

# VIEWPOINTS

## Don't count on reporters to work well with numbers

I can't speak for all people who enter the journalism profession. If they are anything like me, however, they likely tend to hurry too much, not review their work as carefully as they should, and miss glaring typographical errors (my apologies for last week's error-ridden column). Journalists, thus show their humanity day after day, week after week.

Also, if other reporters share some of the same qualities as me, they will admit that one of the reasons they aren't designing robots that land on Mars or teaching quantum physics is they, like me, are generally lousy at math.

income above those thresholds to expire.

Unfortunately, even though the debate over extending the Bush-era tax cuts has been a key point of contention between the parties since Obama took office, many reporters still haven't learned how to accurately describe the competing proposals to their readers.

The Columbia Journalism Review uses, as an example, an Associated Press story on the Senate vote by Alan Fram that ran in the Nashua Telegraph and Concord Monitor in late July that incorrectly suggested that no tax cuts would be extended for the wealthy under the Democratic bill.

In his lede, Fram wrote, "Democrats pushed a yearlong extension of tax cuts for all but the highest-earning Americans through the Senate on Wednesday (July 25)." He later described the GOP proposal as "a rival Republican package that would have included the best-off in the tax reductions," again suggesting that the wealthy would be excluded, and claimed that "the \$250 billion Democratic measure would extend tax cuts in 2013 for millions of Americans...[b]ut it would deny those reductions to individuals making over \$200,000 yearly and couples earning at least \$250,000."

Why is this wrong? Because under the Democratic proposal, all Americans would still pay lower rates on their first \$200,000 (or \$250,000) in taxable income. And up to that level, individuals who earn more would actually see a greater financial benefit.

As analysts from the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities noted when reviewing a similar proposal back in 2010, "high-income people actually receive much larger benefits in dollar terms from the so-called 'middle-class tax cuts' than middle-class people do."

The YG Network, which describes itself as "dedicated to supporting center-right policies and the efforts of policymakers who fight for those policies," has released a YouTube video that

### BETWEEN THE LINES



**DAVID LIAS**  
david.lias@plaintalk.net

describes this legislation – specifically S 3412 – as "Obama's tax hike."

The video's narrator notes, "Liberals don't understand how to create jobs and fix our economy. We need Rep. Kristi Noem to keep fighting for small business. Tell her to vote for jobs by rejecting S 3412, the Obama-Reid-Pelosi tax hike."

In other words, The YG Network wants you to tell Kristi to vote against a piece of legislation that likely may be beneficial to nearly everyone. It is easy, however, to paint this bill as a job killer because that just goes right along with its misinterpretation. By reporters and politicians of every stripe.

Brendan Nyan, in his Columbia Journalism Review article, "The press botches the tax debate – again," notes how journalists just can't seem to present this story in the proper framework.

One problem, notes New York magazine's Dan Amira, is that President Obama himself has reinforced the misleading framing in describing his proposal. During a speech at the National Urban League Convention in Louisiana late last month, for instance, Obama said, "Just a few hours ago, the Senate moved forward a bill that we had promoted to keep middle-class tax cuts for 98 percent of Americans next year."

Conversely, Republicans who support extending all the Bush tax cuts have no incentive to correct Obama or the Democrats when they exaggerate the extent to which taxes would be increased on wealthy Americans.

Too many journalists don't understand the tax code or other aspects of budget or fiscal policy especially well, according to Nyan. He adds, "Moreover, they have little incentive to add nuance or detail to their stories given the overwhelming priority given to dramatizing political conflict in entertaining ways."

So, as you pick up a newspaper, or watch cable news, or surf the internet, prepare for plenty of political drama.

If you happen to come across a political story involving numbers, however, be sure to personally analyze the all of the facts and figures.

There's a good chance, because of reporter error, that the numbers don't add up – to the delight of both Republicans and Democrats.



## SOUTH DAKOTA EDITORIAL ROUNDUP

The Associated Press  
The Argus Leader, Aug. 4, 2012

### Stand up and fight drugs in Yankton Sioux tribe

The death of a 2-year-old girl has brought attention to a real problem on tribal lands — drug use and the lack of adequate enforcement.

Without RieLee Lovell's death in July while in the care of two people charged with meth and marijuana possession, it might not have come to light that the Yankton Sioux Tribe never got around to using a federal grant to hire a methamphetamine detective.

Now, that failure to use a 2010 C.O.P.S. grant has triggered outrage among people in the tribe who have complained about the meth problem in Charles Mix County and people across the state who are sickened by what happened to RieLee Lovell. The child lived in a tribal housing unit in rural Wagner, and her death went unreported for almost two days because the adults who were supposed to care for her were partying, according to prosecutors.

Other events since her death show that the circumstances surrounding her life are just one example of how people who are entrusted with upholding laws sometimes look the other way instead. Most recently, the Wagner police chief was arrested on charges of failing to report his girlfriend's meth use. Then we hear that the tribal leaders let politics and whatever else gets in the way of using the \$157,252 federal grant to hire someone to investigate drug crimes.

Charles Mix County State's Attorney Pam Hein wants more cooperation between law enforcement agencies, including the BIA, local officers and federal agents. That would be a good start, but that already should be happening because there is a program in place called Safe Trails Task Force to do that very thing. Except, no Yankton Sioux Tribal officer is a member. In addition, Charles Mix County Sheriff's deputies and Wagner Police are not cross-deputized to enforce tribal law or respond to an emergency call on tribal land.

Excuses and exceptions don't matter anymore. What matters is that grown adults empowered to make life safer for 2-year-olds and others get on top of the

The Associated Press  
Watertown Public Opinion, Aug. 8, 2012

### When will Washington get it?

English novelist Charles Dickens is one of the greatest authors of all time. His classic "A Tale of Two Cities" begins with one of the most famous opening lines in history. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," serves as an instant hook that pulls readers in and keeps them turning pages.

That opening line can be applied to South Dakota politics these days, especially when it comes to voter registration. As usual, these continue to be good times for Republicans as the number of registered voters in their party — 236,906 — stands far ahead of the Democrats who listed 186,041 registered voters as of Aug. 1. Republicans have dominated voting rolls for years but recently the gap between the two parties has been expanding. But are these the best of times for Republicans? Yes and no.

True, Republicans hold two of the three offices in the state's congressional delegation. The governor is Republican — as is usually the case — and every elected state constitutional officer is Republican. The Republicans also hold sizeable majorities in both houses of the Legislature so it's pretty obvious they've got a good grip on South Dakota politics.

But even with all that, the number of registered voters

who list Republican as their party affiliation has declined in the last four years. In 2008 there were 241,528 registered Republicans which was 4,500 more than the Aug. 1 total. Democrats, however, are in even worse shape during that span, going from 204,413 registered voters in 2008 to 186,041 — a loss of more than 18,000 voters as of Aug. 1 this year.

The long-standing disparity between Republicans and Democrats isn't really surprising because South Dakota has been a Republican state for much of its history. But why are the numbers of registered voters for both parties declining while the number of independent voters increases, going from 84,473 in 2008 to 88,726 now?

We're guessing there's a message somewhere in all those numbers and we're guessing it has more to do with national politics than state politics.

South Dakotans have been fairly satisfied with the way their state has been run for many years and we can't think of too many issues over the past few decades that have really polarized people regardless of who has been in charge. That's part of the "best of times."

"The worst of times" we can lay squarely at the feet of Congress which is so polarized politically that getting anything of substance accomplished is incredibly difficult because regardless of what one party proposes, the other generally opposes it. All you need do is look at the Thomas Voting Reports published in a recent edition of Public Opinion to see that.

Could it be that voters are so sick of partisan politics that both parties are losing their appeal and registering as an independent has become an attractive option? If so, what does that mean for the major political parties in South Dakota and, perhaps, the nation? Maybe a substantial drop in party numbers for both sides, not just in South Dakota but across the country, will serve as a wake-up call. Something needs to be done because what we're getting out of Congress now isn't worth the money we're paying to keep its members employed.

## Wait a minute, Mr. Recycle Man

"There seems to be a deeply embedded uneasiness in our culture about throwing away... what can be reused... Perhaps it feels unnatural. Mother Nature doesn't throw stuff away. Dead trees, birds, beetles... are pretty quickly recycled by the system."

William Booth, Salvation Army founder

Dear Mr. Recycle Man,

My name's Paula, and I'm on your route. I'm turning 60 this year, and I'm sharing this because everybody knows, so you might as well, too. When you get to be my age, life seems more finite, since you have more years under your belt than what lies ahead.

Naturally, you start worrying about what you will leave behind. For me, I don't want my footprint to be littered with garbage that I could have recycled.

If you've wondered why I take time to separate trash from recycling, well, now you know. It may appear to you that there's precious little to be said about what I toss away – if you only knew. Those fresh spinach bags? Spinach is my all-time favorite vegetable and the first one I remember gobbling as a child. Love it to this day.

If you haven't guessed by all of those empty yogurt cups, cranberry juice jugs, baby carrot bags, broccoli wrappers, frozen vegetable bags, strawberry crates and soy milk containers, I'm a little bit of a health nut. As much

as I'm hooked on keeping my waistline, a never-ending battle I might add, I admit my sugarless and starch-less way of life can be pretty boring.

Suppose you've noticed that my bin is void of soda pop and alcohol bottles. It's not that I'm against all that. I'm not really crazy about carbonated beverages, save A&W Root Beer, and I'm allergic to the sulfa in alcohol.

Regarding those spotless ground Italian sausage wrappers, no, I didn't scrub them before tossing them out. I'm a little OCD, but not quite that over the top! Credit my three fur-ball Dachshunds for licking them clean. Same goes for the Styrofoam trays from steaks and chops.

With all those empty Spic and Span, Windex and Mr. Clean bottles, you're probably also thinking that I'm a neat-nick. Kind of.

Anyway, because the amount I recycle is greater than what I throw away, I have difficulty fitting all of it into those tiny bins. Maybe if they were as large as trash bins and trash bins as small as recycle bins, we'd all throw away less and recycle more. Now, there's an idea!

You're probably wondering if I'm writing a book with all the edited drafts that I churn out every week. Well, yes, I am working on a second book, and I do write and edit for a living. You see, writing is a far-from-perfect process often replete with draft

after draft after draft. As Annie Dillard once said, "Good reading is hard writing."

What do I write about? Everyday things. I tend to focus on passages, the losses and acquisitions of treasured or not so treasured people, places and things.

If you read my drafts, it's OK. Don't waste any time saving them in case I'm famous someday. I used to think that would happen, but as time goes by, I have my doubts.

One of these days, you may see a stack of old greeting cards, years' worth from my mother's collection. Why haven't I tossed them yet? I'm on the fence. Sometimes, I think, why not. They're old. She's gone. Plus, I'm tired of being reminded how quickly the years passed. Throwing Mom's cards could be the fastest way to momentarily cure my longing for her, but I know I'd regret it.

As soon as you haul them away, I'd chase after, hollering, "No! Stop! I didn't mean to. I'm sorry." You probably wouldn't hear me. Well, I'd better stop rambling so you can get on your way doing your part to save the planet.

Have a good one...

Yours truly, Paula

2012 © Copyright Paula Damon. A resident of Southeast South Dakota, Paula Bosco Damon is a national award-winning columnist. Her writing has won first-place in competitions of the National Federation of Press Women, South Dakota Press Women and Iowa Press Women. In the 2009, 2010 and 2011 South Dakota Press Women Communications Contests, her columns have earned eight first-place awards. To contact Paula, email boscodamon.paula@gmail.com, follow her blog at my-story-your-story@blogspot.com and find her on Facebook.

### MY STORY YOUR STORY



**PAULA DAMON**  
paula.damon@tw.net

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### PROUD TO LIVE IN VERMILLION

I came to Vermillion in February, 1966 to attend the University of South Dakota. I know that doesn't make me a native of Vermillion but I think I have been here long enough to know a little bit about my adopted home.

If you step back for a moment and begin to reflect on what Vermillion has become and what it has to offer it can become quite the list. For instance, let's consider a few things (not listed in any particular order):

Medical care -hospital, doctors, other medical facilities that do an excellent job of taking care of us; The University of South Dakota and all the experiences it has to offer; A system of parks that offer so much, especially for our children; City streets that are very well maintained; Recreation programs that are offered all year long; A highly professional police department;

A volunteer Fire/EMT department – remember its volunteers; Outstanding assisted living facilities; Quick and efficient snow removal; Water of excellent

quality and quantity; A state-of-the art landfill; A world famous music museum; An excellent recycling program and facility; A city hall that is the best around; Two movie theaters; Restaurants that offer all kinds of culinary choices; Summer plays that are a joy; A city library that continues to grow; An excellent Arts Council; A state museum that offers so much; Very reliable electrical power and thank goodness for buried power lines; An outstanding public school system and all of its programs; Conscientious people willing to serve on councils and boards; A wide variety of churches; A retail sector that offers so much; Many available jobs; Access to the nation's interstate system is only minutes away; The Chamber/Development Corporation working hard to build the community.

I am sure there are many other things that can and should be added to such a list. All in all, I am very proud and pleased to be living in a community that offers so much. Sometimes we just need to be reminded of what we have.

**Bob Fuller**

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