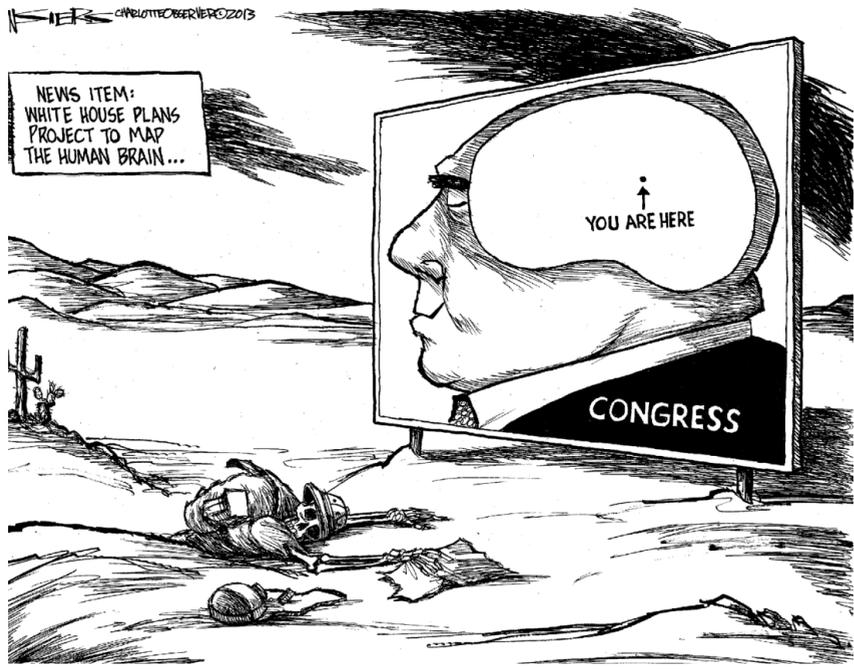


# Wednesday's

# Editorials, Columns & Letters

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## Paper 'n Ink... firing some neurons

By Lynn Brisendine

We often hear that we humans know more about things in outerspace than we do about the Earth's ocean depths. But some closer items are even more mysterious.

People are explorers. Marco Polo went to the East and brought his Italian homeland innovative technologies of the time. Gun powder and pasta were just a couple of things he found by taking a chance and going into the unknown.

A few centuries later, yet another Italian would go West and, betting on his theory that the world was round, he stumbled into the Americas. He was in search of a quicker route to the lands where spices were grown.

A few centuries later, an American stepped on the Moon and this trek resulted in a huge spike in technologies.

Every one of these "trips" resulted in humanity reaping great leaps in foods, machines, and intellectual rewards.

Humans need to cross the river, go through the valley and climb a distant peak. We do fly into space. We do dive into the depths. We do hack our way through the dense jungle. All of which is to discover something new.

It's this kind of thinking that sees a new journey beginning. Plans are in the mill to travel into another place of mystery, an area which we all use but no one truly understands. The machinations so wonderful and complex, this newest quest is that of the human mind. A study of the inner workings resulting in the mapping of the human brain will go where no man has gone before.

The Star Trek reference is easily recalled and appropriate. The journey into what makes a brain work is comparable to the Cosmos in so many ways.

In fact, the brain is a connecting facility for multiple networks. The structure which allows for activity is called a neuron. The neuron is a tiny bit of, well, that's part of what this new look into the inner workings will determine. Your brain and mine have so many of these connectors that if someone could place them side by side they would stretch over 600 miles.

The Milky Way has approximately 100 billion stars. The human brain has probably a little more than 100 billion neurons.

I have often thought that the only thing that makes everything in the Universe real is the notion that we humans can both conceive of and observe what is around us. Human brains have also given us, as far as we know, the only organism that has a self recognition. Some animal scientists are making headway into finding other creatures that live among us which may also have the ability to be aware of themselves. But none as aware as you and I.

According to research, one of the most astounding things I found was that while we humans have 100 billion neurons to offer us intelligence, the octopus has 300 billion. This causes real interesting visualization, but perhaps the number of neurons doesn't equate with intelligence since I haven't seen an octopus make a machine or propose a theory.

So with all of this, some would be quick to say that we mere humans can't compete with today's fast computers. Some of these new super machines can process a trillion bits of information in a second.

While it is true that these machines are much faster than most of us when it comes to calculating numbers, so many other factors must be included to actually make a comparison.

The human brain is constantly working. It controls everything happening with its complicated structure. Breathing, swallowing, heart beats, digestion, growth, all of the necessary operations to make our bodies continue to live. A computer has none of those absolutely neces-

sary functions.

Not only are the non-voluntary actions taking place which keeps the brain busy, the continued use of our senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste, nerve endings telling of temperature fluctuations, moving arms, legs, feet, fingers at times in complicated exercises, all of this and much more are keeping our brains monitoring the environment surrounding it.

In other words, the human brain is the original and expert multi-tasker.

A machine which could mimic just a small portion of what you and I were born with would take a huge amount of energy, in this case electricity. Scientists tell us that a brain operates on about the same amount of electricity as that of a small light bulb.

And should anyone ever make a computer that could mimic our natural abilities, the power required would be massive and the heat generated would be tremendous.

One scientist, Columbia University's Rafael Yuste whose advice the Obama Administration has sought in planning what the *New York Times* characterized as a ten-year, multi-billion dollar undertaking, told of the project in a recent interview. Yuste explained that the ultimate goal of the project is to create what he calls a functional map of the active human brain.

"You could argue, in a very simplistic way, that everything that we are, our whole mental world, amounts to nothing more than neural circuits firing [in patterns] throughout the brain," Yuste said. By mapping circuit activity, Yuste thinks researchers can "discover patterns that are the physical representation and origin of mental states -- of thoughts, for example, or memories."

This mapping of brains will allow researchers to see how the organ works and could possibly give them clues as to how to enhance areas of the piece of equipment which has invented complex machinery, written wonderful novels, painted beautiful art works. Everything we have accomplished is due to this amazing collection of neurons firing away 24/7.

After reading this, I recalled the generally accepted theory that we only use a certain percentage of our brains. The information above kind of disproves that to me. While we may use most of this, a gift at birth, we probably could find ways to use it better. And it is just possible that this newest exploration of unknown territory will provide greater possibilities.

Artificial intelligence is another ongoing project of humans which could never happen unless their was the non-artificial commodity available.

And that, too, points to the incredible tool we all possess right between our ears. It is an object which can and will decode itself, perhaps sooner than later.

All in all, the one object in the Universe which puts everything else, planets, stars, galaxies, black holes, nebulae, quasars, you name the wonders included and they pale to that little gray matter we humans possess.

Deep stuff, huh? Perhaps, but it is all understandable due to a shared collection of electrically charged neurons firing away.

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## State Capital Highlights

Compiled by Ed Sterling, Texas Press Association

### House votes to supplement Medicaid funding

AUSTIN — Legislation proposing emergency supplemental appropriations to keep Medicaid funded for the rest of the year was approved by the Texas House on Feb. 21. House Bill 10 authored by Reps. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, and Helen Giddings, D-DeSoto, now moves to the state Senate for consideration.

Medicaid serves the poor, the disabled, and older Texans. State funding to Medicaid, like education, transportation and other budget areas, was reduced by the Legislature in 2011 to address a projected budget shortfall. But a robust state economy over the past 18 months and brisk tax collections have improved the fiscal outlook. In response, HB 10 proposes to tap the state's general revenue fund to the tune of \$4.8 billion, \$3.2 billion of which is designated for acute care services to be administered by the state Health and Human Services Commission, and a little over \$1 billion for long-term care services to be administered by the Department of Aging and Disability Services. Tied to these appropriations are some \$6.6 billion in federal funds.

CHIP, the state health insurance program that covers the children of needy parents, will get an infusion of \$187.5 million if HB 10 becomes law.

Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, chair of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, has said, in effect, she plans to prevent health care legislation from picking up language that would result in the expansion of Medicaid. This is in line with Gov. Rick Perry's stated position on Medicaid.

Perry has said he plans to reject legislation that would bring millions more Texans into the Medicaid program at a potential cost of billions of dollars to Texas taxpayers. But the fact that nearly 6 million Texas residents have no health care insurance, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, points to the need for a safety net.

Unanimous passage of HB 10 in the House was accomplished by Republicans and Democrats agreeing that in addition to the shift of funding into Medicaid, funding taken away from public education last session would be restored, to some degree, in legislation up for consideration later in the current session. Last session, public education was cut by \$5 billion, resulting in teacher layoffs and various reductions and curtailments.

Of course, the Senate may amend the HB 10. Any differences in the House and Senate versions would have to be ironed out by a conference committee of members of both bodies and returned for final votes by the full House and full Senate.

### Senate confirms SBOE

State Board of Education Chair Barbara Cargill, a Republican from The Woodlands, on Feb. 21 was unanimously confirmed by the state Senate to her second consecutive two-year term as chair.

Cargill was first appointed as chair of the 15-member board by Gov. Perry in 2011 and reappointed to a full two-year term on Feb. 1.

She represents SBOE Dist. 8, about 1.7 million people who reside in Brazos, Grimes, Houston, Montgomery, Polk, San Jacinto, Trinity and Walker counties.

### AG sides with bill

Attorney General Greg Abbott on Feb. 20 joined with Sen. Kel Seliger, R-Amarillo, and Rep. Charles "Doc" Anderson, R-Waco, to express support for SB 674 and HB 1624, legislation requiring that a vote to unionize be by secret ballot rather than by a public vote, as is currently the method.

Abbott said the legislation reinforces Texas' status as a right-to-work state. Seliger said, "This bill simply seeks to codify and protect" the freedom to cast a vote in private. Anderson said, "My concern is about protecting employees from intimidation."

Texas AFL-CIO President Becky Moeller, in a Feb. 20 news release said however, that federal law governs union elections and supersedes any state attempt to regulate union elections in the private sector. "We believe the only workers who could arguably be affected by this legislation are police officers and fire fighters who have collective bargaining agreements with their local governments under state law," she said.

### Drought status continues

Gov. Perry on Feb. 21 extended for another 30 days the drought disaster proclamation that he initiated on July 5, 2011. The proclamation names 172 of Texas' 254 counties, certifying that exceptional drought conditions pose a threat of imminent disaster in each of them.

Pursuant to the proclamation, "all necessary measures, both public and private," as authorized under state law, may be implemented to meet that threat.

## Thinking in Type... Babysitting Memory

By Brian Brisendine

I was flipping through the channels a few nights ago while the family was out of town and came across a popular 80s movie that I watched as a kid with my big sisters.

It was called "Adventures in Babysitting" and starred Elizabeth Shue in the title role as a teenager who takes what she thinks will be an easy job -- babysitting the neighbor's kids.

Not long after the responsible adults leave the teen and her young charges alone, the hilarity ensues.

A friend calls and is stranded somewhere in the scary city so the babysitter loads the kiddos into the station wagon and the adventure in the city begins.

Throughout the movie, the clock ticks ever closer to the parents' planned return home.

Everything imaginable happens to the unlikely group during the course of the evening until finally, they arrive back home just minutes

before the responsible adults walk through the door with the impression that the youngsters enjoyed a nice, quiet evening at home.

"How did it go?" the movie mom asks of the babysitter.

To which she replies, "Just fine ma'am. Just fine."

The movie struck a chord because almost two decades after watching the comedy in the comfort of my parent's home between my reliable big sisters, I endured my very own adventure in babysitting.

It was the summer of 2004 and the first time the adult in our house left me alone with our new baby, almost nine years old at this writing.

It's been a few years since that fateful evening, but my memory has not faded.

Following the movie's theme with a ticking time clock and the impending return of someone responsible, the evening went something like this.

5:15 p.m. - Dad arrives home

from a busy day at the office, eager to hit the couch and catch up on the day's national news.

5:20 p.m. - Mom brings smiling, cooing son into living room in cute little pajamas and plops him into Dad's lap.

5:30 p.m. - Dad attempts to listen to nightly news over strange rumbling sounds in son's baby stomach.

5:45 p.m. - Mom reminds Dad of her plans for club meeting and heads to bedroom to freshen up.

5:50 p.m. - Son instinctively suspects impending doom, but low whimpers are drowned out by increased volume of strange rumbling noises in baby stomach.

5:55 p.m. - Confident, energetic, reliable Mom kisses her guys goodbye and heads out the door with a smile on her face.

5:56 p.m. - Son realizes confident, energetic, reliable Mom has left him home alone with nervous, bumbling, goofy Dad.

5:57 p.m. - Strange rumbling sounds in baby stomach are drowned out by piercing screams at volumes previously unknown by three-month-old vocal chords.

6:25 p.m. - Dad comes to unfortunate conclusion that "soothing baby rocker," "soothing baby bouncer" and "soothing baby fuzzy blanket" do absolutely nothing to soothe baby.

6:26 p.m. - Dad makes mental note to find return receipts for dysfunctional soothing baby products.

6:30 p.m. - Dad begins half hour of undeniably idiotic behavior to try and calm and/or entertain very unhappy son.

7 p.m. - Dad tries Mom's cell phone with plans of begging, pleading and groveling in order to persuade her to return home.

7:01 p.m. - Dad vows to disconnect Mom's cell phone since it rings repeatedly -- on the kitchen counter.

7:05 p.m. - Dad begins odd bouncing moves around the living room resembling a break dancer in a

drug-induced haze.

7:10 p.m. - Strange rumbling noise in baby stomach comes to nauseating crescendo, followed by tiny baby sigh of relief and finally -- no crying.

7:11 p.m. - Dad takes baby to neat, tidy, organized changing station in son's room to investigate nauseating crescendo.

7:12 p.m. - Dad destroys neat, tidy, organized changing station in unsuccessful attempt at locating necessary supplies.

7:14 p.m. - Dad returns to son's room wearing shop apron, rubber gloves and nose plugs.

7:18 p.m. - Dad gives up trying to figure out the combination necessary to undo the 137 snaps permanently welded cute pajamas onto son's body.

7:20 p.m. - Dad is successful in

pulling son's entire body through left arm hole of still-snapped pajamas.

7:21 p.m. - Dad opens diaper.

7:24 p.m. - Dad regains consciousness.

7:25 p.m. - Son smiles and giggles as he kicks legs, dragging left foot through nauseating crescendo.

7:28 p.m. - Dad finally cleans son and gets fresh diaper on after contemplating use of high-pressure power washer, bailing wire, duct tape and staple gun.

7:30 p.m. - Dad forgoes snappy pajamas and wraps son in old college sweatshirt, bundling the waist and tying the sleeves.

7:31 p.m. - Dad and son return to couch -- both worn out.

7:32 p.m. - Mom returns home to sleepy-eyed guys and asks "How did it go?"

"Just fine ma'am. Just fine."

Thanks for reading the *Brownfield News*