

From the Editor’s Desk

Avoiding zugzwang

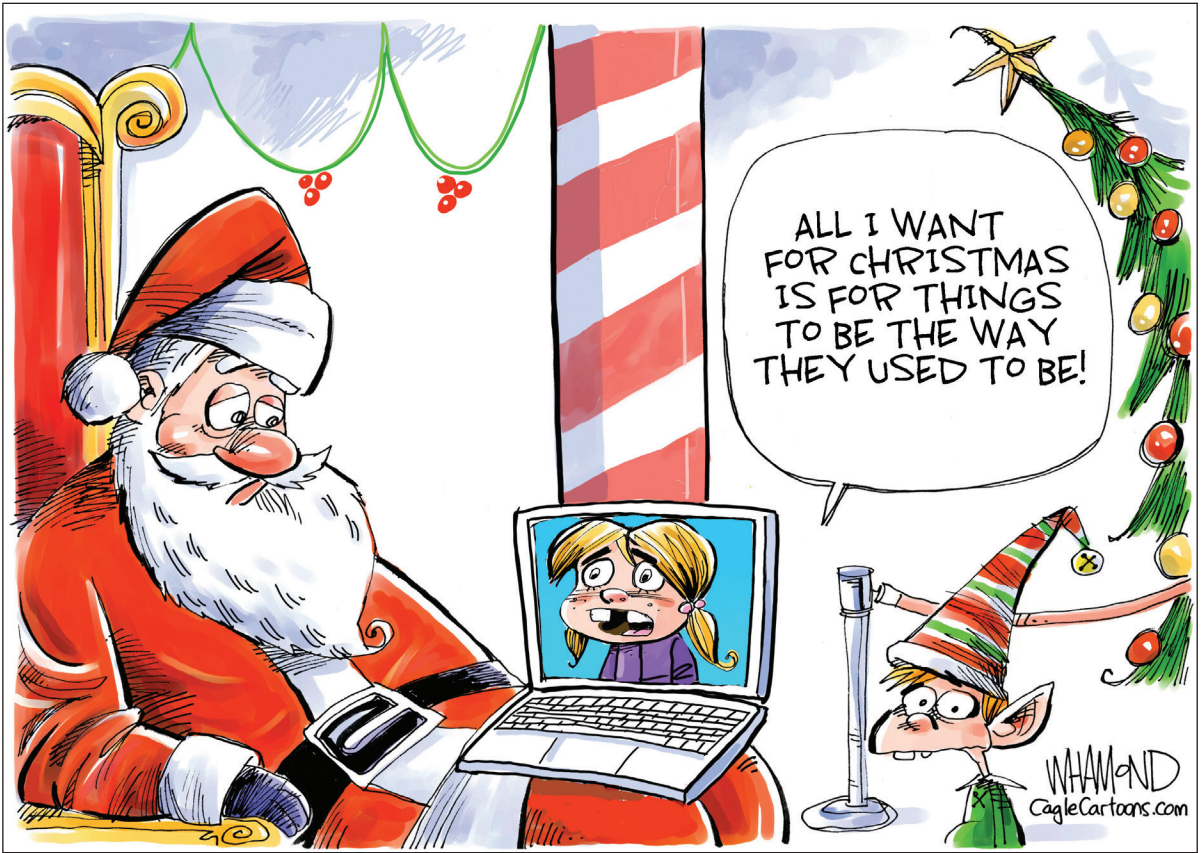
Zugzwang is German and means something akin to being in a tight spot. The word applies in games, for example, in which a player has to make a move, but in doing so worsens their position in the game. Zugzwang was an apt term to describe my attitude for how The Observer and plenty of other newspapers have used social media — specifically, Facebook.

FROM THE EDITOR



**PHIL
WRIGHT**
OBSERVER EDITOR

Facebook has been around my entire career in reporting. I’ve never been entirely satisfied with the platform to promote our work. We can post our stories and essentially give folks a taste of our products. But there are other costs involved in that, such as the time required to monitor comments on our Facebook page. Plenty of followers are civil, but some folks post memes or other graphics to skirt our foul language filter. On occasion, someone advocates for violence or unlawfulness. Someone at the newspaper — usually me — has to go through those comments and delete them and in some instances ban people. I have seen comments using the most vulgar language in the English lexicon. I don’t see a reason in those cases to allow that person to comment again on our Facebook page. Which brings me back to zugzwang. Deleting comments and banning rude posters raises the ire of some. We’re a community newspaper, and I think the standards for language we use in the paper also should apply to our social media platforms. I’m also still a bit surprised when a small business owner, for example, delivers an insult to The Observer on our Facebook page and then complains if I delete the comment. I wonder how long such comments would last on their page. Yet it seems trying to explain that on Facebook is a losing move. Besides, comments, shares and likes do not feed reporters. The Observer does not make money from what we put on Facebook. Sure, links to the website can lead to some subscriptions but not as many as I would like, and right now, not enough to continue to wade through comments. I’ve also wanted to make Facebook a more fun place for The Observer and its followers. We’ve tried out a few tactics, including a scary story contest we ran for Halloween. I think it worked out well. And this month we are going to ask followers to post photos of their holiday decorations or their favorite holiday cookies or candy they just made. But when it came to promoting our news product, I persisted with a broken Facebook strategy. Until recently. A couple weeks ago I complained in a company newsletter about my lack of enthusiasm for posting links to our stories on Facebook. Kathryn Brown, vice president of our parent company, the EO Media Group, expressed similar views. She also presented a possibility for a new strategy. Rather than leaving links to our stories, I now give a run-down of what we’re reporting, along with a photo from one of the stories in the newspaper and a link to our website. These have not drawn nearly the attention we used to with individual links to stories. But much of the headache of monitoring comments has gone away as well. We also are going to continue to use Facebook to engage with the audience in ways that are more productive, such as seeking recommendations for our top stories of the year. I invite our readers to go to our Facebook page and let us know what they think were the most important stories of the year The Observer covered. We’ll have a post on the page Saturday morning for this. We will break these down into two categories: COVID-19 stories and stories not related to the pandemic. Readers and Facebook followers also can weigh in on other elements they might like to see in The Observer’s upcoming annual year in review. Using Facebook in these ways, I think, might not put us in zugzwang, or at least not as often.



Our View

IRS decision about the Paycheck Protection Act should be reversed

The federal Paycheck Protection Program was a blessing for many businesses during the pandemic. The relief helped businesses, including The Observer, keep people employed when the economy slumped. But an IRS ruling last month would force businesses to pay taxes on the government aid. It’s common that businesses are able to deduct expenses, such as payroll and rent from their revenue. The IRS said on Nov. 18 businesses won’t be able to do that with PPP money. The intent of the PPP was

clearly to help businesses stay liquid and not go under. The IRS notice will mean the opposite. The decision should be reversed. Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat, has joined with Republicans to fight it with a bill. “Treasury’s guidance barring deductions for expenses paid by PPP loans is a gut punch for businesses struggling to stay afloat. It defies common sense for Treasury to provide help on the front end, but then take it away on the back end. Our bipartisan bill would fix this mistake and ensure

businesses feel confident using PPP funds to keep their workers employed,” Wyden said. Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley, a Democrat, wants fixes like this, too. He is working to attach a change to a must-pass bill required to fund the government. We did not hear back from the office of U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, Republican for the 2nd Congressional District, before deadline. We concede the tax code normally does not allow deductions for tax-free income. But these are not normal times.

Letters

Bullies do not stop of their own accord

As I catch glimpses of the ongoing election saga in Georgia, I am struck by the level of fear the president creates in those around him. He implies, harangues and accuses, and very few argue with him, due to the unhealthy power he wields to punish those who dare question him. I hope what we are learning is that bullies do not stop of their own accord, and what we tolerate, we will see more of. I am furious that we, the citizens of this country, “home of the brave,” have allowed this abuse of power within our system. The right to question results of an election does not grant the right to belittle and threaten. My respect is for those few brave individuals who have begun to speak back to the bully: Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, and Gabriel Sterling, voting systems manager for the secretary of state’s office. Where are the voices of the rest of the party this man represents? What has happened to the so-called “Party of Lincoln”? Speak up in a show of healthy power, folks, and tell the political bullies out there who they truly answer to.

Patrice Barreto
La Grande

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