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## More Lies About Poker

September 18, 2007 - 2:53am

It was Mark Twain who said, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics." Well, no--actually it was the British author and politician Benjamin Disraeli who came up with the line, which Twain quoted in his autobiography. Still, most people attribute it to Twain, because they can't be bothered to check the facts.



No matter who was first with the quip, it's still certainly relevant today. Every day we're bombarded with statistics that are carefully constructed to obscure the truth and confuse those who try to parse them. Not that many folks do much parsing--they blindly accept whatever numbers are splashed before them without considering the fact that those numbers might be misleading or even bogus.

We saw examples of blind statistical acceptance in two newspaper articles that appeared this past week. In the *San Jose Mercury Times* a piece titled "[Teens Turn to Poker For Profit](#)" mentioned a survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. As did a story in the *Fort Worth Star-Ledger* headlined "[Betting Their Lives](#)". Both used findings from that study to support the claim that online poker is becoming more prevalent among young Americans. From the *Star-Ledger*:

*"According to the National Annenberg (Pa.) Risk Survey of Youth, 11.6 percent of males 14-22 years of age reported playing cards weekly in 2006. That compares to 2 percent of women in that age group."*

And from the *Mercury-Times*:

*"A national survey last fall indicated that 8.9 percent of men ages 18 to 22 gamble online at least once a month. About 1 million young people - some as young as 14 - gamble on the Internet monthly, according to the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania."*

photo by flipchip/lasvegasvegas.com



*A young Dario Miniero was the overall chip leader after three days of the 2007 WSOP Main Event. 2007 was his second WSOP Main Event appearance*

Thinking back to the statistics courses I took in college and business school, "some" isn't a word that's considered especially useful. Are there 14-year-olds who have illicitly signed-on to online poker sites? Probably. Are there, maybe, a few 13-year-olds who figured out their big brother's password and played a few hands? Again, probably. Are these issues statistically significant?

Well, apparently not--see, I actually READ the report that the Annenberg Center issued, and on the very first page, right under the main title of "Card Playing Trend In Young People Starts to Diverge", comes the sub-title "First

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Signs of Decline in Youth Under 18". See, it turns out that card playing among young people is actually *decreasing*:

*"According to the latest results...the overall percentage of male youth ages 14 to 22 who reported playing cards for money on a weekly basis DROPPED (emphasis mine) to 11.6% in 2006 from 12.5% in 2005."*

Do you get the impression from the *Star-Ledger* story that FEWER young men between 14 and 22 are playing cards? Neither do I. The *Mercury-Times* piece says that, "About 1 million young people - some as young as 14 - gamble on the Internet monthly", without bothering to mention that over 70% of those "young people" are between the ages of 18-22. You know--adults. The kind who can vote, drive, and be shipped off to Iraq.

Anyone who actually READS the Annenberg Center report will come away with a very different view of gambling trends that you get in these two articles. Here are a few additional quotes from the report:

*"Among male youth ages 14 to 17, those who reported some type of gambling on a weekly basis and who reported at least one symptom of problem gambling dropped from 13.9% in 2005 to 6.7% in 2006."*

*"Monthly rates of gambling stable among older male youth but declining in younger youth".*

*"For males under the age of 18, weekly use of Internet gambling declined from 2.6% in 2005 to 0% in 2006"*

ZERO percent! How does that square with the breathless announcement in the *Mercury-Times* that "About 1 million young people - some as young as 14 - gamble on the Internet monthly"? Simple--it doesn't.

The Annenberg Center report does identify an increase in problem gambling symptoms in men between the ages of 18-22. But it takes rather a broad view of what a "problem gambling symptom" is. Here's their definition:

*"If respondents had engaged in one or more specific gambling activities in an average month, they were asked four questions about difficulties related to their gambling. These items asked whether in the past year the respondent had (a) "often found yourself thinking about gambling," (b) "ever needed to gamble with more and more money to get the excitement you want," (c) "ever spent more than you had planned on gambling," and (d) "ever felt bad or fed up when trying to cut down or stop gambling?"*

Considering how many high school and college kids play fantasy football and wonder if they should start Philip Rivers or Jay Cutler this week (my own personal dilemma), saying that "thinking about gambling" is a symptom of a problem seems a bit much. As is brooding over a hand where your Aces got cracked by 7-8 offsuit.

It's disturbing and discouraging that the mainstream media continues to treat online poker as some malevolent specter preying on our young people, when it seems like our young people are doing just fine. Not only that, it also seems that online poker sites were doing a pretty good job of keeping underage players from accessing them--and let's not forget, this survey was conducted BEFORE the UIGEA was passed. It didn't take a draconian law passed without debate in the dead of night to reduce underage gambling to zero percent--that had already happened.

I actually [wrote about this subject a few months ago](#) in response to a piece written by the anti-gaming Senator John Kyl, and here's what I said at the end:

*"Are there legitimate issues surrounding online gaming (underage gamblers, addiction, etc) that need to be addressed? Certainly--so let's address them. Prohibition is not a viable option. Passing a law without*

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*open debate is not how a democracy is supposed to work. As citizens, more so than as poker players, it's important that our lawmakers know that WE understand the issues, too. And that we expect our rights to be respected, and not stripped away in the guise of "what's best for us". WE should be the ones making those decisions."*

It's depressing that we're still seeing stories in our papers that make online poker out to be pure evil. The *Mercury-Times* piece at least allows a young player to give his side of the story, but of course it's "balanced" out with misleading statistics. Poker, and poker players, deserve better than that.

photo by [flipchip/lasvegasvegas.com](http://flipchip/lasvegasvegas.com)



*James Mackey is youngest player to win a World Series of Poker event, a few days after his 21st birthday*

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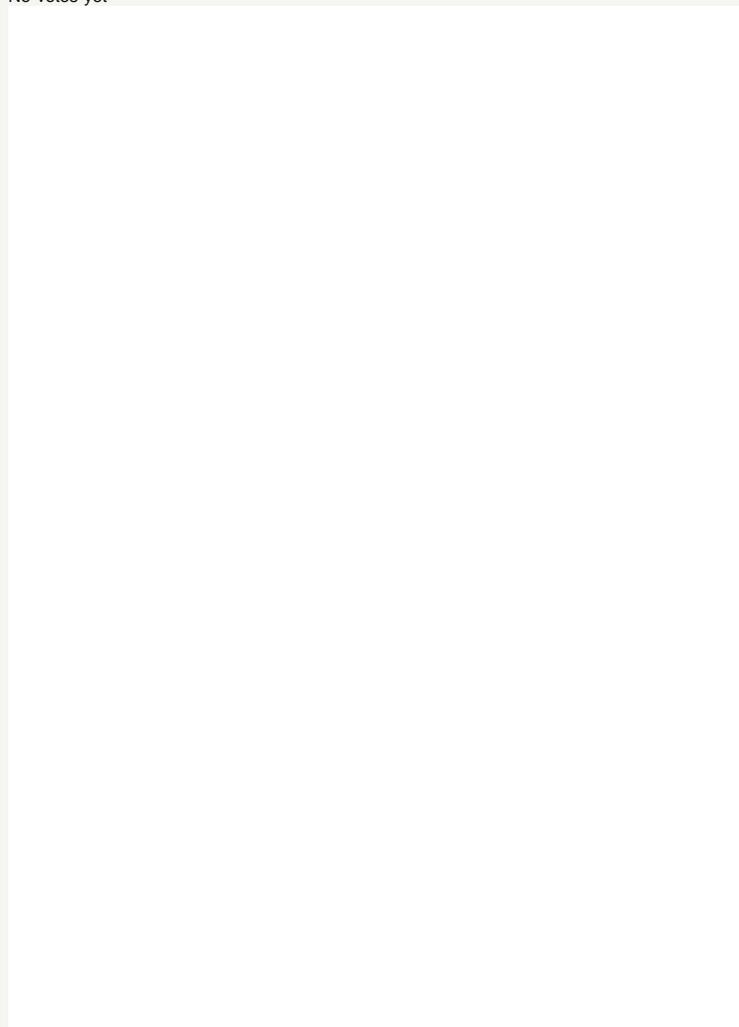
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