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OUR VIEW

GMOs neither villain nor cure-all

The controversy over genetically modified organisms will make an interesting chapter in some future historian's cultural analysis of our time. Rarely have so many worried so much about so little.

That is the underlying message of an omnibus study released this week

by America's pre-eminent National Academy of Sciences. The academy found GMOs — largely seed crops designed to survive weed and insect sprays, or imbued with other theoretically useful traits — aren't risky to eat.

This flies in the face of a favorite phobia of modern Western civilization — that genetic tinkering will in some manner turn around and bite us, a trope that fuels countless movie and television scripts. To give worrywarts their due, carelessly monkeying around with the genetics of germs would warrant such concerns. But tweaking corn and soybeans in minor ways ought to be close to the least of our concerns.

On the other hand, the national academy also punctured much corporate hype touting GMOs. GMO crops aren't a game-changer when it comes to enhancing crop yields. "The expectation from some of the

(GMO) proponents was that we need genetic engineering to feed the world, and we're going to use genetic engineering to make that increase in yield go up faster. We saw no evidence of that," said the leader of the academy study.

This month also saw judicial rejection of local GMO bans in Jackson and Josephine counties in Southwest Oregon, based on a state law that preempts such activism.

Neither a magic bullet for world hunger nor a Frankensteinian threat to our existence, GMOs are a distraction

GMOs are a distraction from far more important basics of agriculture. Such as soil conservation and protection of farmland from urban and desert encroachment.

from far more important basics of agriculture. These include such unglamorous topics as soil conservation, protection of farmland from urban and desert encroachment, improving worldwide distribution networks to stave off famine and ensuring the adequacy of fresh water supplies.

We should care about what our families eat and the consequences of food production for earth's plants and animals. However, it's time to breathe easy about the easy villain of GMOs, and instead refocus on agriculture's fundamental practices and ethics.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

Culture corner

If you love movies, check out Tony Zhou's YouTube channel "Every Frame a Painting."

Zhou is a filmmaker and editor, and his video essays on YouTube are superb mini classes in film.

I came across his work in late 2014 with the episode "The Silence of the Lambs — Who Wins the Scene?" Inside of three minutes, Zhou breaks down

how the camera work sets the tension in the 1991 thriller during the first meeting between FBI newbie Clarice Starling (Jody Foster) and serial killer Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins).

After that, I was hooked.

Zhou delivers his lessons in plain language and uses plenty of examples from popular movies and popular

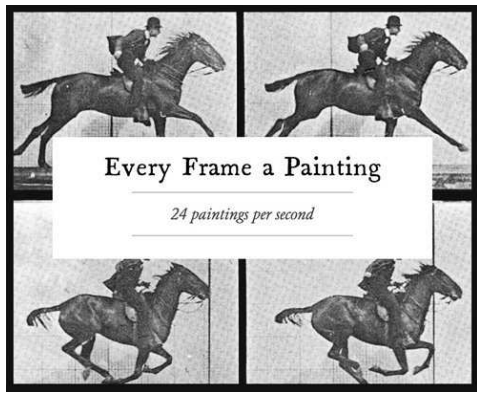
filmmakers. Zhou's work brings you inside what makes for good filmmaking, and what does not. The longest episodes run a little more than nine minutes.

Some of the best moments come when he is critical of what Hollywood does poorly. Zhou's "Jackie Chan — How to Do Action Comedy" reveals why so many Hollywood-

flick fight scenes stink.

Zhou also draws lessons from bad filmmakers ("Michael Bay — What is Bayhem?") and shows off what makes the best filmmakers so good. Blockbuster maker Steven Spielberg, for example, is more subtle about his craft than you might guess.

— Phil Wright



YOUR VIEWS

The old shell game

What does the city manager do when he doesn't want to budget money for a project? He asks the city council to get approval for the Pendleton Development Commission, which is made up of the mayor and city council. They in turn ask the Pendleton Development Advisory Committee for their recommendation. This is the committee formed to do the actual legwork on proposals.

The PDC was formed to administer projects for the Urban Renewal District and is funded through bank loans, which in turn provides funding for projects through loans and grants to increase the tax base. Those loans are then repaid with the increase in taxes received.

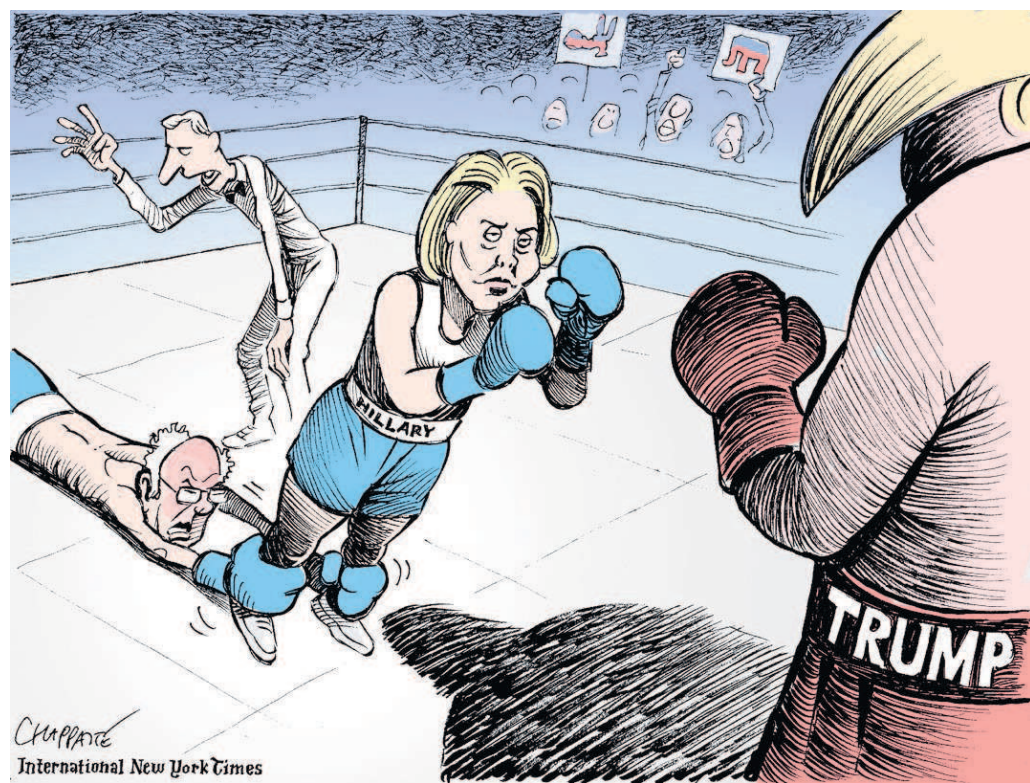
Since I had decided to run for city council, I began attending different commission and committee meetings

to see if I could get a glimpse of "The Big Picture." In the case of the two downtown parking lots, the committee decided, since PDC funds were so scarce and the city budget had not yet been finalized, to recommend that the city fund the projects rather than take funding from the PDC since no increase in the tax base would be realized.

Jordan McDonald presented an alternate plan that would enable the project to be funded out of the general fund, and Chuck Woods agreed.

At the ensuing PDC meeting, the mayor objected to the advisory committee's recommendation and Chuck Woods failed to present Mr. McDonald's sensible approach. I did catch a glimpse of "The Big Picture" and it wasn't pretty. It was a shame our newest council member missed both meetings.

Rick Rohde
Pendleton



OTHER VIEWS

How Facebook warps our worlds

Those who've been raising alarms about Facebook are right: Almost every minute that we spend on our smartphones and tablets and laptops, thumbing through favorite websites and scrolling through personalized feeds, we're pointed toward foregone conclusions. We're pressured to conform.

But unseen puppet masters on Mark Zuckerberg's payroll aren't to blame. We're the real culprits. When it comes to elevating one perspective above all others and herding people into culturally and ideologically inflexible tribes, nothing that Facebook does to us comes close to what we do to ourselves.

I'm talking about how we use social media in particular and the Internet in general — and how we let them use us. They're not so much agents as accomplices, new tools for ancient impulses, part of "a long sequence of technological innovations that enable us to do what we want," noted social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who wrote the 2012 best seller "The Righteous Mind," when we spoke last week.

"And one of the things we want is to spend more time with people who think like us and less with people who are different," Haidt added. "The Facebook effect isn't trivial. But it's metabolizing or amplifying a tendency that was already there."

By "the Facebook effect" he didn't mean the possibility, discussed extensively over recent weeks, that Facebook manipulates its menu of "trending" news to emphasize liberal views and sources. That menu is just one facet of Facebook.

More prevalent for many users are the posts we see from friends and from other people and groups we follow on the network, and this information is utterly contingent on choices we ourselves make. If we seek out, "like" and comment on angry missives from Bernie Sanders supporters, we'll be confronted with more angry missives from more Sanders supporters. If we banish such outbursts, those dispatches disappear.

That's the crucial dynamic, algorithm or whatever you want to call it. That's the trap and curse of our lives online.

The Internet isn't rigged to give us right or left, conservative or liberal — at least not until we rig it that way. It's designed to give us more of the same, whatever that same is: one sustained note from the vast and varied music that it holds, one redundant fragrance from a garden of infinite possibility.

A few years back I bought some scented shower gel from Jo Malone. I made the purchase through the company's website. For months afterward, as I toggled through cyberspace, Jo Malone stalked me, always on my digital heels, forever in a corner of my screen, a Jo Malone candle here, a Jo Malone cologne over there. I'd been profiled and pigeonholed: fan of Jo Malone. Sure, I could choose from woody, citrus, floral and even fruity, but there was no Aramis in my aromatic ecosphere, and I was steered clear of Old Spice.

So it goes with the fiction we read, the movies we watch, the music we listen to and, scarily, the ideas we subscribe to. They're not challenged. They're validated and reinforced. By bookmarking given blogs and personalizing social-media feeds, we customize the news we consume and the political beliefs we're exposed to as never before. And this colors our days, or rather bleeds them of color, reducing them to a single hue.

We construct precisely contoured echo chambers of affirmation that turn conviction into zeal, passion into fury, disagreements with the other side into the demonization of it. Then we marvel at the Twitter mobs that

swarm in defense of Sanders or the surreal success of Donald Trump's candidacy, whose historical tagline may well be "All I know is what's on the Internet."

Those were his exact words, a blithe excuse for his mistaken assertion that a protester at one of his rallies had ties to Islamic extremists. He'd seen a video somewhere. He'd chosen to take it at face value. His intelligence wasn't and isn't vetted but viral — and conveniently suited

to his argument and needs. With a creative or credulous enough Google search, a self-serving "truth" can always be found, along with a passel of supposed experts to vouch for it and a clique of fellow disciples.

Carnival barkers, conspiracy theories, willful bias and nasty partisanship aren't anything new, and they haven't reached unprecedented heights today. But what's remarkable and sort of heartbreaking is the way they're fed by what should be strides

in our ability to educate ourselves. The proliferation of cable television networks and growth of the Internet promised to expand our worlds, not shrink them. Instead they've enhanced the speed and thoroughness with which we retreat into enclaves of the like-minded.

Eli Pariser parsed all of this in his 2011 book "The Filter Bubble," noting how every tap, swipe and keystroke warps what comes

next, creating a tailored reality that's closer to fiction. There was subsequent pushback to that analysis, including from scientists at Facebook, who published a peer-reviewed study in the journal Science last year that questioned just how homogeneous a given Facebook user's news feed really was.

But there's no argument that in an era that teems with choice, brims with niche marketing and exalts individualism to the extent that ours does, we're sorting ourselves with a chillingly ruthless efficiency. We've surrendered universal points of reference. We've lost common ground.

"Technology makes it much easier for us to connect to people who share some single common interest," said Marc Dunkelman, adding that it also makes it easier for us to avoid "face-to-face interactions with diverse ideas." He touched on this in an incisive 2014 book, "The Vanishing Neighbor," which belongs with Haidt's work and with "Bowling Alone," "Coming Apart" and "The Fractured Republic" in the literature of modern American fragmentation, a booming genre all its own.

We're less committed to, and trustful of, large institutions than we were at times in the past. We question their wisdom and substitute it with the groupthink of micro-communities, many of which we've formed online, and their sensibilities can be more peculiar and unforaging.

Facebook, along with other social media, definitely conspires in this. Haidt noted that it often discourages dissent within a cluster of friends by accelerating shaming. He pointed to the enforced political correctness among students at many colleges.

"Facebook allows people to react to each other so quickly that they are really afraid to step out of line," he said.

But that's not about a lopsided news feed. It's not about some sorcerer's algorithm. It's about a tribalism that has existed for as long as humankind has and is now rooted in the fertile soil of the Internet, which is coaxing it toward a full and insidious flower.

Frank Bruni, an Op-Ed columnist for The New York Times since June 2011, joined the New York Times in 1995. Over his years, he has worn a wide variety of hats, including chief restaurant critic and Rome bureau chief.

LETTERS POLICY

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