

from our viewpoint...

Distracted driving accidents on the rise

When you operate a newspaper, you get a lot of e-mail. You get picture submissions, letters to the editor, complaints and news tips. Some of it is junk, of course, and much of it is people who shop their stories around to every newspaper in the country. Every now and then you run across something interesting.

In our e-mail Monday morning was someone shopping a story on distracted driving. According to a Missouri attorney, distracted driving crashes resulting in serious injury and fatalities are on the rise.

We've all done it. The distracted driver cliches tend to include putting on makeup, eating or talking on the phone, but it could be something as simple as reaching over to change the radio station. Anything that takes your eyes off the road for a second could result in a crash. It doesn't always, of course, but it could.

The Missouri attorney says running red lights at full speed, swerving into oncoming traffic and rear-ending stopped vehicles are the most common crashes resulting from distracted driving.

There's been a big push for distracted driving laws. Kansas has a no-texting law and many communities have banned all phone use.

Distracted driving is a big safety concern, but does that mean we should continue to legislate against it? No.

Making something against the law does not force people to take responsibility. How many people still speed even though it is against the law? How many people still pirate music, even though it is against the law?

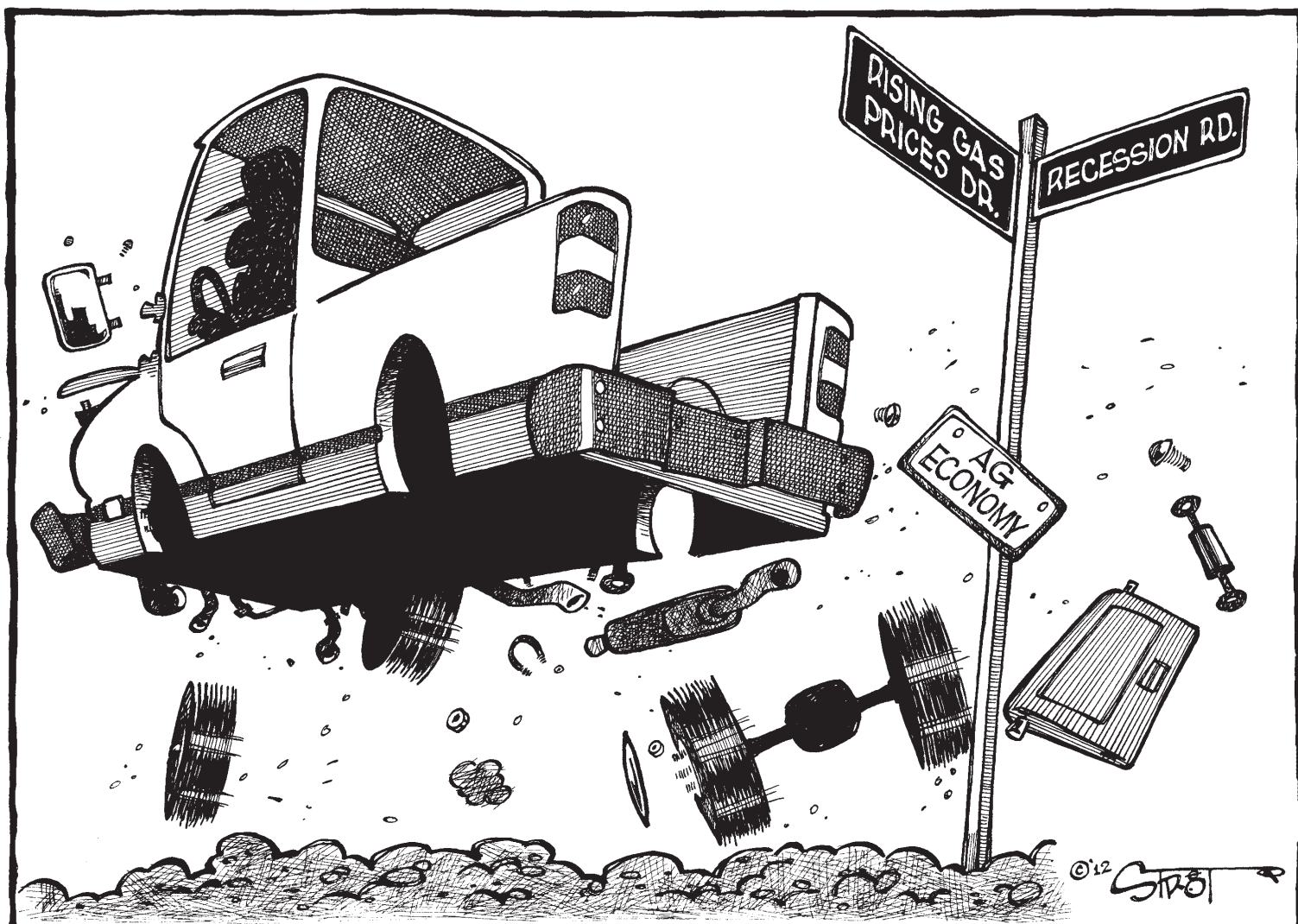
To change people's behavior, to change the culture that says it's ok to talk on the phone while you're driving, efforts need to be concentrated on things other than laws. The subject needs to be addressed by parents whose children are just learning how to drive. We're sure many parents already tell their children to keep their eyes on the road, but how many monitor it actively. How many check to see if their children have been texting or talking on the phone while driving? And how many set a good example by not allowing themselves to be distracted while driving?

The lessons should, and probably do, continue in driver's education classes. New drivers need to be told again and again to keep their eyes on the road. Most of us start out with that feeling of "it'll never happen to me," and it often takes learning that lesson the hard way to shake that feeling. Its that feeling that leads many people to do things anyway that are against the law or dangerous.

Car companies also need to be aware of the problems of distracted driving. Take the Mercedes S-Class. The S-Class is often the first car to come out with new technology. The latest model has an 8-inch LCD screen in the dashboard which can connect to your iPod or display satellite navigation, and it has a multi-function control pad in the center console, all of which seems designed to keep your eyes anywhere but on the road.

Car companies should take distracted driving into account. One way to do this is to start putting information in what is known as heads up displays. These are projected on the inside of the windshield, so the driver can get more information without having to glance somewhere else. Companies should also be careful about putting too many gadgets and controls that are away from the steering wheel. The less a driver is tempted to look anywhere else than the road, the better.

Distracted driving causes hundreds of wrecks in Kansas each year, but Legislating against it isn't going to get the job done. What the government can and should do is run public information campaigns to try and get more people to realize the danger. —Kevin Bottrell



Full disclosure and government coverups

OK, it started out as a simple discussion on openness in government over the recent book by a former Navy SEAL. From there it went downhill.

How much information is being kept from us and how much is sanitized before we get it? Conspiracy theories abound, and most often are proven to be just theories with little basis in fact. For every theory, there will always be those who look at red and see green.

I know the military may feel that the "enemy" could get valuable intel from our being open, but let's face it, the enemy already has that information from all the leaks. And spies, too, maybe.

The U.S. military has hidden so many things that I think they do it out of habit rather than need.

Roswell and Area 51 are prime examples of the government protecting us, and I use that term very loosely. If aliens did in fact crash land here, what is the government protecting me from?

Full disclosure would have ended the need to continually deny and cover up what really happened. Am I more secure today because they kept the whole story from me? I doubt it. I'm by nature curious, and I still want to know that whole story.

Would I be repelled by the sight of an alien body? I don't think so. I watched news footage



sharon
friedlander
• musings

of the Vietnam war at my dinner table and saw the last plane hit the Twin Towers. Nothing from space could be more terrible than that.

Does the military cover up its mistakes by saying that we don't need to know? As a Navy brat, I'm proud of my family's history of service, but those in the service are all just human beings. They make mistakes just like everyone else.

My dad once said that he had to jump to the apron on an aircraft carrier when someone messed up on the flight line. If he hadn't jumped, I would never have known him. So you know mistakes happen, and we are all affected to some degree.

Is national security at stake over alien landings and military successes in these times of terrorists? It will be hard to convince me of that. We have wasted more money and manpower protecting the general population from its own government than we spend educating our children.

The old joke about if two people know a

secret, it will only stay a secret if one of them kills the other, may be underestimating the problems in the military. How can an entire unit keep a secret?

Did you ever play gossip? You know, start at one end of the room with a simple statement, and each person repeats what they heard to the next. By the time it gets to the other end of the room, it doesn't even come close to being what it was when it started out.

Now, picture generals, admirals and staff all discussing any given military operation. Please raise your hand if you think that the story won't change before they have all told it at least once. I bet, like the fish stories, it grew in importance and effectiveness just in the telling.

Did the Seal violate his oath? Only the military can tell you that. Is our national security compromised by these disclosures? Will my life change on any given day because this book was written? Will yours?

I will always be grateful that I was born in a country where we can question our leaders on their decisions and forever perplexed that they hide the most innocuous elements of everyday events from us. And I bet I am not alone in these feelings.

I can only hope that the next time aliens decide to drop in, they do it during the news and in front of the cameras so the government won't have to go to the effort to cover it up.

Don't wait to have 'The Talk'

"The Talk" has traditionally been a conversation between a parent and their teenager about either the dangers of underage drinking or acting responsibly when hormones kick in for the first time. For families, these discussions are extremely important. However, any adolescent teaching moment these days must also include an open and honest exchange about the dangers of prescription drug abuse.

Just take these very sobering statistics into consideration. Drug overdose deaths among teens 15 to 19 years old are up 91 percent in the past decade. And the vast majority of these deaths are because every day, 2,000 teens in this country are using prescription drugs for the first time for the sole purpose of getting high.

The year 2009 marked the first year that, overall, more people in the United States died from drug overdoses than from automobile accidents. And this happened primarily because our nation is abusing prescription drugs at unprecedented levels. In fact more people abuse prescription drugs than the number of



from
other pens
• barry grissom

people who use cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin combined.

Research has always shown that the most successful way to prevent drug overdose is to prevent drug use in the first place. To help parents find the resources they need to have 'The Talk' with their kids before they even think about abusing drugs, the U.S. Attorneys' community has teamed up with the Partnership at Drugfree.org to educate our citizens about the dangers that lurk in medicine cabinets across the country.

On September 23, "the Partnership" will begin its multi-year Medicine Abuse Project campaign to help bring much needed attention to this epidemic and to educate the public

about the dangers of abusing prescription and over-the-counter medicines.

As their partner in this initiative, we will also be helping to promote the Drug Enforcement Administration's fifth National Prescription Drug Take Back Day on September 29 when citizens can turn in their unwanted and expired medicines in a safe and responsible manner. When the results of the four previous Take-Back Days are combined, the DEA and its partners collected over 1.5 million pounds, or 774 tons, of prescription drugs.

"It's never too late to have the talk" doesn't apply when it comes to talking to your children about prescription drug abuse. If you are a parent like me, and you are ready to have 'the talk' with your son or daughter, it's important that you have the best resources available to make this an educational and informative discussion. Go to drugfree.org for helpful tools and more information.

Barry Grissom is the U.S. Attorney for the District of Kansas

Keeping the community invested

While Kansas is blessed with many resources, without question its people are the most valuable. While traveling from Colby to Leavenworth a couple weeks ago, the importance of people came into sharp focus once again.

One stop on this journey was in the small town of Gove in northwestern Kansas. Approximately 75 hardy souls reside in this farm and ranch community.

Main Street is a whopping three blocks long. Only a handful of businesses remain on both sides of the street including a community café, a small grocery, a yarn and antique shop, a museum and of course the county courthouse. Rarely are there more than two or three vehicles parked on the street.

The folks who inhabit this community and the surrounding farms and ranches wear many hats and those active few log countless hours nurturing and tending to their home community.

"It's home to each and every one of us," says Rayna Kopriva. She's lived a few miles southwest of Gove most of her 34 years.



Insight
this week
• john schlageck

"Nearly all of our citizens contribute," she says. "We want to make our little town the best we can."

Kopriva is one on the younger citizens. Many of the older residents consider her "the young kid" of the community.

"I'm everyone's daughter, 'cause I'm still around," she says. "Every year the youngsters of the community graduate. We celebrate this milestone in their lives and they leave to find jobs elsewhere. They visit, but they don't return home to live."

While Kopriva spends plenty of her time helping husband, Daryl, with the farm and livestock, she's also worked at nearly every business in town including the café and grocery store. Kopriva has served on nearly every board as well.

Gove isn't the only one of its kind in Kansas. All across Kansas, the song remains the same. People have left small communities to make their living and raise their families elsewhere. This has left fewer and fewer people behind to make the community viable. It's a progression that's been going on in our state for generations.

Still, rural communities thrive and prosper when farmers, ranchers and small community businesses work together for the common good. The people, or human resources of a community, are individuals who make up the town and their skills create the ability to lead others, manage what is there and produce goods and services.

It's the people who make a community what it is, and the people who keep it alive.

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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