



Illinois Wesleyan University

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On Bullshit, Skepticism, and Belief

Christopher A. Sweet, *Illinois Wesleyan University*



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Fact or Fiction Intellectual Theme Kick-Off, Closing Remarks
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We are absolutely surrounded by bullshit. Every corner we turn, either online, or in the physical world there is bullshit. I say this not for shock value (if it even has any), but because there is general consensus that the bullshitters have run amuck. Both sides of the political aisle would easily agree that bullshit is pervasive. We often use the more polite terms of fake news, spin, or propaganda, but at the end of the day it is one form or another of b.s.

As a librarian I, of course, have a favorite bullshit book. It is called “On Bullshit” by Harry Frankfurt. I’d like to read a passage for you...

“One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves.”

We’ve established that bullshit is pervasive, but today I want to focus on online b.s. since it has caused so many problems in recent years. I would like to argue that your generation should be able to detect some forms of online bullshit better than any previous generation. Much more so than older generations, I find that today’s college students have online bullshit detectors honed over a lifetime of growing up with the web. You guys can spot Fakebooking a mile away. While some of us worry about our neighbor’s seemingly perfect life according to social media, you guys know it’s likely that they were in lockup Saturday night for cocaine possession and probably had botox injections done on Monday right before that killer selfie. Instagram influencers and wannabe influencers clog up your feeds. I posit this: the number of hashtags on an Instagram post has a strong correlation with the amount of bullshit in the post. Adults my age and older have a very poor track record of taking a clearly photoshopped image as god’s own truth. It’s well established that Facebook and twitter were infiltrated and used to influence voters prior to the 2016

election by a vast Russian propaganda campaign. Just 6 of the 470 Russian Facebook accounts created b.s. content that was shared 340 million times. This espionage may or may not have had an effect on the outcome of the actual election, but millions of people were clearly taken in by verifiable bullshit. A 2016 Pew Research study found that 66% of all links shared on Twitter came from Bots. Think about that for a minute. For a time, two-thirds of everything being shared on Twitter was some form of bullshit. The content may or may not have been true, but it was artificially amplified by bots. In many ways, humans are even worse than those bots. We have an innate desire to be the first in our social media spheres to share new information. Those likes and those upvotes give us tiny hits of dopamine in our brains. A 2018 MIT study found “that falsehood (yet another term for bullshit) diffuses significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth, in all categories of information, and in many cases by an order of magnitude.” Specifically, they found that false news stories are 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than true stories are. It also takes true stories about six times as long to reach 1,500 people as it does for false stories to reach the same number of people. This is an absolute epidemic of BS.

The antidote to all this bullshit is skepticism. Skepticism is the process of applying reason and critical thinking to determine validity. The skeptic constantly questions what they see and hear.

Illinois Wesleyan University’s Mission Statement tells us that “A liberal education at Illinois Wesleyan fosters creativity, critical thinking, effective communication, strength of character and a spirit of inquiry.” Critical thinking and a spirit of inquiry are core components of skepticism. One of the videos I showed stated “real critical thinking is exhausting.” I think there is a lot of truth to that statement. It is so easy to click “like,” to share, to upvote, to subscribe. It takes real effort and work to stop and spend some time researching a friend’s claim, or a news story that you are about to share. We need to take that time and do that hard (or at least time-consuming) work of critically evaluating the information we are consuming.

So here’s the thing. We’ve established that we’re surrounded by bullshit and that skepticism is one of the best ways to counter bullshit. But too much skepticism becomes a problem of its own. Unbounded skepticism leads to paralysis and indecision. If you doubt every news story, every expert, every person outside your carefully curated friends group, then you actually enable

bullshit to thrive. Know when it is time to take an informed, educated, stance. In legal terms, a preponderance of evidence means that a party has shown that its version of facts, causes, damages, or fault is more likely than not the correct version. The preponderance of evidence is important for evaluating claims outside of the courtroom. For example, there is a clear preponderance of scientific evidence that climate change is caused by humans. It's ok to doubt an expert or two. It's ok to question your professor and listen to their response. It's ok to debate. To doubt news headlines. But, eventually the evidence adds up. Consensus starts to build. There is a world of bullshit out there, but there are some verifiable facts, there are some truths. There is a preponderance of evidence for some problems.

So, by all means, question everything, but also know when it is time to believe.

Thank you.