

OPINION

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Everyone wins with lottery

The first time I played the lottery was four months ago while stranded with a bad alternator on a Friday night in Ganado, Texas.



DAVID RECHT
COLUMNIST

I used to think the lottery was a contemptible government-sponsored scheme that preyed on the impoverished of America. However, because of the complete absence of things to do in Ganado, I decided to throw moral conviction out the window in favor of something to pass the time. I took a \$5 bill out of my wallet and purchased five scratch-and-win lottery tickets. I didn't win, but the experience led me to reconsider the argument for government lotteries.

Who plays these games? The lottery does not discriminate on the basis of income; the poor want to get rich and the rich want to get richer. No one cares, though, when Bill Gates blows a few bucks.

Rather, the debate centers around the indigent head of a household with two young mouths to feed. Why should the government provide a gambling game to take his money when he should be purchasing diapers and formula?

Diapers aside, the lottery rakes in a ton of money that contributes to the state's General Revenue Fund. That's why the government should provide a lottery to drain the errant father's money.

What about the family? Its problem isn't really the lottery. Someone who neglects the well-being of his family for the sake of a gambling game doesn't really care much about his family. Therefore, in the absence of a legal betting mechanism such as the lottery, he would find other ways to blow the family income. Instead of having money directed to other industries, such as alcohol, tobacco or even black-market goods and services (such as illicit drugs and prostitution), why not channel his money to the government?

In fact, giving money to the state is an investment for our poor friend. Proceeds from the lottery are devoted to five different categories: prizes, commissions to retailers, administrative expenses, cost of product, and deposits to the General Revenue Fund.

What is the General Revenue Fund? It's an account set up by the state of Texas to support various government expenses such as health and human services, parks public safety, public schools and prisons.

What a bargain! By playing the lottery instead of buying groceries, one can blow money and support the schools the kids are using and the prisons they'll eventually end up in because they were neglected by their father.

So don't get mad when the guy at the front of the checkout line asks for a couple of Quick Picks and his son is wearing a worn-out pair of shoes with holes in the bottom of them. His father could support worse causes, such as the tobacco industry. But instead of supporting an addictive, carcinogenic drug, he made the civic-minded decision to give back to the community by playing the lottery.

Instead of giving him a scornful stare, shake his hand and let him know that his benevolence is appreciated.

Not everyone these days is so thoughtful.

David Recht is a Class of '97 civil engineering major

Gates, NBC merger as colorful as featherless peacock

Is the future now? Microsoft and NBC would have us think so. Last week, the new "futuristic" news network, MSNBC, launched itself amid a great press explosion. Here, at last, was the merging of the two greatest technological achievements of the century — television and the Internet. Like many avid Internet users, I was excited about what the debut night of programming would entail. With what new and thrilling thing would MSNBC launch the next generation of news media?

Tom Brokaw interviewed President Clinton. Oh boy. Not that Clinton is a poor interview, or people don't care about what he has to say. It's just that when you hear "Internight" with Tom Brokaw, you'd expect something a little futuristic. Granted, there's not much you can do with a presidential interview to make it computerized or futuristic, and dressing Brokaw and Clinton in Star Trek uniforms just wouldn't cut it.

Not that many people got a chance to complain either. MSNBC is offered as a cable channel, and in very limited areas at best. TCA Cable doesn't offer it here yet, and larger markets, like the city of Houston, don't get access to the so-called "future of broadcast news."

In desperation, I decided the key to the future of this channel must be on the Internet. But after visiting the MSNBC web site (<http://www.msnbc.com>), I discovered nothing extraordinary.

From the site you can access text versions of the top stories, a programming guide, and links to sites related to the top stories. Big deal. You can get that at any news-related site. The big thing I was looking for was a live news feed. After all, with the freeware program Streamworks you can access a live Internet news feed from NBC, NBC PRO. Albeit basic, it is at least a start on a live news program.

But MSNBC, because of its rampant commercialization, only offers the audio version of the Clinton interview in one format, RealAudio. RealAudio is a program plagued with problems in accessibil-

ity from various networks. If this is the future, shouldn't there be more of an effort to be compatible with other plug-in programs that can work for all platforms and all processors?

MSNBC did offer an option titled "Ask President Clinton." I figured this would be an online chat with the president, or at least Brokaw would pick questions from the list to ask Clinton during the interview. The only thing MSNBC did with the viewer-submitted questions was to create a cute little bar graph displaying the frequency and type of question submitted. Oh, and a nice "Thank you for watching" printed at the top of the screen. It seems the "futuristic" network is about as cutting-edge as an episode of "Lost in Space." But if MSNBC wants to find the future of news broadcast-

ing, a model site to look at would be the Bloomberg Information Service.

Once you get to the site (<http://www.bloomberg.com>), one click takes you to the world's top stories, the world's financial markets, or whatever you determine is important. Not only that, but Bloomberg offers live TV news on your computer. If your Net connection isn't fast enough, it offers live radio. In contrast to MSNBC, the most amazing thing about Bloomberg is this: It doesn't claim to be the future Internet news source. It claims to be the first source for news and information. There's a novel concept. Leave the bragging aside, and use the technology to live up to your claims.

Obviously, MSNBC is suffering from an old ailment — egotism — that isn't

rare when two big companies get together to improve our lives. The recent media mergers, such as Time Warner with Turner and Disney with ABC are similarly overblown corporate deals. MSNBC believes itself to be different just because it uses catchy Internet terminology to promote itself.

The technology is new. But what has really happened here? A news channel formed from the merging of two big companies. Except this time, it's nothing that new.

MSNBC is right, the future is now. Just don't expect it to stem from corporate mergers that have been occurring forever.

Stephen Llano is a Class of '97 history major



STEPHEN LLANO
COLUMNIST



Retail giant stonewalls on questions

We all go there. Once, twice, maybe even three times a week.

No, not the Chicken.

I'm talking about the Mecca of that major world religion known as capitalism: Wal-Mart.

But this shrine of consumer goods is only shiny on the surface.

What people don't realize is there is a giant magnet somewhere in each of these oversized stores that attracts cars from miles away and pulls them into the parking lot. It's like a Death Star tractor beam. We're utterly helpless against its only partially true claims of "Made in America."

Here in Bryan-College Station, we not only have an expanded Wal-Mart, but also a SuperCenter and a Sam's Wholesale Club. The power to purchase garden tools, boxer shorts and bad produce at 2:00 in the morning is ours.

We must be the luckiest consumers on Earth.

Or maybe not.

We've all heard about how Wal-Mart invades small towns and wipes out Mom and Pop stores. But I wanted to know how

the retail giant affects an area like Bryan-College Station.

I called the Chamber of Commerce and the Better Business Bureau to find out if any small businesses have been forced to close their doors as a result of the Wal-Mart expansions in our area. Apparently, neither organization keeps such information. Well, OK.

So I called our local Wal-Mart stores. Managers at each location claimed, "It's against Wal-Mart policy to comment on any aspect of operations."

They wouldn't reveal profits generated by the company, pay rates or even the number of Wal-Mart employees in the Twin City Microplex.

According to the managers, all questions are handled by CEO David Glass' office at Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville, Ark.

Of course, he was unavailable for comment. So my call was transferred to various public relations departments and I was eventually put on hold for 20 minutes. Anyway, some Wal-Mart bureaucrats eventually promised to send me a copy of last year's annual report with sales figures and other information for its Bryan-College Station stores. The packet never arrived.

So much for customer service. Local officials were also unwilling to comment. They wouldn't even discuss how much of the

cities' budgets are generated from sales tax collected by the local Wal-Marts.

"Call the state comptroller's office in Austin. They can tell you everything," a receptionist told me.

So I did. After dialing up the comptroller's office and introducing myself, I was greeted with, "You damn newspaper people. ..."

Without elaborating, I will only say the conversation went downhill from there.

So what's the deal? Why are local and state officials afraid to say anything about Wal-Mart? And why is Wal-Mart even afraid to say how many people it employs?

All this secrecy is enough to make a sensible consumer like myself think Wal-Mart is up to no good. Maybe the retail giant is planning to turn all of its little "associates" into zombies and take over the country and eventually the world.

Hey, it could happen.

But I'd be a liar if I said everything is a secret at Wal-Mart. A local manager was willing to answer one of my questions.

And I'm very proud to reveal the "Discount City" does peddle items from the Kathy Lee Gifford Sweatshop Collection.

Michael Heinroth is a Class of '96 political science major



MICHAEL HEINROTH
COLUMNIST



MAIL CALL

Market forces drive NBA players' salaries

I am writing in response to Ray Hernandez's July 22 column on "out of control" NBA player salaries. This trend in the NBA can easily be explained with a little help from ECON 202. Supply and demand drives most aspects of our economy, and the NBA is no exception. Owners are willing to fork over millions to the players who will give them the best chance to win; this winning, in turn, will lead to greater fan support. It is this euphoria for a quality hometown team that will lead fans to want tickets (and other team merchandise) at all costs. Any businessman with half a brain (admittedly that's all some owners have) will figure out he can increase his profits by raising the price of the product as long as the consumer will still buy it. So that's exactly what the owners do. They continue to escalate ticket prices and the fans blindly throw money at them. Was it merely a coincidence that the Lakers raised their tickets prices at The Forum the same week they signed Shaq? Not a chance.

The simple reason NBA players (and other professional athletes) receive such incredible paychecks is because they are specialists in their field. These 7 ft., 300 lb. "Freaks of Nature" can do things on a basketball court that mere mortals like you and I couldn't even fathom. Since they are the best in the world at what they do they can demand whatever the market will allow them. Hernandez's article suggested that changing the rules of the salary cap would solve this escalating pay scale in the NBA. We need to look no further than the NFL to see this isn't the answer. NFL player agents (namely Leigh Steinberg) have become so adept at circumventing the rules of the cap (with signing bonuses, incentive

clauses, etc.) that it has made a mockery of the system. NBA player agents would certainly find ways to sidestep the NBA league office if they attempted to put more restrictions on the cap. These agents would do everything in their power to ensure their livelihood is not disrupted, and the end result would net the league nothing.

Brian Martin
Class of '97

Rio Grande does not form entire border

I just stumbled across Stephen Llano's column in the July 16 Battalion and puzzled over the first sentence. What claim might California and Arizona have on the Rio Grande? My maps show that it misses them by more than a few miles. Surely Llano doesn't think the Rio Grande connects the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean! The Panama Canal might have been unnecessary if that were the case. I wonder what Mexico and Colorado, for that matter, might think about being left out of his postulated battle for Rio Grande ownership. Colorado residents know well what it means to battle over water rights. But even accepted simply as an analogy to bring his point home to Texans, the fact that Ellis Island is not shared internationally, as is the Rio Grande, suggests that perhaps a less-entangled analogy with which he might be more familiar would have served Llano's purpose better. Maybe he could have Ohio and Montana fight over the Red River or something.

Bob Jarvis
Graduate student

Editor's note: The editor apologizes profusely for not noticing such an obvious error. He would ordinarily catch the mistake, but has lately been unable to concentrate on anything but the Olympics in Atlanta, Florida.

