

Aaron Weddle*

Performative Communication & Bullshit as Compelling Aesthetic

Abstract

In this paper, I use the work of Harry Frankfurt and Jason Stanley to explain why bullshit works so effectively, especially in politics. I use Stanley's conceptions of knowledge-how to posit a theory of communication, as well as the roles of communication and how communication is received. I elaborate on bullshit as concept, and how it is communicated in a way to garner the trust of the listener through convincing performance and aesthetic.

Keywords

Bullshit, Trust, Performance, Aesthetics, Communication

Introduction

In the preface to *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche (2005) writes that "...the very things that want to keep quiet are *made to speak out...*" (2005, 155). I want to propose that part of what rings out is *bullshit*, but to identify how it works, I will need to treat it both as constitutive of language, and as an attitude. Harry Frankfurt (2005) discusses the relationship between bullshit and politics in *On Bullshit*, with emphasis on bullshit as an attitude of the speaker.¹ While this is an important characteristic of bullshit, I am concerned

* State University of New York at Binghamton, USA
Email: weddleaaron1@gmail.com

¹ For example, his remark that in politics and advertising: "in these realms there are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who—with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth—dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right" (Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 22-23).

more with what makes bullshit so effective. I will argue here that the reason we can accept or even *believe* this bullshit is because of *trust*, but ultimately trust (and trusting bullshit) is a feature of how we communicate.² Further, I will show through an analysis of the relationship between bullshit and trust, that bullshit is largely performative, and trusting bullshit is largely an effect of crafting a compelling aesthetic, or rather a compelling attitude.

To frame it in Nietzsche's terms, things that are made to be quiet do "speak out;" but the way these things speak out, and whether we trust them is a function of language. For this paper, I would like preliminarily to assert that there are things which are true. This carries a lot of epistemological baggage, so I would like to use "true" in a colloquial sense. Namely, there are everyday situations in which we can ascertain that something either does or does not follow in each context.³ However, we still cannot positively identify in every case what is true and what is false; that is because we are in a time of post-certainty,⁴ and not post-truth as some authors have argued. That is, there are statements which are true or have truth-value, but it becomes increasingly difficult to determine *what* and *who* to believe. First, I will briefly argue against post-truth. Second, I will provide a few examples of what we might consider statements with truth-value in a colloquial sense.⁵ Then, I will examine the implications these trivial and not-so-trivial accounts of truth have: both regarding trust, and regarding political rhetoric and promises. Finally, I will incorporate the work of Jason Stanley, in conjunction with Harry Frankfurt, to posit what features of language might be responsible for bullshit to function as communicative, and how this performative attitude towards truth can be so compelling.

² For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing more on the communicative aspects of bullshit, and less on *why* we trust things that we might recognize as bullshit. While this is an important consideration, it is secondary to the act of communicating bullshit. Further, the mode of communication is constitutive of *why* we trust propositions we believe to be bullshit.

³ As I am writing this I would assert that the lights are on, my computer is on, I have the document open on my desktop, etc. For the time being, I would like to avoid the aforementioned "epistemological baggage" of determining absolute truths; that is not the focus on the immediate paper. The muddling of what is "true" is a necessary feature here.

⁴ I would like to thank Professor Bat Ami Bar-On (1948-2020) for this useful distinction.

⁵ I am not concerning myself here with the variety of epistemological accounts of what may or may not be *true*. Instead, my examples will rely on what we might colloquially refer to as true or false statements, to point out the element of *trust* that exists as a background condition, as well as the consequences the truth or falsehood of each statement bears. Or, to put it in Hegel's (1977) terms: "To know something falsely, means that there is a disparity between knowledge and its Substance." However, the liar does not "know something falsely," but rather, they *purport something to be false* with knowledge of what is true, but more about that later. (1977, 22-23).

1.1. Why not Post-Truth?

In Lee McIntyre's *Post-Truth*, he asserts that "one gets the sense that post-truth is not so much a claim that truth *does not exist* as that *facts are subordinate to our political point of view.*" (McIntyre, 2018, 11)⁶. In other words, we take things as facts based on who or what we trust. I can accept bullshit as true so long as what I take to be facts are subordinate to where my trust lies. This is why we are not post-truth, but rather post-certainty. In the absence of access to hard facts (and even with hard facts), we may trust someone or something that makes statements antithetical to what is *true*. Part of the reason I am taking for granted that things have truth-value is a useful remark that Frankfurt (2005) makes about truth. He says (regarding society) that: "How could it possibly flourish, or even survive, without knowing enough about relevant facts to pursue its ambitions successfully and to cope prudently and effectively with its problems?" (2005, 16). So, facts⁷ ground progress in an important way. Given this observation, I want to turn my attention to what we might consider "colloquial truths," and further, how language establishes a relationship in these propositions.

1.2. Colloquial "Truths"

I want to start my discussion of truth by providing three examples of what we might consider "true" statements,⁸ in the ordinary everyday sense. They are as follows:

⁶ A useful example is found in the article "Conspiracy Theories Can't Be Stopped" from FiveThirtyEight, written by Koerth-Baker (2019). One passage stands out from an interview with Joseph Uscinski: "Summoning—and demonizing—the belief in conspiracies can also have political consequences. "During the Bush Administration, the left was going fucking bonkers ... about 9/11 and Halliburton and Cheney and Blackwater and all this stuff," Uscinski said. "As soon as Obama won they didn't give a shit about any of that stuff anymore. They did not care. It was politically and socially inert." In turn, conspiracy theories about Obama flourished on the right. Uscinski said he is frustrated by this tendency for partisans to build up massive conspiracy infrastructures when they are out of power, only to develop a sudden amnesia and deep concern about the conspiracy mongering behavior of the other side once power is restored" (2019).

⁷ Returning to Fn. 3, I am relying more on the idea that there are *true* things, rather than the idea that truth and falsehood are hard, determined concepts. See more below.

⁸ By "true" statements in this colloquial sense, I mean simply that the statements have a perceived "truth-value" according to the situation in which they occur, or to borrow from Frankfurt's account of truth, they have a certain utility that would be lost without a certain fact of the matter. See *On Truth* for more on this.

Ex. 1. Between two friends: “It is true that I owe you five dollars, since you bought me a sandwich.”

Ex. 2. Employee/Employer: “It is true that you’ve worked hard for the company, so I will give you a raise.”

Ex. 3. Electrician to Co-worker: “It is true that I turned off the power for that line.”⁹

All these examples assert that something is *true*. However, the third example is the weightiest. If it is not true that the other electrician turned off the power, the co-worker could die from electric shock. If the electrician’s co-worker trusts the electrician, then they will go ahead and operate on the line; if they are skeptical or do not trust the electrician, then they will double-check whether the power is turned off (probably wise regardless, given the gravity of the situation). Importantly though, I am working on the assertion that there is a “truth of the matter”¹⁰ here; the electricity is either on or off, I either owe you five dollars or I do not, and so on. Notice that our relationship with each other also affects the degree to which we trust.¹¹ I am much more likely to trust a close friend to return something of value to me than I am to trust a stranger. I would like to now consider political speech and its vulnerability to bullshit.

1.3. Political “Truths” and Bullshit

In *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt (2005) asserts that: “For the bullshitter, however, all bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the lies of the honest man and of the

⁹ Notice that in this third example, there being a fact of the matter is very important. Even if I am changing a lightbulb in my house, I want it to be a fact of the matter that the power is off.

¹⁰ In *On Truth*, Harry Frankfurt (2006) makes an assertion that “Without truth, either we have no opinion at all concerning how things are or our opinion is wrong. One way or the other, we do not know what kind of situation we are in” (2006, 59). The electrician most certainly would like to know what sort of situation they are in. Whether they *believe* that the electricity is on or off has no bearing on whether it actually is. Frankfurt (2006) also notes that “...hiding our eyes from reality will not cause any reduction of its dangers and threats; plus, our chances of dealing successfully with the hazards that it presents will surely be greater if we can bring ourselves to see things straight” (2006, 58).

¹¹ Trust here could be characterized as similar to the way Katherine Hawley elaborates “trust,” namely that trust (as opposed to mere reliance) relies on a kind of commitment. The commitment in each of these cases is different and distinct, but this sets “trust” up as something that has a deeper connotation rather than something like reliance. See Hawley (2014).

liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says." (2005, 56). This is after his consideration that a lie considers truth and is "an act with a sharp focus," (2005, 51) where the focus of the bullshitter is "panoramic rather than particular" (2005, 52) and "it remains true that he [the bullshitter]¹² is trying to get away with something." (2005, 23). Important to note here is that lying requires as a prerequisite knowledge of what is true, at least on Frankfurt's account. Further, bullshit is indifferent to the truth of the matter. Frankfurt (2005) writes that: "It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as the essence of bullshit." (2005, 33-34). A lot of interesting comments on the essence of bullshit are stitched together here, and while I think it provides a good description of the bullshitter as a person, I want to focus on the final citation here where bullshit is *indifferent* to what we may consider the truth of any situation. This emphasizes the idea that bullshit is an attitude.

The pervasiveness of this feature is no surprise in politics, especially given appeals for re-election and popularity. Frankfurt (2005) even writes of politics in the same vein as advertising insofar as political speech is carefully crafted and developed for its audience. (2005, 22-23). It is these motivations that lead me to understand politicians as sometimes *lying* but often *bullshitting*.¹³ This distinction also relies on the epistemological impossibility of a politician knowing enough about any given issue to adequately lie, since lies rely on an understanding and concealment of something which is true. Importantly though, this does not discount that politicians both bullshit *and* lie, often in tandem.¹⁴ For example, I think many politicians who disparage

¹² My emphasis.

¹³ This is not to deny that some politicians tell the truth at least some of the time, but bullshit is so pervasive (especially in politics, I think), that I am treating of only bullshit and lying in the political realm.

¹⁴ I read remarks from Justin Weinberg regarding an empirical study of bullshit that came out. He writes regarding the study that: "...we go on to find that young men are more likely to bullshit than young women, and that bullshitting is somewhat more prevalent amongst those from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds" and further that "...bullshitters also display overconfidence in their academic prowess and problem-solving skills, while also reporting higher levels of perseverance when faced with challenges and providing more socially desirable responses than more truthful groups." Weinberg, Justin. "An Empirical Study of Bullshitters." The results of the study are further elaborated in an article from the very next day from Christopher Ingraham, titled "Rich guys are most likely to have no idea what they're talking about, study suggests," where he elaborates that "...the results appear to suggest that the countries with the greatest propensity toward bombast also have the smallest variances between groups living within them. In the U.S.

climate change are well aware of the truth of the matter and are simply lying for gain. Many however are bullshitting, though, as they either do not bother to learn or cannot understand the science behind climate change. In either case, the effects are problematic and pernicious, especially when the bullshit is performative; that is, bullshitting can be a compelling aesthetic to the listener who either wants to simplify the problems of the world, or the listener who may see the bullshitter as “independent” or otherwise not mired in complicated discussions.

Importantly, bullshit relies on bullshit being received in a certain way by the person who is communicated *to*.¹⁵ According to Frankfurt (2005), while bullshit “...is produced without concern with the truth, it need not be false” (2005, 47-48). As I will point out later, because bullshit does not need to be *necessarily* false is part of the problem regarding how it is communicated so well. Given the carefully crafted attitude of politicians towards voters, bullshit becomes especially pernicious and pervasive. It is important to remember that bullshit is an attitude towards truth, as lying requires knowledge of the truth and “concealment” of the truth. This indifference to what may be considered factual is more and more present in recent years, and the bullshit aesthetic is even applauded. This “indifference” to actual problems can even present itself as a solution to the problems.

2.1. Communication Breakdown

Now that I have provided an account of things which have truth-value, it is important to look at the background condition of information that lets us *believe* the proposition has truth-value, even if it is “bullshit.” Let us consider first a useful distinction by Jason Stanley in “Knowing (How).” Stanley (2011) first posits two statements regarding a person asserting knowledge; the first asserts that “it is cold ‘here,’” and the second asserts that “it is cold in Kingston, Ontario” (2011, 211). If I claim that it is cold here, I may not know that here refers to Kingston, Ontario, even if both asserted claims are relationally true (2011, 211).

and Canada, for instance, there may simply be so much BS going around that everyone ends up partaking in it.” This lends further credence to my initial argument that if Frankfurt is correct that bullshit is everywhere, then bullshit must indeed exist in politics.

¹⁵ I would like to point out that bullshit should be conceived of purely as a linguistic mechanism, but the perception of things which are indeed bullshit as “truths” might be compounded by non-linguistic features of who is communicating (the bullshitter). For example, in Beaver and Stanley’s (2019) “Toward a Non-Ideal Philosophy of Language,” they make a critical distinction between the features of communication which are linguistic, and those features which are not (2019).

In this first example from Stanley, we find a relationship that asserts two purportedly true statements which refer to the same place and helps highlight the epistemic access problem. If I say: "I am writing this right now in my office," but for some reason I do not know where my office is (or I have multiple offices), then I (or the listener) may not know that it is the office at the university, or my office at home, and so on. However, I will still be saying something truthful. Further, Stanley (2011) makes an interesting distinction regarding "how" statements, where "it is clear that someone can know how to do something, without being able to *explain* how to do it" (2011, 212). His example is that "...someone can know how to ride a bicycle without being able to *explain* how to ride a bicycle" (2011, 213). This comports with his "intellectualist" conception of knowing-how that asserts "knowing how is a species of propositional knowledge, or knowing that" (2011, 208). In other words, one might say, "I know that I can ride a bicycle," but this does not entail that I know how to *explain* to do this task. Further, I may know that what someone says is bullshit, but I may lack the ability to explain how I know it is bullshit. This further breaks down meaningful discourse and is quite unsatisfying, at least I think so.

2.2. Trust and Knowledge-How

I want to turn this on its head in a certain way. For the bullshitter, especially in politics, they often do not know how *x* works, or how to explain how *x* works, but the purport to convey an attitude by explaining how *x* works, while remaining *indifferent* to the facts of *x*. Given the epistemological access problem I mentioned before,¹⁶ if they care about presenting themselves effectively, the politician must trust that some person *p* knows how *x* works. If the politician asserts something about climate change, they might have some idea of how it works, but this conception of how it works is dependent on who they are trusting to provide the information. Whether the information the politician receives is true or false, they are bullshitting regarding the information because they have no conception of how to *explain* why a proposition is true or false. To draw further on Stanley's (2011) account, it is helpful to introduce what he refers to as a "practical mode of presentation," which is "a complex set of dispositions towards a way of doing something" (2011, 211).

¹⁶ Stemming from the previous example, this might look something like "Some person *p* knows that I am in this location," while I do not have full access to this information for some reason. If I trust this person, then I can explain *which* location I am in more effectively.

Regarding knowledge “how,” practical modes of presentation serve an interesting function for propositions. Stanley (2011) writes that: “X knows how to F if and only if for some way w, X knows that X can F in way w, and X entertains w under a practical mode of presentation” (2011, 212). The upshot of this is that “*intuitions* about the truth and falsity of ascriptions of knowing-how are sensitive to practical modes of presentation, but the actual truth and falsity of the propositions expressed by such ascriptions is not” (2011, 212). Since bullshit for Frankfurt is an attitude, if we translate this into a “mode of presentation,” we have a mode of presentation that does not care at all about the truth or falsity of ascriptions in propositions, or our *intuitions* about the truth or falsity of the ascriptions, only that they are presented in a particular way, and that we intuit the ascriptions in this way. The mode of presentation serves only to convey a sense of trust that the politician has knowledge-how *to explain*. Knowledge of how to explain have distinct truth-conditions which are separate from knowing how to do “x.” I would like to run with this initial distinction between knowing how and knowing how to explain and consider it in terms of communicative action and communicative speech.

2.3. Communicative Actions & Communicative Language

In David Beaver and Jason Stanley’s (2019) article “Toward a Non-Ideal Philosophy of Language,” they make a distinction between intended and unintended effects of communication (2019, 517). They note that “among the idealizations of semantic and pragmatic theorizing is the conviction that interlocutors aim for (and regularly achieve) mutual transparency of communicative intention” (2019, 517). However, they think this transparency should be thrown out as more important, because (especially in the political and social world) unintended effects of communication can supersede the intended effects communication would have on an ideal theory (2019, 517).

More interesting to the idea of bullshit as communication are what Beaver and Stanley (2019) describe as “effects of communication that are intended but deliberately *masked* (2019, 518). While the “bullshitter” has no stake in the truth or falsehood of their statements, they nevertheless try to persuade their audience. This comes out in an especially pernicious way in politics, if we take politicians to be crafting themselves towards a public audience, and that they have stakes in maintaining a public persona, as they are always under scrutiny.

3.1. Trust and Language

Trust is fundamental to whether we believe something we hear to be true. If we cannot identify the bullshitter just based on their propositions, and we have no other means of identifying whether the proposition is bullshit, then trust begins to play a role. We often do trust bullshit; this is because by its indifference to truth, it may still contain *some* truth. As I noted earlier, Frankfurt (2005) writes that for the bullshitter facts are useful “insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says” (2005, 56). So truth here is not truth in the sense that the liar uses it, where a lie is diametrically opposed to a truth and serves to deceive us about something real, but as a building block to make the bullshit *more believable*.

This does not suggest that the bullshitter is aware that they are engaging with things that may or may not be true, but if they are, it changes how we view communication. I could say something that is true, or at least mostly true, and that might make the rest of my proposition more believable. If I make a true statement (t) about the world, then compounding this proposition with language that is true *in terms of* proposition t, and feasibly true in a potential world (assuming the propositions in “t” are mostly true), then I can say something convincing about the current, or “real” world.

In the article “The Deep Pathology at the Heart of a Scandal at Der Spiegel,” by Elizabeth Zerofsky (2019), a long-time contributor of Der Spiegel is audited by a freelance writer for the magazine, when he notices that one of his reports in an article sounded like a ‘bad movie.’ The result of the audit was evidence that the contributor had been fabricating stories. There is a very telling moment in the article regarding the relationship what we believe has to what we trust. It says: “He believes the reason he was able to discern, eventually, that Relotius was a fabricator was because he’d never actually met Relotius; everyone who worked with Relotius at the magazine loved him. “They said, you speak to him one time, and you would believe everything he says,” Moreno said. “The only way for me to judge him was his work”” (2019). The reporter in question got away with the scandal at *Der Spiegel* precisely because he described things as “true,” which mirrored enough truth in the real world that it was possible to trust him. This adds to the idea that feasibility can help in the fabrication of bullshit. In the end, the audit happened because things were approaching non-feasibility. While cases are not always this cut and dry (sometimes people tell blatant untruths), in the case of the bullshitter this paradigm seems to fit quite nicely. The question remains however, what does this have to do with knowledge-how, and further, what does this have to do with the non-linguistic features of how we communicate?

3.2. Performative Bullshit, Trust, & Compelling Aesthetic

If someone is susceptible to something, we view them as a vulnerable party. In this case it is a susceptibility to fake news, bullshit, and the like. However, I think there is a difference between susceptibility and a willingness to suspend disbelief in favor of a simplistic worldview, or maybe a type of tribalism.¹⁷ In many ways, bullshit is performative and appears as an aesthetic, and even a strategic aesthetic. Returning to the political sphere, we might consider the following observation from Turpin et. al.:

For many domains in which humans compete for prestige, status, or material goods, the criteria for determining who succeeds and fails at least partially rely on impressing others. In these domains, bullshit may be deployed as a low-cost strategy for gaining prestige. An agent working towards being successful in a domain, can engage in the long and arduous process of acquiring expert skills and knowledge... Alternatively, an agent could engage in a less effortful process that produces similar beliefs (i.e., impressing others with bullshit) (Turpin et. al. 2019, 659).

I want to piggyback off this idea vis-à-vis bullshit as both an aesthetic and a form of communication. I have already spent a lot of time explaining how bullshit might work in terms of language, but since we can either assume or know that it *does work*, there are two things I want to consider further to paint a more complete picture. First, I want to consider bullshit both as an art, and as a feature of art. Second, I feel that the audience of bullshit needs more attention. I can theorize all day why they might believe some claim or other over what might be considered “fact,” but what is really going on?

Turpin et. al. say that “...the domain of abstract art may perfectly exemplify an environment for which bullshit is likely to be rampant and effective” (2019, 660). This is further motivated by the “...notion among some abstract artists and enthusiasts that no objective truth exists” (660). Since most of the conversation on bullshit has focused on the political theatre, there is obviously some difference here; however, the element of bullshit as performance and aesthetic is still present. I would argue, like I have earlier to some degree, that certain topics in the political domain do have a “fact of the matter.” Climate change either does or does not exist. Poverty, low wages, and poor labor practices either do or do not exist. There are facts that point one way or the other, and trust is a crux in whether we believe one thing over another. While we can see a lot with our own eyes, we cannot see everything. It is here that the audience must make a trust-decision. Ignoring strict tribalism, what is at play when people accept bullshit as truth?

¹⁷ See section 3.3 for more elaboration on this point.

According to Christensen et. al., bullshit has a largely performative quality. They write that “Much talk that materializes in organizations may be labelled bullshit because it is airy or vague... Such communication, however, is not necessarily superfluous. Simple and ambiguous statements can validate managerial decisions, actions and omissions or be used to impress, seduce, or unite a heterogeneous audience” (Christensen et. al. 2019, 1593). So, if we take bullshit as not just an attitude, but as an aesthetic or performative quality, what do we make of the audience? James Fredal writes that “...a third group of scholars locate bullshit not with the speaker or the text, but with the audience itself. Most point to the weakness of audiences as the primary reason for the proliferation of bullshit: the indifference or irrationality that renders them susceptible to bullshit” (Fredal 2011, 250). While I take issue with this in some ways (I think that in some cases there *is* a “fact of the matter,” and bullshit can exist independent of an audience), Fredal makes clear that the strongest form of this view posits that “...a definition of bullshit that focuses on audience perception holds that there *is* no bullshit unless and until some audience member *perceives* an interaction in those terms (251). At the same time, I am tempted to agree with this sentiment, as bullshit is performative; why would a tree bullshit in a forest, if there were no one around to hear it?

Trust seems to supersede the perception, and there are an overwhelming number of examples pointing to this. In many cases the trust can be simply reduced to tribalism, but referring to the beginning of this section, I want to emphasize that susceptibility is not equal to a “willingness to suspend belief.” Sometimes this comes out as a “simplification of reality.” Thorsten Botz-Bornstein elaborates in their 2015 article “Kitsch and Bullshit,” that “...bullshit and kitsch do not falsify but *simplify* realities” (310). Continuing the parallel with aesthetics, kitsch and bullshit are largely understood to be less about the question of “how” and focus more on the “substance,” or the “what” side of things (2015, 310-311). In other words, “The kitsch “artist” might work a lot on the “how,” but will subsequently present it as the one and only “what” that no critical thinking should ever dare analyze” (310). When we think less about the “how” and focus more on the final product, presentation, and so on, we are more likely to suspend belief, not ask questions, and follow emotions. As I said before, I do not want to conflate susceptibility with a “willingness to suspend belief,” but they may not be mutually exclusive either.

3.3. Tribalism & Expressive Responding

It is worth talking about “expressive responding” as another potential avenue of misinformation and bullshit, and what this means for trust. Schaffner & Lucs note that “expressive responding” functions such that “...individuals intentionally provide misinformation to survey researchers as a way of showing support for their political viewpoint” (Schaffner & Lucs 2018, 136). Further, Schaffner & Lucs set up their experiment in such a way that something visible and “obvious” is presented to the audience of their survey,¹⁸ so that they can better measure the intentionality of participants responses. They hint at their conclusion early in the paper, writing “...we find clear evidence of expressive responding and that this behavior is especially prevalent among partisans with higher levels of political engagement—precisely those respondents who have both the contextual knowledge and motivation to engage in the behavior” (137). In the work on Prior et. al., there is some decrease in partisan-based response when “accuracy incentives” are at play, be these monetary rewards or insistences on accuracy and truth-telling. They write that “In the absence of accuracy incentives, many partisans answer knowledge questions as if they were opinion questions” (Prior et. al. 2015, 511).

Barring strict “tribalism,” echo chambers, and confirmation bias, how do we get to this point of trust? Stating some *kind* of tribalism is tempting, or something akin to what Schaffner & Lucs call “partisan cheerleading” (137). In Schaffner & Lucs experiment they used photos of the inauguration crowd size for Barack Obama and Donald Trump, respectively, with a clear and marked difference between the two. They even remark that “...by design, our test allows us to essentially rule out the possibility that incorrect responses are the result of truly held beliefs or a biased sampling of information” (137). It is also tempting to associate willingness to accept bullshit with a further willingness to *maintain* that bullshit. If bullshit relies on trust or a willingness to believe the bullshitter, then how do we explain these responses other than entrenchment or a desire to “double-down” or perpetuate a falsehood. I find what Jake Wright says about the responses to be particularly helpful here. He writes regarding expressive responding that “...rather than genuinely believing bullshit, bullshit accepters respond in the way they expect group members to respond” (Wright, 2020, 118). He uses a particular salient example here, in which a sports fan will respond that their team is the best, simply because it is what they *ought* to say (118). I still think the idea of

¹⁸ In this case it is a comparison of inauguration crowd sizes.

“doubling-down” is at play here too. No one likes to admit they are wrong. With this in mind, he also claims that “bullshit openness” could be a response to “motivated reasoning,” which “...occurs when one’s deeply-held beliefs contradict available evidence” (Wright 2020, 118).¹⁹

Regardless the motivation, expressive responding is still an act of *presentation* or the maintenance of an aesthetic. If the bullshitter is in effect presenting and selling an aesthetic, the buyer is ignoring any kind of buyer’s remorse and promoting the product anyway.²⁰ In another series of survey experiments conducted by Adam J. Berinsky (surrounding conspiracies around 9/11 and Obama’s religion), he notes that “...in all cases, there seems to be little evidence of widespread expressive responding” (Berinsky 2017, 222). However, I want to note that the survey question(s) used in Berinsky’s experiment and Schaffner’s experiments were different, with Schaffner & Lucs asking about something that was a matter of recent controversy. I cannot say for certain whether timing is related to expressive responding, but it is worth considering.²¹ What expressive responding does support is the idea that expressive responding is, in effect, an effort to further an aesthetic or presentation.

While I have not explored expressive responding in nearly the depth it deserves, I think it is pertinent to say that it is certainly possible that expressive responding or something akin to tribalism or response can perpetuate bullshit. Yair & Huber helpfully point out that “...distorting a survey answer away from one’s own true opinion usually imposes no external cost on a respondent” (Yair & Huber, 2020, 472). Further, in the case of incentivizing correct answers, there is some argument as to whether accuracy incentives gauge “true” beliefs are whether they compromise how we understand political decision making (472). Since it remains somewhat unclear how different questions and their related incentives can affect the choice to expressively respond on a case-to-case basis, I want to leave this open as a potential ex-

¹⁹ See also Garrett, R. K., & Weeks, B. E. (2017). Epistemic beliefs’ role in promoting misperceptions and conspiracist ideation. *PLoS One*, 12 (9), e0184733–e0184733, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0184733>.

²⁰ To further the analogy, the buyer does not want to feel “duped,” and, again, will likely “double-down.”

²¹ I do not have the time here to ask deep questions about the nature of expressive responding, but think it is worth paying attention to as a potential factor in the continuation or propagation of bullshit and is at the very least interesting when looking at responses to questions that should be somewhat “obvious.” I also want to note that Schaffner & Lucs did not reference Berinsky’s paper, but both papers referenced the study done by Prior, Sood, and Khanna (2015).

planation for the perpetuation of bullshit, especially one of bullshit as a kind of performance. It seems at least plausible that this is a reason why bullshit, once received, is continued.

3.4. A Theory of Communication

Bullshit presents itself as an attitude towards language, disregarding the truth-value of statements. As Frankfurt (2005) so aptly put it, bullshit is “panoramic;” (2005, 52) it does not take into consideration the particularity of statements on an individual basis. However, what they say may contain some truths, the intent of the speaker is what is at fault. I want to argue that part of the reason we trust bullshit, is because the bullshitter does not necessarily know how to explain some thing “x,” but they can communicate that they know how to explain x (I.e., any knowledge-how is largely performative).

Of course, this goes nowhere without the trust of the person being bullshitted *to*, but the effectiveness of bullshit relies on the way in which it is communicated. The bullshitter communicates an attitude toward the listener, summed up in the idea that they do not know “x” but purport to be able to explain that thing. However, I want to take this a step further. This *works* because often bullshit has some element of truth. I can say something regarded in some sense as factual, and then anything I say after the initial true statement is more likely to be considered true, or at least feasible. This is because if I say things that would follow in virtue of the initial true statement in a *possible* world, they map reasonably for the listener so long as that possible world follows from our current world. So, when the politician purports to be able to explain something about climate change, their propositions are more likely to be trusted if they ground the propositions in things that are independently factual, or at least seem to be factual about the world, or possible in some world like ours.

Conclusion

Of course, *who* we trust does have significant implications.²² If we return to the examples at the beginning of the paper, if the electrician trusts someone

²² Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall note in an interview with Brian Gallagher and Kevin Berger (2019) that “Most of us don’t have microscopes to see germs. It’s the same with climate change. You can freely go around saying either the climate isn’t changing or that anthropogenic sources had nothing to do with it. Without getting any immediate feedback, without anything going wrong in your life, you can form these kinds of beliefs” (2019).

on the street to identify whether the power is off, rather than another qualified electrician, they are likely going to be in for a shock. But trust is a function of how bullshit works as a mechanism in language. We *do not* have epistemological access to every scientific question, let alone questions about the social world and other areas of life. We must trust that someone does, and then make use of our best judgment.

In the *Apology*²³ (2002), Plato records Socrates as saying: “It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know” (2002, 7-8). This example is fitting because it has both a local and external problem. The local, or internal problem, is rooted in the idea of “thinking to know” something which you indeed do not know, or, rather, the problem of the bullshitter. The external problem is one we face, since we cannot know *what* Socrates said, and must trust accounts from Plato or other writers.

James Ambury (n.d.) writes in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy that: “The Socratic problem is the problem faced by historians of philosophy when attempting to reconstruct the ideas of the original Socrates as distinct from his literary representations” (n.d.). Rather than get into exegetical questions, I want to note in the way of conclusion that even accounts of Socrates may be bullshit. In most cases, the reason we still reference Socrates is because we *trust* that either these accounts are accurate, or we think they are valuable regardless of the question of authorship (the same might be said for Shakespeare). Who is speaking *does* matter in all (or at least most) accounts, and, if we trust that Socrates said, “I do not think that I know what I do not know,” (2002, 8) he may have been conveying simply that he was not trying to bullshit anyone.

Bibliography

1. Ambury James M. (n.d.), “Socrates”, [in:] *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [online] <https://www.iep.utm.edu/socrates/#SH1b>.
2. “Apology” (trans. H. Tredennick) (2002), [in:] E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (eds.), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 3-26.
3. Beaver David & Stanley Jason (2019), “Toward a Non-Ideal Philosophy of Language”, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 39 (2), pp. 501-545.

²³ Plato, trans. Hugh Tredennick.

4. Berinsky Adam J. (2017, October 26), "Telling the Truth about Believing the Lies? Evidence for the Limited Prevalence of Expressive Survey Responding", *The Journal of Politics*, 80 (1), pp. 211-224, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/694258>.
5. Botz-Bornstein Thorsten (2015), "Kitsch and Bullshit", *Philosophy and Literature*, 39 (2), pp. 305-321, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2015.0053>.
6. Christensen Lars Thøger, Kärreman Dan, & Rasche Andreas (2019), "Bullshit and Organization Studies", *Organization Studies*, 40 (10), pp. 1587-1600, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840618820072>.
7. Frankfurt Harry G. (2005), *On Bullshit*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
8. Frankfurt Harry G. (2006), *On Truth*, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
9. Fredal James (2011), "Rhetoric and Bullshit", *College English*, 73 (3), pp. 243-259.
10. Gallagher Brian & Berger Kevin (2019, February 14), "Why Misinformation Is About Who You Trust, Not What You Think", [in:] *Nautilus*, [online] <https://nautilus.us/issue/69/patterns/why-misinformation-is-about-who-you-trust-not-what-you-think>.
11. Garrett R. Kelly & Weeks Brian E. (2017), "Epistemic beliefs' role in promoting misperceptions and conspiracist ideation", *PloS One*, 12 (9), e0184733-e0184733, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0184733>.
12. Hawley Katherine (2014), "Trust, Distrust and Commitment", *Noûs* (Bloomington, Indiana), 48(1), pp. 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12000>.
13. Hegel Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1977), "Phenomenology of Spirit", [in:] A.V. Miller (ed.), *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
14. Ingraham Christopher (2019, April 26), "Rich guys are most likely to have no idea what they're talking about, study suggests", *The Washington Post*, [online] https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/04/26/rich-guys-are-most-likely-have-no-idea-what-theyre-talking-about-study-finds/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e91434c6e332.
15. Koerth-Baker Maggie (2019, March 25), "Conspiracy Theories Can't Be Stopped", [in:] *FiveThirtyEight*, [online] <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/conspiracy-theories-cant-be-stopped/>
16. McIntyre Lee C. (2018), *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
17. Nietzsche Friedrich (2005), "Twilight of the Idols", [in:] A. Ridley & J. Norman (eds.), *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
18. Prior Markus, Sood Gaurav & Khanna Kabir (2015), "You cannot be serious: The impact of accuracy incentives on partisan bias in reports of economic perceptions", *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 10 (4), pp. 489-518, <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00014127>.
19. Schaffner Brian F. & Luks Samantha (2018, February 17), "Misinformation or Expressive Responding? What an Inauguration Crowd Can Tell Us About the Source of Political Misinformation in Surveys", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 82 (1), doi:10.1093/poq/nfx042.
20. Stanley Jason (2011), "Knowing (How)", *Noûs*, 45 (2), pp. 207-238.
21. Turpin Martin Harry, Walker Alexander C., Kara-Yakoubian Mane, Gabert Nina N., Fugelsang Jonathan A. & Stolz Jennifer A. (2019), "Bullshit makes the art grow profounder", *Judgment and Decision Making*, 14 (6), pp. 658-670.

-
22. Weinberg Justin (2019, April 25), "An Empirical Study of Bullshitters", [in:] *Daily Nous*, [online] <http://dailynous.com/2019/04/25/empirical-study-bullshitters/?fbclid=IwAR3PNISGhB51vvr13yrPcfFFow3koCwurgtVgLwaiScueDifm308Aq72IE8>.
 23. Wright Jake (2020), "'Many People Are Saying...': Applying the Lessons of Naïve Skepticism to the Fight against Fake News and Other 'Total Bullshit'", *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2 (1), pp. 113-131, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-019-00051-0>.
 24. Yair Omer & Huber Gregory A. (2020), "How robust is evidence of partisan perceptual bias in survey responses? A new approach for studying expressive responding", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 84 (2), pp. 469-492, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaa024>.
 25. Zerofsky Elisabeth (2019, January 30), "The Deep Pathology at the Heart of a Scandal at Der Spiegel", *The New Yorker*, [online] <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-deep-pathology-at-the-heart-of-the-scandal-at-der-spiegel>.

