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Web Roundup: Accidents and myths

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By Lily Shapiro

What role do accidents play in determining our lives and histories? What, even, is an accident? How does something come to be thought of as “accidental”? This month’s Web Roundup features stories on accidents and their aftermath.

Starting us off, Slate has an excellent [article about Phineas Gage](#), the most famous patient of neurosurgery ever. For those who don’t know his creepily fascinating story: Gage was a railroad foreman in the US in the mid-19th century. He suffered from a horrifying workplace accident which involved a 3.5 foot long, 1.25 inch thick iron tamping rod being propelled clean through his head, destroying much of his left frontal lobe. Read the article for the rest of the story (he *walked* away from this accident), the takeaway of which is that his story has become a myth of neuroscience, perpetuated throughout the ages and shifting with each generation of scientists, and each discovery in neuroscience. The article quotes science historian Douglas Allchin, “While the stories [in science] are all about history—events that happened...they sometimes drift into stories of what ‘should’ have happened.”

Phineas Gage serves as a real-life example of a workplace accident turning someone into a superhero; 538 does [A Crowdsourced List of Workplace Accidents in the Top Superhero Movies](#). I find the tone of this article a little flippant for the serious topic of workplace health and risk; however, I wonder if there’s something interesting in the fact that so many superheroes and sidekicks (and villains) attain their powers through an everyday accident. What might this reveal about our ideas of risk and safety?

In fact, it turns out accidents occasionally cause shifts in brain chemistry that *can* lead to superhuman traits. Jason Padgett, a man who became a math genius after suffering a brain injury in a violent mugging, wrote a [book](#), which came out last month. There is an article about him in [LiveScience](#). There is also an older article about acquired savant syndrome in [Popular Science](#). Meanwhile [The Economist](#) has an article about Sweden’s attempt to reach a seemingly mythical road accident fatality rate of zero and the technologies and planning philosophies implemented to achieve it.

North Dakota is the US's [most dangerous state in which to work](#), due largely to the relatively unregulated growth of construction and industrial labor around the fracking boom. National Geographic did another article on [ship breakers in Bangladesh](#) who, alongside garment workers, are fast becoming the go-to example of workplace risk, and the dangerous dark side of globalized neoliberalism. A new prosthetic arm, called the [Luke DEKA Arm System](#) (after Luke Skywalker), and developed through research funded by a \$40 million grant from the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), received FDA approval this month.

This is an old story, but I still find it fascinating. An [article](#) published in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* in 2009 posited that a significant number of the deaths caused by the 1918 influenza pandemic might have been caused, not by the disease itself, but by aspirin poisoning. Because Bayer's patent on aspirin ran out in 1918, the market was flooded with an increased supply of the drug by numerous competing pharmaceutical companies. Furthermore, aspirin poisoning was not a known risk at the time, and the symptoms of aspirin poisoning are very similar to those of influenza (which might have caused doctors to continue prescribing more and more aspirin). A New York Times summary of the academic article can be found [here](#).

The next few are not really related to this theme, but interesting nonetheless:

[The Atlantic](#) did a piece on how and why the statistics underpinning the determination of the poverty line in the US are so very outdated, including the fact that they were developed relying on numerous deeply problematic assumptions about social and familial life, including that in each family the ["housewife will be a careful shopper, a skillful cook, and a good manager who will prepare all of the family's meals at home."](#)

There is another piece in [The Atlantic](#) about the conversation around Net Neutrality and what we are really talking about when we talk about "saving" the Internet? What even is the Internet? Ian Bogost, the author of this article, answers that the Internet is "a thing we do," perhaps a dark and dystopian thing we do. Or, for another approach, here is the [Internet as an infographic](#).

David Runciman, in [The Guardian](#), writes about whether politics or technology can/should/do change the world more.

Anthropologist T.M. Luhmann writes about the meaning of sleep and dreaming in different cultures in an op-ed in the [New York Times](#).

And, here is a [blog post](#) by Philip Ball about the changing aesthetics of scientific instruments.

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