

that each execution saved eight lives. The Supreme Court had ruled three years earlier that existing death penalty statutes were unconstitutional, but a year after Ehrlich released his study, the Court ended the death penalty moratorium in *Gregg v. Georgia*.

Ehrlich's results have been questioned over the years. Though his study covered the years 1935 to 1969, his conclusion that the death penalty is a deterrent relied heavily on an upsurge in the homicide rate after 1962, combined with a fall in the execution rate during the same period. A 1978 National Academy of Sciences report pointed out that this "simple pairing" of more murders and fewer executions between 1963 and 1969 explained his results. For all of his sophisticated econometric analyses, Ehrlich did not fully take into account other influences on the homicide rate.

In a 2004 study, Hashem Dezhbakhsh and Joanna M. Shepherd analyzed the same kind of data Ehrlich considered for the period 1960 to 2000 and suggested that around 150 fewer homicides occur per execution. But this study included the same distorting mid-1960s period. And Dezhbakhsh and Shepherd's case was also helped by the fact that homicide rates were higher during the death penalty moratorium in the mid-1970s than during the early or late years of the decade. The obvious implication that lifting the death penalty explains the difference, however, is contradicted by the fact that there was also an upsurge in murders in states where the

death penalty laws did not change.

Another problem with studies such as these two is that their conclusions don't hold up when examined against comparison cases, say Donohue and Wolfers. Canada hasn't executed anyone since 1962, though narrow death penalty statutes remained on the books until 1998. Yet Canada's homicide rate has moved in virtual lockstep with that of the United States. And within the United States, homicide rates in the six states that had no death penalty between 1960 and 2000 moved in close concert with those of states that did have death

An oft-cited 1975 death penalty study estimated that each execution saved eight lives, but many researchers have questioned that conclusion over the years.

penalty statutes in effect during at least some portion of that period.

Despite efforts to control for a range of social and economic trends, say Donohue and Wolfers, the studies failed to capture some of the factors that influence homicide rates. Of the half-dozen or so studies that Donohue and Wolfers scrutinized, none produced statistically significant evidence of deterrence upon re-examination.

Noting the impact of such studies on public policy, the authors caution against rushing to change the law based on any study that hasn't stood the test of time and rigorous scientific validation.

SOCIETY

Who Said It?

THE SOURCE: "The Quote Verifier" by Ralph Keyes, in *The Antioch Review*, Spring 2006.

AS MARK TWAIN NEVER PUT IT, "Quotations are only as good as the writers who invent them." And "there's the rub," as William Shakespeare *did* write (*Hamlet* 3.1.65), although who's to say he didn't cadge that line from someone else?

Ralph Keyes, whose work as the author of such books as *The Wit and Wisdom of Harry Truman* (1995) and *The Wit and Wisdom of Oscar Wilde* (1999) has made him a quote sleuth, says there are many reasons why "accurate ascription of quotations is such a slippery slope of scholarship." Take Leo Durocher's famous saying, "Nice guys finish last." What Durocher actually said was "The nice guys are all over there. In seventh place." The more familiar quote is, as Keyes writes, "boiled down to its essence," just like "blood, sweat, and tears" sounds better than Winston Churchill's original: "blood, toil, tears, and sweat."

At least those flawed sayings are associated with their originators. Misattribution of quotes is just as common as misquotation, reports Keyes. On the eve of the war in Iraq, for instance, the familiar quote "No plan survives contact with the enemy" was much bandied about by commentators. It was ascribed, variously, to Dwight Eisenhower, Napoleon, and George Patton. Prussian field

marshal Helmuth von Moltke (1848–1916) was the actual originator, though, like Durocher, von Moltke didn't put the thought in very pithy form.

President John F. Kennedy was a serial misquoter. "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing," he ringingly declared, (mis)citing Edmund Burke. It certainly *sounds* like something Burke might have said, and Kennedy's imprimatur has kept that fiction alive. (The true provenance of the quote is unknown.) Keyes says many misquotes follow patterns. If it's something saintly, then Gandhi said it (or Mother Teresa).

"If it's about honesty, Lincoln most likely said it (or Washington), about fame, Andy Warhol (or Daniel Boorstin), about courage, John Kennedy (or Ernest Hemingway)." Parochialism also plays a role. "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," said football coach Vince Lombardi (if you're American) or soccer coach Bill Shankly (if you're British). "Golf is a good walk spoiled" is "given to Mark Twain in the United States," says Keyes, and to "author Kurt Tucholsky in Germany."

Newspaper reporters routinely improve the grammar, diction, and, yes, the thoughts of those

they quote: Vice President Jack Garner compared his office to "a pitcher of warm piss," but in the newspapers it was sanitized to "a pitcher of warm spit." And while such misquotes might have had limited reach in former times, today the Internet does more to abet misquotation than contain it, spreading each error like a "verbal virus."

But there's nothing new about misquotation. The New York wit Dorothy Parker was so often credited for things she didn't actually say that the playwright George S. Kaufman once lamented, "Everything I've ever said will be attributed to Dorothy Parker."

PRESS & MEDIA

Coverage That Kills

THE SOURCE: "Are News Reports of Suicide Contagious? A Stringent Test in Six U.S. Cities" by Daniel Romer, Patrick E. Jamieson, and Kathleen H. Jamieson, in *Journal of Communication*, June 2006.

IT'S OFTEN HARD TO SAY HOW strongly the news media affect the behavior of individuals, but in one instance the influence is surprisingly clear: Media coverage of suicides encourages more people to take their own lives.

A dozen studies point clearly in this direction, showing that front-page stories and those involving celebrities are most likely to motivate others to take their own lives. Yet each of these earlier studies had limitations, note Daniel

Romer, Patrick E. Jamieson, and Kathleen H. Jamieson, all researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. They took a close statistical look at the experience in six cities over a four-month period, aiming to sort out the influence of everything from local news broadcasts to soap operas and movies.

They found that media attention to suicides led to 21 additional deaths, or 2.5 percent of all such deaths in the six cities. The suicides occurred among the youngest and oldest age groups. People in the 25-to-44 age group were *less* likely to commit suicide

in the days after one was reported.

Not guilty of influencing suicides, say the authors, were national television news, movies, and soap operas. Coverage in local newspapers and news shows accounted for virtually all of the increase.

Social scientists who have studied the phenomenon aren't sure how to explain this "contagion effect." Some troubled people may identify with celebrities or others who kill themselves; some may feel less inhibited when public attention is focused on what is normally a socially proscribed act. The authors don't suggest that the news media stop reporting suicides, but journalists could "reduce the potential for suicidal imitation by downplaying the romantic or sensational aspect of suicide deaths as well as the implication that suicide resolves problems for the victim."