

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

State has no money to fix deadly roads

State officials are focusing on U.S. 50, particularly the stretch from Emporia to Newton, as the state's most dangerous two-lane highway, yet admit they have no money to fix it.

East of Emporia, U.S. 50 runs on I-35, but west of there, it's a two-lane road all the way to the Colorado border. The worst stretch is the 70 miles from Emporia to Newton, which is clogged with big trucks and contributed heavily to the 17 deaths reported on the highway last year.

That stretch was supposed to have been part of the Interstate system, but Kansas officials penciled it out to please the Kansas Turnpike Authority, which feared opening a parallel freeway from Kansas City all the way to Wichita would bankrupt the toll road.

The state Legislature — members of the House and Senate Transportation committees sit on the authority board — made sure no parallel roads were improved enough to compete with the toll road.

Several — including U.S. 24 from Kansas City to Topeka, K-10 from Lawrence to Topeka, U.S. 81 south of Wichita and the deadly stretch of U.S. 50 — were more or less frozen in time. Eventually, traffic west of Emporia became so heavy, the state Department of Transportation rebuilt the road under the latest 10-year transportation plan.

The work did not include any four-lane expressway, however, even though truck traffic has become more and more dense. When U.S. 50 advocates paid for a study of making the road four lanes to Colorado, they avoided that stretch, knowing too well the power of the Turnpike gang.

In the 1950s, blocking U.S. 50 improvements probably made sense. The turnpike represented a big investment to this state. But you have to wonder how many lives have been lost to ensure that turnpike bonds got paid.

Today, U.S. 50 is an overcrowded deathtrap. At last the state seems ready to address the problem, but legislators note it would cost as much as \$1.2 billion to turn the road into a four-lane expressway all the way west.

Under the state's upcoming transportation plan, now in the early stages of planning, there's no money for that kind of improvement. Kansas will be lucky to just keep the pavement it has in good repair with the money it expects to have.

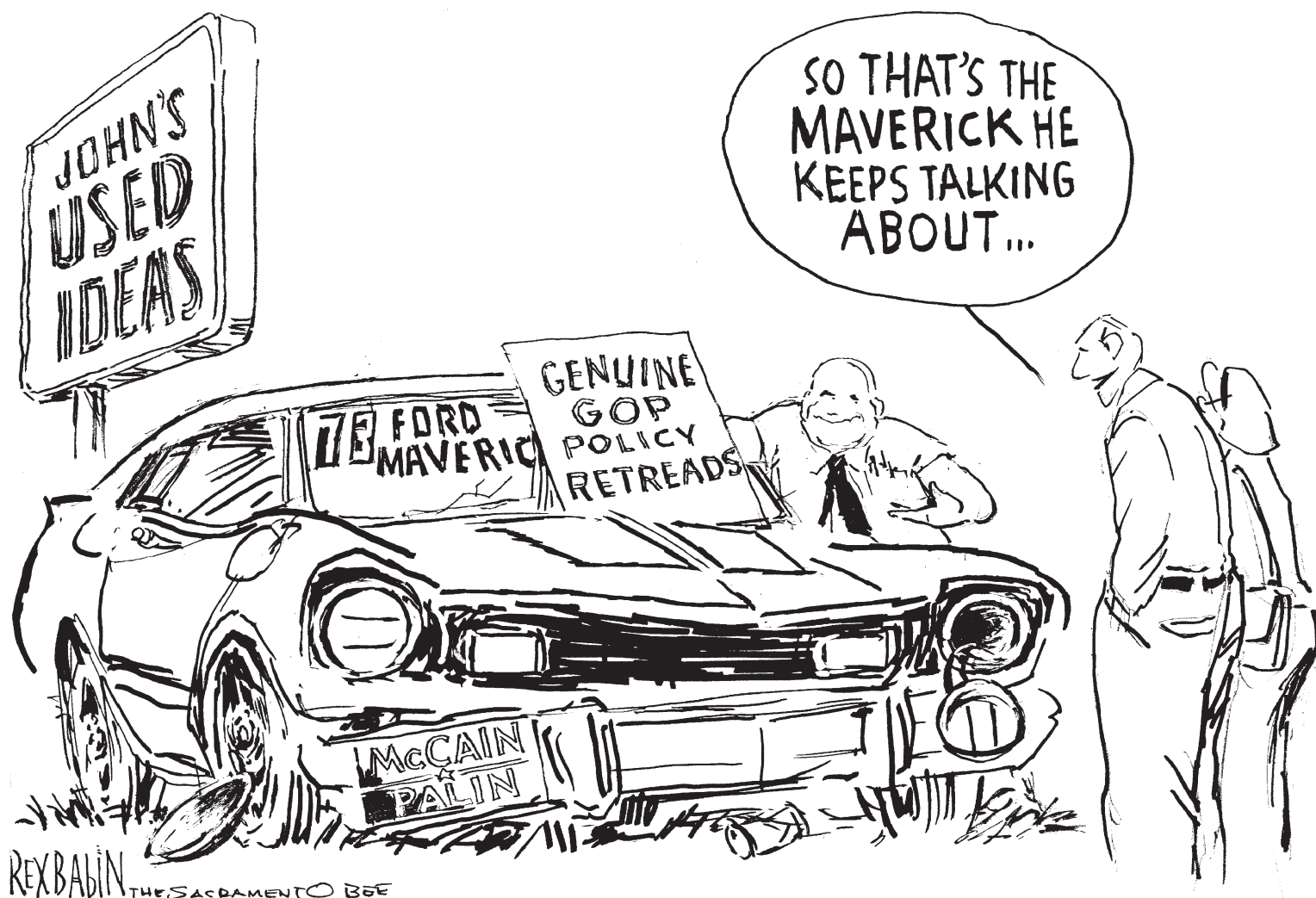
Since Gov. Kathleen Sebelius has told her planning committee to avoid a tax increase of any kind, it's not likely there will be any money for U.S. 50 or any other major road improvements.

That despite the fact that everyone — transportation officials, legislators, road users — agrees the money model for transportation is broken. Fuel tax revenue is going down. The government is forcing automakers to improve fuel economy, people are driving less with \$4 gas, and alternative fuels such as natural gas, hydrogen and electricity are not taxed at all.

With traffic expected to double in the next 20 years, Kansas will be left with inadequate roads and a huge bill, with no plans for paying it.

And U.S. 50 will still be overcrowded and deadly. It's some fix to be in. So far, no one has a clue how to get out of it.

— Steve Haynes



Newspapers own worst enemies?

I'm just fed up with the way the newspaper industry is reacting to its current "crisis."

First of all, it seems like half the editors and publishers in the country and two-thirds of the journalism deans are ready to write our obituary. Some already have.

And a lot of newspaper people stand around, shoveling dirt into the grave.

Yet the dearly has not yet departed. In fact, community newspapers are quite healthy, and the future is nothing but bright for this growing and vital industry.

Yes, I said the future is nothing but bright for the community newspaper, like the ones most rural editors put out. We're not going to tumble to the Internet any more than we rolled over and died for television or radio or cable.

We're better at what we do than any of those "new media," or any that's likely to come along.

We'll still be printing newspapers, still be making money and still be covering our communities like no one else will do way down the road.

I just wish our colleagues would stop shoving that dirt in my hair.

Stop writing that newspapers are about to fade away. It's not true.

Stop claiming that to make money, we have to become "new media" companies. It won't work.

Fortunes will be made in the Internet and other new media, but darned few of them will



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

be made by newspaper companies. As newspapers did with broadcast, we're going to find that this is a different business.

A lot of newspaper companies will make some money at it, and as in broadcast, a few will make a lot. Don't count on the Internet saving us, though. That kind of thinking has never worked.

My company knows we need to use the Internet to survive, as any business does. We're growing online revenue sources, but we don't expect them to overtake newspaper income in the foreseeable future. We expect to make some money, but we expect print advertising to be our bread and butter.

Sometimes newspapers are our own worse enemies. I picked up a city daily the other day and got a shock: The lead story in the lifestyle section was all about how to find coupons online. The story did not say that newspapers still handle 80 percent of all coupons, but made it clear that online was the sexy, fun way to find them.

Why would any newspaper feature that?

Why not just get a gun, and get it over with?

The same day, I came across an article from the Readership Institute, where Director Mary Nesbitt reported that newspaper reading habits have held up pretty well over the last two years. Even the kids are not deserting us in the numbers we've heard.

Where was that story on the financial pages, among all the bad news? I didn't see it.

If we take advantage of our strong position, community newspapers have a strong future. We're about the only mass medium left, as television, cable, radio, magazines and websites continue to fragment their audience.

Today, only a newspaper can command the attention of an entire market.

That's valuable.

City dailies should pay heed. They will have to become local, community newspapers again to survive, giving up in many cases the pretense of regional power. They started out as community newspapers, and need to return to their roots. Those that do — and stop writing their own obituaries — will share in the bright future of our industry.

I'd invite the journalism schools, the pundits and the naysayers to take another look, too.

This is a good business, and it's going to get better — for those who pay attention to what readers want in the way of news.

Libraries screen out 'infojunk'

By John Richard Schrock

Education Frontlines

Some time ago, the medical journal *Pediatrics* summarized a study where scientists used common online search engines to "research" the term "childhood diarrhea." Advice given on nearly 80 percent of the websites was wrong!

Some websites provided parents with recommendations that could have killed to their infant. Researchers separated the websites into university "dot-edu" sites and other sites. The college sites were just as likely to be wrong!

My student teachers have typed in a search for the word "vaccine" and found the very first website (at a famous U.S. university) proclaiming that vaccines never saved anyone's life and instead are responsible for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and many other ailments.

Search engines rank websites by popularity, not accuracy. A student may have to dig hundreds of websites down the list to find genuine science. Better they should go to the library.

Librarians have no magic method to help beginning students tell accurate research from commercial promotions and outright pseudoscience. Indeed, it is the more commercial websites that attract the most users. And the most extreme fanatics persist in flooding the so-called "democracy of the internet" with their manifestos. Simply, any Joe-Six-Pack who can access a server is immediately equal to a peer-reviewed scientist.

And any hint at censoring the internet is considered downright un-American.

Yet that is exactly what a public or school library does, and it is a good thing, too.

First, libraries classify materials: science goes in the 500s and 600s. The occult goes

Other Viewpoints

Opinion from around Kansas, the nation

down in the 100s.

Second, libraries "censor" because they have limited resources. They only have money to buy books and journals, so they select quality reviewed materials. You will not find the nonsense on vaccinations being ineffective in most libraries. If you do, it will not be classified as science.

But the Internet neither classifies nor censors. American students are left looking for the valuable needle of knowledge in a haystack of trash, and they are often unable to tell the difference.

Internet enthusiasts proclaim that we can teach students to detect the differences between accurate sites and pseudoscience. However, the techniques librarians offer (such as

checking who else uses the website or whether the website authors have doctorates) are not effective. You must already have a command of the subject to use these methods effectively, and K-12 students are novice learners. And some websites are so deceptive that they fool even experts.

Bottom line? America is abandoning its students to a vast online wasteland. Instead of going to a quality library, our students are set adrift in a virtual world that mixes comic books and junk reading.

We do a half-hearted job of protecting our students from pornography but make absolutely no efforts to protect them from the overwhelming mass of pseudoscience and nonsense that in the end, poses a far greater threat to our science literacy.

Parents and teachers would do well to direct their students to the few good websites, or back to the print libraries.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

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