



Bullshit

Disrespect for the concept of truth erodes the foundations of any worthy culture.

BACK IN 2005, Princeton University Press published an engaging essay by Harry G. Frankfurt, an emeritus professor of moral philosophy. The title of the little book, which spent many weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, was *On Bullshit*.

Frankfurt began his essay by observing that although bullshit is a particularly salient feature of our culture, it gets almost zero serious attention.

Bullshit is one of the many occupants of the space between truth and lies. Among the others are nonsense and codswallop, bunkum, hooey, humbug, baffle-gab, chicanery and duplicity. Some are mean-spirited. Some are fun. Most are on the slope between highly irritating and largely harmless.

In this bunch, bullshit avoids attention because it is not obviously nasty and because it is too common and too easily accommodated to be immediately worrisome. Frankfurt says it is nevertheless deeply insidious because it undermines the expectation and practice of truthfulness.

Frankfurt defines bullshit as speech (or writing or even certain actions) that aims to influence perceptions and choices, but has no real concern for truth. The particulars of what is said may be true or untrue, but for the bullshitter that is irrelevant. Bullshit aims only to serve an immediate end – to puff up the reputation of the speaker and/or to promote a product or a position. That is all.

Advertising is mostly bullshit – intentional misrepresentation by exaggeration

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and omission. But so is much of what passes for debate these days. Even reasoned deliberation often takes the form of various stakeholders arguing one-sidedly for their favoured positions. The underlying model is decision making in an essentially adversarial forum where each player takes a stand and argues for it. Compromises may be made, alliances negotiated and agreements reached. It is even possible that some mutual learning and appreciation will emerge. But the focus is on winning, not understanding.

Environmentalists who claim to know for sure that we have only 10 years to save the planet are bullshitting. So are cornucopians who claim that technological progress will save us. Neither of them is seeking to present a well-founded summary of the full story. Their focus is persuasion, not truth. And in their world, the concept of truth fades.

Bullshit is not a recent invention. Over two millennia ago, Plato condemned rhetoric as manipulative oratory, and yet it continued to be a focus of education until the 20th century. The old bullshit served established elites and the many conflicting versions of the One True Faith, enforced by burning heretics and enslaving unbelievers.

The old bullshit survives today in the intolerant fundamentalisms of overwhelmed people grasping for certainty.

In a big, complex, diverse and dynamic world, the simple faiths of the Tea Parties and Talibans require massive ignorance. But the old bullshit is probably still less dangerous than the exaggerations and omissions of the post-modern bullshitters serving narrow interests. Their battles for influence based on swayed opinion threaten to bury the struggle for truthful communication, perhaps even truthful understanding.

More power, then, to the merry bands of bullshit exposers – the Yes Men, Adbusters and Ecobunkers – who have been busily poking spanners in the spinworks. More power as well to the independent scientists, non-aligned journalists and collaborative researchers who have been quietly delivering reliable reports on the state of life on our planet.

Most deserving of celebration, however, are the activists who refuse to stoop. There is nothing easier today than to step down into the trough and fight one-sided bullshit with other-sided bullshit. Maybe sometimes the green poop will prevail, but the smell remains and the substance is corrosive.

In his other short book, *On Truth*, Harry Frankfurt notes that establishing and sustaining an advanced culture is impossible if we are debilitated by error or ignorance. Bullshit is an agent of debilitation. The only viable response is to rise above it. 🦋

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