Opinion

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8

Iowa State Daily

Editorial

Letter from the Opinion Editor

For the life of me, I have absolutely nothing to talk about. Shocking, I know. Rest assured we're plenty pissed with the antics of House Republicans both here and in Washington D.C., what, with the "deficit-reduction" aimed at piddly things like, oh, public education, as opposed to something like, I don't know, not conducting a land war in a mountain range halfway around the world.

That is, when they're not treating 'the gays' like second-class citizens, crying wolf about the integrity of a practice that, at best, is a good way to never have sex again and at worst, is a great way to lose half of your earthly possessions (and your soul) to someone who hates you. In this economy, no less.

Moral of the story: This is what happens when Grandma and Grandpa vote, and you don't.

But hey, that's alright – no need for things like preschool or affordable college during a budget crisis.

More ethanol subsidies! More swanky benefits for government employees!

I suppose I could mention how we're still taking applications for the Editorial Board, and how by "applications'" I mean a nice, shiny e-mail telling me you'd like to be opinionated in board-y fashion.

It'd definitely be nice if there were more than five people on the Board, and even nicer if the majority wasn't Daily staff.

I hope everyone's been enjoying the section. I've been wearing my editor pants for almost two months now, and it's been great hiring new people to complement a pretty solid stable of writers.

I'm always looking for those, by the way. The only thing I ask is that you're interesting and mildly articulate. Perendinate. Assuade. Caesura.

No, you don't need to be a journalist, nor do you need to be a writer. I'm one of two biology majors on staff, there's a KURE DJ, an Aussie, a few engineers and I just hired a rocket scientist.

If you've noticed the snazzy new art, that's thanks to three new illustrators, which is three more than we had last semester. If you're artistically inclined, I promise we've got more than enough work to commission – Rick's story about IBM slowly turning into Skynet over there could most definitely have used some animated robot overlords.

I'd like to apologize for a few things while you're still here – letters have taken a backseat lately while we're busy opining about the protests here, there, and everywhere. Rest assured, we want to hear from you. We need to. On average, I get two pages per day, and most days I wish I had more. Keep 'em comin'.

Lastly, I've instituted a moratorium on shmishmortion-related columns. Indefinitely.

Enjoy your adventure. I am.

Editorial Board

Jessie Opoien, editor in chief
Zach Thompson, managing editor of production
RJ Green, opinion editor
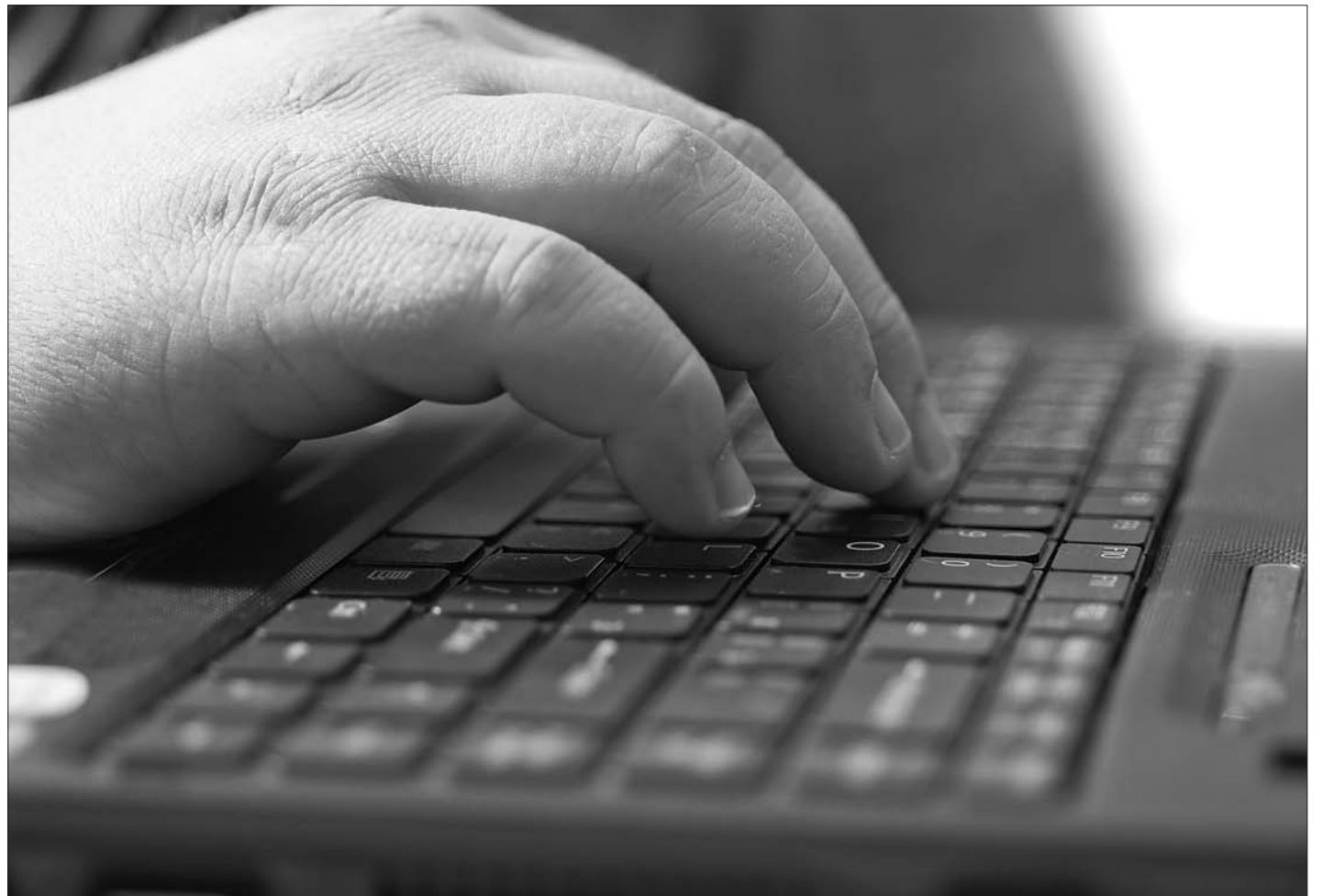**Amy Jo Warren,** community member

Feedback policy:

The Daily encourages discussion but does not guarantee its publication.
We reserve the right to edit or reject any letter or online feedback.

Send your letters to letters@iowastatedaily.com. Letters must include the name(s), phone number(s), majors and/or group affiliation(s) and year in school of the author(s). Phone numbers and addresses will not be published.

Online feedback may be used if first name and last name, major and year in school are included in the post. Feedback posted online is eligible for print in the Iowa State Daily.

Laptops

Columnist Leehey says that while he is fond of his computer, he believes that they have their downsides – Facebook in class, playing games and other distractions are an attempt to ignore the very classes students pay for. Courtesy photo: Thinkstock

Your laptop is your enemy

By Cameron.Leehey @iowastatedaily.com

Laptops in the classroom are an expensive distraction

I am very fond of my laptop computer. Before setting foot in my first ISU class, I took out a sizable student loan and purchased the laptop most capable of satisfying my technological needs and desires

Modern word processing and a wireless Internet connection have aided me greatly in researching and writing papers from any location. PowerPoint, as many of you know, is a fantastic resource for transforming poorly researched presentations into illusions of professionalism. And, of course, there is also a myriad of delightful programs that have no pertinence to school whatsoever – ranging from the relatively benign, such as iTunes, to the quintessentially pernicious, such as World of Warcraft.

But let us set those extraneous functions of our robots aside for the moment and reflect upon how we justified purchasing these devices in the first place: to help us in college. Admittedly, our campus is richly furnished with modern, reliable machines, but one cannot rely upon a console to be unoccupied in a moment of crisis, e.g. when a forgotten paper is due in three hours. Furthermore, libraries do not always offer an atmosphere conducive to productivity – sometimes, it seems, people gather in them to procrastinate socially – so the ability to work off-campus can be critical. And finally, having a laptop at one's immediate disposal does away with the inconvenience of marching through subzero temperatures and fierce precipitation in order to complete an assignment.

But why we do we drag our laptops to class with us? Seldom do we require them on campus, due to the aforementioned abundance of computers, for which Iowa State liberally charges us each semester.

Most classrooms, at least most classrooms I have been in, do not have adequate desktop space for anything larger than a 13-inch MacBook or one of those ridiculous, purse-sized PCs. Even when desktop space is not so scarce, these sophisticated, little machines of ours wind up performing a function better served by a notebook and a pen.

Sure, it could be argued that sometimes, since typing is faster than writing, a laptop is the superior note-taking device, but it is rarely a dominant strategy to produce gigantic tomes of notes for a given class. Much of the time, jotting down a short phrase or list gets the job done. Besides, if you rely upon your laptop for note taking, what do you do when the temperature is low enough to damage your LCD screen on the way to class? Are you really going to want to transport that expensive, fragile machine in your backpack when it is pouring rain?

I have sat in the back of classrooms often enough to know what you are actually doing on your laptop. Nine times out of ten, you are online.

Whether you are playing poker, cracking out on Facebook or just idly surfing, your mind is elsewhere. I am not the only one who notices –your professor does not need to see your screen to know that you are present in body only.

Then again, I do not care if you waste your time in class, and it is possible that your professor does not care either. It is a quandary, though, why a person would spend such sizable quantities of time and money on an education, only to ignore it.

Maybe you do not mean to ignore your classes, maybe the temptation to frolic on the Internet is simply too strong to resist after 35 minutes of a lecture. Maybe that darling laptop of yours, though otherwise a loyal ally, is actually an enemy once you take it into a classroom?

Computers

John Connor will save us all

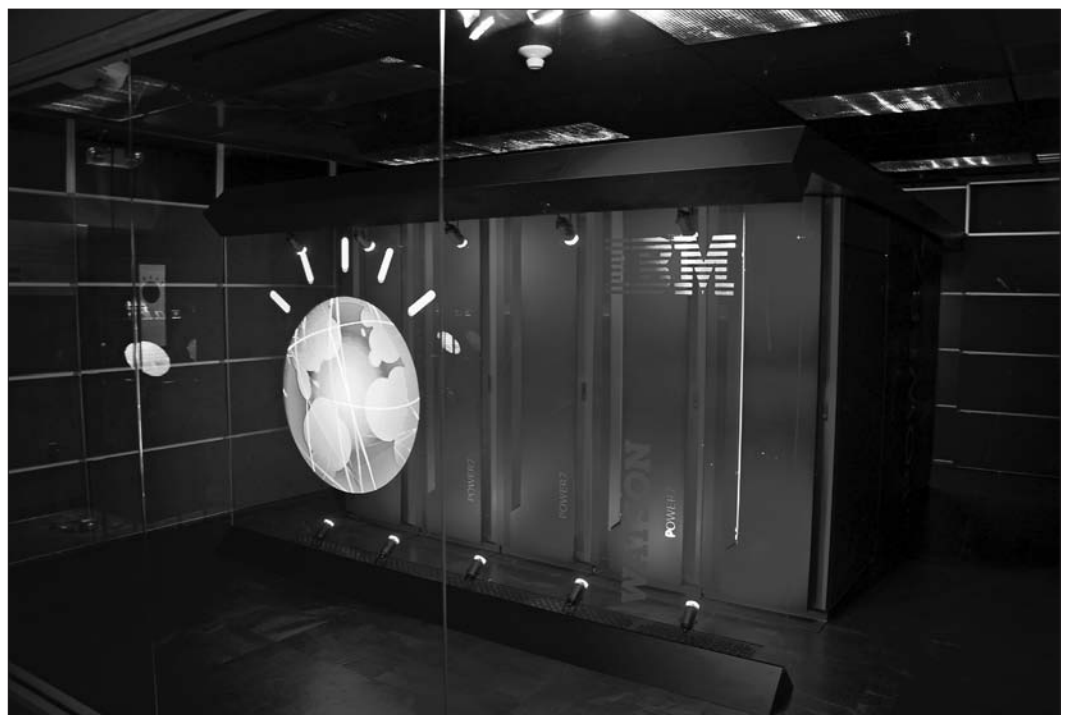**By Rick.Hanton** @iowastatedaily.com

So for those of you that watched IBM's Watson 3000 processor supercomputer take on Ken Jennings and Brad Rutter a couple weeks ago, were you rooting for the humans or the computer? I for one, was rooting for the humans, maybe because I couldn't connect to the computer on an emotional level or possibly because I have a tendency to root for underdogs.

It is tough to see IBM slowly show that their computers can be smarter than the smartest humans we can find. First it was Deep Blue showing the benefits of thinking dozens of steps ahead of the current move in a chess game, now it's Watson showing that computers can gain an amazing level of comprehension of human speech to answer knowledge questions. What will it be next? Will sites like Google slowly gain the uncanny language insight of Watson during the next decade?

Just think about this, the combined main processors of Deep Blue back in 1997 (there were 30 of them) are today about as powerful as one of the most powerful consumer desktop processor chips.

There are even chess-playing computer programs that can run on a laptop and can beat chess grandmasters today. In a decade, will there be smart robots the size of a Roomba that we can give verbal commands to? How cool would that be?

Here at Iowa State, the closest thing we have to Jeopardy is Kaleidoquiz, the 26-hour trivia contest that happens this weekend thanks to KURE 88.5, our local campus radio station. It

Columnist Hanton writes that "it is tough to see IBM slowly show that their computers can be smarter than the smartest humans we can find." Courtesy photo: John Tolva/Flickr

would really be nice if we had a Watson on our team this year to help us win Kaleidoquiz. As it is, my team and most of the others have become quite reliant on Internet search engines, so much that our main base of operations has been known as the Google Room for years.

But those engines can be beat by hard questions or they can simply provide bad answers. Decades ago when Kaleidoquiz began, Google wasn't in existence and neither was the Internet itself. Competitors instead raided Parks Library for information that could be sent back by pay phone to their teams. Like many

things today, Kaleidoquiz used to take much more footwork than it does now. Today with a simple point and click, we can get all the information we need, right at our fingertips.

What will be the next big thing to be better organized by the millions of computer chips under desks and in data centers around the globe?

Watson gained his Jeopardy genius by staring at and categorizing four terabytes of hand-picked data. In the same way, Google's auto-translation engine became one of the best programs in the world at translating text by analyzing millions of translated documents

to create its own statistical logic about how to provide translations. How many other conveniences in our daily life are only made possible by millions of computers working hard on our behalf?

I'm excited about what will happen in our computer-inundated future and hope you are too.

The computing power in our office, in our house and now in our pocket keeps expanding endlessly. We just have to be careful to heed James Cameron's warnings and not give the computers too much control.

We don't want to wake up one morning and find Skynet running the world.