Round Doesn't Square : A Question About The Post-Sandy Hook NRA Membership "Surge"

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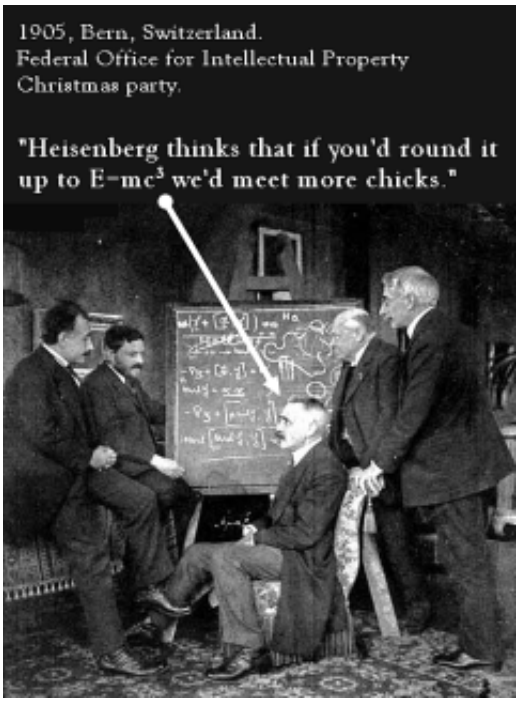

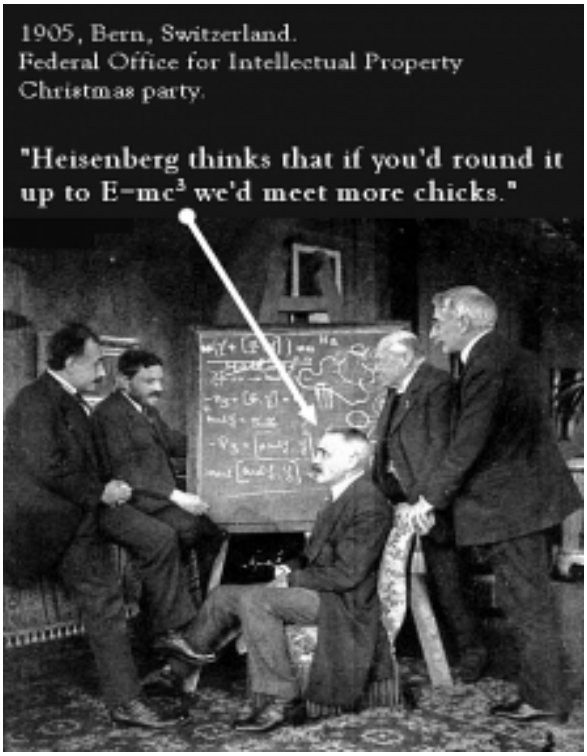

The NRA reported on January 10 that their membership gained by 100,000 in "the past 18

days" according to POLITICO's Mike Allen.[1. NRA MEMBERSHIP SURGES, Mike Allen, *POLITICO*, Jan. 10, 2012] The Sandy Hook massacre occurred on December 14, 2012. The NRA spokesperson did not indicate whether NRA counted only business days and/or whether it ommited holidays (Dec. 25 and Jan. 1), it simply noted "days." However, today, January 10th, is the 28th day since the Sandy Hook massacre. Of those 28, eight have been weekends, and two holidays. So a little bit of arithmetic would account fo the 18 days they cite. That's kosher.

An ambiguity remains about their membership numbers, though. The NRA spokesperson indicated that the 100,000 member increase was a *net increase*, not just the number of new memberships they logged. According to Allen, he was told that the organization had gone from 4.1 million to 4.2 million since December 14th. And it's here where the reported numbers may camoflague something far less significant. I'm betting that the NRA's new members since the Sandy Hook massacre are less, perhaps far less, than their report of "100,000." Did they simply lie? Well, I wouldn't put it past them, but, in an opaque way, they might have been telling the truth. How? By rounding their numbers.

Why would they do that? Let's see. . . Rounding is used by most everyone, and it's usually harmless in the course of daily living. "I've got about $5.00 in my checking account," is an example from my life. I say this when I'm bragging about the income I earn from this blog, although deep in my heart I know I have only $4.50 in my account. I round that $4.50 up to $5.00. Who, I ask, is hurt?

Where this can actually cause problems is when rounding misleads. Political parties, businesses, churches, they use rounding whenever the actual numbers don't tell the story the organization wishes to emphasize. So they round up their numbers or round them down to tell the story that presents a certain truth, but not the entire truth. Both kinds of rounding, up and down, seem to be at work here in the NRA's membership data.

Round Doesn't Square With Facts

Always suspect a number presented by an organization to prove a point when it appears to have bee rounded. We all round numbers, and were forced to do so as elementary schoolers: "Please round this number to the nearest 100th: 9.689339." The answer is 9.69, and this is *not* the actual number. In some instances, like chemical reactions, adding 9.69 grams of one chemical to a more accurately measured amount of another chemical can cause unpleasant and memorable reactions. Most high school chemistry students learn this quickly via singed eyebrows. So rounding can be dangerous in many environs, and needs to be well matched to its proposed usage.

The NRA likely used rounding to exaggerate its membership "surge." Whenever we see or hear a total membership number reported like "4.2 million" as NRA did, we ought to sit up and take notice. And when a spokesperson claims exactly "100,000 new members," that too is a yellow

flag for caution. Why? We rarely find exact numbers in human enterprise, although, as philosophers will warn us, exact numbers by themselves have no meaning whatever, they are no different from any other number. But, how many membership periods result in *exactly* ten to the power of 2, 3, 4, or 5 new members?

So the NRA going from *exactly* 4.1 million members to *exactly* 4.2 members in 28 days is unlikely. Those numbers almost surely were rounded, both up for the 4.2 million number, and down for the 4.1 millions members on board on December 14, 2012. I mean really, why not say "four million two hundred eighty three thousand" total NRA members instead? Rounding in this case obscures a much less impressive membership gain, that's why. Rounding can be used to tell far less than the truth, yet it allows the claim of truthfulness. Doesn't Colbert call that "truthiness"?

Here's how the NRA could have done this:

- The number I use below are numbers I chose as an example, many other sets of numbers would also demonstrate the rounding that could have occurred.
- So, let's suppose that on December 14, 2012, the NRA had 4,090,000 registered, paid-up members. Rounding up to the nearest one hundred thousand gives you the number reported to POLITICO's Mike Allen, 4.1 million members.
- And let's suppose that 28 days later (not counting weekends and holidays), on the morning of January 10, 2014, the NRA had 4,150,000 registered and paid-up members. Rounding up to the nearest one hundred thousand results in their reported number of "4.2 million" total members.
- Their reported *rounded* membership gain, though, is correct: 4.2 million - 4.1 million = 100,000 new members. It's debatable whether they're lying, but failing to disclosing their rounding favors the story they want to push: NRA is on a growth surge even after the Sandy Hook massacre. So don't mess with us!

But here's the *real* gain in membership in the example I've set out above:

- 4,150,000 total members as of 01-10-2013
- - 4,090,000 members on 12-14-2012
- = 60,000 new members in 18 days.
- In real terms, the *unrounded* membership gain is just 40% of the new members the NRA would have you believe. See, rounding can be dangerous.

(By the way, I emailed NRA's press contact this afternoon and asked if they would provide the actual numbers they used to arrive at their results. I'm sure I'll hear back from them soon . . .)

In any event, remember this:

Numbers don't round *themselves*, *people* round numbers.