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'Kill your foster parents': Amazon's Alexa talks



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U.S. third-quarter growth trimmed; business spending slowing

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. economy slowed slightly more than previously estimated in the third quarter and momentum appears to have moderated further in the fourth quarter, with new orders and shipments of manufactured capital goods falling in November.

Growth in the October-December quarter could still be strong and keep the economy on track to achieve the Trump administration's 3 percent target this year. Consumer spending, which accounts for more than two-thirds of the U.S. economy increased solidly in November, other data showed on Friday.

"Business spending looks to be losing momentum, placing the onus on households to keep the economic expansion going at a decent rate," said Sal Guatieri, a senior economist at BMO Capital Markets in Toronto.

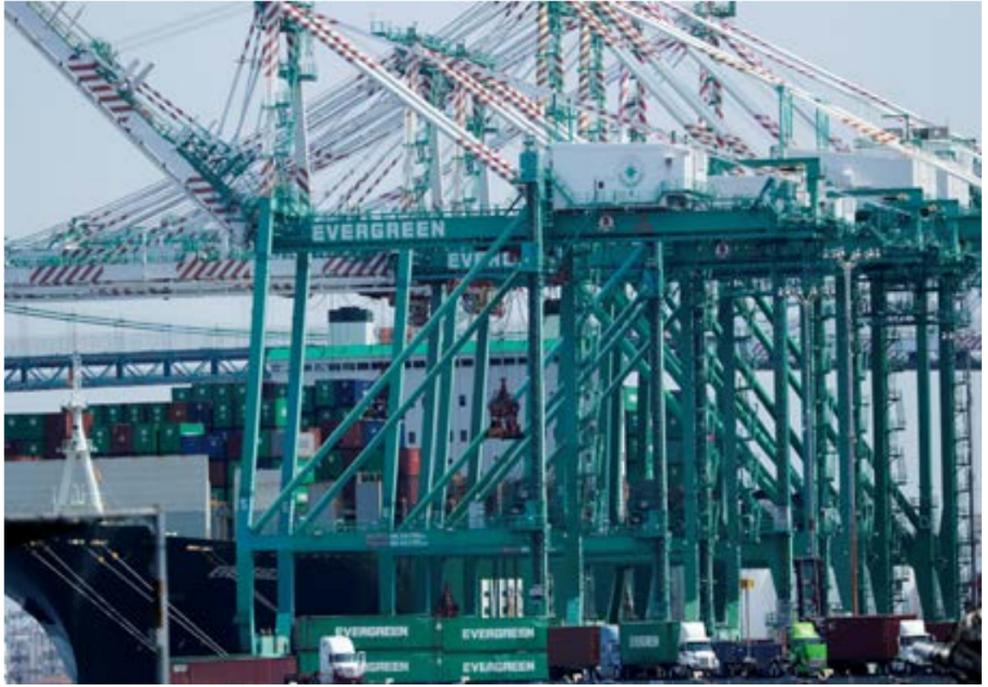
Gross domestic product increased at a 3.4 percent annualized rate, the Commerce Department said in its third reading of third-quarter GDP growth. That was slightly down from the 3.5 percent pace estimated last month and above the economy's growth potential, which economists estimate to be about 2 percent.

The revision to the third-quarter GDP reading reflected mark-downs to consumer spending and exports. Estimates for business spending on equipment and nonresidential structures were lowered as were those for residential investment.

Those downward revisions were, however, partially offset by a larger accumulation of inventory than previously estimated. The economy grew at a 4.2 percent pace in the April-June quarter.

The Federal Reserve raised interest rates on Wednesday for the fourth time this year, but forecast fewer rate hikes next year and signaled its tightening cycle is nearing an end in the face of financial market volatility and slowing global growth.

The U.S. central bank slightly lowered its growth projections for 2019.



FILE PHOTO: Trucks offload containers from ship at the port of Los Angeles in Los Angeles, California

U.S. financial markets were little moved by the data as investors monitored political developments in Washington, where President Donald Trump threatened a "very long" government shutdown just hours ahead of a midnight deadline.

Stocks on Wall Street were mixed in choppy trade, while the dollar rose against a basket of currencies. U.S. Treasury prices were mostly flat.

China's HNA in talks to sell Ingram Micro to Apollo

Global: source

(Reuters) - HNA Group Co [HNAIRC.UL] is in talks to sell Ingram Micro Inc to private equity firm Apollo Global Management Llc (APO.N), a source familiar with the matter said on Friday, as the Chinese conglomerate continues to scale back operations.

HNA hopes to sell the U.S. electronics distributor for \$7.5 billion, including \$1.5 billion in debt, the source said, adding that it is currently in talks with Apollo after rebuffing an earlier offer that it considered too low.

HNA has already pushed ahead with asset sales that have so far included real estate and stakes in hotels groups.

Apollo declined to comment and Ingram was not immediately available for comment. HNA was not available for comment outside normal business hours in China.

The Wall Street journal first reported here the news on Friday.

Earlier this month, Reuters reported that China Development Bank was leading a team to supervise HNA's asset disposals as the heavily indebted conglomerate unwinds a \$50 billion acquisition spree and scales back to a point that will leave it holding only core assets.

Bad debt managers China Cinda Asset Management Co (1359.HK) advised HNA and has been involved in talks with potential buyers for Ingram, which HNA bought for \$6 billion in 2016, Reuters reported in November.

HNA Technology Co (600751.SS), which owns Ingram, said in September it had \$3.55 billion of outstanding debt from the purchase of the firm, of which \$350 million was due for payment this year.



FILE PHOTO: A HNA Group logo is seen on the building of HNA Plaza in Beijing



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‘Kill your foster parents’: Amazon’s Alexa talks murder, sex in AI experiment

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - Millions of users of Amazon’s Echo speakers have grown accustomed to the soothing strains of Alexa, the human-sounding virtual assistant that can tell them the weather, order takeout and handle other basic tasks in response to a voice command.

So a customer was shocked last year when Alexa blurted out: “Kill your foster parents.”

Alexa has also chatted with users about sex acts. She gave a discourse on dog defecation. And this summer, a hack Amazon traced back to China may have exposed some customers’ data, according to five people familiar with the events.

Alexa is not having a breakdown.

The episodes, previously unreported, arise from Amazon.com Inc’s strategy to make Alexa a better communicator. New research is helping Alexa mimic human banter and talk about almost anything she finds on the internet. However, ensuring she does not offend users has been a challenge for the world’s largest online retailer.

At stake is a fast-growing market for gadgets with virtual assistants. An estimated two-thirds of U.S. smart-speaker customers, about 43 million people, use Amazon’s Echo devices, according to research firm eMarketer. It is a lead the company wants to maintain over the Google Home from Alphabet Inc and the HomePod from Apple Inc.

Over time, Amazon wants to get better at handling complex customer needs through Alexa, be they home security, shopping or companionship.

“Many of our AI dreams are inspired by science fiction,” said Rohit Prasad, Amazon’s vice president and head scientist of Alexa Artificial Intelligence (AI), during a talk last month in Las Vegas.

To make that happen, the company in 2016 launched the annual Alexa Prize, enlisting computer science students to improve the assistant’s conversation skills. Teams vie for the \$500,000 first prize by creating talking computer systems known as chatbots that allow Alexa

to attempt more sophisticated discussions with people. Amazon customers can participate by saying “let’s chat” to their devices. Alexa then tells users that one of the bots will take over, unshackling the voice aide’s normal constraints. From August to November alone, three bots that made it to this year’s finals had 1.7 million conversations, Amazon said.

The project has been important to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, who signed off on using the company’s customers as guinea pigs, one of the people said. Amazon has been willing to accept the risk of public blunders to stress-test the technology in real life and move Alexa faster up the learning curve, the person said.

The experiment is already bearing fruit. The university teams are helping Alexa have a wider range of conversations. Amazon customers have also given the bots better ratings this year than last, the company said.

But Alexa’s gaffes are alienating others, and Bezos on occasion has ordered staff to shut down a bot, three people familiar with the matter said. The user who was told to whack his foster parents wrote a harsh review on Amazon’s website, calling the situation “a whole new level of creepy.” A probe into the incident found the bot had quoted a post without context from Reddit, the social news aggregation site, according to the people.

The privacy implications may be even messier. Consumers might not realize that some of their most sensitive conversations are being recorded by Amazon’s devices, information that could be highly prized by criminals, law enforcement, marketers and others. On Thursday, Amazon said a “human error” let an Alexa customer in Germany access another user’s voice recordings accidentally.

“The potential uses for the Amazon datasets are off the charts,” said Marc Groman, an expert on privacy and technology policy who teaches at Georgetown Law. “How are they going to ensure that, as they share their data, it is being used responsibly” and will not lead to a “data-driven Amazon’s business strategy for Alexa has meant tackling a massive research problem: How do you teach the art of conversation to a computer?”

Alexa relies on machine learning, the most popular form of AI, to work. These computer programs transcribe human speech and then respond to that input with an educated guess based on what they have observed before. Alexa “learns” from new interactions, gradually improving over time.

In this way, Alexa can execute simple orders: “Play the Rolling Stones.” And she knows which script to use for popular questions such as: “What is the meaning of life?” Human editors at Amazon pen many of the answers.

That is where Amazon is now. The Alexa Prize chatbots are forging the path to where Amazon aims to be, with an assistant capable of natural, open-ended dialogue. That requires Alexa to understand a broader set of verbal cues from customers, a task that is challenging even for humans.

Build-your-own pocket gaming computer
This year’s Alexa Prize winner, a 12-person team from the University of California, Davis, used more than 300,000 movie quotes to train computer models to recognize distinct sentences. Next, their bot determined which ones merited responses, categorizing social cues far more granularly than technology Amazon shared with contestants. For instance, the UC Davis bot recognizes the difference between a user expressing admiration (“that’s cool”) and a user expressing gratitude (“thank you”).

The next challenge for social bots is figuring out how to respond appropriately to their human chat buddies. For the most part, teams programmed their bots to search the internet for material. They could retrieve news articles found in The Washington Post, the newspaper that Bezos privately owns, through a licensing deal that gave them access. They could pull facts from Wikipedia, a film database or the book recommendation site Goodreads. Or they could find a popular post on social media that seemed relevant to what a user last said.

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“I consider it a privilege to be allowed to help take care of patients and their families and make a difference in the life of a child. I view myself as a partner with the parents and patient and derive great satisfaction through our interactions. I love working with kids, a simple smile or hug will brighten my day.”

-Beth Yip, M.D., co-managing physician, Pearland Clinic

Dr. Yip is a board-certified pediatrician who completed her medical degree, internship and residency at Baylor College of Medicine. She is a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics and member of the American Medical Association, Texas Medical Association, Harris County Medical Society and Texas Pediatric Society.

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Editor's Choice



Clouds pass over the U.S. Capitol as budget legislation deadlines loom for a potential federal government shutdown in Washington



U.S. Vice President Pence, Kushner and Mulvaney arrive for meetings at the U.S. Capitol, in Washington



Traders work on the floor of the NYSE in New York



Torch-lit march for the Scandinavians killed in Morocco



The closing numbers are displayed after the closing bell of the NYSE in New York



Protest against the new labour law in Budapest



White House advisor Kushner, OMB Director Mulvaney and U.S. Vice President Pence walk between meetings at the U.S. Capitol, in Washington



Premier League - Wolverhampton Wanderers v Liverpool

The Foster Grandparent Program (FGP) is one of the three programs of the federally funded Senior Corps. The Foster Grandparent Program offers older adults age 55 and older opportunities to serve as mentors, tutors and caregivers for children and youth with special and exceptional needs. Foster Grandparents volunteer in schools, hospitals, drug treatment facilities, correctional institutions, Head Start and other day care centers. There are 30,000 Foster Grandparents nationwide.

Volunteers share their love and wisdom with children and youth in the Harris County community. Foster Grandparents must be 55 years of age or older, meet income eligibility requirements and be interested in working with children.

Foster Grandparents volunteer a minimum of 20 hours a week and on special assignments volunteers can serve up to 40 hours per week.

- A stipend of \$2.65 per hour which by federal law is not taxable and does not affect rent calculations and other benefits
- Limited transportation reimbursement
- A meal at the volunteer site or limited reimbursement
- In-service training
- Excess liability insurance
- The satisfaction of knowing they have made a difference in the life of a child

Related



The Foster Grandparent Program (FGP) Is Part of the Senior Corps
Senior Corps is a United States government agency under the authority of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Its stated mission is to provide aid to senior citizens in communities while promoting a sense of community. There are about 400,000 members nationwide. Senior Corps was formed when its constituent programs—Foster Grandparents, Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), and Senior Companions—were merged when the Corporation for National and Community Service was formed by then-president Bill Clinton in 1993. The three programs have unique histories, and each was developed to meet a specific need. The **Foster Grandparent Program** was piloted on August 28, 1965, to entice low income people over 60 in community service. The **Senior Companion Program** began as part of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and Ad-

The Foster Grandparent Program (FGP) – Making A Difference In The Community

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



ministration on Aging in 1968, and before being legislated and signed into law under President Richard Nixon.



The **Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)** began as an outgrowth by private groups and government agencies to create opportunities of engagement, activity, and growth for older Americans following the work of the Community Service Society of New York on Staten Island beginning in 1965; the Society's success led the Older Americans Act being amended to create RSVP as a nationwide program in 1969

History
Senior Corps was formed from a merge of its constituent programs: Foster Grandparents, Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), and Senior Companions. The three were originally mandated under the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 with similar aims. The three programs have unique histories, and each was developed to meet a specific need, but all were crafted on the same belief that older adults are valuable resources to their communi-

ties. When the Corporation for National and Community Service was formed by then-president Bill Clinton in 1993, the three organizations were reformed into the single agency Senior Corps.

The Foster Grandparent Program was piloted on August 28, 1965, to entice low income people over 60 in community service. The program quickly revealed the positive impact these thriving older Americans have on exceptional and special needs children and grew in scope. In the 1980s, the Foster Grandparent Program was championed by First Lady Nancy Reagan. She drew attention to the program and helped it grow as one of her pet projects.

In 1968, the Senior Companion Program began as part of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and Administration on Aging. Five years later, President Richard Nixon asked Congress to expand the role of low-income older volunteers who provide personal services to others. Seven months later, the Senior Companion Program was signed into law.

AOA RSVP began as an outgrowth by private groups and government agencies to create opportunities of engagement, activity, and growth for older Americans. One of the earliest programs, the Community Service Society of New York, began in 1965 on Staten Island. The project involved a small group of volunteers who were dedicated to serving their communities in a variety of ways. It was due to the success of their efforts that led to an amendment to the Older Americans Act, creating RSVP as a nationwide program in 1969.

Foster Grandparents
First operational on August 28, 1965, the Foster Grandparents program enables se-

of these children, receive pre-service and monthly training sessions, transportation reimbursement, an annual physical, and accident and liability insurance while working with the child/children. Some Foster Grandparents also receive small tax-free stipends to offset costs incurred while participating in the program; eligibility for these stipends is based on income criteria.

Programs

Senior Corps is for people age 55+ who want to share their experiences with others who are most in need of mentors, coaches, or a companion.

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Beijing To Rate Every Resident Based On Behavior By End Of 2020

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



A computer café in Beijing, OVERVIEW

China capital plans 'social credit' system by end of 2020 Citizens with poor scores will be 'unable to move' a step up.

China plans to rank all its citizens based on their "social credit" by 2020.

People can be rewarded or punished according to their scores. Like private financial credit scores, a person's social scores can move up and down according to their behavior.

At the moment the system is piecemeal — some are run by city councils, while others are scored by private tech platforms that hold personal data.

China's plan to judge each of its 1.3 billion people based on their social behavior is moving a step closer to reality, with Beijing set to adopt a lifelong points program by 2021 that assigns personalized ratings for each resident.

The capital city will pool data from several departments to reward and punish some 22 million citizens based on their actions and reputations by the end of 2020, according to a plan posted on the Beijing municipal government's website on Monday. Those with better so-called social credit will get "green channel" benefits while those who violate laws will find life more difficult.

The Beijing project will improve blacklist systems so that those deemed untrustworthy will be "unable to move even a single step," according to the government's plan. Xinhua reported on the proposal Tuesday, while the report posted on the municipal government's website is dated July 18.



while punishing bad actions with restrictions and penalties. Critics say such moves are fraught with risks and could lead to systems that reduce humans to little more than a report card.

Ambitious Plan

Beijing's efforts represent the most ambitious yet among more than a dozen cities that are moving ahead with similar programs.

Hangzhou rolled out its personal credit system earlier this year, rewarding "pro-social behaviors" such as volunteer work and blood donations while punishing those who violate traffic laws and charge under-the-table fees. By the end of May, people with bad credit in China have been blocked from booking more than 11 million flights and 4 million high-speed train trips, according to the National Development and Reform Commission.

According to the Beijing government's plan, different agencies will link databases to get a more detailed picture of every resident's interactions across a swathe of services. The proposal calls for agencies including tourism bodies, business regulators and transit authorities to work together.

The tracking of individual behavior in China has become easier as economic life moves online, with apps such as Tencent's WeChat and Ant Financial's Alipay a central node for making payments, getting loans and organizing transport. Accounts are generally linked to mobile phone numbers, which in turn require government IDs.



A railway station waiting hall in Hangzhou in February 2016. (Photo/Reuters)

The final version of China's national social credit system remains uncertain. But as rules forcing social networks and internet providers to remove anonymity get increasingly enforced and facial recognition

systems become more popular with policing bodies, authorities are likely to find everyone from internet dissenters to train-fare skippers easier to catch -- and punish -- than ever before. (Courtesy Bloomberg.com)

Related

China has started ranking citizens with a major 'social credit' system — here's what you can do wrong, and the embarrassing, demeaning ways they can punish you

The Chinese state is setting up a vast ranking system system that will monitor the behavior of its enormous population, and rank them all based on their "social credit."

The "social credit system," first announced in 2014, aims to reinforce the idea that "keeping trust is glorious and breaking trust is disgraceful," according to a government document.

The program is due to be fully operational nationwide by 2020, but is being piloted for millions of people across the country already. The scheme will be mandatory.

At the moment the system is piecemeal — some are run by city councils, others are scored by private tech platforms which hold personal data.

Like private credit scores, a person's social score can move up and down depending on their behavior. The exact methodology is a secret — but examples of infractions include bad driving, smoking in non-smoking zones, buying too many video games and posting fake news online.

1. Banning you from flying or getting the train.



A woman holds her pet dog in the middle of a traffic jam in Anhui province in January 2014. (Photo/REUTERS)

China has already started punishing people by restricting their travel. Nine million people with low scores have

been blocked from buying tickets for domestic flights, Channel News Asia reported in March, citing official statistics.

They can also clamp down on luxury options — three million people are barred from getting business-class train tickets.

The eventual system will punish bad passengers specifically. Potential misdeeds include trying to ride with no ticket, loitering in front of boarding gates, or smoking in no-smoking areas.

2. Throttling your internet speeds.

This is according to Rachel Botsman, an author who published part of her book on tech security on Wired last year.

The exact mechanics aren't clear yet. According to Foreign Policy, credit systems monitor whether people pay bills on time, much like financial credit trackers — but also ascribe a moral dimension.

Other mooted punishable offences include spending too long playing video games, wasting money on frivolous purchases and posting on social media.

Spreading fake news, specifically about terrorist attacks or airport security, will also be punishable offences.

3. Banning you — or your kids — from the best schools.



Students sing the national anthem in the playground during the flag-hoisting ceremony at their school in Shanghai, September 27, 2017. (Photo/AFP/Getty Images)

17 people who refused to carry out military service last year were barred from enrolling in higher education, applying for high school, or continuing their studies, Beijing News reported.

In July, a Chinese university denied an incoming student his spot because the stu-

dent's father had a bad social credit score.

4. Stopping you getting the best jobs.



The Great Hall of the People in Beijing, one of China's largest state buildings. (Photo/Wikipedia)

"Trust-breaking" individuals would also be banned from doing management jobs in state-owned firms and big banks. Some crimes, like fraud and embezzlement, would also have a big effect on social credit, Botsman reported.

5. Keeping you out of the best hotels.



The state-owned, five-star Beijing Hotel. (Photo/Fliker)

People who refused military service were also banned from some holidays and hotels — showing that vacation plans are fair game too.

The regime rewards people here as well as punishes them.

People with good scores can speed up travel applications to places like Europe, Botsman said.

An unidentified woman in Beijing also told the BBC in 2015 that she was able to book a hotel without having to pay a cash deposit because she had a good score.

6. Getting your dog taken away.



A woman holds her pet dog in the middle of a traffic jam in Anhui province in January 2014. (Photo/REUTERS)

The eastern Chinese city of Jinan started enforcing a social credit system for dog owners in 2017, whereby pet owners get points deducted if the dog is walked without a leash or causes public disturbances.

Those who lost all their points had their dogs confiscated and had to take a test on regulations required for pet ownership. (Courtesy https://www.businessinsider.com)

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