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## THE USE AND ABUSE OF BERNARD SHAW ON THE INTERNET

This paper aims to define the scope of Bernard Shaw's notoriety today by commenting on the way his views have been discussed on the Internet, particularly on YouTube channel. The starting point for our discussion is the fact that videos featuring Shaw provide the public with merely a collage of his opinions, which should not be discussed, let alone judged, before being placed in their respective contexts. Since Shaw's 'worship' of Hitler and Stalin as able men, as well as his approval of eugenics, have caused a great stir among the anonymous people who post their comments on YouTube, the paper focuses on Shaw's views on war, the Jews, the racial question, capital punishment, history and responsibility, as written about in his plays, prefaces, and essays. Based on the works of prominent media theorists and critics such as Noam Chomsky and Neil Postman, and with emphasis on McLuhan's claim that 'medium is the message', the paper determines the way in which the Internet media *per se* have shaped the content and meaning of Shaw's writings and speeches.

**Keywords:** Bernard Shaw, Internet media, YouTube, eugenics, Hitler, the Jews, anti-Semitism

Twenty years ago, at a Harvard University conference on the future of television, Rubén Blades is reported to have said: "I think we risk becoming the best-informed society that ever died of ignorance", while Professor W. Russell Neuman correctly predicted that the world's favorite future pastime wasn't going to be television, but an entirely new medium. (Stuart 1993: 19). Blades' claim, as it happens, refers more to the nature of this new medium, known as the Internet, than on television, and points to the various possibilities of using this powerful tool in order to, paradoxically, keep people in ignorance while providing them with boundless information. During the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan, the great media prophet, had recognized the power of electronic media to subtly and constantly alter our perceptual senses. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan (1964: 19-20) argued that people had extended their central nervous system itself in a "global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned" so that they inevitably participate in the consequences of their every action. The result is a *global-sized village*, a new human environment gradually created by new technology, where Man now lives and is "returning to the values and perceptions of a preliterate culture" (i), since electric speed mingles "the nonliterate with semiliterate and the postliterate" (31).

If, as McLuhan claimed, the clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools of conversation (Postman 1986: 8), then the word *conversation* could be used metaphorically, to denote “not only speech, but all techniques and technologies that permit people of a particular culture to exchange messages” (7). In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman views *conversation* as a metaphor, so that on a more global level, all culture becomes conversation, affected by different forms of media, which “favor particular kinds of content and therefore are capable of taking command of a culture” (8). John Berger put forward a similar idea in his groundbreaking BBC television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972), when he argued that “perspective centers everything on the eye of the beholder” (Berger 2012: 1:24). In reality, a human eye can only be in one place at a time, but the invention of camera changed that reality (1:51) and made images and words available to numerous people at the same time, which in turn led to the *demystification of art*. The invention of camera, he continues, changed “not only what we see, but how we see it” (3:10). Although Berger spoke of paintings, his description of paintings as “absolutely still, silent, soundless”, as corridors connecting the moment they represent with the moment at which you are looking at them (13:20), can be applied to literature as well. Like paintings, the meaning of literature has become transmittable, lending itself to easy manipulation when filtered through camera lenses. Thus literature, if taken out of context and presented as a mere collage of details, can be used to make arguments that are radically different from their original meaning, as is the case with paintings (13:42-13:59).

In view of all this, the purpose of this paper is to show that the Internet, as today’s favorite pastime and today’s most used education tool, has the power to shape and has shaped many opinions and sayings of George Bernard Shaw. Richard Dietrich (2012) once noticed that if Shaw were alive today, he would be all over the Internet, claiming it as the mind of the Life Force in its most dynamic form. Dead or alive, Mr. Shaw is indeed all over the Internet, but whether the Internet would meet his expectations if he were alive is a question worth musing over.

To illustrate this with an example: when *George Bernard Shaw* is typed in Google Search, the most-used search engine on the World Wide Web, the fourth search result in the drop-down list connects his name to Islam. By clicking this option, one gets about 4,860,000 search results, of which the third leads to the site *goodreads* (n.d.), where a user recommends a book that Shaw allegedly wrote, titled *The Genuine Islam*: “This book is really rare to find maybe because of its content where Shaw really put his effort to express and spread the genuine Islam to the western culture. But most predictable that it was not so favorable for the western elite culture till today”. Thankfully, a more responsible user proclaims the book a fake and informs other users that “The Genuine Islam” was a periodical published in Singapore. In 1936, “The Interview between George Bernard Shaw & Muhammad Abdul Aleem

Siddiqui Al-Qaderi<sup>1</sup> (which took place in April, 1935) was published in the periodical. However, the appalling fact is that the most quoted part of that interview – “If any religion had the chance of ruling over England, nay Europe, within the next hundred years, it could be Islam ... I have always held the religion of Muhammad in high estimation because of its wonderful vitality. It is the only religion which appears to me to possess the assimilating capacity to changing phase of existence, which can make itself appeal to every age.” – *does not actually appear in the interview itself*. Rachel Leow, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University, gives an in-depth analysis of the abuse of Shaw’s views on Islam on her blog, stressing that the Muslim Websites conveniently choose only those remarks made by Shaw which appeal to their religion while disregarding the bigger picture (Leow 2008).

In order to show other ways of abusing Shaw’s art on the Internet, this paper focuses on a YouTube video clip entitled “George Bernard Shaw Defends Hitler, Mass Murder”, which has been viewed almost 150, 000 times and has over a thousand comments posted below it, most of which describe Shaw as a psychopath who passionately advocated genocide all his life.

Before the advent of the Internet, television could not enable us to engage in a dialogue with other television viewers. As Berger (2012: 29:52) predicted, a dialogue between users of the media could become possible in the modern media of communication only if access to television was extended beyond its narrow limits at the time. The Internet has made this possible, but at high cost. Although today YouTube users can reply to one another, the person who posts a video online can still control and use for his/her own purposes the video in question. Berger advises us to consider this kind of arrangement, but be skeptical of it. Bernard Shaw was one such skeptic when it came to television and films. Despite feeling enthusiastic about films and predicting that “the cinema would be an invention of even more revolutionary significance than printing” (Holroyd 1998: 704), Shaw at first exhibited deep distrust of films and refused to give rights to his plays to motion picture companies, regardless of generous offers (Ibid). Shaw felt that the *screen’s silence* (705) would turn him into a *dumb dramatist* (704), and consequently kill his plays. The appearance of the sound film promised a brighter future for the cinema and enabled films to tell their stories both to the literate and the illiterate (704-5).

Shaw himself was keen on the idea of appearing on Movietone newsreels and in screen interviews (705), and in a newsreel interview dating from March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1931, he reopened the capital punishment controversy by declaring the following:

You must all know half a dozen people, at least, who are no use in this world. Who are more trouble than they are worth. Just put them there and say, Sir or Madam, now will you be kind enough to justify your existence? If you can’t justify your existence, if you’re not pulling your weight in the social boat, if you’re not producing as much as you consume, or perhaps a little more, then, clearly,

1 Available from <http://tavernkeepers.com/the-interview-between-george-bernard-shaw-muhammad-abdul-aleem-siddiqui-al-qaderi-april-17-1935/>.

we cannot use the big organization of our society for the purpose of keeping you alive because your life does not benefit us, and it can't be of very much use to yourself. (stclymer 2008: 0:31-1:04)<sup>2</sup>

This speech appears near the beginning of the video clip “George Bernard Shaw Defends Hitler, Mass Murder”, posted on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008, with 149,375 views and 1, 198 comments posted as a reply to it<sup>3</sup>. Prior to the speech, the video explains that Shaw supported Hitler in the mass media by pointing to the notorious lecture that Shaw gave before the Fabian Society in London, “The Politics of Unpolitical Animals”, parts of which were published in *The New York Times* (December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1933). In the speech, Shaw describes Hitler as a very remarkable and able man, whose facial expression of intense resentment appealed to him immediately (Shaw 1933). However, the video fails to mention that part of the speech in which Shaw, as someone who believed in cross fertilization, disagrees with Hitler when it comes to producing a pure-bred race of any people. Hitler, as the “victim of a bad biology and of a bogus ethnology”, didn't realize that instead of driving the Jews out, he should have made them marry the Germans, says Shaw (Ibid). Next, one hears a Shavian quote from *The Listener* (February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1934): “I appeal to the chemists to discover a humane gas that will kill instantly and painlessly. Deadly by all means, but humane, not cruel” (stclymer 2008: 1:37-1:47). The quote is followed by disturbing images of emaciated Nazi victims who were killed in Nazi concentration camps with precisely the same gas that Shaw called for ten years earlier. Finally, as if to justify Shaw, the video ends with the following remark: “It must be said, though, that Bernard Shaw, as well as the left in general, fundamentally opposed Nazism because Hitler had distorted Marxism beyond recognition” (2:20-2:31). The remark ends in a dubious, witty and satirical tone, characteristic of Shaw himself: “Gassing people based on their nationality was absolutely inexcusable. The selection should be based on class. Hitler got it all wrong. Absolutely different people needed to be killed” (2:32-2:46).

With this claim the video ends, while the uploader, who calls himself/herself “stclymer”, draws the following conclusions about Bernard Shaw:

1. Shaw was a vocal supporter of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini
2. Shaw supported mass killing of the unproductive
3. Shaw advocated creating a Zyklon-B type gas to allow more “humane” mass killing.

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2 In 1948, seventeen years after the controversial interview on capital punishment, Bernard Shaw reinstated his opinion on the necessity of effectively dealing with criminals. In an interview for *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1948), he stated: “But the ungovernables, the ferocious, the conscienceless, the idiots, the self-centered myops and morons, what of them? Do not punish them. Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill them” (Shaw 1948). Taken thus out of context, this quote can indeed be taken to describe a callous and insensitive person whose solution for social problems was to exterminate whole classes of society. Unfortunately, with the rise of the Internet era, Shavian quotes and speeches, as a rule, are being commented and interpreted in this fashion.

3 Data retrieved on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013.

Furthermore, the poster welcomes anyone to object to the director's arguments on these points on the condition that they provide support for their objections, while urging people to read at least section one of Shaw's preface to *On the Rocks* as it contains the gist of Shaw's views on extermination.

The video clip itself was taken from *The Soviet Story* (2008), a disconcerting documentary which exposes the atrocities committed by the Soviet Union starting from the Great Famine in Ukraine (1932-33), during which 7 million people died, all the way to the impact of the Soviet legacy on modern day Europe<sup>4</sup>. Throughout the film, frequent comparisons are made between communism and Nazism, stressing that they both shared the Marxist wish to create a new man because both didn't "agree with human nature as it is" (Snore 2008: 12:26-12:30). Shaw was also accused of the latter by G. K. Chesterton (1909: 62), who wrote that "he who had laid all the blame on ideals, set up the most impossible of all ideals, the ideal of a new creature". According to Chesterton, Shaw decided to abandon humanity with all its limitations and advocate progress for its own sake (66). On the practical side, Chesterton declares Shaw the most humane man alive, but in this sense he deems him utterly inhumane (64).

Nevertheless, Chesterton's view of Shaw as one of the heretics of the modern age may be seen as a positive critique of a man who was not afraid to share his contentious views. The notion of the *Übermensch*, popularized by Nietzsche, was bound to be abused because of its controversial nature. Hence, in *The Soviet Story*, Stalin's decision to literally kill all the Ukrainians by taking away all food supplies from Ukraine and giving them to the Nazis is described as a "distorted vision of communist architects" (Snore 2008: 11:14-11:17), whereas Hitler's misuse of the idea of National Socialism is ascribed to his fascination with Marx and Engels, who "publicly advocated racial extermination" (16:33-16:36), as is illustrated with the following statements of Karl Marx: "The classes and the races, too weak to master the new conditions of life, must give way. [...] They must "perish in the revolutionary holocaust"" (16:03-16:16).

The part of Shaw's speech which calls for the justification of one's existence recalls Marx and is often taken to advocate literal extermination of the weak and unproductive social classes<sup>5</sup>. In fact, Shaw's belief in the possibility

4 For more information, see: <http://www.sovietstory.com/about-the-film/>

5 To understand fully the undertone of Shavian speeches, the manner in which Shaw always addressed his public must be considered first. Patricia Pugh dealt with this issue in her article "Bernard Shaw, Imperialist", in which she explained that "when lecturing, Shaw habitually threw out an axiom designed to shock and annoy" (1991: 102). In the "Justify your existence" speech, Shaw begins with the following axiom: "I don't want to punish anybody, but there are an extraordinary number of people whom I want to kill (Славрос 2010: 1:54 1:59)". This axiom, incidentally, does not appear in the movie, most likely because its sarcastic tone points to the sheer absurdity of believing that Shaw would literally want to kill certain people. Next, Pugh (1991: 102) argues that in his speeches Shaw would goad the audience "to discard hidebound theories and prejudices" by "offering a series of paradoxes" so as to force them to "examine the proposition from the opposite point of view". By the end of his lecture, the audience should realize that "what his original statement had implied to

of Progress with a capital P was so profound that he supported eugenics, which has now become a byword for the Nazi regime. According to Shaw, if a society wants to produce the best men and women, which is the basic idea of eugenics, it needs *socialism* to ensure that there are no social or cultural barriers to any two people in a society who want to get married and have children (Gahan 2006: 206). In this *intersection* of Shaw's Fabian socialism and Creative Evolution, Peter Gahan sees the cornerstone of Shaw's political philosophy and biological critique and adds that Shaw did not advocate selective breeding on any other basis (Ibid)<sup>6</sup>.

But judging from the comments posted below the video clip "George Bernard Shaw Defends Hitler, Mass Murder", anyone who is not familiar with the life and work of Bernard Shaw would conclude the opposite. Although a number of comments have been removed or marked as spam, most of the remaining comments exhibit hate speech, not to mention some basic spelling and grammar errors, as well as fundamental unfamiliarity with Shaw's works. These are just some of the reasons why Robert X. Cringely (2012) described YouTube comments as the *online cesspool* which needs to be drained, while Lev Grossman (2006) bitterly wrote that some YouTube comments make one weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, not to mention the vulgarity and the blatant hatred. In 2008, Matthew Moore announced for *The Telegraph* that an effort was being made to introduce a new piece of software that would block offensive and illiterate posts since Internet users were getting upset by the absurdity of many YouTube comments. Moore also described YouTube channel itself as notorious for "hosting to some of the most confrontational and ill-formed comment exchanges on the Internet" (Moore 2008).

To this day, however, this problem has not been effectively dealt with. In fact, the comments for the video in question fit all these descriptions, with most of them containing obscene words while trying to impose the users' point of view as they develop into discussions on anti-Semitism, religion, Nazism, American president Barack Obama, 9/11, American education system, world politics. An illustration of this is a recent exchange of comments between the user with the nickname *HateMeButImRight*, who defends Shaw by proclaiming his views satirical, and *FrustratedGarrett*, a thorough anti-Semite judging by his comments, in whose opinion Shaw was in earnest when condemning the Jews, simply because such an interpretation reinforces the user's own views on the Jewish question:

*HateMeButImRight*: What a bunch of b\*\*\*\*\*. In the same breath you title your work "Shaw Defends Hitler", then within the video itself the narrator states that

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them was not what it really meant to him", and "after a certain amount of discussion, the audience would depart, refreshed by having been forced into some lateral thinking and at least three-quarters convinced that what the great man had said was right" (102-103). However, this explanation of the methods of Shavian lecturing does not necessarily mean that Shaw was not in earnest when proposing some drastic measures in order to cure humanity.

6 This is also the crucial point of disagreement between Shaw's and Hitler's support of eugenics, because Hitler, unlike Shaw, promoted eugenics as means of improving and creating a pure-bred German race by exterminating the *inferior* races.



Shaw did not support Hitler / Nazism or the Nazi movement. Typical YouTube Generation c\*\*\*. Cherry-picking bits and pieces of a story to create a dramatic looking YT clip.

*FrustratedGarrett*: Do you even know what you're talking about piece of s\*\*\*? Making s\*\*\* up without any sense of shame. George Bernard Shaw was atheist, and so was Hitler. The quote in this misinforming video is taken from a whole statement made by Shaw talking about the Jewish parasitic behavior in the West ... Indeed Jews are parasites, and they are the enemies of the West. Jews have become the masters, owners and rulers in the West, and they have damaged the West badly with Feminism, multiculturalism... (stclymer 2008)<sup>7</sup>

As if to seal his/her argument, *FrustratedGarrett* quotes the following: "This is the real enemy, the invader from the East, the Druze, the ruffian, the oriental parasite; in a word the Jew" - George Bernard Shaw" (Ibid). Internet pages are overflowed with this quote, which originally comes from *London Morning Post* (December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1925). But if *FrustratedGarrett* had looked a bit deeper, he/she would have found a far more discriminatory Shavian quote on the Jews in the preface to *The Millionairess* (1936): "Now no doubt Jews are most obnoxious creatures. Any competent historian or psycho-analyst can bring a mass of incontrovertible evidence to prove that it would have been better for the world if the Jews had never existed" (Shaw 2003: 11).

Left as it is, the quote unequivocally demonstrates Bernard Shaw's anti-Semitism. However, immediately before this statement, which is clearly satirical, Shaw condemns "Hitler's throwing Einstein to the anti-Semite wolves" as an appalling breach of cultural faith. According to Shaw, Hitler's anti-Semitism was a "craze, a complex ... a hole in his armour", which proved that a dominant individual shouldn't be allowed to become a despot. Shaw's own solution to prevent such situations was democracy and communism. His displeasure with the way the world had been run stemmed from the distorted vision of democracy put forward by the world's leaders. In his preface to *The Apple Cart* (1928), Shaw (1960: 16) deconstructed Lincoln's 'poetic' definition of democracy as being "government of the people for the people by the people" because he vehemently disagreed with the third article of this definition, since democracy, Shaw was adamant, "cannot be government by the people: it can only be government by the consent of the governed" (19). In this preface Shaw already speaks on behalf of capable people who were born to be leaders, but nonetheless he emphasizes the fact that despite the need for a good government, people should control their leaders, since "no man is good enough to be another man's master" (23). Hence, in *The Millionaires*, Shaw's message to dominators is: "By all means dominate: it is up to us to so order our institutions that you shall not oppress us" (Shaw 2003: 18).

<sup>7</sup> All YouTube comments which are quoted in this paper were copied verbatim from the original source, complete with any erroneous spelling or grammar. The only change refers to what the author of the paper considers *obscene words*, which have been covered with asterisks.

Given all this, Shaw's description of the Jews as obnoxious creatures continues in the following manner: "But I, as an Irishman, can, with patriotic relish, demonstrate the same of the English. Also of the Irish ... We all live in glasshouses. Is it wise to throw stones at the Jews? Is it wise to throw stones at all?" (11). It is strange to think that the man who wrote this has been called a monster by the people who have not read a word of what he wrote, as is evident in the comment of *Eliteranger14*: "George bernard shaw was a monster. You don't freaking kill our own people for not working. They suffer poverty. That's their fault. But you dont kill em. For christ sake" (stclymer 2008). What is more, this user evidently believes that the montage of separate footages in this YouTube video is literally true, without showing any skepticism whatsoever towards what has been said or done with it. This is a sure sign that the person in question is not at all qualified to comment on the opinions of Bernard Shaw. On the other hand, some users straightforwardly and proudly reveal that they have not even heard of Shaw, as is the case with *Daniel Messias*, who even calls him "Shawn" instead of Shaw:

You, who read Shawn seems to be much more idiot than me, because did not know who this butcher was. As said above (and we heard his confession here) he DEFENDED Hitler, advocated killing those who can't justify their existence and called for the development of lethal gas 10 years before the national socialists in Germany did exactly that. And only idiots can defend killers... Bernard Shawn was a son of a b\*\*\*\*! Burn in the hell< satan!. (Ibid)

Finally, there is a marked tendency for a few *core-participants* to dominate the discussion, whether by getting into a fierce dispute between themselves, or simply by expressing their own views, usually in a frantic and illiterate manner, by posting a series of successive comments. Such is, for example, the user *Ger-Rus88JhreNSRAF*, who, seemingly in a fit of rage, posted as many as 38 comments in close succession, although none of these make much sense, except for the user himself/herself, as these two randomly chosen comments show:

1. Unlike @ George Shaw; Hitler was actually Socialist -- in his policies, speeches, works, laws, thoughts, etc...Bernard Shaw, was a stereotypical western pseudo-intellectual Capitalist Liberal-Bourgeois 'Anti/Post-Marxist' Neo-Leftist who in attempts to enslave/control our @ Germanic White Working-Class Peoples for the Bourgeois -- exploited-used @ Socialism, in all ways one can, to mimicry his true Capitalist self. Shaw was a hardcore Capitalist/Zionist -- Beck, Maddow, Limbaugh, Mathews, etc

2. George Bernard Shaw defends Hitler??? You sir are a complete f\*\*\*\*\* moron!!! Shaw hated Hitler as he hated Marx, Engels, Stalin, Lenin, Wagner, Hegel, and Mussolini...Shaw was a 'Pro-British/Monarchist/Capitalist/Imperialist' and 'Self/Anti-Race Human-Hating/Irish-hating' f\*\*\*\*\* criminally-insane senile genocidal liberal bourgeoisie pseudo-intellectual sociopath-psychopath, homosexual, hypocrite, etc, who spent most his life in mental-asylums and diagnosed certified lunatic like his fellow Talmudic predecessor @ Marquis de Sade... (Ibid)



In view of all this, one must consider whether YouTube comments have any critical and educational potential. It has been noted that they “give a voice to the oppressed in their struggle from below” (Neumayer 2012: 57), but at the same time commenting on the Internet has enabled people to hide their identity and in doing so has empowered them to express their views more freely, often in style and form not suited to be read by younger generations, and in some more extreme cases not appropriate to be read by anyone. Hence, instead of concluding the discussion of the abuse of Bernard Shaw on the Internet, this paper will (and should) pose more questions than it will answer: Is anyone to blame for the current state of user-comments on the Internet? Does the nature of the Internet media foster illiteracy and ignorance, despite the fact that their original purpose was to promote education and knowledge? If so, the future for younger generations does not seem bright. Given the extent of the abuse of Shaw’s art on the Internet, chances are that people who come across Bernard Shaw’s name for the first time online will be misled. What course of action, if any, should Shavian scholars take to prevent this from happening and to stop the spread of misinformation? Should they react, help their fellow *global villagers* and drain the *online cesspool*, or leave it as it is?

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**УПОТРЕБА И ЗЛОУПОТРЕБА БЕРНАРДА ШОА НА  
 ИНТЕРНЕТУ**

Резиме

Овај рад има циљ да одреди у којој је мери англо-ирски драмски писац и нобеловац Бернард Шо озлоглашен због начина на који се његови уметнички и политички ставови данас коментаришу на интернету, нарочито на YouTube каналу. У раду се полази од чињенице да видео клипови у којима се појављује Шо представљају само колаже његових ставова, о којима не би требало дискутовати, а још мање о њима судити, пре него што се сагледају у њима одговарајућим контекстима. Будући да су Шоово „обожаване“ Хитлера и Стаљина као способних људи и његово одобравање еугенике, извор бројних полемика у редовима анонимних људи који коментаришу видео клипове на YouTube каналу, у раду је нагласак стављен на оно што је Бернард Шо заиста рекао о рату, Јеврејима, расном питању, смртној казни, историји и одговорности и другим сличним темама у својим комадима, предговорима и есејима. На основу поставки из дела великих теоретичара и критичара медија, као што су Ноам Чомски и Нил Постман, уз осврт на тврдњу Маршала Меклуана „медиј је порука“, рад разоткрива начине на који интернет медији *per se* обликују садржај и значење Шоових писаних дела и говора.

**Кључне речи:** Бернард Шо, интернет медији, YouTube, еугеника, Хитлер, Јевреји, антисемитизам

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