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The Fed left rates near zero at its monthly meeting and tied bond buying to its employment and price goals.



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For those with the fortitude to revisit 2020, there's still time to create a personalized year-end newsletter.



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At age 48, Manny Ramirez has found a new life in baseball by going halfway around the world.

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Business

The New York Times

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‘The Best Year I’ve Ever Seen’

Christmas tree farmers are enjoying the upside of a homebound holiday. Page 8.

NASUNA STUART-ULIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alibaba Showed Clients How to Identify China’s Uighurs

By RAYMOND ZHONG
As the Chinese government tracked and persecuted members of predominantly Muslim minority groups, the technology giant Alibaba taught its corporate customers how they could play a part.
Alibaba’s website for its cloud computing business showed how clients could use its software to detect the faces of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities within images and videos, according to pages on the site that were discovered by the surveillance industry publication IPVM and shared

with The New York Times. The feature was built into Alibaba software that helps web platforms monitor digital content for material related to terrorism, pornography and other red-flag categories, the website said.
The discovery could thrust one of the world’s most valuable internet companies into the storm of international condemnation surrounding China’s treatment of its Muslim minorities.
The Chinese government has swept hundreds of thousands of Uighurs and others into indoctrination camps as part of what it

calls an antiterrorism campaign. It has also rolled out a broad surveillance dragnet, using facial recognition and genetic testing, to monitor them. The United States government, among others, has denounced the program and penalized Chinese companies that are believed to be involved.
It could not be determined whether or how Alibaba’s clients had used the minority detection tool. But the potential for troubling use is high. A social media platform, for instance, could automatically flag videos for additional scrutiny, or even alert the

A potential for misuse of facial recognition tech.

authorities, if they contain faces that the software predicts are Uighur.
After The Times asked Alibaba about the tool this week, the company edited its website to remove the references to Uighur and minority faces.
“The ethnicity mention refers to a feature/function that was used

within a testing environment during an exploration of our technical capability,” an Alibaba Cloud representative said in a written statement. “It was never used outside the testing environment.”
The company declined to say more about its testing or explain why information about the feature had been included in the official documentation of its software. It also declined to comment on why it had been testing tools for detecting ethnic minority faces.
Alibaba is a Chinese corporate giant with worldwide reach. It is

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Retail Takes Another Hit In Red Flag For Economy

By MICHAEL CORKERY and SAPNA MAHESHWARI
Consumer spending has been one of the few bright spots in the pandemic-battered economy. Since the spring, Americans have spent more each month even in the face of mounting job losses, political turmoil and recurring virus outbreaks.
But that streak is over now. U.S. retail sales declined last month and in October, raising questions about how retailers are faring in the all-important holiday shopping season and about the stability of the broader economy.
Sales fell 1.1 percent in November — more than economists had predicted — as spending on categories like automobiles, electronic stores, clothing and restaurants and bars softened, according to a report from the Commerce Department on Wednesday.
The Commerce Department also revised its tally for October to a 0.1 percent decline, from an increase of 0.3 percent that had been reported last month.
Economists said the declines

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Suit Accuses Google Tech Of Monopoly

By DAVID McCABE and DAISUKE WAKABAYASHI
Ten state attorneys general on Wednesday accused Google of illegally abusing its monopoly over the technology that delivers ads online, adding to the company’s legal troubles with a case that strikes at the heart of its business.
The state prosecutors said that Google overcharged publishers for the ads it showed across the web and edged out rivals who tried to challenge the company’s dominance. They also said that Google had reached an agreement with Facebook to limit the social network’s own efforts to compete with Google for ad dollars. Google said the suit was “baseless” and that it would fight the case.
“If the free market were a baseball game, Google positioned itself as the pitcher, the batter and the umpire,” Ken Paxton, the Texas attorney general, said in a video on Twitter announcing plans for the suit.
The complaint, filed in the U.S.

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Facebook And Apple Trade Jabs

By JACK NICAS and MIKE ISAAC
For years, signs of discord have brewed between Facebook and Apple.
Their chief executives, Apple’s Tim Cook and Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, have periodically taken thinly veiled shots at each other. “If they’re making money mainly by collecting gobs of personal data, I think you have a right to be worried,” Mr. Cook said of companies like Facebook in 2014. In turn, Mr. Zuckerberg has retorted: “You think because you’re paying Apple that you’re somehow in alignment with them? If you were in alignment with them, then they’d make their products a lot cheaper.”
But now Apple is making changes that threaten Facebook’s business — and the fight has intensified. Early next year, Apple plans to start requiring iPhone owners to explicitly choose whether to allow companies to track them across different apps, a practice that Facebook relies on

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AGRICULTURE



“This is the best year I’ve ever seen as a Christmas tree grower,” said Thierry Beloin, left, who farms trees with his family in East Hereford, Quebec. With the pandemic shutting down travel, more families are getting their own trees.

The Boon of a Homebound Holiday

Words by GILLIAN FRIEDMAN
Photos by NASUNA STUART-ULIN

This year, with parties and vacations largely canceled, one source of holiday cheer remains intact: Christmas trees.

Americans are buying the trees in droves, and the farms that produce them are struggling to keep up. The surge in demand has been a boon for Plantations Réal Beloin, a Christmas tree farm in East Hereford, Quebec.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” said Thierry Beloin, the vice president of the farm.

The 530-acre farm had completely sold out of trees in August, and loaded up its last shipment to the United States on Dec. 3.

Plantations Réal Beloin is a family-run enterprise. Réal Beloin converted his father’s dairy farm into a Christmas tree operation in 1981. “I’d had enough of cows!” he said. Now, Réal Beloin, his wife, Ninon Mongeau, and their sons, Thierry and Philippe, run the farm together.

It is one of roughly 1,500 Christmas tree farms in Canada, a \$108 million industry. Approximately half of Canadian tree sales go across the border into the United States.

Thierry Beloin was 12 when he

Plantations Réal Beloin, a 530-acre family-run tree farm in Quebec, sold out of trees in August and packed up its last shipment to the United States on Dec. 3.

started helping his father shear trees. He went on to attend agriculture school, and started working at the farm full time when he was 21. Now 27, he hopes to pass the farm onto his future children one day. His brother’s 2-year-old daughter, Brooke, already visits the farm once a week.

During the harvesting season, the farm cuts down roughly 4,000 Christmas trees each day. The farm harvests about 10 percent of its trees every year. A Christmas tree takes 12 years to grow to maturity.

Before the trees are shipped, they must first be wrapped in string to make them easier to transport. Plantations Réal Beloin usually sells about 25,000 trees to vendors in the New York City area.

The farm distributes trees to seven American states and three Canadian provinces, along with more far-flung locales like Dubai and South America. The uptick in demand this year allowed the farm to increase its prices by 10 percent.

“This is the best year I’ve ever seen as a Christmas tree grower,” Thierry Beloin said. “We never had any doubt that we would be able to sell our trees.”



Clockwise from above: Brooke Beloin, 2, visiting the tree farm; Thierry Beloin carrying a tree to a truck; Réal Beloin cutting a stump; Thierry Beloin preparing a shipment; a tree going through a wrapping machine; Réal Beloin looking toward the U.S. border.