

## Health news service might not be unbiased

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 their independence and their supposedly unbiased look at the world around them. 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 more of an industry, however, it became both harder to start a newspaper — bigger, faster presses were a lot more expensive than the hand press of the 1830s — and harder to keep one 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 and fewer voices. Editors responded by firmly establishing the independence of the newsroom, insulating it from the supposedly corrupting influence of advertisers and politicians.

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

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

tion, originally known as the Wesley Medical Endowment.

So the Wichita-based foundation begat the institute, housed in Topeka near policy makers and the Legislature. And the institute formed the news service, which lately has been pushing its "independent" status. At the same time, the foundation has branched out into offering commentary on health issues.

Some respected newspapers have accepted stories from the service, which hired several veteran Statehouse reporters at a time when the papers were cutting back on Topeka coverage. More recently, some have questioned the service's independence, especially in light of the commentary, or editorial, 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 APhow 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 offspring, 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 all disagree on.

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

We'd say it's a case of "let the reader beware." — *Steve Haynes*

## Budget needs to be finished

It is great to be back in north-west Kansas after a long winter in Topeka.

I will be in all my counties during the next three weeks attending different events.

The two biggest issues — the budget and tax plan for next year — have yet to be decided.

The state has adopted a two-year budget plan. The conference committees on budget and tax have to reconcile their different plans into one uniform bill.

The one constitutional duty of the Legislature is to pass a budget before the session ends, and a key component to the budget is tax legislation.

In the 120th District, I have not yet met, talked to or had an e-mail from anyone who feels the state should do away with its income tax. Most people are concerned about a reduction in services and an increase in the property tax.

Taking state dollars away from the Northwest Kansas Technical



**Letter from Topeka**  
By State Rep. Ward Cassidy  
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College and Colby Community College hurts our northwest Kansas economy, reduces programs available for our students and raises the cost of going to school.

The significant difference between the House and Senate tax plans is over how they treat the state sales tax.

The House plan contains a 2 percent growth-in-revenue trigger, so that as the revenues grow above 2 percent from the previous year, the excess money would be used to continue to buy down income tax rates.

The House plan would allow the

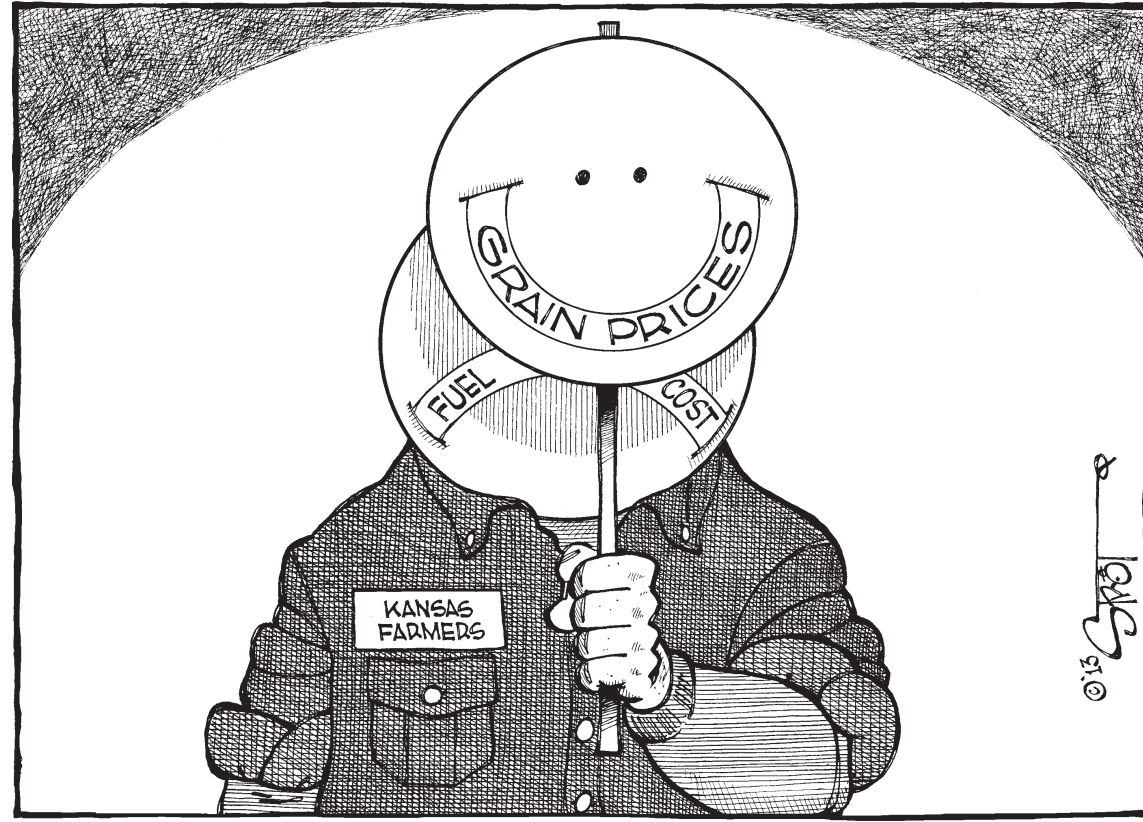
state sales tax to drop from 6.3 percent to 5.7 percent on July 13, as it was promised under current law.

The Senate plan, however, would leave the sales tax at the current 6.3 percent instead of allowing it to drop by the scheduled 0.6 percent.

The Senate plan would use the additional revenue from the sales tax to continue to buy down income-tax rates.

The governor favors the Senate plan.

My own belief is that we should slow down the process until we see evidence of economic growth in the state.



## Reader objects to gun story

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 paper's 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 and horrified that



## Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes  
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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.

## Some states still more open

When you walk into Nebraska's 16-story Capitol, you notice something right away.

No security. No checkpoints. No guards. No police. No metal detectors. None of the paranoia that surrounds getting into a government building in a lot of places these days.

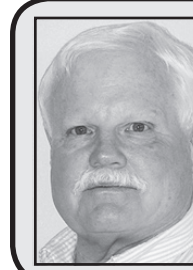
Oh, there is security. Cameras monitor the halls and chambers, and you have to assume someone is watching.

There are guards, but on a quiet Saturday with the Senate not in session — Nebraska alone among the states has only one house — you're not likely to see one.

The statehouse itself is a monument to 1930s design — with 1930s lighting, too, and on the weekend, it can be a little tomb-like. It's filled with carvings, artwork, art deco decoration of all kinds. And it's one of only four statehouses not patterned roughly on the U.S. Capitol, with its dominating dome.

It's tempting to say the Nebraska Statehouse, the first to be built as a modern skyscraper rather than a traditional capitol, is unique, but the contemporary Louisiana Statehouse is remarkably similar. Nebraskans will sniff that it's just a knockoff, and it's true, Nebraska's was planned earlier.

The Louisiana version was rushed to completion at the insistence of then-Gov. Huey Long, the driving force for construction. The Kingfish is still there, by the way; he was laid to rest on the Capitol lawn, in the shadow of a larger-than-life statue, after his assassination inside the edifice in 1935. By that time, he was a controversial U.S. senator. Louisiana may have the more



## Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes  
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usual security, as we do in Kansas. In our state, though as far as we know, no one has ever plotted to do any major criminal act in the Kansas Capitol, visitors routinely go through a checkpoint and a metal detector, run by a civilian. They must use the east ground-floor entrance below the steps. Other entrances are closed or restricted to those with passes.

Capitol police, who work under the Highway Patrol, are visible in uniform during the day.

South Dakota, by contrast, has virtually no security at its Statehouse. During the day, at least, an elderly gentleman mans a guest book by the front door. You're free to wander the halls and go look up the governor, if he happens to be in.

But then, South Dakota's capital is Pierre, a city of around 13,000, barely more than a medium county seat, and crime is not a big issue.

So what's the story with Nebraska? Allen Beermann, a long-time secretary of state who now is executive director of the Nebraska Press Association, says state officials debate the issue nearly every year. So far, they've shied away from metal detectors and searches.

When the offices are open, he added, a handful of armed troop-

ers in and out of uniform patrol the corridors. Others would be only minutes away.

"Both the governor and the speakers (of the Legislature) have decided that it's the people's house," he said. "They don't want to make it intimidating to visit."

That is a refreshing outlook in a time when state officials think we need metal detectors and constant security to conduct a trial in western Kansas, when courthouses in the city are locked down and secure, when federal buildings everywhere have become fortresses.

I suppose it's just the times we live in, but with all the surveillance cameras, metal detectors, computer databases and record keeping in our world, freedom is becoming an increasingly vulnerable commodity.

## In the U.S.A.

"A people that values its privileges above its principles soon loses both."

Dwight D. Eisenhower  
1890 - 1969  
34th U.S. president

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## Sales tax rates might be fouled up

To the Editor:

The local sales tax being levied by the City of Oberlin has found its way into the rural Decatur County area for most Internet sales, telephone bills, satellite television and the like. Most of these services now are charging an incorrect sales tax at the city's 8.8 percent rate rather than the 7.3 rate which should apply for those of us in rural Decatur County.

Rural Decatur County residents should check their April bills to verify they are being charged the correct 7.3 percent rate. So far, I have spent nearly five hours on the

phone convincing companies such as Cabela's, Amazon.com, Dish TV and the phone company that the correct rate is 7.3 percent and not 8.8 percent.

Jean Hale, our county treasurer, was most helpful in verifying that the state has the correct information and provided helpful web sites to use to show companies that indeed the sales tax for the rural residents is only 7.3 percent.

It is difficult to ascertain where

the dilemma with the rates began, but it may be a widespread problem. Most of the companies required three phone calls to correct the error because it was difficult to find anyone who had a clue as to how they got the rates and how to correct them. It has been an interesting couple of days.

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## Letter to the Editor