

# Bullshit, Post-truth, and Propaganda

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## 1. Introduction

It has become something of a cliché since 2016 to see the major political events of that year as evidence of the “power of bullshit” or the “rise of post-truth.”<sup>1</sup> The concepts of post-truth and bullshit have been used, with varying degrees of precision, by academics, journalists, and political commentators to analyze the 2016 Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President. Some uses of these concepts have been frivolous but they have also been used as serious, or semi-serious, tools of politico-epistemological analysis. In his *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, James Ball sees “the eco-system of bullshit” (2017, p. 67) in the Brexit and Trump campaigns. For Matthew D’Ancona in *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, Trump’s election was a “symptom” of “the rise of post-Truth” (2017, p. 16). In *Post-Truth: Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It*, Evan Davis describes “a new kind of politics, and a new kind of bullshit to accompany it” (2018, p. xvii).

The question to be addressed here is whether the concepts of bullshit and post-truth are useful analytical tools. What do these fashionable concepts add to the sum of political knowledge and understanding? The answer is: less than is commonly supposed. It is interesting to compare their use as tools of analysis with older explanations of troubling political developments. When a concept is described as a useful tool of politico-epistemological analysis, at least two things are implied. One is that the concept in question can be deployed to give an accurate or illuminating *description* of certain political developments. The other is that it can be used to *explain* such developments. A question for analysts who write about the power of bullshit or the rise of post-truth is whether these ideas are either descriptively or explanatorily adequate in relation to the recent events to which they have been applied. For example, is it plausible or helpful to attribute the success of the campaign for Brexit to the “routine use” (Ball, 2017, p. 4) of bullshit? Or is such an analysis itself an example of bullshit? Even if bullshit is an effective political weapon, is it effective because of the “rise of post-truth” or is there a better explanation?

<sup>1</sup> From a British perspective, the most significant political event of 2016 was the surprise Brexit vote in favor of the U.K. exiting the European Union. In the U.S. the landmark political event of the year was the election of Donald Trump as President. On Brexit, see Shipman, 2017. Ball, 2017, D’Ancona, 2017, and Davis, 2018 are three books, all by journalists, that use the ideas of bullshit and post-truth to analyze these events. Ball talks about the “power of bullshit,” and the “rise of post-truth” is from D’Ancona. The concept of bullshit also figures in my account of Brexit in chapter 4 of Cassam, 2019.

These questions are difficult to answer because there are so many different definitions and uses of “post-truth” and “bullshit.” One challenge is to clarify these notions. Most writers on bullshit cite Harry Frankfurt’s essay “On Bullshit.”<sup>2</sup> Frankfurt notes that the bullshitter is “trying to get away with something” (2005, p. 23) and that “bullshitting involves a kind of bluff” (2005, p. 46). However, the essence of bullshit is “indifference to how things really are” (2005, p. 34). On this “mental state” view of bullshit, “the mental state of the person who creates some piece of discourse is a crucial factor in determining whether or not what is created is bullshit” (2002, p. 340). Other accounts insist that bullshit is nonsense, and that what counts as nonsense is not determined by the state of mind of the person emitting it.<sup>3</sup> For Frankfurt, bullshitting is different from lying and “bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are” (2005, p. 61). On other accounts, some or all lying is bullshitting, and lying is the greater enemy of truth.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of post-truth was introduced in a 1992 essay by Steve Tesich.<sup>5</sup> Tesich’s conception of post-truth is epistemological: to live in a “post-truth world” is to live in a world in which citizens connive in their own ignorance. Other accounts of post-truth see it more as a normative stance: a post-truth stance is one that downplays the importance or value of truth. There is also the view that post-truth poses a challenge “not just to the idea of *knowing* reality but to the existence of reality itself” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 10). On this metaphysical conception of post-truth, what is true is what is felt to be true. For example, if there is a popular feeling that violent crime is increasing then, to all intents and purposes, violent crime *is* increasing, even if the statistics suggest otherwise.

The discussion below will proceed as follows: Section 2 will clarify the notion of bullshit. Section 3 will discuss the merits of various different ways of understanding the concept of post-truth. Finally, Section 4 will return to the issue of whether the notions of bullshit and post-truth are descriptively or explanatorily adequate in relation to recent political events. Bullshit can be calculated and strategic or spontaneous and unpolished. A bullshitter can be a “mindless slob” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 21) or a craftsman.<sup>6</sup> The power of bullshit in politics is presumably the power of strategic bullshit but questions remain about whether even talk of strategic bullshit does justice to the techniques employed by the political figures who are most often accused of bullshitting.

## 2. On Bullshit

To fix ideas, consider this example based on a report in the *Washington Post* in March 2018:

<sup>2</sup> This essay was originally published in 1986 and republished as a small book in 2005. All quotations here are from the book version.

<sup>3</sup> See Cohen 2002 for a version of this approach.

<sup>4</sup> See Webber 2013 for a defence of the view that lying is worse than bullshitting.

<sup>5</sup> Tesich 1992.

<sup>6</sup> For a defence of the possibility of carefully crafted bullshit see Frankfurt 2005, pp. 22–4.

TRADE DEFICIT: At a fundraising dinner President Trump described a meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. An issue that came up in the meeting was whether the U.S. had a trade deficit with Canada. Trudeau insisted that this was not the case. Trump insisted that it was. Trump bragged at the dinner that he had no idea at the time whether what he told Trudeau was true, but that he had repeated his claim several times.<sup>7</sup>

A natural way to describe Trump's conduct in his meeting with Trudeau is to say that he was bluffing. If bullshit involves a kind of bluff then this is one reason to describe Trump as bullshitting in this case. Suppose that P is the proposition that America has a trade deficit with Canada. Trump confidently asserted that P even though he knew full well at the time of his assertion that he had no idea whether it was true. In other words, Trump was *knowingly ignorant*: he knew that he didn't know. However, instead of confessing his ignorance he tried to give Trudeau the impression that he, Trump, knew that P. The description of the bullshitter as trying to get away with something also applies in this case. Trump was trying to get away with laying a claim to a piece of knowledge that he did not possess. Moreover, he was indifferent to the truth of his assertion about the deficit. This, from a Frankfurtian perspective, is the crucial sense in which he bullshitted. The issue is not whether he cared about America's trading position with Canada but whether he cared whether he was speaking the truth to Trudeau. He did not.

Bullshit is unavoidable "whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about" (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 63). In these circumstances, a person's obligations or opportunities to speak exceed his knowledge. Frankfurt notes that this is quite common in public life, "where people are frequently impelled... to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant" (2005, p. 63). It is not their ignorance that makes them bullshitters nor even just the fact that they don't *think* they know.<sup>8</sup> It is possible to be knowingly ignorant, that is, to know that one doesn't know, without also being a bullshitter. Bullshitters are not just knowingly ignorant. They are knowingly ignorant *and* do not own up to their ignorance. They bluff by pretending to be in the know, or to understand what they do not understand.

Other key features of TRADE DEFICIT are: (a) Trump's assertion was not nonsense. What he said made perfect sense but he was still bullshitting; (b) the judgment that he was bullshitting does not depend for its plausibility on supposing that his claim was false. He would still have been bullshitting even if what he said was true; (c) it is not at all clear whether Trump believed what he told Trudeau. Saying that he had no idea whether his claim was true suggests that did he did not believe it. On the other hand, it is not unknown for people to believe their own bullshit.

<sup>7</sup> At the time of the meeting the U.S. had a trade surplus with Canada.

<sup>8</sup> Frankfurt describes a conversation between Fania Pascal and Wittgenstein in which the unwell Pascal reported that she felt just like a dog that has been run over. Wittgenstein objected, apparently because he thought that Pascal was talking bullshit. In what sense? According to Frankfurt, the problem was that her statement was not germane to the enterprise of describing reality: "She does not even think she knows, except in the vaguest way, how a run-over dog feels. Her description of her own feeling is, accordingly, something that she is merely making up" 2005, p. 30.

However, in these cases they do not assert their bullshit *because* they believe it; (d) Trump's primary objective was presumably to induce in Trudeau the belief that America had a trade deficit. Other objectives can also be easily imagined.<sup>9</sup>

There are several accounts of bullshit that are at odds with TRADE DEFICIT. One view is that bullshit is a type of nonsense, or what Cohen calls "unclarifiable unclarity" (2002, p. 333). Yet what Trump said to Trudeau was neither unclear nor unclarifiable. Another variety of bullshit that Cohen recognizes is *rubbish*, "in the sense of arguments that are grossly deficient in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence" (2002, p. 333). However, Trump was not giving or presenting an argument. It is true that he had no evidence to back up his assertion, and he might in this sense have been talking rubbish, but he was not thereby bullshitting unless he was *aware*—as he clearly was—that he had no evidence to back up his assertion. The bullshitter is not lacking in self-knowledge: he knows he doesn't really know what he is talking about.

A different and more promising approach to bullshit is to relate it to violations of the norms of assertion.<sup>10</sup> Many such norms have been proposed but few that are directly relevant to the question whether a person is bullshitting. One supposed norm of assertion states that one should assert P only if one knows that P. It is not true, however, that a person who asserts that P without knowing that P is necessarily bullshitting.<sup>11</sup> If the lottery ticket a person has just bought is overwhelmingly likely to lose she is not bullshitting when she asserts that it is a losing ticket, even if she does not, strictly speaking, *know* that it is a losing ticket.

Another possible norm of assertion states that one should assert P only if one believes P.<sup>12</sup> An example of Jennifer Lackey's makes the point that it is possible for a person to assert P and yet not be bullshitting even if she herself does not believe that P. Imagine a creationist teacher who is required to instruct her biology students about evolution. When she asserts "Modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*" she herself "neither believes nor knows this proposition" (Lackey, 2007, p. 599). Yet she is not bullshitting. She is neither bluffing nor trying to get away with something, so the fact that a person's assertion that P breaches the belief norm of assertion is not sufficient for the assertion to be bullshit. Nor is it necessary. If, in TRADE DEFICIT, Trump believes his own bullshit he is not violating the belief norm but is still bullshitting. It is worth adding that there are cases—TRADE DEFICIT might be one—in which it is hard to say what a person really believes but not hard to say whether they are bullshitting.

Lackey proposes the following norm of assertion: (RTBNA): one should assert that P only if "(i) it is reasonable for one to believe P, and (ii) if one asserted that P, one would assert that P at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that P" (2007, p. 608). Trump is in breach of this norm in TRADE DEFICIT. Whatever he

<sup>9</sup> Another objective might have been to unnerve Trudeau or cause him to doubt himself. Judging by the report in the *Washington Post*, Trump may well have achieved these objectives.

<sup>10</sup> See Koetzee 2019 for a version of this approach.

<sup>11</sup> See Koetzee 2019 for further discussion of this approach to bullshit and Lackey 2007 for criticism of the knowledge norm for assertion.

<sup>12</sup> Koetzee is in favor of the view that bullshitting involves breaking a belief norm for assertion. See Koetzee 2019.

actually believes, it is not reasonable for him to believe that America has a trade deficit with Canada, and he does not assert that America has a trade deficit with Canada because it is reasonable for him to believe this. Now consider the following case:

QUESTION TIME: A lazy and not very smart government minister is preparing to answer questions in parliament about a complex issue. He is briefed by a capable and reliable official but still has no real grasp of the issues. According to his briefer, the available evidence supports a particular proposition P. In parliament, the minister confidently asserts that P and tries to sound authoritative in doing so. Yet he has no real understanding of P or the surrounding issues.

In this all too familiar scenario, the minister is bullshitting. He tries to conceal what he recognizes as his own ignorance and bluff his way through a tricky parliamentary occasion. However, it is reasonable for him to believe that P is true because his briefer assured him that it is. Furthermore, he asserts P in part because it is reasonable for him to believe what his reliable briefer has told him. If P were not reasonable, the briefer would have told him so and the minister would not have asserted it. His assertion is, in this sense, responsive to the reasonableness of P. So here we have a case in which a person is not in breach of RTBNA but is still bullshitting.

This analysis of QUESTION TIME might be questioned on the following grounds: I take myself to know that  $E=MC^2$  but I actually have no idea what that really means.<sup>13</sup> If asked I would confidently say that  $E=MC^2$  because I have it on good authority that this is the case. I have no theoretical understanding of what the claim amounts to but I am not bullshitting when I assert, on the basis of what experts tell me, that  $E=MC^2$ . How is this any different from the Minister in QUESTION TIME relying on an expert briefer? The difference is that the minister *pretends* to understand. Whether I am bullshitting in asserting that  $E=MC^2$  depends on whether, in making this assertion, I am trying to give the impression that I understand the equation. If that is the spirit in which I confidently say that  $E=MC^2$  then I, too, am bullshitting.

An important difference between TRADE DEFICIT and QUESTION TIME is this: in the former case, the President has no idea whether his claim about the deficit is true. This is not the minister's situation in QUESTION TIME. Since he has been told by his trustworthy briefer that P is true, he has a good idea that this is the case. What he lacks is not *knowledge* of the truth of his assertion but a proper *understanding* of it. Trump in TRADE DEFICIT and the minister in QUESTION TIME are both *phonies* but there are different ways of being a phony and correspondingly different ways of being a bullshitter.<sup>14</sup> In TRADE DEFICIT the President pretends to *know* what he knows he does not know. The minister in QUESTION TIME pretends to *understand* what he knows he does not understand. Both are bullshitting but in different ways.

<sup>13</sup> I thank the editors for raising this question.

<sup>14</sup> Frankfurt claims at one point that "the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*" (2005, p. 47).

To sum up: an assertion is bullshit if only if, at the time of the assertion the person making it:

- (a) Either realizes that she does not understand her own assertion or realizes that she does not know whether her assertion is correct.
- (b) Tries to conceal her ignorance or lack of understanding by pretending to know what she does not know, or to understand what she does not understand.

This is still a mental state account of bullshit. In the most egregious examples of bullshit, the bullshitter has *no idea* whether her assertion is true and also knows that she has no idea.<sup>15</sup> There are degrees of ignorance and degrees of bullshit. The extreme bullshitter is not just ignorant but *clueless*. Accordingly, the gap between what she actually knows and what she pretends to know is an especially large one.

A peculiarity of Frankfurt's discussion is his insistence that when a bullshitter asserts that P, he is not trying to deceive anyone concerning P itself. Rather, what the bullshitter cares about is "what people think of *him*" (2005, p. 18). The crucial idea here is that people who perpetrate bullshit "misrepresent themselves in a certain way" (2005, p. 19):

The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts, or about what he takes the facts to be. . . . His only indispensably necessary characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to. . . . The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides is that the truth-value of his statements are of no central interest to him (Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 54–5).

Yet in TRADE DEFICIT Trump's primary objective was to convince Trudeau that America had a trade deficit with Canada and that he, Trump, believed this to be the case. The only sense in which he did not intend to *deceive* Trudeau about the facts is that it is unclear what Trump took the facts to be. QUESTION TIME is more plausibly a case of a bullshitter trying to deceive his audience about himself rather than about the facts. However, what the minister is trying to conceal is not a lack of *interest* in the truth value of P but a lack of *understanding*. This brings out the range of objectives that a bullshitter may have. Bullshitting does not have just one objective. Some bullshit is mainly concerned to misrepresent the facts. Other bullshit is mainly concerned to misrepresent the bullshitter.

One of the challenges facing all mental state accounts of bullshit is that it can be, at least to some degree, indeterminate what the bullshitter's state of mind is. In other words, it can be indeterminate what they truly believe or are trying to achieve by bullshitting. The notion of psychological indeterminacy comes up in Frankfurt's essay: "it is preposterous to imagine that we ourselves are determinate, and hence susceptible both to correct and to incorrect descriptions, while supposing that the

<sup>15</sup> Having no idea whether P is a deeper form of ignorance than simply not knowing that P.

ascription of determinacy to anything else has been exposed as a mistake” (2005, p. 66). However, this is not in itself an objection to mental state accounts of bullshit. If an assertor’s mental state is a crucial factor in determining whether their assertion is bullshit, *and* it can be indeterminate what their mental state is, then all that follows is that it can be indeterminate whether they are bullshitting. This is intuitively the right result; sometimes this *is* indeterminate.

### 3. On Post-truth

Tesich begins his 1992 essay by discussing what he calls the “Watergate syndrome.” The revelation that President Nixon and his cabinet were a bunch of cheap crooks sickened and disgusted the nation. As a result, and because Nixon was so quickly pardoned, “we began to shy away from the truth. We came to equate the truth with bad news and we didn’t want bad news any more” (Tesich, 1992, p. 12). Instead, we looked to our government to “protect us from the truth” (1992, p. 12). Similarly, in the Iran Contra scandal, President Reagan perceived correctly that the public really did not want to know the truth. So, he lied to us, “but he didn’t have to work hard at it” (1992, p. 13). Such examples of the public’s unwillingness to face up to political reality lead Tesich to his conclusion that “we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world” (1992, p. 13). As a result, “we are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams” (1992, p. 13).

For Tesich, the essence of post-truth is wilfull ignorance. To live in a “post-truth world” is to live in a world in which citizens connive in their own ignorance. They allow themselves to be lied to and turn a blind eye to evidence of wrong-doing by their political masters. What motivates this policy of wilfull ignorance is that they can’t handle the truth. Tesich does not point out, however, that there is something paradoxical or perhaps even self-defeating about this policy. After all, it is only because the public already knows the awful truth at some level that it seeks to avoid it. Not *acknowledging* or *attending* to the truth is not the same as not *knowing* it. Far from being an indication that the truth has been denuded of any significance, the policy of wilfull ignorance that Tesich describes shows how much truth matters to us. It matters enough for us to want to avoid it when it is troubling. If we were genuinely indifferent to the truth there would be little need for us to avert our eyes from it.

One thing that is reasonably clear is that on Tesich’s conception “post-truth” is an *epistemological* notion. It is not a special type of truth, or a special way for a proposition to be true, but an epistemic posture towards perfectly objective truths. It is the posture of not wanting to know them. In contrast, other accounts of post-truth see it as a *valuational* stance. On this reading, what is mainly at issue in talk of “post-truth” is the *value* or *importance* of truth. For example, President Trump is reported to have told his butler, Anthony Senecal, that the tiles in the nursery of his

Mar-a-Lago residence had been personally made by Walt Disney. When Senecal questioned the truth of this claim, Trump's response was: "Who cares?"<sup>16</sup> This sums up the post-truth attitude. Post-truth in this sense "concerns our attitude to truth, rather than the truth itself" (D'Ancona, 2017, p. 126). In contrast, a third account of post-truth *is* concerned with truth itself. On this account, "what seems new in the post-truth era is a challenge not just to the idea of *knowing* reality but to the existence of reality itself" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 10). In the case mentioned above, if there is a widespread popular feeling that violent crime is increasing then violent crime *is* increasing, even if the statistics suggest otherwise. What *is* true is equated with what is *taken* to be true; perception is reality.<sup>17</sup> This is not directly a claim about the importance of truth or our desire not to know the truth. It is about what *constitutes* truth, and is therefore *metaphysical* in its orientation.

One point to emerge from this survey is that "post-truth" is not a single concept with a single agreed content. Of the three notions of post-truth, the one that is most closely related to the concept of bullshit is the valuational notion. The attitude to truth displayed by Trump at Mar-a-Lago, his total lack of concern about whether his assertion was true, is the indifference to how things really are that Frankfurt sees as the essence of bullshit. It is possible that Trump believed his statement was false and intended by making it to deceive. That would make his statement a lie. However, it is also possible that he didn't know, and didn't care, whether his statement was true. This would make his statement bullshit rather than a lie, and therefore an expression of a post-truth *attitude*. The remaining question is whether, as many commentators suppose, it is helpful to describe or explain recent political developments by reference to the rise of post-truth or the power of bullshit.

#### 4. Propaganda and Hate Speech

One reason that such analyses are less novel and less interesting than they might seem is that they tend to be proposed by commentators who do not think of bullshit in the way that Frankfurt and other philosophers think of it. For example, Ball sees "bullshit" as a "catch-all word to cover misrepresentation, half-truths and outrageous lies alike" (2017, p. 5). Davis has a similarly lax view. He takes bullshit to include "all forms of mendacity and self-deception as well as pure nonsense" (2018, p. 33). On this conception, merely accusing a person of bullshitting leaves it open whether they have lied, uttered a piece of nonsense, or told a half-truth. Furthermore, the power of bullshit includes the power of lies, and the idea that lying can be a powerful political tool is hardly new. Davis' view implies that Hitler and Goebbels were bullshitters but to describe their anti-Semitic rants as bullshit is surely to trivialize them. Furthermore,

<sup>16</sup> As reported by Matthew D'Ancona. See D'Ancona, 2017, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> In case this seems fanciful, see Lee McIntyre's report of an exchange between Republican politician Newt Gingrich and a CNN reporter. In response to statistics showing a decline in violent crime Gingrich argued that the average American does not feel safer and that he would go with how people feel. See McIntyre, 2018, pp. 3–4. While Gingrich's approach can be interpreted, as McIntyre interprets it, as evidence of a commitment to some version of "post-truth," it can also be seen as an example of how right-wing populism addresses what Stuart Hall calls "lived experiences" (1979, p. 20).



there is all the difference in the world between their outrageous lies and the relatively mild examples of political bullshit given above. To use the concept of bullshit to describe such disparate phenomena is to deprive it of at least some of its interest and usefulness.

On a narrower view of bullshit there is more substance to the idea that recent political developments are evidence of the power of bullshit. In a notable passage, Frankfurt describes politics, along with advertising and public relations, as “replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept” (2005, p. 22). The issue with using the concept of bullshit in Frankfurt’s sense as a tool of political analysis is whether the resulting analyses are plausible, not whether they are interesting or substantial. A key question here concerns the relationship between lying and bullshitting. According to Frankfurt, advertisers may qualify as liars since “they may know that they are purveying falsehoods with an intention to deceive” (2002, p. 341). However, their most fundamental commitment is as bullshitters and “they are liars only, as it were, incidentally or by accident” (2002, p. 341). In contrast, the mendacious politicians that Frankfurt would have us regard as bullshitters are not liars by accident.

How is it possible to lie “by accident”? Frankfurt imagines advertisers deciding what they are going to say in their advertisements without caring what the truth is, and this is what makes their advertisements bullshit. If they also happen to know or discover disadvantageous truths about their product then “what they choose to convey is something that they know to be false, and so they end up not merely bullshitting but telling lies as well” (2002, p. 341). In this case the lying is incidental since the advertiser is “not motivated primarily by an intention to deceive” (2002, p. 341). If lying by one or both sides was not incidental to the Brexit referendum campaign then this would be a reason to question the idea that the campaign represented a new kind of politics based on bullshit. Similarly, it is not obvious that Trump’s success in 2016 can be attributed to the power of bullshit rather than the efficacy of more old-fashioned political methods. In that case, one would have to conclude that the concept of bullshit is overrated as a tool of politico-epistemological analysis.

Three test cases help to bring the issues here into sharp focus. The first is a slogan used by the Leave campaign for Brexit: “We send the EU £350 million a week—let’s fund our NHS instead.” Is it accurate to describe this as “the ultimate bullshit political claim” (Ball, 2017, p. 52)? The same question can be asked about a Vote Leave poster stating that “Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU.” Lastly, there is Trump’s statement in 2015 that he had witnessed thousands of people in Jersey City cheering as the Twin Towers came down on 9/11.<sup>18</sup> He later added that New Jersey has a “heavy Arab population” and that what he witnessed was “not good.” If the concept of bullshit is of any politico-epistemological value then one would expect it to apply in some or all of these cases, each of which is representative of some of the political tactics employed in 2016. One would expect it to apply both in the sense of

<sup>18</sup> See the account of Trump’s claim and responses to it in Ball, 2017, pp. 21–4.

providing a helpful *description* of these tactics and a promising *explanation* of their effectiveness. Unfortunately, the reality is much more complicated.

One reason for questioning the relevance of bullshit in these cases is that in at least two of them the putative bullshit was carefully crafted.<sup>19</sup> The bullshitter produces his statements without a concern for the truth and this implies a nonchalance or carelessness that is difficult to reconcile with any idea that a great deal of care and attention has gone into the production of his bullshit. Yet a great deal of care and attention certainly *did* go into the production of the two Brexit slogans, just as a great deal of care and attention goes into the production of many advertisements. However, for Frankfurt, bullshit can be carefully crafted and need not be unrefined. Crafted bullshit might be called *strategic* bullshit. Although the notion of crafted bullshit involves “a certain inner tension” (2005, p. 22) Frankfurt insists that it is coherent. The strategic bullshitter is still trying to get away with something and displays a certain laxity, even if the mode of laxity cannot be equated with “simple carelessness or inattention to detail” (2005, pp. 23–4). Rather, the strategic bullshitter’s laxity takes the form of indifference to reality.

If the Brexit slogans were bullshit, then they were strategic bullshit. It is possible to imagine someone coming up with the figure of £350 million for the UK’s weekly contribution to the EU, not knowing or caring whether the figure had any basis in reality and using it in a calculated manner to give voters the impression that the UK was paying a large sum for membership of the EU. This is not what happened. The £350 million figure was not plucked out of the air. The Treasury estimated that the UK’s notional annual contribution to the EU was £19 billion, and £19 billion divided by 52 is roughly £350 million. However, this takes no account of UK’s rebate from the EU. When this is taken into account, the net figure is closer to £175 million. Those responsible for the £350 million claim knew this but continued to use the higher figure.<sup>20</sup> A letter from the Chair of the U.K. Statistics Authority pointed out that the £350 million figure confused gross and net contributions and represented a “clear misuse of official statistics.”<sup>21</sup>

There is nothing new in the misuse of official statistics. The £350 million figure was clearly tendentious and misleading though it could be seen as having *some* basis in reality. The campaign in favor of remaining in the EU also made a series of tendentious and misleading claims. What does it add to describe such claims as “bullshit”? If bullshit includes misleading half-truths then such a description will not

<sup>19</sup> It was carefully crafted in at least the first two cases. It is much less clear to what extent Trump’s bullshit is crafted.

<sup>20</sup> In a lengthy blog post published in 2017 (<https://dominiccummings.com/2017/01/09/on-the-referendum-21-branching-histories-of-the-2016-referendum-and-the-frogs-before-the-storm-2/>), Dominic Cummings, one of the architects of the successful Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum, wrote that the aim of the £350 million a week slogan was “to provoke people into argument” and that “there is no single definitive figure because there are different sets of official figures but the Treasury gross figure is slightly more than £350 million of which we get back roughly half”

<sup>21</sup> The letter from Sir David Norgrove, which was addressed to Boris Johnson, can be viewed here: <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Letter-from-Sir-David-Norgrove-to-Foreign-Secretary.pdf>. The issues are complex, as is clear from this post: [https://fullfact.org/europe/foreign-secretary-and-uk-statistics-authority-350-million-explained/?utm\\_source=content\\_page&utm\\_medium=related\\_content](https://fullfact.org/europe/foreign-secretary-and-uk-statistics-authority-350-million-explained/?utm_source=content_page&utm_medium=related_content).

be strictly inaccurate but adds nothing to the analysis given by the Chair of the U.K. Statistics Authority. If, on the other hand, bullshit is understood as Frankfurt understands it, then describing the £350 million claim as bullshit is not just inaccurate but also potentially confusing. Unlike the President in TRADE DEFICIT, there was no question of those responsible for the claim having no idea of its truth value and not caring that they had no idea. They were not indifferent to reality, at least to the extent that it mattered to them that the £350 million figure was, at least loosely, based on an official figure. Viewed from this angle, the notion that the £350 million claim was bullshit is closer to being bullshit than the £350 million claim itself.

In 2016 Turkey was one of a group of nations being considered for EU membership even though it was a long way from satisfying the conditions for membership. The claim that “Turkey is joining the EU” was, if not straightforwardly false, then certainly misleading.<sup>22</sup> It is debatable how much its impact would have been lessened by a more accurate claim such as “Turkey is negotiating to join the EU.” The objective was to frighten voters about the prospect of mass immigration from Turkey, and the latter version might have been just as effective as a means of achieving this objective. The technique used by Brexit campaigners was similar to one described by Jason Stanley in his work on propaganda. Stanley writes:

Imagine, for example, a non-Muslim politician in the United States saying, “There are Muslims among us”. The assertion is true; there are many Muslims in the United States. But the claim is clearly some kind of warning. The speaker is raising the presence of Muslims to the attention of his audience to sow fear about Muslims.

(Stanley, 2015, p. 42)

“There are Muslims among us” is an example of what Stanley calls “demagogic propaganda.” The example shows that demagogic propaganda claims can be true, even if they *communicate* something false, in this case the falsehood that Muslims are inherently dangerous to others.<sup>23</sup> In the same way, the claim about Turkey was a truth or half-truth that worked as a warning about Turkish immigration and its adverse consequences. Since Turkish immigration would be Muslim immigration, the slogan indirectly sowed fear about Muslims entering the U.K.

Even more than the £350 million claim, describing the Turkey slogan as bullshit is unhelpful. It adds nothing to the characterization of it as propaganda and makes it more difficult to understand what is going on in such cases. Far from displaying a bullshitter’s indifference to truth and falsity, the propagandist is aware of the possibility of employing true assertions to communicate something false or to demonize minorities and foreigners. Those who came up with the Turkey slogan were using a tried and trusted propaganda technique. To describe them as bullshitting is to give entirely the wrong impression. The art of demagogic propaganda is to come up with a true statement that nevertheless distorts the nature of reality. The bullshitter is “neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 56). The demagogic propagandist is on the side of the false but in the guise of the truth or

<sup>22</sup> For some reason Ball claims that “strictly speaking, the poster could be described as true” (2017, p. 53).

<sup>23</sup> See Stanley, 2015, p. 42.

half-truth. To describe him as a bullshitter is to misrepresent the true nature of his skulduggery.

There might be concerns about relying too heavily on Stanley's account of propaganda given its idiosyncrasies and inconsistency with some of his own examples.<sup>24</sup> The key to Stanley's conception of propaganda is the notion of an *ideal*. He defines propaganda as "the employment of a political ideal against itself" (2015, p. xiii) and represents political propaganda as using the language of cherished ideals to unite people behind objectionable ends. For example, the idea that leaving the EU would enable the U.K. to "take back control" appealed to the cherished ideal of self-mastery. What made it self-undermining was the probability that exiting the EU would drastically diminish rather increase the U.K.'s autonomy and self-mastery. However, this conception of propaganda—what might be called the *ideals* conception—makes poor sense of the claim about Turkish immigration and, for that matter, of "There are Muslims among us." In neither case is the language of cherished ideals being employed, let alone being employed against the ideals themselves. There is no ideal to which "There are Muslims among us" appeals.

A different conception of propaganda is needed to make sense of these examples. On what might be called an *affective* conception, propaganda works by manipulating people's *emotions*.<sup>25</sup> As Brennan notes anti-Nazi propaganda during World War II "tried to instill fear and racist paranoia" (2017, p. 36), in this case fear of Germans. In much the same way, as Stanley notes, "There are Muslims among us" tries to sow fear of Muslims. The instilling of fear of Muslims was also the point of the Turkey slogan. In the case of Trump's comment about people cheering the downing of the Twin Towers, the target emotion was *hatred* of Muslims. Fear and hatred are not the only emotions that affective propaganda tries to instill. It might also attempt to instill emotions like pride and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, it is not built into the notion of affective propaganda that it manipulates people's emotions for objectionable ends. Anti-Nazi propaganda was not propaganda in the service of an objectionable end, even if the specific forms that this propaganda took were sometimes objectionable. Having said that, fear and hatred are certainly the most potent of the emotions that propaganda instills, and it is a fact that propaganda has often served objectionable ends.

A form of propaganda that is closely related to affective propaganda is what one might call *identity* propaganda. Identity propaganda appeals to a narrative about who "we" are, who "they" are, and what "they" and doing to "us." Identity propaganda seeks to sharpen the division between them and us, and promotes the conception of "them" as "the other"—alien, inferior but a threat to "us." Trump's comment about 9/11 was a classic piece of identity propaganda. In this case, Muslims are the Other, and what they are doing to "us"—to America—is cheering our destruction. Since this form of "othering" serves to instill fear and hatred of the Other, identity propaganda can also be affective propaganda.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Brennan, 2017 for some telling criticisms of Stanley's account.

<sup>25</sup> See Brennan, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> On "othering," see Brons 2015.

Another concept that is useful for present purposes is that of hate speech.<sup>27</sup> This can be defined, very roughly, as any form of expression that denigrates a person or persons on account of their belonging to a specific social group. Trump's Jersey City claim denigrated the Muslim population of New Jersey on account of their Muslim identity. It was therefore both an example of identity propaganda and hate speech. Another even more overt example of this combination was Trump's denigration of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. as criminals and rapists. To describe such remarks as mere bullshit is not only to misdescribe them but also to underestimate their potency and offensiveness. Hate speech is dangerous in a way that mere bullshit is not. It is speech that promotes, incites, and justifies violence or discrimination against a particular group of people.

The question raised earlier was whether the notions of bullshit and post-truth are descriptively or explanatorily adequate in relation to recent political events. Enough has been said to raise questions about their descriptive adequacy. Their explanatory adequacy is no less questionable. The apparent effectiveness of the various tactics described above has less to do with the power of bullshit than the power of propaganda and hate speech. The use of "bullshit" as a catch-all word to describe all of these tactics ignores significant differences between them and creates the false impression of a single, unified methodology. The claim about Arab Americans celebrating 9/11 or Mexican rapists entering the U.S. resonated with many Trump supporters because they appealed to their xenophobia. What needs to be understood is why xenophobia is a such a powerful force in politics, and the theory of bullshit offers few answers.<sup>28</sup>

These remarks also have a bearing on the descriptive and explanatory value of the concept of post-truth. Is it plausible that people are susceptible to bullshit because they don't want to know the truth, don't care about the truth, or think that perception is reality? Such a blanket assertion is hard to justify, not least because there are many more straightforward explanations of recent political developments: for example, pro-Brexit voters who believed that the £350 million claim was literally *true* were presumably not frightened of the truth, however misguided they might have been in other ways. Others may have believed that the £350 million claim expressed a deeper truth, even if not the literal truth. Such voters cannot be accused of not caring about the truth or of supposing that there is no difference between what is taken to be true and what is true. This is presumably not their attitude in their daily lives, where the distinction between what seems true and what is true will be both familiar and important to them.

Truth also matters for propagandists and strategic bullshitters. It must matter to them which of their techniques is effective and they will want to know the unvarnished truth about that. The luxury of treating the truth as unimportant or determined by their own beliefs is not one that they can afford. Furthermore, what people say about the nature of truth or facts in the heat of political debate is one thing. Their actual view is another. When one of Trump's officials asserted that there

<sup>27</sup> See Brown 2015 for an analysis.

<sup>28</sup> A much more promising approach is to focus on the roots of ethnonationalism in the U.S. and U.K. See the account of the roots of ethnonationalism more in Appadurai, 2006.

were facts and “alternative facts” about the number of people who attended his inauguration this was seized upon as evidence of the rise of post-truth.<sup>29</sup> It is more likely to be evidence of the absurdities that political operators produce when under pressure to explain away what they recognize as awkward facts. For the hapless official who came up with the line about alternative facts, the obstinate and inconvenient truth was that the crowd for President Trump’s inauguration was smaller than the crowd for President Obama’s. Everything else was spin, as she probably realized.

Even after the limitations of recent analyses of the alleged rise of post-truth or power of bullshit have been exposed, there is the question whether such analyses are not just flawed but harmful. The case for saying that they are is that they trivialize and misdescribe political techniques that are more pernicious than those of the bullshitter or post-truther. It is a travesty to describe hate speech as mere bullshit since this does not even come close to capturing what is wrong with it and why it works. In the same way, it is a travesty to describe demagogic or racist propaganda as bullshit. For Frankfurt, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies. There are many grounds to question this claim, and even greater grounds to question the idea that bullshit is more dangerous than hate speech, demagogic propaganda, or various other techniques whose use has become increasingly prevalent since 2016. Each technique merits serious study in its own right rather than as a species of the genus *bullshit* or *post-truth*. This is not to question the legitimacy of these concepts or the possibility that some assertions are indeed bullshit or expressions of a post-truth attitude. It is to question their ultimate value as tools of politico-epistemological analysis.

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<sup>29</sup> The official in question was Kellyanne Conway. The episode is recounted in the *Wikipedia* entry on alternative facts: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative\\_facts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_facts).

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