

This website is an electronic hyper-text version of a scholarly review. While normal reviews compare, contrast, and critique books and other publications, this essay will do the same, but with publications available on the World Wide Web. Critiquing websites for their scholarly credibility is relatively new. Guidelines and criteria have been established for decades on how to properly dissect and evaluate publications such as books and articles. Such a generally accepted guideline is not available for web page reviews. Instead, this essay will critique the selection of web sites using a set of criteria based on discussions and readings from class.

This essay will evaluate and critique a number of websites that focus on the development of the V2 rocket, the ballistic missile developed by Nazi Germany during WWII, and Wernher von Braun's involvement therein. While the number of sites touching on this particular point in history are numerous, this essay will focus on those sites who pay particular attention to the theme. Four websites have been chosen that represent a varying range of research and design. These factors will be applied to a list of criteria that will attempt to measure how "scholarly" the site is, as well as define where the site was helpful, useful, or could use some improvement.

The following sites have been chosen:

1. FlyingBombsAndRockets.com (<http://flyingbombsandrockets.com>)

Although the navigation and layout is somewhat choppy, this site provides a neat glimpse into the lives of the South Englanders who were on the receiving end of the V-2 rockets.

2. V2Rocket.com (<http://v2rocket.com>)

From the web site itself "This site will try to give you an accurate account of the design, production and combat deployment of this weapon during World War 2. **In an attempt to build a historical record, this website will exclude any political agendas. This website does not support any ideology of Nazi Germany.** "

### 3. Marshall Space Flight Center History Office

(<http://history.msfc.nasa.gov/vonbraun/index.html>)

The Marshall Space Flight Center History website hosted by NASA is a great resource for information regarding all aspects of space flight relating to its campus in Huntsville, Alabama. A section dedicated to von Braun is very user friendly and quite informative.

### 4. National Air and Space Museum (<http://www.nasm.si.edu/exhibitions/gal114/gal114.htm>)

The National Air and Space Museum's Space Race website, hosted by the Smithsonian Institute, is quite a shocking disappointment. While it is very navigable, the lack of substance and inferior quality of design leave much to be desired. This site briefly covers the V-2 and von Braun, as its main focus is the race to space.

Present day situations have a way of linking to the past in surprising and sometimes odd ways. Representative of this is the link between the United States' ability to put men on the moon and Nazi scientists. It was at the outbreak of the Second World War that a small group of physicists were able to obtain a contract with the Nazi Luftwaffe (Air Force) and Heere (Army) for the development and implementation of long range ballistic missiles. The experiments and inventions of this elite Nazi coalition was the creation of the first ballistic missile used against a long distance target. As the Allied forces moved into Germany following the end of WWII, the United States exported many of the missiles the Germans had created, and gave the scientists and physicists the option to immigrate to the U.S. where they would be employed in the development of U.S. military rocketry. One of the fundamental scientists for developing the Nazi rockets was Dr. Wernher von Braun. It was also in large part because of his involvement that the United States was able to build the rockets capable of putting astronauts on the moon. The great irony is found in that some of the people who brought the US the sophisticated

rocketry used during the 'Space Race' were the same people we were fighting against just 20 years before and trying to stop the same experiments. How did the US justify the use of former enemies in their quest for dominance in space? How did the scientists, physicists, and engineers justify their passion for rocketry with the knowledge that their inventions were being used to kill citizens in enemy countries?

While using the above questions as a starting point for evaluating the chosen sites, this essay will also discuss two main criteria needed to classify a scholarly web site. Guidelines, rubrics, and criteria for printed historical media have been around for quite some time. Such a classification is not yet available for web sites, yet there are certain print related measurements against which a web site can be judged to determine the quality of it's scholarly content.<sup>1</sup> New criteria are also necessary to accurately place a web site in the arena of scholarly or not. Like Occom's razor, the following is a list of items against which the sites will be checked for simplicity of design and accuracy of scholarship. The list is broken into two sections, each dealing with, what I feel, are the two main aspects to a web site; content and design.

## Content

Based on Research

Peer Reviewed

Publicly Accessible

Presents a Conflict or Argument

Archive or Not

## Design

Commodity

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<sup>1</sup>See *Journal of American History* Review Guidelines (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/jah> ) for more information on possible criteria to use while critiquing potential scholarly web sites.

Firmness

Delight

The first section, content, deals with the scholarly nature of the web site. How does it compare to its print counterpart if it exists, or comparably so if it does not exist? Of first importance for any scholarly work, whether in print or electronic format, is that it be based on research. This is probably the crux of all scholarly work; it is based on research of facts and the findings of others. Secondly, central to the development of scholarly work is the review process of fellow researchers and those knowledgeable on the subject. Thirdly, inherent in the format of scholarly work portrayed on the World Wide Web is the accessibility of the information to the public. Whereas books and journals are available in libraries, limited to the copies available at hand, the World Wide Web provides, ideally, an unending supply of information, restricted only by ones access to a computer. Fourthly, many would argue that a historical perspective is not worth telling at best, or not scholarly at least, with out an argument. A conflict provides the "What's the point?" of the work. Web pages create an unique situation not commonly found with printed scholarship. Finally, A web site has the ability to blend a simple archive, a collection of historical artifacts, with the interpretive work that are the result of scholarly research using archives. The line dividing archive and scholarly work is thin and gray.

If the content is the first element in the equation to equal a good scholarly web site, then the design is the second. If either element in the equation is missing, the result is less poor scholarship.

**good content + good design = good website**

When any amount of time is spent learning how to create a web site, the developer quickly sees there is more to it than just typing a few lines of code. Building a web site is just that, building,

creating, and designing. It incorporates many aspects from the world of fine arts. It evokes a sense of the construction world. A site is "Under Construction" when not fully completed; those who make the sites are "Developers." As with architecture, a web page design needs the fulfillment of three aspects; commodity, firmness, and delight.

**Commodity:** What kind of commodity, or usability, does the site have? Is the site easy to navigate, is the site intuitive, does the visitor know what to expect? How well does the site use the availability of web based media (video/audio/still images/etc)?

**Firmness:** Is the site firm, or well built? Does the navigation lead you to the correct page or are there broken links? Who is supporting the site, is there a hidden agenda? Will the site remain on the Web for a considerable amount of time, or will funding cease and close down the site? With this point we can see perhaps the greatest advantage that books have over work on the Web. Once a book is published and printed, it is available for as long as the paper exists. Books printed hundreds of years ago are still available. Web pages are continuously dependent on a source of income for their availability. Someone must pay for the server it resides on and the domain name for it to be accessible. If any number of variables fail to support the work, then the research is lost.

**Delight:** Is the site a delight to look at, is it visually pleasing? How well chosen is the color scheme? Is the layout consistent and provide an easy way to find the information?

With the criteria laid out, it is now time to venture into the critique of the chosen web sites. The sites are grouped into two categories, personal/individual sites and government sites. A greater amount of quality should, and will, be expected from the government sponsored sites. With a wider degree of financial and staff support, the government sites should be able to

produce a better quality experience.

We shall look at the personal sites first. These consist of FlyingBombsAndRockets.com and V2Rocket.com.

FlyingBombsAndRockets is a particularly interesting site. Of all the sites reviewed, this is the only site created and maintained by someone from England. Of more interest, is the heritage Stephen Henden brings to the site. His family lived in the area where the V-2 rockets were aimed at, and survived the terror of the Doodlebugs, as they were known. The home page, while lacking in design, clearly states the sites purpose. "The aim of this site is to detail those [bombings] that occurred in South London, as well as a selection of major incidents across the capital."<sup>2</sup> Based on personal research with survivors and relying on several texts, Henden provides accurate and detailed information regarding the V-2 bombings of South London. Two books are cited as being instrumental in providing background and factual reference for the content on FlyingBombsAndRockets.<sup>3</sup> Satisfied with the information from the texts but left with a great desire to know more Henden spent a great deal of time looking into the number of casualties, the location of each bomb impact, and the extent of damage caused by each bomb.

Henden's argument is nestled at the bottom of the first page of the V-1 story; the attacks on London must never be forgotten. He makes a great effort with numerous details and stories gathered for many locations where the bombs fell. Henden also includes an incident log for several areas, detailing the street locations, time, date, and number of fatalities.

Where the content of the site is seemingly stable, the design needs much improvement. It is uncertain when the site was created or last maintained, for there is no indication of copyright date and a single image was found dating to 2004. The navigation is mainly found on a side

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2 <http://www.flyingbombsandroockets.com/index.html>

3 These books are "Doodlebugs and Rockets" by Bob Ogley and "The Doodlebugs" by Norman Longstaff.  
[http://www.flyingbombsandroockets.com/Intro\\_page.html](http://www.flyingbombsandroockets.com/Intro_page.html)

menu, but links to the "Next Feature" are found at the bottom of each page. These links keep in sync with the side menu for the most part, but often skip an item, as if a page was added at a later time, thus taking the links out of sequence. Several pages also employ a completely different style of layout, creating a moment of confusion, until one returns to the main turquoise background. The front page is a jumble of links, images, and blocks of text, with advertisement placed in awkward spots. Overall, Hendon should be commemorated on the depth and accuracy of his content, but lacks in design.

V2Rocket.com is another personal site, this one claiming to be an unbiased archive of information about the rocket, although the content doesn't really support this claim. In the article about Wernher von Braun, the text mentions von Braun's involvement in a non-partial way, but concludes with statements that seem to clear him from all blame and responsibility, stating that his greatest crime was simply that of succeeding through the only possible means, or that his crime was the err of complacency shared with many others. The home page shows a directory style list of available topics on the site. Scrolling down further on the long home page shows the authors book and DVD for sell, some other links of interest, and his favorite German beer hall. One great attribute this site incorporates into the essay-like pages, are links to audio recordings of von Braun, a page devoted to video and still images of the rockets, and specifications for model hobbyists.

In regards to the design, the site could use some work. Most of the pages fall under two different styles, a long page with content or list of items and a design containing content on the left and blank space on the right. There are links on the bottom of each sub-page, but only the 'Home' button works. This site is not quite scholarship, and needs improvement in the design area.

The Marshall Space Flight Center's History Office puts together the cleanest site regarding von Braun and the V-2. The MSFC in Huntsville, Alabama was the home of von Braun as he worked with NASA on getting astronauts into space and putting them on the moon. Such close ties to von Braun lessens the likelihood of a non biased approach to von Braun's participation with the V-2. True to the assumption, MSFC tries to abdicate any responsibility for interpretation of von Braun's activities by stating that "scholars are still reassessing his role in these controversial activities," and then providing a link to excerpts from a book produced for NASA by two University of Huntsville professors. The page claims the ability to view the complete text of the book, but the link is hauntingly dead. While the content is there mainly to present von Braun as a hero of the space age, it is beneficial to the beginning researcher and provides a great stepping stone into von Braun's life and involvement with the V-2.

What the site lacks in unbiased content, it makes up for in a stellar (pun intended) design. The flow of the site is intuitive, clean, easy on the eyes, and well laid out. The content is constantly placed between a never changing header on top and an equally stolid menu bar on the right. Nothing less would be expected from a government agency with deep pockets.

The Smithsonian Institutes' National Air and Space Museum website celebrating the "Space Race" is a dismal design failure compared to all but the FlyingBombsAndRockets web site. With such a great presence in the historical world, it should not be hard for the Museum to put up a decent looking web site. The dark blue background with orange text is great for my High School alma mater, but is hardly fitting for a professional historical web site. The navigation is made easy with a menu bar on the right side and below the main content. In the section relating to the V-2, the supporting text for the many pictures is sparse and glossy. This NASM site seems to be just a glorified time line.

In conclusion, let us first review the two questions which were to remain with us throughout our review of the web sites: How did the US justify their use of former enemy scientists? and How were the German scientists able to reconcile the destructive purposes of their creations? Only a few sites give input into these questions. Each has their own bias, whether as a descendant of victims, enthusiastic hobbyist, or governmental participant, which skew the interpretation of Wernher von Braun's participation in the V-2 project. As previously mentioned, V2Rocket.com is the only site to clearly come out with an answer to these questions. A conclusion to be drawn from this observation is that a website's representation of a historical experience is not too much unlike the printed counterpart; total objectivity is not achievable. As a further observation, the ability to incorporate interactive and different forms of media went mostly unused. This may be from a lack of quantity, yet a government official as von Braun came to be, certainly has left a video and audio trail more extensive than those shown by the above sites. All in all the quality of content among the government sites was decent, with the quality of design either extremely lacking or superbly excellent. As pertaining to the private sites, the quality of content was better than expected, but the lack of design shows the limitation of a privately funded venture. As the World Wide Web matures, it is surely to become as common a place for quality scholarship as the current printed media.