

On Bullshit

Taken from Princeton Professor
Harry Frankfurt

[Buy the book ...](#)

What do we mean by “bullshit”?

- Bullshit is commonly employed in situations where truth and accuracy are far less important than the ability to achieve a suitable response in the audience.
- Such a response is the gaining of popularity or favour (often needed in politics, religion or advertising).
- It is not at all uncommon to hear of people "bullshitting" a job interview, or attributing their performance in an examination to their ability to bullshit.
- Bullshitting walks the line between extemporaneous speaking and lying outright.




What the professor says ...

- “One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit.”
- “Everyone knows this.”
- “Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted.”
- “Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it.”
- A lot of these people are, though, quite wrong.
- How do you assess your own bullshit-spotting ability?



Distinctions

- Bullshitting involves a kind of bluff. It is closer to bluffing, surely, than to telling a lie.
- Lying and bluffing are both modes of misrepresentation or deception.
- The liar is essentially someone who deliberately promulgates a falsehood.
- Unlike plain lying, however, bluffing is more especially a matter not of falsity but of fakery.



*Never tell a lie when you
can bullshit your way
through. – Eric Ambler*

Why?



Bullshit Artists?

- The liar is concerned with truth-values. In order to invent a lie at all, he must think he knows what is true.
- A person who undertakes to bullshit his way through has much more freedom and access to creativity. It is more expansive and independent, with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play.
- This is less a matter of craft than of art.
- Hence the familiar notion of the “bullshit artist.”
- We like bullshit artists more than we do good liars. (*A big mistake*, says your instructor.)



What are they up to???

- Bullshitters attempt to deceive us about their enterprise.
- Their distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way they misrepresent what they are up to.
- They use language to obfuscate (cloud up, hide) not to reveal.
- Like magicians who guide your eyes away from the trick with their wand and hand movements, bullshit artists guide your mind away from their intentions with their improvising verbal movements.



When to lie, when to bullshit

- The liar hides that he is attempting to lead us away from the truth.
- The bullshitter hides the fact that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him.
- The bullshitter's intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it. It is to conceal his wishes.
- Conceal them from YOU.
- It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth.
- Producing bullshit requires no such conviction.



When do you bullshit?

- When telling the truth would reveal your ignorance. (Prof says we're expected to speak or have settled opinions without knowing what we're talking about. **True?**)
- When you require that your audience have confidence in you.
- Hence the close parallel between bullshit artist and con-artist.
- Ask yourself not "what should I think?" but "*what does this person want me to do?*"
- *Bullshit Generator for Office Initiatives*



Let's listen to the man himself ...



Relevance to Professional Communications?

- You are deluged by unclear language in arenas of persuasion.
- Where money is involved, so is “snow.”
- What to look for:
 - ✓ *Speed (emergency deadlines)*
 - ✓ *Concealment*
 - ✓ *Emotion*
 - ✓ *Signs (but not true shows) of goodwill*
 - ✓ *Change of the subject (when you try to pin them down)*
 - ✓ *Language/narrative you can't understand (but believe you should be able to understand, owing to the artist's tone)*