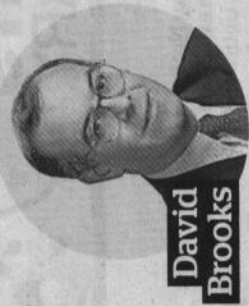


Word is we're on our own in a harsh world



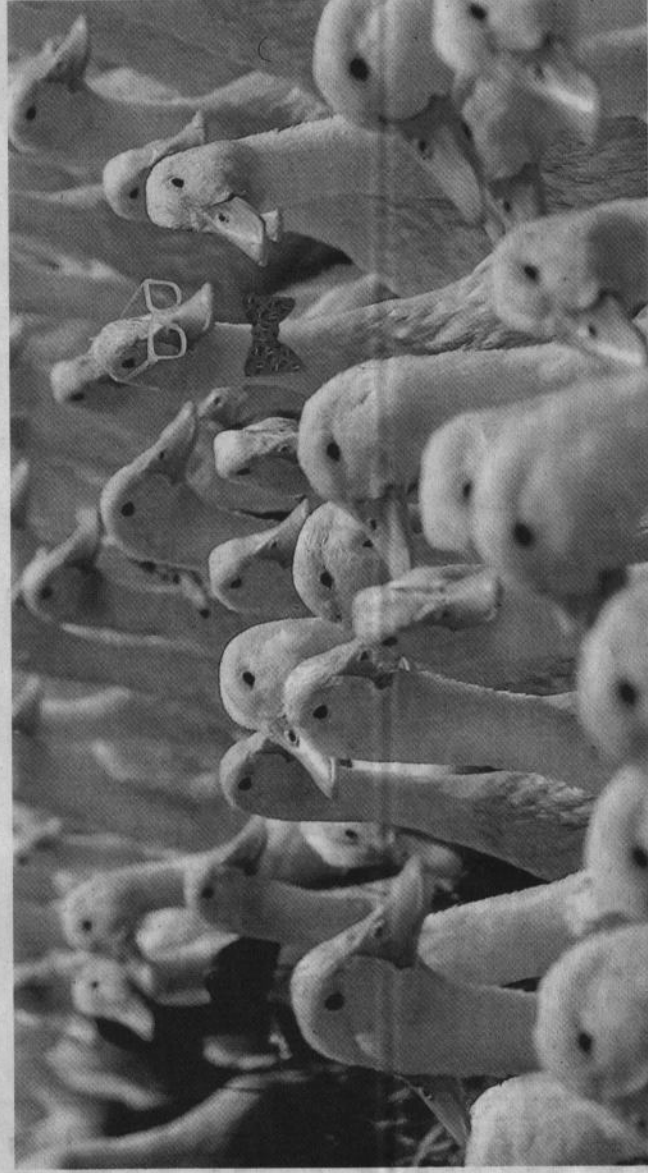
David Brooks

About two years ago, the folks at Google released a database of 5.2 million books published between 1500 and 2008. You can type a search word into the database and find out how frequently different words were used at different epochs.

The database doesn't tell you how the words were used; it just tells you how frequently they were used. Still, results can reveal interesting cultural shifts. For example, somebody typed the word "cocaine" into the search engine and found that the word was surprisingly common in the Victorian era. Then it gradually declined during the 20th century until around 1970, when usage skyrocketed.

I'd like to tell a story about the past half-century, based on studies done with this search engine. The first element in this story is rising individualism. A study by psychology experts Jean M. Twenge, W. Keith Campbell and Brittany Gentile found that between 1960 and 2008 individualistic words and phrases increasingly overshadowed communal words and phrases.

That is to say, during those 48 years, words and phrases such as "personalised," "self," "standout," "unique," "I come



ally aware, because social and moral fabrics are inextricably linked. The atomisation and demoralisation of society have led to certain forms of social breakdown, which government has tried to address, sometimes successfully and often impotently.

This story, if true, should cause discomfort on right and left. Conservatives sometimes argue that if we could just reduce government to the size it was back in, say, the 1950s, then America would be vibrant and free again. But the underlying sociology and moral culture is just not there any more. Government could be smaller when the social fabric was more tightly knit, but small government will have different and more cataclysmic effects today when it is not.

Liberals sometimes argue that our main problems come from the top: a self-dealing elite, the oligarchic bankers. But the evidence suggests that individualism and demoralisation are pervasive up and down society, and may be even more pervasive at the bottom. Liberals also sometimes talk as if our problems are fundamentally economic, and can be addressed politically, through redistribution. But maybe the root of the problem is also cultural. The social and moral trends swamp the proposed redistributive remedies.

Evidence from crude data sets such as these are prone to confirmation bias. People see patterns they already believe in. Maybe I've done that here. But these gradual shifts in language reflect tectonic shifts in culture. We write less about community bonds and obligations because they're less central to our lives.

used until about 1980, but usage has surged since. On the general subject of demoralisation, he finds a long decline of usage in terms such as "faith," "wisdom," "ought," "evil" and "prudence," and a sharp rise in what you might call social science terms such as "subjectivity," "normative," "psychology" and "information." Klein adds the third element to our story, which he calls "governmentalisation."

Words having to do with experts have shown a steady rise. So have phrases such as "run the country," "economic justice," "nationalism," "priorities," "right wing" and "left wing". The implication is that politics and government have become more prevalent.

So the story I'd like to tell is this: Over the past half-century, society has become more individualistic. As it has become more individualistic, it has also become less mor-

66 per cent, and gratitude words such as "thankfulness" and "appreciation" by 49 per cent.

Usage of humility words such as "modesty" and "humbleness" dropped by 52 per cent. Usage of compassion words such as "kindness" and "helpfulness" dropped by 56 per cent. Meanwhile, usage of words associated with the ability to deliver, such as "discipline" and "dependability" rose over the century, as did the usage of words associated with fairness. The Kesebirs point out that these sorts of virtues are most relevant to economic production and exchange.

Daniel Klein of George Mason University has conducted one of the broadest studies with the Google search engine. He found further evidence of the two elements I've mentioned. On the subject of individualisation, he found that the word "preferences" was barely

first" and "I can do it myself" were used more frequently. Communal words and phrases such as "community," "collective," "tribe," "share," "united," "band together" and "common good" receded.

The second element of the story is demoralisation. A study by Pelin Kesebir and Selin Kesebir found that general moral terms such as "virtue," "decency" and "conscience" were used less frequently over the course of the 20th century. Words associated with moral excellence, such as "honesty," "patience" and "compassion" were used much less frequently.

The Kesebirs identified 50 words associated with moral virtue and found that 74 per cent were used less frequently as the century progressed. Certain types of virtues were especially hard hit. Usage of courage words such as "bravery" and "fortitude" fell by