On Bovine Excrement

Words, the poet and playwright Amiri Baraka once noted, have users. But, more important, users have words. Baraka believed that if we want to understand language, we need to get out of its etymological backyard and into its sociological neighborhood. Take the word *bullshit*. When it’s uttered in a locker room or a closed door meeting between lawyers working on plea bargains, context says the word means “you’re lying.” In such a venue, it’s hardly profane. The same word used by a high school teacher or on television would be heavily profane: its rare utterance gives the word a force it would otherwise not have. Our in-group/out-group divisions, our media-mass relationships, cannot be ignored when we interrogate words under the lamp of usage.

Indeed, when we find a word’s context, we find its meaning, a fact that Harry Frankfurt, in *On Bullshit*, seems unable to grasp. Failing to look over the fence is just one drawback of his tiny book—it’s actually not a book but an essay spun out in Large Print to fill 67 pages, maybe 5,000 words. It’s disappointing to see such a smart guy explore the term only literarily. Throughout, I wanted Frankfurt to take a bus downtown where, when people say...
it, he’d know what it means.

His afternoon of linguistic adventure—"Harry Frankfurt’s Day Off"—is spent fishing in the dictionary. He first finds humbug, a word related to bullshit, which denotes "deliberate" or "deceptive misrepresentation." Humbug, like a hoax, is done by someone who knows she’s lying. That’s not bullshit, Frankfurt says; the bullshitter doesn’t know and doesn’t care she’s not telling the truth. Bullshit can’t be lying because, he says, lying counters the truth: a lie can only occur when the teller knows the truth and is willfully claiming the opposite. Frankfurt notes that the word comes from "bull session," in which what a person "expresses or says is not to be understood as being what he means wholeheartedly or believes unequivocally to be true."

In a deft turn, Frankfurt links bullshit to "hot air." "Just as hot air is speech that has been emptied of all informative content, so excrement is matter from which everything nutritive has been removed." Just like B.S. Moreover, bullshit is "closer to bluffing, surely, than to telling a lie." Which leads to Frankfurt’s most decisive statement in his miniature tractate. "The essence of bullshit is not that it is false but that it is phony" [author’s emphasis]. For him, anything phony has "no concern with the truth," which, he hopes, has neatly cleaved crap from fabrication.

Much of Frankfurt’s explanation I find interesting. But to say bullshit is like flotsam, adrift from lying and falsity, loses me. I agree bullshit is hard to define; but that doesn’t mean the word, in its putative "unconcern," harms no one or is free from abuse. I would argue that bullshit is very much concerned with not being true: successfully manufacturing phoniness, the stinkier the better, is what our culture has become so adept at doing.

Midway through Frankfurt’s little opus we become aware of a big problem. The writing. Surveying the liar’s cosmos, Frankfurt focuses his scope with clumsy ineptitude. He espies his target as, "this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit." Lack of connection to a concern with truth. As of the essence of...

How awful to have to stumble through briar patches of prepositional phrases, easily recognizable as the thorny crown of academese. While Frankfurt may be navigating difficult concepts, he sounds vague, tentative, awkward. Such academese echoes his own idea of bullshit: indifferent "to how things really are." But worse than indifference is his failure to analyze the patriarchal language communities that shape our communications. Frankfurt avoids the brightness of context, the world of relational usage. He avoids the users...
Frankfurt is right to say that we’re drowning in bullshit. He would have been more right to say—and to probe—how clever B.S. managers keep creating the wall of swill, ten feet high and rising. Unsurprisingly, the fabricators of self-preserving institutions are the source: those writers of legal, medical, ecclesiastical, and academic jargon (among the latter is our author), those lobbyists, politicians, financial planners, press secretaries, publicists, cable newsmen, and other speakers of twaddle. I give you the bullshit of Hollywood: tech-nasty terrorists or soulless corporations are defeated by rogue individuals who, along the way, have acrobatic sex with kinky partners. Such dissemblers have made bullshit a trusted form of deceit, palatable to all.

Often toward diabolical ends. When President Bush says that "freedom is on the march in Iraq," I can think of no better word to describe it than bullshit. That it’s intellectually vacuous, State-of-the-Union nonsense as well doesn’t lessen its punch. Of course, Bush’s line mystifies us with its gobbledygook: Who could be against freedom? Of course, he’s snowing the masses with feel good phrases like "enemies of freedom" and "they hate us for our freedoms." Frankfurt has said on Book-TV (when asked by a few uncomprehending questioners who want examples) that politics is bullshit. But the politics of Bush’s newpeak is not unconcerned with truth. True lies lie behind the newpeak: the idea is to evade how bad things are (what’s really marching in Iraq is an impending civil war) and to evade the embarrassment of yet another American quagmire.

While we’re huffing about the onset of the lying and NSA illegalities, Bush’s repeated claims about freedom justify his administration’s invasion and convince enough people that any security policy has value as long as it "stays the course" and we’re on permanent alert. Repeated statements justify and convince. Or, they justify as they convince. So do mantra-like iterations of the "war on terror," "tax relief," "affordable health care." How can there be a war on an idea? Whose taxes are being relieved? Who, whether insured or not, thinks health care is affordable?

Frankfurt thinks it informative to distinguish such crap from lying. It’s true: no one can take "the war on terror" to court on grounds that its hollowness has violated statutory law or ethical guidelines. It matters less what Bush and the neo-conservatives believe is true. It matters that as users know how to exploit our willingness—our psychologically astute and neurologically evolved naivete—to accept what they tell us is true. Who needs evidence when circumlocutory claims act like evidence: when fundamentalists preach obedience to morality because it’s the literal word of God; when Enron uses legalese to fake loans to itself and then record the loan’s
interest as income; when actors sell health products by asserting, "I’m not a doctor but I play one on T.V."; when James Frey, who (before being clubbed by Oprah to admit he lied) argues that, by his reckoning, five percent falsification is "comfortably within the realm of what’s appropriate for a memoir."

That religious claims of supremacy or of inviolable sacred imagery (Muhammad can be portrayed in language but not in a cartoon?) are largely unchallengeable in most cultures shows just how much the bullshitters can get away with. Such pretenses are not indifferent to the truth; they are the truth. Moreover, they are the truths of technological savvy McLuhan warned us of, a kind of bewitching misrepresentation. Bullshitters dazzles us via the mass media, whose nature it is to enthrall. For our part, we can give in to its gloss, or we can seek to disenthrall ourselves from it. And yet my feeling is, too many of us would rather brood on bullshit than examine the not-very-sanitary interaction between its purveyors and the purveyed.