



Free Press Viewpoint

'Unbiased' news? Look at the source

The American press has a long history of independence, a tradition which began in a rough-and-tumble world where every town might have half a dozen newspapers, each with its own (or its owners') point of view, but culminated in the established, supposedly unbiased era we live in today.

Newspapers pride themselves on independence and their supposedly unbiased look at the world. And while we all know the system is hardly perfect, that there's no such thing as a total lack of bias, it does work pretty well most of the time.

In its heyday, the business was not unlike today's Internet. Any fool with a press and some type could start a newspaper, and more than a few did. As it became an industry, it became harder to start a newspaper – bigger presses were more costly than the hand press of the 1830s – and harder to keep going.

The industry consolidated and grew to the point where newspapers dominated the political and public conversation, but at the same time there were fewer voices. Editors responded by establishing the independence of the newsroom, insulating it from the influence of advertisers and politicians.

When there was only one paper in most towns, the responsibility was great to ensure that everyone was treated fairly and all voices were heard. And that has worked out pretty well, too.

All of which makes it hard to explain the rise of the KHI News Service, a supposedly independent operation run by the Kansas Health Institute. The Institute itself is a bit of a mystery, a "think tank" and advocacy organization established by the Kansas Health Foundation. And if you're getting tired of wading through layers, take a breath and hang on.

The foundation was created by the United Methodist Church with money from the sale of Wichita's Wesley Medical Center to a private operator nearly 30 years ago. The church put a \$200 million endowment into the foundation, originally known as the Wesley Medical Endowment.

So the Wichita-based foundation begat the institute, in Topeka near policy makers. And the institute formed the news service, which has been pushing its "independent" status. The foundation has branched out into commentary on health issues.

Some respected newspapers have accepted stories from the service, which hired several veteran Statehouse reporters. More recently, some have questioned its independence, especially in light of the commentary operation at the institute.

Certainly, the service is not an independent news source in the same sense as the Associated Press, a cooperative formed by newspapers to cover national and international news. No one tells AP how to cover the news, though the owner-members certainly set the budget and priorities.

But the institute still puts up most of the budget for its off-spring, the news service.

So how's a reader to evaluate a news story from the institute? (These do not appear in our papers, by the way.) With care, we'd say, because the organization does have a viewpoint. It's up to each reader to evaluate the material.

The best advice is the old line, "consider the source," and this source has a bias toward public-health goals set by an activist few. Good or bad, these are things we could disagree on.

A good example is a recent study by the institute trumpeted in Kansas newspapers that supposedly shows the state's ban on indoor smoking has not hurt restaurant or bar trade. An independent review by one Kansas newspaper showed the study's contention that sales have held up fails to consider inflation.

We'd say it's a case of "let the reader beware."

– Steve Haynes

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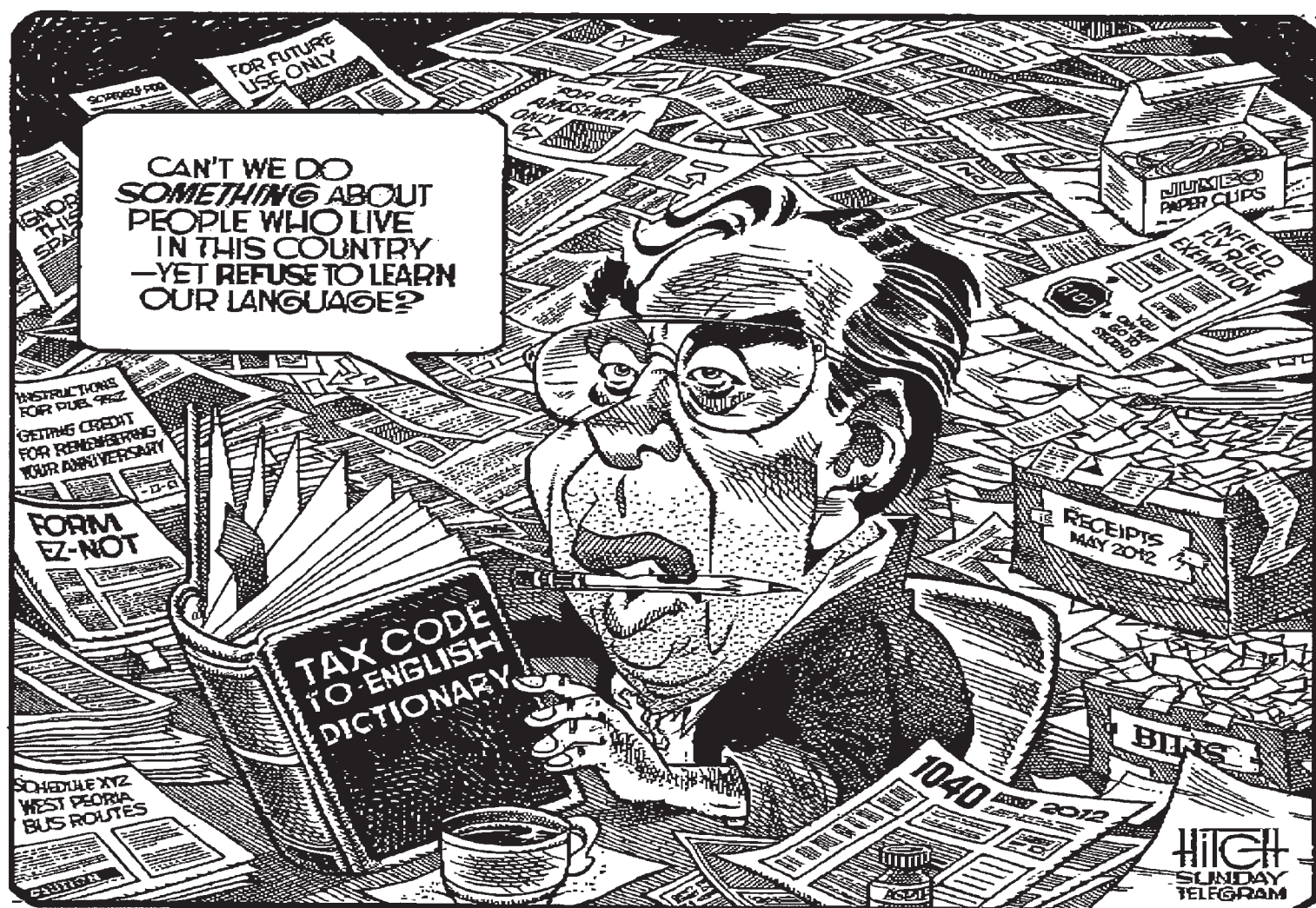
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Gun debate raises child-rearing question

As the gun debate heats up on both the state and federal level, we heard a story of how it is affecting some of our brothers and sisters in Nebraska.

We attended the Nebraska Press Association's annual convention in Lincoln over the weekend to see old friends and to find out what's happening with our northern neighbors.

What we found out is that it's about the same up there as it is here – dry, cold and agricultural.

One speaker caught my attention, however. She runs a small, family-owned newspaper group in western Nebraska and she'd just lost a subscriber because of a story one of the papers had run.

She told us that a former resident, who now lives in New York, had canceled his subscription and told them not to worry about a refund; they could keep the money. He no longer wanted their publication in his home, he wrote.

The horrible, awful story was about a Pheasants Forever initiative in their area. Every child who passed the hunter safety course received a free BB gun.

The former subscriber was aghast that anyone would put guns in the hands of children



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

and horrified that the newspaper would report such an atrocity.

Since this is something that has been going on for several years and everybody in town is pretty happy about it, the letter surprised and confused the editor.

She said that she was happy that her kids were outside with their father learning how to shoot blue rock instead of inside sitting on their cans and playing violent video games.

The games were a particular problem for her, she said, when she found out that the boys had somehow found some non-parent-approved blood-and-gore games where they "shot" people and blew them apart.

Better, she reasoned, to understand what a gun can really do and to learn to use one safely than to think it is all play, that no one really

gets hurt and that at the end of the day, all you end up with is a sore wrist and burning eyes.

Since all three of my children took the hunter-safety course when they were preteens, and went out with their father hunting the elusive quail, pheasant and blue grouse, I had to agree with my friend.

The story does not end with everyone smiling, but it's not all bad.

My friend contacted her former reader and explained her views asking if they could just agree to disagree.

He said he still felt the same but they could just keep the rest of his subscription money.

She said her husband thought of donating it to the National Rifle Association, but decided that probably wouldn't be the best course. I think he's just going to buy more blue rock with it and take the boys out for another round of sun, fresh air, bonding and gun safety.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkansan.com

Surrendering flagships hurts public good

The University of Kansas plans to cut its general education requirements in half. According to the *University Daily Kansan*, KU will cut requirements from 72 credit hours of principal and distribution general education coursework to 36. This follows the action of Kansas State University in 2011 that cut their general education coursework to eight courses: the "K-State 8."

Why are the two flagships of Kansas higher education gutting their general education programs?

We are drifting toward a "school-is-for-job-training" attitude. This "who-needs-to-learn-about-a-Grecian-urn?" philosophy drives politics in Topeka and other state capitols as well.

And money is tight. Kansas has shifted from the 1980s, when 40 percent of high school graduates attended college, to the current situation where twice that percentage now attend some school beyond high school. With money to support college-level students spread thin, tuition has soared to make up the difference.

Having a well-educated populace was once thought of as a "public good." Underwriting more of public college education provided a melting-pot campus where hard-working and academically-gifted but poor students had as much opportunity as rich kids. Today, to justify their underfunding of education, politicians paint college as a private benefit. Some states' universities receive no public money at all.

So how does this drive a reduction in general education courses? In hard economic times, most folks focus on the earning power of a higher degree and see it as job training. "Gen-ed" courses are viewed as needless requirements that "get in the way." As one student interviewed in the *Daily Kansan* reported: "Students are having to take an unrealistic amount of general education requirements."

At the Board of Regents and Legislature, leaders look at the average time students spend in college – 5 1/2 years – and general education gets the blame. They are wrong.

First, 60 percent of college students across the country change their majors at least once.



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

That is the major reason American students take longer. And it is a good thing.

In today's complex world, few students have the broad experience base they need to select a career.

A broad "gen-ed" curriculum forces them to sample a wide range of potential vocations. It is good when a student who enters college with a vague idea that she or he might want to be an accountant, is "turned on" to writing and journalism by an inspiring teacher. It is not good, for the person or for society, when a student locks into a vocational path they thought they might like and then graduates into a job that they discover they hate. That wastes a life – and state resources.

Secondly, future jobs require transferrable skills. Composition and speech and math and a basic understanding of what is alive in the thought of today are in high demand from employers. Those skills underlie the versatile workers of tomorrow.

The rationale for reducing "gen-ed" is based on the "outcomes" shuck-and-jive. First reduce the purpose of general ed to a simplistic "core curriculum." Then asserting that writing can be assessed in a chemistry class or speech in an education course. This bankrupt strategy devalues the specialized skills of the composition and speech professors. Real transferable skills are taught by real professors in the field.

Art, music, literature, history and similar courses are often dismissed by those who never experienced the humanities. My father was a good provider and worked hard. But when he retired, he had no favorite author to read, no appreciation of music. Watching "Wheel of Fortune" gets old fast. While humanities

courses also teach transferable skills, they contribute to our having a "life" after we get home from "making a living." That is a third reason general education contributes to the public good.

Other countries have had a model focused on job training. I will be in China this summer, where Chongqing has a whole university devoted just to electrical engineering. But China comes up short on creativity, Nobel Prizes and mental happiness. So China is adding humanities to many college's curricula.

Other developed countries realize that their students will need to learn more, not less. They are adding courses. We are cutting them.

Both flagship universities in Kansas have surrendered to the job-prep pirates. Kansas students who want a fuller intellectual education may want to consider climbing aboard another ship.

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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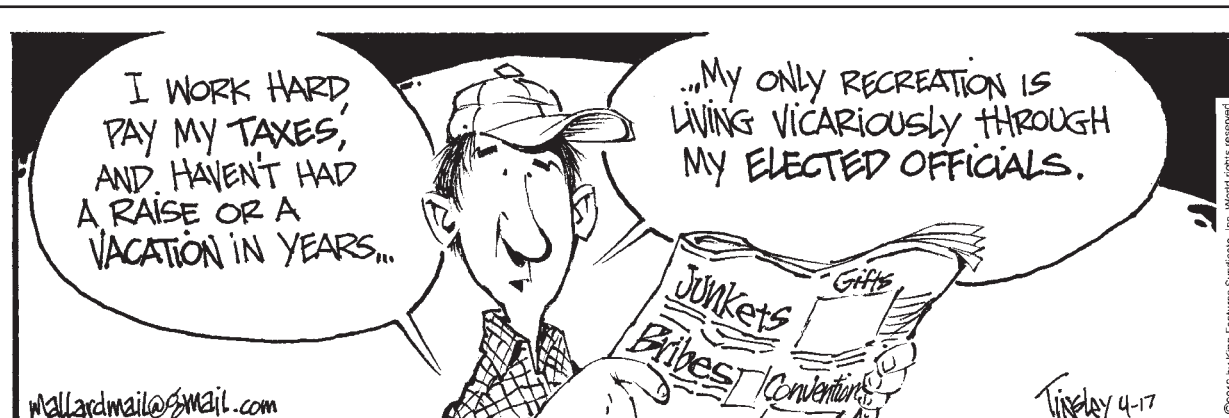
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