



American Expression E2760 Cunningham's Law

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Cunningham's Law is an observation about how people behave when exchanging information on the internet. It is stated as, "The best way to get the right answer on the Internet is not to ask a question; it's to post the wrong answer." The idea is that people may ignore a sincere request for help, yet quickly respond when they notice something they believe is incorrect. Correcting errors can be more motivating than answering questions.

The law is named after Ward Cunningham, a computer programmer who created the first wiki. However, Cunningham did not formulate the saying himself. The expression was coined by Steven McGeady, who attributed the underlying observation to Cunningham. It became popular online communities because it humorously captured an experience: a poorly answered question might receive little attention, while an obviously mistaken claim can attract numerous corrections almost immediately.

Cunningham's Law works partly because people have a desire to demonstrate knowledge and correct misinformation. When someone asks, "What causes lightning?" readers may assume that another person will provide the answer. But if someone writes, "Lightning occurs because clouds collide with airplanes," readers may feel compelled to intervene. The incorrect statement creates urgency and gives respondents a specific claim to challenge, making participation easier and more engaging. This tendency reflects how correction can provide people with a clear purpose for participation.

The principle can be used as a strategy for obtaining information. A person who does not know the correct solution might post a tentative or intentionally inaccurate answer, hoping that experts will correct it. For example, someone troubleshooting a computer problem could suggest an incorrect cause and receive responses explaining the cause. Nevertheless, spreading false information can be misleading, irritating, or unethical.

Cunningham's Law is better understood as a humorous social observation than as a rule. People do not always correct false statements, and questions frequently receive answers without provocation. The effect depends on the community, subject, and visibility of the post. In technical forums, where participants enjoy solving problems and displaying expertise, corrections may appear quickly. In less active communities, both questions and incorrect statements may simply remain unanswered.

The law illustrates an important feature of online communication: disagreement generates more engagement than uncertainty. A question leaves room for many possible responses, whereas an incorrect assertion gives readers a target. This helps explain why controversial or inaccurate statements can generate discussions. However, high engagement does not guarantee accurate information. Several people may repeat the same mistake, so corrections should be evaluated using reliable evidence and trustworthy sources.

In conclusion, Cunningham's Law describes the tendency for people to respond more to an incorrect statement than to a request for information. Its popularity comes from the recognizable psychology behind it: people enjoy correcting errors, demonstrating expertise, and resolving disagreement. Although intentionally posting false claims can produce useful corrections, the practice carries risks and should not replace honest questioning. The broader lesson is that online communities are highly responsive to claims that invite correction, but responsible communication requires accuracy, evidence, and good faith.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do people often feel more motivated to correct a wrong answer than to answer a question?
2. How does Cunningham's Law explain human behavior in online discussions?
3. Do you think intentionally posting a wrong answer to get the correct information is ethical? Why or why not?
4. In what situations could Cunningham's Law be useful, and when could it cause problems?
5. How has social media made Cunningham's Law more relevant in modern communication?