

## GERMAN PROPAGANDA ARCHIVE

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**Background:** The Nazis said enough repugnant things to provide all sorts of quotations, but there are some quotations that people have invented. This page discusses seven quotations that I think are fabricated or misattributed. More examples may follow as I discover them.

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### False Nazi Quotations

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#### 1. “Truth is the greatest enemy of the state” (Goebbels)

This is the most popular forged quotation. The full version:

“If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.”

Last I checked (December 2011), this shows up on 500,000 web pages and twenty published books (most of which are vanity press productions, evidence for the value of publishers who still believe in editors). It is attributed to Joseph Goebbels. No one ever gives a citation to the source. A fair number of web citations are to “Joseph M. Goebbels.” That wasn’t his middle initial. One book credits it to “Joseph Goebbels.”

There are several hundred pages in German that cite the statement, but none give a source, and one site (perhaps the earliest) notes that is “retranslated from English.”

Goebbels wouldn’t have said that in public. He always maintained that propaganda had to be truthful. That doesn’t mean he didn’t lie, but it would be a pretty poor propagandist who publicly proclaimed that he was going to lie. I know of no evidence that he actually said it. I haven’t read everything Goebbels wrote, but I have been through a lot of it.

The Nazis issued a weekly series of posters with inspiring quotations that were displayed throughout Germany. One from 1940 displays Goebbels’s alleged love of truth:



**The truth is always stronger than the lie.**

Goebbels actually accused others of using the technique. In a 1941 article titled “[Churchill’s Lie Factory](#),” he wrote:

“One should not as a rule reveal one’s secrets, since one does not know if and when one may need them again. The essential English leadership secret does not depend on particular intelligence. Rather, it depends on a remarkably stupid thick-headedness. The English follow the principle that when one lies, one should lie big, and stick to it. They keep up their lies, even at the risk of looking ridiculous.”

He accuses the English of the “big lie,” and suggests that, were he to use such a technique, he would not publicly announce it.

The quotation usually seems to be used by those on the political left and right, who find it helpful in to associating those they don’t like with the Nazis. Since this is so common, my colleague Quentin Schultze and I have begun a blog titled [Goebbels Didn’t Say It](#) to follow its spread and, we perhaps too optimistically hope, to reduce its use.

It is related to quotation #3, which is usually quoted accurately, but taken out of context.

## **2. “Truth is unimportant” (Goebbels)**

The following quotation is sometimes attributed to Goebbels:

“There was no point in seeking to convert the intellectuals. For intellectuals would never be converted and would anyway always yield to the stronger, and this will always be ‘the man

in the street.’ Arguments must therefore be crude, clear and forcible, and appeal to emotions and instincts, not the intellect. Truth was unimportant and entirely subordinate to tactics and psychology.”

However, it is a summary of Goebbels’s thinking by Hugh Trevor Roper in his introduction to *Final Entries 1945: The Diaries of Joseph Goebbels* (New York: Putman’s, 1978). p. xx. Once again, although Goebbels was entirely willing to lie when it was useful, he always maintained in public that his propaganda was truthful.

### 3. Hitler and the “Big Lie”

The false Goebbels quotation above is actually a take-off on Hitler's familiar statement in *Mein Kampf*, which is often misunderstood. Hitler stated:

“In this they [the Jews] proceeded on the sound principle that the magnitude of a lie always contains a certain factor of credibility, since the great masses of the people in the very bottom of their hearts tend to be corrupted rather than consciously and purposely evil, and that, therefore, in view of the primitive simplicity of their minds, they more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a little one, since they themselves lie in little things, but would be ashamed of lies that were too big. Such a falsehood will never enter their heads, and they will not be able to believe in the possibility of such monstrous effrontery and infamous misrepresentation in others....” (p. 231 of the Manheim translation)

Hitler is accusing the Jews in the Vienna press of this strategy. It is often taken as evidence that Hitler advocated the “Big Lie.” He is, in fact, accusing his enemies of lying.

Now, Hitler was entirely willing to lie — but in public he insisted that he and his propaganda were truthful.

### 4. Hitler: "What Luck for Rulers that Men Do Not Think"

This alleged quotation by Adolf Hitler is on over 1,700,000 web pages. I think it is a fabrication, but am still investigating. It is not in *Mein Kampf*, nor in the Domarus edition of Hitler’s speeches. None of the pages that cite it gives a reliable source. Several cite a book that has it, but said book provides no reference to an original source.

### 5. Hitler and Gun Control

The following quotation shows up about a 665,000 times on the Internet last I checked (21 April 2012):

“This year will go down in history! For the first time, a civilized nation has full gun registration! Our streets will be safer, our police more efficient, and the world will follow our lead into the future!”

However, Hitler never said it, even though fabricated sources are sometimes provided. In fact, the Nazis liked guns, and [greatly reduced German restrictions on their ownership](#).

### 6. Hitler and “Law and Order”

The following statement is cited less often today than it was during the 1960s, as news of its falsity has gotten around, but it still shows up on a number of web sites:

“The streets of our cities are in turmoil. The universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. Communists are seeking to destroy our country. Russia is threatening us with her might and the Republic is in danger. Yes, danger from within and without. We need law and order! Yes, without law and order our nation cannot survive. . . . Elect us and we shall

restore law and order. We shall, by law and order, be respected among the nations of the world. Without law and order our Republic shall fail.”

There are a lot of things wrong with this statement, beginning with the fact that Hitler wanted the Republic to fail, and was open about it. It had its origins in a communist newspaper, and popped up in the movie *Billy Jack* (1971). For full details, see that most useful book by Paul F. Boller, Jr. and John George, *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, & Misleading Attributions* (New York: Oxford, 1989), pp. 45-46.

## 7. Hermann Goering on Culture and Revolvers

Goering is often quoted as having said:

“Whenever I hear the word culture, I reach for my revolver.”

This one is also dealt with in *They Never Said It*. (p. 36). It actually comes from a play by the prominent Nazi writer Hanns Johst titled *Schlageter*, which deals with the life of a Nazi “martyr.” It’s also an unlikely thing for Goering to have said, since he prided himself on his artistic knowledge.

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[Go to](#) the 1933-1945 Page.

[Go to](#) the German Propaganda Home Page.

# Goebbels Didn't Say It

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State. [Falsely attributed to Joseph Goebbels]

Thursday, April 12, 2012

## On Don Quixote and the Internet

Like Don Quixote, are we engaged in a hopeless quest in tilting at Internet windmills?

First, who are "we"? We're [Quentin Schultze](#) and [Randall Bytwerk](#), both professors in the [Department of Communication Arts and Sciences](#) at [Calvin College](#) with a long interest in the Internet (we co-taught an early course in web design in 1996).

Second, we have a forthcoming article in [Etc.: A Review of General Semantics](#) that studies the spread of the quotation at the head of this blog — an alleged quotation by Joseph Goebbels that as best we can determine is fabricated. Nonetheless, it is currently on nearly 500,000 web sites.

Our goal, which will be reported in this blog, is to reduce the number of citations. That is a challenging task and we are not at all confident of success. The next post outlines the challenge.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [9:03 AM](#) 1 comments

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Some years ago I (Randall Bytwerk) got an e-mail from someone trying to track down the Goebbels quotation at the top of the page. Since I've...

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"Goebbels didn't say it" is an attempt by two professors to put a small dent in the amount of nonsense on the Internet. We want to reduce the incidence of a fabricated quotation by Joseph Goebbels.

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Friday, May 4, 2012

## Sighting Report #5

A letter to the editor published [online](#) in the *Jacksonville Daily News* (North Carolina) uses the fabricated Goebbels quote to make a point about local politics, particularly a proposal for the Sturgeon City Civic and Environmental Education Center and refinancing existing loans.

In addition to using the quote, the letter says, "Those well versed in history will readily agree that Goebbels was both a master of propaganda as well as an infamous historical figure. He was very adept at not only convincing people that outright lies were the truth, but he was capable of bending the truth with far more curves than a pretzel! The taxpaying public has been sold a sow's ear and some are trying to make it into a silk purse."

Posted by Quentin Schultze at [2:37 P.M.](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Sightings](#)

Wednesday, April 25, 2012

## Sighting Report #4

Goebbel's famous non-quote about telling a lie big enough and often enough to get people to believe it is finding a home in quite a few titles on Google Books.

- One interesting sighting is in David Rankin's book, *The Things I Wish They'd Told Me: ... as I Was Growing Up*. The false quote appears on [page 378](#) in a list of quotations about "Truth."
- R. Thomas Risk and colleagues used it on pages 228 and 229 in their book, *Where We Find Ourselves: Portrait of a Modern Infidel*. The [book](#) includes footnotes, but does not give a source for the Goebbel's quote.
- William Campbell Hunter, Jr., used the quote on [page 138](#) of his 2008 Drew University doctoral dissertation on "The Value of the Filmic Encounter as a Pedagogical Tool for Empathy Promotion in Allied Health Undergraduates." He sources the quote in a footnote as follows: "Reference is being made to Joseph Goebbels the Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda."

Posted by Quentin Schultze at [4:06 P.M.](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Sightings](#)

## Sighting Report #3

A search of Google for postings during the last 24 hours indicates that the false Goebbels quote is flying around cyberspace.

It was used, and then apparently removed, on the right-leaning [White House Dossier](#) website.

It appeared on [Digg](#) in response to an article titled, "Drug Czar Claims Hemp Fiber Contains THC."

Harry Hopkins used the quote in his [letter](#) to the editor of the Bloomington, *Indiana Herald Times*. That paper's website makes it difficult to tell what Mr. Hopkins was responding to! Maybe that's not even important since Goebbel's non-quote seems to work for any situation of someone not agreeing with what someone else has said--especially the media.

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Bruno Korschek used the quote in an [article](#) on ArticleSnatch titled, "Orwell, Goebbels, And Obama -- The Triumvirate Of Language Control." Mr. Korschek is the author of the book *Love My Country, Loathe My Government*.

Finally, the website "Evolution--No Intelligence Allowed" used it in an [article](#) titled "Evolution: Fact, theory, Hypothesis" to discuss scientific theory, models, and facts.

Posted by [Quentin Schultze](#) at [3:38 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Sightings](#)

Tuesday, April 17, 2012

## Sighting Report #2

There are 31 new hits for the phrase in the last 24 hours. The most interesting is [Fraudonomics](#), which looks at "the interaction between government, the media, and Wall Street." It looks to be on the political right. It has the quotation at the top of the page. Rather amusing that a blog with the name "Fraudonomics" is the victim of a fraudulent quotation.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [8:06 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Right Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

Thursday, April 12, 2012

## Sighting Report #1

Along with tracking reports on the number of citations, we will also post new Internet pages that use the fabricated quotation.

A Google search on 12 April 2012 finds 171 new search results for the last week. Here are two of them.

- [Sago](#), a conservative blog that claims to be "handcrafted opinion served fresh daily" has a post dated 8 April 2012 that criticizes President Obama: "By his remarks, he is making it clear that objective reporting is neither necessary nor desired. This thinking is reminiscent of Joseph Goebbels when he said, 'If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it...'"
- [My Common Sense Politics](#) is a blog to the left of Barack Obama. It has a long list of quotations to the bottom left of its pages. One of those quotations is the fabricated quotation by Joseph Goebbels.

We will post interesting sighting reports as we come across them.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [9:42 AM](#) 2 comments

Labels: [Left Wing](#), [Right Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

## Tracking Report #1

We will regularly update the number of times the phrase "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" appears in a Google search. There will be exceptions, but nearly all of the hits will be pages that use the quotation, or parts of it.

For **12 April 2012**, Google provides 521,000 results. This is up from 500,000 in December 2011.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [9:26 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

## An Outline of the Problem

Some years ago I (Randall Bytwerk) got an e-mail from someone trying to track down the Goebbels quotation at the top of the page. Since I've read a great detail of material by Goebbels, it did not sound right. After considerable effort I could find no source for the quotation, even though at the time tens of thousands of web pages cited it.

I talked with my colleague Quentin Schultze and we decided there was something interesting going on. We've now been following the spread of the quotation for three years and will soon publish the article mentioned in the previous post. We've decided to keep up on the interesting spread of a fabricated quotation on this blog.

### Contributors

- [Quentin Schultze](#)
- [Randall Bytwerk](#)

Here's the situation as discussed on my [German Propaganda Archive](#):

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Goebbels actually accused others of using the technique. In a 1941 article titled "[Churchill's Lie Factory](#)," he wrote:

"One should not as a rule reveal one's secrets, since one does not know if and when one may need them again. The essential English leadership secret does not depend on particular intelligence. Rather, it depends on a remarkably stupid thick-headedness. The English follow the principle that when one lies, one should lie big, and stick to it. They keep up their lies, even at the risk of looking ridiculous."

He accuses the English of the "big lie," and suggests that, were he to use such a technique, he would not publicly announce it.

The quotation usually seems to be used by those on the political left and right, who find it helpful in to associating those they don't like with the Nazis.

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What has happened since then? That is the subject of future posts.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [9:20 AM](#) 9 comments

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# Goebbels Didn't Say It

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Friday, June 22, 2012

## Another Dubious Internet Dictionary of Quotations

A month back we noted Thinkexist, an Internet quotation site that provides no sources for its quotations.

Another such site including the Goebbels quotation is [Searchquotes](#). It claims: "Our goal is to help you by delivering amazing quotes to bring inspiration, personal growth, love and happiness to your everyday life." Like Thinkexist, it provides no information on who is behind it, nor does it give sources for its quotations. It gets about 4,000,000 visitors a month, and probably provides a lot of advertising revenue to its owner, whomever that anonymous person or persons may be.

As always, do not trust anonymous sites of quotations. Use a good print dictionary of quotations instead.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:27 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Bad Sites](#), [Discussion](#)

## Tracking Report #4

Google remains puzzling. Today (22 June 2012) a search for "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" gets 243,000 hits. However, if one searches for the phrase plus "Goebbels," the result is 943,000. These results are similar to Tracking Report #3.

With the first search, the lead hit is our [false Nazi quotations page](#), followed by the unreliable Thinkexist dictionary of quotations. With the second search, Thinkexist gets the first two hits, followed by our site.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:01 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

Sunday, May 27, 2012

## Dubious Internet Quotation Sites

Books and magazines used to have editors — and good ones still do. The Internet allows anyone to be his own publisher. On the one hand that can be good. The financial barriers to reaching an audience have been eliminated. However it also means that a great deal of nonsense gets distributed.

This site attempts to combat a small corner of nonsense. However, other sites promote it. For example, the popular quotation site [Thinkexist.com](#) has the fake Goebbels quotation, and is probably the source for many who cite it. It apparently gets over a million visitors a year.

What is interesting to us is that the site provides **no** information at all as to who is behind it. Nor does it give any sources for the quotations it provides. It allows visitors to provide feedback — but although we have twice reported that the quotation is a fake it remains on the site.

Compare that with a real print dictionary of quotations. An excellent example is the *Yale Book of Quotations*. The editor assiduously sources quotations, and finds lots of them that are falsely attributed. If you want to be sure the quotation you are using is real, do not depend on anonymous Internet sites

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Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [4:47 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Bad Sites](#), [Discussion](#)

Saturday, May 19, 2012

## Sighting Report #6

There are 31 new hits for the past 24 hours. The top one is for [Regainyourbrain](#), subtitled "the war on independent thought." It has the dubious Goebbels quotation at the top of each post — and attributes it to "Joseph M. Goebbels." "M" was not his middle initial, but 35,000 Internet pages think it was — and indeed, the first two quotations we can find (dating back to 2002) use that wrong middle initial. This post is concerned about the effects of cell phone radiation on the brain. The site as a whole is filled with claims of sinister conspiracies to use technology to turn humans into helpless puppets of the Pentagon, the New World Order, etc. Digital television, cell phones, and other technologies are all part of the plot.

The second site, [The Logical Sceptic](#), also has the quotation at the head of each post, although at least it does not provide "M" as a middle initial. It is a Ron Paul fan site.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [4:55 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Pseudoscience](#), [Right Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

## Tracking Report #3

Google is at times mysterious. Last week a Google search for "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" got over a million hits. Today it gets 242,000. However, a search for the phrase with "Goebbels" as an additional term results in 999,000 hits. We'll have to try both searches in the future.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [4:37 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

Saturday, May 5, 2012

## German Tracking Report #1

The quotation has spread dramatically in English-language web pages and has even infected Germany, where various web sites have translated it into the language it supposedly originated in. When we first started tracking it in 2009, there were about 400 pages in German that included the phrase "da die Wahrheit der tödliche Feind der Lüge ist, und somit wird die Wahrheit durch die Ausbreitung der größte Feind des Staates," the phrase we are tracking in English. As of May 5 the number of page has dropped to 265 in a Google search. However, more than one site may have translated it, which might produce different phrasing. We'll look into that as time permits.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:23 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [German Tracking](#)

## Tracking Report #2: Citations double ?!

The first tracking report was on April 12. It found 521,000 hits for the phrase "truth is the greatest enemy of the State." A search on May 5 gets 1,050,000 hits. It's unlikely that the total doubled in three weeks — perhaps Google's search engine is finding more pages?

In any event, the trend is clearly going the wrong way from our point of view.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:10 PM](#) 0 comments

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### Contributors

- [Quentin Schultze](#)
- [Randall Bytwerk](#)

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Tuesday, February 12, 2013

## Tracking Report #5

As of today, a Google search for "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" returns 348,000 hits. We are happy to report that the top two are our pages that attempt to persuade people not to use the dubious quotation. However, we don't seem to be having a great impact. People tend to believe that "if it is on the Internet, it must be true."

There are also 83,000 pages that attribute the quotation to "Joseph M. Goebbels." As we've noted before, "M" was not his middle initial.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [8:00 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

Friday, December 7, 2012

## Other Dubious Quotations

The 7 December 2012 *Wall Street Journal* has a page 1 story on a fake quotation by Thomas Jefferson that has been used by, among others, President Obama. There is a page on [Monticello.org](#) debunking several dozen falsely attributed Jefferson quotations. The article also discusses other scholars who attempt the Sisyphean task of debunking fabricated quotations by Churchill, Lincoln, and others. The article cites Churchill expert Richard Langworth:

It's a hopeless task, he says, complaining the Internet is like an electronic "Hyde Park Corner" where anybody can say anything, whether it is true or not. "You would need an army of secretaries to reply to all these tweets. Twitter and Facebook have made it worse, because people glom onto these things and pass it on and there it goes."

It's good to have company in opposing dubious quotations.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [6:37 AM](#) 1 comments

Labels: [Discussion](#)

Thursday, October 25, 2012

## Sighting Report #8

We're at high season in the election cycle and the quotation continues to spread: 179 new pages in the past week. Most associate Romney or Obama with Goebbels.

Another quotation site has popped up, too. [Crossquotes](#) provides quotations "from a Christian Perspective." It includes the quotation. As a Christian myself I like to see people take the trouble to be accurate.

Meanwhile, a Google search for the phrase "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" provides only 166,000 hits, a significant decline. We find, though, that Google results vary widely so we

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will wait to see if this represents a long-term decline. There are still 32,000 pages that attribute the quotation to 'Joseph M. Goebbels,' although "M" was not his middle initial.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [1:12 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Bad Sites](#), [Sightings](#)

Saturday, September 8, 2012

## Success Report #1: Michael C. Moynihan in "Tablet"

One of our hopes for this blog is that it will spread the knowledge that the Goebbels quotation is a forgery. We're beginning to have occasional successes. Just recently [Michael C. Moynihan](#) wrote an interesting piece titled "[Hitler on the Campaign Trail](#)" that looks at the spread of Nazi comparisons in American politics. He writes:

While fascism is a major political force almost nowhere, it is inaccurately referenced everywhere. The "Big Lie" myth is bipartisan, popular with excitable representatives of both political parties and all ideologies: Sen. Chuck Grassley, Rush Limbaugh, Joe Scarborough, and Chris Matthews have all accused their enemies of planning to lie loud and lie often—just like the Nazis. And the fear of impending American fascism, a charge made **most recently** by Rep. Ron Paul during the Republican National Convention in Tampa, are distressingly common. Even the recent kerfuffle over an anti-Obama cover story in *Newsweek* led one Huffington Post blogger to **dismiss** the author, Harvard historian Niall Ferguson, as a "British fascist."

If an American politician playing fast-and-loose with the facts is indistinguishable from an editorialist for *Der Stürmer*, than how does one distinguish between Paul Ryan and Heinrich Himmler? If Niall Ferguson is a "British fascist," what would one call Lord Haw-Haw, Oswald Mosley, or the bald-headed street brawlers of the British National Party? "Rather severe British fascists"?

That's exactly the point we're hoping to get across in this blog and it's satisfying to see it used in ways that make the point to a broader audience.

There is one point at which Moynihan is a tad unclear. He writes in his penultimate paragraph:

The "big lie" wasn't a Nazi propaganda "technique." It wasn't "invented" or "pioneered" by either Hitler or Goebbels. Nor was it the backbone of an anti-Semitic media strategy that precipitated the Holocaust.

I initially misread the first sentence as suggesting that the Nazis were not major users of falsehood, which seemed odd in the context of the essay — I think the quotation marks around "technique" threw me off. Mr. Moynihan dropped me a note explaining that his point was the technique was hardly unique to the Nazis. That makes excellent sense, and is much more consistent with the flow of the essay than my original reading.

It's also probably worth noting that leading Nazis believed their own propaganda. Much of what the Nazis said about Jews was false, but the only credible explanation for the enormous effort Hitler put into killing Europe's Jews is that he really did *believe* that they were Germany's great enemy in the world.

A central claim of Nazi propaganda was that "world Jewry" intended to wipe out Germany both as a nation and as a people. This was a false claim (or else the alleged powerful forces of "World Jewry" were remarkably weak, since within ten years of total defeat West Germany was in the midst of the "economic miracle" that continues today). However, the common definition of "lie" assumes intent to deceive. A first-grader who writes on a test that "2 + 2 = 5" is wrong, but not a liar. I don't mean to suggest that the falsehoods in Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda were equivalent to a first-grader's addition error — there is moral culpability in spreading false information. One might argue, however, that although Nazi propaganda was often false, its makers did not always think that they were lying. In that sense, perhaps some Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda is less an example of the "big lie" than of the human tendency to see what one wants to see.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:05 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Discussion](#), [Success](#)

Monday, September 3, 2012

### Contributors

- [Quentin Schultze](#)
- [Randall Bytwerk](#)

## Sighting Report #7

With the political season raging, people continue to use the fabricated quotation against their political foes. Supporters of the Democratic Party are using it more than the Republicans at the moment. For an example, see a post on the [Washington Monthly](#) site.

There are 190 new pages for the past week.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [9:28 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Left Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

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Sunday, August 26, 2012

## Google's Ngram Viewer Finds No Citations

Google's [Ngram Viewer](#) allows one to search for words and phrases in the millions of books digitized by Google. It covers the years until 2000. It finds not a single citation of the dubious Goebbels quotation. Proving a negative is impossible, but this is still further evidence of the unlikelihood of the quotation.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [4:05 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Discussion](#)

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Tuesday, August 14, 2012

## Our Article on the Alleged Goebbels Quotation

Our article titled "Plausible Quotations and Reverse Credibility in Online Vernacular Communities" was recently published issue of *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*, 69 (April 2012), 216-234. Here is the abstract:

"Cyberspace includes information that lacks vetting by traditional gatekeepers such as editors and librarians. One growing type of online information is unsourced quotations attributed to well-known individuals. After summarizing the history of textual fabrication as semantic misinformation, this article traces the origin and rapid spread of a quotation misattributed to Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels. The quotation spread from online sources to print and even at least one peer-reviewed academic journal — all without ever being sourced. The same quotation was widely used by both the political Right and Left to support opposing ideologies. Cyberspace provides an arena for creating seemingly credible but unverified persuasive messages that confirm the existing assumptions of online communities of discourse. The essay concludes with suggestions for verifying unsourced online quotations attributed to otherwise 'credible' people."

You can find the journal at larger libraries, but if you have want to read it and cannot find a copy, e-mail either of us.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:59 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Discussion](#)

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# Goebbels Didn't Say It

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State. [Falsely attributed to Joseph Goebbels]

Tuesday, September 17, 2013

## A Good Site on Bad Quotations

While reading an article on dubious quotations by Corey Robin in the 20 September 2013 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I learned of a [blog](#) devoted to what he calls WAS — *Wrongly Attributed Statements*. It's a blog worth following.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [8:23 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Good Sites](#)

Wednesday, September 11, 2013

## Sighting Report #10

It's bad enough having hundreds of thousands of web pages spreading the false Goebbels quotation, but people can even proclaim their gullibility by wearing a t-shirt with the phrase.

A [t-shirt company](#) offers Sarah Palin against a Nazi backdrop with the quotation "Truth is the greatest enemy of the state."

And you can also get the quotation on a [bumper sticker](#), courtesy of e-Bay.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [10:56 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Left Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

## Tracking Report #7

A Google search on 11 September 2013 finds 379,000 hits for the phrase "truth is the greatest enemy of the State." Bing, which last time returned only 8,500 hits, now claims 17,000,000. That can't be right, so I'll check again in a few days. The Google total is almost exactly the same as it was back in May 2013.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [10:52 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

Saturday, June 29, 2013

## A Sign of Success

One of the reasons we began this blog was to make it possible for people to check the accuracy of the dubious quotation. Since this page shows up fairly high on a Google search that sometimes happens.

Today I came across this interesting posting by "[eatbees](#)" that found the quotation used by a British politician, went to this site, and wrote an interesting post reflecting on larger issues. It's worth a look.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [5:35 AM](#) 2 comments

Labels: [Success](#)

Read this first

### An Outline of the Problem

Some years ago I (Randall Bytwerk) got an e-mail from someone trying to track down the Goebbels quotation at the top of the page. Since I've...

About this blog

"Goebbels didn't say it" is an attempt by two professors to put a small dent in the amount of nonsense on the Internet. We want to reduce the incidence of a fabricated quotation by Joseph Goebbels.

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False Nazi Quotations

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Friday, May 24, 2013

## Sightings Report #9

In the last 24 hours, twenty new pages cite the phrase "truth is the greatest enemy of the State." All are from the right, using the quotation to attack President Obama. This is fairly typical. During the Bush administration, those on the left found it useful to attack him as an acolyte of Joseph Goebbels.

The blog Polichicks has a post titled "[Truth is the Greatest Enemy of the State](#)." It claims that former IRS Acting Commissioner Steven Miller was following Goebbels's strategy. And following Goebbels's advice, the post claims, has been the policy of the Obama administration: "This has been the across the board mantra for President Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder for four and a half years."

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [1:13 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Right Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

## Tracking Report #6

A search on Google for the phrase "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" returns 380,000 hits. Bing returns 8,510. These are holding relatively steady since the last time we checked on 12 February 2013.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [12:50 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

Tuesday, March 26, 2013

## Google vs. Bing Search Results

A search today on Google for the phrase "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" returns 396,000 hits. On Bing, it only gets 8,710, an interesting difference.

And on Google, the first hit is our page on [False Nazi Quotations](#). It doesn't make the top ten on Bing, although this blog is the 5th item on the first Bing page. Rather curiously, the top Bing hit is a 2007 blog entry — and the blog has not been updated since 2008. Makes one wonder about Bing.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [9:53 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Discussion](#)

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- [Quentin Schultze](#)
- [Randall Bytwerk](#)

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# Goebbels Didn't Say It

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State. [Falsely attributed to Joseph Goebbels]

Wednesday, May 20, 2015

## Tracking Report #10

Well, Google is providing fewer hits for the phrase "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" It's down to 45,400 hits today. I'm not sure if the absolute number of usages is declining or if Google is simply reporting fewer cases —probably the latter.

The #1 hit on a Google search is from a site that takes the quotation from one of those unreliable Internet quotation sites, but hits #2 and #3 are from our pages. At least anyone who has doubts about the quotation will be able to easily find our discussion of it.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [6:15 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

Wednesday, February 4, 2015

## The State of the Dubious Goebbels Quotation

It's been some time since we last updated this blog, so this will be more comprehensive than usual.

First, a Google search on 4 February 2015 provides 56,900 results. Now, the last time we checked on 7 August 2014, the total was nearly 2,000,000. A Bing search provides 37,600 results. It's unlikely that there has been such a dramatic reduction in pages citing the quotation (although it would be nice to think so). Google is always tinkering with its algorithms, so the likeliest reason is that.

Limiting the search results to the last week, there are eighteen new pages. There is the usual wacky variety of arguments. [Communities Digital News](#) uses the quotation to argue that George Soros is to blame for the Ferguson riots. A comment to a post on [NumbersUSA](#) uses it to support claims that President Obama is lying about his immigration policies. [Nearlyfacts.com](#) has a long video purporting to prove that NASA faked evidence for the moon landings. It sites the quotation as support for that claim.

The entertaining thing about the video is that it is on a site with this disclaimer:

The views/facts portrayed in the videos and/or advertisements on the website: [nearlyfacts.com](#) are not those of the site owners and operators or anyone connected with them. The "facts" may not actually be facts, but may be the ideas and or views of the owners or producers of the videos and advertisements. [NearlyFacts.com](#) accepts no responsibility for any loss of any kind caused by anything on or omitted from this website. The content of this website is presented to entertain. [NearlyFacts.com](#) Strongly recommends that everyone get advice from a competent, qualified professional in the area before taking action that may cause loss or damage to themselves or others, no matter how remote that possibility is.

Rather amusing.

Read this first

### An Outline of the Problem

Some years ago I (Randall Bytwerk) got an e-mail from someone trying to track down the Goebbels quotation at the top of the page. Since I've...

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"Goebbels didn't say it" is an attempt by two professors to put a small dent in the amount of nonsense on the Internet. We want to reduce the incidence of a fabricated quotation by Joseph Goebbels.

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Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [1:01 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Pseudoscience](#), [Right Wing](#), [Sightings](#), [Tracking](#)

Tuesday, October 7, 2014

## A Bumper Sticker with the Dubious Quotation

Ebay has a listing for a bumper sticker with the fabricated Goebbels quotation.



At least it's cheap: \$2.50 including postage.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [6:03 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Sightings](#)

Tuesday, August 19, 2014

## Sighting Report #12

It's both entertaining, and alarming, to see what nonsense is believed on the Internet. Today's sighting comes from [thepeoplesvoice.org](#) and is titled "Promoting Confrontation with Russia." It concludes that Putin is an innocent victim of Western propaganda.

Typical of the care the writer takes in electing evidence: Not only is our false Goebbels quotation cited to demonstrate the iniquities of Western media, but he also quotes Winston Churchill as saying:

"(a) lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on."

That quotation goes back at least to Charles Spurgeon. A check of a source like Richard Langworth's *Churchill by Himself: The Definite Collection of Quotations* would have easily demonstrated that the quotation does not originate with Churchill.

The familiar quotation that one can use statistics like a drunkard uses a lamppost ("for support rather than illumination") seems to [go back to A. E. Housman](#). After looking at a large number of occurrences of the quotation, I've concluded that its appearance is an almost sure sign of shoddy argumentation. Those who use it select whatever bits and pieces of support they can find to buttress their conclusions, seldom being critical, seldom considering evidence that does not agree with their established opinion.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [1:43 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Sightings](#)

Sunday, August 10, 2014

## Sighting Report #11

The MWC News is a site claiming all sorts of noble virtues, including:

"Our aim is to offer a clear-cut distinction between fact and opinion..."

This post, dated [9 August 2014](#), is on the conflict between Israel and Hamas. It quotes the fabricated Goebbels quotation to support the claim that the media are complicit in supporting guilty Israel against innocent Hamas.

Their ability to separate fact from fabrication does not seem well-developed. As is so often the case, they use the quotation without bothering to check its accuracy because it says what they want to say. Like most who use the quotation, they also select the evidence they think supports their case, ignoring what doesn't agree with their positions.

### Contributors

- [Quentin Schultze](#)
- [Randall Bytwerk](#)

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:08 PM](#) 1 comments

Labels: [Left Wing](#)

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**Monday, July 7, 2014**

## Tracking Report #9

Well, the news isn't good. A Google search on 8 July 2014 returns nearly 2,000,000 hits, six times the number the last time we checked. As always, Google's numbers vary remarkably over time. Bing is at 39,000, only 2,000 above the last time we checked.

The good news is that our page on the matter is still #1 on Google and #3 on Bing, so anyone search the phrase will likely see our page.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [6:42 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

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**Monday, December 16, 2013**

## Tracking Report #8

Time to see how the fake quotation "truth is the greatest enemy of the State" is doing.

A Google search on 15 December 2013 produces 308,000 hits, down from 348,000 the last time we checked. Our two sites are still #1 and #2, so who knows? We may be having a modest effect. A Bing search gets 37,300, much more reasonable than the 17,000,000 that mysteriously showed up back in September 2013.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [5:32 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

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# Goebbels Didn't Say It

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State. [Falsely attributed to Joseph Goebbels]

Friday, November 25, 2016

## The Fabricated Quotation and Donald Trump

Over the years that we have followed this fabricated quotation allegedly by Joseph Goebbels, we find it is regularly used by both those on the right and left to assail their opponents. Let's look at what has happened since the advent of Donald Trump.

A Google search on November 25, 2016 finds about 35,000 web pages with the quotation that mention Donald Trump. Clinton supporters used it to denigrate Trump, and Trump supporters used it against Clinton. Some examples:

An August 11, 2016 post on [westernjournalism.com](http://westernjournalism.com) claims that Clinton is following Joseph Goebbels's strategy in dealing with Donald Trump. It claims to be "a rapid, up-to-date political news service that is relevant to the Tea Party movement of Constitutional conservatives." It doesn't believe in fact-checking, apparently.

Dr. Rich Swier, who advertises himself as a "conservative with a conscience," does not apply his conscience in matters of accuracy. In a September 13, 2016 post titled

### "Hillary's Goebbels Problem — 'The Big Lie'"

he accuses the Clinton campaign of using Goebbels's methods by "frantically seeking ways to hide the truth about Mrs. Clinton."

Meanwhile, *Sputnik News*, a Russian site with a remarkable ability to convey untrue material, carried a piece in September 2016 titled "[Trump's Immigration Speech and Godwin's Law](#)." It cited the Goebbels quotation and claimed that Trump was using Goebbels's methods.

Closer to home, the *Piqua Daily Call*, a newspaper in Florida, published a column by Maria Boone titled "[Burning down the house](#)." She says, among other things:

An infamous man from history once declared "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic, and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State."

The speaker worked for a man who has much in common with Donald Trump. This man found himself on the cusp of power in a country that was floundering in turmoil and dissatisfaction with its government. The bossman, like Trump, found he could garner support by proclaiming who people should be afraid of and who they should blame for all their problems. The speaker was Joseph Goebbels, Propaganda Minister in Nazi Germany. His boss was Adolf Hitler.

Trump has found his own Goebbels in Steve Bannon, an anti-Semite, xenophobe, misogynist, white nationalist. Bannon has been named chief strategist and senior counselor for the Trump administration. Bannon hosts a website that asks questions such as "Would you rather your daughter be a feminist or have cancer?"

There are more. We're actually surprised there aren't more than 35,000, but they will surely come as the left begins focusing on Trump's presidency and the right assails those who fail to

### Read this first

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### False Nazi Quotations

- [German Propaganda Archive](#)

recognize his virtues.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [12:53 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Left Wing](#), [Right Wing](#), [Sightings](#), [Trump](#)

Tuesday, March 22, 2016

## "Propaganda News" is Gullible

One would hope that a site named "Propaganda News" would be wary of uncritically accepting material — but that isn't the case. In a post titled "[Social Engineering Through the Propaganda of the Republican Presidential Race](#)," the full alleged Goebbels quotation is given to support this argument:

When it comes to politics, *everything* is propaganda. By now, most of us have come to realize that there is no difference between the Republicans and the Democrats; however, they are too quick to assume that an outsider like Donald Trump is truly an outsider, or Ted Cruz is the next Reagan.... In order to understand this fully you have to come to accept that our nation has been marked for conquest, and when Obama said fundamental transformation, he meant transformation to a socialist/communist state, period.

If "everything" in politics is propaganda, I suppose it applies to this site as well, which the author seems to confess at the end:

By accepting Ted Cruz or Donald Trump as our presidential candidates we are signaling to the left that we are willing to surrender certain values in order to solve problems they have forced upon us. It's that simple, we are being socially engineered. Of course, this is just my opinion.

But he seems to think his opinion is a pretty good one....

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [2:47 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Right Wing](#)

Thursday, February 18, 2016

## Goebbels and Merkel?

Our fabricated quotation shows up on a variety of German sites. Today, it appears in a comment on the [Deutsche Welle](#) web site, accusing Chancellor Merkel of imitating Goebbels. Since it's buried deep in the comments section, I'll reproduce it here:

**Tina** • a day ago DW article Merkel Unmoved by Criticism:

" "Despite all the critical findings in surveys, more than 90 percent [of German voters] say as they did before, that whoever has to flee terror, war or persecution, should have the possibility to be admitted into Germany and to find shelter. I think that's wonderful," she said." Interesting. I thought it was closer to 90% of Germans thought the refugee crisis was poorly handled by Merkel. I guess Mrs. Merkel is using Mr. Goebbels' strategy of the "Big Lie."

"If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest

### Contributors

- [Quentin Schultze](#)
- [Randall Bytwerk](#)

enemy of the State.”  
Keep repeating it Mutti. Everyone doesn't believe it yet.

“Everyone” does seem to believe what they see on the Internet, however.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [1:57 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [German Tracking](#)

Friday, January 8, 2016

## The Dubious Goebbels Quotation Shows up in Canada

We're suspicious of any organization that uncritically accepts the dubious Goebbels quotation. It indicates a lack of an ability to evaluate information.

The latest example is the Centre for Research on Globalization, a Canadian organization. In a post on 7 January 2016 titled "[France's Police State: The Gravediggers of the French Republic](#)," it uses the quotation to support the argument that French security measures are about to turn France into a police state the equal of Nazi Germany.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [3:20 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Sightings](#)

Thursday, August 6, 2015

## “The Blaze” Falls Victim

Paul G. Merkel, writing for *The Blaze*, has a piece titled "[Progressive Politicians and Hollywood Unite to Spread Anti-Gun Propaganda](#)." It begins with the fabricated Goebbels quotation.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [6:45 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Right Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

Friday, May 22, 2015

## The Dubious Goebbels Quotation on Academic Sites

Although there are tens of thousands of citations of the dubious quotation on the web, there are far fewer on academic sites (.edu). Still, there are some.

Professor Chris H. Lewis at the University of Colorado teaches a course titled "[America, the Environment, & the Global Economy](#)." Among other things it promotes critical thinking, for which he gives twelve characteristics, one of which is "use credible sources." He cites the fake Goebbels translation. He provides a source for his previous quotation from Hitler. He doesn't source the Goebbels quotation. He likes Colbert's concept of "[truthiness](#)." In a way, his citation is an example of "truthiness." People's "gut feeling" is that it is something that Goebbels would say, so obvious that examining its accuracy is unnecessary.

A second is in a 2004 article by Peter McLaren and Gregory Martin at UCLA titled "[The Legend of the Bush Gang: Imperialism, War, and Propaganda](#)." It has the Goebbels quotation at the beginning of the article, with no source provided. The article begins by noting that "fascism and war" have become the United States's preferred methods to starve off economic collapse and relieve "the agonizing tension of its underlying contradictions." Since in their view the United States is following fascist policies, it only makes sense to cite a leading fascist to support their point.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [6:36 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Discussion](#), [Left Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

Wednesday, May 20, 2015

## German Tracking Report #2

A Google search currently finds 259 hits for the German version of the dubious Goebbels quotation: "da die Wahrheit der tödliche Feind der Lüge ist, und somit wird die Wahrheit durch die Ausbreitung der größte Feind des Staates." This is down slightly from the last time we checked in 2012. A search for new pages in the last month gets no results, a good sign.

As noted in an earlier post, none of these pages cites a German source. The quotation has been translated from English into German. As noted last time, there may be more pages with slightly different wording, not surprising since there are usually a variety of alternatives when translating.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [6:54 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Labels: [German Tracking](#)

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# Goebbels Didn't Say It

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State. [Falsely attributed to Joseph Goebbels]

Sunday, June 17, 2018

## Andover High School Turmoil over Fake Goebbels Quotation

The *New York Times* of 16 June 2018 has an article about Andover High School in Massachusetts that was distressed to discover a [Nazi quote in its yearbook](#). The relevant passage:

The quote, which reads "Make the lie big, keep it simple, keep saying it and eventually they will believe it," is widely associated with Hitler and Goebbels's use of propaganda to build the Nazi empire. The quote is not attributed in the yearbook, and appears in black text underneath the photo of the student, who has not been identified.

Now, the quotation is a reasonable summary of the principles of Nazi propaganda (or, indeed, of much advertising and political discourse), but it is not a direct quotation from either Hitler or Goebbels. Part of it is based on Hitler's widely misquoted discussion of the "big lie" in *Mein Kampf*. Although Hitler was entirely willing to lie, he is accusing the "Jewish press" of Vienna of the tactic. As I've noted elsewhere, it would be a poor sort of propagandist who publicly proclaimed that he lied.

There are lots of fabricated quotations out there (Lincoln, Churchill, etc.), but fake Nazi quotations are the pit bulls of political controversy. As [Godwin's Law](#) has it, they stop conversation. The worst one could charge an enemy with in the past was being a tool of the Devil. Since belief in him has diminished, the Nazis have taken his place. During the Bush years, thousands of Internet posts proclaimed that he was following Goebbels's principles, often using the quotation this blog follows. Then it was Obama's turn to be the new Goebbels. Now Trump.... Actually, after Singapore I think the better historical reference for Trump may be Neville Chamberlain ("Peace for our time"), but that's another matter.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [5:09 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Discussion](#), [Sightings](#)

Thursday, April 19, 2018

## Speech on Fake News Uses Fake Quotation

Jen Senko put out a film in 2016 titled *The Brainwashing of My Dad*, describing the effect of Fox News, etc., on her father. She gave a speech based on the film to the New York Society for Ethical Culture in 2017 — and cites the dubious Goebbels quotation. So a speech on fake news uses a fake quotation. If you're curious, the reference is at about the 5-minute mark on this [YouTube video](#).

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [2:25 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Sightings](#)

Thursday, April 12, 2018

## Global Research Displays Shoddy Research

A conspiracy-type site GlobalResearch has a piece titled "[Propaganda, Disinformation and Dirty Tricks: James Earl Ray Was Innocent of the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)" It uses the

Read this first

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Some years ago I (Randall Bytwerk) got an e-mail from someone trying to track down the Goebbels quotation at the top of the page. Since I've...

About this blog

"Goebbels didn't say it" is an attempt by two professors to put a small dent in the amount of nonsense on the Internet. We want to reduce the incidence of a fabricated quotation by Joseph Goebbels.

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usual dubious argumentative style and cites the fabricated Goebbels quotation as evidence that the "Deep State" is involved in all sorts of dreadful things. The conspiracy allegedly involved:

Deep State operatives such as the afore-mentioned highly secretive conspiratorial groups such as the CIA, the infamous J Edgar Hoover, Hoover's equally infamous and very racist FBI at the time, the Pentagon, the US military's sniper squads, the racist Memphis Police Department, the Mafia, assorted war-profiteers, the mainstream media, and many elected and non-elected officials that exist at every level of government.

I'm always surprised at that those who believe that such a massive conspiracy involving thousands of people could be concealed. That many people could keep the secret? Truly, the "Deep State" must have astonishing control over its participants.

As usual, a site that assumes anything it finds on the Internet must be true should be disregarded.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [1:13 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Sightings](#)

Wednesday, December 6, 2017

## Austrian Site on Fake Quotations

There are a fair number of people engaged in the Sisyphean labor of discouraging dubious quotations.

Gerald Krieghofer has an Austrian site titled [Zitatenrätsel](#) that tracks them in the German-speaking world. He has a 6 December 2017 post that looks at [dubious Goebbels quotations](#).

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [10:52 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [German Tracking](#), [Good Sites](#)

Friday, November 3, 2017

## Article on Fake News Uses Fake Quotation

Peacock Panache, an site on the political left, has a post titled "[Fake News and the Big Lie](#)" on 1 November 2017. It is less than enthused about Trump Administration statements and claims:

The study did find that Trump's constant calling-out of specific media sources affected public perceptions of the accuracy of those sources. That shouldn't surprise us. There is a famous Joseph Goebbels quote, describing the propaganda tactic known as "The Big Lie."

It then cites the alleged quotation by Goebbels.

So we have an article assailing fake news that uses a fake quotation.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [3:22 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Left Wing](#), [Sightings](#)

Thursday, June 22, 2017

## "Reliable" Sites and the Dubious Goebbels Quotation

I'm particularly annoyed by sites that look reliable, but spread the dubious Goebbels quotation that this blog is following. That is almost always a sign that a site should be avoided.

One example is the [Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team](#). On the surface (but only on the surface) it looks to be a scholarly site, although it provides very little information on who is behind it. However, its page on [Joseph Goebbels](#) is headed by the dubious quotation. I've twice e-mailed them, but they haven't removed the material. On the same page, they reproduce a large section of one of my translations, with no credit.

In short, it's not a site to be recommended.

### Contributors

- [Quentin Schultze](#)
- [Randall Bytwerk](#)



Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [12:01 PM](#) 1 comments

Labels: [Bad Sites](#)

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Friday, November 25, 2016

## Tracking Report #11

It's been a while since we did a tracking report on the fabricated quotation by Joseph Goebbels.

The last one, in fact, was on May 20, 2015. At that point there were 45,000 Google hits. On November 25, 2016 the total is 40,600. It would be encouraging to think citations were ebbing, but is a result of changes in Google's algorithms rather than a decline in use. Microsoft's Bing search engine provides 2,430,000 results.

Fortunately, our pages are at the top of most search engine results, so those who try to be accurate will find sufficient information as to discourage them from further spreading nonsense.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [1:09 PM](#) 1 comments

Labels: [Tracking](#)

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# Goebbels Didn't Say It

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State. [Falsely attributed to Joseph Goebbels]

Monday, July 13, 2020

## Thomas Sowell Fails to Do His Homework

Thomas Sowell, in a recent [interview with Fox](#), misquotes Goebbels as saying "people will believe any lie if it is repeated long enough and loud enough." He does qualify his statement by saying that "Goebbels is supposed to have said" it.

As I have observed often before, although Goebbels believed lying to be a necessary tool of the propagandist, in public he always maintained that his propaganda was truthful. Indeed, he preferred to tell the truth, although often selectively.

Sowell's quotation is also more a revised version of Hitler's notorious claim about the "big lie" technique, although Hitler, too, was not claiming it to be his policy, but rather accusing the Jews of Vienna of the tactic.

Sowell is normally a careful scholar, so it is disappointing to find him citing Goebbels inaccurately.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [3:42 PM](#) 0 comments

Saturday, April 25, 2020

## Still another fabricated Goebels Quotation

A visitor to the site asks me if this quotation, allegedly by Goebbels, is genuine:

*Let me control the media and I will turn any nation into a herd of pigs.*

A Google search on 25 April 2020 finds 5,500 results.

It is almost certainly fabricated, and for the usual reasons.

1. No one I checked provides a source. The sites that cite it are often dubious (e.g., RT [formerly Russia Today] is a familiar source of dubious information). The RT citation is from 2014, making it one of the earliest I can find.
2. No reliable scholar cites it. I checked Google Scholar and Google Books. There are a few Google Books citations, but none from a book that inspires any confidence.
3. Although I have not read everything Goebbels wrote, I have read a lot. I have never encountered this quotation.
4. As I have observed before, Goebbels is unlikely to have said something like this. A good propagandist—and he was that—is unlikely to make such a statement.

In short, one cannot prove a negative, but it is highly unlikely that this is something Goebbels said or wrote. As usual, if you find someone who cites this, is excellent evidence that he or she does not check sources.

Read this first

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Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [8:09 AM](#) 1 comments

Labels: [Discussion](#)

Saturday, September 14, 2019

## Another Misattributed Goebbels Quotation

A visitor to my site asks about this quotation, allegedly by Goebbels, which is cited often on the Internet:

There was no point in seeking to convert the intellectuals. For intellectuals would never be converted and would anyway always yield to the stronger, and this will always be “the man in the street.” Arguments must therefore be crude, clear and forcible, and appeal to emotions and instincts, not the intellect. Truth was unimportant and entirely subordinate to tactics and psychology.”

**Goebbels didn't say it.** It is instead taken from Hugh Trevor-Roper's introduction to *Final Entries 1945: The Diaries of Joseph Goebbels* (New York, Putnam's, 1978), p. xx. It is a reasonable summary of Goebbels's views— but he never would have put it in that way. As I've observed before, in public he always maintained that propaganda had to be truthful.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:54 AM](#) 3 comments

Tuesday, August 20, 2019

## Tracking Report #12

It's time to see how the viral (but fake) Goebbels quotation is doing on the Internet. As always, I search for the phrase “truth is the greatest enemy of the State.”

On 20 August 2019, a Google search finds 44,000 hits for the phrase. About 50 have been added in the past month.

Google however, doesn't list all hits any longer. Microsoft's Bing still does. It finds 3,500,000 hits.

A Google search for the phrase in German (“somit wird die Wahrheit durch die Ausbreitung der größte Feind des Staates”) finds 57 hits. Bing, on the other hands, finds 11,900 results.

A small consolation is that our page debunking the quotation is the #1 hit on Google.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [5:47 AM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [German Tracking](#), [Tracking](#)

Friday, August 9, 2019

## NewsMax Goes for Fake Quotation

Marc Rudov has an article on NewsMax titled “[Trump's Real 2020 Opponent Is the Accusation of Racism.](#)” Rudov, who claims to be a “[branding advisor to CEOs,](#)” uses the quotation to support his argument that unless Trump can dispel the racist argument, he will lose the election.

This is an interesting use of the quotation. For one thing, Trump has control of the state at this point (assuming one doesn't accept the “deep state” claims). Given the context, Trump would be the one destroying truth.... And one would hope that a consultant to CEOs would use reliable evidence.

As is so often the case, the quotation sounds so plausible that people don't bother to check their facts.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [1:46 PM](#) 0 comments

Labels: [Right Wing](#), [Sightings](#), [Trump](#)

Tuesday, December 18, 2018

## The Heartland Institute

The Heartland Institute is a decidedly right-wing organization that claims to provide “somewhat reasonable thoughts on life and liberty.” Today its website carries an essay by one Seton Motley,

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### Contributors

- [Quentin Schultze](#)
- [Randall Bytwerk](#)



As best I can tell, Attkisson has depended on the Internet for her quotations, not bothering to check their accuracy. I'm surprised, since the publisher is a good one, and good publishers usually make some effort at fact-checking.

Thanks to Gary N. Curtis, whose blog [Fallacy Files](#) brought this to my attention.

Posted by [Randall Bytwerk](#) at [7:37 AM](#) 0 comments

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PLAUSIBLE QUOTATIONS AND REVERSE CREDIBILITY IN ONLINE VERNACULAR  
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Author(s): Quentin J. Schultze and Randall L. Bytwerk

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# ***PLAUSIBLE QUOTATIONS AND REVERSE CREDIBILITY IN ONLINE VERNACULAR COMMUNITIES***

QUENTIN J. SCHULTZE AND RANDALL L. BYTWERK

*Cyberspace includes information that lacks vetting by traditional gatekeepers such as editors and librarians. One growing type of online information is unsourced quotations attributed to well-known individuals. After summarizing the history of textual fabrication as semantic misinformation, this article traces the origin and rapid spread of a quotation misattributed to Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels. The quotation spread from online sources to print and even at least one peer-reviewed academic journal—all without ever being sourced. The same quotation was widely used by both the political Right and Left to support opposing ideologies. Cyberspace provides an arena for creating seemingly credible but unverified persuasive messages that confirm the existing assumptions of online communities of discourse. The essay concludes with suggestions for verifying unsourced online quotations attributed to otherwise “credible” people.*

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.

—Joseph Goebbels

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Randall L. Bytwerk (PhD, Northwestern) and Quentin J. Schultze (PhD, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign) are professors in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI, 49546.

The above quotation appears on a rapidly growing number of Internet pages. In 2002, it was on about a dozen pages; by mid-2008, it was 14,000. In mid-October 2009, the total was 47,900; on April 1, 2011, it reached 333,000. By December 1, 2011, the total surpassed 500,000. If one allows for partial quotations or minor variations, the figures are even higher. Forty thousand pages attribute it to “Joseph M. Goebbels.” “M” was not his middle initial.

As best as we can determine, Goebbels never said it. Proving a negative is impossible, but we have read a wide range of Goebbels’s writings and speeches without finding the quotation.<sup>1</sup> No one who cites it online or in available printed sources—including academic works—provides a source. The quotation also appears on over 400 Internet sites in German, sometimes with the note “retranslated from English,” and sometimes with the wrong middle initial.<sup>2</sup> No German Internet page or book that we can find provides a source.

How can it be that new, unsourced, even fabricated, quotations attributed to historical or current figures can suddenly appear and then be rapidly distributed online with few, if any, skeptical responses? Does the Internet fundamentally alter how or at least how quickly quotations are used publicly to label people and movements? If so, what are the implications for discourse in the age of cyberspace? We use the above quotation as a case study to address such broader questions.

In this essay, we offer preliminary observations about the online use of plausible but sometimes fabricated quotations. We first briefly review the history of literary fabrication and contrast it with the use of fabricated quotations. Next, we consider the history of collecting and employing quotations. Then, we consider the role of quotations in conferring credibility on speakers and writers within “vernacular communities.” We examine the case of the protean Goebbels quotation, especially its use within online vernacular communities to achieve what we call “reverse credibility”—that is, credibility conferred upon writers by virtue of the negative ethos of the person quoted. The case of the Goebbels quotation suggests what the spread of unchecked but plausible quotations reveals about the nature of public discourse, especially argument, in the Internet age. Finally, we suggest ideas and practices to guide responsible online communication in the age of such potentially protean quotations.

### **Textual Fabrication in History**

The practice of literary *fabrication*—intentionally misattributing written words to particular persons and institutions—is ancient. Anthony Grafton



writes: “Forgery of a kind is as old as textual authority.”<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Library of Congress catalog heading for books on the subject is the charming phrase “literary falsifications and mystifications.”

Major forgeries have obvious intent, and are useful in a limited range of situations. The Donation of Constantine purported to be a document by Emperor Constantine I giving control of Rome and the western Roman Empire to the Pope. It had clear and restricted application, and was not likely to be used to settle a dispute between France and Germany about control of Alsace-Lorraine. The *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a product of the Russian secret police, is still used today to argue that Jews are engaged in a nefarious conspiracy to rule the world, but could not easily be applied to, say, Koreans.

The use of fabricated quotations has functioned somewhat differently. They do not require the care necessary to make a forged document (or work of art) appear credible. They are generally brief—from one sentence to a short paragraph. Readers today are used to seeing and hearing quotations attributed to a well-known person, but with no information that reveals the precise source or original context. That makes them easier to accept and harder to prove or disprove, particularly if readers are only vaguely familiar with the quoted authors and/or texts. These characteristics are especially true in the age of cyberspace.

### Quotations in History

Given the ways that manuscripts and legal documents once were hand-copied and recopied from place to place, and given the disparate ways that ancient and modern readers have considered textual originality, it is difficult to know when and how human beings began intentionally associating particular quotations with familiar persons, respected movements, or accepted canon. But it is likely that there has always been some positive ethos, particularly credibility, from this practice regardless of a quotation’s veracity.

The “commonplace” books (*locus communis*) dating back to the fourteenth century were individual collections of whatever sayings and information the owner found interesting. Many included quotations. There were other collections intended for preachers.

With the widening of literacy and the rise of printed books, collections resembling modern dictionaries of quotations began to appear. One of the earliest in English was John Cotgrave’s *The English Treasury of Wit and Language: Collected Out of the Most, and Best of our English Drammatick Poems; Methodically Digested into Common Places for Generall Use*.<sup>4</sup> It was

organized by topic, but without sources; all quotations were “anonymous.” The most successful early collection was David E. Macdonnel’s *A Dictionary of Quotations in Most Frequent Use. Taken from the Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, and Italian Languages*.<sup>5</sup> This was a literal dictionary of quotations, with entries only in foreign languages and indexed by the first word of the quotation. It was intended for those unable to translate quotations they found in their reading, not as a tool for locating quotations. It was an instant hit, remaining in print for at least 60 years. In the forward to the fourth edition (1803), Macdonnel wrote:

At a former period of our literary History, it is certain that an attempt to form “A Dictionary of Quotations” would have been fruitless, and unavailing. When *Memory*, and not *Taste*, was consulted, in citing Passages from ancient Authors, no compilation, however voluminous, could have been adequate or useful.<sup>6</sup>

In short, quotations had become separated from their context, and now were “classic flowers” (vi) suitable for common use. Collecting and distributing de-contextualized quotations had become a popular art, akin to collecting interesting or compelling scientific facts that seem to speak for themselves, without need for understanding the underlying scientific theories and methods.

Other dictionaries of quotations quickly followed, until today hundreds are in print, and countless collections of various sorts are available on the Internet. Many contemporary public speaking textbooks encourage consulting them. People have grown used to finding quotations that fit their immediate needs, regardless of the quotations’ original contexts. Speakers and writers have pleased, informed, and inspired readers who assumed that the quotations were both accurate and correctly attributed.

Charlotte Brewer says in *The Oxford History of English Lexicography*, “Today we take it for granted that a dictionary of quotations is as likely to be used as a source of a pithy and apposite quotation for a speech or presentation, as it is to offer us the attribution for such a quotation as used by someone else.”<sup>7</sup> If this is indeed the case, why do such compilations often fail to provide references that would prove the veracity of attributed quotations?

### **Conferred Credibility in Online Communities**

Clearly, using quotations from such credible sources made it easier for speakers and writers to add credibility to their own ethos. By “credibility” we mean the apparent trustworthiness and believability of a source resulting

from reasonably objective criteria such as the speaker's credentials and the credentials of the speaker's sources. From what we can tell, scholars rarely assume that such compilations were credible enough to be worthy of citation. The general public, however, has relied upon the use of unsourced quotations to make arguments more credible as well as interesting. So have leaders in business and government. Most trade book publishers do not require authors to source quotations by famous speakers and writers, providing a means for even relatively unknown writers to easily confer some credibility on their own arguments.

The semantic value of using quotations to achieve greater credibility depends partly on the audience's assumption that a particular quotation is *literally* and *referentially* accurate—that is, accurate both in terms of the wording of the quotation itself and in terms of the person (the referenced "author") to whom the quotation is attributed. In other words, fabricated or not, such "authoritative" quotations can add credibility to written or spoken words—credibility that the same words would not possess on their own, without the authorial reference.

Such referential credibility is probably enhanced by the use of quotations attributed to historically important persons. References to famous figures as sources can confer credibility even when posthumous quotations have been intentionally or unintentionally misused. John Maynard Keynes's influential *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* includes an important misquotation of material from Keynes's reliance on an erroneous secondary source.<sup>8</sup> Paul F. Boller, Jr.'s *Quotemanship* has a chapter on "spurious quotations" that presents a wealth of popular but apparently fabricated quotations.<sup>9</sup> Probably because of his sustained credibility, Abraham Lincoln is most likely the most unintentionally misquoted as well as the most intentionally quoted person in American public discourse. Albert A. Woldman wrote in 1950, "Like the Scriptures, Lincoln's words are quoted to prove or disprove almost every political, economic, and social issue of the day. The only difficulty is, a lot of the words aren't Lincoln's."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, such conferred credibility is used most effectively in specific "vernacular communities" whose members collectively hold similar views toward the quoted source and the issues that the speaker or writer is addressing.<sup>11</sup>

### **Protean Quotations for Reverse Credibility**

From what we can tell, the fabricated Goebbels quotation is one of the first quotations attributed to a well-known deceased person that has been spread widely, quickly, and almost exclusively online through various kinds of

Internet-based communities. Even if the quotation first appeared in an undocumented print source (which we think unlikely), its distribution is a product of the Internet age, without any extant references to an original printed or recorded source. Moreover, the quotation has now moved from the Internet to print—not the other way around.

The quotation is also an interesting example of what we call “reverse credibility”—that is, credibility conferred on a speaker or writer because of the alleged reference’s negative ethos. Its words gain immediate semantic power because they are plausibly associated with a widely disliked source about whom few people know much. If Goebbels said it, it must be bad indeed; he was an evil person. After all, the quotation *sounds* like something people expect Goebbels would have said. Were not Hitler and his comrades proponents of the “big lie,” the totalitarian charade that led to the deaths of millions of innocents? Was not the entire Nazi system based on falsehoods?

Although it is true that Goebbels was willing to lie when he thought it productive, he preferred not to. He realized that clear *lies*—statements intended to deceive—are awkward when discovered.<sup>12</sup> Once uncovered, lies call for explanation; people want to know why they were misled and are more likely to challenge other messages from the same sources. He also recognized that outright lies are not usually necessary to persuade; one can generally select information to give a misleading impression without technically lying. In public, Goebbels repeatedly insisted that his propaganda was truthful. At the 1934 Nuremberg rally, for example, he claimed: “Good propaganda does not need to lie; indeed, it may not lie. It has no reason to fear the truth.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, even Hitler’s statement on the “big lie” is generally taken out of context. The passage comes from *Mein Kampf*, in which he is discussing the Jewish press in Vienna:

In this they proceeded on the sound principle that the magnitude of a lie always contains a certain factor of credibility, since the great masses of the people in the very bottom of their hearts tend to be corrupted rather than consciously and purposely evil, and that, therefore, in view of the primitive simplicity of their minds, they more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a little one, since they themselves lie in little things, but would be ashamed of lies that were too big. Such a falsehood will never enter their heads, and they will not be able to believe in the possibility of such monstrous effrontery and infamous misrepresentation in others....<sup>14</sup>

Hitler, in short, is accusing his *enemies* of the tactic, not recommending its use. He, too, was entirely willing to lie—but only an incompetent propagandist

warns his audience that he actually lied. In sum, although people widely believe that the Nazis brazenly proclaimed their duplicity, they in fact proclaimed the opposite, which makes it implausible that Goebbels said what this quotation alleges that he said—particularly since the first citation that we have been able to locate is over 50 years after his death.

One way to evaluate the modern use of undocumented quotations is to examine the communities out of which they emerge. In other words, the “truth” of a quotation is not the same as its referential usage by particular groups that might be predisposed toward accepting or rejecting its apparent credibility. We cannot determine with certainty that Goebbels never uttered the quotation, but we can assess whether or not the quotation seems like a good fit with the ways that he and colleagues publicly used language, including how they said that they used persuasive language at that time. But, it is also possible to examine how contemporary vernacular communities use the quotation regardless of its likely accuracy. In spite of some technological limitations, the Internet is potentially a valuable resource for such research.

### **Emerging Online Uses of Quotations**

Where and when did the fabricated quote first appear? We have attempted to find its first appearance, with limited success.<sup>15</sup> The earliest use we can date is in an online article from the political right on March 11, 2002, that raised questions about the commercial airliner that was flown into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.<sup>16</sup> The next use is three days later, this time in a reader comment on an article from the political left criticizing consumer protection policies.<sup>17</sup> The quotation was probably already in circulation, given that it was cited within a short period by two Web sites representing contrasting political vernaculars with opposing political standpoints and most likely separate readerships. The fact that both of the “original” online citations attribute it to “Joseph M. Goebbels” also suggests a common, and unreliable, source, and that it was first used on the Internet rather than in print. Many subsequent online users did not use the incorrect middle initial.

After the first use we can identify, the quotation spread gradually until a dramatic increase began in 2006. During the presidency of George W. Bush, it was widely used in attacks from the left on him. A Google search finds 307,000 hits for a key phrase from the quotation and Bush.<sup>18</sup> A typical example from 2006 was prefaced with the quotation, then began: “Propaganda machines are dangerous, even more so in a democracy than in a totalitarian regime, because their goal is to confuse, disinform, lie, raise fear and manipulate the opinions of

the people” [original underlined]. It continued with a critique of Bush’s Iraq policy.<sup>19</sup> The usual claim was that Bush and his administration were employing Nazi principles of propaganda to deceive the public into supporting his policies.

With the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009, political opponents quickly adapted the quotation to support attacks on his policies. The result by December 2011 was also 307,000 Google hits, many of which accuse him of using Nazi principles of propaganda.<sup>20</sup> A typical example had the quotation at the head of a discussion of Obama’s health proposal. The article began: “It looks like Barack Obama is well aware of this....”<sup>21</sup>

The quotation can be employed universally against any government, and any government action, making it particularly useful in any anti- or pro-government vernacular community. Since Goebbels is a reviled figure for all but a few neo-Nazis, and since the political right and left squabble about whether Nazism (“National Socialism”) was of the right or left in its essence, both can use his alleged statement. It can be employed not merely for argument or elegance, but to make an *ad hominem* attack that will appeal to a particular vernacular community: “If my opponents are acting in a way consistent with Joseph Goebbels’s advice, they are so evil as to need little refutation.” One fabricated quotation used in the right semantic context can immediately transfer negative ethos from an earlier public figure to a later, even living one. Presumably such negative ethos attributed to enemy leaders also contributes reverse credibility to the vernacular community’s own contrasting leadership.

### **Publishers without Editors**

Today, every person with Internet access can be a publisher—usually without an editor—with a potential audience the size of the Internet itself. In one sense, the Internet represents inexpensive self-publication, although even book self-publishing is now fast and affordable. Still, a writer who desires an online readership most likely will have to write for a specific community that holds consonant opinions, perspectives, and interests.

In order to determine the likely communities employing the Goebbels quotation, we reviewed the top 30 Google hits for the quotation on April 8, 2011. Google’s general Web-search algorithm is known only to a few company insiders, but it is known that rankings are based partly on previous successful searches for the same topics (i.e., the hyperlinks that searchers click on after they receive their search results on a Google results page). Therefore, our top search results probably reflect some of the actual diversity of search results that Web searchers would discover upon their own searches with similar terms. The results show that the quotation is used to

support the most disparate and conflicting positions within particular kinds of vernacular communities.

The first hit is an Internet dictionary of quotations that is the source of a significant number of uses. Although the site provides no information about its operators, it receives about 1,500,000 visitors monthly.<sup>22</sup> It is not possible to determine exactly how many hits the page with the quotation receives. The second hit is a page on false Nazi quotations maintained by a co-author of this article; it argues against the online tide that the quotation is fabricated. The page receives about 5000 visitors a month, and has not had noticeable impact in reducing the frequency of the quotation.<sup>23</sup> Six other hits are quotation pages of varying sorts.

The remaining hits run the range of opinion. One site uses it to accuse the U.S. government of concealing the facts on 9/11, another to argue against vaccinating dogs. One uses it to evidence the similarities of George W. Bush to Hitler, another to suggest that Barack Obama is following the example set by Goebbels. The quotation, in short, is used to attack any conceivable opponent, but in most cases the opponent is part of a government, political organization, or movement.

A broader review of pages is also interesting. A review of the top 200 finds most are polemical sites that juxtapose the quotation with the object of attack. Many are either blogs or comments responding to Web articles or blog posts. The basic claim is that George W. Bush, Barack Obama, or the government, or occasionally Moslems, Christians, or others, are just like Joseph Goebbels (although occasionally, the quotation is attributed to Hitler). In many ways, people use the quotation in ways consistent with Richard Hofstadter's analysis of the paranoid style in American politics—beginning with a conclusion that some entity is involved in a hidden, deceitful plan to secure ignoble ends, then assiduously searching for any and all evidence that seems to support it.<sup>24</sup>

We can find only one refereed scholarly article that cites the quotation, but with no reference.<sup>25</sup> A Lexus-Nexus Academic search provides three published articles employing the fabrication, two of which are from *BusinessWorld*, in the Philippines, and one from *The Washington Times*.<sup>26</sup> None of the three dozen books citing it on Google Books has a publisher with a reputation for editorial diligence.

### **Internet Argument via Memes**

The Internet age is also the age of instantly distributed quotations—both accurate and inaccurate ones, from text quotations to media sound bites.

Before the Internet's advent, the spread of quotations was more tightly restrained at least by the financial, temporal, ethical, and editorial limitations of scribes and print. Print editors could be gatekeepers for good as well as bad, and in tune with their own vernacular readerships as well as according to their own ethical standards for sourcing. Some reviewers for scholarly publications still check the accuracy of references and quotations, working with well-equipped libraries. Trade books and popular journals were never seen as editorially careful as scholarly publishers, but they still suffer embarrassment when faced publicly with errors. The editor of *Science News* printed the following letter from a reader: "Your article on fossil fuels contains a horrible mistake. You not only misquote Shakespeare from *Macbeth* but also attribute the quote to the wrong character." The editor's printed response? "Sorry! Its [sic] 20 years since we played in *Macbeth*. We won't forget about literature, but from now on we will check our memories."<sup>27</sup>

In cyberspace, any quotation can quickly go "viral," taking on a life of its own as people quickly pass it along to bolster existing vernacular views about public persons or issues. In a sense, quotes can become like Internet-spread urban legends, which sometimes reference and even quote well-known persons. As with all previous media, the person who does the initial quoting has the advantage of first say—as well, now, the advantage of initial Google indexing. Theoretically, there are more opportunities online than in print for people to respond to others' use of quotations (such as on blogs or in the "discussion" section at the bottom of online news reports). In addition, the Internet can support hyperlinks to online copies of original sources or even to online disputes about the credibility of sources. The Google Books project is scanning millions of volumes from paper copies and making them available for online searching. Moreover, thanks to the Internet the average person today probably has more and quicker access to contradictory sources that might shed light on the veracity of quotations and related rhetorical claims. Corrections, too, can become viral—but not as easily.

### **Quotations as Texts in Moral Communities of Discourse**

Textual critics such as Richard A. Lanham see no literal way out of the authorial uncertainty being created by the expanding quantity and variations of digital texts. He wonders what "the text" is when so many people can alter, comment upon, and redistribute texts. He contends that the "blurring of the creator/critic distinction ... finds a direct legal and financial



manifestation. Our ethics of quotation, and the stylistic formulas that embody it, is called into question by electronic media.” Lanham suggests that compared with the printed word the electronic word “has no essence, no quiddity, no substance....” The electronic word “is volatile both in how it is projected onto an electronic screen and in how it works in the world. In both places, its essence is dynamic rather than static.”<sup>28</sup>

On the one hand, we agree that digital copies of texts challenge some of the traditional rhetorical practices and ethics of quotation. The moral weight of distributing unchecked quotations online may seem to bloggers to be less than distributing errors in print. Much of the Internet is more gossipy than literary, scholarly, or journalistic. Certainly the Internet fosters more ambiguous moral contexts than does a book, magazine, or journal with an identified author, publisher, and community. The blogosphere, in particular, does not suggest to users quite the same community-centric, moral gravitas as other forms of publication and interaction.

Rather than like hearing a speech or reading an essay—both relatively discrete, bounded rhetorical events—arguing online tends to be conversationally protean. The protean conversation can occur almost immediately or it can take place asynchronously, with people adding to a discussion minutes, hours, weeks, or even years after its initial appearance. High-energy and strikingly protean social networking services (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) along with blogs are the most popular online activities.<sup>29</sup> Online, people can more easily address audiences they do not personally know, and the anonymity and distance of online behavior leads to what has been termed the “online disinhibition effect” in which “people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn’t ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world.”<sup>30</sup>

It may be that online contributors are often hurried, perhaps borrowing ideas or quotations that they quickly discovered on another Web site or in a mass-e-mail posting. As with the passion of the moment in a conversation, the online communicator is more likely to simply want to make a point in order to participate; he or she needs a bit of information, a quotation, or a turn of phrase. Anything can potentially “work,” whether facts, feelings, or even fabrications taken for facts. User statistics for Web sites generally find that many users visit briefly, and if they respond, it is often hurried, based on partial reading, before hurrying on to the next site.<sup>31</sup>

To help them participate in such protean discourse, online interlocutors often look for what are now called “Internet memes,” rhetorical cousins of the Aristotelian enthymeme.<sup>32</sup> Richard Dawkins introduced the larger idea

of a meme in his *The Selfish Gene*, proposing it as “a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.”<sup>33</sup> Memes, some suggest, live in an environment of selection, in which some spread and mutate, others quickly disappear, mental analogues of physical genes. Online memes are dynamic. Henry Jenkins argues that a static concept of meme “fails to consider the everyday reality of communication—that ideas get transformed, repurposed, or distorted as they pass from hand to hand....” He adds that the ideas which survive might be “those which can be most easily appropriated and reworked by a range of different communities.” Jenkins contends that the “repurposing and transformation of media content adds value, allowing media content to be localized to diverse contexts of use.” Jenkins contrasts this semantically fluid appropriation of media content with the older models of “centralized control over distribution and attempts to maintain ‘purity’ of message.”<sup>34</sup>

We are not so quick to accept arguments about the suddenly disappearing text and “new” media of dynamic communication. To some extent, cyberspace merely reflects the age-old reality of communication gaps, misunderstandings, confusion, and distortions which have always marked human intersubjectivity. We agree with John Durham Peters that “communication is a trouble we are stuck with” and “failed synapses are a major source in modern dialogue and life.”<sup>35</sup>

With respect to the use of quotations, the difference between printed and online text communication seems to be a matter of degree, not substance. When memes circulate quickly online, across so many different discourse communities, they are not likely to be particularly well known by members of any group. For a time, they become free-standing information, unconfirmed in terms of their original or fictional sources, and separated from previous vernacular discourse about those texts. Online, there is a period of rapid distribution before more careful, informed vernacular criticism has a chance to form. Human beings will still need to participate in discourse that at least potentially equips them to engage others wisely and well. Some of these communities are public, such as schools, bookstore discussion groups, and town hall meetings. Others are private and more parochial. Both can contribute to a Tocquevillian sense of self-interest that is moderated by neighborliness. Both can be fostered online as well as in local institutions.

## Conclusions

We suggest, first, that the online distribution of unchecked quotations is sloppy. Even though this practice appears to be increasingly the norm in

the blogosphere, such misrepresentation seems, relative to printed texts, to be more a matter of degree than kind. Items published online that are not useful or are proven inaccurate or untruthful will likely disappear from much discourse. Effective search technologies do allow a once-buried meme to be re-discovered and given new life, as is the case with our protean quotation. After several years of obscurity, it quickly gained epidemic spread. The originator, whoever he or she was, lost all control over the original fabrication once it first appeared online. Originals can easily beget more copies of the fabrication no matter what the first author later intends. Books—even academic tomes—can disseminate historical fallacies and commonplace factual errors.

We speculate that the rhetoric of online quotation represents a shift from persuasion to semantic reinforcement within communities. Traditional public rhetoric sought to change attitudes to win over adversaries. That required an understanding of the audience, of the rhetorical situation, and at best, knowledge of historical continuities that lend wisdom to seemingly novel situations. That is not to say that rhetors were always patient, rational, and ethical. Surely not. The goal, in theory, however, was to persuade, to reduce the differences between opposing positions so that the audience could move from their position to that of the rhetor. Electronic use of unchecked quotations seems a different species, aimed more at reinforcing existing attitudes than changing the attitudes of those who disagree. Instead of “identification,” in Kenneth Burke’s term, the goal is separation: the rhetoric of fabrication seems to assume that the other side is so incomprehensibly wrong that there is no point in trying to persuade on the basis of any common ground. The likely result is enhanced polarization of existing positions that grow increasingly dichotomous.

In this kind of public discourse, Hitler and the Nazis can serve as semantic equivalents of Satan and his hosts. Just as calling one’s theological opponents “tools of the Devil” produced discord rather than amity, so, too, comparing one’s opponents to Goebbels and the Nazis is the argument to which no satisfactory answer is possible, putting them (from the rhetor’s viewpoint) outside any boundaries of civilization. Since the charge is unanswerable (anyone as evil as Hitler would surely deny being as evil as Hitler), it stops the conversation with opponents.<sup>36</sup>

Second, the spread of this quotation (and others like it) evidences a significant change in the self-regulation of public rhetoric. In the past, media discourse was more likely to occur through gatekeepers who often went by the name “editor” and were more likely trusted. Editors are fallible, but the

fact that printing a newspaper, magazine, or book, or producing a radio or television program required significant expense encouraged both care in the product and an approach calculated to secure an adequate audience for the survival of the institution. Mainstream media, at least in the free world during the last century, usually exercised some editorial control. Cranks, crackpots, and passionate political partisans always existed, but they usually lacked the resources to reach a mass audience.<sup>37</sup> Today, Wikipedia calls anyone who contributes to its articles an “editor,” hoping that the joint efforts of many will produce quality—although even Wikipedia is beginning to doubt that universal editorship produces that desired quality.<sup>38</sup>

Third, the medium that makes it so easy to spread unchecked quotations is also a medium that provides ways of holding each other accountable. It is increasingly easy to access online the content of books (e.g., Google Books) and periodicals (e.g., MagSearch and TheFreeLibrary) that assess the veracity and attempt to determine the sources of quotations. Respected dictionaries of quotations make extraordinary efforts to determine the accuracy of the quotations they provide, even if a few carefully researched books can hardly offset hundreds of thousands of people citing a dubious quotation.<sup>39</sup>

Fourth, the viral spread of plausible quotations reinforces their credibility. Even before the Internet, fake Lincoln quotations were printed so frequently that attempts by Lincoln scholars to disprove them were of limited success.<sup>40</sup> The quotations *sounded* like something Lincoln would have said, and his name gave the words far more force than they would otherwise have had. In the same way, the protean quotation we have considered *sounds* like what people think Goebbels would have said. The quotation has even infected German Internet pages, with people believing that an unsourced quotation credited to Joseph Goebbels in English is so obviously credible as to translate it into German rather than attempt to find the German original.

Fifth, Internet memes such as plausible quotations can be quickly transformed by people able to put them to almost any semantic purpose for any vernacular community or for their personal amusement or argumentation. Users of an Internet meme can do anything they wish with it. When George W. Bush was president, millions of pages compared his methods to those of Goebbels. When Obama became president, an entirely different group of people found the quotation applicable to him. There is little ideological overlap between the two groups. One who thinks Bush and Goebbels are rhetorical cousins will generally not think the same of Obama and Goebbels

(although there are some outside the normal political spectrum who apply the comparison indiscriminately). The target of the quotation varies, but the semantic use is the same: my opponent uses Nazi methods, and is therefore despicable.

Finally, the speedy spread of such a dubious quotation demonstrates the need for a renewed public sense of rhetorical ethics. Passing along plausible but unsubstantiated quotations does not necessarily constitute a lie since the transgressor might not have intended to deceive. Nevertheless, quotations ought not to be distributed without at least using search engines to determine if the validity of the quotation has been addressed by those who might have reason, knowledge, and resources to do so.

Experts can be wrong, but they can also collaborate online to provide the general public with their own assessments of various rhetorical claims. Jan Brunvand, perhaps the best-known scholar of urban legends, notes that sites like snopes.com have had significant success in diminishing belief in doubtful tales: "Because they have been publicized so much people no longer believe most of the classic urban legends."<sup>41</sup> There are now Web sites where informed people—experts and amateurs who are intimate with historical figures and their texts—share their knowledge of valid and likely fabricated quotations. Perhaps more scholars need to develop ways of making their knowledge available to the broader community. A scholarly article, even if its text is accessible electronically, reaches far fewer people than does a well-designed Web site.

Coupled with the growth of the Internet, the declining resources available to libraries, newspapers, standard publishing companies, and even university presses could result in increased, and increasingly believed, nonsense. Citizens still need good dictionaries of quotations, meticulous Web sites, and the help of passionate experts who scrupulously track the extant words of the persons we quoted. We can benefit from the services of librarians who know sources and research and who care about the cause of truth. Scholars can serve the general public as well as our own vernacular communities of learning. We were disappointed that two scholars used the unsubstantiated quotation prominently at the beginning of their published, peer-reviewed essay. Accuracy matters. Public discourse is weakened by using unreliable quotations and unsourced, dubious information to support arguments, even if those arguments are otherwise sound (although we suspect that those who use bad information are also prone to bad arguments).

The task is difficult. As those who in the past tried to discredit fabricated quotations discovered, Mark Twain was right: "A lie can travel

halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” So it says on 435,000 Internet pages. But for some reason, not even one of those pages seems to provide a source.<sup>42</sup>

### Notes

1. Since Goebbels's remarks are sometimes confused with Hitler's, we also checked *Mein Kampf* and the four-volume edition of Hitler's speeches.
2. See, for example, <http://heplev.wordpress.com/2008/06/09/hitlers-rezeptebefolgend/>, accessed December 8, 2011, which claims that “the Arabs are following Goebbels's advice exactly.” (Our translation).
3. Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 8.
4. John Cotgrave, *The English Treasury of Wit and Language: Collected Out of the Most, and Best of our English Drammatick Poems; Methodically Digested into Common Places for Generall Use* (London: Humphrey Mosely, 1655).
5. David E. Macdonnel, *A Dictionary of Quotations in Most Frequent Use. Taken from the Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, and Italian Languages* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1797).
6. David E. Macdonnel, *A Dictionary of Quotations, in Most Frequent Use, Taken Chiefly from the Latin and French, but Comprising Many from the Greek, Spanish, and Italian, Languages*, 4th ed. (London: G. and J. Robinson, 1803), v–vi.
7. Charlotte Brewer, “The OED Supplements,” in Anthony Paul Cowie, ed., *The Oxford History of English Lexicography*, Vol. 1, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 268.
8. J. Ronnie Davis and Francis J. Casey, Jr., “Keynes's Misquotation of Mill,” *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 87, Number 346 (June 1977): 329–330.
9. Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Quotemanship: The Use and Abuse of Quotations for Polemical and Other Purposes* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1967), 320–364.
10. Albert A. Woldman, “Lincoln Never Said That,” *Harper's*, May 1950, 71.
11. Edward Goldsmith, one of the first scholars to use the term “vernacular community,” says that one is based on “consanguinity, real or fictitious,” and “cannot conceive of life outside it....” *The Way: An Ecological World-View*, rev. and enlarged (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 387, 390. Goldsmith's magnum opus was first published in 1992.
12. This is the definition still used by most ethicists. See Sisella Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 6.

13. Joseph Goebbels, "Propaganda and Public Enlightenment as Prerequisites for Practical Work in Many Areas," in Randall L. Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 45.
14. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*. Trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 231.
15. Google's search function offers limited help. Although it does allow searching through results by date, it does not conduct that search on the original version of the page. Therefore, a page that Google shows as 2002 may have been modified later to add the quotation. Page revision histories can be traced using the "Wayback Machine" on archive.org, but it is incomplete, and does not yet have the capacity to search the entire database. Once one has a page URL, however, one can track revisions made over time.
16. Geoff Metcalf, "So where *is* the plane?," a commentary on WorldNet-Daily, a conservative site. It raises questions about the commercial airliner that hit the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. He cites "Joseph M. Goebbels," using the quotation to question the usual account of 9/11. At our request, Mr. Metcalf kindly went through his files, but could not determine where he got the quotation from. See [http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=26777](http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=26777), accessed December 8, 2011.
17. Cited by [http://www.earths.net/mar11-mar24\\_02.htm](http://www.earths.net/mar11-mar24_02.htm), accessed December 8, 2011. It also credits the quotation to "Joseph M. Goebbels."
18. Not all of the hits made the Bush-Goebbels comparison, but the substantial majority of those we checked did, accessed December 8, 2011.
19. Rodrigue Tremblay, "War and Propaganda Machines," <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article15241.htm>, accessed December 8, 2011.
20. As with Bush, not all pages accuse Obama of using Nazi propaganda methods, accessed December 8, 2011.
21. "Truth is the Mortal Enemy of the State," <http://awakentheelephants.com/blog/?p=1869>, accessed December 8, 2011.
22. [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/-if\\_you\\_tell\\_a\\_lie\\_big\\_enough\\_and\\_keep\\_repeating/345877.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/-if_you_tell_a_lie_big_enough_and_keep_repeating/345877.html), accessed December 8, 2011. The "about us" link on the site does not function, and there is no information as to who is behind the site. The visitors estimate is from Quantcast.com, an Internet ranking service. In his introduction to *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), Fred R. Shapiro writes: "The science of compiling a quotation dictionary consists in comprehensively

- identifying the most famous quotations, tracing them to their original sources as far as possible, and recording those sources precisely and accurately" (xviii). This online collection definitely does not do that.
23. <http://bytwerk.com/gpa/falsenaziquotations.htm>, accessed December 8, 2011.
  24. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1965).
  25. Peter McLaren and Gregory Martin, "The Legend of the Bush Gang: Imperialism, War, and Propaganda," *Critical Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 4, Number 3 (August 2004): 281. The reference is at the head of the article. We checked with the lead author, who could not remember where he found the quotation.
  26. Suzanne Fields, "Decency Goes A.W.O.L.: When Slander Puts Everyone in Peril," *The Washington Times*, September 17, 2007, A19. Retrieved October 20, 2009, from LexisNexis Academic. Online at <http://www.creators.com/opinion/suzanne-fields/when-decency-goes-awol.html>, accessed April 11, 2012.
  27. Alan Lichtenstein, "Double Double, Shakespeare Trouble," *Science News*, Vol. 105, Number 13 (March 30, 1974): 203.
  28. Richard A. Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 19.
  29. "What Americans Do Online," [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/what-americans-do-online-social-media-and-games-dominate-activity/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/what-americans-do-online-social-media-and-games-dominate-activity/), accessed December 8, 2011.
  30. John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, Vol. 7, Number 3 (June 2004): 321, <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/disinhibit.html>, accessed December 8, 2011.
  31. A report from The Nielsen Company found that the average American visited 72 different domains in January 2010, spending an average of 56 seconds per page, [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/facebook-users-average-7-hrs-a-month-in-january-as-digital-universe-expands/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/facebook-users-average-7-hrs-a-month-in-january-as-digital-universe-expands/), accessed December 8, 2011.
  32. Since the field is still new, there is a lively discussion on terminology and definitions that we do not wish to get into in this essay.
  33. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192.
  34. [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_spread\\_its\\_dead\\_p.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html), accessed December 8, 2011.
  35. John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 263–264.



36. This has been semi-facetiously stated as Godwin's Law: "As on online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1."
37. There were always exceptions. Early American newspapers were often vehemently partisan. Father Coughlin used radio in the 1930s to reach a huge audience, a forerunner of today's talk radio. However, the cost of print and airtime generally reduced such exceptions to those that could achieve a significant audience.
38. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flagged\\_revisions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flagged_revisions), accessed December 8, 2011.
39. See, for example, Paul F. Boller, Jr. and John George, *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Ralph Keyes, *"Nice Guys Finish Seventh": False Phrases, Spurious Sayings, and Familiar Misquotations* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
40. Paul F. Boller and John George, *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 84.
41. David Hochman, "Rumor Detectives: True Story or Online Hoax?," *Reader's Digest*, April 2009, 103, <http://www.rd.com/home/rumor-detectives-true-story-or-online-hoax/>, accessed April 11, 2012.
42. *The Yale Book of Quotations*, 615, traces a close version of it to Charles H. Spurgeon in 1859: "A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on." Spurgeon states he is quoting "an old proverb." A Google search finds only 600 pages that credit the quotation to him.