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Shooting the shit: the role of bullshit in organisations

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Abstract

This article argues that a great deal of both 'talk' and 'text' in organisational settings is, ultimately, bullshit. By 'bullshit' I mean the type of organisational speech and text that is produced with scant regard for the truth and is used to willfully mislead and to pursue the interests of the bullshitter. Bullshit is particularly prevalent in immaterial roles that lack a clear sense of social purpose. In these contexts, employees try to occupy themselves by engaging in bullshit. They do this by circulating discourses which are strategically ambiguous, over-packed with information and deliberately fleeting in nature. In order to construct these discourses, they frequently turn to examples set by the management fashion industry. When bullshit begins to take hold of an organisation, it can have surprisingly positive effects. It can create a positive image for the company and can help to increase self-confidence and build legitimacy. However, this often comes with some distinctly darker consequences: primary tasks are crowded out, valued occupational identities are compromised and stakeholder trust is undermined. Ultimately, bullshit leaves us with organisations that may be appealing on the surface but are distinctly brittle.

INTRODUCTION

The production of talk and text – or 'discourse' - is central to organisational life. Most of us are now 'paper pushers' who spend our days creating, circulating and consuming discourses. One study estimated that office workers whose job is to try to persuade others make up 25% of the US economy (McCloskey and Kalmer, 1995). This estimate was recently increased to a whopping 30% (Antioch, 2013). So what exactly do all these discourse jockeys spend their time doing? The answer is surprisingly mundane: they create power point presentations, engage in routine discourses in service encounters, chat with colleagues, send emails, sit in meetings, or sit in meetings and send emails to arrange other meetings.

If the post-industrialisation of our economy has done one thing, it has been to turn us into 'talk and text' workers. Even in sectors that are not as naturally talk and text heavy – such as agriculture and manufacturing – discursive work has become increasingly prevalent. For instance, farmers now spend time working on their 'brands' and manufacturing workers spend time in team meetings talking about quality targets. Just doing things is not enough – what is really important is being able to talk in a compelling and convincing way about what will (or perhaps might) be done.

Now that discourse is increasingly central to organisational life, how can we understand it? The past two decades have produced whole libraries of work trying to answer this question (Phillips and Oswick, 2013). Putting aside all the theoretical and sophistic explanations, the central insights from the field charged with making sense of all this discourse seem to boil down to this: in organisational life, 'talk and text' does not just describe organisational reality, it constitutes it. To put this another way, organisational discourse generates the social reality of organisations. If one were to be even more extreme, discourse could be said to be where the reality of organisational life is located (Ashcraft et al, 2009). The organisation is talked and texted into life.

Underlying the concept that discourse constitutes organisational reality is the assumption that discourse is productive – it creates, calls forward, makes up, crafts and so on. But what if this is not always the case? What if talk and text are not always such productive and creative mechanisms? Are there perhaps moments when discourse does things other than construct organisational reality (Alvesson and Karreman, 2011)? After all, we all know there are occasions where discourse does very little at all. We have all sat through meetings where a colleague spoke at great length and achieved absolutely nothing. We have seen the creation of expensive consultancy reports that were binned as soon as they were released. Indeed, we might go as far as suggesting that the great majority of discourses that are produced within organisations are stunningly non-constitutive of organisational reality.

How can we understand all these ineffective, empty, ephemeral discourses that float around organisations? In this essay, I would like to argue that they might be best understood as being bullshit. Borrowing from Harry Frankfurt's (2005) short pamphlet of the same name, I will argue that 'bullshit' can be defined as a discourse which is created, circulated and consumed with little respect for or relationship to reality. 'Bullshit' is crafted to willfully mislead and to serve the bullshitter's purposes. I will claim that this kind of discourse is particularly prevalent in immaterial contexts that lack a clear sense of social

purpose or value. In order to stave off this sense of purposelessness, many organisational members turn to the dark art of bullshit. Bullshitters make use of discourses that are strategically ambiguous, conceptually over-packed and fleeting. The raw materials for such discourses are frequently provided by, amongst others, the gurus, consultants and business schools of the management fashion industry. The potential outcomes of this bullshit are distinctly two-sided. On the one hand, bullshit can help to bolster an organisation's image, self-confidence and legitimacy. On the other, it can simultaneously have more corrosive effects such as crowding out the primary task of the organisation, violating (previously) valued occupational identities, and undermining stakeholder trust. The end result is that an organisation indulging in bullshit may have an attractive image but ultimately becomes hollow and brittle.

To make this argument, I will begin by looking at debates about organisational discourse. I will point out that non-constructive discourses have been largely overlooked in the broader field of organisational discourse analysis. Next, I will examine the characteristics of bullshit, and give some examples of it and of organisational contexts. I will then sketch the outlines of a theory of organisational bullshit. To do this, I will identify what triggers bullshit in organisations, the process of bullshitting and some of the double-edged consequences. I will conclude by outlining what bullshit might mean for organisational discourse analysis and some measures that might be taken to stem the flood of bullshit in contemporary organisations.

DISCOURSE

The study of organisational discourse has grown from what was once a niche area of linguistics into a large field made up of many different theoretical strands. At the core of this field is the conviction that organisational life is largely about the creation, circulation and consumption of talk and text. If we are to understand how organisations work, then we need to follow how these processes of discourse operate and what their effects are. The second central conviction of the field is that the creation, circulation and consumption of talk and text 'constructs social reality, rather than simply reflects it' (Hardy et al, 2005: 60). Organisational discourse is assumed to be the central mechanism though which people make up social reality.

Most people seem to accept the first assumption that the circulation of talk and text is an important aspect of organisational life. However, the second assumption (that organisational discourse constructs social reality) has been called into question by a range of critical voices. Some have argued that this second assumption tends to ignore the role that the agents using and mobilising these discourse have. Indeed, if actors are accounted for at all, they are thought about as an after-effect. This is evident in the widely spread assumption that 'discourse constructs actors'. Critics have pointed out that writing off actors and seeing them as an effect of discourse tends to ignore how actors frequently intervene in, resist and rearticulate discourses in ways which are not expected (eg. Gabriel, 1999). Indeed, careful studies of the active use of organisational discourse have now appeared which deal with these active uses of talk and text. These studies give a rich account of

the playful and creative ways in which people use discourse to do the work of organising (for review see: Ashcraft et al, 2009). In this sense, these studies are not so much about discourse as they are about discursive practice.

A second criticism that has been targeted at works of organisational discourse analysis is that they tend to engage in the ontological trick of discursive reductionism. By this I mean that studies of discourse seek to reduce all aspects of social reality into a discourse. Critics of this position would point out that this effectively marginalises aspects that do not neatly fit into the arena of language (Fleetwood, 2005). Of particular note here are materiality and what critical realists are fond of calling 'underlying generative structures' such as bureaucracy, capitalism, patriarchy and kinship relationships (Reed, 2005). As critics have pointed out, organisational discourse analysis has presented a rather flat and insufficiently nuanced account of organisational life by ignoring these elements. It is as if talk and text (and perhaps talking and texting actors) are all there is. To address this significant oversight, some have developed a discourse analysis informed by critical realism (eg. Fairclough, 2005). This approach seeks to focus 'not just upon discourse, but on relations between discursive and other social elements' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2010: 1215) such as materiality, technologies and social structures. By doing this, researchers working in this tradition are able to highlight how discourse can influence and impact these other aspects of social reality (or vice versa).

A third potential shortcoming in the literature on discourse has recently been highlighted by Alvesson and Kärreman (2011). In their intervention, they have pointed out that 'discourse analysts often seem to emphasize that discourse has a lot of muscle mass – although different muscular discourses may neutralize each other or create uncertain effects. We are not so sure. Discourse may make a difference – however, this muscularity cannot be assumed but needs to be demonstrated' (p.1140). In this passage they point to a very important issue. To simply assume from the outset that organisational discourse constitutes reality is to make a huge leap of ontological faith. And this leap of faith leads us to narrow our empirical gaze to only looking for cases in which discourse in some way constructs or constitutes reality. But as Alvesson and Karreman point out, surely there are other effects which discourse might have which are far less muscular. It can varnish, gesture, connect, instruct as well as produce and construct (p.1140-1).

In many cases, the discourses that litter organisational life are examples of what Alvesson and Karreman call 'ephemeral talk' (p. 1140). This is discourse that 'has no significant constitutive agency, apart from transient meaning' (ibid). If we think about this category of discourse for a second, we begin to realise that organisations are actually completely full of fleeting talk that lacks substance. Think of many of the meetings that people suffer through – they are frequently hours of empty talk. More 'serious' discourses in organisations often have an ephemeral character as well. Think of strategy discourse – although it is treated with great reverence, it is often fleeting, interchangeable, relatively meaningless and very ineffective. Similar things can be said about statements of organisational values which often seem to jumble together a whole set of nice sounding generic words like 'quality', 'service', 'value' and so on with little effect. Indeed, being a middle manager often means becoming adept at working with these ephemeral 'weasel words' (Watson, 2004).

What is so remarkable about this large managerial lexicon is how often it has little relationship with the reality of what is going on in an organisation. Reading a strategy statement in many firms will not reveal what the firm does. Listening to talk in a meeting often reveals little about what happens in employees' day-to-day work. Asking a manager about their leadership style will often reveal fanciful stories rather than actual realities (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). Because it is so deeply disconnected from the everyday reality of organising, such talk often has very little 'effective' impact on organisational processes (beyond at times being a pesky distraction which needs to be tolerated). In this sense, a good portion of talk and text in organisations seems to be fundamentally 'empty', bearing little relationship with the reality of what goes on in the organisation. Training in management involves mastering the art of empty talk. And the skilled managers are the ones who are able to work well with it (Swartz, 1991).

BULLSHIT

If empty talk and text are important parts of organisational life, how should we understand them? I think the key to unlocking this overlooked issue – the dark matter of organisational life – can be found in a short essay by Harry Frankfurt (2005) entitled 'On Bullshit'. In this striking piece, Frankfurt points out that much of our social life is characterised by a flood of what he calls 'bullshit'. He gives many examples ranging from men engaging in competitive over-exaggeration about sports to the public relations industry pushing a product to cultural commentators concerned with 'sincerity'. For Frankfurt, bullshit is not simply a false statement – a claim that is meant to deceive or to violate the truth. Rather, bullshit is language that has two distinctive characteristics: (1) it is articulated without concern for the criteria of the truth and (2) the bullshitter willfully articulates it to pursue their own purposes and interests. Let us look at each of these points in a little more depth.

The first core characteristic of bullshit is that it is talk which has a 'lack of connection with a concern for the truth' and an 'indifference to how things really are' (p. 33-34)[1]. To put this differently, bullshit is talk that has been emptied of meaningful content and become hot air. It is a form of discourse which roves across topics, buzz words and conjectures without stopping to test its own worthiness against any criteria of truth (whether that be a comparison with empirical reality, basic criteria of reason or some kind of inter-subjective checking against broadly shared social understandings of reality). A classic instance of bullshit is a set of claims about a new product being 'better', 'brighter' and 'whiter'. Notice there are no clear criteria about what exactly it is better, brighter and whiter than. Indeed, the interlocutor is not supposed to consider a referent at all. They are simply supposed to be carried along by a set of hyperbolic statements. Understanding bullshit as being talk or text that is unconcerned with the truth helps us to distinguish it from simple lies. As Frankfurt points out, lies are crafted with a concern for the truth (p.51), it is just that they are typically made with an attempt to conceal what the truth is. In contrast, bullshit ranges free without any clear concern for the truth as a referent that needs to be carefully and judiciously avoided.

1. Of course, the idea that there is a special class of discourse which is crafted with no relationship to 'truth' or 'how things are' is scandalous in the extreme for the average discourse theorist. As I have pointed out earlier, many working within the field are of strong social constructivist leanings and sign up to the rather strong ontological claim that reality ('how things are') is some kind of product of, or at least completely mediated through, the discourses that we use to understand and engage with it. They would baulk at the claim that there is some kind of pre-discursive truth without a relationship to which a bullshit discourse might be articulated. Frankfurter is certainly no friend of social constructivist ontologies. Indeed the parting shot of his essay seems to be aimed at precisely this strand of philosophy. While I might not sign up to the hard analytical realism peddled by Frankfurter – or even particular strands of critical realism – I think there is merit in considering participants' experiences and reports of 'reality' (which surely most have, however that is defined in an intersubjective way), and considering how much talk which is articulated in organisational life often bears little resemblance to much of the talk which is circulated within organisational life. So for me, Bullshit might be more precisely thought about as talk and text which is articulated with no concern for broadly shared understandings and experiences of reality within a particular social group (such as an organisation).

The second criterion which distinguishes bullshit from normal discourse is the fact that it is composed of talk and text which are produced with the intention to mislead interlocutors so that the bullshitter can pursue their own interests (Frankfurt, 2005). What this means is that bullshit has a degree of intentionality about it. Bullshit is actively used to do something – to pursue one's interests through misleading. For instance, a bullshitter might list a whole string of impressive facts and figures about a consumer market (which are rattled off without concern for whether they are accurate or not) so that they are seen as an expert in this area. Such an act might deceive us (as they may not in fact be an expert) and serve the bullshitter (as it bestows them with an air of expertise). The intentional nature of bullshitting helps us to distinguish it from discourses which have little relation to the truth but which are not actively intended to mislead. A classic example of the latter would be the talk and text produced by a neophyte in a field whose mistakes and exaggerations we might forgive.

If Bullshit is empty talk that has no reference to the truth and is produced with the intentions to mislead and to benefit the bullshitter, then the worlds of organisations and management are a veritabletreasure trove of examples[2]. Perhaps the paradigmatic example of this is the well-known boardroom game of 'bullshit bingo', where the players are challenged to count up the number of empty buzz words which are used during a meeting. Often they will be assigned a buzz word (like 'value', 'quality', 'responsibility' etc.). When your buzz word is uttered during a meeting, you score a point. The person with the highest score at the end of the meeting wins. What makes this game more than just an entertaining pastime is the fact that it points to the emptiness and disconnection from reality often present in management discourses. It suggests that the vocabulary of management is virtually interchangeable and means very little.

This point is underlined in a telegram sent on the occasion of the retirement of a British diplomat in Rome. In this ceremonial piece of communication, he complained of a "Cultural Revolution» which was forced on the diplomatic service by the two most powerful UK government departments (the Treasury and the Cabinet Office). This resulted in a 'change-management agenda . . . written in Wall Street management speak already ... discredited by the time it [was] introduced. Synergies, best practice, benchmarking ... roll out, stakeholder.... fit for purpose, are all prime candidates for a game of bullshit bingo, a substitute for clarity and succinctness.» (MacIntyre, 2007). What is so concerning for the diplomat about the changing language in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is not the fact that it is changing, but that it is founded upon 'management speak' which is ephemeral and 'discredited by the time it is introduced'. But more than this, he is concerned with the apparent fuzziness and verbosity of much of this discourse. This stands in strict opposition to the 'clarity and succinctness' that he claims to prefer. Although we might read this parting missive as a case of sour grapes, there is probably something more here. The language of managerialism is a relatively late-comer to the genteel UK foreign service. And this puts a retiring diplomat in a relatively good position to assess the kind of management speak which has become background noise in most of our working lives. He recognises almost instantly that most management talk is often bullshit – it is speech that is created without a relationship to the truth. It is largely crafted to sound impressive.

2. The other great treasure-trove of bullshit is politics. In her analysis of Blairite policy, Eleonora Belfiore (2009) does a wonderful job of highlighting the role which bullshit plays in arts policy. She traces the rise of the importance of statistical evidence as an important currency in this policy area and shows how this evidence is frequently used in highly selective ways.

Another example of organisational bullshit is the rise of New Public Management in Universities. Lorenz (2012) claims that universities are increasingly beset with managerial bullshit including talk about quality, the creation of value, and rankings. According to Lorenz this is bullshit because it avoids reference to the truth and instead is mainly concerned with the effects of a discourse. What is more, the propagators of this discourse don't believe in it themselves. Lorenz points out that the bullshit quality of much management talk in universities is particularly debilitating for faculties because its 'hermetic, self-referential nature' make it 'completely resistant to all criticism' (Lorenz, 2012: 601). Because it is self-referential, management discourse does not obey or break the rules of scholarship which most university faculties are versed in. It does not make reference to the truth. Instead, merchants of management speak seem to be playing a different and altogether more cynical game where truth simply does not count. This is a game in which questioning and critiquing do not seem to work. Merchants of bullshit are thus able to avoid being held to criteria such as truth and to the harsh critique which this might involve.

A final example of bullshit in organizations is the complex financial moves used by accountants to please their stakeholders. According to Norman MacIntosh (2009), many of the earnings reports routinely issues by large corporations conform to the characteristics of bullshit. They are not strictly truthful insofar as they don't reflect the underlying characteristics of what the company has actually earned during a quarter. Nor are most earnings statements bald-faced lies which purposefully seek to deceive investors and others. Rather, MacIntosh claims, they are bullshit. This is because earnings statements are constructed to please a wide range of interest groups rather than to reflect any underlying reality. They are contrived to comply with the law and various other accounting guidelines. But they are also crafted in a way which keeps analysts and senior management happy too. They 'satisfy the market for accounting information – investment analysts, shareholders, bankers, top executives, the SEC, tax authorities and other related parties' (p. 158). Doing this mean being 'indifferent to whether or not the earnings report tells the truth or not' (p. 158).

A THEORY OF ORGANISATIONAL BULLSHIT

In order to understand organisational bullshit, we need to not only look at the phenomenon itself, but also at what prompts it, how it works and what its outcomes are. In this section, I will argue that bullshit is prompted by organisations that are dominated by immaterial roles that provide their occupants with little sense of broader social purpose and value. One way to fill this existential void is through bullshit. I will argue that the process of bullshitting involves articulating discourses which are strategically ambiguous, over-packed and fleeting. Bullshitters frequently draw on the raw materials that are provided by the management fashions industry. Doing this can have a distinctly two sided-effect. On the one hand, it can help to impress and build confidence in others, allowing an organisation to build legitimacy in the eyes of important stakeholders (and thereby ensure its survival). On the other hand, it crowds out many of the core organisational processes, clashes with organisational members' occupational identities and undermines stakeholder trust. This can result in a dispirited workforce and a fatal sense of lacking purpose within the organisation.

Prompts of Bullshit

It is tempting to think that bullshit is simply caused by a few individuals who have a rather cavalier approach to the truth. In many settings this may indeed be true. However, organisational bullshit seems to go beyond just a few rogue employees. There appear to be whole organisations that actively encourage the circulation and propagation of bullshit. Frankfurt points out that particular sectors such as those of politics and public relations are especially prone to bullshit. Some have even gone as far as to say that spouting bullshit seems to touch the core characteristics of politics (Belfiore, 2009). But as I have already indicated, if we look beyond these two bullshit-intense sectors to other areas, we find that there is still a significant amount of discourse that seems to have no regard or connection with the truth. Indeed, many large organisations seem to offer significant opportunities for the bullshit artist. So what is it about these particular organisations or industries that seems to provide ample opportunity for bullshit?

Perhaps a good starting point to this question is provided by Graeber's (2013) short essay on bullshit work. In this widely discussed piece, he argues that recent transformations of the economy have led to an increasing number of what he calls 'Bullshit jobs'. These are jobs in which people 'spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed' (Graeber, 2013). They are largely concentrated among the managerial, professional, administrative, sales and service sectors. Graeber points out that the rise of highly productive technologies during the early 20th century – such as factory automation - coupled with the extensive outsourcing of most manufacturing to countries like China has meant that there is less need for labour in Western countries. People need to work less but they seem to do more. It is this, Greaber argues, that has caused the advent of bullshit jobs. Ultimately he sees these empty and meaningless jobs as a way of corralling the surplus time available in Western society into the controlling structure of the work place. According to Graeber, this helps to ensure our additional free time remains yoked to the demands of an increasingly immaterial form of capitalism. So building on Graeber's argument, we might claim that the basic structural driver for the prevalence of bullshit is a broader socio-economic shift towards an immaterial economy that creates large numbers of jobs without an obvious social value that are often experienced as being purposeless and empty by their occupants.

Faced with a job that is experienced as being relatively empty and meaningless, occupants are confronted with a profound question – how can they occupy themselves and cope with their pointless working day? Graeber points out that occupants of bullshit jobs not only find them meaningless, but are often chronically underemployed. Although they are 'working 40 or even 50 hour weeks on paper' in reality their job often only requires 'working 15 hours just as Keynes predicted, since the rest of their time is spent organising or attending motivational seminars, updating their facebook profiles or downloading TV box-sets'. Amongst these responses to bullshit work, there seem to be two sets of different ways of dealing with the emptiness of many contemporary jobs. One way is to fill the working day with what Roland Paulsen (2013) has called 'empty labour'. This is private activity designed to pass the time in a relatively under-stimulating manner such as surfing the internet. The objective of this

kind of activity is to simply fill the day up and make it pass faster. The other response seems to be propagating, circulating and participating in various forms of bullshit. Graeber gives motivational seminars as one example. The more mundane forms of bullshit include endless email exchanges, lengthy meetings, training in pointless skills and, of course, much of the apparently purposeless administrative labour which drains the will to live of so many office dwellers.

Bullshitting

Indulging in bullshit is a way of sidestepping the meaninglessness that stalks working life in the immaterial work place. But what exactly does bullshitting entail? At the core of the task of bullshitting seems to be the avoidance of any obvious connections between discourse and truth or reality. This is often a difficult task to achieve as most statements can be pinned down and compared to some criteria in one way or another. The skilled bullshitter seeks to avoid this connection. After all, it would draw them into the requirements of justification and reason-giving – a game they would surely lose at. One way to do this is by relying on significant amounts of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984). This entails words or concepts that are difficult or impossible to pin down. Very broad words like 'excellence', 'quality' and 'innovation' are excellent examples of strategic ambiguity. They are words that could mean almost anything to anybody. Using such words makes it difficult for an interlocutor to pin them down and inquire in any more depth into their particular claims. It allows a bullshitter to escape from too much interrogation.

Another possible strategy is to over-pack discourse with terms and concepts[3]. This makes it harder to pin down what the core concepts actually are. In the case of over-packed discourse, it is difficult to actually discern what is important and what is not. Concepts that should be subjected to further interrogation are skirted over without any further inquiry. Discourses of leadership, for example, are over-packed with a whole series of associations, ideas and other concepts (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). This makes it difficult for an interlocutor to actually pin down much of this relatively empty leadership talk. Over-packing discourse is a way to avoid difficult questions by ensuring that there is no clear focus that might allow us to work out what a concept actually means.

A final possible strategy for bullshitting involves ensuring discourses are dynamic. This involves assiduously avoiding any clear commitment to a particular discourse and continually shifting between different terms in a vague and often baseless fashion. By keeping discourse shifting and moving, it is possible for the bullshitter to avoid attaching themselves to a particular position which they might be asked deeper questions about. For instance, many corporate strategies are typically made up of a set of rapidly shifting trends, ideas and management fashions. Because the actual content of corporate strategy changes so rapidly, it becomes difficult to subject it to any kind of critical scrutiny. Once questioning and criticism has been formulated, the discourse has moved on. The result is that continued shifting discourses are rarely, if ever, subjected to scrutiny. Instead, they are tolerated as passing amusements and novelties.

3. The concept of over-packing in relation to discourse analysis is discussed by Alvesson and Karreman (2011)

Bullshitting is hard work. It requires the capacity to continually come up with new, over-packed, ambiguous concepts. In fact, the creativity this requires is beyond the abilities of most organisational members. To bullshit, most people need a continued supply of discursive resources from external sources. Fortunately, there is a whole industry of consultants, gurus and other managerial idea workers who are charged with creating and circulating these discourses. The management ideas industry works through continually feeding out a series of fads and fashions (Abrahamson, 1999). These typically are appealing not because they work, but because they are attractively packaged and promoted. This gives potential adopters a stock of ideas and discourses that they can use in their day-to-day acts of bullshit mongering.

Outcomes

The prevalence of bullshit in organisations might seem unappealing, but there are clearly some significantly positive outcomes. Bullshit allows individuals to build up an appealing image (often in absence of other more substantive resources such as knowledge and abilities). This is highlighted in a study of a large management consultancy firm that found employees talked about how they used bullshit to impress clients (Alvesson and Karreman, 2004). Bullshit was seen as particularly effective for maintaining a 'them and us division' between the members of the consultancy firm and the people buying their services (p. 161). When a consultant inadvertently began to try to bullshit another consultant, they would quickly drop it once they had discovered the identity of their interlocutor (p. 160). The implication here is that bullshit is for the clients, and one should 'tell it like it is' to other members of the consultancy. Furthermore, this suggests that the bullshit is not believed in by its merchants – it is simply used to impress.

Bullshit is not just used to impress other people. It can also be used as a kind of confidence trick to impress and convince oneself. This point is made in a study of middle managers by Tony Watson (1994). He highlights how middle managers often use bullshit as a way of trying to build a convincing narrative about who they are in the face of what is often a very precarious position. Liberal doses of bullshit help anxious middle managers to perform a confidence trick on themselves and convince themselves that they are useful and worthwhile members of the organisation who actually have something to add. This can help to firm up their sense of self worth and confidence in taking action – often in the face of many tough challenges and doubts.

As well as being used to build an impressive image for others and increase one's own self-confidence, bullshit is frequently used by organisations to build their broader legitimacy. This is a central insight that can be found in Meyer and Rowan's (1977) classic piece on institutional theory. This work points out how organisations often adopt policies and practices not because they are particularly effective or efficient, but because they are considered to be broadly socially acceptable. For instance, many firms adopt total quality management practices not because it helps to make their products be of higher quality but because it makes their organisation appeal to a wider set of stakeholders by appearing to be a 'good organisation' (Zabrecki, 1998). Popular management practices such as total quality management can actually clash with core processes in an organisation and make them less efficient.

But by building legitimacy through adopting these popular management ideas, these organisations can appeal to core external stakeholders such as investors, funders, buyers and suppliers that provide the organisation with its core resources. If these key stakeholders see the organisation as legitimate, then they are much more likely to be willing to provide the core resources the organisation needs to survive. What this ultimately suggests is that by indulging in bullshit mongering (particular targeted at external audiences), organisations can build their legitimacy and ultimately increase their chances of survival.

Bullshit in organisations can certainly lead to some positive aspects such as enhanced image, increased self-confidence and bolstered legitimacy. It is for these reasons that bullshit does not just go unchecked, but is actually positively encouraged within many organisations. However, the picture is not always so rosy. Organisational bullshit often brings with it some less pleasant consequences. Bullshit can become a fatal distraction from the primary tasks of an organisation. By primary tasks, I mean the central activity an organisation was either created to perform or must perform to survive (Dartington, 1998). These are tasks like educating students in a university, prudently investing clients' money in a financial institution, serving food in a restaurant and treating sick patients in a hospital[4]. Because it can help to enhance an organisation's image, self-belief and legitimacy, managerial bullshit can become quite addictive. When a firm gets hooked on bullshit, a significant amount of the organisation's effort becomes focused on the production, circulation and consumption of bullshit. This might act as a mere distraction from the primary task of the organisation. If this is the case, then organisational members may need to spend a significant amount of their time and resources on processing this baseless bullshit that holds little relation to the actual substance of organisational life. Managers and employees, for instance, will need to spend large chunks of their day attending meetings or implementing change programmes linked with this bullshit. The result is that organisations can begin to neglect the core processes that actually create value within their organisation. This might be tenable for a short period of time, but when processing bullshit that is associated with change efforts becomes a routine part of organisational life, it leads to a systemic distraction from primary tasks. In extreme cases, members of an organisation can completely neglect their primary task, making it uncertain what the organisation actually does and what broader value it offers society.

But more than just crowding out the primary task of an organisation, bullshit can trigger a deep sense of affront among organisational members. If members of an organisation are continually subjected to bullshit, they are likely to rapidly stop taking much of it particularly seriously. Any new initiative, direction or program is likely to be cynically treated as just another passing fad. But beyond cynicism towards passing initiatives, a deeper and perhaps more painful consequence is that any semblance that there might be a coherent set of criteria and procedures which could be used to test ideas and conjecture is put aside. This can be experienced as a profound challenge by many organisational members who are deeply committed to particular schemes of values that they use to judge worth and value in organisational life. When these schemes are questioned, it is as if the hard won occupational and professional identity of these organisational members is being up-ended.

4. The idea that an organisation has a primary task was treated as a basic axiom in much early organisation theory. However, this was partially called into question by behaviourial theories of the firm which point out that organisations are typically an agglomeration of a number of primary tasks - each of which are defined by different political coalitions (Cyert and March, 1963). Since the complex restructuring of corporations that has happened following the financialisation of corporate control during the 1970s, we have seen this basic axiom being thrown into question. Today many organisations either do not seem to own up to having a primary task, assume what they do is in pursuit of some other more grandiose goal (such as shareholder value maximization), articulate a rather abstract sounding primary task which does not seem to look anything like we would expect, or have a confusing array of poorly matched primary tasks (often due to haphazard mergers and acquisitions). The result is that many organisations and their members become utterly confused about what exactly the organisation actually does and therefore what their own purpose within the organisation is.

The result is that people working within bullshit laden organisations not only develop a deep sense of cynicism, but also experience a sense of violation and harm being done to their occupational identity, and often, by implication, to themselves. Many professionals who have been subjected to the discursive vagaries of new public management, for instance, often experience it as being an assault or affront to their identities as skilled and able professionals.

As well as crowding out the primary task of an organisation, and lacerating employee identities, organisational bullshit can severely undermine the trust a range of stakeholders have in an organisation. If stakeholders continue to be confronted with an ongoing parade of what appears to be utterly baseless talk, it is likely that they are going to begin to doubt the genuineness, ability and consistency of the organisation that they are dealing with. When this happens, stakeholders might tolerate the organisation but they are unlikely to rely upon it or develop meaningful and sustainable relationships with it. Indeed, it is more likely that these relationships will become transactional and brittle. The result is that when the advantage gained from the transaction begins to wane – or when another better offer turns up – the stakeholder is likely to pull out. What this means for the organisation is that although it might have access to many of the resources which it needs to operate, these resources are likely to be relatively fluid and often difficult to rely upon. Thus, if conditions change, many of the core resources that the organisation relies upon such as capital, finding streams, customers, suppliers and so on could rapidly evaporate. Consequently, organisations that are mired in bullshit are often the ones that become increasingly brittle, unstable, and liable to be blown apart by small changes in the environment.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that one of the striking features of a lot of organisations is that many of their discourses, in both talk and text, are bullshit. By this I mean that a great proportion of their talk and text is produced with little relation to the truth. Organisational bullshit is particularly prevalent in immaterial sectors of the economy where people often find themselves charged with jobs which are meaningless and devoid of obvious referents. This void creates conditions that are particularly amenable to being filled with organisational bullshit. This typically involves using highly ambiguous, over-packed and fleeting discourses. The management fashion industry (such as consultants, gurus, business schools and so on) provides individuals and organisations with a rich stream of raw-material for crafting bullshit. As bullshit begins to take hold of an organisation, it can have two quite different effects. On the one hand, it can help to boost the organisation's image, build self-confidence and bolster its legitimacy. On the other hand, it can crowd out the primary task of an organisation, violate valued occupational identities within the organisation and ultimately undermine the trust of broader stakeholders in the firm. This means organisations often face a trade off between seeking to build their image, self-confidence and legitimacy through circulating bullshit or bolstering their primary tasks, valued occupational identities and stakeholder trust through avoiding it. Unfortunately, in a society and economy which values image so highly (Gabriel, 2005), the bullshit option often seems to be the

default setting. This is unfortunate because this option often leads to brittle organisations with unclear directions, uncommitted (and even incompetent) employees, and highly suspicious and transactional stakeholders.

Bullshit presents some significant challenges for those who run and work in organisations. It is certainly very attractive, but also potentially very dangerous. The argument I have made above suggests that managers and employees alike need to maintain significant vigilance towards bullshit. One side of this vigilance entails the recognition that a small amount of bullshit may be helpful. Bullshit sessions can be useful spaces where people try ideas without having to totally commit to them. Bullshit can also be useful insofar as it can help to inspire (self) confidence in managerial initiatives. But the other side of vigilance involves recognising that the constant presence of bullshit can be very harmful for an organisation. This is because it will detract an organisation from its primary tasks, leading to a dangerous goal drift whereby organisations become so mired in bullshit that they lose sight of the purpose for their existence. This suggests that organisations need to develop a capacity to entertain a limited amount of bullshit, in circumscribed spaces. This might involve providing areas for bullshit sessions or even the limited use of bullshit merchants.

This first piece of advice is probably not so difficult for most organisations to implement – they already have more than enough bullshit to go around. So what is perhaps more important – and more difficult - is that organisations must develop the capacity to effectively process, and in many cases protect themselves from, bullshit. This could involve procedures for the careful vetting of ideas, the application of critical reasoning and simple tests of truth. Basic questions could be asked about the reasoning and evidence that underline practices. What is more, it is probably important to slow down the flow of bullshit and focus on giving substance to a limited number of ideas. Doing this will help to avoid the 'narcissistic decay' (Swartz, 1991) which can set in and destroy organisations that lose sight of their primary task, systematically misrecognising the occupational identities of their staff and destroying the sense of trust which stakeholders might have in them.

As well as presenting some interesting challenges for organisational members, the prevalence of bullshit posits some challenges for researchers. If organisations are mired in discourses that have no relationship with the truth, then it may be necessary to revisit one of the central assumptions of organisational discourse analysis. By looking for bullshit, we may notice that not all discourses are 'productive' or 'constructive'. They can also be corrosive. As we have seen, bullshit is often more than just ineffectual hot air. It can sometimes be profoundly demoralising and leave whole organisations with little sense of a viable alternative. Perhaps discourses can do far more than constitute reality. Bullshit discourses can dissolve a sense of reality, leaving organisational members feeling alienated and empty. If this is the case, then we need to begin to pay closer attention to the ways in which discourses can destroy social reality in organisations.

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