



Free Press Viewpoint

Stay in charge of high technology

The recent crash of computer servers at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment highlighted one of the problems with putting our important records on computer: what happens when the computers go down?

The department found out in August when 85 percent of its servers went down. Officials were quick to reassure people that no data had been lost, but all the state's birth certificates just as easily could have gone the way of the dodo.

The crash ended up being no more than an inconvenience. It took weeks to fully restore the servers and the department is working through the backlog of records request now. Although the situation was well handled, it raises a lot of concerns over the shift toward putting all records online.

This shift has been slow but inexorable. Court records, business filings, taxes and more are all on computers now, and many are accessible from the Internet.

But is this a good thing? Sure, sometimes. It's great to have the information at your fingertips. Press a few buttons and you can call up your birth certificate or your court case – or someone at the agency can do it for you.

However, computers and software are not perfect, as the health department found out. They are vulnerable to both glitches and malicious attacks. Hardly a month goes by that we don't hear about some hacker getting access to credit card or bank data.

Software can be too complicated for its own good or operators can lack the training to use it.

What's the solution? Unfortunately it's hard to predict when computer software will fail. By and large, the first sign that a server is going to crash is when it crashes. What was good about the situation is that the department knew where the physical records were – in this case, a salt mine near Hutchinson.

That's the lesson we can take away from this. Keep the backups. Like the health department, we need to make sure we keep both paper and electronic documents. This is something that both consumers, business and public agencies can do.

Physical records, of course, are vulnerable in their own right. You can lose them in a fire or they can be stolen. But physical records have persisted since biblical times.

We are quickly becoming a much more technological society. It infiltrates every aspect of our society, and that's not always a bad thing. Technology is good, it can help make our lives easier, but we need to be informed and cautious users. We need to remember that there is value in keeping both physical and electronic records.

We let technology take over, and we're asking for trouble.
— Kevin Bottrell

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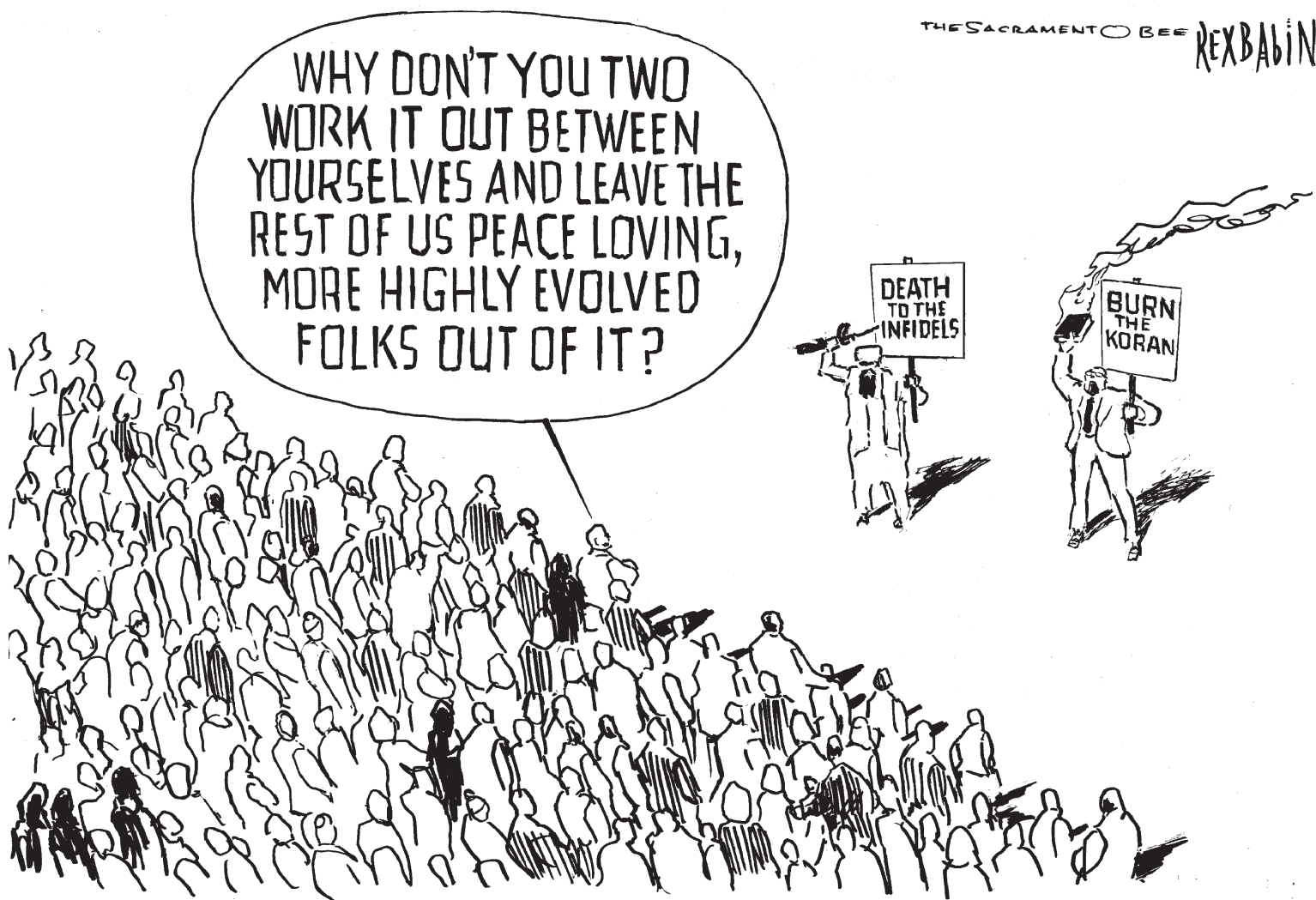
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Musical taste reflects love of stories

I like country music.

You would have to know my family to realize how big a confession that is.

I grew up on church music and what might be called easy listening. My folks watched Lawrence Welk, though we also watched Ed Sullivan – including the American debut of the Beatles. My older brother and sister listened to rock. My sister became somewhat of a music snob in college, though I think she's outgrown that. And, to be honest, I really enjoy most styles of music – as long as they don't involve screaming at volumes loud enough to cause permanent deafness or the use of language I wouldn't want to have to explain to my grandchild.

My brother Dan, though, was unabashedly country, down to pointy-toed boots and a Western hat. Since my early years were spent, in large part, tagging around after him – at least after I learned not to cry when I fell down or squeal at the sight of a garter snake – he probably gets much of the credit or blame for my tastes in music as well.

Not to say I haven't thought about why I like it, especially since I seem to have outgrown other kinds of music. Some of my younger co-workers think "Proud Mary," from 1969, is a great song. So did I – for the first thousand times I heard it – but it no longer has anything to say to me. "Your Cheatin' Heart," recorded by Hank Williams in 1952, still says something new to me when I hear it – after a thousand repetitions. What's the difference?

In a nutshell, country music tells stories.



Marian Ballard

• Collection Connections

There are stories of hurt and betrayal – cheating heart songs – but there are also stories of birth and growth, of lifelong love affairs, of triumph over challenges and challenges over injustice.

Stories are what define us.

Do you remember the first book you read, or the one you read over and over? I'll bet it wasn't about arithmetic or spelling. It was a story. My early favorite was a Golden book called "Duck and his Friends," about a duck who was afraid of the water. I still remember it, because the story spoke to me in some way.

Today, I enjoy reading all sorts of things – though only rarely a mathematics book! What they all have in common is that they tell a story. History tells the story of a people. Textbooks tell the story of a discipline, of the process of learning, of building and acquiring knowledge. Of course, I'm also nuts about fiction, because the stories help me understand the world around me a little better as I consider a fictional character's life.

The Colby Free Press tells stories, too. We bring to you the hail and the harvest, the "thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" in sports.

Many of the stories that are my direct re-

sponsibility are about landmarks in people's lives – birth and death, marriages and honor rolls and scholarships, just to name a few.

When your business wins an award, I want to know about it. When your kid does well, I want to share the story.

That's what some people miss seeing about a community the size of Colby. They see limited resources, but I know there's a wealth of stories waiting to be told.

Why should others hear your stories? They are the things that connect us. It is through stories that bonds are formed within a community. We are not all the same age. We don't all live in identical homes, or spend our time doing identical things.

In fact, each person lives in a unique world. There's a saying among family systems specialists that no two children grow up in the same family; I lived in a family with two older brothers and an older sister, while my brother Dan lived in a family with an older brother and sister and a younger sister. His world looked different; his story of childhood is different. Both stories are worth hearing, so understanding and caring can be shared.

I still like all those old country ballads, for their stories make my world richer. And I still like to hear your stories, for the same reason.

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.

Raise college standards, don't lower them

Research shows that 60 percent of incoming college freshmen require some remedial instruction. In Kansas, only 25 percent of high-school seniors taking college tests are considered by ACT to be college ready.

Simply, too many students are beginning college unprepared for college coursework. At some high schools, all students are counseled to take a college prep curriculum when many would be better served by a vocational-technical route. Kansas' college-able students pay higher tuition today because the state is underwriting more students who are not ready.

The Qualified Admissions program currently allows a 10 percent window for students who do not meet the criteria. A Kansas Board of Regents committee is proposing new criteria that open this window to 15 percent! Instead, a "hard 21" ACT requirement should be phased in over the next 10 years, reducing the 10 percent window by 1 percent per year.

Current exhortations to regents schools to increase retention rates will force grade inflation and cheapen the value of degrees. This is unfair to qualified students who completed rigorous college-prep programs.

Technical schools are critical for training students for various trade skills, and their faculty are hired from those trades. But tech schools have no business offering college academic curricula including general education courses.

Lacking such faculty, they must resort to part time adjuncts that may lack the credentials. Academic faculty at both community colleges and universities should be evaluated by colleagues on appropriate criteria for active participation in the academic community and not hired by administrators merely to generate



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

credit hours.

Cheap instructors, cheap courses and cheap degrees are becoming a problem nationwide as various "alternative" delivery systems are being touted as equivalent to face-to-face teaching.

The current national embarrassment over some for-profit schools recruiting non-collegeable students is closely tied to the problem with online courses. As more students graduate with online courses, the inadequacy of this format in many fields is becoming apparent.

A rapidly growing number of programs in medical and pharmacy schools, as well as the performance arts, are prohibiting transfer of online labs and performance courses. Some are excluding online courses completely.

Accrediting agencies including the Higher Learning Commission have been called on the carpet for accrediting questionable programs offering inflated credit. All the teacher education schools in Kansas easily acquire accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), a questionable credential changing its criteria every few years.

Online programs from outside of Kansas are approved by the Board of Regents in batches of hundreds based on questionable outside "accreditation" while the six regents schools

have to justify adding any single program. We have become a lawless "Wild West" when it comes to academics.

We must match the best young minds from Kansas with the best academic minds we can find. We can afford to do that if we exclude the non-college-able, confine community colleges, tech schools and universities to their respective roles, enforce academic standards and keep bogus programs out of the state, and do not bog the academic enterprise down with No Child Left Behind accountability.

Yes, Kansas has the agricultural research corridor, an excellent medical school and facility, and is a center of aviation research. Cheerleading for national funding and recognition has its place. But there are far more serious threats to Kansas higher education during this long-term economic downturn.

A governor does not make the decisions on these issues, but has the power and influence to work with the Board of Regents, the Legislature, the universities and the public to maintain and strengthen our higher education system.

Kansans have the common sense. They need to hear the details.

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.

We encourage comments on opinions expressed on this page. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701, or e-mail colby.editor@nwkansan.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Free Press, its staff or the owners.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

