

# Opinions

The Banner

## Editorial

### Breakdown

#### Landslide

What? Could the Internet actually have drawbacks? Talk to anyone on a college campus, and the answer would probably be no. But if you ask many of the exclusively-online small businesses that are now facing a market that is too big, and their answers might surprise you.

According to a recent study by respected consulting firm Forrester Research Inc., most of these businesses will fail by next year. Since the onset of the Internet shopping boom, around 30,000 retailers have sprung up, causing an already overwhelming market to become so weighted down by small businesses that more and more people are relying on the larger retailers like Amazon.com and Wal-Mart, probably more out of a sense of familiarity than an appreciation of their products. So for one of the first times since its titanic growth, the Internet does not seem to be fulfilling its perceived role as an accessible market for all.

An April 12 Associated Press article called the coming landslide of small business deaths a "bloodbath." Mergers and buyouts will cause a frenzy among the businesses vying for a place on the over-crowded Information Superhighway, leaving many to go under and simple disappear.

Are we seeing the same trend with online commerce that we have in the world of super-stores? As the majority of small-town businesses board up after the new clothes-food-garden-toy-photo-disco centers spring up, Internet business is beginning an eerie echo of their physical counterparts, as entrepreneurship becoming dangerous in a world of Mac-truck sized corporations.

The question is, where do we go from here? If even a virtual market is essentially based on who can have the most stuff in the same place, will the Internet become just another commodity controlled by a few choice (or not-so-choice) companies that will use their pure monetary power to sway consumer "needs" and form our opinions about ourselves?

We've seen it already in the corporate world and, as a result, soon after in the consumer world. Now, the one thing that people thought might escape that trend is proving subject to the same capitalist limitations. And another one bites the dust.

#### Due time

On April 12, the Energy Department urged congressional approval of over \$300 million to compensate government workers who have cancer and other afflictions that resulted from building nuclear weapons over the past 50 years.

For years, the government repeatedly denied compensation claims of workers in nuclear weapons labs, which appears to be their standard policy on all controversial issues.

More than 3,000 workers would be compensated if the bill passes, either in lump sums of about \$100,000 each or more, depending on their medical needs.

When the government can finally admit publicly that they are wrong (and pay an exorbitant amount of money to prove it), America as a whole is moving in the right direction.

The unfortunate aspect of this situation is the suffering that went unacknowledged during the decades of omission. If the government had revoked its policy of opposing legitimate claims, a large amount of workers could have been helped financially with their illnesses.

This bill needs to be approved by Congress so these citizens can get the appropriate, most likely expensive, medical attention that they deserve. The plan is expected to cost \$120 million a year for the first three years of the program, but hey, America owes it to them.

### Bringing down the house

After months of debate, the South Carolina Senate finally voted 36-7 to lower the Confederate flag flying over the state capitol building. However, the senate bill, which proposes moving the flag to a Confederate monument in front of the statehouse, may face opposition from members of the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

Enough already! Supporters of the Confederate flag suggest it symbolizes heritage and not hate. In fact, supporters also say the flag is a source of southern pride.

Sorry, but any symbol that is a constant reminder of decades of bigotry, racism and intolerance doesn't sound like anything to brag about. When a symbol represents one person's pride and another person's pain, the argument to fly it high over a state capitol building seems unjustifiable.

After 38 years, South Carolina should take the flag down. Maybe then our society can finally heal from the wounds of a war that divided a nation and symbolized a legacy of struggle, degradation and oppression of a people.

# Charity not just for holidays



Andrew Thomasson  
columnist

Working far and alongside the poor and homeless population has been something I have loved to do ever since the first time I went to downtown Charlotte with my youth group to feed and socialize with the hungry people walking down the street when I was twelve. We would take coolers of sandwiches, hot dogs, chips, desserts and drinks in the big white church van and pass them out to hungry passersby.

I have since done work at Crisis Assistance Ministries (CUP) in Charlotte, where my father and I learned many of the skills we would need to run the food and clothing ministry that he is the director of now. At CUP, I also worked alongside a Long Island native puertorriquena, from whom I learned to speak Spanish reasonably fluently.

My father is now director of CUP, and I have worked there for the past two summers and after school during my senior year in high school, doing about every job there was to viewed clients, managed the food inventory and picked up food from the Second Harvest Food Bank. I did much more, but I don't want this to be a "look-how-great-Andrew-is" column.

However, during my work with this population, I have noticed many negative stereotypes and troubling things coming from the "rest"

of the population. One of these stereotypes is that people who are homeless or are right at the poverty line are lazy drunks who drain the taxpayers' fare Cadillacs. Granted, there are a few people who abuse the system badly to their benefit, but such is the case with any system, especially one that involves government. There are always loopholes, and there will always be people who live to find and exploit these holes, but the greater percentage of the population consists of the working poor.

These people bust their butts from the time they are about 16 or 17, and they don't retire sometimes until their failing bodies stop allowing them to, when they are in their mid- to late seventies.

They basically live from paycheck to paycheck, having enough to pay rent every month, and then deciding which bills are critical to pay this month (e.g. which utility is about to be cut off), then having meager fifty dollars left over to buy food and other such necessities.

Unfortunately, when you have five, six, ten people to feed on that fifty bucks a month, it just isn't enough. I have given food to families of eight that have a combined total monthly income of around three hundred dollars. Many are single mothers taking care of their sickly mother or father, their three

kids, and their kids' kids. They are working as hard as they know how, but it really isn't enough.

Also, since many of them grew up in the same kind of situation, they don't have the same concepts of things like "saving money for a rainy day," as most middle class individuals have in today's society. When you're living paycheck to paycheck, there isn't any margin for error. If the breadwinner gets hurt, or has to go to the hospital for

three weeks, then the family may very well be out on the street. It's that immediate.

I would like to shift my focus now to donations, specifically donations of food. CUP gets a lot of food and non-perishable food products are always in need at places like CUP. Even though CUP gets USDA (Department of Agriculture) surplus food from the food bank, it still relies on food donations from churches and benevolent individuals to help sustain its inventory and feed the people who come in hungry.

It has always been a topic of interest to me that around Thanksgiving and Christmas, donations of food skyrocket. Yes, that is the time of year when the emphasis is on giving, and that is the time of year when most canned food drives take place. And I am truly grateful for

such outpourings of love and caring in November and December. However, I must make the point that the homeless and hungry population does not solely exist for two months out of the year.

They are human beings, just like us, and they do need that food, however they can get it, and subsequently, ministries like CUP need your donations of food year-round. Since I have spent most of the column complaining, I would like to end it on a happy note. I have made several very good friends that are members of the working poor, and I have learned a lot about perspective from them.

Although they are not any financially secure as my family and I are, I still see them as being happier with their lives than many obnoxious rich people. I believe this is because they have been forced to strip away their lives and to see the bare essentials, and they can see how trivial and unnecessary it is to have that summer home in the country or the swimming pool in their backyard. They have what they need to survive, and I have not seen many people in that situation complaining about not having this thing or that thing.

It puts a great deal of perspective on my life, and on my perception of Happiness comes first, material wealth a very distant last.

# The Mardi Gras experience



Mark Ebert  
columnist

There are still glimmers of hope.

As the face of America becomes more homogenized, with urban sprawl, cookie-cutter housing developments and countless Wal-Mart stores littering the landscape, there still remain American cities and places with character, style and class.

New York, the Pacific Northwest and San Francisco come to mind. But, truly, the city that best denies these recent homogenizing trends sits in the Louisiana Delta, surrounded on all sides by water, waiting for the fateful day it washes away.

A strange and magnificent city, New Orleans must constantly consider its own safety. The city has sunk to below sea level. Passing ships on the Mississippi are seen above eye level within the city limits. This can't be healthy.

Scientists have computed that if global warming continues, within the next half-century the "Big Easy" will become a sunken treasure destroyed by the tides.

Maybe this sense of fatalism explains why the people of New Orleans are so willing to have a good time.

What other city in America could possibly condone a month-long

ritual of drunkenness and irresponsibility called Mardi Gras?

For the past two years, the intoxicating draw of New Orleans has charmed me into gathering a group of friends and enduring the 12-hour drive south.

Somewhat, for me, the trip has been something of an annual celebration. Not a celebration of life or anything like that, but rather an exercise of indulgence, debauchery and hijinks.

One snapshot memory I will always hold from my first Mardi Gras was of a deep, dark narrow alleyway that my two friends and I decided to use to paint the walls.

Cars were parked bumper to bumper in this alley, and in the back, an empty space provided refuge from the hoards of people in blue suits and the prying eyes of the police.

We encountered many things in that back alley. First, we found incalculable relief from our capricious bladders. We also found a circle of friendly pot smokers. My roommate's stomach began to boil, and he felt the need to violently stain the hood of some unfortunate Volvo.

Most of all, in that alley, the

memory I will remember the most has to be the look of pure joy on my other friend's face as he stepped aside, trying to dodge the projectile vomiting of my roommate.

In his side step, he managed to land and slip on a collection of human droppings left by some other Mardi Gras reveler. His clumsy mannerisms and exaggerated fall looked just as if he had stepped on a banana peel. Unfortunately for him, he had not.

These hijinks are, in some way, the heart of my Mardi Gras experience.

Flashback to year two. After three days of debauchery, nothing tragic had happened. I thought to myself, "surely, something must be wrong."

It was the last year before when I was only few hours of the journey had produced an unfortunate twist. At the midnight hour passed, we all decided that it was time to travel home. We all had received more than our fair share of beads and enjoyed the good-hearted give-and-take dialogue from the women above.

The time for loud conduct and concentrated attention towards the balcony admirers had passed. Unfortunately, at the last intersection before we reached our parked vehicle, one of my friends was led astray by the cries of an admirer. He began to look skyward and start the gestures and shouts that identify the game of bead bartering.

The transaction was successful, and reasonably short. We would soon be driving highway miles again, away from the uncertainties and screams that cloud Mardi Gras. Things would not turn out so simply. Along with the beads, my friend had also just received a dose of pepper spray, seemingly from an

officer of the law, on the arena below his belt that he had moments ago exposed.

A quick note: the effects of pepper spray are powerful, and can erase even the most exhilarating drunk stupor. At least, these were my thoughts as I looked at the pained face of my afflicted friend.

Again, back to year two. Nothing bad had happened, but my intuition told me that surely something would.

I won't bore you with the first some details. But rest assured that time spent at the New Orleans Jazz and Municipal Court House passes slowly, and was the worst possible way to spend a Monday afternoon in a distant and unknown city.

In a city where the police had been so impressive with their ability to look the other way (most impressive was their ability to sneak up behind and command a public urinator to "STOP"), things had changed.

Even after the pain-staking court process (which moved with the speed of pond water) and the ensuing lightning of the walter, I still adore New Orleans.

The spectacle of Mardi Gras offers many treats that are becoming harder and harder to find anywhere else in America. Every college student, as a rite of passage, should try its parades, taste the jambalaya, smell the gutters full of the Mardi Gras excesses.

A word of warning before I go. Although it can be a whirlwind of good times, beware and be aware of the pitfalls of the "Big Easy." Don't make the trip if you're not ready for the turbulence and trouble that is easy to find in the fun and excitement of this city in fact. I hope to see you there.