along” (to cite my colleague philosopher and professor emeritus Bob Stalnaker’s words, which my colleagues so very much appreciate that they keep citing it in their own course descriptions). In this vein, here is a whole series of remarkable quotes (with emphases strategically added) about expected levels of “expertise” when it comes to seminars, “Special Topics” courses and the like:

- “As usual for advanced seminars, we expect the discussion to place us in unanticipated locations, hence no syllabus at this stage.” (Danny Fox and Miya Privoznov, Fall 2022)
 - “The schedule will be flexible and open ended, following the discussion where it leads, and spending as much time on each topic as it seems to need. That is, we will make it up as we go along.” (Bob Stalnaker, Spring 2023, then cited by Kai von Fintel, Amir Anvari, Giorgio Magri and Forrest Davis in their own course descriptions)
 - “In this class we will discuss literature that is outside of our customary focus of attention, in an attempt to educate ourselves about research in adjacent areas that might be relevant to how we situate what we do, how we frame our long range research agenda, how we teach, and how we interact with sister disciplines.” (Irene Heim and Martin Hackl, Spring 2012)
 - “... [Y]ou need to become used to feeling ‘stupid.’ I mean this in an entirely non-disparaging sense: obviously, you’re not stupid. What it is is that you’re not completely understanding a complex topic. Of course, that is in fact the permanent condition of science. The whole point of science is to work at things we don’t understand and make some progress towards understanding, but that progress will then result in even more things we don’t understand...” (Kai von Fintel, Fall 2016)
- Is the freedom and privilege to have a seminar “place us in unanticipated locations” or to “feel stupid” or to “make it up as we go along” or “to discuss literature that is outside of our customary focus of attention” or to “not completely understand a complex topic,” etc., the sole prerogative of only a select subset of MIT Linguistics faculty on some arbitrary subset of topics? What are the defining cri-

teria here, and who defines these? Is the sole Black faculty member in MIT Linguistics outside of this privileged subset?

My MIT Linguistics colleagues will certainly remember that this issue of unfair and biased gate-keeping against me is not new in our department. Some will remember a previous department head who declared, flat out, that my work in the context of the MIT-Haiti Initiative was outside the realm of linguistics, even though the same department head would routinely advertise the same MIT-Haiti Initiative during visiting-committee evaluation.

Here we are treading on discrimination patterns that should be most troubling to all MIT faculty and to the administration. Similar patterns arise about my colleagues’ reactions to my inviting guest speakers to my Fall 2024 seminar.

The Battle for the Place of Guest Speakers in Seminars at MIT

The department has characterized the enlisting of guest experts as “outsourcing” my responsibility for the course. This is a disingenuous argument — again, Orwellian doublespeak — in a department where I was told, from day one 28 years ago, that it is a unit that values co-teaching, collaboration with other faculty, etc. Inviting guest speakers is a common practice at MIT and in academia, especially in advanced seminars, and it does not absolve the instructor of their responsibility. In fact, many courses in the department, including those taught by other senior faculty, have featured guest speakers. My intention in inviting guest experts is to enrich the course content and expose students to diverse perspectives, especially given the lack of diversity within the department — both intellectually and otherwise.

Consider one required course at MIT Linguistics, called Field Methods in Linguistics where the department pays the native speaker of an unfamiliar language (i.e., a language about which the instructor might have relatively little expertise in) in order for that language consultant to help the class explore the grammatical structure of the unfamiliar language in question. This is one case where there is explicit “outsourcing” to an expert outside of MIT. This is for a good reason: namely, to allow exploration into the structures of that language toward enriching the students’ knowledge in an area that the instructors themselves, truly, have relatively little expertise in. As far as I can tell, none of

my MIT Linguistics colleagues has ever complained about this kind of “outsourcing.”

Here’s another example of an MIT Linguistics offering — our Fall 2022 Industry Workshop, ably organized by a visiting faculty — which has made crucial and effective use of guest experts at every meeting. Why did such a workshop, as recently as two years ago, with such a strong cast of guest speakers, not raise any concerns whatsoever about “outsourcing of responsibility”?

In my own case, I shall recall my own teaching history at MIT and the fact that most seminar-style courses that I have previously taught at MIT Linguistics, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, have included guest experts. Consider courses such as the “Special Topics” seminar Linguistics and Social Justice in Fall 2021, the Haitian Creole Syntax seminar in Fall 2016 and the “Special Topics” seminar Computational Phylogenetics in Spring 2015. In all three courses, I invited the collaboration of colleagues, both in and outside MIT, who had much needed expertise on some key topics in the course. The same is true with my undergraduate courses Creole Languages and Caribbean Identities and Black Matters: An Introduction to Black Studies. If my colleagues’ concerns about “expertise” and “outsourcing” were genuine, then they should have already noticed this long established pattern of guest speakers sharing their expertise in relevant areas being explored in my courses. And this is exactly the model to be followed in my Fall 2024 “Special Topics” course.

This frequent inclusion of guest speakers is based on my desire for “integrity along with intellectual and professional standards” — to borrow some choice words from my department head in an email to our unit on May 30, 2024, in response to a linguistics graduate student who had written, the day before:

“Everyone deserves to have analytical tools that help them understand the situations that they find themselves in, and this is precisely where Michel’s body of work, his expertise, and his seminar can make a difference. His seminar would be a worthwhile contribution to the department, to the Institute, and to the fight against the ongoing dehumanization of Palestinians, and it would be a massive mistake to consider it outside the scope of our department. In my view, to do so would be to censor it.”

My goal has never been to “outsource responsibility” but to enhance the quality of

my courses and offer the best to our students, including the best “analytical tools that help them understand the situations that they find themselves in.”

Another reason for my inviting guest speakers in many of my courses at MIT Linguistics is to expose students and colleagues to the true diversity of our field, intellectually and otherwise, in a department with an extraordinarily narrow mission statement. As the sole Black faculty at MIT for the past 28 years, I have witnessed first-hand a variety of “micro” and “macro” racist aggressions, from subtle to vile. Think, say, ugly sexual stereotypes about certain body parts of Black men in interracial couples. These are stereotypes, with a dreadfully brutal racist history, that came in through some joke addressed directly to me by a senior faculty colleague at a social event!

This level of discrimination should not be acceptable to anyone, especially not to the MIT administration.

The Weaponization of Language in Decolonization and Liberation Struggles

Recall this disturbingly dissonant state of affairs: Though I’ve now written a couple of articles, in *Le Monde Diplomatique* and in *Inside Higher Education*, on recent cases of weaponization of language in the current political context, on top of decades of articles about the weaponization of language and linguistics against Creole speakers, my MIT Linguistics colleagues continue to claim that they do not understand what it means for language to be “weaponized” and how such use of language is at all related to linguistics. The short of it is that language is not a neutral tool but instead a powerful weapon that can be used to shape our perceptions of reality and our understanding of ourselves and others. The language we use to describe people, political events and social phenomena, including the language of linguistics (that is, language about language), can either reinforce existing power structures or challenge them.

In the context of decolonization and liberation, language and linguistics play a crucial role in reclaiming narratives that have been suppressed or distorted by dominant groups. It allows marginalized communities to articulate their own experiences and perspectives, to challenge the dominant discourse, and to envision alternative futures. As Arundhati calls it in her speech on “assaults on meaning” “the keystone of fascism is the capture of language.”

This is why linguistics is so important for understanding and addressing issues of social justice and political oppression. It provides us with the tools to critically examine how language has been used to perpetuate injustice and to imagine how it can be used to promote liberation.

Noam Chomsky and Louis Kampf on “Intellectuals and Social Change”

The controversy surrounding my course proposal raises broader questions about the role of professors in society, especially vis-à-vis resistance to hegemony and indoctrination. In his essay *The Responsibility of Intellectuals* written during the time of protests against the Vietnam war in the 1960s, Chomsky argued that intellectuals have a moral obligation to use all of their knowledge and skills to challenge injustice and to speak truth to power. Chomsky, who has long been a vocal critic of Israeli policies towards Palestinians, has faced his own share of censorship and vilification for his political views.

Around the same time that Chomsky was writing his essay on the responsibility of intellectuals, he and late professor Louis Kampf co-taught a course titled *Intellectuals and Social Change* which was offered as “21.995”—a course in the former Humanities unit.

Now that Chomsky has suffered a stroke and can no longer speak about “The responsibility of intellectuals” vis-à-vis the US and Israeli war machine against Palestinians, it is sadly ironic that Chomsky’s own former colleagues and students have now appealed to the disciplinary classification of his course on “Intellectuals and Social Change” to block my course on linguistics and social change from being offered as a linguistics course, suggesting instead that it be co-taught with an instructor in History or Political science and possibly be cross-listed with Linguistics.

Their argument is that, like Chomsky who, with Kampf, taught his political course outside of the linguistics unit, I too should arrange to teach my course outside of linguistics — with a co-instructor in Political Science or History — then possibly have it cross-listed in Linguistics. But there is one fundamental difference between Chomsky and Kampf’s 21.995 course and my “Special Topics” proposal—a difference that my MIT Linguistics colleagues have glossed over. Nowhere in the Chomsky and Kampf’s title and course description do they mention language or linguistics. Their course was all about politics and social justice. Ironically, the course

contents—on “the role and responsibility of individuals who challenge the assumptions of the established political and social order, and who are concerned with ideas and their consequences”—seem relevant for arguments against the current political repression at MIT Linguistics and the rejection of my course proposal.

Unlike Chomsky and Kampf’s *Intellectuals and Social Change* (21.995), my “Special Topics” proposal is decidedly a linguistic course, though it does bear on language in society and in political contexts, and it is even more linguistics-oriented than other courses I’ve taught at MIT. Furthermore, and here I must repeat ad nauseam, language in society is an area of linguistics in which I have extensively researched, published and taught—more so than in any other area of intellectual inquiry! Imagine the consequences if my colleagues and the MIT administration were to accept the claim that I lack “expertise” to offer this seminar in an area that I’ve devoted most of my career to. Then I certainly would lack “expertise” to teach any other topic in linguistics! Sigh...

Conclusion

It is important for the MIT administration and, more generally, leaders in higher education to support my course and others like it for several reasons:

- *Upholding Academic Freedom:* The rejection of my course proposal, based on flimsy pretexts and political disagreements, violates the principles of academic freedom that are essential for intellectual inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge.
- *Protecting Faculty Rights:* As a tenured full professor, I have the right to teach courses within my area of expertise without undue interference from colleagues or administrators with differing political views.
- *Promoting Intellectual Diversity:* The course offers a unique perspective on language and linguistics, and their roles in social and political issues, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive intellectual environment at MIT. The course proposal thus aligns with MIT’s emphasis on intellectual diversity and exploration of unconventional topics, as it delves into areas not typically covered in the regular linguistics curriculum — an expected feature for “Special Topics” courses at MIT Linguistics.
- *Addressing Pressing Social Issues:* The course directly addresses some of the

most pressing challenges facing society, aligning with MIT’s mission, and the broader objectives of higher education to solve global challenges and promote a better world. In the case of MIT, my course directly relates to the Institute’s focus on using knowledge for the betterment of humankind (“Mind Hand Heart”). Indeed the course aims to equip students with linguistic tools to critically analyze power dynamics and promote positive social change.

Viewed from these perspectives, the attempt to censor my course proposal, therefore, is not only an attack on my individual academic freedom, but also a broader assault on the responsibility of intellectuals as critical voices in society. It is a symptom of a growing trend towards the suppression of dissent and the narrowing of acceptable discourse, particularly on issues related to Israel and Palestine.

This trend for politically-motivated censorship is not limited to academia. It is evident in the mainstream media, where anti-genocide voices are often marginalized or excluded altogether. It is also evident in the political sphere, where legislation aimed at suppressing criticism of Israel has been introduced in numerous states and at the federal level.

The responsibility of intellectuals, in this context, is to resist these attempts to silence dissent and to defend the principles of academic freedom and free speech. It is to use all available platforms—from email to social media to articles such as this one—to educate our colleagues, students and the public about the realities of the ongoing genocide in Gaza and to challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuate such crimes against humanity, courtesy of our own tax dollars and our electoral choices.

The battle over my proposed “Special Topics” seminar at MIT is a reminder that even colleagues and former students of Noam Chomsky, often considered as part of the “leftist majority” in academia, can engage in the most outrageous kind of “Palestine Exception” as political repression, and even claim Chomsky’s example while doing so. These ongoing attacks on academic freedom, particularly the suppression of critical analyses about the discourse surrounding the war on Gaza, have far-reaching implications for the future of academia. They are not only a threat to academic freedom but also a form of intellectual dishonesty and indoctrination. They contribute to the longevity of dis-

courses about a so-called “just war” (another Orwellian distortion) whose goal is the genocide of the Palestinian people. If scholars are not free to explore controversial topics and challenge dominant narratives, the pursuit of knowledge will be stifled and the very foundations of academic inquiry will be eroded.

It is precisely in these moments of conflict and controversy over politically, intellectually and ethically fraught issues that the true value of tenure, academic freedom and intellectual integrity is revealed. It is through the open and honest exchange of ideas, even when those ideas are unpopular or controversial, that we can hope to advance knowledge and promote a more just and equitable world. As MIT President Kornbluth exhorts us to do, we need “to apply our legendary problem-solving skills to an age-old challenge: finding ways to build meaningful connections across differences” and “to strive to live up to our values of openness and respect.” As one of these videos promoting the #BetterWorld slogan eloquently tells us, “it’s exploring and solving that moves us forward... It’s what makes the world better. It’s what makes us MIT...”

The battle over a linguistics course and over the very definition of “linguistics” at MIT Linguistics is, therefore, not just a local dispute over a single elective “Special Topics” course and its place in the linguistics curriculum, but is a microcosm of a larger struggle taking place in academic institutions across the globe—a struggle about the very foundations of higher education. It is a struggle between those who seek to uphold the principles of academic freedom and intellectual integrity versus those who seek to silence dissenting voices in order to maintain the status quo, with the university becoming an echo chamber for fascism.

The stakes are high. If universities are unwilling to defend the principles of academic freedom, they risk becoming complicit in the suppression of knowledge and the erosion of democratic values. As my colleague Noam Chomsky, a staunch activist against fascist attacks on academic freedom, once wrote, “It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies.”

I will not be silenced. I will continue to speak out against injustice, both in the classroom and beyond. The struggle for academic freedom is a struggle for the very soul of the university, and it is a struggle that we cannot afford to lose. We must all be willing to engage in this battle if we are to uphold fundamental principles of democracy and justice.



