

I would rather see more bullshit*

Luis López

luislope@uic.edu

University of Illinois Chicago

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the presence in public life of lies together with other forms of misleading statements that are usually referred to as bullshit: meaningless statements, unresponsive answers to questions, statements that trigger false implicatures. I present a typology of the types of bullshit with ample examples that highlight similarities and differences. Focusing on the USA context, I show that politicians used to avoid plain lies in very public fora with intense media attention about topics that could easily be fact-checked. Instead, other forms of avoiding the truth – evasive answers to questions, misleading statements - would be used instead. The political turbulence that has developed since 2016 has brought about a radical change in sectors of public discourse, so that even a huge, televised audience can be fed a barrage of easily falsifiable lies. This change came about after the discovery that a candidate could lie extensively to at least some section of the electorate without being penalized. My conclusion then is the opposite of Frankfurt's ([2005]1986) original idea that bullshit reveals disregard for the truth. In public spaces, the use of bullshit is motivated by a reluctance to lie, if only because the speaker does not want to get caught. Thus, bullshit shows careful regard for the truth, even if this concern is purely instrumental.

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1. Introduction

David Emmons, a BBC Radio 4 journalist said the following in December 2015: ‘These days, if a politician is caught in an outright lie - claiming something to be true which he or she knows to be false - it can be political suicide. At the very least it can prove highly damaging.’

Just as Emmons was saying this, the ground had already started to shift under his feet. We now have a new breed of politicians, in the USA associated with the MAGA movement, who can and do lie without harming their political prospects while those not associated with MAGA do not have the same leeway. Legacy politicians dissemble, mislead, evade – in other words, they bullshit – when they do not want to tell the truth but are afraid to get caught in a lie. Frankfurt ([2005] 1986) famously argued that the bullshitter shows indifference to the truth while the liar shows at least a minimum concern for truth. I argue this conclusion is reached on the basis of a minimal subset of bullshit types. Once a complete

typology of bullshit is laid out, we see that there are types of bullshit that evince a preoccupation for the truth – and that lying in contemporary politics is what shows indifference to truth.

Traditional political lies are usually uttered in fairly circumscribed contexts because the dissembling politician is worried and concerned about the truth, even if only in an instrumental sense. The novelty of the political landscape after 2016 is that traditional bullshit is now sharing public space with brazen lies among one sector of the political class, even in situations of maximum media exposure, because they know they can. This motivates the title of this essay: I would rather see more old school bullshit than open lying because of what it says about the present and future of our democracy.

Crilley (2018: 421) points out that in scholarly work regarding bullshit “there is a tension between [...] suggestions that there have been ‘genuine changes in the way public discourse was conducted [...] and [...] claims that a deep-seated culture of bullshit (that is hard to change) led to the ruptures of 2016.” I agree that there is a tension between the two claims. The question is whether this tension is, in fact, irreducibly paradoxical or can be accounted for. I argue that both claims are true: political bullshit has been with us since time immemorial but also something radically changed around 2016 with the appearance of lies in contexts that used to be free from open mendacity. This paper presents an analysis of what these changes were.

In section 2 I delimit the senses of the concept ‘bullshit’ and I present a detailed typology of the forms of bullshit. In section 3 I present some additional background. In section 4 I discuss the distribution of lies and bullshit in traditional politics. In section 5 I discuss the changes that have taken place in political discourse since 2016 and account for Crilley’s paradox. Section 6 presents the conclusions.

2. Typology

2.1 Bullshit and falsehood

Frankfurt (2005[1986]) (see also Dynel 2018) argued that there is a clear conceptual and empirical distinction between lies and bullshit (a stance that he abandoned in Frankfurt 2002): When you lie, you believe what you say is false and there is a concern that some statements are true and others are false. When you bullshit, you simply don’t care if what you are saying is true or not: truth is irrelevant if all you want to do is evoke a certain emotion and mislead about your purpose. This led him to conclude that bullshitting is more dangerous for democracy because at least when someone lies, the truth is still lurking in the background.

Other scholars, working in the wake of Frankfurt’s influential essay, claim that there is an extensional overlap but a principled conceptual distinction (Stokke and Fallis 2017, Gibbons 2024). Stokke and Fallis (2017) claim that “most lies are not instances of bullshitting”. Cova (2024) and Cohen

(2006) argue that some lies are also bullshit, some lies are not bullshit. Fallis (2015:1) claims that most lies are bullshit and doubts that there is a principled distinction between the two.

Defining bullshit is difficult because whether a statement is bullshit or not depends on one's ideological stance. Statements like "vaccines cause autism" or "vaccines are safe" will be regarded as unobjectionably true by some people and utter bullshit by other people. Thus, we are not going to agree on what 'bullshit' denotes. However, it is possible to identify a sense or senses of bullshit: even if we do not agree on the status of vaccines, we can agree that the reason why we see one statement or the other as bullshit is because they are obvious (to ourselves) falsehoods. Thus, "obvious falsehood" is one of the senses of bullshit, even if we do not agree on which propositions are obvious falsehoods.

The typology that I develop in this article is an attempt at classifying the senses of bullshit, even though I understand that the examples that I provide do not denote bullshit for many people. To facilitate the discussion, I assume that the examples of bullshit that I present would be regarded as bullshit by an ideologically mainstream person – call it *Subject-m* – who trusts that the science they learnt in school provides knowledge, is skeptical of unsupported conspiracy theories; does not rely on explanations of natural phenomena based on supernatural agents, and finds the usage of fancy words for ordinary things to be pretentious.

Obviously false statements are the clearest examples of bullshit. Our Subject-m would regard as bullshit all the pseudo-science that has been polluting the social networks in recent years: the earth is flat, evolution is wrong, vaccines do not prevent illnesses, diet and good vibrations cure cancer (see Johnson 2010, Cova 2024). Likewise, conspiracy theories like Pizza-gate fall into this category of bullshit.¹ A false statement that is not obviously false is not considered to be bullshit. Claiming that Ramón y Cajal was born in 1853 would not be regarded as bullshit by Subject-m, although it is false – however, a specialist might regard it as bullshit because, in their opinion, it is an obviously false statement (he was born in 1852!). Again, we see that even though we cannot agree on the extension of the notion 'bullshit' we can agree on the sense of it.² Finally, if a lie is a falsehood uttered by an agent aware that what they say is false (see Mahon 2015 among many recent references to the philosophy of lies), then it follows that a lie that is obviously false is also bullshit.

2.2 *Bullshit and bullshit**

¹ Pizza-gate was a conspiracy theory according to which Hilary Clinton, John Podesta and other democratic leaders were also the leaders of a pedophilic ring housed in the basement of a pizza house.
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/pizzagate-gunman-d-c-sentenced-four-years-prison>

² The denotation of bullshit is capacious. There is in fact a show in Netflix called "bullshit: the game show". It works like this: a participant answers an outlandish question (which animal's fart is worst smelling?) and then they have to rationalize the answer and convince other participants that their narrative is true. If the other participants are not convinced, they call bullshit. So, bullshit in this show seems to be equivalent to what used to be called tall tales.

There are many bullshit statements that are not false. I refer to this set as bullshit*, an ad hoc technical term that I take to be equal to the set of bullshit statements minus the set of bullshit false statements. I further classify bullshit* in two categories according to their truth values: (I) statements that are meaningless and (II) statements that are literally true but that avoid the Question Under Discussion, trigger false inferences, or are expressed with overblown rhetoric. I continue to assume that we all agree on the senses of bullshit even if we do not agree whether a particular statement is bullshit: for instance, there is a general consensus that overblown rhetoric is bullshit, but we may not agree whether a particular statement is overblown rhetoric.

Some scholars have defined bullshit* (or generally, bullshit) in terms of the speaker's intention or the speaker's state of mind with respect to the claim being uttered, as Frankfurt (1986[2005]) himself did. Choosing one or the other approach makes a taxonomic difference: Mukerji (2018) classifies the Pizza-gate conspiracy theory as bullshit because the people who started it were (presumably) indifferent to truth; however, if someone retweeted the false information sincerely, then the Pizza-gate conspiracy would not be bullshit anymore. I would say the Pizza-gate conspiracy is bullshit from Subject-m's point of view, regardless of the state of mind of the utterer, because it is obviously, ridiculously false. Since it is false, then it is not bullshit* because bullshit* is limited to statements that are not false. Notice that the verb 'to bullshit' evokes a malicious agent, while the nouns 'bullshit' and bullshit* are free from this association. Somebody who sincerely says 'the earth is flat' is not bullshitting, even if the proposition itself is bullshit from the point of view of Subject-m.

I do not expect my classification to be fully exhaustive or definitive, although I hope it is useful as we investigate the ramifications of this concept.^{3,4} Some of the types of bullshit* discussed here have been mentioned in the literature, others have not, and no one has discussed all of them under the same roof. I believe this classification highlights some similarities and differences that previous work has missed.

³ I don't discuss academic philosophy as a fertile ground to grow bullshit (see Cohen 2006, Ivankovic 2016, Pennycook et al 2016). Were I to include it, it should probably be located in (I.1).

⁴ There are two other taxonomic proposals in recent years. Cohen (2006:20) classifies them into two categories: (i) nonsense rubbish and (ii) trivial insincere talk or writing. Cohen claims Frankfurt wrote about (ii) while Cohen himself is interested in (i) (particularly, with regards to academic writing). He also argues that bullshit as in (i) might be uttered sincerely, so you can have bullshit without bullshitting. The reader can see that some forms of bullshit that are identified in the main body of this paper fall out of Cohen's consideration, such as pseudo-science claims.

For Meibauer's (2025) there are five categories of bullshit: (i) bullshitting; (ii) persuasive bullshitting; (iii) bald-faced bullshitting; (iv) pseudo-profound bullshitting; (v) pseudo-scientific bullshitting. Unlike my proposal based on truth conditions, no conceptual parameter seems to structure this classification.

[I]

Meaningless statements: I am referring here to statements that are not intended to have a truth value in the real world, or at least the truth value is somewhat irrelevant for the speaker's purpose.

[I.1]

Traditional Bullshit*: It consists of utterances that seem to have content, but they do not. Instead, they only aim at an emotional response in the audience – cf.: Cova's (2024) point that bullshit is seductive, interesting, while also being shallow. This is the category that Frankfurt (1986[2005]) discusses, which he describes as statements uttered without concern for the truth. Frankfurt himself provides the classic example of [I.1] is what is usually referred to as bombastic grandstanding, as in the following example:

- (1) Our great and blessed country whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind...

Frankfurt (1986[2005:17])

The purpose of grandstanding is for the speaker to present themselves as a patriot and a deep thinker while flattering the audience as members of a special group that participates in a solemn occasion. (For discussions of Traditional Bullshit*, see Cohen 2006, Pennycook et al 2016, Tosi and Warmke 2016, 2020)

[I.2]

Wishful Thinking deserves to be regarded as a separate subcategory of [I]. I use this label to refer to statements that express one's wish for a particular state of affairs, (most likely, in a spiritual or symbolic plane independent of empirical knowledge), which one objectively understands is nonsense. Possibly the most famous piece of [I.2] bullshit* is the following quotation:⁵

- (2) When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.

Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*.

⁵ An anonymous reviewer points out that self-deception is possible and therefore someone might believe (2) literally – that the universe has a consciousness and a will of its own and it is attentive to the desires of human beings. I agree with the reviewer, and it is a good example why it is useful to adopt the point of view of a hypothetical Speaker-m. Speaker-m would regard (2) to be nonsense, and therefore bullshit. Self-deception has attracted a considerable literature in philosophy and psychology. For a general discussion, see Deweese-Boyd (2023).

Notice that [I.2] and obviously plain falsehoods are sufficiently different to warrant classifying them in different categories. Plain bullshit falsehoods are presented as true statements that run counter to scientific or elite consensus and at least some of their proponents seem to truly believe them. Claims like (2) are not meant to be literally true.

[II]

This category consists of literally true statements that are nonetheless bullshit*: I classify here all those statements which could be regarded as off topic, those that trigger misleading inferences, as well as some types of grandiloquent rhetoric. The main property that all the types of bullshit* in [II] have in common is that they are uttered to avoid telling something that could be regarded as false or uninteresting, or something true that the speaker prefers to keep hidden. Their common property then is that the speaker performs a speech act of assertion purporting to undertake the communicative commitment that the conversation calls for when, in fact, they avoid doing so. This category is of particular interest for scholars worried about dishonesty in public life and for this reason I discuss it in more detail than the others.

[II.1]

I label Unresponsive Bullshit* those true statements that do not answer the Question Under Discussion (henceforth QUD) while simultaneously pretending to align their discourse goals with their interlocutor's (on QUD, and discourse goals, see Roberts 2012). In Gricean terms, unresponsive bullshit* is a violation of Relation, and sometimes also manner, which may trigger an implicature (Grice 1989). The literature has articulated some detailed discussions of this type of bullshit*: Carson (2010, 2016), Meibauer (2025), Sorensen (2011), Stokke and Fallis (2017). Carson (2016: 57) presents us with what I consider to be a classic example. During a debate, a presidential candidate is asked: "I want to ask you about your criteria for nominating people to the US Supreme Court. Would you be willing to nominate anyone who supports the Roe vs. Wade decision? Or, will you regard opposition to Roe vs. Wade a necessary requirement for anyone you nominate?" To which the candidate answers:

- (3) There are many things that need to be taken into account when nominating someone for the Supreme Court. This isn't the only relevant consideration. Many other factors are also important. The Supreme Court is a venerable institution and, as our Founding Fathers wisely intended, a central pillar of our blessed democracy. We need outstanding people to sit on the Supreme Court. I would nominate someone with an outstanding intellect and legal mind who has adequate judicial experience and supports my judicial philosophy of following the Constitution as it is written.

The QUD is transparent and a yes/no answer is expected if the discourse goals of the interlocutors are aligned. Instead, the candidate provides a set of plausible assertions which, although thematically related, do not address the QUD. In fact, after reading the candidate's response, one does not know what their position is with respect to choosing Supreme Court justices that oppose abortion, which is of course the point. The candidate has avoided answering the very explicit QUD, has feigned to share a discourse goal with their interlocutor, thereby committing type [II.1] bullshit* (but see Dynel 2018: 332 for a different analysis).

[II.2]

In [II.2] I locate true statements that lead the inadvertent audience to false inferences, such as misleading implicatures (other than violations of Relation) or false presuppositions. [II.2] is pervasive in commercial publicity. I call this Misleading Bullshit*. Here is a classic example:

- (4) More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette.
(ad campaign, 1940-9, see Gardner and Brandt 2006).

This assertion says: Doctors who smoke prefer camel. However, its particular syntax triggers an inference: doctors approve of Camels and prefer to smoke this brand. However, notice that this assertion would be true if 97% of doctors did not smoke at all, 1% smoked Camel, and about .5% smoked either Lucky Strike, Marlboro, Winston or Chesterfield. Tobacco ad campaigns are a rich source of [II.2] bullshitting*, as they try to communicate the false message that cigarettes are not all that bad for your health without explicitly lying, thus resorting to misleading statements that trigger the desired inferences. For this purpose, using medical doctors as props is regarded as useful (or was, at a time when M.D.s were universally respected in the USA). Here is another example:

- (5) 20,679 physicians say "Luckies are less irritating".
(ad campaign, 1930, see Gardner and Brandt 2006)

This looks like a very big number. But actually, 20k was not even 10% of the number of doctors that were active in the USA at the time the ad ran. What did the other 90% of doctors say? We don't know. Notice also that the comparative structure less X than Y is missing the Y: Less irritating than what? We also don't know. Lacking a crucial constituent, the utterance does not have a truth value, the utterer simply trusts the reader/listener to complete the sentence in the desired direction (for the notions of Completion and

Expansion, see Bach 1994). Thus, in order to extract a fully-fledged proposition from this utterance, the addressee would have to complete the sentence with an additional unarticulated constituent, most likely “Luckies are less irritating than all the other brands” – while the speaker avoids the commitment entailed by actually saying so. The use of Completion and Expansion to lie and mislead is extensively discussed in Saul (2012). Additionally, the use of a very precise, not round-up figure gives the impression of scientific truth.

We also find numerous examples of type [II.2] bullshitting* in the political sphere. The following example is drawn from the latest presidential address to both chambers of congress:

- (6) It has been stated by many that the first month of our presidency — it's our presidency — is the most successful in the history of our nation.
(Trump congressional address, March 5, 2025)

The interesting item in this sentence, what makes it bullshit* rather than a plain falsehood or a lie, is the quantifier ‘many’. ‘many’ can only be evaluated against a context: In a sentence like “Chris has read many novels by Dickens, ‘many’ would be interpreted differently if Chris was an English professor or a teenager. Therefore, the question that (8) triggers is: What is the context against which the truth value of “many x say y” is to be evaluated? If ‘many x’ is a subset of the members of Trump’s family and acolytes, then (8) is possibly true. If the variable that ‘many’ binds is supposed to range over history professors, it is certainly false. This is a clear example of bullshit* because it is not necessarily false but the inference one is invited to draw – that there is some sort of consensus among knowledgeable people that the Trump presidency is excellent - is false.

Thus, a skillful type [II.2] bullshitter* can use syntax, contextually interpreted quantifiers or incomplete utterances to mislead their audience into false inferences. It is not surprising that they also manipulate conversational implicatures (Grice 1989) for the same purpose.⁶ Consider the following example:

- (7) Some people believe that the USA should negotiate with terrorists and radicals, as if some ingenious argument will persuade them that they have been wrong all along”
(Bush, 2008, speech in the Knesset).

⁶ There is a rich recent literature on false implicatures, mostly arising from Meibauer’s (2005) argument that a true statement that triggers a false implicature should be regarded as a lie. The empirical work carried out so far (see Weigmann and Meibauer 2019 for a summary report, as well as Wiegmann 2025 for recent developments) has shown that at an intuitive level we see a false implicature to be fundamentally dishonest and an almost-lie, even if not quite the same thing as a lie.

[II.3]

For additional examples, consider the examples in (8). As before, the B speaker is meant to be Subject-m. This individual will qualify the A utterances in (8) as bullshit:

- 9

A-Chicken with parsley.

B-That's bullshit!

As the reader can see, many different types of utterances can be regarded as bullshit. Bullshit can be a plain lie, or a statement honestly believed but obviously false, or a true statement that is nonetheless insincere. If we circumscribe our attention to bullshit*, it seems that the property that all instances of bullshit* have in common is that they are deficient in sincerity, even if the statement itself cannot be regarded as a lie. Meaningless statements like [I.1], [I.2] and silly rhetoric like [II.3] are intended to make us feel good about events or things and, most specially, the addressee. I take them to be reasonably benign. I consider [II.1] more harmful. It functions in a bifurcated way: for the politically naïve, a little discourse like (3) gives the impression that the speaker is thoughtful and reasonably aligned with their own thinking; for the politically astute, the bullshit* is very easy to detect and its purpose transparent - and easily forgiven, if the speaker is of the same political party. Since the same message functions differently with different audiences, I suggest that [II.1] bullshit* is comparable to a dogwhistle.⁷

Even more deleterious is the effect of [II.2] on political culture. The speaker who uses this type of bullshit* wants the addressee to add a false proposition to their discourse model, while simultaneously making the addressee believe that the false proposition is part of their common ground of shared believed propositions. Unlike straightforward lies, type [II.2] bullshit* allows the insincere speaker to avoid committing themselves to the false proposition. In later sections I turn my attention to misleading [II.2] bullshit*. But first I would like to discuss some of the earlier literature on bullshit to set the frame to my own discussion.

3. Background

A number of scholars have been working on bullshit, whether to define it, present their own taxonomy (see footnote 4), or to analyze its effects and consequences. In the process, these earlier scholars provide

⁷ A dogwhistle is a linguistic form that sends a message to one group while sending a richer one to another group. For instance, the usage of the phrase 'wonder-working power' in a State of the Union address acts as banal meaningless bullshit* for most of the population, but some people recognize it as a term used in evangelical liturgy; this way, the speaker communicates a religious commitment to a crucial constituency of which many will be unaware. See Henderson and McCready (2024) for a detailed analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of dogwhistles.

some revealing insights. I summarize those that are more closely related to my own contribution, not attempting to provide a thorough overview within the limits of this article.⁸

It is fair to say that contemporary philosophical interest in bullshit stems from Harry Frankfurt's essay (Frankfurt 2005[1986]). He argues that bullshit has two distinctive features. The first feature is its disregard for the truth - as opposed to actively lying, which involves an awareness and preoccupation for the truth. The second feature is that the bullshitter hides their intention: they pretend to be concerned with the truth (in sections 5 and 6 I argue against Frankfurt's claims). Thus, as mentioned above, bullshit is a property that is defined in terms of the attitude of the speaker. The taxonomy in section 2 shows a number of examples in which the descriptive term bullshit can be applied to utterances that are pronounced sincerely – consider obviously false statements like or wishful thinking statements like (2) -, so you can utter bullshit without bullshitting. This suggests that locating bullshit in the speaker's attitude might be too limiting. Additionally, as we have seen, plain straightforward lies can also be regarded as bullshit. Frankfurt took one sub-type of bullshit, the type that I discussed under [I.1] and generalized its properties to all kinds of bullshit.

Johnson (2010) discusses bullshit of the obvious falsehood variety and suggests that the bullshitter is not indifferent to truth (as in Frankfurt 2005[1986]), rather, they are culpable of intellectual negligence. There is some truth to this, although I would say that this negligence is accompanied by a peculiar type of arrogance, the arrogance that makes one defy received opinion and pursue an eccentric theory - without realizing that they lack the intellectual chops to carry it out. Johnson (2010)'s analysis also does not generalize to other types of bullshit*, such as the category of truthful bullshit* [II].

Cova (2024: 597) also overgeneralizes from a sub-set: he argues that the feature that all instances of bullshit propositions have in common is that they seem interesting superficially, but upon inspection it turns out they are not; they are seductive and give rise to an unwarranted positive emotion. (If we are talking about attempting to arouse negative emotions, then we're talking about mindfucking (McGinn 2008, Meibauer 2016). This definition does cover many instances of bullshit*; however, [II.1] bullshit* represented in (3) is not always seductive or interesting, nor does it need to be in order to fulfill its conversational goal.

Unresponsive bullshit [II.1] has played an important role in analyses. Carson (2016:60) argues that unresponsive bullshit is a counterexample to Frankfurt's definition: An unresponsive answer suggests that the speaker is concerned with the truth (with hiding the truth). I agree, and I explore this insight in depth in later sections. Stokke and Fallis (2017) and Stokke (2018) define bullshit* as a statement that

⁸ There are also many investigations into fake news (Gelfert 2021, Fritz and Cabrera 2022a,b, Mukerji 2018, and references therein). The topics overlap, to the extent that many instances of fake news are bullshit. I don't discuss fake news as a category in this paper.

ignores the current QUD – in other words, in their view, all bullshit* is unresponsive [II.1] bullshit. However, this approach does not encompass other types of bullshit, such as [I.1] or even [II.2]. Consider [I.1]: Meaningless statements, may actually not have a QUD at all. As for [II.2], we can imagine that a claim such as (4) answers the implicit QUD ‘are lucky strikes better than other brands?’, probably misleading the public regarding what doctors believe, but not evading the QUD.

Some authors define bullshit in terms of the speaker’s attitude, like Frankfurt did (Mukerji 2018, Gibbons 2024). Meibauer (2016:75) adds an additional ingredient: not only does the bullshitter show a loose concern with the truth, but they also present the dubious assertion with excessive certainty. I agree that a lot of bullshit falls in this category. But not all instances of bullshit are overly confident; for instance, a speaker who utters an unresponsive [II.1] kind of bullshit, may in fact express - or feign - uncertainty as to what the right answer is.

As the reader can see, different authors have focused on different types of bullshit and generalized their conclusions to all bullshit – in the process adding insight on different facets of the concept without fully encompassing it. Despite all this work, Crilley’s questions remain unresolved: Is bullshit an old or a new phenomenon? What has changed since 2016? With this much background, we are ready to approach the questions that guide my research.

4. Bullshit* and the Fear of Lying

Why do politicians bullshit*? The bullshitting* politician seeks to obtain an advantage: in electoral politics, it means being (re)elected; likewise, the bullshitting* marketer seeks to sell a product. In order to achieve these goals, the different types of bullshit* fulfill different purposes. Bullshit* of type [I.1] makes the audience feel good about themselves, even grateful for being able to participate in something important and solemn; [II.3] in commercial advertisement flatters our desire to be acknowledged as a person of high status; at least in the case of restaurant menus, [II.3] bullshit* may enhance the diner’s experience: perhaps ‘prince of the seas’ does taste better than ‘sardine’. Now I would like to focus on [II.1] and [II.2], which are prevalent in politics.

Gibbons (2024) argues that bullshitting* is a rational behavior, an adequate response to perverse incentives and a reasonable path for a politician to obtain their goals. For a politician to find out the truth takes a lot of work, and it is costly, both in terms of procedural costs and opportunity costs. If the politician weighs the costs and benefits of telling the truth vs bullshit*, they will find it is easier to utter some piece of bullshit* and move on (Gibbons 2024:1006). Moreover, if the politician is able to mimic truth-telling, they can get the benefits of telling the truth with no cost. I agree that bullshitting* is a rational behavior in specific circumstances where the incentives to bullshit* are strong; however, Gibbons

does not provide an account of our central question, namely, the changes that have taken place since 2016: have the benefits of bullshitting* changed? If so, how?

Bullshitting* of type [II.1], [II.2] is, indeed, strategic. But I am not sure whether the bullshitter* makes a choice between bullshitting* and telling the truth, or rather between bullshitting* and lying. Take example (3). We could say that this candidate is avoiding the truth – that he will only select Supreme Court justices that oppose *Roe v. Wade* because he calculates that the truth would make him lose votes. But we could also say that he is avoiding telling a lie: that he may nominate justices that favor abortion.

In the following I would like to propose this change in perspective. Instead of comparing the costs and benefits of telling the truth v. bullshit*, as Gibbons does, I compare bullshit* with the costs and benefits of lying. Green (2001: 165) takes this path when he claims that “people use evasion and duplicity not just to avoid telling the truth, but also to avoid lying. At times, they go to great lengths to avoid saying that which is literally false. Why not simply lie? The answer is that we recognize, if mostly at an intuitive level, that lying involves a moral wrong that is mitigated in the case of mere misleading - mitigated because the misled party shares at least some of the blame for her false belief”. The claim that bullshitting* is evaluated as less reprehensible than lying has found some empirical support (Petrocelli 2018a,b). However, it does not account for the changes in public speech that have taken place since 2016; presumably, the moral scale that places lying lower than misleading – and the jury may still be out on this issue, see Saul (2012) - has not changed since 2001, when Green wrote his article. We need a perspective that provides us with insight into the contemporary political culture.

Let’s consider the following hypothesis: A politician bullshits* because they want to mislead their audience without being held to account: A politician that evades a straight answer or who provides an answer that triggers misleading implicatures can’t convincingly be challenged with the plain accusation “you lie!”. In this sense, politics behaves the same way as commercial publicity. The marketer does not want to be accused of false advertising (which can be prosecuted in civil court), so they are careful not to lie (see the examples 4 and 5). If we take this for granted, we can see that a politician may lie if they feel they can do it safely. So, here is a rule of thumb: Politicians and advertisers bullshit* in circumstances in which, if they lied, they could get caught and consequences would follow. In the following I present a couple of examples of how this model predicts the appearance of bullshit* and lies among traditional politicians (henceforth *tradpol*).

In the runup to the Iraq War, the Bush administration lied and bullshat* extensively. What is of interest to us is that they lied about some things and they bullshat* about others. Bush and the members of his administration lied about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. These lies were safe for them to utter because they were based on purported secret intelligence – so, only some intelligence

officers knew they were lying, and they kept mum. Journalists could not fact-check, although many doubted their claims because they were inconsistent with what was known about the Hussein regime.

However, when Bush was asked if Saddam Hussein was connected with Al Qaida or with the 9/11 attacks, Bush did not lie: instead, he bullshat*. He repeatedly provided unresponsive answers, always making sure that he pronounced the name Saddam and phrases like 9/11, terrorist attacks and the like in the same sentence, without explicitly claiming that Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks (see Gershkoff and Kushner's 2005 analysis of Bush's rhetoric). The strategy worked: at the time the Iraq War began 69% of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein had been involved in the 9/11 attacks and a staggering 82% believed that Hussein had collaborated with Al Qaida (Washington Post 9/6/2003).⁹ Both beliefs are utterly false. Why did Bush not lie directly about this issue? Because he knew that – unlike his lies about weapons of mass destruction - he could be called out on the lie: reasonably well-informed people knew that the 9/11 attacks had been orchestrated by an Islamic organization that viewed Hussein's secular regime with contempt, and vice-versa.

These two examples support my proposal that bullshit* and lies inhabit different ecologies in the tradpol's rhetorical landscape. Bush lied when he could get away with it because his lies were “supported” by secret intelligence and therefore could not be fact-checked; where he knew he could not lie he bullshat*.

Another circumstance under which a tradpol may lie is when speaking in front of a relatively small audience, such as the campaign trail. In this situation there probably will not be any quick fact-check, and if there is a fact-check, it will not be on the first page of a national newspaper. This is how Obama was able to claim in 2012, falsely, that his job numbers had improved during his presidency.¹⁰ TV ads in local stations are particularly fragile. A TV ad distributed by the Obama campaign in 2012 claimed that Mitt Romney intended to outlaw abortion in cases of rape and incest. The Romney campaign responded with outrage. FactCheck.org rated the claim false – but it was never on the first page of any national newspaper. Notice also that since the ad came from the campaign and not from the candidate, Obama could credibly distance himself from the lie.¹¹

Thus, a tradpol misleads when lying is too risky. The reverse is also true: tradpols may lie if they think they can get away with it because the lie cannot be fact-checked at once or because the audience is so small that the fact-check will not get much traction anyway.

My proposal predicts that a tradpol will not provide false statements that can be easily be fact-checked in situations of maximum exposure. In order to test this prediction, I have read a number of State

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/vault/stories/data082303.htm?>

¹⁰ <http://mi.tt/MmNH9p>

¹¹ <http://mi.tt/MmNH9p>

of the Union addresses by Joe Biden, Barack Obama and George Bush (they are all downloadable from the national archives).¹² The State of the Union is a solemn occasion that has wide media coverage. I found no lies and even not too much bullshit* - and most of the bullshit* is of type [I.1], intended to flatter the televised audience. There is a glaring exception, in Bush's State of the Union Address, Jan 2, 2003, he said: "The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." This was a straightforward lie, but at the time only a few people knew this was a lie and consequently he could not be called out on it (although there was some substantial discussion regarding the plausibility of this unsettling claim). Thus, this is not an exception to my proposal.¹³

5. Trump utters some bullshit* but mostly he lies

The real counterexamples to my proposal emerge with a new type of politician: let's call them the *trumpol*. Trumpols lie openly.¹⁴ Moreover, they lie in public contexts, which used to be protected from open mendacity – like a presidential debate (such as the claim that immigrants eat cats and dogs, September 10, 2024) or a solemn address to congress. Consider Trump's address to congress on March 5, 2025. An address to congress is the kind of stage where a tradpol avoids lying. It is televised in every channel and therefore addressed to a huge national audience (Trump's reached 36.5 million, according to Nielsen). Despite the easy fact-check and the exposure, Trump lied almost uninterruptedly.¹⁵ These are some examples extracted from the first 5 pages of the transcripts (total of 30 pages):¹⁶

¹² <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union>

¹³ There is a long tradition of complaining about politicians' mendacity as entertainingly documented in Jay (2010). This complaint is so commonplace that the suggestion that politicians' lying is as constrained as everyone else's would probably be regarded as naïve by most people. However, I find that tradpols do not lie much (as I argue, they prefer to bullshit*) but when they get caught lying, the event is given great publicity.

¹⁴ A reviewer for *Philosophia* suggests that Trump's open lying could be categorized as *bald-faced* lying. A bald-faced lie is a statement that everyone in the audience knows is false, the statement is uttered to place it on the record for purposes other than deception. A traditional example is a witness at trial that tells an open lie in order to protect themselves from a gangster's wrath. The trumpol's lies, on the other hand, work differently, because they are addressed to a sector of the public that will take them to be truthful statements. As an example, Arceneaux and Truex (2023) show that a majority of Republican voters believe that Joe Biden did not win the 2020 and that this election was not legitimate. This means that a majority of Republican voters believe what Donald Trump tells them and it matters to them that what Trump says is true. There is a rich body of work on bald-faced lies in the contemporary literature; I direct the interested reader to Sorensen (2007) and Carson (2010) as classic references.

¹⁵ Trump's addresses during his first term as a president (2017-2020) contain considerable amounts of bullshit* of the bombastic sub-genre as well as hyperboles. They also include a few lies but not quite as many as in his 2025 address. I take it as a sign that the revolution he started has consolidated.

¹⁶ Fact checked by CNN: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/04/politics/fact-check-trump-address-congress>

(i) “The presidential election of November 5 was a mandate that hasn’t been seen in decades.” Is this bullshit* of the hyperbolic variety or a lie? The usage of the vague temporal PP (how many decades? Two or ten?) suggests bullshit*. But if we adopt the assumption that a ‘mandate’ is a reflection of popular support for one’s policies in the election results, this is a plain lie. In fact, his popular vote margin was 1.48%. Biden in 2020 got a 4.45% popular vote margin.

(ii) “more Americans believe that our country is headed in the right direction than the wrong direction.” None of the independent polls run after he took the presidency shows this.

(iii) [Discussing undocumented immigration] “people from mental institutions and insane asylums were released into our country.” Not true, never happened.

(iv) “I withdrew from the unfair Paris Climate Accord, which was costing us trillions of dollars.” The USA allocated \$5.8 billion to international climate finance. Not trillions. This is not hyperbole: multiplying an amount by a thousand is not hyperbole.

(v) “we ended the last administration's insane electric vehicle mandate.” There was never an electric vehicle mandate from the Biden administration.

Trump’s lying – the transparent nature of these falsehoods, the very public fora in which he utters them – is difficult to reconcile with Frankfurt’s association between lying and concern for truth.¹⁷ As I discussed in sections 2 and 3, Frankfurt argued that lying suggests at least a minimum regard for truth while bullshitting reveals indifference to truth. He only considered bullshit of type [I.1] – i.e., grandiloquent, meaningless statements – assuming that all bullshit is of this type. I would agree that the person who utters [I.1] bullshit is not aiming at making truthful statements, (although I would not know if they cared about the truth or not.) On the other hand, if a speaker often lies in very public situations, we must conclude that they are not committed to truth.

Ultimately, when Frankfurt wrote his influential essay, the trumpol had not become a powerful force (there had been a few precedents, like senator Joe McCarthy) and he could not predict the media climate we are living in. I examine this in the following section.

6. Why I’d rather see more bullshit

¹⁷To be sure, there is also some bullshit in this speech that may or may not qualify as lies – I show a clear example in (8).

Let me briefly summarize what we have so far. Tradpols have always lied, but in a traditional political environment lies can be costly: the media scrutinize and fact-check tradpols' claims, the opposing party does the same and universities may supply scientific research that exposes falsehoods. To the extent that these actors are trusted and believed, tradpols avoid lying and instead resort to bullshit*, in particular of type [II.1] and type [II.2]. This allows the tradpol to communicate a misleading message without incurring the liability of committing to a straight falsehood.

What has shifted in our public life since 2016 that a president can lie brazenly in an address to congress? The epistemic environment that politicians navigate has moved substantially. The institutions that used to function as guardrails against political lying have lost their authority among a sector of the public. Consider the following data: 8% of republicans and 51% of democrats claim to trust that the media will report fully, accurately and fairly, giving us an average of 21% (Gallup 10/2/2025); this is down from 53% in 1997. In 2018, 21% and 76% among republicans and democrats respectively trusted the media. 43% of respondents agree that they have great confidence in higher education, which is a 16-point drop since 2016; Only 26% of Republicans express great confidence in higher education (Gallup 07/5/2025). 35% of Americans trust the judicial system, a drop of 25 points since 2016 (Gallup 12/16/2024). Even the medical professionals – whose prestige had been used to sell cigarettes - have seen their authority diminished: in 2024, the Center for Disease Control only had a 33% approval rating among republicans, and 73% among democrats.¹⁸ Thus, since the traditional fact-checkers that would stymie a tradpol's lies are not trusted by a large swath of the population, a politician who addresses their speech to this sector of the population loses some of the fear of lying.

The traditional political culture is one in which there is a common public sphere. There is a shared set of propositions that are considered true by everyone, a different set of propositions are regarded as false, and another set are controversial; there is political debate, but foundational issues are agreed upon. These foundational, uncontroversial propositions are supported by an almost universal respect for some sources of authoritative knowledge – not because of authority *per se* but because we understand how this knowledge came to be. For instance, if the Center for Disease Control tells us that we should vaccinate our children, we accept this recommendation because we understand that it is the result of considerable scientific work and reflection as well as a history of success. Likewise, the department of justice is respected as an apolitical institution that will protect citizens, and its decisions to prosecute or not are assumed to be based on evidence of wrongdoing. The fact-checkers in Academia and the Press are generally respected even if there is some healthy skepticism regarding biases; importantly, the media of

¹⁸ The undermining of medical authority had catastrophic consequences during the COVID pandemic (Jia et al 2023).

any ideological color are expected to report falsehoods uttered by any candidate. Consequently, the lying tradpol will be punished in the ballot box. Bullshit* is resorted to when one is afraid of lying.

The contemporary political culture is split in two. A good section of the population expects political actors to continue playing by the old rules. The politicians that seek their vote are tradpols: they avoid lies and resort to bullshit* when cornered. But the trumpols are not restrained in the same way. Their audience does not respect the traditional fact-checkers, which they see as promoting a partisan world view. Instead, they listen to or read alternative sources that agree with their own world view, and which they see as more reliable. The media that conservative voters watch will generally not challenge a trumpol on his lies. The legacy media (CNN, MSNBC) will do the challenging, but they preach only to a diminishing choir that will never vote for them anyway.¹⁹ Consequently, the trumpol can lie without too much concern about the political cost. So, to put it somewhat crudely, the trumpol lies because they can. They have realized that they don't need to bullshit* because they will not be penalized for lying. As mentioned, what makes lying undesirable for a tradpol is that you can be challenged and get red ears – and harm your chances of reelection. At this point, it is good to recall that in 2004 we knew the Bush Administration had lied extensively and repeatedly to take the USA to war in Iraq; one would expect that they would be punished, but they won re-election. I suspect, without evidence, that the realization that you can lie and be reelected was a powerful discovery at the root of the recent change in political rhetoric.

Under these conditions, the strategic advantage that bullshit* has over lying for the tradpol disappears for the trumpol. In fact, the advantage is reversed: a lie may look more credible than bullshit* precisely because it seems to avoid evasion and appears to hold a verifiable truth value. Saying that “inflation rose 5.1%” last year” sounds credible because providing an exact number makes the claim open to challenge and holds the appearance of being based on analysis; while saying that “inflation rose within parameters predictable given the current macroeconomic variables” is easily detected as bullshit* and sounds shift.

¹⁹ There is already some scholarly work that empirically examines the effect of corrective information on people's beliefs. The results vary (see Walter et al 2020). However, my concern is not whether fact-checking changes minds, my concern is whether the sectors of the public that consume conservative media exclusively have access to fact-checking that challenges their beliefs. It seems to me that the conservative media environment limits exposure to corrective information: how else can one account for the fact that most Republican voters believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction *after* it became known that he did not (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005)? How is it possible that a majority of Republican voters still believe that the Dominion machines changed votes (Trang et al 2025)?

²⁰ There is potentially a third reason that needs to be discussed even though I eventually think it is misguided. Stanley (2012) claims that Americans do not expect politicians to tell the truth anymore, nor do they care. Stanley (2012) does not present empirical evidence for this claim (it is a general press article, after all). I'd like to point out that, if what Stanley says were correct, then there would be no difference in behavior between tradpols and trumpols. Additionally, there is plenty of evidence that people do care about the truth values of what politicians say, and they tend to believe them, at least when they flatter their partisan beliefs (see footnote 14). See also Mathiesen and Fallis' (2017) discussion of Stanley's article.

This ends the first part of my argument: tradpols use bullshit* when lying would jeopardize their fortunes. When they lie, they do so in low-stakes situations or about propositions that cannot be challenged. The shift to open lying takes place when the liar is not afraid of being penalized. If lies are not penalized, lies are a better option than bullshit*.

And now I can finally go back to the implicit question hidden under the title of this article: Why would I prefer to see more bullshit* than lies? Recall that Frankfurt claimed that bullshit is more dangerous for democracy than lies because, as he claimed, the liar is at least somewhat concerned with the truth while the bullshitter does not care. He provides no detailed argumentation or evidence for this claim. I disagree, and I claim that the sort of bullshit* that he discussed, exemplified in (1), is in fact benign (as I pointed out above). (1) is indeed meaningless, but it does not reveal anything about the attitude of the speaker to the truth: Someone may utter (1) in a ceremonial occasion that demands this type of rhetoric and utter only truthful sincere statements in other contexts where they are expected to describe their policy proposals. My position is the opposite of Frankfurt's: lies are more dangerous than bullshit*.

I would rather see more bullshit* because lying and bullshit* reflect two different political cultures. In tradpol culture lying is avoided because lying has consequences. The deployment of bullshit* is a sign that the political culture does not tolerate lies. The trumpol political culture is one in which lying and misinformation are pervasive because the intended audience believes the lies and discounts the challenges, therefore lying does not affect and may in fact benefit the trumpol's electoral prospects. The trumpol political culture is built on a deteriorated epistemic environment in which the relationship between political agents and their audiences is direct, without the intermediary role of fact-checking institutions

Some poll data suffices to show how dangerous the trumpol is. Many Americans (31%, in 2024 according to Public Religion Research Institute) believe that the presidential election of 2020 was rigged, Joe Biden did not win it legitimately, and the liberals that deny it are corrupt. According to many other Americans, the elections of 2020 took place normally, the tradpols that deny this are corrupt and their followers are delusional. Thus, with regards a foundational issue, such as the validity of elections, which used to be uncontroversial, we have now a political divide. This political divide leads to mistrusting not just politicians or democratic institutions but even our fellow citizens if their political views are different: In 2016, 47% of Republicans said that Democrats are immoral, in 2022 the figure grew to 72%. 35% of Democrats also held a dim view of Republicans moral standards in 2016, but in 2022 63% did (Pew Research Center). I regard this level of polarization as highly dangerous for democracy.

I surmise that our current political culture is characterized by this lack of trust in institutions and even fellow citizens. This lack of trust is the legacy of the widespread lying that has created opposing

realities: Contrary to Frankfurt's assessment – formulated at a time that appears very distant – we can see that lies, rather than old school bullshit*, have a deleterious effect on the cohesion of a democratic society.

Conclusion

We can go back to Crilley's observation from the introduction. I copy and paste the quote again here for the reader's convenience: "there is a tension between [...] suggestions that there have been genuine changes in the way public discourse was conducted [...] and [...] claims that a deep-seated culture of bullshit (that is hard to change) led to the ruptures of 2016." This essay resolves this tension: it has shown that there was among tradpols a deep-seated culture of bullshit* that usually stopped short of lying in very public fora. The bullshit* strategies that we have investigated in this article are familiar from philosophy of language: tradpols may misdirect the QUD by providing evasive answers to straight questions, they may provide incomplete statements that require Completion to form a truth conditional proposition, or they may utter truthful statements that evoke false implicatures. What they all have in common is a lack of sincerity that nonetheless allows them to avoid the commitment entailed by a false assertion.

What has changed is that lies are now occupying public spaces that used to be old-school bullshit*'s turf. This is due to a loss of trust in democratic institutions and traditional sources of authoritative knowledge among a sector of the citizenship. Additionally, straight lies may seem to the uninformed to be more sincere than bullshit*. Since lies do not punish the trumpol in the ballot box, and may even be lightly advantageous, lies abound. Strangely enough, tradpols and trumpols now coexist in the same electoral landscape, giving this writer the impression of witnessing an asymmetric warfare.

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