

EDITORIAL

Internet an aide as the coronavirus spreads

The list of grievances against the internet is a long and sometimes sordid one.

Cyberspace — if you'll indulge the rather dated term — has plenty of nooks devoted to misinformation, and crannies crowded by the purveyors of ad hominen attacks and conspiracy theories to make moon landing deniers blush.

But in the era of coronavirus the online world has also shown off many of its positive attributes.

The internet makes it easier for parents to put together lessons for kids whose one-week spring vacation suddenly, and unexpectedly, stretched to at least seven.

It's also an endless source for ideas about entertaining restless children, from cooking to crafts to outdoor pursuits. Some of these might even work, at least briefly.

For higher education, the internet allows institutions such as Blue Mountain Community College to continue to operate, but in a way consistent with reducing the spread of the virus.

Telecommuting has been around for about as long as the internet, of course, but never has the ability to work from home been more vital than during the age of social distancing.

Restrictions are having a devastating effect on some businesses, of course — the dining and lodging sectors being a notable example.

But the harm, both in purely economic terms and in the provision of public services, would be even greater if many people didn't have the option to work from home.

And although the internet teems with claims about coronavirus ranging from the silly to the potentially dangerous, it's also a forum that enables generous people to find ways to help their friends and neighbors.

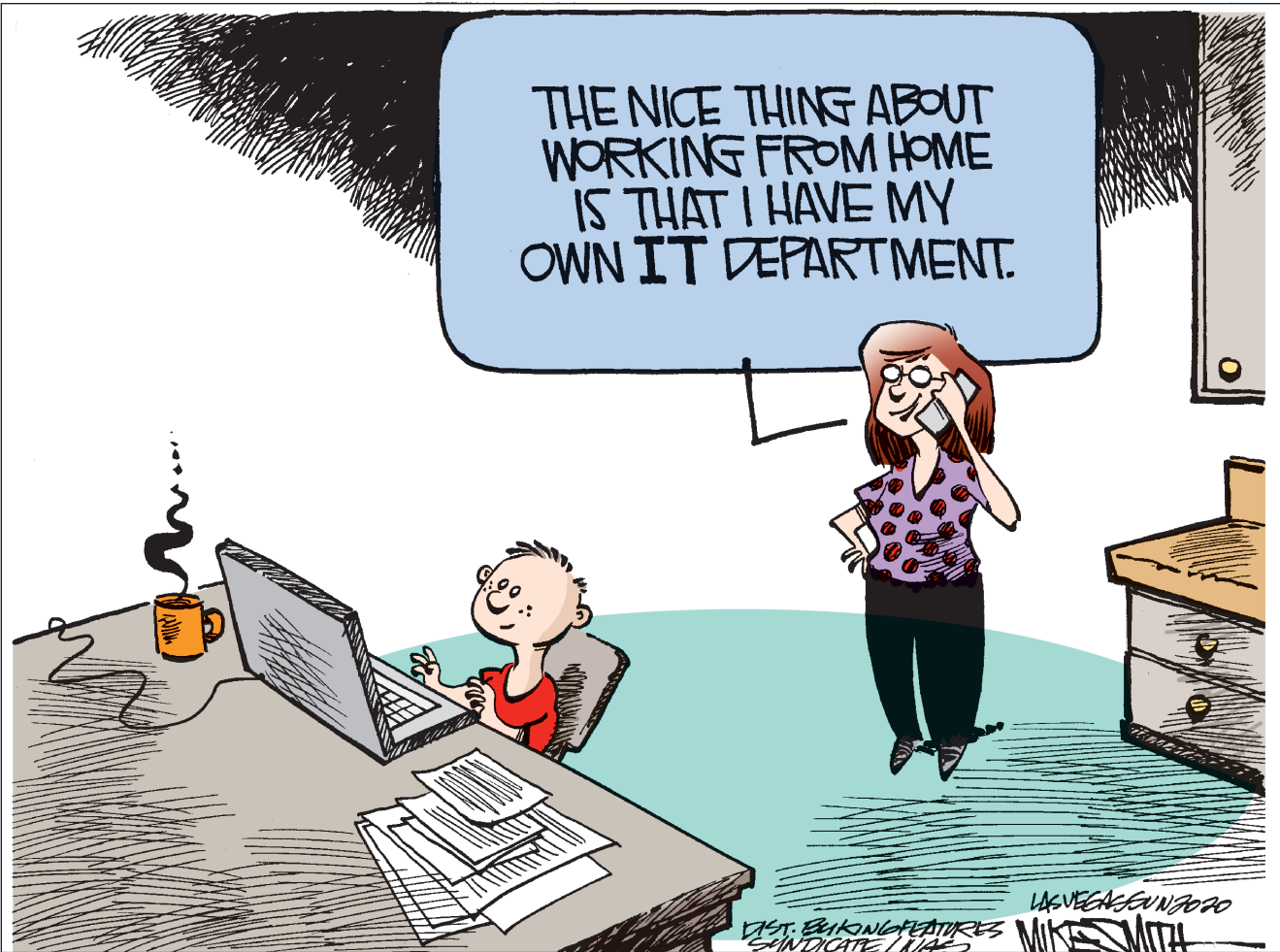
The internet, ultimately, is just another tool, albeit more complicated than, say, a hammer.

And like any tool, how we wield it determines whether we end up with a sore thumb or a useful and solid construction that enriches our lives.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

Letters to the editor

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Handing out cash won't work

As the COVID-19 crisis deepens, my fellow economists have reached deep into their bare cupboards of old ideas, and what have they found?

Models that do not work: bailouts for big companies. Tax cuts for people well-off enough to owe taxes. Cash-grant schemes, a favorite of the universal income crowd.

These tactics won't be effective. We cannot predict how bad the economic situation will get. And however bad it is, you cannot fill the hole with money alone.

In 1929, Irving Fisher, the greatest economist in America, said that stocks had reached "a permanently high plateau." In December 2008, the incoming Obama team locked onto a forecast that was out of date by Inauguration Day. The models now are useless. Is the \$1-trillion-plus package proposed by the Treasury Department "enough"? No economist knows. In this situation, we must act without knowing, and do whatever it takes.

But we must act wisely. Bailouts of airlines will benefit those who own stock. Tax cuts, no matter how designed, are geared toward people who have money to tax. These are not priorities.

Cash grants are another issue. Cash is simple, appealing and welcome — although getting it quickly to those most in need is not so easy. But the main problem right now is not a shortage of cash.

The critical looming problem is the security and stability of basic supplies. We can beat the virus if people are separated and sheltered in safe and secure homes and apartments. For that, they must remain housed and fed.

We need medical supplies, as everyone knows: masks, oxygen, respirators, ventilators. We need field hospitals, converting hotels and dormitories and even stadiums. We need people trained

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quickly to work these facilities and to be paid well for work that requires them to be on the front lines. We need to gear up factories all over the country to make the necessary goods, on the assumption that global supply chains will not be revived before inventories run out. For these tasks, we need workers.

We also need more basic, everyday items that flow across the country in vast domestic networks: food, cleaners, disinfectants, paper goods, motor fuel. They need to get into grocery stores, pharmacies and gas stations. For all that, we need truckers, stockers, checkout clerks, managers. Even the restaurants that now only offer takeout will need drivers. We need security guards in the stores. In short, our critical service and distribution workers need to stay on the job.

These needs aren't going to be addressed by bailouts. And cash grants come with two big hazards. First, they may fuel panic buying and hoarding, accelerating the rush to shortages, deepening hardship and even hunger for those who do the right thing and refuse to panic. Second, cash grants may encourage essential low-wage workers to stay home, making it difficult to keep the distribution chains working as they must.

We need instead to guarantee that our critical sectors — food, fuel, medicines, household basics — all stay open, while everything inessential is closed. For this, workers in those sectors need higher wages, health protections, a guarantee that medical costs will be covered if incurred. Amazon has raised wages, and that is a start. All big distributors, grocery and drug chains and fast-food franchises should follow.

We'll also need many more workers in health care — a sector where armies of domestic workers could quickly deploy their cleaning and housekeeping skills. People with some training in health care proper can get more. People who have quit the sector can come back. Better pay will help here as well.

The millions now being laid off do need expanded unemployment insurance — a shelter-in-place supplement would replace some lost income. The fast way to do this is through employers; just have the government reimburse them.

But more important for those at home is to cut their costs. Los Angeles has enacted a moratorium on evictions and late fees for renters. The federal administration has announced a moratorium on foreclosures for some mortgages. These are proper steps. Internet and other basic telecommunications services should be made free for the duration. The government can support closed businesses with loans and grants to keep them in hibernation until this abates.

Can all this be paid for? Of course it can be. Whatever we can do, we can afford. Getting caught up in budget guesswork, business as usual for Congress and economists, is a time-consuming mistake. In the end, the problem is not money. It is speed, logistics, targeting.

For that, a Health Finance Corporation, modeled after the Reconstruction Finance Corporation of Depression and World War II fame, with unlimited borrowing power, can put the money where it is needed. States and cities, the National Guard and the Army, business and labor can all do their part. If we act, at once and wisely, a better America will rise to the call.

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OTHER VIEWS

Balancing civil liberties in the time of coronavirus

Editorial from The Chicago Tribune:

Americans are a mobile, energetic people with a fierce attachment to personal liberty. We generally believe in doing what we please without having to get permission from the government. We don't like being told what we can and can't do.

In a free and democratic society, these are healthy attitudes. But in an emergency, they can override good judgment. Examples from the past week: Chicago police on Saturday broke up at least two house parties after Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker issued a stay-at-home order, St. Patrick's Day revelers celebrated in crowded pubs the weekend before that holiday, college students partied on Florida beaches and the governor of Oklahoma tweeted gleefully that he was "eating with my kids and all my fellow Oklahomans" in a "packed" restaurant.

Since Saturday's order from Pritzker, the space for people to behave irresponsibly in Illinois has shrunk. Pritzker shut down restaurants and bars. Some Florida communities closed their beaches. The Oklahoma governor deleted that tweet and declared a state of emergency.

In a war, natural disaster or other crisis, many measures that would normally be regarded as intolerable intrusions on personal autonomy are entirely justified. One person doesn't have the right to recklessly expose others to a potentially lethal virus. Mandatory quarantines have long been allowed for serious infectious diseases. So has compulsory vaccination.

Sensible vigilance, however, can veer into panic. During World War I, thousands of Americans were imprisoned merely for opposing the war. During World War II, the federal government interned 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry. Neither policy looks defensible in retrospect.

So any measures taken to combat the new coronavirus have to be scrutinized for

necessity and value. Infringements on freedom should not be imposed without a very good reason, even in an emergency.

From a legal and constitutional point of view, governmental agencies have considerable authority to enforce rules to combat infectious diseases. The courts have generally been reluctant to interfere with these authorities. But their latitude is not unlimited. "The more restrictive the measures, the more medically validated justification you need," says Colleen Connell, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois.

A nurse who had treated Ebola patients in West Africa in 2014 was involuntarily quarantined for three days when she arrived at the Newark, N.J., airport, on suspicion that she had been infected. She went to court, claiming violation of various rights. The suit ended in a settlement in which New Jersey agreed to grant certain protections to anyone quarantined, such

as the right to a lawyer and the right to contest the decision.

We are not on such treacherous ground with COVID-19. Pritzker's stay-at-home order lets Illinoisans leave home to go to the grocery, pharmacy, medical facility, gas station or essential workplace, or just to take a walk. Roads and airports will stay open, and public transit will keep operating.

Under the circumstances, the steps taken so far are prudent precautions that don't demand too much of citizens as the pandemic intensifies.

History has shown the key to success in combating epidemics of infectious disease comes from voluntary cooperation of the public in the needed safeguards. Confronted by a frightening contagion, most people in Illinois have shown a willingness to do their part. That's the best way to control the pandemic — and to avoid greater limits on our freedom.