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Bullshitting: Deception, Friendliness, and Accuracy

This character is often so friendly, glib, and obliging that you're grateful for having encountered him.

—Kevin Mitnick on the social engineer¹

... Any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact.

—Ivy Lee, "Declaration of Principles"²

Social engineers are master bullshitters.

Some of them would even admit this openly. The phone phreaks of the 1970s through 1990s were especially open about being bullshitters. In fact, instead of calling it "social engineering," more often they simply called their practice of conning telco employees out of information "bullshitting."

Much like "trashing," the phone phreak term "bullshitting" sounds crude. No wonder contemporary security researchers use the phrase "social engineering"—it just sounds more respectable. But like trashing, bullshitting is a rich and complex concept. Focusing

on it illuminates more than just telephone exploration. Using the concept of bullshitting as a lens reveals a great deal about contemporary interpersonal social engineering practice, and as well as the older mass social engineering practices of the early to mid-twentieth century. And looking ahead, this concept will join trashing and pretexting as tools to help us illuminate the contemporary practice of masspersonal social engineering.

Bullshitting is the central act of social engineering. It's what happens when the social engineer engages with the target. Social engineers need to trash their targets and learn everything they can about them. They then can construct pretexts—for example, ready-to-hand social stereotypes—that they can fully embody and that their targets will recognize. But all of that preparation will be for naught if the social engineer can't bullshit. There comes a moment when the social engineer must put their plans and technical knowledge to the test during the engagement with the target. This is a difficult moment, a trial of the social engineer's ability to be adaptive. During the engagement, social engineers rely on a peculiar, truth-indifferent mix of deception, friendliness, and accuracy to successfully manipulate their targets. That is what we mean by bullshit.

To understand bullshitting, we have to return to the phone phreaks who developed bullshitting as a social engineering technique. We'll join the phreaks in taking bullshit seriously by drawing on a small area of philosophical and sociological inquiry—the meaning and uses of bullshitting—to clarify what social engineers do when they meet their target. We will then take a look at phone phreak bullshitting guides and come to recognize bullshit for what it is: a skillful, truth-indifferent mix of deception, accuracy, and friendliness. We'll once again take this phreak and hacker concept and look back at the older, mass social engineers and find that they, too, were consummate bullshitters.

On Bullshit with the Phone Phreaks

We owe a great deal to the phone phreaks, who bequeathed us the theoretically rich concept of bullshit. Recall that the phone phreaks were people obsessed with the Bell telephone system in the 1960s through the 1980s. In order to explore its furthest reaches, the phreaks found ways to make free long-distance calls. The histories of and documentaries about the phone phreaks tended to emphasize the technologies they used to explore the Bell System, especially their “blue boxes” that could create special control tones that could manipulate the network. They are often lauded for their technical abilities to connect phone circuits together (a process called *tandem stacking*) and their skills in getting free long-distance calls. Less discussed are the phreaks’ social skills in bullshitting the operator.

In its simplest form, bullshitting involves talking to telephone company employees, typically operators and technicians, in order to manipulate them into doing something for the phreak or giving the phreak access to vital internal information. This is the central activity of social engineering. A phreak might bullshit an operator, for example, and convince the operator to connect the phreak to a special phone line so that the phreak can make free long-distance calls. Another phreak might bullshit a phone technician in order to learn how a new switching system works.

To be effective, phone phreak bullshitting required a lot of accurate, technical knowledge—the sort of thing the phreaks would find during trashing runs in the dumpsters outside telephone company offices. But, of course, bullshitting was deceptive: the phreaks would often use pretexts, such as being a fellow Bell employee. And yet, the phreaks weren’t cruel when they sought to deceive operators; in fact, they were downright friendly. Bullshitting then was far from simple: it was a complex mix of deception, kindness, and technical mastery, all brought together in calculated, interpersonal manipulation.

Despite the term sounding crude, the phreaks were onto something when they called their engagements bullshit. After all, our society is full of bullshitters, and this has attracted the attention of serious academic thinkers. What emerges from this scholarly analysis are two seemingly distinct conceptions of bullshitting. On the one hand, bullshitting is a harsh, dangerous, manipulative practice that undermines trust in institutions and deceives the audience. On the other, bullshitting is a social practice that allows for identity-play, social experimentation, and camaraderie. As we will see, both of these perspectives will hold when we consider phone phreak bullshitting as well as social engineering in all its forms. In the hands of social engineers, both of these conceptions merge in a creative, truth-indifferent mix of deception, accurate knowledge, and sociability.

Bullshitting as Indifference to Truth

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a small but robust group of philosophers developing a theory of bullshitting as it relates to lying, truth-telling, and deception. The debates are lively and address many important questions, including how to identify bullshitting, distinguishing bullshitting from lying, and considering the extent of bullshitting in contemporary society. The dean of this school of philosophers of bullshit is Harry Frankfurt, whose popular 1986 essay (republished in 2005 as a bestselling book), *On Bullshit*, kicked off the debate about the definition, practices, and extent of bullshitting in contemporary American culture.

Perhaps the most quoted line from *On Bullshit* is Frankfurt's point about the "essence of bullshit": bullshit is essentially a "lack of connection to a concern with truth . . . [an] indifference to how things really are."³ For Frankfurt, bullshitting is far more dangerous than lying, because at least the liar is concerned with the truth or how things really are—even if they want to tell us the opposite of the truth. Instead, bullshitting is indifference towards truth or falsity.

“It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth,” Frankfurt argues. “Producing bullshit requires no such conviction.”⁴ Thus, the bullshitter

is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His [sic] eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.⁵

Ultimately, for Frankfurt, the bullshitter’s purpose is to deceive us as to their true intentions. One of his key examples is readily understandable: the politician who blusters on and on about our Glorious Country and its Special Blessings from God. This politician, Frankfurt argues, is far less concerned about true and false and far more concerned about our impressions of them as a God-fearing patriot. In this sense, this aspect of bullshit resonates with our discussion of recognition of pretexts in the previous chapter. Bullshitters can rely upon stereotypes and other easily recognized social practices as a deceptive cover.

Frankfurt’s initial definition of bullshitting as an indifference to truth or falsity has been challenged by several other philosophers who develop counterexamples and offer technical arguments about situations where one might care about truth but still be bullshitting.⁶ The extent of this debate is beyond the scope of this chapter, but for our purpose of considering bullshitting among social engineers, one modification of Frankfurt’s theory is quite useful. It comes from the philosophers Andreas Stokke and Don Fallis, who modify Frankfurt’s indifference to truth or falsity thesis into indifference towards the *inquiry* into what is true or what is false.⁷ As they explain,

We characterize bullshitting as a mode of speech marked by indifference toward contributing true or false answers to [questions under discussion]. The kind of indifference toward truth or

falsity that characterizes the phenomenon of bullshitting is not indifference toward the truth-value of what one says, but indifference toward the effect that one's contributions have on the discourse.⁸

For Stokke and Fallis, then, bullshitting undermines the inquiry towards truth as this inquiry plays out in specific conversational situations they call “questions under discussion.” These questions under discussion might be things like: when does the bus arrive? What’s the weather like outside? Do you have much homework to do? Whereas a liar would know the truth and tell its opposite, and the honest person would simply answer truthfully to the best of their ability (including saying they don’t know the answer), the bullshitter simply makes statements with no intention of moving the discussion toward truth. Instead, the bullshitter is more interested in impression management: perhaps evading the question, hiding true intentions, trying to appear friendly while really being uninterested, or the like. Thus, for Stokke and Fallis, “the bullshitter makes contributions while not caring about their effect on particular subinquiries.”⁹

Setting aside the debates about definitions, if there is anything to fault in Frankfurt, Stokke, and Fallis’s conceptualizations of bullshitting, it is that they underplay what is at stake when bullshitters bullshit. Who cares if the politician bloviates or the person bullshits about the weather with no evidence? But, as criminologist Daniel Mears notes, bullshitting can be part of exploitation and manipulation: “Bullshitting can provide a means by which to influence or control perceptions of reality and in turn with a means to achieve specific social, political, and economic goals.”¹⁰ This point is especially important when we consider social engineering.

Shooting the Bull

But before we turn to the instrumental, manipulative communication goals of social engineers, we ought to consider the more

sociable connotations of bullshitting, found in phrases like “shooting the bull” or “bullshit session.”

Perhaps the most extensive consideration of this connotation of bullshitting is in communication and sociology scholar Chandra Mukerji’s late 1970s work on hitchhikers. Much as Frankfurt would note almost a decade later, Mukerji argues that an indifference to truth is a key feature of bullshitting. But rather than see it as purely dangerous, Mukerji sees it as a sociable practice: “truth and falsehood are not issues in bullshitting because this kind of talk is playful; it is a way to make conversation more fun.”¹¹ Hitchhikers, she argues, engage in playful bullshitting in order to reconstruct their experiences and hence themselves as heroes in “road stories.” These stories present the hitchhiker as “worldly” with “enough guts, daring, endurance and friends to ‘make it’ on the road.”¹² Moreover, the hitchhiker’s audience—typically fellow hitchhikers or the people giving them rides—have a stake in such stories. Their stories are told to others who “have vested interests in glamourizing life on the road.”¹³ Given that these are stories vocally told to strangers, the stories could be forgotten or denied later, reducing the truth-value stakes while placing more emphasis on the sociable, entertaining qualities of the bullshit.

The criminology scholar Mears develops this sociable, identity-play aspect of bullshitting further, noting that key functions of bullshitting include socializing, exploring the self, expressing feelings, and passing time. As Mears notes, “To those well-versed in the art of bullshitting, there is an ability to define oneself and to achieve particular goals.”¹⁴ Thus, beyond hitchhiking road stories, we can imagine many social settings in which truth or falsehood are set aside in favor of plausible yet edgy conversation, from fishing stories to barroom tales to hallway talk at academic conferences.

To draw these two streams together—the indifference to inquiry towards truth and the sociability of “shooting the bull”—we can

return to Frankfurt. Specifically, Frankfurt notes the artistry and creativity of bullshitting, connoted in the phrase “bullshit artist.” As he explains,

A person who undertakes to bullshit his way through has much more freedom [than the liar]. His [sic] focus is panoramic rather than particular. He does not limit himself to inserting a certain falsehood at a specific point, and thus he is not constrained by the truths surrounding that point or intersecting it. He is prepared, so far as required, to fake the context as well. This freedom from the constraints to which the liar must submit does not necessarily mean, of course, that his task is easier than the task of the liar. But the mode of creativity upon which it relies is less analytical and less deliberative than that which is mobilized in lying. It is more expansive and independent, with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play. This is less a matter of craft than of art. Hence the familiar notion of the “bullshit artist.”¹⁵

For Frankfurt, bullshitting is playful and dangerous, sociable and subversive, creative and cunning. Such an artistic approach can serve the purposes Mukerji identified: to have fun, create entertaining stories, build relationships, and foster community. It can also be used to undermine a drive towards truth, as Mears, Stokke, and Fallis observed. Truth, indeed, is beside the point.

Exquisitely Accurate Bullshit

And yet, we must emphasize that bullshitting is not lying. It is not the simple telling of the opposite of the truth. In fact, bullshitting often involves getting details, facts, and arguments right—at least to the extent that they serve the bullshitter. Frankfurt points to entire industries, such as advertising and politics, and notes the

exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who—with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth—dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every [bullshit] word and image they produce exactly right.¹⁶

Indeed, the idea of *caring* for the bullshit—for getting it just right—reflects an older meaning of “accuracy”: from the Latin *accuratia*, or “care, attention.” The underlying research and planning that bullshitting often requires is tremendous: bullshitting works best when the target is extensively studied, the language of the target is fully understood, and the messaging is carefully calibrated to reach that target. (Otherwise, why would any phreak or hacker jump into dumpsters?)

Like Frankfurt, Mukerji observed hitchhikers caring for the bullshit they provided. Their stories of the dangers of the road must be “plausible . . . too much exaggeration can make the story implausible.”¹⁷ Plausibility relies upon articulating the bullshit story with the audience’s experiences. An accurate story is one that resonates with the audience’s own understanding of life on the road; a misalignment means that storyteller’s bullshit is called out.

Thus, facts can matter—even in a bullshit story. The bullshitter’s contributions can be true statements, accurate information, or deception—the point is that this *mix* of lies and truth are made with indifference to the understood purposes of the conversation. In the case of bullshitting the operator, the phone phreaks undermine the operator’s “questions under discussion” not with pure lies but with a careful mix of accurate information and deception that covers up the phreaks’ intentions.

Bullshitting the Operator: Best Practices

Here, we want to return to our benefactors, the phone phreaks, who generously gave us the rich concept of bullshit.

The three-fold conceptualization of bullshitting as an indifference towards the inquiry into truth, a playful, sociable practice, and an act of care and attention to information, maps back onto the phone phreak guides to bullshitting the operator. These guides can

be found in a range of underground magazine articles (such as *2600* and *TAP*), computer Bulletin Board System (BBS) posts, and (to a lesser extent) mainstream press articles appearing in the late 1970s to mid-1980s. These guides reveal the exquisitely sophisticated craft of phone phreak bullshitting as a mix of deception, sociability, and getting it right. They demonstrate how bullshitting can amplify the social engineer's deceptive *pretexts*, why *being friendly* is the social engineer's best bet, and how to *use the lingo* gathered during trash-ing. These practices are precursors to contemporary, masspersonal social engineering practices, and they also throw new light on the older mass social engineering.

Deception: Pretexting

Phone phreak guides to bullshitting often recommend that the would-be bullshitter come up with a plausible role to play before calling up the Bell operator. This is of course the practice that would eventually become formalized and referred to as “pretexting,” although the phreaks themselves did not use that term. Pretexts give the bullshitting phreak an advantage as they seek information or access, because they set the stage for the subsequent conversation.

The guides get quite specific about titles and ways to introduce oneself to the operator. An early guide in *TAP* recommends pretexts such as being a fellow operator or Bell security employee.¹⁸ A BBS guide with the enigmatic title “Flying Penguin Presents: Bullshitting the Operator” provides even more roles to play. When bullshitting an operator, Flying Penguin advises us, “we must be from the phone company.”¹⁹ To that end, the guide offers a list of titles the phreak could adopt, including

- Toll service maintenance engineer
- Station repair
- Cable MTCE technician
- TSPS maintenance/maintenance administrator

- Central Office Supervisor
- TSPS Security[, and]
- Toll Service Maintenance.²⁰

Beyond roles, the guides offer scripts. A guide in *TAP* provides a script for talking to Customer Name and Address (CN/A) operators:

Hi, this is Jim with the Residence Service Center in Pasadena. I've got a customer on hold who claims not to have made a rather lengthy call to (212) 555-1212, so I need the customer's name on that please. That was (212) 555-1212.²¹

Likewise, “Sharp Remob’s Guide to Bullshitting the Phone Company Out of Important Information” suggests calling the operator and saying, “Hi, this is Bob Dwyer with repair, do you show any order activity on 555-2344?”²²

Pretexting is the most clearly deceptive aspect of phone phreak bullshitting. To return to the philosophers Stokke and Fallis, a phreak claiming to be someone they are not completely undermines the specific inquiry into truth undertaken by the operator. Arguably, the use of a pretext is a lie, maybe even an Augustinian lie: the phreak knows perfectly well they are not who they claim to be. The operator answers the phone with the intention of helping a fellow Bell employee or customer, and the phone phreak is only too happy to maintain this illusion during the inquiry in order to gain access to information or other resources. But even the best pretext cannot function without other elements of bullshitting—including offering a bit of friendliness.

Being Friendly

Bullshitting an otherwise naive operator or clueless technician in order to manipulate them or gain even more information sounds pretty harsh. This is part and parcel of the connotation of bullshitting as deceptive indifference to truth or falsity. However, returning to the jovial side of bullshitting (as we saw in Mukerji’s study of

hitchhikers), the phone phreaks did not just manipulate the operators; they were friendly to them.

An article in *TAP* reminds the reader that “operators are people too, y’know. So always be polite, make good use of ‘em, and dial with care.”²³ Likewise, the Flying Penguin’s “bullshitting the operator” guide reminds phreaks to “always say thank you!”²⁴ Another phreak recommends sounding “friendly and natural.”²⁵

An illustration of how friendliness functions can be seen in one of the rare recordings of an actual social engineering engagement available. In front of an audience at the first HOPE hacker conference in 1994, a hacker going by the handle SN calls Sprint, looking to get a Customer Name and Address (CN/A) telephone number—a phone number that only Sprint employees should have access to. He bullshits a Sprint operator, Deborah Brown (DB).

DB: Sprint Customer Service, this is Deborah Brown speaking, and how may I help you?

SN: Hey, Deborah, how’s it going?

DB: It’s fine.

SN: This is Bob Dwyer, over at Spring Social Engineering, how you doing?

DB: I’m fine. And yourself?

SN: Pretty good, you know, it’s one of those days.

DB: Okay.

SN: Umm, you wouldn’t happen to have the number for the CN/A that handles 313? That’s Michigan.

DB: I think so . . . just a moment. (humming, computer keyboard tapping)

SN: So, you guys busy over there today?

DB: We were *real* busy earlier.

SN: Yeah, I know *exactly* what you mean.

DB: Ok, it's 313 . . .

SN: Mm huh.

DB: 424 . . .

SN: Uh huh.

DB: 0900.

SN: OK. . . . Alright. Hey! Is CIS up for you guys over there?

DB: Yes.

SN: Yeah? 'Cause we've been having a lot of problems with data loss from CIS to the switch, and it's not processing the TCs too well. What do you show is the last account that you, umm, handled or processed?

DB: Last account?

SN: Yeah.

DB: Umm . . . 18-

SN: Oh, wait, we have it right here. Yeah, in fact, CIS just came back online for us.

DB: Did it?

SN: Yeah.

DB: Oh.

SN: Hey! Thanks a lot for your help!

DB: You have a good one!

SN: Alright, bye-bye!

DB: Goodbye!²⁶

SN is very careful to include sociable lines: "how's it going?", "you guys busy over there?", and "you have a good one!" He isn't just engaged in an instrumental hunt for information; his friendly demeanor and kindness to his supposedly fellow employee helps smooth the interaction (and, perhaps, distracts from his audacious self-identification as "Bob Dwyer from Sprint Social Engineering").

Such friendliness is a great tactic when bullshitting targets at work. As a BBS post titled “The Official Phreaker’s Manual” explains,

Most Bell employees are really glad to talk to someone. Remember, they usually interact with disgruntled customers with complaints. Their spouses probably yell at them, and their supervisors either complain about their performance or ignore them. Society at large just doesn’t care about them. They’re most probably disenchanted with the world at large, and maybe even dissatisfied with their jobs. The chance to talk to some one who merely wants to listen to what they say is a welcome change. They will talk on and on about almost anything, from telecommunications to their home life and their childhood. The possibilities for social engineering are endless. Remember, Bell employees are humans, too. All you have to do is listen.²⁷

This is bullshitting in the social, “shooting the bull” sense that Mukerji observed among the hitchhikers. Friendliness, a bit of camaraderie in a cold, corporate setting makes the interactions smoother and the information flow more freely.

But the admonition to be friendly may not be as much about humanity and compassion as it is about improving the phreaks’ control over the Bell System. A *TAP* article on bullshitting CN/A operators notes the utility of friendliness: “When the employee [read: phone phreak] sounds natural and cheery, the CN/A operator doesn’t ask any questions.”²⁸ Here, being friendly is thus more than mere politeness; it helps the bullshitting operation by covering up the phreak’s intentions to gain illicit access to information behind a cloud of joviality and kindness. This reflects something that communication researchers who study deception have found: friendliness is associated with “honest” demeanor, whether or not the friendly person is telling the truth.²⁹ Friendly bullshit keeps intrusive questions at bay.

Moreover, friendliness has the side effect of helping preserve bullshitting possibilities for future phone phreak use. As one phone phreak advises,

You SHOULDN'T, if you screw up, or if the phone co. employees are uncooperative, break down and swear at them or call them names. This will only contribute to the destruction of these departments for engineering purposes.³⁰

Likewise, a rare guide to *in-person* phone phreak bullshitting describes how to get a tour of a Bell Central Office and urges anyone who engages in such a tour to “Make sure to leave a good impression so that fellow telecommunications hobbyists can tour the place in the future.”³¹

Accuracy: Using the Lingo

However, a friendly tone will only take you so far. This is especially the case when the phreak is pretexting as a fellow telco employee. Such a role is only possible if a phreak knows the Bell System language. The bullshitting guides of the phreaks heavily stress learning the Bell system lingo and using it accurately.

For example, a 1974 guide to bullshitting a special class of phone operators explains that knowing the lingo lends an “air of authenticity” when dealing with these operators.³² Here, being “authentic” means using the right terms, such as these suggested lines: “This is Phil Donehue on the 4-A 17-C test board. We have some trunk testing to perform and require a no-test trunk for the 555 office.”³³ With the right lingo spoken to the right operator, this gives the phreak a, well, freaky ability: the ability *to listen to other people’s phone conversations*. “The fact is that just about anyone with the right numbers to call and the correct things to say could tap into anyone’s telephone line using telephone company circuits.”³⁴

Another guide also makes a similar argument in an article on “Rate & Route” operators, a special class of telephone operators. “The [Rate & Route] operator has a myriad of information, and all it takes to get this data is mumbling cryptic phrases at her.”³⁵ The guide goes on to share the “cryptic phrases”: “numbers route,” “directory route,” “operator route,” and “place name,” to name

a few. The most extensive phone phreak guide is probably BIOC Agent 003's "Course in Basic Telecommunications," a series of text files appearing on BBSs around the years 1983 and 1984.³⁶ These files include information on bullshitting the operator as part of a larger, exhaustive emphasis on the technical terms and details of the phone system itself. The guide explains how the fruits of trashing and research can lead to better social engineering engagements.

As these guides show, the phreaks go to great lengths to learn the terms and use them correctly. Thus, in contrast to the deception of the pretext, the phone phreak's use of lingo demonstrates the careful use of accurate information during the bullshitting operation. Like Frankfurt's "exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen" or Mukerji's hitchhiker who spins a plausible tale, the phreaks work to get things right.

But again, these deployments of correct information are not in service of the operator's understanding of the goals of inquiry, but instead are used to cover up the true intentions of the phreak. If we speak of these practices purely in terms of "true" and "false"—if we use terms like "lies" or "fake news"—we might say that the bullshitter is concerned with truth only so far as it relates to the effectiveness of the communication. Whether the bullshitter is aware of the truth or not, they will likely attempt to achieve verisimilitude sufficient to achieve the desired effect. The bullshitter might not know or care about the truth, but will likely want the audience to at least see the bullshit as plausible. This is what we mean by accuracy. Despite the accuracy of the phreaks' use of phone lingo, the care and attention paid to getting things just right, they are still bullshitting.

Bullshitting in Hacker Social Engineering

The contemporary, professionalized field of interpersonal hacker social engineering no longer uses the term bullshitting. Indeed,

the transition from the less polite “bullshitting” to the more professional-sounding “social engineering” occurred in the 1980s through 2010s. Sometimes, the terms “bullshitting” and “social engineering” appeared alongside one another in BBS posts or magazine articles. Eventually, however, “social engineering” replaced “bullshitting” as the term of art among hackers.

Something gets lost when “bullshitting” is dropped from the lexicon. Bullshitting is an excellent label for what happens when social engineers leave the trashing/OSINT stage to put their pretexts to the test in the field and engage with people. Hacker social engineers may not call it bullshitting, but they are consummate bullshit artists, nonetheless. As the hacker social engineer Kevin Mitnick puts it, “successful social engineers have strong people skills. They’re charming, polite, and easy to like—social traits needed for establishing rapid rapport and trust.”³⁷ Contemporary social engineering guides, such as the books by Hadnagy, Conheady, or Mitnick, build on the phone phreaks’ older guides by including discussions of role-playing and deception (in the form of developing a pretext), accuracy (in the form of information gathering and getting terms, names, and jargon right), and friendliness. On this last point, Johnny Long’s *No Tech Hacking* starts with an anecdote about his first physical social engineering engagement, when his mentor suggested Long enter the building via a loading dock. When Long protested—“there’s people there!”—his mentor prescribed bullshitting: “Just look like you belong. Say hello to the employees. Be friendly. Comment on the weather.”³⁸ Indeed, an unofficial motto that professional social engineer Chris Hadnagy offers his students is: “leave them feeling better for having met you.”³⁹

This mode of bullshitting, adopted from the phreaks, is predominantly aimed at interpersonal manipulation. Like the phreaks before them, contemporary social engineers might use “vishing” (a portmanteau of “voice” and “phishing”) to ask for passwords over the phone. Or they may use bullshit in emails as they phish. And

they also bullshit in person when they go to physically penetrate a target organization.

Bullshit among the Mass Social Engineers

Bullshit isn't limited to the interpersonal social engineering of phreaks and hackers.

If there's any group of social engineers who never used the word "bullshit" (at least in print), it's definitely the mass social engineers of the early to mid-twentieth century. Indeed, their adaptation of the Progressive-era emphasis on "facts" means they would be incensed to have their techniques of controlling crowds through media messages called "bullshit."⁴⁰ Phone phreaks and hackers may have been comfortable with such crude language, but not mass social engineers like Bernays, Fleischman, or Ivy Lee.

But as we have shown, "bullshit" is a rich theoretical concept. Much like the phreak and hacker term "trashing," which also was never used by mass social engineers, it's profitable to take up bullshitting as a lens to reconsider the activities of the mass social engineers. Indeed, arguably Harry Frankfurt had their ilk in mind when he composed his book *On Bullshit*. His sharpest condemnations are directed at the use of bullshit by marketers and political communicators.

And those condemnations seem justified. From the start of his career, mass social engineer Ivy Lee peddled bullshit. In 1914, he was hired by the industrialist John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to advocate on behalf of the family after a mining company the Rockefellers had invested in paid an armed militia to break a union strike earlier that year. The militia slaughtered union members in the town of Ludlow, Colorado, including women and children who tried to hide from the militia under a tent, but were killed when the tent was set on fire by the strike-breakers.⁴¹ The event is now known as the Ludlow Massacre.

The Rockefeller family didn't need more bad publicity; thanks to the work of the muckraker Ida Tarbell, they were already vilified due to their history as the owners of the legendarily rapacious Standard Oil corporation.⁴² Their involvement in a bloody, machine gun-driven, tent-burning, union-busting operation was not helping their reputation. To help clear the Rockefeller name, Lee sent tens of thousands of bulletins and booklets "to opinion leaders throughout the country: 'public officials, editors, ministers, teachers, and prominent professionals and business men.'"⁴³ Conceived of as missives exploring the "struggle for industrial freedom," these bulletins included benign facts about Colorado coal mining meant to inform people about the industry. They also included material meant to sully the unions and strikers. As the media studies scholar Stuart Ewen notes, Lee mixed accurate facts about the industry with "calculated inaccuracies—Lee's dispatches, for example, routinely exaggerated the salaries received by the union organizers."⁴⁴ A biography of Lee concurs with Ewen's assessment, explaining that "most of the bulletins contained matter which on the surface was true but which presented the facts in such a way as to give a total picture that was false."⁴⁵ This mix of fact and deception was designed to prove the bullshit claim "that the pillage at Ludlow was the work not of the mine operators and their armies, but of 'well-paid agitators sent out by the union.'"⁴⁶

Moreover, Lee used deceptive pretexts. The bulletins were labeled as being produced by the Colorado coal industry, with no mention of the Rockefeller family's sponsorship.⁴⁷ He also recruited one Helen Grenfell, the "Vice-President of the Women's Law and Order League of Colorado," to provide an "eyewitness" account of the Ludlow Massacre that blamed the union for starting the fight and stated that the fatal fire was caused by accident, not set deliberately by the strike-breakers. "Unmentioned in the report were the facts that Grenfell was not, in fact, an eyewitness to events at Ludlow and that she was the wife of a railroad official whose company profited from carrying Colorado coal."⁴⁸

The use of deception alongside facts contradicted Lee's stated ethical standards. Writing in his 1925 pamphlet *Publicity*, he declared that "the essential evil of propaganda is the failure to disclose the source of information."⁴⁹ In his "Declaration of Principles," a now-famous statement he had sent to newspaper editors across the United States just nine years prior to the Ludlow Massacre, Lee assured wary news editors that his public relations work "is accurate," and that "any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying any statement of fact. . . . Full information will be given to any editor concerning those on whose behalf an article is sent out." His goal is to "supply to the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about." Lee concluded with a promise: "I am always at your service."⁵⁰

Apologists for Lee's work on behalf of the Rockefellers—with its pretexts and bullshit about union leader salaries as well as who started the conflict—note that Lee could not possibly have lived up to his own declaration, because he was fed information from his employer and from a journalist in Colorado and he didn't have the time to verify every detail.⁵¹ However, when Lee was called out on the deceptions in his work by the US Commission on Industrial Relations, he did little to correct the record, despite his promise of cheerful assistance. To Lee's credit, he did send out some corrections in the form of one thousand booklets. But this was a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands he had sent with the deceptive information.⁵² Moreover, "despite Lee's efforts to rectify the problem, copies were still being circulated without the correction."⁵³ And none of this addresses the fact that Lee did not disclose that the Rockefellers were behind his bulletins, belying his promise to provide "full information . . . concerning those on whose behalf an article is sent out." And although Lee was chastened when his bullshit was called out by the Commission, he repeated his tactics on behalf of coal mine operators in West Virginia just a few years after Ludlow.⁵⁴

Lee's work was quintessential mass social engineering bullshit—glorying in facts and accuracy when presenting statistics about Colorado coal mining, and yet deceiving readers about his sources and peddling inaccuracies that supported his public relations mission. The truth of the Ludlow Massacre was beside the point. The point was to sway public opinion towards the Rockefellers and away from the union, and to do so behind the ethical veneer of a declaration of principles.⁵⁵ But Lee did adhere to at least one part of his principles: he was, by all accounts, cheerful and friendly. John D. Rockefeller Jr. commended him for doing his work in an “entirely good natured, attractive, and impressive manner.”⁵⁶

Despite Lee's bullshitting, or perhaps because of it, he is now considered a foundational figure in the field of public relations. To this day, public relations professionals point to his “Declaration of Principles” as the start of the modern field.⁵⁷ However, American studies scholar Jonathan Auerbach notes that, while Ivy Lee has the best claim to the title “father of public relations,” most scholarship gives that honor to Edward Bernays. This is because Bernays

was happy to put himself forward as the father of public relations, even though he clearly came on the scene a full decade after Lee. Considering influence rather than seniority, I would again insist that Lee remains the more important figure in the history of public relations, despite Bernays's relentless efforts to toot his own horn. The simple fact is that Bernays was more fun and flamboyant than Lee. He was also a far better self-promoter and propagandist for propaganda.⁵⁸

In other words, Bernays was an even better bullshitter than Lee, a charming and affable character who bullshitted himself into the limelight as the “father of PR.”

Multiple scholars of Bernays note that he exaggerated the success of his own campaigns. For example, over the course of his long life, he overstated the impact of his Torches of Freedom march, the event he and Fleischman concocted for the American Tobacco Company.

The Torches march included a few women smoking while marching in the 1929 Easter Parade in New York City in order to, in his words, “smash the taboo against women smoking.”⁵⁹ In Bernays’s telling of his life, the event went from being a minor one to the most transformative moment in American tobacco history, being covered in every major newspaper and being the single reason why women smoked in America.⁶⁰ In a video interview in the Museum of Public Relations, a grandfatherly Bernays claims that the day after the Torches of Freedom march, “there wasn’t a newspaper in the United States [ignoring the story.] Even the *New York Times* had a front page story, ‘Debutantes Light Torches of Freedom To Protest Man’s Inhumanity to Women by a Taboo Against Smoking.’” While it’s accurate to say that the *Times* had a front-page story on the Easter parade, the headline was, in fact, “Easter Sun Finds The Past In Shadow at Modern Parade.” The phrase he quotes is non-existent, and the smoking women are mentioned only in passing.⁶¹ In addition, Bernays was also wrong about the impact of the event: women had smoked in public for years prior to the march and the coverage of the event was far less extensive than Bernays claimed.⁶² Bernays obviously had a stake in our believing in his mass social engineering prowess, so he bullshitted about it.

Most strikingly—despite his pseudo-feminist campaigns to help women enjoy the freedom of smoking—Bernays’s drive to be the “father of PR” led to him completely erasing the work of someone who might claim the title “the mother of public relations.” His wife, Doris Fleischman, gets even less credit than Ivy Lee for her role in developing the field, despite the fact that she was an equal partner in their public relations firm and did much of the key work in developing theories of mass social engineering.⁶³ Bernays’s reason for not giving his partner her deserved credit? There was a taboo on women in professions, and his clients wouldn’t accept Fleischman.⁶⁴ So much for taboo-smashing.

The rampant bullshitting among mass social engineers may be why Frankfurt was unsparing in his criticism of them:

The realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept.⁶⁵

While the phreaks were at least honest in calling what they did “bullshit,” the mass social engineers are the ones most associated with the practice in modern American thought, mixing deception, facts, and friendliness together on a mass media scale. Lee and Bernays are, to this day, celebrated figures in the field of public relations. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their finely crafted bullshit.

Conclusion

Social engineers—mass, interpersonal, or otherwise—are bullshitters. Social engineering is an artistic, truth-indifferent mix of deception, accurate information, insider knowledge, friendliness, talking out of one’s ass, flattery, and self-aggrandizement. Bullshitting offers a flexible suite of communication skills for the social engineer. It is sociable, but with instrumental goals: to keep the pretext alive and to get valuable information, access to restricted technologies or networks, or control of crowds through media messaging. Bullshitting, in sum, is the social engineer’s engagement tactic of choice. Whether it is a phone phreak calling up an operator, a hacker social engineer sending a phishing email, or a public relations firm creating a media campaign, bullshit is always involved. Bullshit is dangerous, capable of radically undermining our trust.

So, if social engineering relies heavily on bullshitting, why don’t we throw the social engineers out? The answer is simple: they claim to be doing it for our own good. We turn to that next.

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