

A week's worth of science news, Nov. 5

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[PETER CALAMAI](#)

This week's column is reported from Baltimore, Md., location of the New Horizons in Science annual briefing by the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing, which Peter Calamai attended last week.

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Sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll

Free-flowing beer, rampant sexual congress and wailing music. That may sound very modern but this particular debauchery actually dates back 35 centuries, to around 1479 B.C. in Egypt's golden age.

"These people were coming together to get knee-walking, passed-out drunk," archaeologist Betsy Bryan told the briefing. Yet before passing out, there was plenty of sex, recorded in graffiti carved into stones. There was even the equivalent of "designated drivers," whose task was to ensure these party animals came to no permanent harm.

Bryan was describing as yet-unpublished discoveries from a temple at Luxor, Egypt, where the professor from Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University has been excavating for 11 years.

The temple was dedicated to the goddess Mut, wife of Amun, the greatest national god of ancient Egypt. The Mut temple is linked by a processional way to Amun's central temple at Karnak, which scholars consider the largest existing religious complex in the world.

Although the current ruins date back only to 700 B.C., the researchers have uncovered stones and other artefacts from previous Mut temples up to 1,000 years earlier.

The debauchery — far too explicit to detail in a family newspaper — is recorded in stone carvings from the reign of Hatshepsut (1479 to 1458), a woman who was one of Egypt's most successful pharaohs.

Bryan said the sex and drunkenness appears to have been a religious experience, a way of achieving an epiphany with the goddess Mut, whose hymn was "Bring to her her Red Beer."

Fear and loathing

Lots of people talk about politicians who prey on the hopes and fears of the ignorant masses. Ted Brader has done something about it.

Brader is a political science professor at the University of Michigan. Here's what he found about political campaign ads that rely on emotional appeals, either positive or negative: They can be effective in winning support. Music and imagery can trigger predictable emotional responses. The reasons commonly cited by journalists and political mavens, such as leading voters to like and dislike individual candidates, aren't why largely emotional appeals work. They're more likely to influence voters concerned about issues than the so-called "ignorant masses."

Brader came to these conclusions after manipulating several hundred adults with two TV campaign ads during the 1998 Democratic primary in Michigan. The script was identical for both ads, but the music and images differed.

One aimed for a "feel good" appeal and the other tried to evoke fear and anxiety. In Canadian terms, for "feel good" think of the Bloc Québécois ads in the last federal campaign; for fear/anxiety the Liberals' "guns in our streets" ad.

Brader also showed that a photograph changed the effect of positive and negative news stories about immigration.

Support for reducing immigration rose when the photograph was of a man of Hispanic appearance and the story implied immigrants would take jobs away from Americans. When the man looked European, however, anti-immigration support didn't change between positive and negative versions of the story.

Markets rule OK

If you want to know which team is going to win a major league baseball, football or basketball game, just phone Las Vegas. The bookmakers are right almost all the time, says economist Justin Wolfers.

"This means you no longer have to read the sports section. You merely have to get that one summary statistic — the betting odds," Wolfers said at the briefing.

The professor from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania cited the collective wisdom of gamblers as just one example of an emerging field of research known as prediction markets.

The research is based on the premise that market prices alone are a sufficient statistic for accurate forecasting of outcomes, because they pull together all publicly available information.

Prediction markets extend well beyond the world of sports. A trading site operated by the University of Iowa for bets on American elections has a better track record than the Gallup Poll. An online exchange to trade "stock" in new movies invariably indicates which flick will top ticket sales in the opening week.

As well, markets can be created expressly for predictions. At Hewlett-Packard, salesmen were allowed to bet on next month's volume of printer sales. Six months out of eight, these bets were closer to actual sales than the official company projections, even when only a dozen salesmen placed bets totalling no more than \$400.

The economist's research has also found the best way to make a prediction market accurate: Add as much uninformed betting as possible, because "the dumb betting draws in the smart betters."

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The Origins of the Future, by John Gribbin (Yale University Press)

Out this month is what may be the most ambitious volume yet from this master of popular science writing. Gribbin devotes a chapter each to 10 seminal questions where research should make major inroads over the next decade, such as how the universe began and how our world will end (not necessarily, it turns out, when the sun becomes a red supergiant in 5.5 billion years).

The opening chapter, "How Do We Know the Things We Think We Know," should be required reading for all the federal politicians claiming their current plans to tackle climate change are "scientific." None of them is.

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