

Where We Are

It's (Not) All Bullshit

James Fredal

When Harry Frankfurt's sleeper hit *On Bullshit* came out, it helped legitimized a whole new kind of academic work on the misuse of language. Unfortunately, because Frankfurt is a philosopher and unlettered in rhetoric, he presented a skewed understanding of his topic. Frankfurt believes, as have many philosophers since Plato, that the job of language is to represent reality faithfully. Either one's words correspond to the facts as they should, or they do not. Prior to Frankfurt, one could misrepresent the facts in one of two ways: unintentionally (as error) or intentionally (as lying). His achievement was to describe this third kind of failure, bullshit, which doesn't care about the truth at all and is therefore "worse than lying." This discovery was less profound than Austin's realization that words do things, but it did give humble bullshit quite a boost.

But as rhetoricians know, he got language wrong. It isn't for representing reality, it is for social engagement. Both Isocrates and Cicero tell stories of how the first humans were worse off than animals: they had no hide, no paws, no talons, no claws, nothing to protect themselves, and they were perishing. Then they were given measured language, *logos*, and with this tool, individuals were able to understand one another, to recognize and regard each other, come together, cooperate, form bonds, frame laws, establish societies, and live in peace and security (Cicero *On Invention* §I.ii.2-3, p. 6-7; Isocrates *Antidosis* §253-255, p. 327). This is myth, not archeology, but like other sophistic narratives, it reveals a profound truth. Long before language was domesticated and taught to mime "the facts," it did things. It was, as Burke says, both social tool and symbolic act.

Frankfurt's essay illustrates how misguided is our collective focus on lying, and on not caring enough about the truth, as the cardinal sin of language. In many, perhaps most instances, the central moral and epistemic problem with a speech or an argument is not that we deliberately lie or misrepresent reality. The problem is that while seeming simply to tell the truth (or not), we misuse this social tool called language. We select some "facts" and ignore others, we put these facts in one set of terms rather than another, we use resources not available to others, we manipulate conventions of politeness and decorum to quash another's perspective, we deploy media and technology to monopolize air space. And we make things: we create loyalties and hatreds, ingroups and outgroups, heroes and monsters, pedestals and boundaries. We affirm some

and shame or negate others, and we often do this to exalt “us” and to ignore or diminish “them.” In these and a thousand other ways, speakers—especially elite, wealthy, privileged or powerful speakers—misuse language for their own ends, to dehumanize others and empower themselves. What’s worse than lying is using symbolic action to dominate others and then selectively masking or subtly flaunting this domination (Fredal). Lots of bullshit transpires without words ever being spoken.

It isn’t that lying isn’t wrong or important. But speaking deceptively is only one kind of symbolic offense, only one way that language goes wrong, and it is often not the most important one. Postman provides a helpful corrective: bullshit, he says, is when someone uses language to treat other people in ways that you don’t approve of. Postman relativized the idea, suggesting that everyone produces what someone will call bullshit. This is true of course, but the subjective quality of bullshit does not mean that we shouldn’t press forward with rhetorically informed definitions, applications and analyses of bullshit, and especially of its culturally important sources, modes, and varieties.

But it’s not just bullshit anymore. Frankfurt’s essay was just one wave on a scholarly tide of attention to a range of other forms of language misuse both creative and destructive. A collective term is needed that can easily refer to all of these forms. For now, I’ll use “bull” for want of anything better. The list, certainly incomplete, includes bullshit, but also hoaxes, humbug, hypocrisy, demagoguery, doublespeak, doxing, dog-whistles, eichmannism, fake news, phoniness, phishing, forging, satire, skaz, parody, parafiction, pretense, propaganda, projection, bluffing, bullying, butterfly attacks, mansplaining, misinformation, trolling, shaming, chain trading, imposture, epistemic injustice, cons, conspiracy theories, alternative facts, astroturfing, and gaslighting on top of the full spectrum of cognitive biases revealed by cognitive psychology, all thriving in the media-rich soil of chauvinism, populism, and anti-intellectual revanchism. Unfortunately, our terminology remains largely colloquial, ambiguous, and in need of analysis and pruning. Many terms overlap. What ties the list together is not that they all involve some form of deception, though most probably do, but that they all manage the permeable boundary between language and power, either to point it out or to exploit it.

As a result of the Nixon White House, the Vietnam war, the anti-war and civil rights movements, the Pentagon Papers, and the Watergate scandal, rhetorical theory shifted toward the political. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1972) chided Forbes Hill for ignoring the glaring deficiencies in Nixon’s “Vietnamization” speech; Wander (1983) accused rhetoric of being ideological. That era today seems quaint, but it may serve as an example for our times. The Trump White House, Russian election interference, extortion in Ukraine, QAnon, COVID-19 misinformation, the Boogaloo boys and the Black Lives Matter

movement might catalyze a similar shift toward rhetorical interest in all forms of bull, bestowing upon Frankfurt a halo of prescience. With apologies to Churchill, never has so much been shoveled at so many by so few.

Our era moves toward a precipice and a bridge linking bull to fascism. Four features stand out, differentiating this from prior ages:

1. There are greater volumes and varieties of media-fueled bull coming from more sources higher up the institutional, bureaucratic, and corporate ladders. We see dozens of new breeds contributing to an explosion of instances. The examples are as numerous as they are obvious: Senate leader Mitch McConnell's refusal to advance a late-term Obama Supreme Court candidate before rushing to appoint a late-term Trump candidate, Trump's claims of voter fraud while encouraging his supporters to commit voter fraud, Bill Barr's preemptive mischaracterization of the Mueller report, Mike Pompeo's address to the RNC against the rules of his own agency, the incitement to violence that passes for patriotism on Fox News.
2. Bull is now more brazenly produced, more thinly veiled and easily disproved. Assertions widely known or easily seen to be false or self-serving are made and repeated. Little effort is expended in hiding or managing bull so that it is consistent, plausible, or seems evidence-based. No one tries to avoid the appearance that federal agencies are acting in response to Trump's tweets or that those tweets aren't informed by Fox News. "What need we fear who knows it," says Lady MacBeth, "when none can call our power to account?"¹
3. We see more complex interactions among different types of bull, over time, through multiple forms of social media, for layered purposes, with multiple audiences, and with compound effects. An astroturfed conspiracy theory on social media is traded up the chain to a political candidate, linked to theories of a national hoax, falsely tied to a famous progressive billionaire, given credence by a gaslighting television network and amplified by bullshit tweets, all built on top of a solid foundation of lies, and fueled by a toxic mix of anti-science contempt for all those who disagree, in order to distract from widespread corruption. Analysis can no longer proceed on the basis of individual categories of language abuse.
4. An increasingly widespread and symmetrical cynicism, similar to what is seen in conspiracy theorizing, that sees both sides of the political spectrum accusing the other of the same or comparable discursive sins. A central feature of conspiracy theorizing is its penchant for imitating the practices and methods of the groups that

they attack. Conspiracy theorists use elaborate footnotes and citations to criticize mainstream academic scholarship, they justify the need for secrecy in unmasking mysterious “insiders,” and they demand total and unbending loyalty in their fight against the mindless obedience of the enemy. In their naïve adherence to a black and white moral universe, they accuse the “sheeple” of criminal naiveté. Currently, each half of the population of the U.S. considers the other half to be either duped by bull or engaged in its wholesale manufacture. Both sides can’t be right.

The current political age has seen virtually every known form of bull proliferate, such that whole areas of discourse are now dominated by them. One might be forgiven for suspecting that the naively sincere word had gone extinct. We will need new rhetorical tools for its examination, tools that can do justice to its depredations and work against it.

Notes

1. Spoken by Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 1.

Works Cited

- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard UP, 1975.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. 1950. U of California P, 1969.
- Cicero. *On Invention*. Trans. H. M. Hubbell. Harvard UP.
- Frankfurt, Harry. *On Bullshit*. Princeton UP, 2005.
- Fredal, James. “Rhetoric and Bullshit.” *College English*, vol. 73, no. 3, 2011, pp. 243–59.
- Isocrates. “Antidosis.” *Isocrates*, translated by George Nolin. Harvard UP, 1982, pp. 179–365.
- Kohrs-Campbell, Karlyn. “Conventional Wisdom, Traditional Form—A Rejoinder,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 58, no. 4, 1972, pp. 451–54.
- Postman, Neil. “Bullshit and the Art of Crap-Detection.” Paper delivered at the National Council of Teachers of English. Nov. 28, 1969, Washington D.C. Retrieved from <https://www.josieholford.com/bullshit-and-the-art-of-crap-detection/>
- Wander, Philip. “The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism” *Central States Speech Journal*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1983, pp. 1–18.