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Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics may refer to:

- The phrase "[Lies, damned lies, and statistics](#)"
- An episode of *[The West Wing \(season 1\)](#)*

*This [disambiguation](#) page lists articles associated with the title **Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics**.*



If an [internal link](#) led you here, you may wish to change the link to point directly to the intended article.

Categories: [Disambiguation pages](#)

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Lies, damned lies, and statistics

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"**Lies, damned lies, and statistics**" is a phrase describing the persuasive power of numbers, particularly the use of [statistics](#) to bolster weak [arguments](#). It is also sometimes colloquially used to doubt statistics used to prove an opponent's point^[*by whom?*].

The term was popularised in the United States by [Mark Twain](#) (among others), who attributed it to the British Prime Minister [Benjamin Disraeli](#): "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics." However, the phrase is not found in any of Disraeli's works and the earliest known appearances were years after his death. Several other people have been listed as originators of the quote, and it is often erroneously attributed to Twain himself.^[1]

History [edit]

Mark Twain popularized the saying in *Chapters from My Autobiography*, published in the *North American Review* in 1906. "Figures often beguile me," he wrote, "particularly when I have the arranging of them myself; in which case the remark attributed to Disraeli would often apply with justice and force: 'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.'"^[2]

Alternative attributions include, among many others (for example [Walter Bagehot](#) and [Arthur James Balfour](#)) the radical English journalist and politician [Henry Du Pré Labouchère](#) (1831–1912), [Jervoise Athelstane Baines](#),^[3] and British politician and man of letters [Leonard H. Courtney](#), who used the phrase in 1895 and two years later became president of the [Royal Statistical Society](#). Courtney is quoted by [Baines \(1896\)](#) as attributing the phrase to a "wise statesman",^[4] but he may have been referring to future statesman rather than a past one.^[5]

The earliest instance of the phrase found in print dates to a letter written in the British newspaper *National Observer* on June 8, 1891, published June 13, 1891, p. 93(–94): NATIONAL PENSIONS [To the Editor of The National Observer] London, 8 June 1891 "Sir, —It has been wittily remarked that there are three kinds of falsehood: the first is a 'fib,' the second is a downright lie, and the third and most aggravated is statistics. It is on statistics and on the absence of statistics that the advocate of national pensions relies..." Later, in October 1891, as a query in *Notes and Queries*, the [pseudonymous](#) questioner, signing as "St Swithin", asked for the originator of the phrase, indicating common usage even at that date.^[5] The pseudonym has been attributed to [Eliza Gutch](#).^[6]

The [American Dialect Society](#) list archives include numerous posts by Stephen Goranson that cite research into uses soon after the above. They include:

- [Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke](#) (1843–1911) is reported twice in October 1891 to have used the phrase, without attributing it to others:

"Sir Charles Dilke [1843-1911] was saying the other day that false statements might be arranged according to their degree under three heads, fibs, lies, and statistics." *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, Monday, October 19, 1891

The Derby Mercury (Derby, England), October 21, 1891; Issue 9223 "Sir Charles Dilke and the Bishops" "A mass meeting of the slate quarry-men of Festiniog [Ffestiniog](#), Wales] was held Wednesday night [Oct. 14] to protest against certain dismissals from one of the quarries...." He [Dilke] observed that the speeches of the Bishops on the disestablishment question reminded him that there were three degrees of untruth--a fib, a lie, and statistics (Laughter)"

- The phrase, as noted by [Robert Giffen](#) in 1892, was a variation on a phrase about three types of unreliable witnesses, a liar, a damned liar, and an expert (*Economic Journal* 2 (6) (1892), 209-238, first paragraph; the paper was previously read at a meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science at Hobart in January 1892). 1892 Jan talk, June pub Robert Giffen (1837–1910, Walter Bagehot's assistant editor at *The Economist* 1868ff; 1882-4 President of the Statistical Society): "An old jest runs to the effect that there are three degrees of comparison among liars. There are liars, there are outrageous liars, and there are scientific experts. This has lately been adapted to throw dirt upon statistics. There are three degrees of comparison, it is said, in lying. There are lies, there are outrageous lies, and there are statistics."
- That phrase can be found in *Nature*, page 74 November 26, 1885: "A well-known lawyer, now a judge, once grouped witnesses into three classes: simple liars, damned liars, and experts. He did not mean that the expert uttered things which he knew to be untrue, but that by the emphasis which he laid on certain statements, and by what has been defined as a highly cultivated faculty of evasion, the effect was actually worse than if he had." ^[7]
- A minute of the [X Club](#) meeting held on 5 December 1885, recorded by [Thomas Henry Huxley](#), noted "Talked politics, scandal, and the three classes of witnesses—liars, d—d liars, and experts." Quoted in 1900 in [Leonard Huxley's](#) *The Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*.^{[8][9]}

Uses [\[edit\]](#)

The phrase has been used in a number of popular expositions, including:

- *Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics: The Manipulation of Public Opinion in America*, by Michael Wheeler ([W.W. Norton & Co.](#) 1976; [Dell](#) paperback 1978).
- *Quotes, Damned Quotes some of them to do with statistics* (1985), by John Bibby - an attempt to untangle the history of this quotation.
- *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists* (2001), by [University of Delaware sociologist](#) Joel Best ([ISBN 978-0520219786](#)).
- *How to Lie with Statistics* (1954) by [Darrell Huff](#).
- The essay *The Median Isn't the Message* by [Stephen Jay Gould](#) begins by repeating this quote. Gould explains how the statistic that [peritoneal mesothelioma](#), the form of cancer with which he was diagnosed in 1982, has a "median survival time of eight months" is misleading.^[10]

- "Lies, Damned Lies, and 'Fact Checking'"; a variation on the phrase in an article by columnist Mark Hemingway, regarding the citation of disputed evidence or even outright opinion as dispositive proof for an argument.^[11]
- "Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics" is episode 21 in the first season of NBC drama *The West Wing*.^[12]

References [edit]

- ↑ Best, Joel (2012), *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists*, University of California Press, p. 5, ISBN 9780520953512, "...usually attributed to Mark Twain or Benjamin Disraeli..."
- ↑ Mark Twain (1906-09-07). "Chapters from My Autobiography". *North American Review*. Project Gutenberg. Retrieved 2007-05-23.
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- ↑ Baines, J. A. (March 1896), "Parliamentary representation in England illustrated by the elections of 1892 and 1895", *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* **59** (1): 38–124, JSTOR 2979754. The quote is on p. 87.
- ↑ ^a ^b "Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics". University of York. Retrieved 2007-05-23.
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V · T · E

Misuse of statistics

[hide]

Circular analysis · Correlation does not imply causation · *How to Lie with Statistics* (1954) · Impression management · "Lies, damned lies, and statistics" · Misleading graph · Sampling bias

Categories: English phrases | Misuse of statistics | Mark Twain | Laymen and statistics | Benjamin Disraeli

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