



Free Press Viewpoint

News isn't news without real facts

We can note with solemnity the passing of several beloved celebrities last week. Ed McMahon and Farrah Fawcett received their fair share of well-deserved news coverage, but an interesting phenomenon developed around the death of pop legend Michael Jackson, an overwhelming amount of interest that some are claiming nearly “broke” the Internet. The reality is far less drastic, of course, but the singer’s death did result in a huge increase in web site traffic on news sites and especially Wikipedia. The Wikipedia bit is the most interesting. So many people attempted to log onto the site that it went down for about a half hour. Even before that, when Jackson’s death was still in doubt, Wikipedia editors had to stop people editing his death into the articles. Would-be contributors were even changing small things, such as listing his latest album as his last and changing the verb “is” to “was.” All of this while there were only reports of his death, no actual confirmation.

This is perhaps one of the greatest dangers of what we have turned Internet news into. We fully expect Internet news and information services (and other news source that have Internet branches) to have the news first, and this has caused Internet media to strive, too much in many cases, to get the up-to-the-minute news up before anyone else. This is a natural inclination of the media, to always try to scoop the competition. But it can, and has, created big problems. Take CNN, who had the story up around 5 p.m. (Central Time) on Thursday. To their credit, they did mention in the article (not in the lead though) that his death at that time was unconfirmed, but they also had sidebar after sidebar posted. A timeline of Jackson’s life, a retrospective on his music, a rundown of the controversies in his private life. All under the assumption that he was dead. All in large type size on the front page of their web site. Complete with flashy graphics. Now imagine if he hadn’t been dead.

True, we should expect big organizations like CNN to have the information quickly, but we should expect them to have it accurate. If they can’t confirm the death, if they are posting a story based on rumors and hearsay on this kind of celebrity news, then they have left the realm of legitimate journalism and entered the worst side of tabloid speculation. A sidebar on a suspected alien baby would not have been out of place. We must encourage Internet news sites to not only have up-to-the-minute information, but to continue to practice responsible journalism.

—Kevin Bottrell

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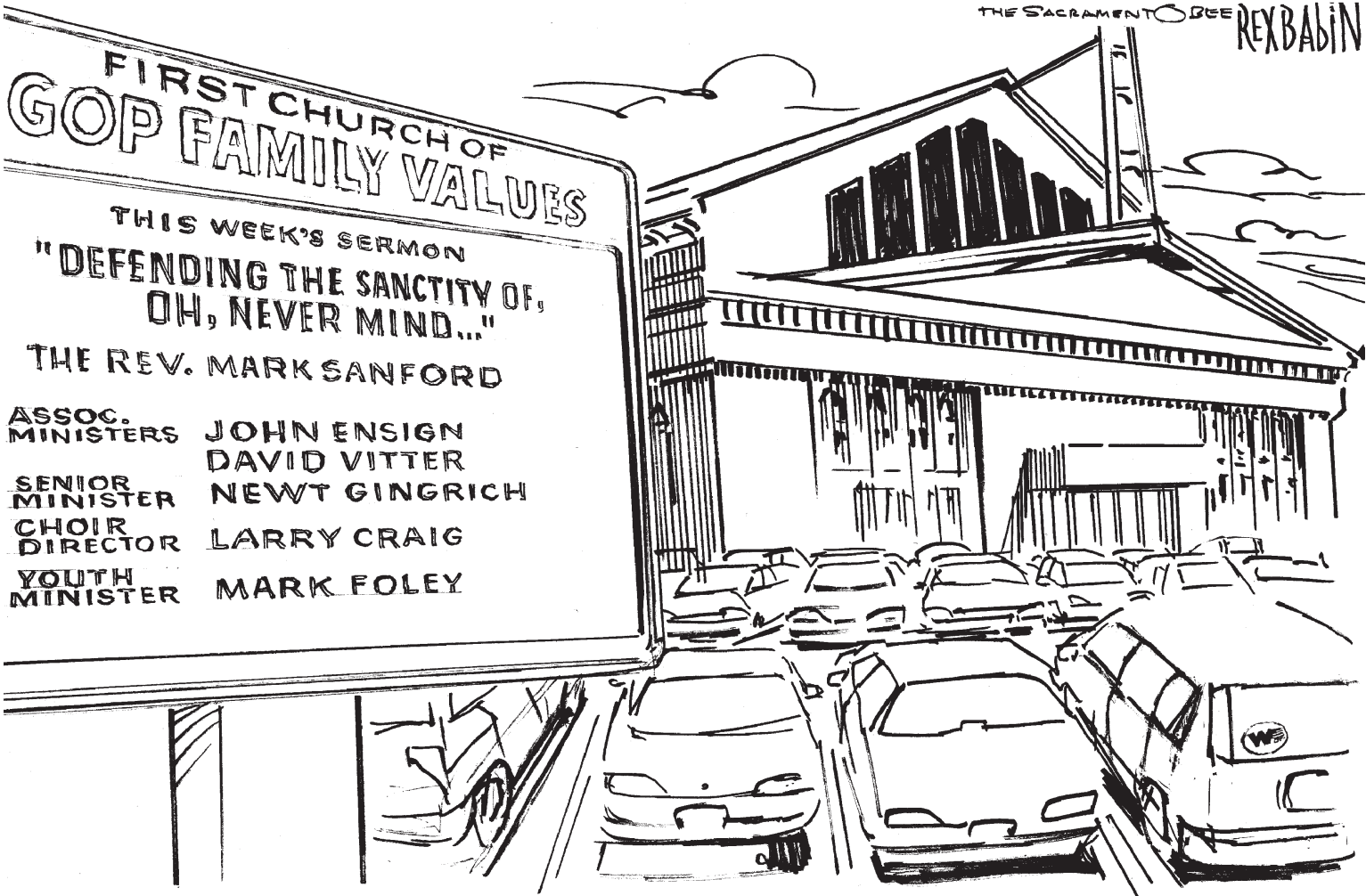
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Keeping cool for the Fourth

As I write this, it's Friday afternoon, ending a long, hot week.

One paper has gone to press, about two hours ago, and already it's time to think about the next. Ideas for inspiring readers are far from my thoughts, unless I could inspire someone to a snooze in the afternoon heat.

Typically for an office on Friday, the staff has thinned out a bit, and those of us who remain are feeling less than totally dedicated to our tasks.

Summers are hard on adults. Once upon a time, my summer days were divided between trips to the swimming pool and trips to the library, with “hanging around” tossed in for good measure. Then I got a job, and the face of summer changed, particularly the Fourth of July.

The summer I was 16, I worked at a commercial laundry. On July 4, we worked a half-day. After I got off, I went to the family picnic at Grandma's, where those who were not wage slaves had already gathered.

My father's youngest brother, who lived out of town, had been working that day as well — he was a high school coach who cut hay for relatives in the summer. The rest of the family was relaxed and cool and taking it easy. Uncle Dave and I were hot and tired and dirty. You could say we were taking it easy, too, though it would be more accurate to say we were limp and wanted to stretch out for a snooze more than anything. (Not that I, as a 16-year-old, would have admitted wanting a snooze.)

The summer I was 20, I had a memorable Independence Day as well. It was the Bicen-



Marian Ballard

Collection Connections

ennial Year (yes, I really am that old!), I was in college, and I spent the season doing summer stock theater at the Post Playhouse at Fort Robinson, Neb.

It was traditional to have a Fourth of July parade in the nearby town of Crawford at the start of a pro rodeo held there every July 4 and 5, and the playhouse had a float featuring actors in costume.

Bicentennial year meant bicentennial costumes, reflecting fashion in 1776, and bicentennial costumes were not cool. The temperature was hot, the sun was bright and everyone on that float, myself included, wanted nothing more than to retreat to our normal evening schedule.

Since then, I have to admit, I've avoided Independence Day celebrations as much as possible. I don't take hot weather well, and fireworks are only fun for me if they're a mile away.

For a time when my sons were in grade school, we started the day with a tradition of their 4-H club. Next to Flag Butte — a butte is a flat-topped hill with steep sides — was an old one-room school which was maintained by the rural neighborhood. Several annual events

took place there, including a farmer's market and a Christmas party.

The Independence Day celebration was a flag-raising on top of the butte at 6 a.m., followed by breakfast. After that, a gathering — without fireworks because of dry grass and no running water — I sent the boys off with their father, who loved the holiday, and I celebrated the day by catching up with the weeding in my garden, taking nice long breaks in the shade.

I believe in the principles we celebrate on the Fourth, though I'm not sure that our interpretation of freedom bears much resemblance to that of the Founding Fathers. Freedom, after all, is never absolute. We all depend on the land, depend on the air, depend on the community which shares the load and gives everyone a chance to shine.

My avoidance of firecrackers didn't deprive two boys of the chance to deafen themselves; it simply affected how and when they were free to do that. In the same way, my urge to write is a freedom made possible by the fact that someone else has the urge to build, and someone farms, and someone else works in a mine or a factory.

Have fun on the Fourth, our nation's 233rd birthday. Keep cool, enjoy your family and friends, and remember that freedom means celebrating the way you prefer, not the way you are ordered.

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

Tenure doesn't make schools effective

In an ideal world, Kansas law would make sure that schools attract and keep good teachers and eliminate ineffective ones. It looks like legislators have some work to do before we get there.

Each year, the National Council on Teacher Quality grades states on their laws on identifying and retaining effective teachers and removing (or “exiting”) those that are ineffective. You can read the 2008 Yearbook at www.nctq.org.

This is a comprehensive report that not only offers constructive criticism but also comparisons to other states, including examples of best practices. The council commends Kansas for a few things, but overall gives the state a D+, citing the need for new policies.

Take tenure, for example. Many jobs have a probationary period, after which employees gain certain rights, although nowhere near the extent of protection provided by teacher tenure. One of the downsides of tenure is that it makes it difficult dismiss ineffective teachers.

According to the report, “the awarding of tenure appears to be virtually automatic” in Kansas. State law does say schools must consider student performance as one factor in deciding whether to grant tenure. But it's only one of several factors, and not even the most important. Worse, there's no requirement that schools present any objective evidence that a teacher is effective before granting tenure.

Kansas does a somewhat better job in retaining effective teachers. The council gives the state high marks for its laws on new-teacher mentoring, which are meant to help ease teachers into the job. On the other hand, it says

Other Opinions

John R. LaPlante Flint Hills Center

“the state should consider awarding teachers for their effectiveness by supporting a performance pay plan.” Right now, effective teachers are paid the same as average ones, which is hardly the way to encourage the best.

Changing the way we pay teachers could help districts find teachers for hard-to-staff subjects and schools. If people who can teach science are at a premium compared with, say, English teachers, they should be paid more. Yet that doesn't happen. To make matters worse, would-be teachers with relevant experience in an outside job — say, engineers who can teach mathematics — get no bonus. Instead, they start at the bottom of the pay scale.

The council says Kansas should be more aggressive in getting rid of ineffective teachers. “The state,” it says, “should adopt a policy whereby all teachers who receive a single unsatisfactory evaluation are placed on a structured improvement plan.” Those who receive two unsatisfactory recommendations should be dismissed, it says.

There are two main approaches to improving school quality. One says that schools, like businesses, improve when they must compete for customers. It advises states to let parents

spend education money on the school of their choice, not just the one assigned to them by the school board. That's the approach that I have advocated in my work with the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy.

A second approach is to adopt regulations designed to increase quality, such as those recommended in the report.

We should use both approaches. School districts, as we know them, are going to be important players for a long time, so it's important that we make the best use of them. Given that taxpayers in Hays help pay for schools in Salina, and taxpayers in Olathe help pay for schools in Wichita, it makes sense for the state to require schools take a serious look at policies governing how they recruit and retain good teachers, and get rid of ineffective ones. Thanks to the National Council on Teacher Quality, we have some suggestions on what those policies should look like.

John R. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Wichita-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. A complete bio on Mr. LaPlante can be found at www.flinthills.org/content/view/24/39/, and he can be reached at john.laplante@flinthills.org. To learn more about the center, go to www.flinthills.org.

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