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Media miss the story of modern wealth

By focusing on evidence of prosperity, such as a recent study, the media are failing to critically examine reality

It costs less to live today than it did in the 1950s. That's news to a lot of Americans, who have seen real wages decline in recent years. It was also news to The Register-Guard, which promptly ran a story by Los Angeles Times writer Art Pine on the subject across the top of Friday's front page.

According to Pine, W. Michael Cox conducted a study that found the real cost of most goods in the 1990s is lower than it was in the 1950s. Cox, the chief economist for the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, determined the number of hours a laborer would have to work in order to afford certain goods.

Pine's story did little more than paraphrase and quote Cox's study. No alternate interpretations of the data or contradictory studies were cited, even though both exist. In short, Pine engaged in poor journalism, and he isn't alone.

This isn't to say Cox's study is false or that the findings are necessarily misleading. The price of many goods has declined since the 1950s because of rapid wage growth during the '50s and '60s and low levels of inflation throughout the 1990s.

Cox makes additional claims that are largely true as well. The quality of some products has improved dramatically because of changes in technology, making the product of today a better deal than the product of yesterday.

The problem with Pine's story, and with a large number of media reports of late, is that they blindly accept assertions about improving economic conditions without carefully examining those claims. There are many aspects of Cox's study that need examination.

Most significant, the methodology of the study is questionable. Why compare current costs to those of the 1950s? Just because real prices have declined since then doesn't indicate anything about recent trends. Many studies suggest real wages have fallen during the 1990s, which would cause the hours needed to purchase a product to change.

An additional problem stems from the way Cox chose to measure wages. According to the story, he used federal figures on the average hourly wage for "rank-and-file production workers." Unfortunately, manufacturing and production jobs have accounted for a declining portion of employ-

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ment, while service jobs are increasing and are more frequently held by adults who are supporting themselves. Those low-wage jobs are not accounted for in the \$13.18 per hour Cox gave as the current "average" wage.

Accordingly, the estimate Cox makes about the ability of the average American to afford certain goods and services is flawed. Pine's story ignores this when it claims to speak to the common reader in the lead; like many reporters lately, Pine is telling Americans to ignore their personal observations and have faith in the system.

There are other problems with Cox's findings that are ignored in the story. For example, the cost of a house is calculated per square foot — with the hours-to-area ratio improving over time. Unfortunately, this ignores the rapidly increasing size of

new homes; they might be cheaper per square foot, but the homes being built in many major urban areas are too large to be affordable for the average worker.

Additionally, the study points out that the average amount an American family spends on food, shelter and clothing has declined from 54.8 percent in 1950 to 37.7 percent today. This is flawed for several reasons. It ignores the dramatic increase in two-income families over the time period. It fails to account for shrinking family sizes — most people are having fewer children these days. And it suggests, wrongly, that increased spending on non-essential items such as recreation is necessarily good and that it indicates people have already fulfilled their essential needs.

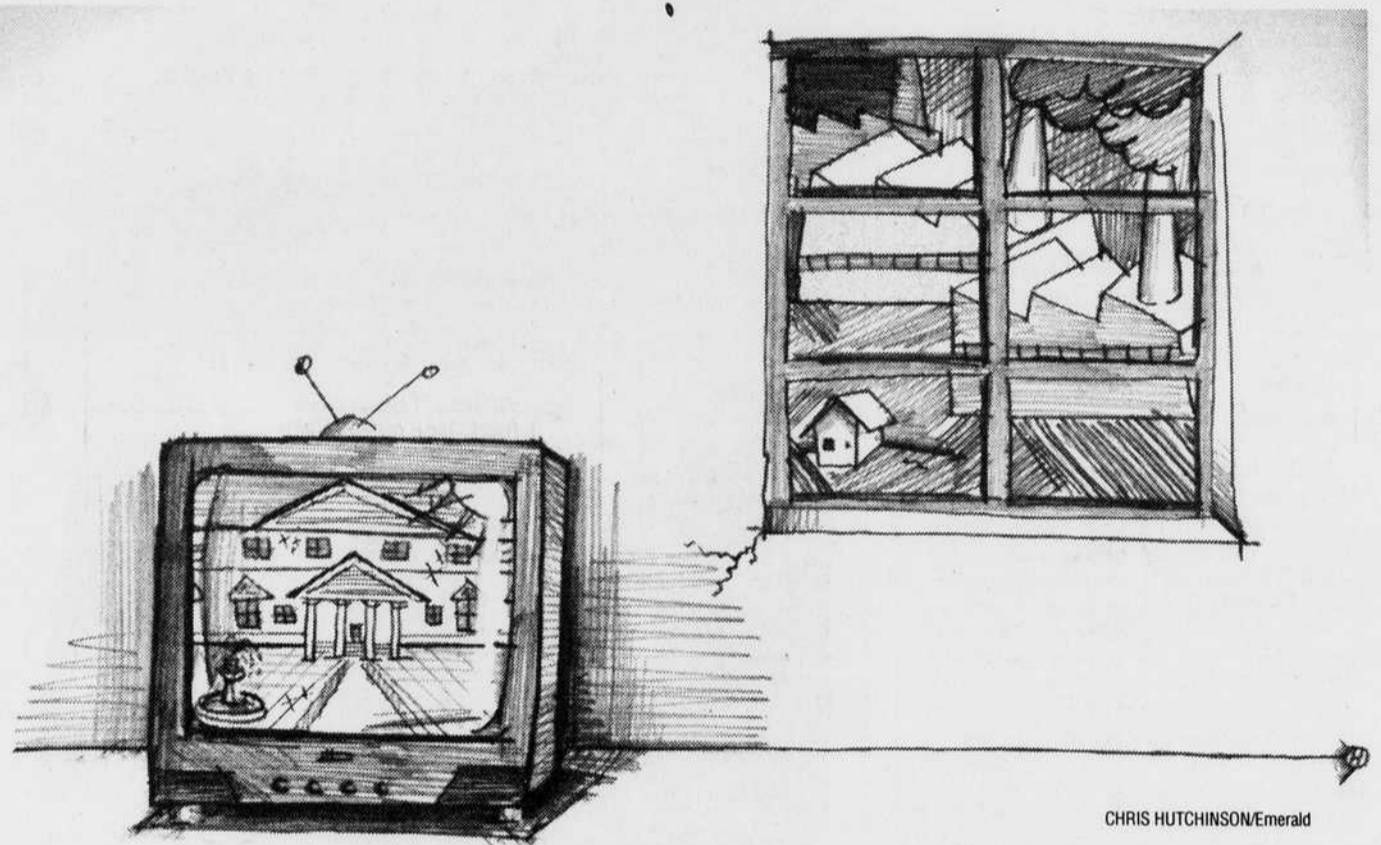
Contradictory research and a careful examination of the study would reveal many

more flaws. None of this is present in Pine's story, however, and this is where the real problem lies.

A growing number of news stories proudly proclaim the booming global economy has made life better for Americans. Leading economic indicators are tracked as gauges of personal happiness. Unfortunately, this isn't an accurate reflection of real life.

By not telling the stories of the average American (rather than the corporate leaders for whom the bottom line is the bottom line), journalists are doing their readers a great disservice. There's nothing wrong with reporting on studies such as the one by Cox; the problem comes when reporters merely parrot such studies.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stereo story errors

An article that appeared about my freshman seminar course entitled "Stereophysics" contained a number of errors (ODE, Jan. 29). The most important error to correct is to properly identify Ken Humphries, an expert in the field of designing and building speaker systems. Humphries is not a car stereo dealer. He is part owner (one of the "brothers") of the Fabulous Tweeter Brothers (not Tweet Brothers). The Fabulous Tweeter Brothers is a locally owned speaker manufacturing company that also runs a retail store selling speakers and speaker components. Other errors included saying the course was about car stereos when it was about applying the understanding of physical-

science principles to stereo systems in general. The course never talked about car stereos at all. (One student did mention his interest in car stereos — most likely the root of the misconception.) I was also drastically misquoted in the article, but nothing worth discussing since there was no harm done. To see how many errors can be contained in one article does make one lose a bit of faith in the written word. I don't know if it is the pressure of meeting deadlines or just sloppy journalism, but hopefully more care will be taken in the future. A simple check on some facts before printing would result in a great reduction of errors.

Stanley Micklavzina
 Physics instructor

Vote Progressive

Somebody said to me, "Adrienne, if you're tired of bitching about the Senate, run for a Senate seat."

Well, I want that person to know I agree with them. Too many people are indifferent when it is time to vote but complain when the results are in. Well, you may be happy to know that this year all you have to do is vote and the Progressive slate will take care of the rest. The students on the Progressive slate have come together because of a common interest in empowering students. We want you to be able to know and direct what your money is being used for.

The more I hear of tuition raises and fee increases, the more angry

I get. Classes are difficult enough, let alone the one or more jobs most of us have just to scrape by. I am against increases in tuition and fees that are not controlled by students. We need to stand up for our rights as students and demand control over our hard-earned money. It amazes me how much students are misled about financing their own education. We deserve the right to be educated free from the stress of more money here, more money there. Some people argue, "What's a couple hundred dollars going to hurt?" Well, I can tell you it means the difference between eating or not for a lot of us. I feel the responsibility to help other students understand the literal value of each dollar that is spent at this university and how to gain more

control over its disbursement.

Because I believe so strongly in the democratic process, a process that some of us take for granted, I am going to run for EMU board finance senator, seat No. 4, to make sure, to the best of my ability, that this process is upheld on a smaller level and understood by the average student. One way to decrease the chance of student fees being controlled by the administration is to vote Progressive on this year's ballot.

Exercise your right to vote. If you want a student government that is not afraid to cut through the politics and actually make a difference, vote for student rights. Vote Progressive.

Adrienne Young
 Candidate for EMU board
 finance senator, seat No. 4