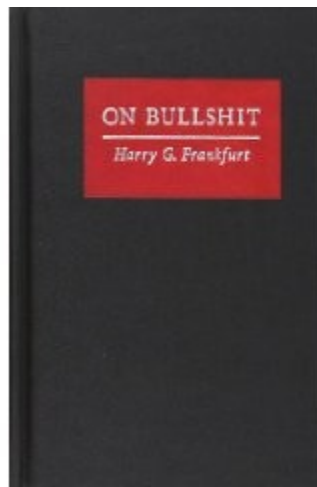


The overwhelming proliferation of bullshit

Giancarlo Livraghi – October 2012

We are becoming so accustomed to the bullshit inundation that we are losing track of what makes sense and what doesn't. This is partially overlapping with the *ingormation* disease (that I explained in <http://gandalf.it/offline/ingormat.pdf>) but it isn't the same. While bullshit is generally brushed off as just silly, its widespread effects are a serious problem.

An opportunity to look into this messy subject is offered by a small book, elegantly published by the Princeton University Press in 2005.



This essay was originally written in 1986, but I wasn't aware of its existence until recently, when a thoughtful reader mentioned it during an interesting conversation on *The Power of Stupidity*.

As a bibliophile, I am pleased to have this book because of its attractive edition quality. But the text is disappointing.

It's boringly academic, pedantic, digressive. Though it's a short book, it's long-winded. Almost half of its 67 small pages are taken up by disquisitions on the uncertain etymology of "bullshit" (and other words, such as "humbug"). Also the rest is crammed with inconclusive attempts to find a theoretical definition and unnecessary digressions on terminology.

However, there is substance – and it deserves to be understood.

Bullshit, professor Frankfurt explains, is “fake”, but not always “false”. Something that is appropriate in one context can become nonsense when it’s placed in another – or extended beyond the limits of its meaning. Distortions can be deliberate, but they can also happen unintentionally. Digressions can be meant to disorient and confuse – or caused by involuntary incoherence.

A widespread kind of bullshit is a representation of what someone pretends to be, smuggled in the context of an unrelated subject. At the end of his essay, Harry Frankfurt comments that there can be “sincere” bullshitting, because there is a difference, that can be quite relevant, between what people are and what they think they are – and even more often, I dare say, between what they know and what they think they know.

Anyhow, the crucial fact is that the enormous invasion of bullshit is as widely neglected, misunderstood and underestimated as the power of stupidity. But it isn’t the same. Bullshit doesn’t always begin stupidly. By careless repetition, even the most accurately reported facts or considerate thoughts can turn into gibberish.

A powerful, widespread multiplier of bullshit is submissive agreement. It’s comfortable to be “followers” and to take for granted whatever is said or reported by some self-appointed “leader” – or randomly picked up somewhere, somehow, without bothering to consider if it makes sense.

Studies on so-called “urban legends” (some of which were deliberately planted to verify their spreading) prove that the most ridiculous nonsense can be perceived as unquestionable “truth” when it’s repeated often enough. We all know that, don’t we? We’d better not be so sure. There is so much bullshit that even the most careful people can be confused. And of course there is also the opposite danger, to brush off as meaningless something that isn’t – and deserves to be considered.

A nourishment of bullshit is prejudice. Whatever suits our habits and opinions sounds reassuring. What doesn’t, is disturbing. To keep our minds alert and open, we need to think twice before we agree superficially with everything that “sounds right”. And pay attention to what “sounds strange”.

«The most exciting phrase in science, that heralds new discoveries, is not “eureka!” but “that’s funny”.» Isaac Asimov.

It’s useful to find reliable confirmation of what we are in the habit of thinking. But it’s even more interesting to understand when and why it is better to change our perceptions or to see things in a different perspective.

As with stupidity, laughing about bullshit isn’t a solution. Funny or not, it’s dreadfully widespread – in attitudes and behaviors, not only in words. It can be petty gossip or pompous solemnity, loud or whispered, blandly superficial or pseudoscientific. In all shapes or disguises, it’s always toxic.

It isn’t necessary to seek a theoretical definition of bullshit. What really matters is to understand how to keep it under control. The basic tools are doubt, careful attention, a pinch of healthy distrust, a touch of humor and a robust dose of good sense.