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On the Internet, Everyone is a Crypto-Fascist ...

Anyone who has spent any significant time on the Internet will recognize the deep and fundamental truth encapsulated in the economic principle commonly known as Godwin's Law. Godwin's Law, named after the anti-internet censorship advocate Mike Godwin, suggests that "as an online discussion thread grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches a certainty." An essential corollary to Godwin's Law is that once the specter of National Socialism has been invoked, any intelligent discussion on the main topic of that thread has effectively been rendered impossible.

On its surface, Godwin's Law is not an economic principle at all, but simply a clever articulation about the readily observable tendency of Internet-based discussions to degrade over time into vulgar shouting matches, ad hominem attacks, or off-topic conversations about celebrity gossip. But since economists have not been shy about repackaging their trite observations or truisms as mathematically describable economic "laws" of human behavior, neither shall I.¹

There are at least two ways to formulate the underlying economic principles neatly captured by Godwin's Law. The first, and most simplistic, is that the low cost of participation in any given online discussion, combined with the vast number of potential participants, means that, on the Internet, almost everything that can be said, will be said. According to this formulation, Godwin's Law is simply a special case of the more general law in which the probability of the particular thing-to-be-said in question (a comparison to Nazis, which is after all, a relatively popular rhetorical strategy) is relatively high, and social cost of saying it (because of the prevailing norm of pseudo-anonymity in most online discussions) is relatively low. In this sense, the online community simply represents the approximate, material realization of the proverbial infinite number of monkeys: just as classical

¹for example, Yochai Benkler, in his book *Coase's Penguin, or, Linux and the Nature of the Firm*, provides a mathematical formula for understanding why people choose to have sex: the expected reward of sex (R), Benkler argues, is equivalent to $R = Mt + H + SP$, where M = monetary rewards, H = intrinsic rewards (orgasm), and SP = social-psychological rewards. Reading this, I was mortified by own lack of quantitative rigor in approaching this particular decision-making dilemma.

probability theory argues that both groups will — eventually — collectively produce an exact facsimile of Hamlet, it suggests that, with even greater frequency, they will promulgate cheap rhetorical comparisons to Hitler.

Although Godwin's Law emphasizes the negative possibilities of this Internet equivalent of the Law of Large Numbers, the general principle captures what advocates of the open source approach to knowledge production believe most significant and unprecedented about the economics of cyberspace. Eric Raymond, in his widely-cited *Cathedral and the Bazaar*, provides the most common, positive formulation: "with many eyes," he suggests, "all bugs are shallow." By this he means that any task, no matter how difficult, time-consuming, or expensive (in this particular case, the identification and elimination of errors from complex software, such as operating systems), can eventually be solved simply by appealing to the massive universe of online citizens. This is the heart of open-source economics, and it is essentially an evolutionary model of development: simply by throwing a problem into the primordial soup of the Internet, giving it enough time, and making sure that enough "eyes" are aware of it, you will ultimately arrive at an "optimal" solution. You don't have to understand or explain why any particular individual might be willing to contribute to the solution — altruism, ego, obsession, whatever — you can simply trust that someone, somewhere, will have the relevant knowledge, expertise, and motivation. That the inherently teleological character of open source economics make it more akin to intelligent design than classical Darwinian evolution is rarely noted or mentioned.

The second, more sophisticated formula for representing Godwin's Law in economic terms would take into account the time dimension of the phenomenon. One of the important codicils to Godwin's Law is that it cannot be invoked deliberately — that is to say, one cannot unilaterally decide to shut down a conversation simply via an invidious comparison to mid-20th century fascism. It is only when the comparison is introduced accidentally, or organically, that the conversation ending implications of Godwin's Law become realized. In this sense, Godwin's Law captures the sense of instability, or rapid entropy, that defines most Internet-based discussion threads. Although such discussions often start out very passionately and attract a dedicated and enthusiastic following, their value diminishes rapidly with time, while simultaneously the relative ability of a Hitler reference to derail conversation increases. Again, to borrow from our economist friends, the discount rate of sustained discussion is extremely high in the cyberspace economy, and therefore speed, novelty, and sensationalism is encouraged. The positive interpretation of this is that Internet-based conversations "know" when they are over; by the time Godwin's Law is invoked, everything important that should be said has been said.

The more cynical interpretation is that the structure of Internet communications prevents anything but the most facile and superficial conversations.

It would be interesting to think further about the relationship between both readings of Godwin's Law and Michel Callon's argument about the performativity of economics. As Christopher Kelty has suggested (and Lawrence Lessig before him), the uniquely protean nature of cyberspace makes it a place in which the dual meaning of law — law as social construction, and law as fundamental description of the way the world works ($E = MC^2$) — are particularly intertwined, and perhaps indistinguishable.