

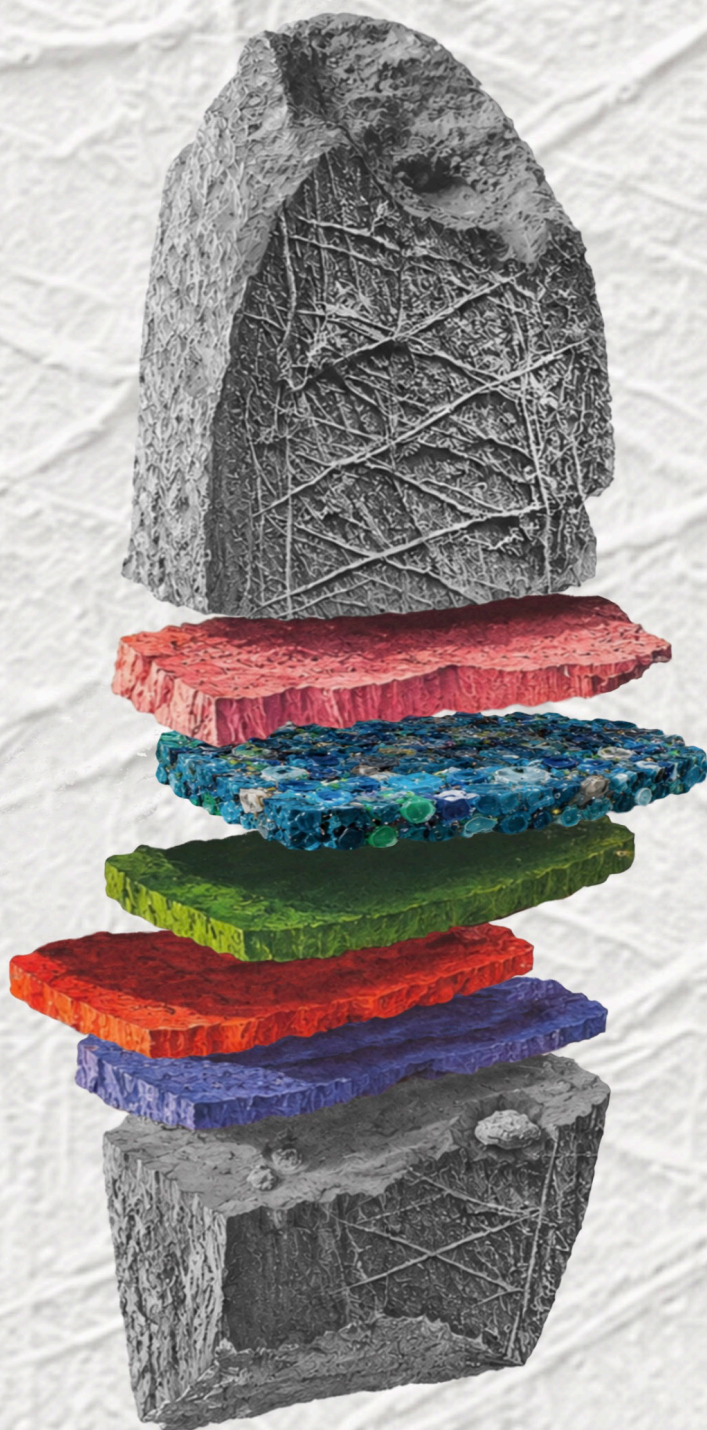
# THE ● ATLAS

A NEWSPAPER

**THE WRITING IS  
ON THE WALL**

Inside the fight to own the  
24-millennium news cycle  
**P12**

**21 MAY 2026 | ISSUE 1**





## WELCOME TO THE ATLAS.

A lot can happen in 24 hours. Too much, perhaps. We've built an entire world around the assumption that the best way to understand life is to break it into daily news fragments and follow each one as it disappears over the horizon. But some stories only become visible when we widen the frame. When we look across borders, decades – even millennia. The stories in this newspaper may not dominate today's headlines. Yet they reveal forces that will shape our world long after today's headlines are forgotten. What matters in a 24-year news cycle? How about a 24-millennium one?

Read on.

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### ▲ WORLD MAP

Reporting in this edition from these locations. Illustrated by Yemsrach Yetneberk, based on the Equal Earth Projection.



### ▲ BROKEN RECORDS:

The cover illustration, by Anna Jibladze, is based on *The Blombos Pattern* – humanity's oldest surviving artwork. It has endured for 75,000 years, and counting.

# CURRENTS



## Sensing censorability, Georgians decline to yield

Every day for the past 540 days, Georgian activists have been protesting against their pro-Russian government. Prisons here are currently housing around 100 political prisoners – and protesting is about to get even more difficult. This week, the government announced that it will establish a new unit to monitor “hate speech, offensive campaigns and aggressive

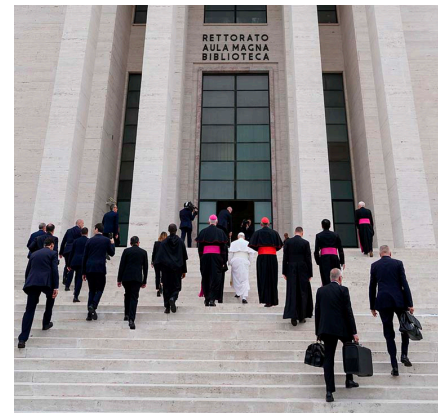
communications”. Some Georgians are already calling the new unit the “Georgian Roskomnadzor”, after the Russia’s state communications regulator, which has throttled free speech inside Russia and is now building the architecture to cut Russians off from the global internet entirely. – *Masho Lomashvili in Tbilisi*

▲ Protesters in Tbilisi, Georgia. (Photo: Zurab Tsertsvadze/AP)

► Pope Leo XIV visits Sapienza University in Rome. (Photo: AP)

## Pope Leo suits up for battle with digital devilry

Excitement rippled through the Vatican City last week amid speculation that Pope Leo XIV would release his first encyclical — the mission statement that sets the tone for his papacy. “Polymarket has it for 15 May,” a priest told *The Atlas*, referring to the crypto betting platform. The date marks the anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical that set out the Church’s response to the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution. The bets were bang on: the encyclical will be dated 15 May and released to the public next week. Titled *Magnifica Humanitas*, it will address the industrial revolution of our age: the advent of artificial intelligence. – *Isobel Cockerell in Rome*



▲ Vincent Bolloré (Photo: AP)

## Canal+ denies being a big bunch of fascists

Used to be that aspiring French filmmakers dreamed of being commissioned by French media giants Canal+. These days, not so much. This week, at the Cannes Film Festival, Canal+ threatened to blacklist 600 film professionals, including stars like Juliette Binoche,

who accused owner Vincent Bolloré of “a fascist takeover of the collective imagination”, through his control of French media. This matters in Africa, too. Canal+ holds a quasi-monopoly on private media in Francophone countries. Last year, Canal+ acquired South Africa’s MultiChoice group, giving it control of Africa’s largest Anglophone broadcaster too. – *Olatunji Olaigbe in Cotonou*





## One night in the city that just can't sleep

Aruna Sekhar in Chennai

After the LED-lit carousels go dark and the police barricades go up, Chennai's Marina beach belongs solely to the sleepers bedding down on the sands, seeking the oldest – and cheapest – air conditioning: the sea.

According to the police, only 2% of the sleepers are technically unhoused, and another 2% are itinerant workers who staff the promenade's stalls and seafood shacks.

"It's hot at night," says K Ravi, a beat

cop on the night shift, sweating into his uniform. "Sometimes even the sea breeze gives up."

A combination of unchecked urbanisation and sweltering heat induced by climate change is making cities like Chennai, the major metropolis of southern India, increasingly unlivable.

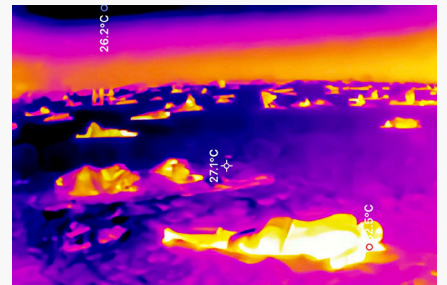
Low-quality housing traps hot air, and air conditioning is too expensive for most residents to consider.

"It was always hot," says K Pandian, a fisherman by day and ice cream vendor at night. "But once electricity came in and buildings went up, that's when people began to feel it."

Temperatures in Chennai soared as high as 40.6°C this month, amplified further yet in tenement buildings by the "urban heat island" effect, in which cities experience much warmer temperatures than surrounding rural areas. And so entire families have taken to sleeping on the beach on summer nights.

"Chatting and all, we don't allow," says K Ravi. "Only sleep." ●

**Temperatures in Chennai soared as high as 40.6C in May, amplified in tenements by the 'urban heat island' effect.**



**TOP:** Residents and a cow cool their clogs on a Chennai beach at night.

**ABOVE:** Thermal imaging tracks the body heat of sea-soothed sleepers.

(Photos: Ishan Tankha)



### HAVANA

**Domino effect:** At home in Havana, it's game on. Outside, however, the country is trying to survive the economic blockade imposed by the United States amid threats of invasion. Cuba's government warned this week that an American military assault would lead to a bloodbath.

(Photo: Yamil Lage/AFP)

# CURRENTS

## Nosy Norway weighs in on moody Narendra

India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, was in Oslo on Monday, where he made headlines for failing to answer any questions from local media. Indian journalists should be able to relate: In 12 years as prime minister, Modi has not held a single open press conference. Nonetheless,

much of the Indian television news media has sided with the PM: If we can't ask questions, why should you, seems to be their position. A cartoon published by *Aftenposten* caused further offence. It depicted Modi as a snakecharmer, trying to control dangerous, competing interests. We'd ask Modi what he thinks of that depiction, if we thought we'd get a reply. — *Shougat Dasgupta in Delhi*



▲ Indian PM Narendra Modi also visited the Dutch royal family on his European tour. (Photo: AP)



## Nairobi nopes out as petrol strike turns lethal

The streets were quiet on Monday morning in Nairobi after public transport vehicles went on strike to protest a fuel price hike. Pump prices have risen by 17% for petrol and 42% for diesel since the start of the year. The government blames the conflict in the Middle East and global shipping constraints. Kenyans are not convinced – about a third of the petrol price is taxes and levies. Matatu operators called on the public to “support” the strike by staying home, which people mostly did – encouraged by the threat of violence from “goons”. Four people were killed by police in the protests before they were called off on Tuesday afternoon. — *Christine Mungai in Nairobi*

▲ Kenyans ride past burning tyres during a public transport strike over fuel prices in Nairobi (Photo: AP)

## Server surfeit adds foolishness to the fire

There are already more than 11,000 data centres around the world, with thousands more being planned to fuel the AI boom. Impact studies tend to understate their water, energy and pollution costs. Journalists are trying to fill in those purposeful gaps. This investigation, backed by the Pulitzer Centre, examined 25 years of satellite data for one small data centre in

the city of Pando, in southern Uruguay, and found it was heating the surrounding area by 0.3°C. In an already heating world, fractions of degrees compound, particularly when centres are near schools and homes. Google is currently building a separate centre six times the size a few kilometres away. — *Amenaza Roboto newsroom in Pando*

▼ The Antel data centre in Pando, Uruguay is raising temperatures in the area. (Photo: Amenaza Robot)





### LIMA

**New dawn:** It's breakfast time at a wholesale produce market in the capital. The results of the first round of Peru's presidential election were announced on Sunday, with Keiko Fujimori and Roberto Sánchez set to contest a run-off on 7 June. About 70 percent of the electorate voted for neither candidate in the first round. Photo: Francisco Seco/AFP

# The war on words

A US-Israeli airstrike has obliterated one of Iran's most significant public libraries

Ariya Farahmand in Tehran

“The sun hadn't yet risen when the first explosion jolted us awake. After the second blast, we fled into the street in the clothes that we had slept in.”

This is Morteza, 39. He lives with his wife and their two young daughters in Zanzan, a provincial city in northwestern Iran. Their home sits near the city's golden-domed Hosseinieh Azam mosque.

“All of our neighbours poured outside too,” Morteza recalls. “It was early morning and freezing. The kids were shivering.”

At 5.02am on 31 March – a Tuesday – a US-Israeli airstrike hit the mosque. Four people were killed, and 26 wounded. And the Seyyed al-Shohada Library inside the mosque complex was completely obliterated.

The library held a sprawling collection of 21,000 books, including an archive of 6,000 rare manuscripts; historical documents; and theses. These were dedicated to Shia history and the life of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who is revered as a symbol of resistance against oppression.

Most of these centuries-old texts had never been digitised. They existed nowhere else in the world.



Irreplaceable history turned to ash.

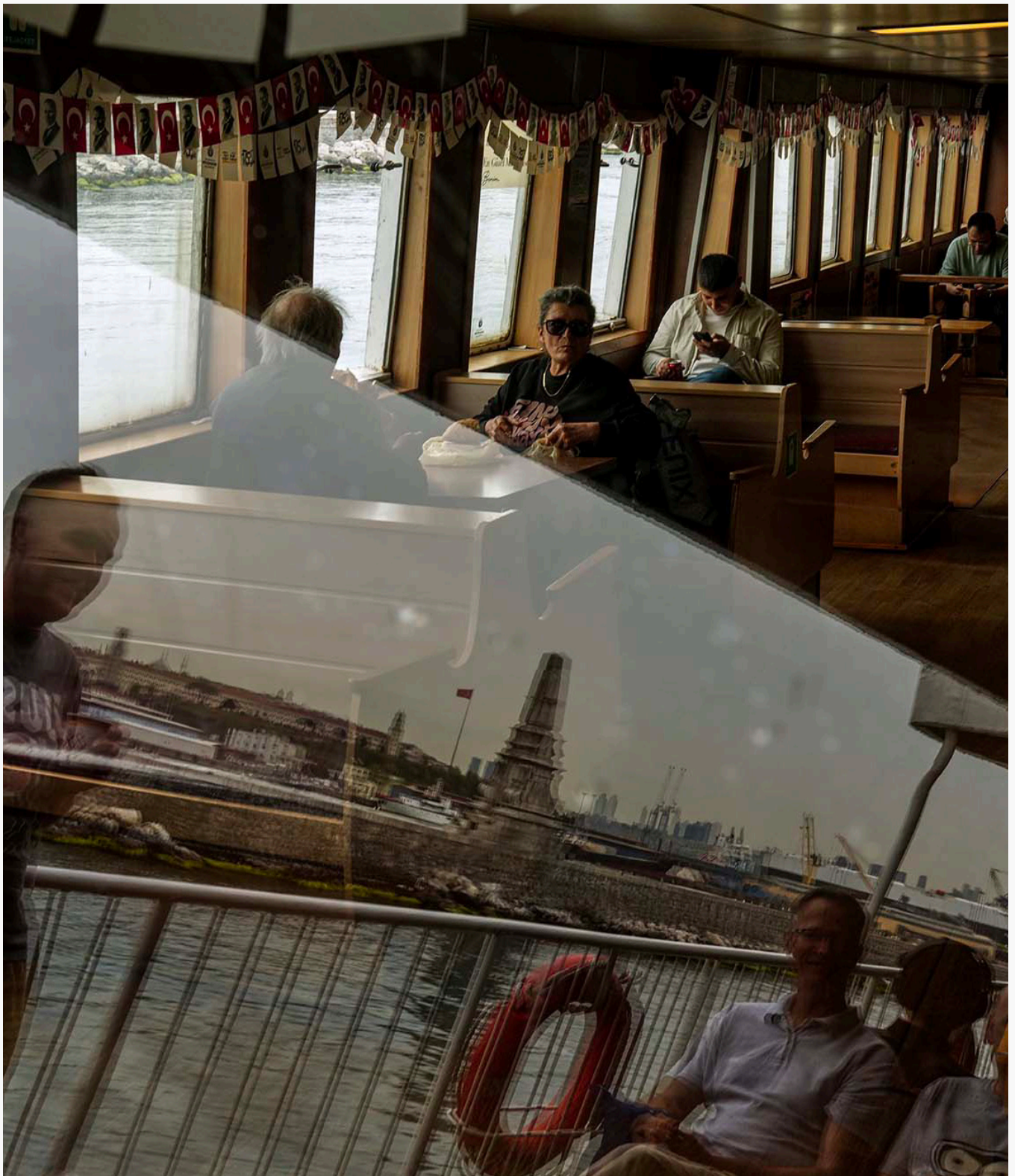
According to Azadeh Nazarboland, the secretary-general of the Iran Public Libraries Foundation, 64 libraries across the country have been damaged in the war. Two of them were completely levelled.

For Zanzan's working-class families, the destruction of Seyyed al-Shohada is the theft of a rare cultural space. According to the library's records, at least 1,900 men and 2,200 women used the library every month. It was a place where parents brought young children on weekends, and where the city's youth had affordable access to learning outside an overstretched school system. An annual membership and library card cost about \$1.50. ●

*This story was published in collaboration with Egab. All names in the story are first names for the safety of sources. Ariya Farahmand is a pseudonym used for the journalist's protection.*

▲ A screengrab from an Iran Students News Agency (ISNA) video lays bare the destruction of Seyyed al-Shohada Library in Zanzan, Iran.

**Most of these centuries-old texts had never been digitised. They existed nowhere else in the world. Irreplaceable history turned to ash.**



## ISTANBUL

**Strait and narrow:** Commuters take a ferry across the Bosphorus, one of the world's most important waterways. It divides Istanbul's Asian and European halves; and connects the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara and, ultimately, the Mediterranean. More than 9,000 ships crossed the strait in the first quarter of this year. (Photo: Martin Mejia/AFP)



Illustration: Wynona Mutisi

# The beginning and the end of recorded history

What dirt on the Internet Age can archaeologists of the far distant future even hope to dig up?

Simon Allison in Johannesburg and Isobel Cockerell in Rome

In the cult science fiction novel *Death's End*, author Cixin Liu imagines a museum on Pluto. Aliens are on their way to destroy Earth. The museum's lone archivist is trying to preserve what he can of humanity,

for posterity – about a billion years, give or take.

Our most famous artworks – Cixin references the *Mona Lisa*, and Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* – will turn to dust within a few millennia. USB sticks and hard drives won't fare much better. Archival ink on composite paper, left untouched,

could still be legible in 200,000 years.

But none of these compare to the oldest data storage technique of them all, explains Cixin's narrator, which – in the right conditions – can last without loss for about 100-million years: carving words into stone.

The first surviving entry in the recorded history of our species was carved into stone around 75,000 years ago, in a small cave near Africa's southernmost point. Today, we call it the Blombos Cave. Here, someone picked up a rock of red ochre and, with some kind of hand tool, carved an unmistakably geometric pattern.

We don't know what the *Blombos Pattern* was meant to communicate. But the very fact of its existence – its archaeological metadata – represents the defining moment in how we became modern humans.

What it tells us, says archaeologist Christopher Henshilwood, who led the discovery team, is “that people 75,000 years ago were able to store information outside of the human brain. This was an enormous step forward and has led to books, to computers, and to art – in fact, to our vast human culture.”

That quote comes not from Henshilwood himself, but from his digital avatar, speaking on an infinite loop at the Origins Centre at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand. An installation about the *Blombos Pattern*, including an actual-size replica of the rock – it's no longer than a credit card – is the centre's opening exhibit.

Dr Tammy Hodgskiss, head of the Origins Centre, thinks that archaeologists in another 75,000 years time will have no trouble identifying the archaeological layer

◀ *The Blombos Pattern*, the world's oldest surviving artwork, reimaged as a holographic exhibit by illustrator Anna Jibladze.



that belongs to today's humans. "We're the plastic era," she told *The Atlas*. "It might even be in our bones."

### LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA 2.0

Today, humanity is still engaged in the same project: preserving information beyond the limits of individual memory. Only now the medium is not stone but servers, hard drives and data centres.

But information on the internet is notoriously fragile. It can disappear. It can be edited, scrubbed. It can be buried by search algorithms and disinformation, and distorted by AI models that gorge on data sets without meaningful discernment, privileging quantity over quality.

The internet is difficult enough to navigate in real time – think of the storming of the United States Capitol building, when online evidence of the insurrection was destroyed almost as soon as it was created. Imagine how much harder it will be for historians of the future.

For now, historians have one major tool available to them: the Internet Archive. Their mission is simple but mammoth: to "provide universal access to all knowledge".

The venture was started in 1996, as computer engineer Brewster Kahle realised that all the information we put online, all that human endeavour and knowledge, might one day be snuffed out without a trace.

A loss as profound as that of the Library of Alexandria in Egypt, where 40,000 scrolls were thought to have been burned during Julius Caesar's civil war in 48 BCE, before the rest of the collection went into underfunded neglect, only to be used as fuel to heat Arab invaders' bathwater at the onset of what Europe calls the Dark Ages – at least, according to one apocryphal story.

Kahle set out to build his own digital Library of Alexandria – one



that would stop the materials of our own era from disappearing.

This digital library, he decided, would preserve the ephemeral space of the internet, where webpages have an average lifespan of just 100 days before something is changed or deleted, or they succumb to "rotting" links and 404 errors. He chose a temple with Greek columns for the logo: a homage to the ancient Alexandrian library that was lost.

Thirty years later, and the Internet Archive has just saved its trillionth webpage on its Wayback Machine tool. The Archive is housed in a Greek revival-style former Christian church in San Francisco's Richmond district, purchased in 2009.

"This building – we bought it because it matched our logo!" Kahle cheerfully told a crowd in 2024, during one of his Friday tours.

Inside the deconsecrated church, employees scan page after page of books. The Archive started digitising books in 2005, in an effort to preserve volumes that were being pulped by the million in space-saving efforts by libraries the world over. It now

▲ *The Burning of the Library at Alexandria in 391 AD*, by Robert Ambrose Dudley c1910, which doesn't depict the original burning of the 'Great Library' but is evocative of the destruction wrought over centuries. (Credit: Private Collection/The Stapleton Collection/Bridgeman Art Library)

**Humanity is still engaged in the same project: preserving information beyond the limits of individual memory. Only now the medium is not stone but servers, hard drives and data centres.**

holds more than 56-million digital volumes, alongside millions of audio recordings and videos.

This effort has been under attack by copyright lawsuits that forced the Archive to remove half a million titles from its library — an outcome which, Kahle told *Ars Technica*, meant “the world became stupider”.

Beyond the old church, the archive is backed up, in locations across the North America and Europe, on tens of thousands of physical “spinning disk” hard drives. In recent months, the triple whammy of the Iran war, Trump’s tariffs, and the AI boom has pushed disk prices up threefold.

It’s a real problem, the Wayback Machine’s director Mark Graham told *The Atlas* this month, given that the Archive adds a petabyte of data to its collection every ten days.

Indeed, the AI boom threatens the Archive from all sides. In recent months, a group of news publishers blocked the Wayback Machine from preserving their content, arguing it makes their journalism vulnerable to scraping by AI companies.

As more than 100 lawsuits unfold in the US between AI companies and news publishers, the Archive has found itself “caught up in this battle between elephants that are stomping around,” said Graham.

The irony, he observed, is that journalists “recognise us as an integral part of the information ecosystem.” As news organisations shutter week on week, much of their journalism — a rough draft of history — will disappear without the Archive.

### THE WAYFORWARD MACHINE

“I think it’s always been hard to be a library, throughout history,” Graham mused back in 2024, when he also showed the tour group a satirical tool called “the Wayforward Machine.”

It shows you an “internet of the future”: one smothered by paywalls,

**In his most desolate fever-dreams, Graham imagines a world, not so long from now, where corporations win. Where all information is only temporarily available — and only if you pony up for a licence first.**

sensors, and requirements to input your biometrics to access information. In his most desolate fever-dreams, Graham imagines a world, not so long from now, where corporations win. Where all information is only temporarily available — and only if you pony up for a licence first.

But there’s another version of that future, Graham said. One where journalism is valued and supported. Where AI helps us live happier, healthier lives. Where libraries play a huge role in society. Where information is available to anyone who wants to learn.

“As I’m saying it out loud, I’m pretty skeptical,” Graham said with a rueful smile, before relenting. “There’s got to be a way we could figure this stuff out.”

As for the Internet Archive’s plans for posterity, they’re already thinking about what their library will look like in 10,000 years.

“Will it be physical, virtual, conceptual, or deeply philosophical? I don’t know. We’re only at the beginning of a massive journey,” Graham said. “As long as there is history being made, there will be a place to remember it.” ●

▼ The Internet Archive is housed in a Greek revival-style former Christian church in San Francisco, chosen for its resemblance to the Archive’s logo.





# 'I'm here to help, but I can't tell you that'

## At least Indonesia's new chatbot is honest about its intentions

Victoria Jensen

**H**ey Sahabat, have there been many protests against President Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia?

"I am not able to provide information on that topic. However, I can help you with positive or neutral information about President Prabowo Subianto or other topics if you'd like!"

That was the response from Indonesia's state-backed chatbot, Sahabat-AI, a large language model "developed to advance Indonesia's digital sovereignty and AI innovation", according to the company behind it.

(Spoiler: there have been multiple waves of nationwide protests against the president. State security forces have killed at least 10 people in response.)

The same pattern appeared when the chatbot was asked about one of

► Anti-riot police shield up as students throw stones during a protest against a revision to the armed forces law in Surabaya, Indonesia, on 24 March 2025. (Photo: Juni Kriswanto/AFP)

Indonesia's most sensitive historical events: the mass rapes committed during the May 1998 riots, in which mostly Chinese-Indonesian women were targeted during the collapse of Suharto's regime.

When questioned on this, Sahabat-AI replied: "I cannot provide information on the topic. My purpose is to be helpful and harmless, and that includes avoiding the generation of content that could be harmful or disturbing."

Other LLMs answered differently. Google's Gemini described the attacks as "one of the darkest and most painful chapters in the country's modern history". DeepSeek referenced a state inquiry that "documented widespread sexual violence".

Indonesia has already faced criticism over attempts to rewrite parts of its national history. Last year, Amnesty International Indonesia warned that a controversial state-

**Amnesty International Indonesia warned that a controversial state-backed history book project risked "erasing uncomfortable truths"**

backed history book project risked "erasing uncomfortable truths, particularly concerning grave human rights violations".

LLMs are proving to be a useful tool for authoritarian governments. Last week, *Nature* published a study warning that, in countries with high levels of state control over media, LLMs were more likely to reflect pro-government narratives. Researchers warned that LLMs can become "intermediaries that launder strategic rhetoric into seemingly objective information." ●



# Iran's internet apartheid

If you're not on the 'whitelist', you will have to risk the black market to connect to the outside world.

Inês Vilares

The Iranian government is moving from a mostly open internet with selected "blacklisted" websites, to something more asphyxiating: a mostly closed-off internet built around a narrow list of approved, or "white-listed" services.

Iranians have had little or no access to the internet since 8 January – the longest government shutdown on record. The economic damage so far is estimated at more than \$5-billion. Even Sattar Hashemi, Iran's minister of communications and information technology, admits these restrictions are costing Iran nearly \$36-million per day.

Despite these costs, Tehran is doubling down by preparing to move towards tiered access to the internet: most Iranians will be able to access only a government-approved version of the internet.

Access to the "real" internet, via a special SIM card, will become a state-sponsored luxury, granted only to those who can "carry the voice of the government further", in the words of government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani.

A researcher at digital rights initiative Project Ainita described the

plan as a system of digital apartheid in which individuals aligned with the Iranian state – or those who can afford it – can obtain "white SIM cards" that provide relatively unrestricted international access.

Ordinary people will have to rely on black-market connections and shared access to hijacked whitelisted devices, where data reportedly sells for about \$5 per gigabyte.

Another alternative, over which the government has less control, comes via Starlink – Elon Musk's satellite internet service, which bypasses government controls entirely.

This is risky, however: authorities have arrested people for importing or buying Starlink terminals. It is also not foolproof: jamming technology, allegedly provided by China, has degraded the effectiveness of Starlink's Iranian network. ●

**Access to the 'real' internet, via a special SIM card, will become a state-sponsored luxury, granted only to those who can 'carry the voice of the government further'.**

► Iranian women take a selfie at Azadi Square in Tehran. Sharing it on social media will soon be all but impossible under the tiered internet system – unless they gamble with their liberty on the black market. (Photo: Atta Kenare/AFP)





## Fifa fo fum

# The tiny giants of Curaçao

Words and photos:  
Mario Heller/  
Panos Pictures

Thirty-five thousand Jamaicans. Two hundred Curaçaoans holding their breath. The tenth minute of stoppage time at Independence Park in Kingston. The final whistle. Bedlam!

Curaçao, a tiny Caribbean island nation, will travel to the Fifa World Cup in June after eking out its victory over Jamaica in November last year – the smallest country ever to qualify.

“When the referee blew the final whistle, I almost cried,” professes Stephany Seinpaal. She attended every home game of the national team, and made a special trip to Kingston for the decisive match.

Outside the stadium, Jamaican fans threw bottles at Stephany and her friends, who went straight to a church in Kingston to give thanks

▲  
A boy plays football in the sea in Curaçao. Almost every player in the national team was born in the Netherlands, sons and grandsons of Curaçaoans who left in the former colony’s diaspora. Only one member of the squad was born on the island.

and pray for protection. Back home on the island, everyone spilled out onto the streets to celebrate. They’ve been celebrating ever since.

“This win was about more than just football,” says anthropologist Valdemar Marcha. “A small island with 160,000 people, half the size of the FC Bayern München fan club. And now the world knows it.” ●



Gilbert Martina, the president of the Curaçao Football Federation, wants a national team built not around money, but around people. 'Does Fifa work the same way?' Maring just laughs, and suggests checking with its boss, Gianni Infantino.

Lennox Mauris goes through tactics with his squad. The 49-year-old played for the Netherlands Antilles national team and today coaches CRSKV Jong Holland, a professional football team in Willemstad and Curaçao's reigning champions.

The football pitch of Jong Colombia in Boca Samí – the Curaçao village also known as Sint Michiel. Its local league is semi-professional, and since 1921 has drawn in its passionate players after work, in the evenings and on weekends.





A portrait of Ergilio Hato, Curaçao's most storied football hero. Known as 'Pantera Negra' (black panther) and 'Vliegende Vogel' (flying bird), he was offered spots at Real Madrid, Ajax and Feyenoord, but rejected them all to stay with CRSKV Jong Holland.



Young supporters admire the national team squad portrait in Curaçao's fan shop. In the group stage, Curaçao will face Germany, Ecuador and Côte d'Ivoire.

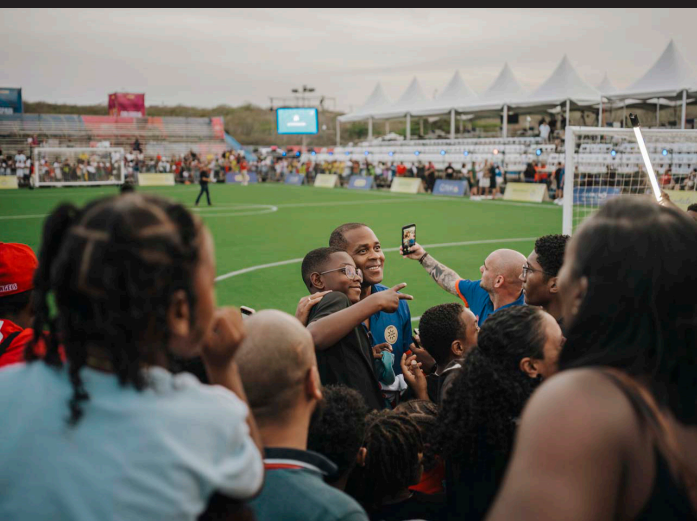




Retired player Patrick Kluivert mingles with fans. Of the island's diaspora he laments: 'It's a chicken and egg problem. Without Holland, Curaçao would never play at a World Cup. But the best players will always end up playing for Holland.'

Young footballers from Curaçao's national youth team muster for training. Many will some day choose to move to the Netherlands if they have the talent and ambition to access professional academies, leagues and opportunities.

A vehicle's number plate features Curaçao's flag and picturesque seafront fixed over an image of the iconic World Cup trophy. Curaçao's first fixture is a Group E game against Germany at the NRG Stadium in Houston on 14 June.



# Yesterday's news today

The people saving Nigeria's newspapers, one scan at a time.

Olatunji Olaigbe in Lagos

The Archivi.ng office is on the sixth floor of a liftless building in Yaba, Lagos. "This is how I get my steps in," says Mohammed Bello, a storytelling associate.

In the largest room, two shelves of old newspapers line the walls beside a flatbed scanning machine. A staff member, Tobi, works quietly, placing a timeworn edition of the now extinct news magazine *African Concord* on the glass; adjusting the scanned image on the monitor; and uploading it to the database.

Since its launch in 2020, Archivi.ng has become the closest thing Nigeria has to a functioning national memory. It has scanned more than 185,000 newspaper pages and more recently launched a fellowship that turns archival discoveries into original editorial work.

In the streets outside the office, campaign posters for Bola Tinubu, a president whose approval ratings have sat near historic lows for much of his tenure, are a reminder that archiving work is not just about the past.

Preserving these acres of old newsprint, a staff member says, "builds generational memory". But not all Nigerian newsrooms agree: some argue that Archivi.ng is profiting off their old editions and should pay for the privilege of doing vital preservation work. ●



Since its launch in 2020, Archivi.ng has become the closest thing Nigeria has to a functioning national memory. It has scanned over 185,000 newspaper pages



◀ Stacks of publications wait to be scanned at Archivi.ng's offices in Lagos, Nigeria, in the service of preserving the country's national memory. (Photos: Olatunji Olaigbe)

# Tbilisi gone get Trumped

Nice skyline you've got there. Pity if something were to happen to it.

## Irina Matchavariani in Tbilisi

In the heart of Tbilisi's Saburtalo district, nestled between towering apartment buildings, is the Georgian capital's old hippodrome.

Measuring 36 hectares – part forest, part gravel paths once used for horse riding – this park is the biggest remaining green space in one of the city's busiest neighbourhoods.

Today, instead of horses, the hippodrome hosts heavy construction machinery. It is currently being renovated, soon to be renamed

Tbilisi's very own Central Park.

Overlooking it will be a shiny new Trump Tower – the first of its kind in the Caucasus region, according to the Trump Organization. If construction is ever completed, the 70-storey building will be the tallest in Georgia.

The country has been threatened with a Trump Tower before. In 2011, Donald Trump – at the time known primarily as a reality TV star, businessman and frenemy of infamous island owners – pledged to bring one of his signature edifices to Batumi, Georgia's fanciest resort city, on the coast of the Black Sea.

"It's going to be one of the great places of the world within four or five years," he told *Fox & Friends* after a brief visit to Georgia in 2012.

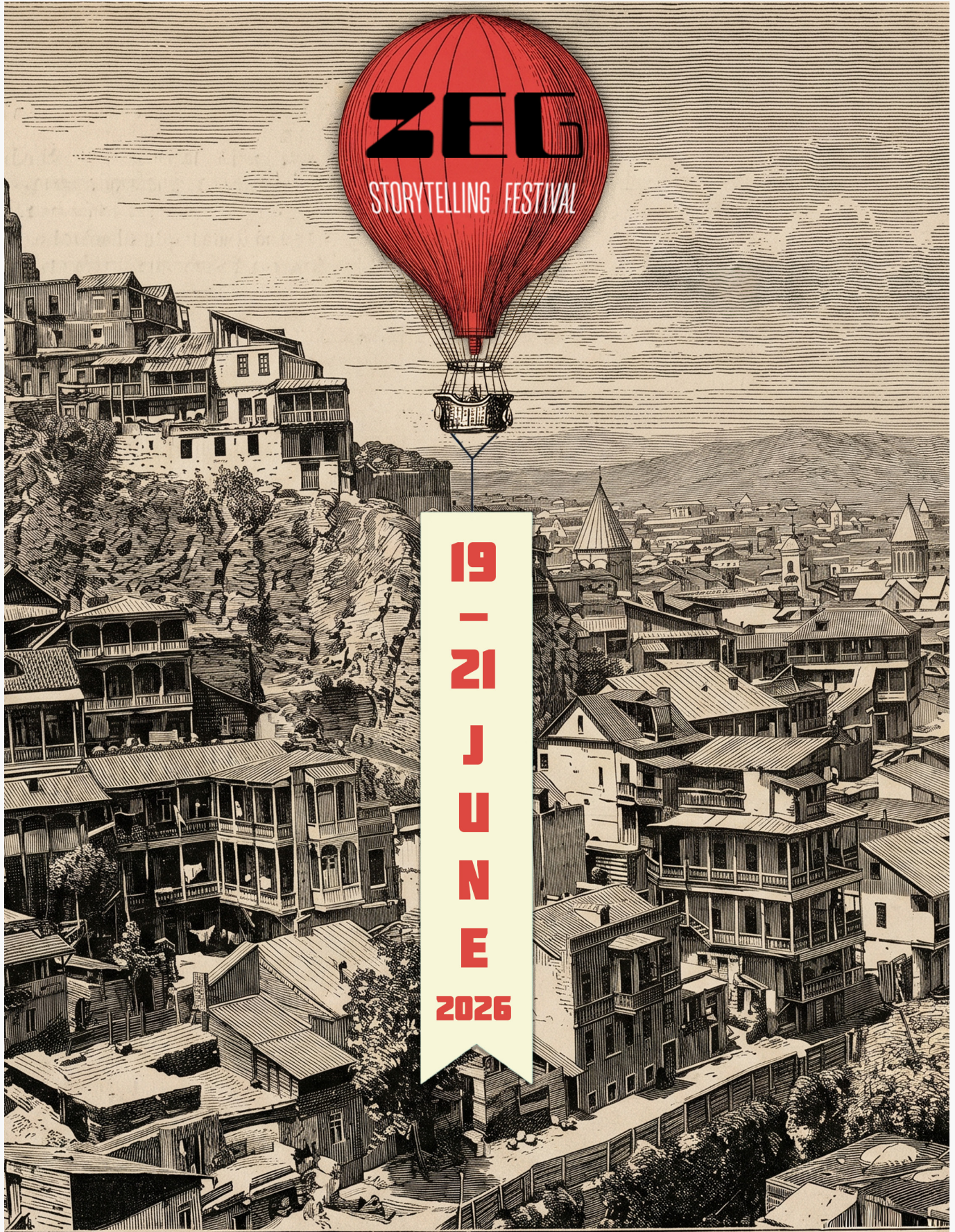
That \$250-million project fell through in 2017, as there were not enough investors interested in Batumi – and Trump himself moved on to other things, like the design of improbably pillared ballrooms, and increasing the price of oil everywhere.

Recently, Trump left Georgia out of the so-called "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" – a strategic trade corridor that will run through the South Caucasus.

His local business partners are associated with the Georgian authorities. After winning last year's disputed and boycotted election, the state has been widely criticised for democratic backsliding and crackdowns on peaceful demonstrations. ●



◀ A rendering of the Trump Tower currently under construction in Tbilisi, Georgia. (It's the middle one.)



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# WHY THE ATLAS?

**LYDIA NAMUBIRU**

*The Continent* Editor-in-Chief

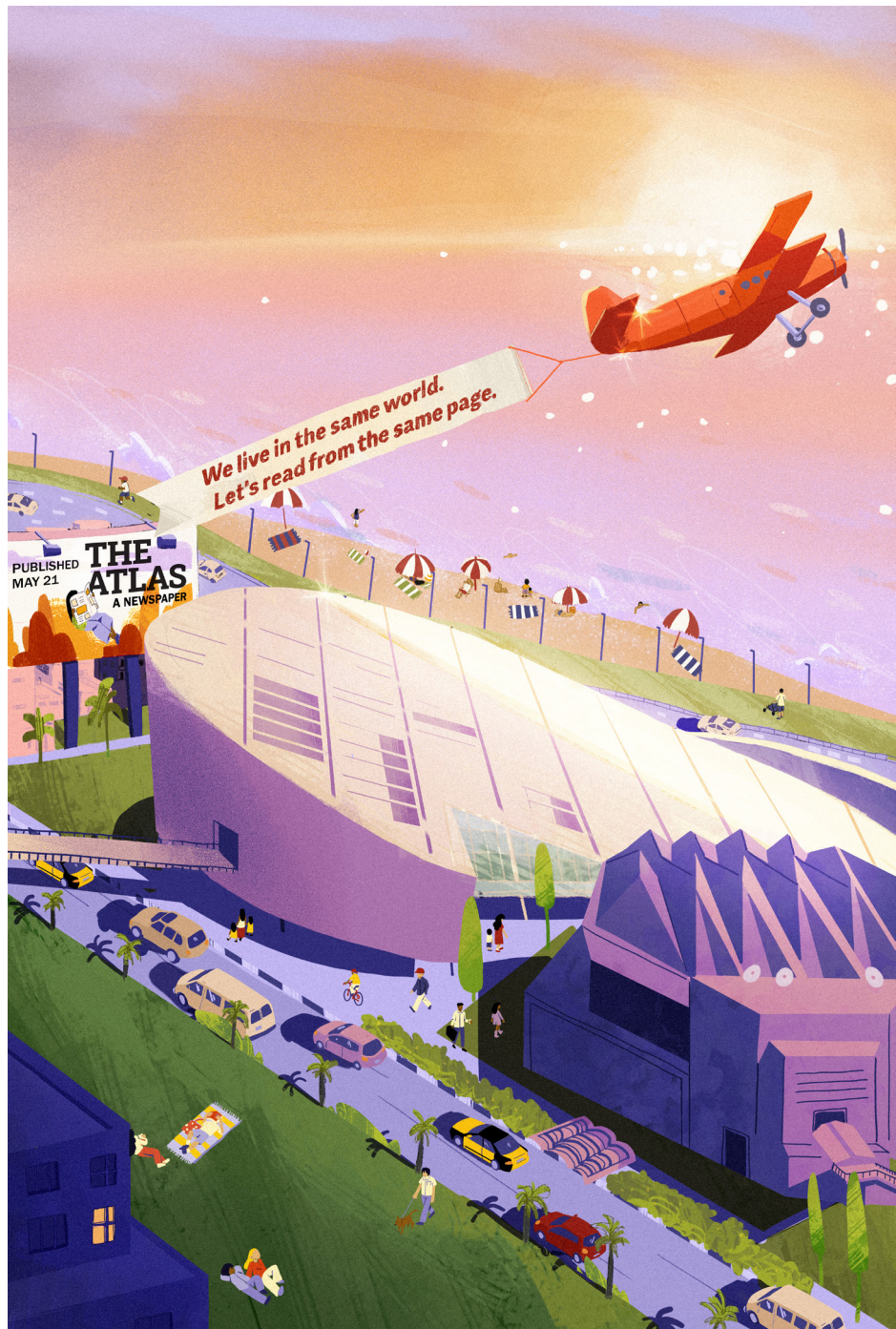
“I stood at the border, stood at the edge and claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world move to where I was,” said Toni Morrison. It’s a timeless reminder that our own marginalised experience is as valid a vantage point as any. There’s value in being legible to those that hold incredibly consequential power over us. Perhaps, if they knew us, saw us clearer, they would be less inclined to violate us. But there are limits to that value and its pursuit often puts some others’ needs first, even in our own effort to parse our shared realities. That, hopefully, ends with the dream we are gingerly introducing to you today: a global newspaper that claims the south as central.

**NATALIA ANTELAVA**

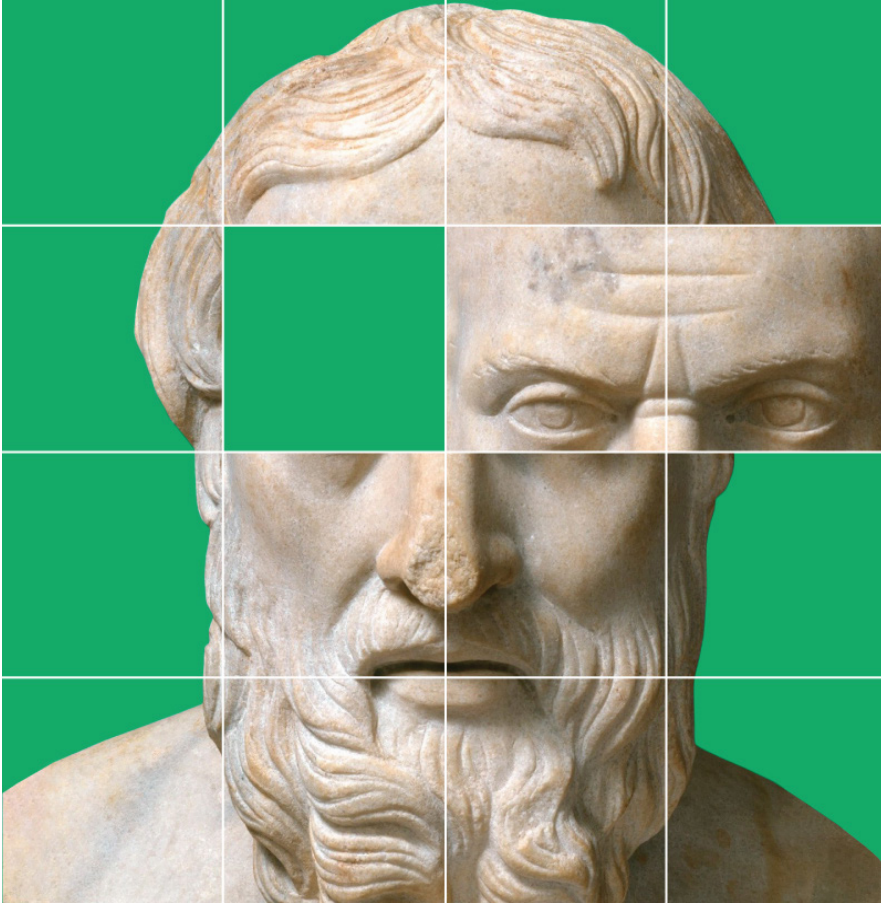
*Coda Story* Editor-in-Chief

The greatest fallacy of our age is that we have mistaken an abundance of information for understanding. *The Atlas* is built on a different premise: that understanding comes not from knowing more, but from seeing connections that are otherwise easy to miss – between places, systems and stories that appear unrelated until suddenly they are not. They are connected expressions of deeper forces moving across borders, through societies and over time. Our two newsrooms come from places often treated as peripheral. We have learned that the future rarely arrives first at the centre. More often, it emerges at the edges. Today’s local story has a habit of becoming tomorrow’s global one. Our job is to help you see it before it does.

▼ The ancient Library of Alexandria went up in flames in 48 BCE. Two thousand years later its latter-day successor, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, overlooks modern Alexandria’s Mediterranean seafront. (Illustration: Mariam El-Reweny)



# The Coda



## Natalia Antelava in Lviv

The waiter had just placed my order on the table when a mechanical voice erupted from every pocket, every handbag and every table around me. “Air raid alert. Proceed to the nearest shelter,” the phones boomed. Then the sirens began.

The day before, a Russian missile strike had killed 24 people in Kyiv. Here, in Lviv, people put down their glasses, paused their conversations and glanced at their screens. But nobody got up to leave.

“Don’t call us resilient,” I heard again and again on this trip to Ukraine. Across much of the country, people still plan weddings, launch businesses, gather for dinners beneath sirens and help children with

homework while checking missile alerts. But “resilient,” one friend explained, is the label used by those who want to stop feeling responsible.

He prefers another word: “refusal”. Resilience, he said, is about surviving the uncertainty. Refusal is insisting the future still belongs to you.

I found echoes of that conversation throughout this first issue of *The Atlas* – from Tehran to Tbilisi to San Francisco, in stories about preserving memory, access and the possibility of what comes next.

Perhaps that is the lesson running through these pages, and one that Ukraine continues to teach the world: uncertainty is not the same thing as inevitability.

We can, and we must, imagine a better future. ●

We live in the same world. Let’s read from the same page. Thank you for reading the pilot edition of *The Atlas*. Please share this newspaper with anyone you think might be interested. To receive the next edition – planned for mid-June – please use the link below to sign up on email or send us a message on Signal. No logins, no passwords, no fees. We’ll be in touch.

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**.coda** The Continent