

Keeping eBay at bay

Attempted auction of kidneys, child display need for increased regulation



From Pez dispensers, to human kidneys to, well ... humans — things certainly have changed a lot on the eBay auction site.

Four years ago, it was a dream of increasing one woman's Pez dispenser collection. Good ol' Pierre Omidyar never expected his creation to one day feature 2.6 million items daily. He never dreamed that eBay would have more than 1,500 non-Pez categories.

And Pierre never thought there would be listings for human kidneys and unborn babies floating in cyberspace along with listings for used jock straps.

Not that it matters really — Pierre is now a billionaire.

He probably hired people whose job at eBay is to do nothing but worry about human kidneys and unborn baby listings popping up.

Well, if he hired such employees, they'd sure have their hands right now. Ever since a listing for a human kidney fetched a bid of \$5.7 million last week, a string of copy-cat kidney listings have found their way onto the auction site.

And the ante was raised a little higher when an unborn baby was put on the market, a child to be born "late in the month," whose University of Chicago law school parents' "intelligence scores" could be obtained by the bidder "upon request."

The going price (before eBay shut the auction down)? \$109,100.

Yep folks, it's a sad, sick, scary world.

I felt a particular interest when the eBay story broke last week, because I've been a registered seller on eBay since January.

I've sold probably 200 or so items obtained from garage sales, thrift shops or my own attic. It's easy really:

You throw an item description and picture on

eBay, wait a week for bids, wait a few more days for a check to arrive and then mail off the merchandise.

What bewilders me entirely about the sellers of human kidneys and unborn babies is their complete disregard for postage difficulties.

I mean, mailing off a 10-year-old ALF doll is one thing, but how do you pack up a human kidney? Extra plastic wrap? In a Tupperware container plastered with duct tape? Awfully messy, if you ask me.

For \$5.7 million, I damn well want to be sure my kidney is not damaged because some moron tried to mail it in an envelope at "book rate."

And an unborn baby? Geez, this one is a packer's nightmare. Throw the mom in a crate with some Saltine crackers?

But let's talk about the intelli-

gence of the buyers and sellers of these auctions for a minute.

It's obvious the sellers of kidneys and babies are counting on people's frail sense of hope. Whether or not their offers are serious is questionable. (eBay believes all the ads are hoaxes.)

It's also obvious the sellers have the intelligence of Fun Dip. Not only will they have wasted 25 cents on a listing fee, but after eBay sorts through its membership information, FBI agents may soon be staining these comic geniuses' fingers with black ink for attempting to traffic human organs — punishable by a minimum of five years in prison and fines of up to \$250,000.

Now, a word about the buyers. Hope, as I said earlier, is a frail thing. When hope is shattered, people don't hesitate to latch onto whatever might give them hope again. Therefore,

I don't blame people who made bids on kidneys or children out of desperation for a

happy, normal life.

I also don't condone their actions as reasonable. It doesn't take a Nobel prize winner to realize that little hope can come out of an auction site that has Beanie Babies as one of its biggest categories.

I do hope false auctions such as these have opened buyers' eyes to the truth — that hope has to be found in other (legal) ways.

So what about eBay — the medium through which all this madness has transpired? Well, some say this is just icing on the cake of eBay's recent troubles: a plummeting stock price and a multiple-day outage earlier this summer boosted the popularity of rival auction sites.

I'm not so sure. eBay is about as big and successful as all other auction sites combined. No one has more sellers and buyers and despite other auction sites' gains, I don't see any other site catching up.

But eBay better bet its buttered brown brownies that things like these need to be avoided in the future to ensure success.

Right now, eBay relies on observant buyers to report unlawful items for sale. With 2.6 million items for sale, this is a pretty unrealistic approach. It wouldn't be too inconceivable for someone to bury a kidney listing in a category no one would think to work (like in antique fishing tackle). Sure, you'd get less looks at your illegal auction, but you'd also get less attention and less time in jail.

eBay probably needs to hire employees to screen ads. It would take a heapload of money and time on its part, but heck, Pierre has plenty to spare.

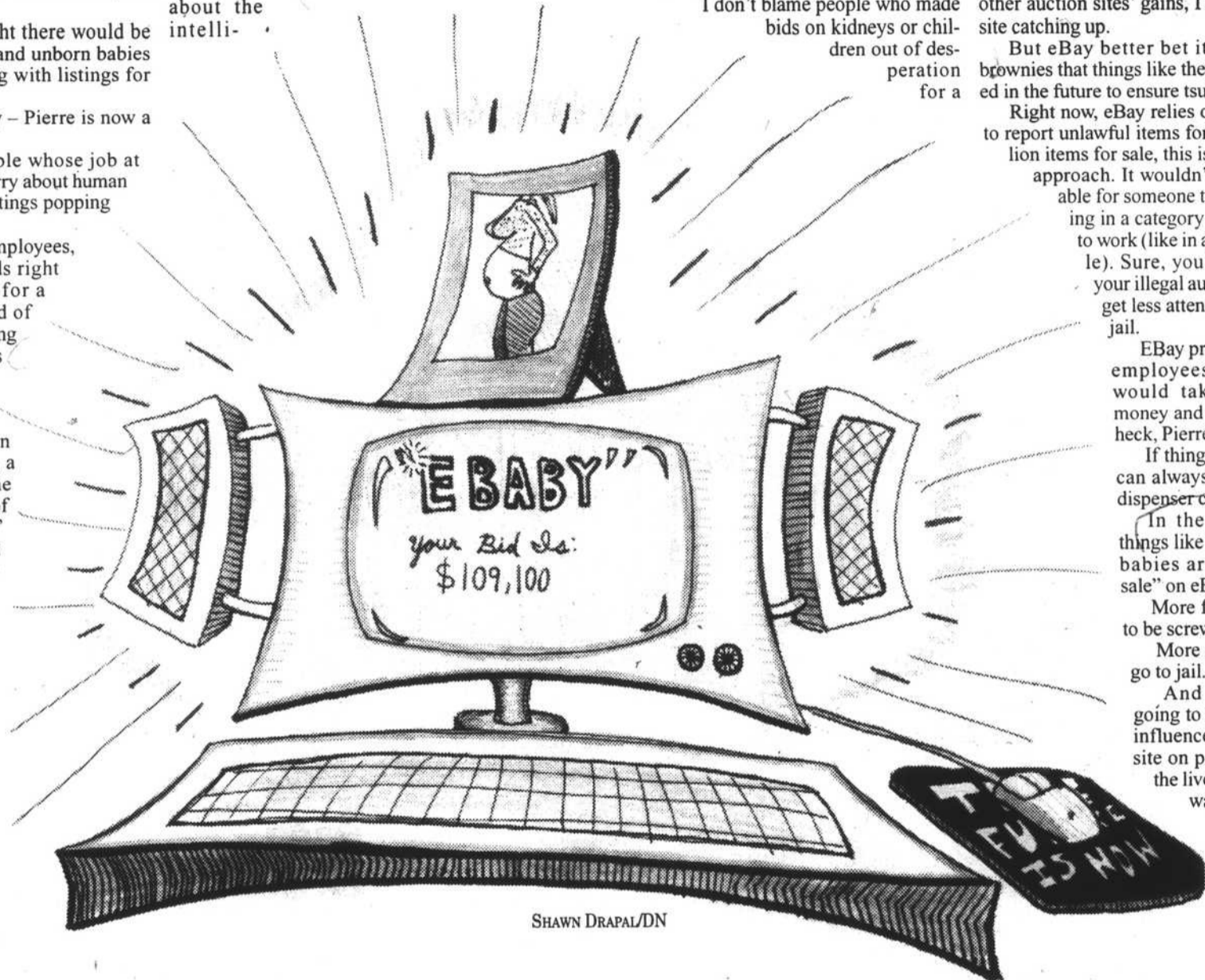
If things get really tight, he can always sell his wife's Pez dispenser collection.

In the meantime, more things like kidneys and unborn babies are going to go "on sale" on eBay.

More fragile hope is going to be screwed with.

More morons are going to go to jail.

And more stories are going to be written about the influence of an auction Web site on people's lives and on the lives of people who just want to live a normal life — no matter what the auction price of it might be up to.



SHAWN DRAPAL/DN

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Crime of the heart

Study correlating abortion and decrease in crime further devalues human spirit



Sunny Side Up

with Jessica Flanagan

Once upon a time, not so far away, a nation was born. A nation nourished on concepts such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

And justice for all. I think. Maybe I just dreamed all of that.

The news broke in the Chicago Tribune: 40 million-plus abortions since 1973 may have resulted in the current decrease in crime.

Well, maybe not resulted in a decrease in crime but at least correlated with a decrease in crime.

The study was conducted by University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt and Harvard Law Professor John Donohue III.

They suggest that as much as half of the overall decrease in crime between the years of 1991 and 1997 may be explained by the rise in abortions after the 1973 Supreme Court ruling in Roe v. Wade.

The theory says that fewer crimes are being perpetrated by individuals between the ages of 18-24, the peak crime years.

The theory also says the increase in abortions reduced potential criminals. (Potential criminals are identified as unwanted children born to unmarried and poor women — these children are expected to commit the most crimes in their adulthood.)

Shhhh. Does anyone else hear that? RED ALERT! RED ALERT!

I didn't hear it, either.

A blip or two buried in the news, a faint rumbling, which I find to be of particular interest.

Usually a decrease in crime is an occasion for every slick-ass politician to don a brand new tie and woo us into believing it happened as a result of their brilliant policy or hard work in the inner cities.

But don't expect to hear anything soon about this study from our fearless leaders. Nobody really wants to talk about it. It's like one of those damned skeletons to add to our nation's closet.

Pro-life groups denounce the study as "fraught with stupidity" — mainly because the study fails to consider a number of possible social phenomena.

The director of the National Consortium on Violence Research, Alfred Blumstein, was quoted in Time magazine as saying Donohue and Levitt fail to factor in other important variables, such as crime prevention measures and a thriving economy.

What really gets me is that even the pro-abortion groups don't want to touch it. They want to maintain that abortion is a "right." The last thing they need is for someone to misconstrue abortion as a means of population control. That's racist, maybe fascist, definitely classist population control.

So the question is not only how this study will impact our view of the abortion epidemic but how sweeping it under the carpet will impact our "knowledge" of the issue.

The study will add to the growing trend of identifying the social value of people as a direct result of their economic status.

It will further devalue the human spirit, lowering the bar of expectation for those of us not born with the silver spoon. We're refusing to look any further for the truth for fear of what we know we will find. Maybe for fear of what we've become.

By keeping the ideas introduced by this study out of popular political discourse, we (as a society) will log its conclusions as true.

And then the next time we hear that one out of every four pregnancies end in abortion, we will privately cling to the fact that it's better for society anyhow. It'll be part of our search for an absolution that will never come.

You see, as a nation we've done some pretty awful things. And we're beginning to feel the repercussions.

We've had, and are having, to face and deal with the reality of slavery and the legacy of racism and oppression that followed.

You and I look back and wonder how in the world anyone ever justified slavery for even one moment. How could anyone have possibly had a total disregard for human life — especially since the motivation behind slavery was purely selfish.

Well, just what exactly do you imagine our great grandchildren will think when they look back at what we did to our unborn children? How will we be portrayed in the history books?

In the case of slavery, later generations have had the opportunity to attempt to right the wrong. Or at least attempt to ensure that the descendants of slaves were not treated in the same awful manner.

Future generations won't have that option in the case of abortion. Those babies will never have babies.

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