

Wednesday's

Editorials, Columns & Letters

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Paper 'n Ink...

larger than...

by Lynn Brisendine

The networks, both on air and satellite, are in an election year mode with an unrelenting drum-beat of campaign news and gossip.

This week is no different and could just be an even more concentrated approach as the debate is set to take place this evening.

Sitting in front of my keyboard trying to figure out what to write about this week, I decided that any subject to escape the ongoing and practically constant harangue of politics is needed.

Reading some recent articles on so many scientific trends now being formulated, theorized and actually found to be true, the advancement of human knowledge is not just interesting but hard to believe. Believing is one thing, while understanding so much of today's scientific news is difficult, if not impossible.

I have noticed that researchers, scientists, astronomers and so many other fields looking into life's mysteries have gone in two distinctly different directions. Some are studying and probing the hugeness of the outer universe. Using ground based telescopes and some unique satellites, our knowledge of what's beyond is growing in leaps and bounds.

Likewise, researchers and technicians delve into the world of microscopes and another universe of items so small we are working with the infinitesimal.

A quick question on an internet search engine. What is the speed of evolution of human knowledge? And this is one of the answers that immediately appeared on the screen...

"In his 1982 book Critical Path, futurist and inventor R. Buckminster Fuller estimated that if we took all the knowledge that mankind had accumulated and transmitted by the year One CE as equal to one unit of information, it probably took about 1500 years or until the sixteenth century for that amount of knowledge to double. The next doubling of knowledge from two to four 'knowledge units' took only 250 years, till about 1750 CE. By 1900, one hundred and fifty years later, knowledge had doubled again to 8 units. The speed at which information doubled was getting faster and faster. The doubling speed is now between one and two years."

Looking at the stars in various ways, we have been learning at a phenomenal rate. When any of us ventures outside at night, depending on the light pollution around us, we can see an estimated 2,000 to 6,000 stars with the naked eye.

What is out in the way-beyond continues to fascinate and overwhelm. Astronomers are now estimating that something like 30 billion trillion stars make up the known universe.

When they take an extended photo of a small area which seems empty at first look, they are finding millions of galaxies which contain billions of stars. These night sky watchers are developing

techniques using the colors of light and the wave lengths of light as it blinks its way across the void to determine amazing things.

Just by analyzing the merest and quickest shadows, they can figure out planets in orbits. And in just the past couple of years we have gone from thinking we see one or two planets in orbit around a star close enough to study, to a set of facts relating that millions of rock-like planets within two thirds to one and a half times the size of earth are out in just our part of the Milky Way. These newly found planets are also being located in the life zones of their hosting stars.

A recent article discussed some of the immense features we are finding in the way beyond.

"VY Canis Majoris (VY CMa) is the largest known star and also one of the most luminous. It is a red hyper giant in the constellation Canis Major. It is 1800-2200 times the sun in radius, about 3.0 billion km (1.864 billion mi) in diameter. Placed in our Solar System, its surface would extend out past the orbit of Saturn. Some astronomers disagree, and think that VY Canis Majoris might be smaller; merely 600 times the size of the Sun, extending past the orbit of Mars."

Another recently discovered item hit a nerve. We are in the midst of a dry period in our part of this world. Water, or the lack of it, is in the news as area lakes disappear. So how much water is out in the cosmos? A lot, and recent telescope sightings found this...

"Astronomers have discovered the largest and oldest mass of water ever detected in the universe, a gigantic, 12-billion-year-old Cloud harboring 140 trillion times more water than all of Earth's oceans combined. The cloud of water vapor surrounds a supermassive black hole, called a quasar, located 12 billion light-years from Earth." The discovery shows that water has been prevalent in the universe for nearly its entire existence, researchers said.

Of the top ten huge items found in outer space, one of them is the galaxy you and I call home. The article describes it thusly...

"The Milky Way is a barred spiral galaxy 100,000-120,000 light-years in diameter containing 200-400 billion stars. It may contain at least as many planets, with an estimated 10 billion of those orbiting in the habitable zone of their parent stars."

And if none of that impresses, some of our brightest minds are now postulating that our universe is just one of who knows how many others that may exist.

In this space Sunday let's take a look inward at another universe of structures so small to see, but matter that means so much to our lives.



Thinking in Type:

By Brian Brisendine

Eating whatever the lunch ladies put on your tray as you shuffle through the school cafeteria line every day is -- to utilize a food analogy -- as American as apple pie.

Most kids would argue though that the lunchtime fare put before them every school day is far less pleasing to the taste buds than a warm slice of apple pie.

Indeed there seems to be a new movement from America's youth, protesting their noontime options in campus eateries across the nation.

It looks like America's kids don't like the new and healthier lunches being served up in school cafeterias.

Not enough food, they say. Not tasty enough, they say.

I'd feel sorry for the 38 million children eating school lunch in cafeterias across the United States, only I'm too busy thinking about those starving kids in Africa.

I have a feeling they would be more than happy to have low-fat milk, lean meats and salad to eat.

Every day. It seems to me that the "crisis in school lunch" as it was portrayed this week by one of the more sensational news channels is a First World, if not uniquely American, problem to be sure.

It also seems to me that the "crisis" isn't that at all.

It is, in fact, a problem of spoiled children raised on too-large portions and unhealthy ingredients.

In a nation where our children are in the midst of an obesity crisis while at the same time, millions still go to bed hungry, school food is often the only square meal of the day many children receive.

We owe it to them to make the food as healthy as possible, packed with nutrients rather than

fat and excess calories.

A meal that will sustain them through the evening that may or may not see another offering on the family table.

No kids, tomato sauce on pizza is not a vegetable, and French fries aren't either.

You will survive without tater tots and nuggets for lunch. Really, you will.

Meanwhile, there's a Facebook page (Slunch) to handle complaints and a video, "We Are Hungry" on YouTube, so kids (and their teachers) can complain about their food.

The teachers enabling the kids' whiney attitudes is another matter for another column.

The video is set to a catchy and familiar tune and features some campy acting that's good for a chuckle or two.

But it comes off, to this writer at least, as entitled kids crying for the nachos and soda they've become accustomed to.

This, too, shall pass, and an entire generation of students will grow older not thinking choco-

late milk is an inalienable right.

A more balanced report I saw, showed offended cafeteria workers emptying a trashcan onto the ground. The amount of food relegated to the bottom of the waste bin was astonishing.

They argued the servings doled out were more than enough, but the students offering the loudest complaints were the ones turning up their noses at their choice of meals.

I do my best to avoid "back in my day" stories, but I can attest that the state-of-the-art cafeteria and renovated eating spaces at BHS are a far cry different today than when I used to dine there.

As for parents upset about the government telling their kids what to eat, I'd encourage them to start packing -- sack lunches, that is.

The rest of us should unite, tell the little darlings to sit down, be grateful they have food and eat what's in front of them.

Bon appetit.

Letter to the Editor

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State Capital Highlights

Compiled by Ed Sterling, Texas Press Association



Appeals court upholds Texas open meetings law...

AUSTIN — A case brought by a group of 15 city officials naming the State of Texas and Attorney General Greg Abbott as defendants failed before the New Orleans-based U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals on Sept. 25.

In *Asgerisson et al. v. Abbott*, plaintiffs sought to have the court declare the Texas open meetings law "unconstitutionally vague" and "overbroad" and because of criminal provisions local governmental officials face if accused of knowingly circumventing the law. A violation is a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of \$100 to \$500, confinement in jail for one to six months, or both.

Plaintiffs' central argument was that the criminal portion of the law abridges their right to free speech under the First Amendment. However, in a unanimous decision by a three-judge panel, the 5th Circuit affirmed a lower court ruling that the law is constitutionally sound.

After the court released its decision on Sept. 25, Abbott said the outcome "... is a great victory for democracy and the First Amendment. The decision further guarantees the public will continue to have access to information about how their government works. Making meetings accessible and allowing the public to see how decisions are made are the foundation of open government. A healthy democracy requires that the public have access to how government operates."

In 2006, again in 2009-2010 and currently in 2011-2012, sets of more than a dozen city officials from many regions of Texas unsuccessfully brought the same general case and arguments before a federal district court and the 5th Circuit.

Originally adopted by the Texas Legislature in 1967, the open meetings law is intended to discourage public officials from meeting in non-public settings to deliberate on public business. According to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, invalidating the law potentially would allow government corruption to escape public scrutiny.

Disclosure: Texas Press Association participated in a friend-of-the-court brief in support of the state's position in *Asgerisson v. Abbott*.

Push is on for spending limits

Gov. Rick Perry, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and other Republicans last week called a stricter constitutional spending limit for the state budget ahead of the upcoming legislative session.

In calling for a spending limiting amendment to the state constitution, Perry said, "Government growth, if any, should be kept to the bare minimum and should be limited ... to the rate of our population growth combined with the rate of inflation."

Dewhurst said Texas is "the national model when it comes to keeping state spending to a minimum," adding, "We take pride in the fact that Texas ranks 47th out of 50th per capita in state spending."

Perry called on lawmakers to commit to the five principals of his Texas Budget Compact:

- Practice "Truth in Budgeting";
- Support a constitutional limit of spending to the growth of population and inflation;
- Oppose any new taxes or tax increases and make the small business tax exemption permanent;
- Preserve a strong Rainy Day Fund; and
- Cut unnecessary and du-

plicative government programs and agencies.

In explaining Truth in Budgeting, Perry said, "We owe it to Texans to create a budget process that's more honest and transparent by making the tough decisions Texans make every day and presenting a truly balanced budget free of IOUs and accounting maneuvers."

Red Tape site draws input

Computer users who have an Internet connection now have an easy way to make their thoughts known on an expanding variety of statewide topics including occupational licensing, state agency rulemaking, public school mandates and manufacturing in Texas.

Texas Red Tape Challenge (www.texasredtapechallenge.com) allows citizens to log in and "share ideas, discuss others' ideas and vote the best ones to the top."

According to the site's sponsor, Texas House Government Reform and Efficiency Committee, "workable ideas that gain consensus will be considered by the Committee for inclusion in its formal report to the 83rd Legislature which begins in January 2013."

More kids taking SAT

Data released by the College Board on Sept. 24 show that in Texas between the 2007-2008 school year and last school year, the number of Hispanic public school students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test increased by 65 percent.

Gains in SAT-taking also were posted by African-American students, up 42 percent; Asian students, up 29 percent; and white students, up 9 percent.

State Education Commissioner Michael Williams reacted, saying, "We are clearly building a college-going culture in Texas."

