The Portland Spectrum serves the student body by providing fact-based and well-researched arguments alongside in-depth news coverage of issues important to the student community. We encourage and co-facilitate a diverse marketplace of ideas filled with thought-provoking discussions.

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Measure 92, the ballot measure proposing the labeling of genetically modified foods, swept through the city by storm. The term “genetically modified” sounds long and scary, perhaps, but before we make any blind assumptions, we ought to get a second opinion. 

I first spoke with Allison, a recent college graduate who works as an organizer of Food and Water Watch, a national activist organization working to “ensure the food, water and fish we consume is safe, accessible and sustainable so we can all enjoy and trust in what we eat and drink”. Food and Water Watch is worked extensively to urge a popular ‘yes’ vote on measure 92. Allison believes that by forcing companies that produce genetically modified food to label their product as such, consumers will be better empowered to make conscious decisions to purchase the food or not, based on the given information.
Spectrum: Can you describe your understanding of the genetic modification of food?

Allison: “Genetically modified foods are foods that were not produced in nature. A genetically modified food has had the DNA of another plant inserted into it, and the majority of these are co-treated with pesticides. ...Some of these crops are actually regulated by the USDA as pesticides, so if they were regulated as foods, they’d be regulated by the FDA.”

Spectrum: What do you know about the studies performed on genetically modified foods?

Allison: “The majority of testing is done by the corporations actually producing the genetically modified foods. We don’t believe that corporations producing the genetically modified foods should be the same ones testing it.”

Spectrum: Do you know what these tests are like?

Allison: “I don’t know too much of the science behind it—most are pretty short term. I just believe that there is such a concern that the testing isn’t there, or isn’t complete. In fact, sixty-four countries outside the US, including the European Union, have labeling due to lack of testing.”

Spectrum: What did you think of the arguments from the other side? How did you address them?

Allison: “Well, I’ll address the main ones: I know that one is that it will cost Oregonians a lot of money. We know that from the Consumers Union, which is a nonpartisan policy and action group of the Consumer Reports, labeling GMOs would cost less than a penny a day for Oregonians. We believe that the low income should have this information [the proposed GMO label] too. Another argument is that measure 92 would hurt farmers. Labeling genetically modified foods would not hurt farmers; farmers would not be affected. If you look at the law, it was actually written in that this would not hurt farmers. Farmers would actually be benefited because they are not growing GMOs and we could differentiate between local products and out-of-state ones.”

Spectrum: What’s good about differentiating?

Allison: “We’d be able to tell what was grown locally and what wasn’t. It’d promote local farmers and businesses that buy local products.”

Spectrum: What did you think of the advertisements for measure 92?

Allison: “I think the ads were trying to convince people that there is a need for GMO labeling because they are different from a traditional crop—just showing that the seeds are fluorescent blue— it’s a symbol that they’re different. I think that’s where they’re coming from.”

Spectrum: I’ve seen a lot of those kinds of advertisements—just showing people a color difference doesn’t really say why they should be afraid.

Allison: “It’s a basic level. Not everyone has taken microbiology, but they are concerned about what they are eating. They just want to know. The fact that we’re eating a fish gene is scary. We just want to give people information; we’re not telling people not to eat them [genetically modified foods], we just wanted to give people an informed choice. We don’t want to be told what to eat.”

After speaking with Allison, I sat down with Dr. Weasel, associate PSU professor of feminist studies, environmental health, and food ethics. She is the author of the book Food Fray.

Spectrum: What does it mean for a food to be genetically modified?

Dr. Weasel: “So I think that what ‘genetically modified’ means, as it pertained to the ballot measure, talks about transgenic organisms, where DNA from a different species is being transferred into—in this case—a plant. But of course animals can be genetically modified as well. So it’s really that transgenic process that that term refers to in the popular understanding. But genetic modification, of course, as a biology major, can be a lot of different things— it doesn’t necessarily mean transgenics, but I think that in reference to the ballot measure and people’s concerns, it’s about transgenics.”

Spectrum: How is genetically modified food commercially produced?

Dr. Weasel: “So, there’s two primary traits— herbicide tolerance, and BT [Bacillus thuringiensis] insecticide protein traits. So, in the laboratory, those genes are isolated and put into corn, cotton, soy, canola—commercial crops. And then there’s a selection process: the plants are selected for the ones that have the highest BT production, then those plants are bred. A few multinational corporations have patents on those traits— they control the profits.”

“We’re not telling people not to eat them (genetically modified foods), we just want to give people an informed choice. We don’t want to be told what to eat.”

~Allison
Spectrum: I was just wondering procedurally, because it’s kind of in-the-dark for people who aren’t in the genetic sciences how this happens. So can you shed some light on the production in that way?

Dr. Weasel: “So there’s two ways that the foreign DNA can get into those plant cells, and that’s either through agrobacterium vector- that’s a natural infectious agent. You clone the gene of interest into the agrobacterium plasmid, then when the agrobacterium infects the plant, it will insert the DNA into the plant’s genome. The other approach for plants that aren’t susceptible to agrobacterium is just to use bio-ballistics, which was originally a modified rail gun, shooting gold-coated bullet particles with the DNA and then with high force, forcing it into the cell. It’s a gene gun, basically.”

Spectrum: Do you know how developers ensure that no extraneous effects come of genetic modification?

Dr. Weasel: “Well I think in the approval process, the companies that are seeking approval are asked what kind of procedures they’ve done, and I think that certainly they want to make sure there’s no acute, harmful effects, but really all this testing is done by the companies and a lot of that is not available to the public. If you look at documents marked as CBI, that’s confidential business information. But, you know, in terms of extraneous effects, I think when they develop these strains they’re looking for the most efficient production of that trait without any productivity loss and those kinds of things. So if there are a lot of extraneous traits, often that will reduce yield-- any extra protein that’s made will exert an additional stress on the cell.”

Spectrum: After which those plants would just die?

Dr. Weasel: “Well yeah, or they just wouldn’t be selected in their screen because they’re going to be selecting for the trait, but they’re also going to want to make sure the yield stays high. So, plants that have the trait, but don’t yield as much won’t be selected for commercial purposes. But it’s really up to the companies to make that information unavailable.”

Spectrum: Would you eat a genetically modified food, knowing that it is tested, but those tests are not public?

Dr. Weasel: “Well I think that for Americans, we’re so concerned about our own, personal health, that often we think about food as starting on their plate and going into their body. So in terms of trusting it as food, it’s also important to point out that most of the genetically modified crops out there are not for human consumption. If you look at the USDA website, you can see where the corn crop grown in the US goes every year, and only a very, very tiny sliver is going to humans. It’s mostly going to animal feed, ethanol... And then the genetically modified products that are in foods are highly, highly processed so all those derivatives of corn and soy-- things like maltodextrin and things on a label that don’t necessarily look like corn are corn in a very processed form. So thinking only from the perspective of the person ingesting it, from a biological standpoint, is kind of shortsighted, because I think there’s a lot of environmental, ecological, and food insecurity issues around our food supply. It’s widespread, and perhaps not well-monitored enough, and the use of these crops is perhaps not very well thought through.”

Spectrum: So would you say the environmental harm outweighs the human concern?

Dr. Weasel: “Yeah, I wouldn’t necessarily call it the environmental harm; it’s like the agricultural harm in the long term because one of the big issues is weed resistance. So, resistance to these herbicides, resistance to Round Up. We just finished the first patent cycle of Round Up-ready crops, which enables an extreme use of the herbicide Round Up, because now that the crops are resistant to it, the resistance has bled into the weeds, so now we have weeds that are resistant to Round Up. So then Round Up becomes obsolete. So now we’re going to 24D, another herbicide, and we’re kind of moving backwards because Round Up was a relatively safe herbicide. 24D is a slightly less safe herbicide, so if...
Round Up becomes obsolete, we lose a safe herbicide and farmers have to use a less safe one. So that will have a detrimental effect on the food supply if we keep losing safe herbicides.”

Spectrum: That’s sort of a by-product of poor practice, would you say?

Dr. Weasel: “Yeah. I think that there are better and worse ways to do it. But I think it’s also a by-product of the fact that it’s completely market-driven, so because all of the commercially-available traits come from the private sector where the profit is the motive, there’s less concern for the bigger agro-ecological health perspective because it’s actually a good thing if weeds become resistant to Round Up right as the patent protection ends on Round Up for that company, because otherwise, the deal with the patent is, ‘you get proprietary use of it for so many years, because you put in all the R&D into developing it, and then once those years are up, it’s freely available to everyone’. The a lot of competition comes in and it’s not good for that company. So if Round Up-resistant traits become obsolete, they put something new in the pipeline, 24D resistance, and the public sector and private entities now have access to that proprietary trait, and it’s useless! So that doesn’t harm the company at all. So it’s actually in the interest of profit to have that obsolescence. But that’s not good for the environment or our food supply in the long term.”

Spectrum: Would you say that’s more blame put on the practice or on the act of genetic modification in itself?

Dr. Weasel: “Well I think in this case it’s both, because the traits that are commercially available are pretty simple, simple gene traits, and those tend to be more amenable to resistance. So now what they’re doing, is they’re making stacked traits, putting in resistance to two different herbicides. And that should slow down the process of resistance. So that’s a better practice. So that’s an aspect of the genetic, a kind of trait- a single gene trait, and that’s easy to work with and to use. But you product out there that’s driven by profit, and farmers invest in the entire infrastructure to use that technology, and it’s very hard to tell farmers, ‘hey lay off for a season and go back to old practices.’ It gets mixed up there.”

Spectrum: The major public concern about genetic modification, for those who are unaware of the environmental factor, is that there’s some sort of health risk in consuming a genetically modified food. Is that true?

Dr. Weasel: “Well, certainly I’m not able to comment on that because I have not done the research; I’ve been on policy panels, and most of the information you get to see there is blacked out. So I wouldn’t say I’m an expert on saying if there are or are not health effects of consuming genetically modified foods. But I do think that the thing that people react to is this idea of cross-species barriers. Somehow, that that’s unnatural or that seems wrong. But I think there’s also broader concern about our food supply in general, and people are paying much more attention to food in this country and where is comes from and where it was produced, so anything that seems unnatural is seems scary.

Spectrum: So in all, would you rather have genetically modified food labeled, or would you rather have the information of how the tests are performed available to the public?

Dr. Weasel: “Well, I think they’re two different questions: one is a question of scientific literacy and of course, I’m a scientist, I’m an educator, so I think that scientific literacy is always a good and important thing, and you need to understand beyond a label. But the consumers want genetically modified food labeled, and I think we already have so many other labels and companies use labels in so many quasi-deceptive ways. You go to the store and you see ‘natural,’ ‘everything’s natural- and there’s ‘fat free...’ We have a lab in the non-majors class where they test fat free salad dressing, and they see that there’s actually fat in the fat free dressing, so why is that? Well, because the standard for it to say fat free is that it has to contain less than one gram of fat or something-- there’s a cutoff. So all of this labeling is way beyond science, so while I think it’s a good opportunity to make a good point about scientific literacy, and making consumers know what genetically modified foods are, the whole labeling thing, to me, has a whole other public marketing element to it.”

~Dr. Weasel
Spectrum: I understand that the measure is intended to give consumers a choice, but I'm only afraid that it would be an uninformed choice because, like you said, the species barrier sounds scary, but isn't well backed-up.

Dr. Weasel: “Well, I see a lot of uninformed choices being made about food anyway. ...If Americans are willing to eat McDonald’s special sauce, I don’t think they’re going to care about genetically modified food. So I think there will be some people who avoid it, and make uninformed decisions, but I think we’ll see opposition. I know there’s the argument that it would just affect the state of Oregon, but there are other states that have passed this in the northeast. There’s only a small sector of the population willing to pay more for a different product, so if cost becomes an issue, I thin we’ll see people eating genetically modified foods. ...I’m not so convinced that the labeling would increase the cost of all food. I think we have much greater concerns around low-income families and access to food that to focus on labeling of genetically modified foods. I think it’s a very small issue compared to the bigger forces around.”

Spectrum: I saw a chalk picture on the ground a while back, of a tomato with the caption, “there could be fish genes in this.” What do you think of those kinds of ads?

Dr. Weasel: “You know, there was a picture going around in Time magazine for a while when cloning was just becoming successful, and they used a picture of a mouse with a human ear grafted onto it. And then people were thinking, ‘there’s mouse genes in my lettuce.’ It was really about some stem cell therapy and regeneration of human tissues, and somehow that image got linked to genetically modified food for people. So people were thinking there were mouse genes in their lettuce, fish genes in their strawberries. And I would ask my students to guess what foods were genetically modified, go home and read about it, then take the quiz, and I could always tell that students knew that it was always corn, soy, cotton canola, and maybe a tomato. But then students would be saying ‘strawberries,' 'lettuce,' foods in the produce section, when it’s really all in the processed foods. But I have seen in the past few years, public scientific literacy, though it may not be where we as scientists would like it to be, has really improved. I think people are aware of the major crops subject to genetic modification, and even what the traits are. So nowadays, I can start talking about corn and BT and herbicide resistance, and I don’t have to start with, ‘it’s not your lettuce, it’s not your strawberries, there’s no mouse genes, and there’s no ears growing from your produce.’ We’ve moved up from those kinds of images. But I think people’s fear also comes from a different place, and I don’t think that only scientific literacy is going to dispel those
fears. Food is about so much more than science, and we see all these people making food choices, but it’s confusing. The science about food is changing all the time— is margarine good for you, or is butter good for you? Should you eat more fats? More protein? Less protein? So consumers get confused by the science, but that’s not an excuse not to learn about it.”

In all, the fear surrounding genetically modified foods funnels down to a lack of corporate publication and poor farming practices. So, are you justified to reject a genetically modified food? The answer depends on the perspective: from an ecological view, pro-measure 92’ers have a pest- and herbicide monopoly to blame. From a health standpoint, while it’s important to keep in mind that there have been no related cases thus far, the truth is that without the corporate research documentation to verify, we just can’t know. After hearing what Allison and Dr. Weasel had to say on the matter, it might behoove us to be more afraid of the farming and business practices, and a little less afraid of the GMO by itself.
Aetna: Is it Worth It?

by David Sherman
New and returning students under 24 years of age at Portland State University may be enrolling in a college they can’t graduate from due to unsustainable and inefficient use of federal student loan money.

We’ll explore the long-term effects of the mandatory PSU student health insurance plan, the history of health options and costs at PSU, and how these compare to other Oregon 4-year universities. Finally we’ll explain how you may be able to save enough money for an entire extra year of tuition.

As you continue reading, consider that according to projectonstudentdebt.org, 61% of students who graduated from PSU in 2012 had student loan debt. On average, they came out owing $26,066. Additionally, according to the Oregon University System, of those PSU students who started college as freshmen in 2006–2007, only 14% graduated in 4 years (36% graduated in 5 years and 45% graduated in 6).

Tuition at PSU is on the rise but is still lower than Oregon’s other 4-year options. According to each school’s website, an Oregon resident can expect to pay $2,163 at PSU, $2,253 at University of Oregon, or $3,041 at Oregon State University for 12 undergraduate credits per term, including tuition and fees. The PSU numbers do not include the cost of health insurance (currently $694 per term). Once you factor that in, the cost of attendance at PSU is $2,857 per term (not including cost of living expenses, more on that later). At University of Oregon health insurance is more expensive, but not mandatory. OSU health insurance (also

Photo Illustration by Devin Courtright
Aetna student health) is cheaper at $555 per term (not mandatory) and the university Dean of Student Life Office’s Human Services Resource Center has a program that subsidizes health insurance for students in need.

Health insurance is an expensive fee which is sometimes ignored because the amount of financial aid granted can still leave enough extra money to get by for a single term. Most students, however, will face problems after 11 terms due to the hard cap on federal student loans.

The maximum for federal student loans for a student under the age of 24 is $31,000. At a rate of $2,857 per term a student under 24 years old will be out of student loan money after 10.9 terms - just shy of the 12 terms necessary to get a degree for the 14% of PSU students who do manage to graduate in just 4 years.

In other words, if you start college at PSU at the age of 18 and take the student health insurance plan every term, you will run out of federal student loans by the time you are 21. This system of hidden fees that outpaces the federal loan options is effectively undermining the universities own “Access to Learning” core value by making its education only accessible to students who have financial support outside of federal loans.

A 21-year-old with no college degree, $31,000 in student debt, and no more federal loan money for 3 years will have a hard future ahead of them. Interest on student loans begins 6 months after graduating or failing to register for more classes. According to the finaid.org student loan repayment calculator, $31,000 in student loans will take 119 monthly payments (10 years) of about $356. It further estimates that you will need an annual salary of $42,810 to pay it off without financial hardships. There are not many jobs that pay $42,810 to a 21-year-old with limited work experience and no degree. Alternatively, a drop-out could get lower payments if they signed up for the 50 year repayment plan at only $181.79 a month for 601 months, making the total cumulative payment $109,085.05 – over three times the sticker price of their incomplete education.

How did this happen? Before the 2011-12 academic year PSU offered a health insurance plan through Aetna with limited coverage and a maximum payout of $7,500 per condition per school year. It cost $90 per term and was included in the $190 student health fee (currently $119). If you were one of the majority of students who only used it occasionally when sick or for the various free services at the SHAC, it was sufficient. Unfortunately it did little to cover those who needed certain major medical services. The old plan can still be found here: [http://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.shac/files/media_assets/insurance/BROC1011.pdf](http://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.shac/files/media_assets/insurance/BROC1011.pdf)

As little as five years ago resident tuition and fees (including the health fee) were only $1,722 for 12 undergraduate credits. That $31,000 in federal student loans would have been enough to cover 18 terms (6 years).

When asked to comment on the role of health insurance fees in causing students to max out their federal loans before attaining a 4 year degree, PSU President Wim Wiewel said it has always been the student’s responsibility to cover the cost of school. He suggested Pell grants, scholarships, and jobs as possible ways students could make up the difference.

While PELL grants, student hardship remission, and scholarships are all well and good, they are unfortunately limited in scope and availability. Jobs may be a more readily available and reliable source of income for some students, but they also take time and energy away from a student’s academic pursuits. Additionally, students are likely to struggle to find a job that pays well and will work around a constantly changing class schedule. There are campus jobs that are designed to work around school schedules but a student who drops out for any reason, including sudden lack of funds, automatically loses their job and thus all forms of livelihood and stability.

Banweb lists the expected annual cost of attendance as $23,052 (cost of tuition, fees, and expected costs of living). Note that this does not include $694 per term for health insurance. With Oregon’s current minimum wage at $9.10 per hour it would take 2,533.19 hours to cover the full cost of attendance. Assuming one could find a job that would give a minimum wage worker a full...
"This system of hidden fees that outpaces the federal loan options is effectively undermining the universities own ‘Access to Learning’ core value by making its education only accessible to students who have financial support outside of federal loans."

40 hours a week, it would take 63 full work weeks (52 weeks = 1 year) to cover the cost of 1 year of school.

Typically students look to these loans to cover the cost of tuition and work to cover the cost of living. Using the annual cost of living expenses on Banweb, a student still needs to come up with $16,569 per year. Assuming a student could find and manage 40 hours of work a week at minimum wage, it would take 1,820.77 hours (45 full work weeks) to cover the costs of living.

To put this in perspective, let us consider a realistic student work week of 20 hours at minimum wage. At $694 the Aetna PSU Health Plan would consume 76.26 hours (3.8 weeks) of work per term. An equivalent level of coverage provided by a ‘silver’ level health insurance plan available on CoverOregon.com costs $61 a month ($183 per term) and would take 20.1 hours or roughly 1 week of work. This is nearly a 4:1 ratio of cost with equivalent coverage.

Such a difference in health care costs for comparable coverage is certainly stark. How much student money is actually being wasted this way? Some students complete a waiver form and provide supporting documentation to opt out of the plan. Let us consider the total amount of money Aetna would receive from PSU if all students stayed with this mandatory health insurance plan and its automatic charges.

The PSU website states there are currently 29,452 students for the 2013-14 academic year. At $694 per term, that’s $20,439,688 per term potentially spent just on the Aetna student health care plan. In contrast, the total cost of student health insurance through coveroregon.com would be closer to $5,389,716 per term.

During an interview with the SHAC Marketing and Communications Coordinators, Angela and Nick informed us that there are approximately 9,000 students on the mandatory student health insurance while 14,000 students have signed the waiver to opt out of it. That makes $6,246,000 being spent on what could be a more efficient $1,647,000.

If reasonably comparable coverage can be found using the same pool of student funds for up to $15,000,000 less, why does
"If reasonably comparable coverage can be found using the same pool of student funds for up to $15,000,000 less, why does PSU stick with a student health care plan that is 3 to 4 times more expensive? Is the coverage difference between these plans so different?"

PSU stick with a student health care plan that is 3 to 4 times more expensive? Is the coverage difference between these plans so different?

Let’s compare the Aetna PSU Student Health insurance basic summary sheet found here: https://www.aetnastudenthealth.com/schools/psu/Portland_State_University_500499-912071-900479_1415_FINAL.pdf

with the $61 per month silver level health insurance plan basic summary sheet found here: https://s3-us-gov-west-1.amazonaws.com/oregonhix/sbcs/39424OR1030002-06_SBC.pdf.

Not only is the Cover Oregon health insurance significantly cheaper – it’s also slightly superior in almost every area from prescriptions, tests, and urgent care to emergency rooms, rehabilitation services, mental/behavioral services, pregnancy, hospice care, and surgery. Both plans frequently require some kind of pre-authorization/pre-certification or else risk a $200 penalty.

To its credit, the PSU Aetna student health insurance does cover several pediatric dental services, though it doesn’t cover any adult dental services at this time. The Cover Oregon plan has a separate dental plan that can be attached to an existing health plan for $27 a month per person regardless of age and includes full coverage on exams, x-rays, cleanings, periodontal maintenance, sealants, and topical fluoride.

One has to dig a little deeper to discover what may be causing such a large difference between the plans to justify so much expense. Some of the answers can be found in the Aetna PSU Student health insurance detailed summary (as opposed to the basic summary mentioned earlier): https://www.aetnastudenthealth.com/schools/psu/sob1415.pdf. Note that in this document the focus changes from ‘costs to you’ to ‘coverage from the insurance’ so you will see what was listed as 20% on the basic summary sheet is listed as 80% coverage on the more detailed sheet.

While the per person deductible is still cheaper for the Cover Oregon health insurance, the total family deductible is also much higher. The reduced family deductible could be the cause of

Doing the math

Cost of attendance for a 3-term year (numbers taken from Banweb & http://www.pdx.edu/shac/insurancebenefits

| Tuition and Fees | $6,483 |
| Books and Supplies | $2,028 |
| Stafford Fees | $126 |
| Room and Board | $936 |
| Personal Expenses | $2,130 |
| Transportation | $11,349 |
| Health Insurance | $2082 |
| TOTAL: $25,134 |

Total for 4 years = $100,536
Student loan max = $31,000
Difference = $69,536

Total for 4 years, Tuition and Fees only (including mandatory health insurance) = $34,260
Difference = $3260

Cost of health insurance alone for 4 years = $8328
higher PSU costs but a comparable family deductible can be found in another Cover Oregon plan (https://s3-us-gov-west-1.amazonaws.com/oregonhix/sbcs/85804OR0260005-06_SBC.pdf) that costs $89 a month and is still $427 cheaper per term than the PSU health insurance.

An exhaustive search and comparison of the detailed PSU plan and the $61 Cover Oregon silver plan, which can be found here: https://www.modahealth.com/pdfs/ben_sum/OR/150101/ind_health_plan_brochure_or_2015.pdf, finds three primary differences that might shed some light on the high cost of PSU health insurance.

- Up to $8,000 organ transplant coverage, $5,000 for travel and housing, and $100,000 facility benefits coverage.
- Up to $2,500 per policy year for elective abortion expense.
- Up to $75,000 per policy year in transgender reassignment surgery and benefits.

Without going into the philosophical, ethical, religious, political, or other arguments for or against these extremely controversial areas of coverage, it is worth mentioning that while the plan I am comparing the PSU health plan to doesn’t cover these three things, many others may, and potentially for a similarly reduced price. With that in mind everyone including those who might wish to have the extra coverage found in the PSU plan owes it to themselves and their academic career to shop the Cover Oregon marketplace.

While the rising costs are daunting and the future potentially bleak for students under 24, there is something that can be done. The most important step to making the federal loan money stretch as far as possible is to get out of the PSU student health insurance plan. Currently PSU will not let you out of the plan unless you get OHP (the Oregon Health Plan, insurance for those beneath the poverty line), or your insurance has no more than a $2,500 deductible and at least 80% in-patient hospitalization coverage. These requirements are easily covered by many silver level plans and can potentially cost around $61 a month (significantly less than the $69.40 per week for the PSU plan).

The opportunities to get off the PSU health insurance are unfortunately limited. You have to sign up and complete the processes through coveroregon.com during the open enrollment period which at the time of this writing starts on November 15th. Doing this at the beginning of your college career can turn that 10 terms of student loans into 13 terms (+1 academic year), or more if you qualify for OHP.
TORRENTING ON CAMPUS
In an age in which information and connectivity saturates nearly every waking moment of our lives, it is all too easy for the line between ‘reality’ and ‘virtual reality’ to blur. We become accustomed to the luxury of escapism; the ease of access our technology affords us in providing instant gratification at a moment’s notice.

Want to binge watch that new show that all of your friends have been raving about? Simple! Just do a quick search for a 50 gigabyte torrent of all 7 seasons, open up your file-sharing client of choice, and download away!

Actually...maybe you’d better re-think that one.

The use of file-sharing software has become so commonplace in modern society that many view it as, essentially, a crime without punishment. According to a study performed in July 2013 by the information-indexing website Softpedia, “On any given day, there are about 30 million people sharing [torrents], though the number varies from day to day by a few million” -- a number that was determined through collecting data from three of the largest BitTorrent trackers.

Despite the rampant utilization of peer-to-peer file-sharing applications in downloading copyrighted content, individual litigation is rare. While the appeal of ‘free’, easily-available content with little in the way of legal recourse may seem like just another miraculous convenience of modern technology, the legal and ethical responsibilities a campus-wide network must adhere to demand a higher standard of discipline in combating issues of copyright infringement.

“Most students have engaged in this behavior for some time in their homes prior to a matter being brought to my office”, said Domanic Thomas, Assistant Dean of Student Life and Director of Conduct and Community Standards at Portland State. “Our goal is to prevent students from being severely impacted by outside entities in the form of litigation and understand the potential impact on others attempting to make a living.”

Contrary to what the overall lack of litigation may imply, chances are that you ARE being monitored when you decide to torrent the latest episode of, say, Game of Thrones...or practically anything else that enough people want access to.

In a study published in 2012 by a team of Computer Scientists at the University of Birmingham entitled ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Monitoring: Direct Monitoring in BitTorrent’, Dr. Tom Chothia wrote “You don’t have to be a mass downloader. Someone who downloads a single movie will be logged as well. If the content was in the top 100 it was monitored within hours. Someone will notice and it will be recorded.”

Most of the companies monitoring BitTorrent traffic were determined to be copyright enforcement firms, security firms, or researchers.

With such active monitoring in smaller networks, it should come as no surprise that Portland State’s network takes it up a notch in
regards to the monitoring of student and guest activity on campus.

“Portland State University utilizes a next generation firewall with application visibility and control at our internet border to monitor and control campus internet traffic”, said Sean McKay, Associate Director of Computing Infrastructure Services for OIT.

“PSU blocks BitTorrent, the most heavily abused peer-to-peer file sharing protocol on our wireless network”, McKay said. “Anyone with a legitimate academic or business need to use this protocol can use a wired port.”

While taking action against smaller circles, such as household networks, is rare, BitTorrent traffic in a massive, shared network such as Portland State’s represents a clear liability and risk to PSU’s network functionality as a whole. To this end, PSU’s stance on the usage of BitTorrent clients and issues of copyright infringement are explicitly impressed upon students.

“[There are] mandates outlining standards for educating our students in violation and potential fines for a lack of response”, Thomas said. “Most home servers support 3–4 devices at any given time. PSU networks will support anywhere from 10,000 devices to beyond 50,000 at any given time. The impact could be felt among 30,000 students if we neglect our obligations in this area.”

The Office of Information Technology’s webpage has laid out clear and explicit rules and regulations regarding acceptable use of PSU’s Wi-Fi connectivity, along with clearly outlined disciplinary measures to be taken against those found in violation of this trust.

“Over the last two weeks, we have received five DMCA violation notices”, McKay said. “Upon a second DMCA violation, they are directed to the Office of the Dean of Student Life.”

“Cases are referred to us by OIT”, Thomas said. “They are usually contacted by the copyright owner or parties acting on their behalf. The violations are handled like many others within our process. The process is one that is educational and attempts to support the learning necessary to avoid future violations.”

First-time offenders will be issued a warning. Failure to comply with the terms of the warning and continuous abuse of PSU’s network through illegal file-sharing often results in more severe measures taken against the offending student(s).

“Students are often barred from our wireless network as a result of repeated offenses. This is an unfortunate outcome that may limit the case of learning afforded by the network”, Thomas said.

In a campus setting, BitTorrent traffic can easily hinder both security and stability on a large scale, posing a serious risk to network efficiency and the education opportunities provided through the use of computer technology.

“The use of file sharing applications introduces possible exploits and vulnerabilities into any network”, said Josh Goessler, a member of the IT department at Portland Community College’s Sylvania campus responsible for managing and supporting classroom labs and assisting administrative staff.

“Further, items downloaded with these applications can be malicious and infect systems. While file sharing applications carry a certain amount of risk, its usage has a far more prominent effect on the speed and stability of a network.”

“In practical terms, it takes resources to keep a network and its offered services running smoothly. When resources have to be allocated towards addressing copyright infringement claims and accommodating P2P traffic on a network, it impacts the amount of innovative technologies that can be implemented on a campus,” Goessler said.

Within the last couple of decades, strides in technology have blessed us with the simple luxury of ease. We can listen to what we want, when we want. We can take and upload photos anywhere, at any time. We can even steal any form of media we desire at the drop of a hat.

But just because you can doesn’t mean you should. Especially not when doing so puts the integrity and security of both an entire network and your college career at risk.

“When the wrong mix of hubris and copyright owner mix, it is a bad combination for the student in question”, Thomas said.

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Like what you are reading so far? Check out the Portland Spectrum magazine, your place for in-depth campus news, every month starting next quarter.
Food insecurity is an epidemic that has swept across numerous college campuses for some time now, especially from the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008. Since then, more and more students attending college have no choice but to work multiple jobs, sometimes having to wait several weeks to get a check, but in most cases fall short when it comes to putting food on the table. As a result, numerous food pantries have been established throughout the country to fight this epidemic and aid hungry college students in desperate need of food.

ASPSU Food Pantry Coordinator Kathleen Steppe is “quite honored” to be a member of ASPSU’s Executive Cabinet in fighting this issue of food insecurity here at Portland State University (PSU). To combat food insecurity here on campus, Steppe said that “we address the issue of student hunger by not focusing on labeling one as ‘in need’ as perhaps, there is no student exempt from possibly benefitting from some supplemental food items, at points along their journey through PSU. Equally important to us is providing a welcoming and inclusive environment to procure these items.”

Located in SMSU 325, the ASPSU Student Food Pantry is operated by a student volunteer staff, consisting of a collective of students, ASPSU staff, and faculty who are a part of the collaboration which addresses student hunger in a unique way by providing non-perishable food items and “positive vibes” to currently enrolled students here at Portland State University. According to Steppe, the ASPSU Student Food Pantry buys non-perishable food items with donation monies given, along with assistance by donation drives on campus, and is the “gracious” recipient of these items. “Inspiring is the collaboration of PSU students, professors, professionals, student groups & collectives that make up this supportive alliance,” says Steppe. “All of whom donate their time, energy, resources, or a combination thereof, to be of service and donate provisions to this worthy entity...Together we revere inclusive perspectives and recognize our beloved pantry serves multiple purposes at PSU: providing non-perishable food to our student population within Portland State University, sharing mutual respect for our community of higher education; and not shying away from the truth, by candidly acknowledging the need to address student hunger.”

According to a report published in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, researchers from Oregon State University (OSU) have determined that 59% of college students enrolled at Western Oregon University were struggling with food insecurity at some point during the past year. The report says that as a result of this food insecurity pandemic, there has been an increase in “possible implications for academic success, physical and emotional health and other issues” affecting many student’s overall well being and college experience. “Based on other research that’s been done, we expected some amount of food concerns among college students,” said Daniel López-Cevallos, associate director of research at OSU’s Center for Latino/a Studies and Engagement. “But it was shocking to find food insecurity of this severity. Several recent trends may be combining to cause this.” These trends López-Cevallos is speaking of are demographic trends in...
combination with rising tuition and an increase in low-income and first generation students attending college, “making this issue more significant than it may have been in the past.” Megan Patton-Lopez, lead author of the study with Oregon’s Benton County Health Department, adds that “for past generations, students living on a lean budget might have just considered it part of the college experience, a transitory thing... But rising costs of education are now affecting more people,” said Patton-Lopez.

“And for many of these students who are coming from low-income families and attending college for the first time, this may be a continuation of food insecurity they’ve known before,” said Patton-Lopez. “It becomes a way of life, and they don’t have as many resources to help them out.”

One resource that does help students nationwide is the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA), a professional organization that provides campus-based programs focused on alleviating food insecurity, hunger, and poverty among college and university students. According to the CUFBA website, “food insecurity has increasingly become an issue on college and university campuses and can pose a significant barrier to student success.” The organization also states that more and more college students do not fit the perception of the typical college student, being between the ages of 18-22 years old, with support from home. “Many students are now supporting families and working full-time while attending college, says the website. “These students are often food insecure or one missed pay check away from being food insecure.” The types of food banks out there that serve students ranges from food pantries that operate out of a closet to some food banks that have large store rooms and supply upwards of 50,000 pounds of food a year. There are emergency food banks, food banks that hold regular distributions, and food banks that hold set shopping hours. Campus-based food banks are in every sector and every region of the country, therefore students will be able to find food banks from community colleges to large research universities and from Oregon to Maine and all points in between.

“The need for resources such as this (student-run food pantries) is growing on campuses across our nation. Portland State University is no exception.”

~Kathleen Steppe, ASPSU Food Pantry Coordinator

Despite all the effort the ASPSU food pantry has done to feed students at PSU, Steppe is hopeful that more students will become aware of the activities and services that the ASPSU Food Pantry has to offer. She says “many are unaware of the diligent effort and personal sacrifice that our peers within our student government this year and in years past have expended on behalf of the student body, shared governance, building bridges of culturally-competent communication to profoundly address what our student body needs are and how best to meet those needs, and more...The need for resources such as this (student-run food pantries) is growing on campuses across our nation. Portland State University is no exception.”

“The choice to come and visit our pantry is the students,” says Steppe. “All who enter our pantry are greeted with a smile and a positive vibe.”

The ASPSU Student Food Pantry provides non-perishable food items and is located in SMSU 325.

Photo contributed by Kathleen Steppe
About a month ago you may have noticed the photos starting to surface on social media: a sea of people in downtown Hong Kong brandishing umbrellas against police tear gas and pepper spray; expansive encampments complete with recycling stations; city buses appropriated to serve as street barriers and ad-hoc “democracy walls” where protestors and passerby pen their dreams and demands for Hong Kong’s future. Dubbed “The Umbrella Revolution” by Western media, in fact the decentralized movement is far from a revolution – although there are certainly many who hope it might move in that direction.

The protests started up in the last days of September when the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKDS) initiated a strike to express their discontent with Hong Kong’s stunted electoral process. Hong Kong was a British colony until 1997, at which point it was turned over to the People’s Republic of China. That change in governance came with a promise from the Chinese Communist Party that Hong Kong would eventually be given democratic election privileges.

Yet for decades that promise has remained unfulfilled: Hong Kong’s leadership is still chosen by a 1,200-person electoral committee, only half of whom are elected. The current leader, Leung Chun-ying, barely made the 50% margin of votes needed to take office. He is widely unpopular and seen as pandering to business interests. In addition to election woes, Hong Kong residents have also experienced pressure from China to de-politicize their school curricula. One of the student organizations to initiate the current protests – the secondary school group called Scholarism – arose out of that last round of protests concerning academic freedom.

by Sara Swetzoff
In response to these ongoing grievances, a trio of university professors started to plan a multi-day sit-in movement called Occupy Central with Peace & Love. The action was in planning for more than a year, yet according to the leftist socialist blog Nào, the coordinators kept postponing it. So when the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of the China announced in August of this year that Hong Kong’s long-awaited democracy could only consider candidates pre-approved by Beijing, students took things into their own hands.

Starting on September 22, over 13,000 university students boycotted classes and took to the streets. On September 26, about 1,500 secondary school students from the organization Scholarism joined them. On the last day of the strike the students broke through the barricades that had just in the last year sealed off Civic Square, an area in front of the government headquarters, from public access. When police repelled students with tear gas and pepper-spray, and arrested three prominent students leaders, the previously planned Occupy Central movement was finally launched in response.

One month later, the protest encampments have spread to multiple neighborhoods. Protesters are not just students; blogs and media outlets have reported that a wide range of working class and poor contingents are joining in the camps. Participants say that there are no leaders, but rather many participating groups who organize themselves into units. This model is inclusive yet poses its risks – namely, there is no clear plan or strategy to achieve its aims. Just last week students called on protesters to take a cross-movement vote on the next steps, but then called it off the night before, saying that demonstrators from across the movement were not adequately consulted.

However, the key demands remain: the movement demands the resignation of the current Chief Executive and the immediate implementation of free elections. So far the government has not budged. Pressure from the Chinese Communist Party is great, with mainland Chinese media outlets controlled by the Party unanimously condemning the protests and smearing participants as foreign agitators and Western spies. Artists who have come out in support of the Umbrella Movement have seen their shows in mainland China cancelled, sometimes without explanation but more often in connection with boycott lists circulated online. For an older generation of Hong Kong Chinese, the situation has a familiar feel: recalling the Community Party’s massacre of student protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989, some warn students not to rock the boat.

Yet leftist socialist organizations seem to know what they are up against, as they articulate a vision for a broad and cohesive movement that leverages various worker strikes towards government capitulation. However, according to the website of the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI), their cause is undermined by the mainstream Democratic parties and the similarly tame position of negotiation espoused by the Occupy Central organizers. Socialists lament that a lack of clear political vision in the overall movement is driving protesters into the arms of right-wing nativist groups who want to keep out immigrants from mainland China and even talk of secession. Socialist blogs assert that these groups morph the discourse into a localized nationalist call and shift the conversation away from the underlying issue of capitalism and the need for comprehensive economic reform – not just in Hong Kong, but also in mainland China.

Despite these uncertainties, many remain hopeful that the Umbrella Movement heralds a new era. Edward Hon-Sing Wong, a Toronto-based student from Hong Kong who was involved in the early 2000s democracy movement, was not without his own initial doubts. Nonetheless he recently wrote on his blog, “Ultimately, however, surely we must recognize that collective action in itself, especially in the context of individualized consumerism so often seen as a mantra of Hong Kong society, opens up the opportunity for a consciousness-raising that rejects neoliberalism and embraces solidarity.”

Wong continues, “Surely, the nature of this collective action, this collective care can in itself act as a critique against those that suggest that the status quo for all its faults is the only solution. Hesitation at supporting the umbrella revolution is not unfounded, but – for now anyways – I prefer to err towards the side of possibility, of opportunity.”
Whiteness like nothing I had ever known. Whiteness rivaling fabled angel whiteness, touched here and there by deep staccato greens, pianissimo pinks, adagio blues, fleet ing concerto yellows, the shading of sands and yet whiteness. A symphony of its own composition. Stretching out toward the sea a long low ridge, a cliché of half-moon bay trimmed with finery of palm, bluest water and a golden beach. Modern colonial buildings each more presumptuous than the last. Far to the right, grasping at the sky, clustered ancient walls. Walls that surround, encompass, enclose souks, palaces and minarets. Drifting across the bay comes the call of the Faithful to prayer: "Allah, Allah, Akbar!"

Whiteness! City of whiteness under a blinding, chanting African sun. City of wonder, Tangier. Our ship soon is tying up. I can see the guides and photographers, souvenir hawkers, candy salesmen and postcard vendors, A thousand brown-skinned faces, a thousand worshippers of Allah, a thousand new faces. Brown-skinned, brown-eyed, black-haired--- handsome.

As I descend the gangplank I can see the faces more intimately. The smiles, the questions all seem to fit. There were trunks by the dozens being lifted onto the docks (a thousand pairs of hands for each--- reaching). I smile down into the smiling faces of the porters looking up at me; chestnut eyes, white teeth, muscular bodies, all wanting to help with my one small case and the pack on my shoulder. "No." And I shove five pesetas into a waiting hand (I had not been to the Exchange). Yes, I am here.

The smells are new, the sounds and sights are new. Yet it is as if I remember all of this. For some reason I belong. I am accepted. I am no longer pestered by the guides as I leave the Customs House and turn up the road into the medina. High above the native section the sun (as if pausing in welcome) has touched the minarets in a crescendo of light.

It wasn't an elegant hotel bar or even one of the nightclubs that Tangier boasted. It was a dark, smoke-filled place smelling of beer, liquor, cigarettes and hashish, inhabited by men in business suits with an obvious absence of the female gender. Toward the back sat a small group of Moroccan youth dressed in European-style business suits purchased by comfortable families and allowances in Paris or in the tailor shops of the Boulevard Pasteur. They wore dark glasses in a futile attempt at concealing the fact that they were not foreign business men or tourists but were Moroccan citizens who by law were forbidden the consumption of alcohol. Scattered here and there in the bar were several men of the foreign and tourist variety who relished their drinks or sipped looking carefully at one another. I had been brought here by a member of the Diplomatic Corps on a previous occasion who told me it was popular with visitors and remittance men paid by their families to keep a good distance from home and not to tarnish in any way the family name. Raul the bartender served me a cognac, Courvoisier, and asked politely about my day. At this point the bright light from the doorway flooded the room, and the young Moroccans turned their faces quickly to the wall except for one whose father I surmised was probably an influential official, and would see that he didn't get into trouble for drinking, in walked a fellow in suit and hat and took a stool at the bar on the far end. Raul greeting him served him the obvious 'usual', a bottle of Evian water, and chatted for a while with him. In a short time the man looked down the bar, and seeing me as an obvious new face motioned for Raul. He said a few words and Raul approached me. "Would you like to join the gentleman for a drink since you are a fellow American?" It always amazed me that we Americans can always be picked out of a crowd anywhere on the globe (after all my suit was tailored in Paris too)... I had it explained or I read it somewhere that we Americans have a syncopation of movement that other people don't. Anyhow, always being willing to meet new individuals, I picked up my snifter of cognac and moved down the bar.

Immediately the man began a long dissertation that condemned or praised just about everything, the type of conversation that I later began to recognize as either alcohol or drug induced when it repeats itself again and again. After a while he excused himself and went to the men's room. When he came back he was very mellow and appeared far less agitated than before, though he walked with a somewhat unsteady
gait. Being a naïve, properly brought up young man, I did not recognize the effects of heroin use and we talked on. I am sorry to say that I don't remember much of the conversation, except that Tangier was a great place to be free and get anything you wanted. He told me that he was working on a major book and he lived in Tangier where he had a place in a big old house. I later learned that it was owned by a known furnisher of young Moroccan boys to entertain visiting foreign men—in other words, prostitutes.

My partner at the bar, talking on, included an invitation to drop by for a visit (I was an attractive nineteen year old boy— you do the math). Several other men came into the bar and our party grew as people chatted about the quality of hash, last night’s conquest, and when the next check would arrive. Time passed and the Writer, as I had begun to think of him (since he had mentioned his book, though he didn’t reveal any of its contents) grew more and more vociferous and told long stories of visions and dreams. The visits to the men’s room increased and people came and went. The man kept asking for more bottles of Evian water, complaining of his dry mouth, and recited several poems with extremely colorful language for my carefully protected, young and naïve, but ready-to-listen ears. Food was brought in from a nearby restaurant and though the ‘Writer’ didn’t eat much, unless my memory is playing tricks on me, I ate well. By now the night had passed and it was very late or early. I shook the hand of the “Writer”, promised to come by his lodgings for a visit and headed somewhat awkwardly myself for the door.

The Moroccans had long since vanished, Raul was beginning to clean up and I opened the door to the empty street. As I left the darkness of the bar into the dawning light, Boulevard Pasteur surrounded me. The singing trees enveloped me. Above my head millions of birds sang in the leaves, chorused their tune, and welcomed the dawn in the warmth of the air comfortably cooled by a light breeze from the Mediterranean. The birds sang.

I thought of the night that had been, the day to come. Raul had said he was a wealthy man—a writer. Of course to Moroccans all Americans were wealthy. The birds trilled sweet notes into the air. Not like the screaming starlings on the bridge over the river at home, but melodic and clear. They rejoiced the coming of an African dawn. I thought again of the ‘Writer’, middle-aged to my young mind (if I wrote, would I be like him?) sitting in a drug and alcohol induced daze dreaming fantasies of life in some remote bar, far from home, on the edge of another world. Figures in jelaba and Fez hurried past me. Veiled ladies in dark attire, faces covered, undisturbed by King Mohammed I’s edict removing the requirement for women to be veiled, hurried past on unacknowledged errands to unknown destinations. I thought again of the ‘Writer’ and how I would perhaps one day be writing myself of this birdsong-filled morning and singing in unison with the birds the praises of morning in Tangier. I heard the donkey bells as the Berbers rode or strode past with their wares on the way to market place. I thought of how the ‘Writer’ seemed enveloped, lost in his own dreams, his conversation mumbled in scattered bits and pieces. Would I see myself succumb to drug-induced phantasmagoria of the night? I crossed the Boulevard Pasteur going toward my villa in the sky and heard once again the call to prayer. “Allah, Allah Akbar! (God is Great!)”

As I turned into the garden gate of my residence in Tangier I thought of the writer’s name: “Burroughs, William Burroughs” Raul had said. It would be some time before I read the book Naked Lunch and some of his poems, though I remembered some of the lines from that long ago time. The iron gated door of the garden closed securely behind me, enclosing me in bird song and the scent of flowers over the voice of prayer and the wind chime-like tones of the fountain’s falling water. Tangier sang in a concerto of birds as morning dawned.
ISIS: A History Of Terror

by David Sherman

The looming possibility of another war in the Middle East has been the subject of many media outlets, fear mongering since the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) started their march towards Iraq. Unfortunately very little information is being popularized outside of their war crimes. Where is this group coming from? What are they exactly? What are they trying to do? Understanding the history of these peoples can help one grasp the nature of the current affairs.

As the name implies, ISIS or ISIL (the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant) operates inside of Iraq and Syria. The group came out of Jordan to setup insurgency operations to counter the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. At the time they were just the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). They became ISIS when protests erupted in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 and the group sent insurgent forces into Syria. They currently control just under half the national territories of both Syria and Iraq.

ISIL is a Sunni organization devoted to an extreme interpretation of Islam. Their use of extreme violence comes from a Wahhabi tradition in which Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), according to the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, advocated purging practices of individuals who corrupted the nature of Islam.

To better understand what has caused this group to expand in the way it has, we need to look at religious identities through historical governments. The Prophet Muhammad died in 632 CE. After his death we begin to see the first splits in Islam between the Sunni and Shi’a ideals. It starts with the right of ascension. Shi’a Muslims believed that the Prophet Muhammad designated a successor and that only the family of the prophet can be the leader of Islam. Sunni Muslims believed that no successor was designated and that anyone from Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet, could be the ruler of Islam. Since this initial split each branch of Islam has developed differing beliefs on a number of things including the fallibility of their leaders, the coming of Al Mahdi, religious authority outside of the Qur’an, temporary marriages and more.

By 661CE the Islamic Empire is beginning under the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 CE). They operated out of Damascus (modern day capital of Syria), at its peak reached from modern day Pakistan all the way through Spain to the western edge of France, and was Sunni. They were replaced by another Sunni empire, the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE) which operated out of Baghdad in modern day Iraq. The Abbasids were interrupted by the Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171 CE) a Shi’a empire from Egypt that would ultimately meet its end at the hands of Sunni uprisings, Turkish invasions, and the Crusades.

The Ottoman Empire arises as the longest lasting Sunni empire in 1299 and lasts until 1923. It mostly operated out of Constantinople and controlled territories from the borders of Vienna to the Persian Gulf and along the northern edge of Africa from Algiers through the modern state of Eritrea. The Ottomans administered the region with the millet system. The miller’s allowed regional rule of law to be administered by one’s own local religious authorities unless the problem involved a Muslim, in which case it was settled in a Sunni court. This system maintained a relatively cohesive empire for nearly 700 years.

When the Ottoman Empire was chopped up at the end of WWI the western allies created a series of mandate states under the Sykes-Picot Agreement, with consideration of the Balfour Declaration. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret agreement between the United Kingdom, Russia, and France to split up the ottoman empire into colonial states that were each to be administered by a given European power. This included creating a state of Israel in recognition of the Balfour declaration to “give a land
without a people to people without a land” despite that there were in fact many Palestinians there at the time.

In doing so they created previously nonexistent Western-style borders in such a way that, whether intentionally or inadvertently, forced theocratic self-governance away from a people who had it for 700 years. In the case of the Sunni population, Western borders took them from being the major Imperial population for roughly 1200 years, and put them in a situation where they barely held control of their own region or became minorities all together.

A Pew research study done in 2009 took a census of Muslims around the world. They found that Shi’a Muslims made up 65%-70% of the Muslim population in Iraq. Likewise Shi’a made up 35%-40% of the Muslims in Yemen, 45%-55% in Lebanon, and 15%-20% in Syria. These numbers would hardly account for the drastic difference in total worldwide population in which Shi’a Muslims only make up 10%-13% while 87%-90% are Sunni Muslims. This partitioning is at the heart of much of the unrest in the region and it is this partitioning that ISIS is trying to re-draw.

ISIS is attempting to do this on two levels. On the governance level, the state has absorbed many smaller jihadist groups and expanded its reach significantly since its inception. As of June 2014 they began calling themselves the Islamic State and declared their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the Caliph, going so far as to present documentation that links his ancestry back to the Prophet Muhammad. He is an educated man with a BA, MA, and PhD in Islamic Studies from the Islamic University of Baghdad, and unlike most extremist organizations, he is running ISIS with business acumen.

The second level is that of pure, unadulterated violence on the ground. Amnesty international has accused ISIS of ethnic cleansing of religious minority groups in northern Iraq on a historic scale. In a report issued in September 2014 Amnesty International describes how ISIS “systematically targeted non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, killing or abducting hundreds, possibly thousands, and forcing more than 830,000 others to flee the area it’s captured since June 2014”. ISIS has released video footage of ruthlessly murdering dozens of young men, including one infamous video showing 6 bound children lined up and executed in a small room. Kidnapping, rape, and slavery are rampant throughout the organization. Nazand Begikhani, a leading academic researcher and board member of the High Commission to Monitor Violence against Women in Kurdistan, has said, “These women have been treated like cattle... They have been subjected to physical and sexual violence, including systematic rape and sex slavery. They’ve been exposed in markets in Mosul and in Raqqa, Syria, carrying price tags”. The UN has confirmed that 5,000-7,000 Yazidi women and children had been abducted by ISIS and sold into slavery.

ISIS has even been destroying historic holy sites including the Christian tomb and shrine of the prophet Jonah, the 13th century mosque of Imam Yahya Abu al-Qassimin, the 14th century shrine of St. George, and the 7th century Christian Green Church in Tikrit among many others.

Does the history justify this level of violence? Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his Islamic State certainly seem to think it does. Or they seem to think it takes this much violence to get the irrepressible wheel of history to roll back almost 100 years.
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