City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Spicer, A. (2020). Playing the Bullshit Game: How Empty and Misleading Communication Takes Over Organizations. Organization Theory, 1(2), 2631787720929704. doi: 10.1177/2631787720929704

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/26044/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1177/2631787720929704

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to City Research Online policy.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@citystgeorges.ac.uk

Check for updates

Theory Article

Organization Theory
Volume 1: 1–26
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/2631787720929704
journals.sagepub.com/home/ott
SAGE

Playing the Bullshit Game: How Empty and Misleading Communication Takes Over Organizations

André Spicer

Abstract

Why is bullshit so common in some organizations? Existing explanations focus on the characteristics of bullshitters, the nature of the audience, and social structural factors which encourage bullshitting. In this paper, I offer an alternative explanation: bullshitting is a social practice that organizational members engage with to become part of a speech community, to get things done in that community, and to reinforce their identity. When the practice of bullshitting works, it can gradually expand from a small group to take over an entire organization and industry. When bullshitting backfires, previously sacred concepts can become seen as empty and misleading talk.

Keywords

activity theory, bullshit, domination, power, resistance

Introduction

When Anna Weiner moved from a New York publisher to a Silicon Valley start-up, she was stunned by the way people spoke. The technology firm she worked for hired 'a man who spoke in inscrutable jargon and maintained a robust fleet of social media accounts: He had thousands of followers and behaved as if he was an influencer. He was constantly changing job titles on a website where people voluntarily post their resumes, giving himself promotions to positions that did not exist' (Weiner, 2020, pp. 162–3). Weiner was stunned when 'the influencer brought a scooter into the office and rolled about barking into a wireless headset

Cass Business School, City, University of London, London, UK

Corresponding author:
André Spicer, Cass Business School, City, University of London, Bunhill Row, London, EC1Y 8TZ, UK.
Email: andre.spicer.1@city.ac.uk

Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).

about growth hacking: *value prop, first moved advantage, proactive technology, paralellization. Leading edge-solutions. Holy grail'*. 'It was garbage language to my ears', Weiner writes, 'but the customers loved him. I couldn't believe it worked' (ibid).

The 'garbage language' Weiner stumbled on is not unique to Silicon Valley. Organizations in many industries are infused with similar language. The ex-*Financial Times* journalist Lucy Kellaway collected up some examples in her 'guffopedia'. They include 'chief pollinator', 'iconicity' and 'loincloth strategy'. Stephen Poole's (2013) dictionary of management speak has entries on 'thought shower', 'drill down' and 'going forward'. Another dictionary of business jargon includes 'consumer centric', 'fast track', 'talent pipeline' and 'going granular' (Watson, 2015). Sometimes these terms refer to precise ideas. But more often, they are meaningless and misleading forms of communication. In other words, they are bullshit.

Bullshit is a 'discourse which is created, circulated and consumed with little respect for or relationship to reality' (Spicer, 2013, p. 654). It is 'crafted to wilfully mislead and to serve the bullshitter's purposes' (ibid; see also Christensen, Kärreman, & Rasche, 2019; Spicer, 2017; McCarthy, Hannah, Pitt, & McCarthy, 2020). Existing accounts explain bullshit with reference to individual characteristics of the bullshitter (e.g. Frankfurt, 2005), to psychological propensities of the audience (e.g. Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2015), or wider social structures (e.g. Graeber, 2018), In this paper, I claim bullshitting is a social practice. I will argue that in particular speech communities people are encouraged to play the language game of bullshitting, and when it is played well it can bolster their identity. Under certain conditions, bullshitting is relatively harmless and can even be beneficial. But bullshitting can quickly spiral out of control and take over an entire organization or industry.

I will argue that bullshitting is triggered by a speech community with many conceptual entrepreneurs, significant amounts of noisy ignorance and permissive uncertainty. These conditions are likely to spark the language game of bullshitting. This entails people articulating empty and misleading statements that are processed in a shallow way and lead to surface-level agreement. When this game works, it can enhance the image and identity of players. If this happens, they are likely to engage in further rounds of bullshitting and reinvest in the speech community which perpetuates bullshitting. When the game backfires, it can undermine the players' identity and image. This makes them less likely to want to play the bullshit game again and reinvest in the speech community which encourages bullshitting. When bullshitting reinforces players' image and identity, it increases the scale and scope of bullshitting. As a consequence, bullshitting can evolve from being informal interaction into a routine practice, a formalized procedure and even a sacred ritual. When bullshitting misfires, it can be undermined. This can mean that what were previously seen as sacred statements end up being viewed as bullshit.

To make this argument, I proceed as follows. First, I outline the evolving history of the concept of bullshit. After considering existing explanations of bullshit, I make the case for seeing bullshit as a social practice. I develop a model of how the social practice of bullshitting works in organizations. In the discussion, I chart how bullshitting can either scale up or be undermined. In the conclusion, I draw out some of the implications of this analysis, the limitations of my argument and lines for future research which it opens up.

What Is Bullshit?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, bullshit is an informal vulgar term which means 'to talk nonsense, especially with the intent of misleading or deceiving'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines bullshit as 'to talk nonsense or rubbish' and 'to bluff one's way through something by talking nonsense'. The word is rooted in 'bull' which has been used from the

17th century onwards to mean nonsense. This in turns derives from the Old French term *bole* which means fraud and deceit.

During World War I 'bullshit' entered informal British, North American and Australasian English speech. The lexicographer Eric Partridge (2006, p. 152) claimed that during World War I, British commanding officers emphasized 'bull'. This meant paying significant attention to soldiers' appearances by ensuring they were perfectly dressed and their shoes were shined, even when this focus on appearance hindered the daily tasks of waging war (see also Frankfurt, 2005). Australian and New Zealand troops mocked British officers by calling it 'bullshit'. Partridge suggests the term became common in military life during World War II. Throughout this period, it was used to refer to excessive regimentalism and attention to appearances. For instance, if soldiers prepared their quarters for inspection by a commanding officer, they engaged in 'bullshit'. Partridge gives the following example: 'We've got to get this place bullshitted up—the Commanding Officer is coming around tomorrow morning.' The troops used the term 'bullshat' to refer to something which has been polished up for display purposes. For instance, 'Don't touch that, it's just been bullshat!' 'Bullshit' was also closely connected with high-level administration. For instance, during World War II, New Zealand airmen referred to the air-force headquarters as the 'bullshit castle'.

The term bullshit entered into print during World War II. The first instance of the word recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary is in a dictionary of North American slang published in 1942. A Google n-gram search shows a rapid growth in the use of the word in published sources from the early 1960s onwards. But it was only in 1986 that the term received a detailed philosophical treatment. In an article originally printed in a specialist journal in 1986 then republished as a book in 2005, Harry Frankfurt set about defining bullshit. While lying is an attempt to conceal the truth (Bok, 1978), bullshit is to talk without reference to the truth. 'It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth – this indifference to how things really are – that I regard as the essence of bullshit', Frankfurt writes (p. 33). Underpinning this is a 'motive guiding and controlling' the bullshitter meaning they are 'unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are' (p. 55). To illustrate this, Frankfurt recounts an encounter between the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and his friend and Russian teacher, Fania Pascal. While Pascal was convalescing in hospital after having her tonsils removed, she received a call from Wittgenstein. Pascal said 'I feel like a dog that has been run over.' Wittgenstein told his friend 'You don't know what a dog that has been run over feels like.' Although the philosopher's response is unfriendly in the extreme, it does make a logical point. Strictly speaking, a human can't know what a run-over dog feels like.

G. A. Cohen (2002) challenged Frankfurt by arguing that bullshit does not only entail seeking to more or less intentionally 'mislead with respect to reality' (Cohen, 2002, p. 329). Cohen pointed out that sometimes 'the shit wears the trousers' (p. 324). Instead of focusing on the bullshitter's intentions, he argues, we should look at the structure of bullshit. Cohen goes on to identify 'unclarifiable unclarity' as the key feature of bullshit (p. 333). These are statements which are unclear ('unclarity') but for which there are no procedures to make it clear ('unclarifiable'). A bullshit statement is 'not only obscure but cannot be rendered unobscured'. Furthermore, 'any apparent success in rendering it unobscured secretes something that isn't recognizable as a version of what was said' (p. 332). To illustrate this point, Cohen returns to his days as an earnest young PhD student obsessed with the writings of the French Marxist, Louis Althusser. He explains how he found 'the material hard to understand', and when he did 'extract what seemed like a reasonable idea from one of their texts, I attributed it more interest or more importance . . . than it had'. His struggle to understand the texts and his subsequent use of this Althusserian language was not driven by a desire to mislead, but by the inherent 'unclarifiable unclarity' of the French philosopher's texts.

Frankfurt and Cohen's papers have inspired a growing field of 'bullshitology'. Much of this research broadly accepts the insights in both papers, but points out that there is need to look at bullshitting as a form of communication. This means understanding the interactions between bullshitters, the language of bullshit and audience (Christensen et al., 2019). Recent psychological research (e.g. Pennycook et al., 2015) considers the targets of bullshit by examining how some people with an 'uncritical open mind' are particularly receptive to bullshit. More sociologically oriented research has pointed out that in some social settings 'bullshit' is expected, enthusiastically embraced or silently tolerated (Christensen et al., 2019, pp. 1595–97).

Based on these different strands of thinking, I am now in a position to identify the core components of bullshit. The first component are *empty claims*. This means bullshit is characterized by an indifference to the truth (Frankfurt, 1986) or processes of truthful inquiry (Cohen, 2002). Bullshit entails claims which are disconnected from normal standards of truth such as logic, clarity and evidence (Spicer, 2017). The second core aspect of bullshit is that it is *misleading*. Bullshit is associated with 'mis-representational intent' (Meibauer, 2018) such as deceiving (Frankfurt, 2005), confusing (Cohen, 2002) or even avoiding questioning (Carson, 2016). The third core aspect of bullshit is that it entails *communication*. Bullshit is a form of linguistic interaction (Christensen et al., 2019). It involves characteristic patterns of communication such as evasiveness or not being held to account for one's claims (Littrell, Risko, & Fugelsang, 2020). Bringing these three aspects together, I define bullshit as *empty and misleading communication*. A more substantive definition of bullshit is that it consists of evasive and/or persuasive communication involving an indifference to the truth or attempts to pursue the truth which are driven by epistemically maligned intentions.

What Isn't Bullshit?

Before examining the underlying structure of bullshit, it is worth pausing to point out the differences between bullshit and other similar concepts. Bullshit is frequently differentiated from lying. A lie is a statement which the liar believes to be false but they present as if it is true, often with intentions of deceit (Bok, 1978). In contrast, bullshit is not presented as if it were true and the intention behind it is not always outright deception. This distinction is captured by Frankfurt (2005) who argues that a liar is concerned about the truth, but attempts to replace it with falsehood. In contrast, the bullshitter is unconcerned with the truth and speaks with no reference to it. The bullshitter falls short of lying because they make use of insincere and misleading statements rather than outright falsehoods. Recent psychological work has found that established measures of everyday lying are sufficiently distinct from bullshitting (Littrell et al., 2020).

A second concept which is relatively close to bullshit is jargon. Jargon is technical language which is often tied to prestigious bodies of knowledge such as science, the arts and religion. It helps the speaker to be precise and communicate ideas quickly with other initiates, but it also hampers communication with the non-initiated (Vilhena et al., 2014). Fluent use of jargon can be a marker of community membership, which creates identity but also entry barriers (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998). It can also create a sense of secrecy around the community, making discussions understandable only to the initiated (Halliday, 1976). While jargon might seem nonsensical to the outsider, it is highly meaningful and sensible to insiders. It is also loaded with its own logic, empirical references and it is at least potentially decipherable. Finally, jargon is not typically used to mislead members of the community. Rather, it is used to communicate things which are meaningful within that community. It is worth noting that jargon can be used to mislead or confuse people who are not initiates in the community originating the jargon (Feldman, 2008).

A third type of language which is similar to bullshit is the ambiguous statement. This might seem empty because it is difficult to define and can be attributed with multiple meanings

(Eisenberg, 1984). For instance, managerial buzzwords are ambiguous because they can refer to a very wide range of things. Ambiguous statements might be maddening to the precise mind of an analytic philosopher, but they are a characteristic part of everyday life. For instance, managers use ambiguous concepts as part of their day-to-day work (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010). When making ambiguous statements, managers do not always have malign intentions to mislead or deceive others. Managers can use ambiguity to facilitate action, create agreement between conflicting factions, open up ground for exploration and discovery, or simply fill in a conversation (Eisenberg, 1984). Cohen (2002) acknowledges ambiguous statements can generate novel social, cognitive or aesthetic experience. However, ambiguous statements which are used to mislead or deceive are more properly identified as 'bullshit'.

There is a final type of statement which should not be strictly considered to be bullshit. These are statements which are empty and misleading but do not entail communication. The idea of an uncommunicated statement may seem like an oxymoron. For something to be a statement or claim, it needs to be communicated with another person. Perhaps the closest we might get to uncommunicated empty and misleading claims is 'bullshitting ourselves'. This is when we engage in empty and misleading self-talk. For instance, a would-be entrepreneur might mislead themselves into believing their venture will inevitably succeed. Such self-bullshitting could foster the well-documented effect of naïve optimism among entrepreneurs (de Meza & Southey, 1996). However, even empty and misleading claims that are shared with another person are typically thought through and couched in shared linguistic categories. This means it is a kind of self-communication or 'internal conversation' (Archer, 2003). For this reason, I think that self-focused communication can be meaningfully thought about as a specific form of bullshit: self-bullshit. Indeed, psychologists have found that more frequent bullshitters were also likely to engage in significantly more self-enhancement behaviours (Jerrim, Parker, & Shure, 2019; Littrell et al., 2020). This led one study to speculate that bullshitters also tend to bullshit themselves (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Explaining Bullshit

Having defined what bullshit is, and what it is not, we can move on to ask why bullshit exists. In the small but growing interdisciplinary field of bullshitology, there are four types of explanation: speaker-focused, audience-focused, social-structural and social practice.

The most intuitive explanation for why bullshit exists is the individual bullshitter. Many philosophical accounts assume that particular individuals have questionable motives or moral flaws which predispose them to bullshitting. For instance, Frankfurt points towards questionable motives of bullshitters such as intention to mislead their audience for personal gain (Frankfurt, 2005). Others point out that bullshitters are driven by Machiavellian motives like deceiving their audience to gain power and resources (e.g. Penny, 2010). More recently, Cassam (2016) has argued that bullshitters are plagued by 'epistemological vices' such as carelessness, negligence, dogmatism and prejudice. Perhaps the most important of these is 'epistemic insouciance' (Baird & Calvard, 2018; Cassam, 2018). This entails 'a casual lack of concern about the facts or an indifference to whether their political statements have any basis in reality' (Cassam, 2018, p. 2). Some have argued that bullshitters suffer from cognitive failures. Littrell and colleagues (2020) found that bullshitters tend to have lower cognitive ability, be less honest, less open-minded, have lower feelings of self-worth and a higher tendency for self-enhancement. Finally, a recent study of school children found that bullshitters shared demographic characteristics; they were more likely to be males from better-off socio-economic background (Jerrim et al., 2019).

Focusing on the characteristics of a bullshitter does not explain why some people are willing to accept misleading and empty claims.

This paucity has led a group of psychologists to offer a second way of explaining the existence of bullshit. They have shifted attention from the characteristics of the bullshitter to the characteristics of the audience. There is long stream of work in cognitive and developmental psychology which shows that most people are not particularly good at spotting deceptive or misleading statements (Bond & DePaulo, 2006). It is much more difficult for us to engage in the difficult cognitive work of consciously and deliberative reflecting on new information to decide whether it is true or not (Gilbert, 1991; cf. Hasson, Simmons, & Todorov, 2005). For instance, one laboratory study found that people are more likely to accept the statements of a fluent dodger (a person who talks well but doesn't answer a question) than someone who is less fluent but answers the question (Rogers & Norton, 2011). During the last five years or so, a body of psychological work has emerged which has uncovered variation in acceptance of misleading statements. Those who are most receptive to bullshit had 'uncritically open minds'. They are 'less reflective, lower in cognitive ability (i.e., verbal and fluid intelligence, numeracy), are more prone to ontological confusions and conspiratorial ideation, are more likely to hold religious and paranormal beliefs, and are more likely to endorse complementary and alternative medicine' (Pennycook et al., 2015, p. 559). The study found that people with uncritically open minds were more likely to assess tweets by the New Age guru Deepak Chopra as being profound statements of truth. Interestingly, they were also likely to say that randomly generated sentences were also profound statements of truth. Subsequent studies have found that people with uncritical open minds are also more likely to accept fake news (Pennycook & Rand, 2019) and see illusory patterns in images where there were no patterns (Walker, Turpin, Stolz, Fugelsang, & Koehler, 2019). Other work has started to explore how receptiveness to bullshit is correlated with factors such as personality (Bainbridge, Quinlan, Mar, & Smillie, 2019), political beliefs (Nilsson, Erlandsson, & Västfjäll, 2019; Sterling, Jost, & Pennycook, 2016) and perceptions of the status of the speaker (Gligorić & Vilotijević, 2019).

Focusing on the characteristics of bullshitters and their audience means we can ignore the role of wider social structures. This gap has led to a third approach to explaining the existence of bullshit. For instance, Mats Alvesson (2013) argued that wider socio-cultural concerns with 'imagology' (looks and appearance) has encouraged organizations and individuals to generate clichés and bullshit. He gives examples such as job applicants inflating their CVs with impressive sounding skills and positions and universities engaging in grandiose branding campaigns. In my own book on the topic, I explored how the changing nature of bureaucracy created ideal conditions for bullshit (Spicer, 2017). I argued that the rise of 'neocracies' which are obsessed with constant change and novelty has led organizations as well as people working within them to produce a large stream of bullshit. Graeber (2018) argued that features of contemporary capitalism such as increasing automation, powerful people hoping to dominate others and a desire for social aggrandisement give rise to socially useless and existentially meaningless 'bullshit jobs'. These are

> jobs that are primarily or entirely made up of tasks that the person doing the job considers to be pointless, unnecessary, or even pernicious. . . . were they to disappear, it would make no difference whatsoever. Above all, these are jobs that the holders themselves feel should not exist. (Graeber, 2018, p. 24)

A recent study found that about 8% of the population think they work in a 'bullshit job' while a further 17% of people are doubtful of the social value of their job (Dur & van Lent, 2019).

Bullshit as a Social Practice

Social structural explanations largely overlook the social interactions in which bullshitting arises and evolves. This paucity has led to a fourth approach which sees bullshit as a social

practice. This means viewing bullshitting as a shared form of social interaction which is accepted or even encouraged within a particular community (Christensen et al., 2019, pp. 1595-7). It entails looking at the way people used bullshitting to participate in a community, negotiate practical challenges, create and maintain an identity, and ultimately reproduce the community of which they are part.

One of the rare examples of an analysis of bullshitting as a social practice is Joshua Wakeham's (2017) theoretical account. Drawing on studies of social epistemology, he argues that we gain most of our knowledge second hand. This means that we do not do epistemic due diligence ourselves. We are usually not cognitively equipped to do such due diligence, and even when we are, it is exhausting for us and alienating for others. Furthermore, in most social settings there is not one obvious correct answer waiting to be found (Fuller, 2006). So instead of relying on common standards of epistemology, we rely upon social cues to sort out which knowledge claims are true and which are false. These include the characteristics of the person speaking, the background knowledge that people draw on, and the interactional dynamics between parties. Often our reliance upon social cues means we systematically relax our epistemic norms to deal with 'the social pragmatic need to get along' (Wakeham, 2017, p. 33). This makes us 'accustomed to faking it and going along with social fictions when necessary' (p. 33).

To understand bullshit as a social practice, let's take a brief look at Jackall's (1986) study of a large American corporation. He found that bullshitting was systematically expected of middle managers in the company. One informant told Jackall that his job involved 'characterizing the reality of a situation with *any* description that is necessary to make that situation more palatable to some group that matters . . . Everyone knows that it's bullshit, but it's *accepted.* This is the game' (Jackall, 1986, p. 145). A crucial aspect was not using too much or too little bullshit, and also being able to judge the appropriate moment to bullshit. Competent bullshitters also needed to become competent audience members for performances of bullshit. They had to learn that bullshit should not be taken too seriously and it should be engaged with in just the right way. If you took bullshit too seriously, you ran the risk of being seen as a chump. Likewise, if you challenged bullshit too frequently, you risked being seen as an asshole.

A second example of the social practice of bullshitting at work can be found in a study of health and safety practices in the Norwegian offshore oil industry (du Plessis & Vandeskog, 2020). They found that many of the onshore agencies were adept users of the language of 'resilience'. The researchers noticed that onshore staff such as managers from a large oil company and government officials were adept at speaking at length about resilience, but rarely would they be specific about what they actually meant. This meant the concept was essentially 'unclarifiable' and could be applied to almost any aspects of the shipping operation. The offshore operational staff were skeptical and indifferent about 'resilence'. The offshore staff could talk about resilience when they were expected to (for instance, when a safety inspector arrived), but they didn't seriously believe in it. One ship captain described resilience talk as 'toilet paper' which he only used to 'cover my arse'. Offshore operatives used the language of resilience as a kind of game they were expected to play if they wanted to legitimate their work in the eyes of distant bureaucratic bodies who would infrequently take an interest in them. They needed to play the bullshit game if they wanted to keep the authorities off their back.

A third example of bullshitting in the workplace can be found in an ethnographic study of police officers in Copenhagen (Sausdal, 2020). While following officers on their long and often boring shifts, Sausdal noticed that they would occasionally talk in crude and violent terms. They talked about prisoners as 'filthy animals', laughed about the bombing of a foreign village, ignored the desecration of a cemetery and discussed crushing the skull of a suspect. Sausdal was confused. This kind of disturbing talk stood in stark opposition to the routine and dutiful

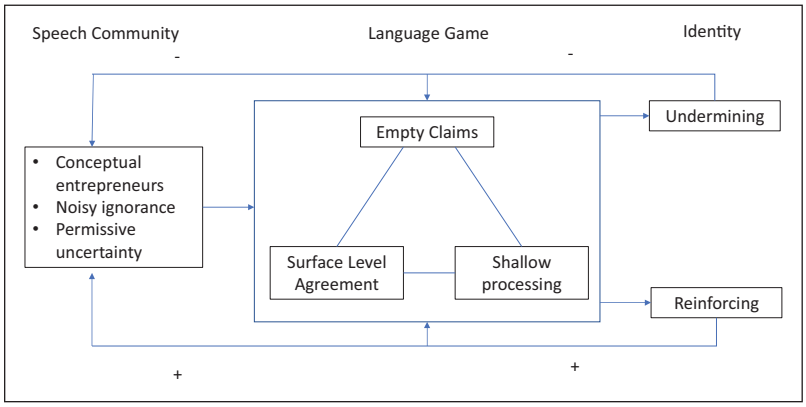

Figure 1. A Theory of Bullshitting.

behaviours of the officers he had observed. Over time, he realized that this kind of talk was best thought of as bullshit. It was 'mean yet meaningless' (Sausdal, 2020, p. 96). He realized this talk was bullshit which wasn't supposed to mean anything substantive. They were often 'saying stupid things just for the sake of saying stupid things – bullshitting for the sake of bullshitting' (p. 104). Officers saw it as way of 'stirring things up' during a tedious shift. They relied on the fact that fellow police officers clearly knew when one of their number was bullshitting. They also knew that these crude and violent outbursts were fantasies (which they usually didn't find that appealing). One police officer explained that 'We are obviously being obscene when saying stuff like that. And, yes, we know it's tasteless, but that's the point really. Besides that, there's often no real point to it' (p. 107). In short, bullshitting was a way to pass the time – but it was also a way to be part of the informal culture of the police force.

A Theory of Bullshitting

In this paper, I will build on the idea that bullshitting is a social practice. In particular, I will develop the idea that some speech communities encourage the language game of bullshitting. By playing this language game, people can support (or in some cases undermine) their image and identity. This in turn can give rise to vicious or virtuous circles of bullshitting. I will argue that speech communities tend to encourage bullshitting when they have three characteristics: they are occupied by many conceptual entrepreneurs (who create a plentiful supply of bullshit), there is noisy ignorance (which creates a demand for bullshit) and there is permissive uncertainty (which creates an opportunity for bullshitting). Such speech communities give rise to the language game of bullshitting. This entails participants articulating misleading statements, processing them in a shallow way in order to maintain a sense of surface-level agreement between the players. When this game works smoothly, it can enhance the image and identity of the players. This often leads them to continue playing the bullshit game. It also reinforces the speech community which supports the game. However, when the game of bullshitting misfires, it can undermine the image and identity of players. If this happens, people are less likely to continue playing the game and are less likely to continue investing in the speech community (see Figure 1).

Speech community

The practice of bullshitting doesn't come out of nowhere. It tends to be nurtured within particular speech communities. According to Gumperz (1968, p. 66) a speech community is 'any human aggregate characterized by regular and

frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage'. Speech communities are built around shared linguistic repertoires, common linguistics norms, as well as shared linguistics competencies (Morgan, 2004). Speech communities can be geographically bounded groups such as residents of the Lower East Side in New York City (Labov, 1966), Philadelphia (Labov, 2001) or Belfast (Milroy & Milroy, 1992). Speech communities can also be national or even transnational such as speakers of specialist occupational languages (Bechky, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991) or administrative languages (Gumperz, 1968). Often these speech communities can be porous, with people moving in and out of them or engaging in 'code switching' so they can participate in a number of speech communities at once (Morgan, 2004). Often linguistic communities serve as ways of marking out group membership. Becoming part of that group means learning new ways of speaking. Gumperz pointed out that

> elaborate linguistic etiquette and stylistic conventions that surround them, (mean) classical, liturgical, and administrative languages function somewhat like secret languages. Mastery of the conventions may be more important in gaining social success than substantive knowledge of the information dispensed through these languages. (Gumperz, 1968, p. 70)

In the contexts of organizations, becoming part of the speech community of middle management means learning a set of 'elaborate linguistic etiquette and stylistic conventions'. Often that means learning how to bullshit.

Within a particular speech community, there are three core components which are likely to make bullshit more prevalent: *conceptual entrepreneurs, noisy ignorance* and *permissive uncertainty*.

The first characteristic of the speech community which is conducive to bullshitting is a large number of potential suppliers of bullshit. One important source of supply are *conceptual entrepreneurs*. These are actors with a stock of pre-packaged concepts they try to market to others. Many conceptual entrepreneurs operate in the management ideas industry. This is a sector made up of consultants, gurus, thought leaders, publishers and some academics (Sturdy, Heusinkveld, Reay, & Strang, 2018). The quality of actors operating in this industry tends to be extremely variable. A consequence is that some of the conceptual entrepreneurs seeking to peddle their wares in the management ideas industry are bullshit merchants. There are some sub-sectors of the management ideas industry where bullshit merchants are particularly concentrated. One is the 'leadership industries' (Pfeffer, 2015). This sub-sector includes many consultants, speakers, experts and advisors who create and distribute pseudo-scientific ideas about leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2013). A second sub-sector with a significant concentration of bullshit merchants is the 'entrepreneurship industry' (Hunt & Kiefer, 2017). This is the cluster of mentors, (pseudo-)entrepreneurs and thought leaders who push poorly evidenced, misleading and seductive ideas about entrepreneurship. Often their target is so-called 'wantrepreneurs' (Verbruggen & de Vos, 2019). In some cases, these ideas have been found to encourage vulnerable young people to adopt what are seductive but empty and misleading ideas about entrepreneurial success (Hartmann, Dahl Krabbe, & Spicer, 2019). For instance, Chen and Goldstein (forthcoming) followed a cohort of students at a mid-ranked North American university as they joined a campus-based business accelerator. Many put their lives on hold to launch start-ups. When these eventually failed, they often found themselves struggling to re-enter the mainstream labour market. They also tried to grapple with the ultimately meaningless and misleading advice about entrepreneurship they were exposed to during their time in the accelerator.

A second aspect of a speech community which can foster bullshitting is *noisy ignorance*. This is when actors lack knowledge about an issue yet still feel compelled to talk about it. It is not just the result of a lack of cognitive ability (however, it could be; Littrell et al., 2020).

Rather, noisy ignorance is mainly due to a lack of understanding or experience concerning the issues being discussed. Often that ignorance has been strategically cultivated (McGoey, 2012). In some other cases, actors deliberately avoid gathering information or knowledge about an issue. In other cases, noisy ignorance is created by knowledge asymmetries where one party knows much more about a particular issue than another. When an actor is relatively ignorant about an issue, they do not have the wider background knowledge in order to compare new claims. Nor do they have an understanding of the right questions they might ask. This means they rely on relatively crude understandings of an issue yet tend to be much more certain than an expert would be (Raab, Fernbach, & Sloman, 2019).

When ignorance is *noisy*, uninformed actors do not simply stay silent about what they don't know. Rather, they are compelled to speak about an issue of which they have little knowledge or understanding. A recent experimental study found that this compulsion to speak (coupled with a lack of accountability created by a 'social pass') was an important factor in explaining bullshitting (Petrocelli, 2018). Similar dynamics have been found in field studies. For instance, middle managers are often relatively ignorant about the work their subordinates are engaged with, but are under pressure to act as the leader by doing or say something (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). They fall back upon generic management speak rather than engage with the people they manage in language they find meaningful. A second example is British government ministers who find themselves with a new policy portfolio (King & Crewe, 2014). Often these politicians have little or no knowledge of the new policy area, but they are under pressure to say and do something. To address this tricky situation, politicians rely on empty and often misleading language.

There also needs to be an opportunity in a speech community to use bullshit. Such an opportunity typically appears when a speech community is infused with *permissive uncertainty*. This is a situation where actors do not know what will happen and are willing to consider almost any knowledge that might plug this epistemic gap. They face high levels of uncertainty, yet have permissive epistemic norms which guide the problem of sorting out what to do. This creates a curious situation where almost any knowledge claim goes. When faced with a wicked problem such as a significant and unexpected environmental change, some organizations experience high levels of uncertainty but also find that different kinds of experts claim ownership over the problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). This can create experimentation, participation and dialogue (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005). But equally, it can create multiple failures, conflict and drift. Under these circumstances, a greater sense of confusion can well up and an 'anything goes' approach takes hold.

The most obvious aspect involved in this kind of situation is a state of uncertainty (Fuller, 2006; Wakeham, 2017). This entails epistemic uncertainty which comes from having imperfect knowledge about the world. Epistemic uncertainty can also be generated by competing and overlapping knowledge claims which create a dense patchwork of contradictory truths, making it difficult for an actor to make a judgement about what they think is correct. In addition, people face ontological uncertainty. This comes from the fact that social reality is 'inherently risky and always under construction' (Fuller, 2006, p. 274). Even if an actor acquires knowledge about social reality, that social reality can shift and change. Such changeability makes it very difficult to be certain of one's judgements.

What makes uncertainty even more difficult to deal with is permissiveness. This is created by relaxed 'epistemic vigilance' (Sperber et al., 2010). In some settings, relaxing one's epistemic vigilance is a way of investing epistemic trust in another person or, at the very minimum, as a way of keeping conversation and interaction going (Sperber et al., 2010). This sets up what we might call 'epistemic indulgency patterns'. These are similar to the industrial indulgency patterns which entail routine social

interactions where an authority figure like a manager allows their subordinates to get away with otherwise banned behaviour (such as stealing materials from a factory) in exchange for compliance (Gouldner, 1954). A similar process happens with epistemic claims. This is when people are willing to indulge weak claims from others in return for indulgence of their own weak claims. When this happens, people begin to allow weak or empty claims to pass without too much scrutiny. If they were to engage in greater epistemological due diligence, then social interaction would become too costly, time-consuming and conflict inducing. These epistemic indulgency patterns allow bullshit to pass without more serious assessment.

When such epistemological indulgency patterns are paired with endemic uncertainty, it can create a confusing, yet liberating situation: no-one knows what's happening and which bodies of knowledge they should draw on to sort things out. For instance, the process of rapid social change in the United States during the late 19th century created a great sense of uncertainty in many people's lives. It led to the confusing multiplication of forms of knowledge and authority. This uncertainty coupled with a pluralism created an ideal setting where sham commercial ventures and questionable experts peddled their wares. In the medical field, 'quacks' (unlicensed doctors) outnumbered licensed doctors by three to one in many parts of the country (Janik & Jensen, 2011). Quacks offered miracle cures which had no basis in science. The market for their 'bullshit' cures flourished until the early 20th century when legislation reduced the permissiveness associated with medical knowledge claims. Arguably a similar process has occurred in recent years with the rise of new technologies such as artificial intelligence. These new technologies have created a great deal of uncertainty, but they have also enabled some degree of permissiveness around who is able to claim expertise in the technology. This has opened up significant space for bullshitters who talk about artificial intelligence but have little understanding of the underlying technology. This makes it not terribly surprising that a recent analysis of 2,830 'artificial intelligence' start-ups in Europe found that about 40 percent of them did not use AI technology at all (MMC Ventures, 2019).

Language games

The presence of *conceptual entrepreneurs, noisy ignorance* and *permissive uncertainty* creates a speech community which is conducive to bullshitting in organizations. But bullshitting is an active process which has a game-like quality to it. This is best seen as a *language game*. I borrow the concept from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958, p. 11) who used it to capture how 'speaking a language is part of an activity, a form of life'. These language games are 'rule-governed practice, integrating communication and action' (Mantere, 2013, p. 6). They have characteristic moves, players, strategies and stakes. Learning how to participate in a language game enables one to make statements which are meaningful in a particular context. The example Wittgenstein gave of a language game is a group of builders communicating with one another. He explains how 'language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar" "slab", "beam". A. calls them out; — B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call' (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 3). Wittgenstein goes on to explain how these four words (block, pillar, slab, beam) constitute an entire 'primitive language' and the builder can get things done by simply saying 'block there', 'slab here' and so on. Each of these terms ('block', 'slab' etc.) gains a meaning within the language game. Some of the other examples include forming and testing a hypothesis, making a joke, telling a story, and reporting an event (Wittgenstein, 1958, pp. 11–12). Within the context of organizations, language games can include repeating the ideas of management gurus (Astley & Zammuto, 1992), developing strategic plans (Jalonen, Schildt & Vaara, 2018; Manatre, 2013),

engaging in competitive wars (Rindova, Becerra, & Contado, 2004), interacting in an online chat group (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2010), or engaging in an inquiry following a scandal (Kewell, 2006). To this list, I would add bullshitting.

At the heart of the language game of bullshitting is the act of advancing *empty and misleading claims*. Recent linguistic analysis has identified the components of a statement that is bullshit (Meibauer, 2016, 2018). These are assertions which (1) shows a loose concern for the truth, (2) are driven by misrepresentation of intent and (3) express undue certainty. To bullshit, an actor needs to make an assertion which displays a lack of concern for standards of truth or falsity. In addition, the intent of the statement should be misrepresented. It should not be clearly stated that the person is trying to mislead or not speak with regard to questions of truth or falsehood. Finally, a bullshit statement is typically presented with much more certainty than is warranted. This means that what are often loose conjectures are presented as certainties. An example of this can be found in a study of students at an elite high-school in the United States (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009, 2011). When required to talk with their teachers about a particular subject, the students often had not put in the required work. To do deal with this tricky situation, students would rely on a few signals of knowledge (such as a few key names or facts). The students would hide their intentions of avoiding scrutiny by feigned fascination with the topic. But most importantly, they would present themselves in an excessively confident manner. They hoped this mixture of conspicuous signals, feigned interest and extreme confidence meant they were able to get through lessons with minimal work. And typically it worked. After leaving, many of the students realized that this ability was the main thing they had learned during their time at the school. It was a skill which stood them in good stead when they took up leadership positions throughout American society.

The language game of bullshitting also entails responding to empty assertion. In particular, it involves the *shallow processing* of empty and misleading claims. This happens when an interlocutor who hears a bullshit claim does not engage in meaningful inquiry through questioning or exploring a claim in more depth (Fallis, 2015). They can avoid such inquiry in a range of different ways (McCarthy et al., 2020). One way is through acquiescence. This entails a passive response whereby a person faced with a bullshit statement lets it pass without any serious challenge. An example of this is when a senior figure takes the floor in a meeting and makes a series of empty and misleading statements while the audience feigns attention and offers no serious public challenge (Fleming, 2019). A second potential response is enthusiasm. This entails a more active and affirmative response whereby an actor faced with bullshit responds by joining in. For instance, during interactions with managers spouting the empty and misleading language of leadership, some professionals may respond by 'talking the talk' (Bresnen, Hyde, Hodgson, Bailey, & Hassard, 2015). They begin to use the language of leadership themselves (which they might personally regard as 'bullshit') to get the attention of their superiors. It can involve a process of one-upmanship whereby a listener responds with additional bullshit which is even more empty and more misleading than the initial offering. For instance, sailors talking in a group frequently tell increasingly tall stories about their exploits on previous voyages (Henningsen & Roberts, 1965). A third way people can respond is by believing the bullshit. This is when a person listening to a bullshitter mistakes what they are saying as being an approximation of the truth. In many language games of bullshitting, this is a sign that the listener is naïve and does not understand the game being played. For instance, in his study of hitch-hikers, Mukerji (1978) found that young and naïve hitch-hikers would often mistake the bullshitting of older hitch-hikers for truth statements. This unwarranted belief marked the young hitch-hikers out as neophytes who did not completely understand the culture and were not fully fledged participants in the game of bullshitting. A final response to bullshitting is negation. This is when someone 'calls bullshit'

by pointing out the false or misleading nature of a statement. Calling bullshit can be an abrupt act where someone simply responds 'that's bullshit' and in doing so closes down space for inquiry and justification. This kind of response can be found in online debates about political issues. In other cases, bullshit can be called in a more careful way through exploring a claim, charting out why it might be considered bullshit and what might be done to make it less bullshit. An example of this careful calling out of bullshit is Rudolph Carnap's interrogation of Martin Heidegger's phrase 'the nothing nothings' (Egan, 2018). In this important moment in the development of 20th-century philosophy, Carnap judiciously interrogated the meaning of the phrase, eventually identifying its self-referential nature.

Each of these responses is likely to have different effects on the ongoing pattern of interaction. The first two responses (acquiescence and enthusiasm) can help maintain surface-level agreement (Goffman, 1959). Through either acquiescing or enthusiastically participating, actors can keep the interaction going in a polite way. For instance, if an audience member remains relatively silent while their boss spouts bullshit, the social relationship is likely to remain intact. If an actor shows that they actually buy into bullshit and begins to mistake it for a truth claim, then it is likely they will either be sidelined from the bullshit game or given some subtle signals (either from the bullshitter or other listeners) that they should not take it so seriously. This kind of reorienting work helps to bring the bullshitter back on track. Finally, when a listener actively calls bullshit on a speaker, it can disturb the surface-level agreement between people. The bullshitter can seek to repair this surface-level agreement through strategies such as evasive bullshitting, whereby they answer a fairly direct question with an irrelevant answer (Carson, 2010). For instance, following the financial crisis of 2008, senior executives of some of Britain's largest banks were asked to testify in front of a committee of the UK Parliament. When the bankers were quizzed about their responsibility for the crisis, many responded with evasive bullshit. They expressed regret, claimed they had already apologized and shifted blame to others (Tourish & Hargie, 2012). This evasion had a game-like quality. The inquisitors kept asking questions aimed at establishing the veracity of claims while the bankers continued to avoid the questions. This points to a significant challenge for people calling bullshit: the effort they need to put in to refute bullshit is often of an order of magnitude greater than what is required to produce the bullshit in the first place (Brandolini, 2014). This means calling out bullshit can be an effortful and time-intensive activity that potentially harms people's relationships, which ultimately is judged to be not worth their while.

There are moments when the social practice of bullshitting runs smoothly. This happens when bullshitters are able to continue articulating empty and misleading statements, these statements are accepted (through either acquiescence or enthusiastic embrace) and a degree of surface-level agreement is maintained. This entire process is likely to involve *in situ* sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) whereby actors adjust and make changes in response to actors involved in the bullshit game. When it continues, they are able to maintain a language game where questions of truth and falsehood are not the yardstick people use to judge statements. Instead, players mobilize different criteria to judge the relative worthiness or relevance of a particular statement. For instance, Mukerji (1978) noticed that bullshitting among hitchhikers was judged on the basis of whether it amused people. However, there was always the potential for a bullshit game to misfire. This happened if an interlocutor called bullshit and tried to drag the discussion back to criteria of truth and falsity. If this happened, then it became much more difficult for people to continue to bullshit. It also made it much more difficult for people to positively or neutrally respond to bullshitting and maintain a sense of surface agreement around the bullshit.

Identity and image

Participating in a language game is a form of identity work. It is a way of creating, maintaining and in some cases undermining how others see us, and how we see ourselves (Brown, 2015). When a language game is played competently, it can reinforce the image others have of a bullshitter and how bullshitters see themselves. When bullshitting misfires, it can undermine the image and identity of bullshitters.

Successful bullshitting enhances the image of bullshitters. This happens when bullshitters are able to more or less convincingly present themselves as more grandiose than they actually are (Alvesson, 2013). External audiences are more likely to make positive judgements about them and be more willing to invest resources in them. The link between bullshitting, favourable judgement and resourcing can be seen in a recent study of the evaluation of contemporary art. This study found that when abstract images were paired with randomly generated 'bullshit' titles, they were judged as being more profound than images which either had no title or a descriptive title (Turpin et al., 2019). In this context, bullshit was a low-cost strategy that encouraged evaluators to see an image as more valuable than they otherwise would. Organizations often use trendy but misleading names to attract resources (particularly from the uninformed). In recent years, firms have gained a boost in valuation by adopting a name invoking blockchain technology (Cahill, Baur, Liu, & Yang, 2020). In the late 1990s, firms gained a similar boost in value by adding '.com' to their name (Cooper, Dimitrov, & Rau, 2001). In the early 1960s, firms with the suffix 'tronics' were perceived as being more valuable (Malkiel, 1999). Some of these firms did not actually use the technologies which their name invoked, but the title helped them to attract resources and higher valuations.

As well as enhancing one's image, bullshitting can also help to enhance self-identity. This is because bullshit can enable bullshitters to conjure a kind of 'self-confidence trick' (Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley, & Littlejohns, 2006). This happens when bullshitters mislead themselves into believing their own bullshit. Research on self-deception in psychology has found that through various cognitive processes (such as selective information search, biased processing, selective remembering) people are able to focus on information which bolsters their sense of self and marginalizes any information which might undermine their sense of self (Schwardmann & Van Der Weele, 2019; Smith, Trivers, & Von Hippel, 2017; Von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). This has the advantage of limiting the cognitive load of the person making a misleading claim. Self-deception enables individuals to present themselves as much more self-confident than they would otherwise seem if they had to engage in cognitively taxing processes of dual processing (holding in one's mind both the deceptive statement as well as the truth). The self-confidence which comes from self-deception can aid resource acquisition. For instance, entrepreneurs are encouraged to ignore their objective chances of failure so they can appear self-confident in their search for resources to support their venture. This self-confidence can make it easier to acquire the resources an entrepreneur needs, but it can also lead to delusional and potentially destructive behaviours (; Hartmann et al., 2019; Spicer, 2017, pp. 123–30).

Bullshitting doesn't always work so smoothly. It can easily misfire. When this happens, it can lead to negative outcomes. It can undermine an actor's identity. When others realize that an actor frequently engages in bullshitting, they may begin to mistrust them by questioning whether they are competent, benevolent and have integrity (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). External audiences may see bullshitting as a sign that an actor does not know what he or she is doing (and is therefore incompetent), that they are immoral and do not have the best interests of others' at heart (and is therefore malevolent), and that they are unable to do what they say they will (and therefore lack integrity). If external audiences begin to distrust a bullshitter, they are likely to punish or avoid them. Their claims can be discounted, resources

can be withheld and they might be ignored entirely. A study of CEO calls with market analysts following the announcement of a merger or acquisition found that when CEOs used more management speak they were punished by the stock market with a lower pricing of the firm's shares, irrespective of the longer-term value the M&A may create (Salvado & Vermeulen, 2018). This is because management speak led analysts to question a CEO's motives for undertaking a merger or acquisition.

When bullshitting misfires, it can undermine how bullshitters see themselves. Failures can prompt a bullshitter to reflect on the meaningfulness of the language which they use. Reflection is likely to lead at least some players of the bullshit game to the conclusion that their chosen activity is meaningless and empty. For instance, Paulsen (2017) explored how employees in a Swedish government employment agency reacted when the organization became increasingly dominated by empty management rhetoric. As this happened, many officials found themselves doing what they regarded as socially useless and existentially meaningless work. As part of their job, they were obliged to reproduce a large stock of standardized bullshit terms. Some also sought to come up with equally vacuous and misleading explanations for the importance of their own job. As a result of this process, many employees started to see their own work as 'bullshit jobs'.

Bullshitting is unlikely to have purely positive or negative outcomes. Positives and negatives are likely to be mixed. For instance, bullshitters could be seen as rogues who have a fine image but are untrustworthy. Similarly, those involved in bullshitting can start to see themselves as being confident but also engaged in something which is ultimately meaningless. It is also worth noting that the costs and benefits of bullshitting are not equally distributed. Often bullshitters try to externalize the identity and image costs of bullshitting onto others while enjoying the benefits. For instance, one standard move of populist politicians has been to project the lack of trust others have for them outwards onto other people or institutions.

Vicious and virtuous circles

Bullshitting can create self-reinforcing or self-undermining feedback loops. This is dependent on whether bullshitting enhances or diminishes the image and identity of the bullshitter. Such outcomes shape the extent to which bullshitters are willing to continue to engage in the language game of bullshitting as well as their likelihood of continuing to invest in and support the broader speech community which encourages bullshitting.

When bullshitting enhances an actor's image and identity, they are likely to engage in more of it. One way they can do this is by extending the *scale* of their bullshitting. That means using quantitatively more empty and misleading statements when communicating about a particular issue. For instance, an organization increases the scale of bullshitting when they use more empty and misleading phrases in their advertising to consumers. A second way bullshitting might increase is through extending the *scope*. This is a qualitative shift whereby actors bullshit about a wider range of issues or in a wider range of forums. For instance, an organization would increase the scope of bullshitting if it had previously been bullshitting in their advertising to consumers but then also began bullshitting in communication with employees. An implication of increased scale and scope is that becoming a legitimate participant in the collective conversation also means bullshitting. Otherwise veracious people get drawn into using bullshit just so they might be seen as having a legitimate voice in their organization. Positive results from bullshitting can lead an organization to invest more into the speech community which encourages bullshitting. This means they are more likely to rely upon the management ideas industry as a source of input when making decisions, more likely to reward noisy ignorance and more likely to stoke up permissive uncertainty. Ultimately, increasing the scale and scope of bullshit and the speech community around bullshitting is likely to lead to unbounded bullshitting. This is when empty and misleading statements have few

boundaries and are applied in a wide range of contexts.

When bullshit simultaneously enhances and undermines an actor's identity and image, those actors are likely to only tactically accept further bullshitting. While they may not officially and explicitly support further bullshitting, they can unofficially tolerate some degree of it. This means bullshitting becomes a kind of public secret: something everyone knows about, but is rarely explicitly acknowledged (Costas & Grey, 2014). Bullshitting becomes a language game which is useful and potentially embarrassing. It is allowed but not officially sanctioned. While bullshitting still takes place, the scale and scope of it is unlikely to increase. While there may be ad hoc and unrevealed backing for the speech community which supports bullshitting, there is little consistent and public support for it. This means an organization might continue to draw on the services of the management ideas industry, but not in a systematic or public way. It also may implicitly allow noisy ignorance, but it does not publicly celebrate it as a virtuous form of behaviour. Finally, permissive uncertainty may be unofficially tolerated and accepted, but it is not officially condoned. Under these circumstances, we are likely to witness the emergence of a bounded form of bullshitting. This is when empty and misleading talk is used in a limited number of instances and in relation to particular issues. Bounded bullshitting involves some degree of self-policing by participants. While engaging in some bullshitting, participants typically limit themselves, thereby ensuring they are not going too far. It also means they keep an eye on other less bullshit-intensive language games which effectively act as a form of limitation and constraint.

When bullshitting undermines an actor's image and identity, it is likely to be actively punished. Actors typically notice when bullshitting has a detrimental effect on how other groups see them. They also are likely to notice when bullshitting starts to undermine how they see themselves. When this happens, they are likely to rein in or even largely cease bullshitting. This may be difficult, particularly when bullshitting has become a routinized part of formal communication. But it is possible for people to linguistically retool. It is easier to change if there are alternative language games bullshitters can retreat into. If bullshitting is punished, actors are also likely to curtail their investment in the speech community which encourages bullshit. This means they become less reliant on the management ideas industry, they stop rewarding and tolerating noisy ignorance, and they tamper down permissive uncertainty through stricter epistemic standards.

The Rise and Fall of Bullshit

Bullshitting is a common social practice in many organizations. In the previous section, I have argued that people engage in bullshitting to participate in a speech community, to get through day-to-day interactions within that community, and to reinforce a positive image and identity of themselves. Successful bullshitting can beget more bullshitting. When this happens, what starts out as informal bullshitting can gradually become a collective routine, then part of the formal organization and end up as a sacred truth. However, bullshit can backfire. When this happens, bullshit can become self-undermining. Unsuccessful bullshitting can beget less bullshit. If this happens, what starts as sacred values can end up being revealed as bullshit. In what follows, I look at how each of these processes happens (see Figure 2).

Escalating bullshit

Like many other social practices, bullshitting can be scaled up. This happens when bullshitting gradually broadens from informal improvisation to become routinized interaction and eventually becomes a sacred value.

Bullshitting often begins as an informal language game which is restricted to a small group of people. This is a typical 'bullshit session' in which a group of close acquaintances trade empty and misleading talk as a way of keeping social interaction going (Spicer, 2017). It is like a piece of improvised social theatre where the

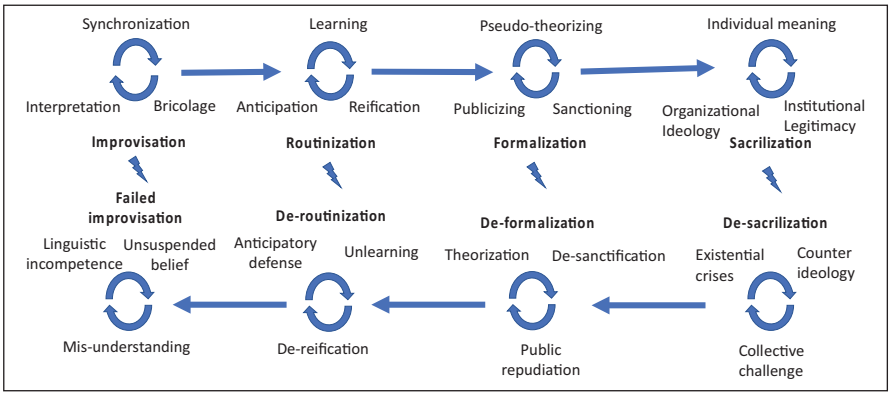

Figure 2. Escalating and De-escalating Bullshitting.

participants are the only audience. Just like in a theatre performance (or other fictional narrative), participants are willing to suspend their disbelief and take on a part so the performance can proceed. They are willing to put aside critical questioning and proceed as if bullshit contained some degree of truth. Once players have put aside typical criteria for assess truth claims, they need to engage in a process of interpretation. This entails understanding what is happening in a social setting where typically standards of truth might no longer apply. After developing an understanding of what is going on, a would-be bullshitter moves from being a peripheral passive participant who sits and listens to become someone who is actively involved. This requires some degree of synchronization. The bullshitter has to align their own actions and words with those of others (Hadida, Tarvainen, & Rose, 2015). Finally, a participant must try to craft a space for themselves and push the language game on by adding to it. They can do this through bricolage (Perkmann & Spicer, 2014). This entails drawing on a wider stock of cultural resources (such as the products of conceptual entrepreneurs as well as past performances of bullshit) to fashion something which both continues the bullshit session and also adds to it. This process can be seen in Layton's (2010) study of street prostitutes in Vancouver. When she began studying these women, she realized that she had to suspend her usual skepticism about their claims if she really wanted to understand their world. Although she spent many months studying these women, she remained uncertain about when they were bullshitting her, when they were saying something truthful, and when they were outright lying. Layton found that understanding what was bullshit and what was not proved to be very difficult to determine. She lacked the deep insider knowledge required to make such judgements. As she learned more about the lifeworld of the prostitutes, she learned that truth and bullshit often were closely woven together. A good understanding of the culture enabled her to discern the 'street wisdom' which was often passed on through bullshitting.

Over time, improvising bullshit is likely to become a routine. One way this process of routinization happens is through learning. By repeated exposure to and use of bullshit, people become accustomed to both the script and how it should be performed. This is what happened when Cothran (1974) studied swamp dwellers in the Southern United States. She slowly learned that many shocking tales she was told about violence and murder were often little more than 'trash talk' which shouldn't be taken too seriously. Over time she learned how to play her role in this trash talking as well. A second way bullshitting can become routinized is through anticipation. Anticipation involves coordinating future action in a way which is

shaped by a feel for what will happen next (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). When people begin to anticipate bullshit during a social interaction, they also start to organize and act accordingly. One way is by taking prophylactic measures to protect themselves from bullshitting. For instance, increasing concerns about 'fake news' have led many media organizations to anticipate that at least some of the information they use will have a bullshit-like quality. Anticipating bullshit, many media companies have put in place prophylactic measures such as independent fact checkers (Graves, 2016). A third way bullshit can become a routine part of an organization is through reification. This is when a fluid and subjective process (such as a language game) starts to take on a stable, object-like quality (Fleming & Spicer, 2005). Often this happens when common, yet changeable, language becomes embodied into 'devices' which have an object-like quality (Martí & Gond, 2018). Some examples of such devices include assessment systems, rankings, metrics, flow charts and tick-boxes. When previous empty and misleading claims start to be embodied into these devices, they develop their own substantive reference point. They start to take on their own seemingly objective reference points. This makes what might have previously seemed to be a vacuous statement appear to have a greater degree of substance. For instance, as corporate social responsibility has developed as a management discourse, people working in the CSR industries have created a range of CSR metrics and rankings (Brès & Gond, 2014; Gond & Nyberg, 2017). These have given an objective and apparently neutral quality to what was previously seen as a relatively subjective area.

Over time, routinized bullshitting can gradually become built into the formal organization. When this happens, bullshitting become part of the official *lingua franca* of an organization. One way this can happen is through pseudo-theorizing. Theorization provides a more technically precise language based on analysis, empirical study and design (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004; Perkmann & Spicer, 2007). Pseudo-theorizing occurs when the external trappings of theorizing (such as technical experts and scientific language) is present but substantive processes of theorization are absent. One way pseudo-theorizing happens is when experts with apparently legitimate credentials are mobilized to vouch for empty and misleading ideas. This gives bullshitting a sheen of technicality, precision and rationality. This is what has happened to many 'new age' ideas as they have filtered into corporate life. Their mystical foundations were often obscured through the use of more technical and scientific language (Purser, 2019; Spicer, 2017). A second way this process happens is through sanctioning. This entails people in positions of authority (either within or outside the organization) deeming particular forms of bullshitting to be acceptable in important organizational forums such as official meetings, internal communications and reports. Bullshitting can be actively sanctioned through authoritative individuals modelling the use of the language themselves, bullshit being encoded in internal guides and templates, and bullshitting being passively sanctioned in organizations. Finally, bullshitting becomes formalized through publicizing. This is when bullshitting which is common inside an organization starts to be used in external communication. This is particularly important when bullshitting is either taken up in external communication by high-profile figures or spoken in the collective voice of organization. An example of the former is when a CEO begins to use empty and misleading terms which are common inside the organization in communication with important external audiences such as analysts, the media or politicians.

When bullshit has become part of the formal organization for some time, it can slowly start to seem valuable in and of itself. When this happens, bullshit can be treated as sacred. Sanctification happens when an element of secular life (such as bullshitting) is elevated, a sense of higher meaning is projected into it, and deep existential significance is invested in it (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Harrison, Ashforth, & Corley, 2009). One way bullshit can become sanctified is through individual meaning seeking. This entails individuals

searching for a deeper significance to what is ultimately meaningless language. Psychologists have found that when subjects are presented with various randomly generated words, some individuals try to give these words a deep spiritual and existential significance (Pennycook et al., 2015). A second way bullshit can be sanctified is through organizations providing meaning through ideology. Organizations try to do this by drawing on what might have been empty, meaningless and highly fluid words to give them a deeper sense of existential significance. When this happens, meaningless and misleading statements become empty signifiers (Cederström & Spicer, 2014). For instance, during the 1980s, the concept of 'quality' inspired almost religious reverence and was used to speak about almost anything from product design to human resource policies (Xu, 1999). Finally, bullshit can become sacrilized when it is legitimated by wider institutions. This happens when meaningless terms are embedded within commonly accepted practices, rules and cognitive schemes. When this happens, what was previously bullshitting within a particular organization can begin to seem like something which is inevitable and highly valuable across an entire field. For instance, within the cultural sector in the United Kingdom, a wide range of empty terms such as 'creativity' began to be used by actors in increasingly reverential terms (Belfiore, 2009). When this happened the idea of creativity began to be treated as a sacred value.

De-escalating bullshit

Bullshitting doesn't always work. In the previous section, I argued that bullshitting can misfire and undermine a bullshitter's image and identity. When this happens, bullshit can be undermined and become a less important part of social processes. In organizational contexts, bullshitting can be undermined through four processes: failed improvisation, de-routinization, de-formalization and de-sacrilization.

One way by which nascent bullshitting de-escalates is when improvised social interaction fails. For instance, improvisation can fail when an actor doesn't suspend their disbelief and puts aside concerns about the truthfulness of a statement to let social interaction flow. For instance, a participant in a meeting may resist being swept up in a presentation filled with management buzzwords and ask for precise understandings of how this will work operationally. When this happens, resolute disbelief can become a significant barrier to ongoing bullshitting. A second way improvisation can be undermined is through misunderstanding. This happens when an actor doesn't fully 'get' that they are involved in a bullshit session. When this happens, they might mistake bullshitting for outright lies or even statements of truth. For instance, novice hitch-hikers sometimes think the tall tales of 'old hands' are statements of truth (Mukerji, 1978). Although this could be momentarily amusing, it often proved to be awkward. A final way that improvised bullshitting can be undermined is through linguistic incompetence. For bullshitting to work, you need to have at least some level of skill in pulling together claims. When bullshit is poorly cobbled together, the emptiness and misleading nature of much of the language is likely to spark a backlash against the bullshitter.

When bullshitting becomes part of the routine processes in an organization, it is more likely to be undermined through de-routinization. One way this happens is through unlearning. This occurs when actors consciously question the bullshit they use in an unthinking way. For instance, if a management buzzword is identified as bullshit, actors have to consciously reflect on their language and find alternatives. A second way routine bullshitting can be undermined is through anticipatory defence. This means actors who expect bullshitting will put in place prophylactic measures to protect themselves. This is what happened in the media industry. A few high-profile scandals concerning journalists making up stories led to large-scale efforts to expand routine 'fact checking' in news production process (Graves, 2016). A final way routinized bullshit can be interrupted is through de-reification. This is when

seemingly objective categories and processes are revealed to be contingent and subjective (Berger & Pullberg, 1965). This happens during shocks or crises in an organization, when an organization comes into contact with alternative speech communities, and when outsiders disturb the existing speech community.

As well as undermining routinized bullshitting, actors can question bullshit which has been integrated into the formal structures of an organization. This happens through the process of de-formalization where what appeared as legitimate organizational processes are shown to be illegitimate. One way this process can occur is through theorizing. This is when claims which appear to have a rational gloss are subjected to deeper and more searching inquiry by experts. For instance, overblown claims about the effectiveness of a management technique may be deflated through careful empirical tracking of actual impacts. A second way bullshit can be deformalized is through de-sanctioning. This can occur when people in formal positions of leadership 'call out' bullshit in an organization and question its use. When this happens, organizational members are less likely to routinely bullshit. Finally, bullshit can be deformalized through public repudiation. This happens when an organization as a whole commits itself to avoiding management jargon, unnecessary acronyms and other forms of business bullshit. For instance, some organizations have adopted 'no bullshit' rules. Although an organization may informally continue to use some forms of bullshit, this public repudiation is likely to serve as a device people can use to effectively challenge the use of bullshit in the organization.

A final way in which bullshit can be undermined is through de-sacrilization. This entails questioning the deep emotional and moral value attributed to a particular term. De-sacrilization can be sparked by individual crises of meaning when individuals begin to recognize the meaninglessness and potential emptiness associated with bullshit. Such existential explorations are likely to be sparked by periods of reflection or intense experiences which call into question deeply held values. An example of this process is when individuals going through career transitions have to question their existing values and begin to see what they once thought of as sacred as 'bullshit'. De-sacrilization can also take place when organizations systematically undermine the meaning associated with a particular bullshit vocabulary. This occurs when there are systematic and collective attempts to highlight the lack of meaning or potential emptiness in a particular vocabulary. For instance, organizations engaged in a significant change process might highlight the empty nature of what had previously been seen as very meaningful language. Finally, vocabulary can be de-institutionalized by field-level actors. An example of this is when a particular management fad is called into disrepute across an entire field and starts to be treated as 'bullshit'.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that bullshitting should be seen as a social practice. People engage in bullshitting in organizations so they can fit into a speech community, get things done in day-to-day interaction and bolster their image and identity. Bullshitting is most likely to arise in speech communities where there are many conceptual entrepreneurs, which are dominated by noisy ignorance and characterized by permissive uncertainty. These kinds of speech communities encourage the language game of bullshitting. This language game entails an actor articulating bullshit, it being processed in a shallow way and a sense of surface-level agreement being maintained. If this language game works, then it enhances players' image and identity. When this happens, they are more likely to re-engage in practices of bullshitting and reinvest in the wider speech community which supports it. If bullshitting misfires, then it undermines an actor's image and identity. This in turn encourages actors not to re-engage in further bullshitting or reinvest in the speech community which supports it. Bullshitting tends to evolve and it can be scaled up. When this happens, bullshitting shifts from being a

relatively informal practice into a collective routine, then a formalized procedure and eventually can become a sacred ritual. However, bullshit can also be undermined when it misfires. When this happens, what seems like a sacred value can end up being seen as bullshit.

Contributions

At the narrowest, this paper extends the emerging field of 'bullshitology'. Existing work has largely focused on the intentions of the speaker (e.g. Frankfurt, 2005), the characteristics of the audience which make them susceptible to bullshit (e.g. Pennycook et al., 2015) and the social structure which encourages bullshitting (e.g. Graeber, 2018). Building on recent work which understands bullshitting as a social practice (e.g. Wakeham, 2017), I have argued that bullshitting is a routinized linguistic interaction which takes place in a speech community. Bullshitting can become, in Wittgenstein's words, 'a form of life' which infuses large parts of day-to-day interaction in an organization. This takes the focus away from particular individuals and their cognitive failures or devious intentions. Instead, it reminds us that bullshitting is something that fairly rational and ethical people participate in because it is the linguistic norm in a particular setting. Talking bullshit becomes the way one becomes a viable member of a linguistic community. Calling out bullshit can be difficult not just because it is time-consuming (Brandolini, 2014), but also because it involves challenging the community one is part of, the language which holds it together and one's own sense of self.

Seeing bullshitting as a social practice reminds us that, like any practice, it is a product of a wider community which structures and feeds it. I have pointed out that there are three characteristics of a speech community that can support the practice of bullshitting in organizations. These are conceptual entrepreneurs, noisy ignorance and permissive uncertainty. By recognizing that bullshitting in organizations is driven by these wider factors, we begin to see how it is not simply personal choice or poor reasoning which leads people to become enthusiastic bullshitters. Rather, bullshit is partially prompted by the community of which one is a part.

Seeing bullshit as a social practice reminds us that it is not just a single linguistic occurrence. Instead, bullshit often exists within a stream of speech acts. This process of learning how to play the bullshit game can be reinforced or undermined overtime. People are likely to be either punished or rewarded for engaging in acts of bullshitting. I have argued that the more one is rewarded for bullshitting, the more likely one is to engage in it. This means there is scope for people to get stuck in bullshit traps. When this happens, it can increase the scope of bullshitting from small and tolerable levels to larger, more intolerable levels. Bullshit can go from a bounded activity to an unbounded one. When this happens, bullshitting is likely to move from being a net positive activity to being one which has more negative consequences. This can create problems for individuals, organizations and entire sectors.

Finally, by seeing bullshit as a social practice, I have tried to challenge the assumption that bullshitting is always something bad. Like any language game, bullshitting can result in both positive and negative outcomes. I have pointed out that bullshitting can undermine an actor's image as well as their identity. Bullshitting can have some positive consequences such as increasing self-confidence and building an external sense of legitimacy. Recognizing that bullshitting can sometimes be positive – at least in the short term – gives us a better sense of why people in organizations may be willing to overlook it, accept it and even indulge in it. In addition, it gives a sense of the potential dilemmas that people are likely to face when they are caught between pro-social goals (such as being polite) and epistemic goals (such as seeking out the truth).

Limitations

Seeing bullshit as a social practice has a number of important limitations. First, it is important to note that not all communication in organizational life is bullshit. There are many

forms of communication which cannot be strictly considered in this truth–bullshit–lies continuum. Second, identifying bullshit can be difficult. The philosophical literature offers some clear guidelines for picking out bullshit statements, but these remain relatively broad in scope. This means there is a significant scope for interpretation in when to deem one statement to be bullshit and another to be non-bullshit. This interpretive scope implies that we are likely to be self-serving when engaging in bullshit spotting. This means we are unlikely to deem many of our own statements to be bullshit, while we are more likely to label the statements of others as bullshit. A wider interpretive scope opens up space for intense political struggles over what counts as bullshit and what does not.

Finally, this interpretive flexibility points to a wider problem with many statements around bullshit. The claim that you can make a distinction between truth, lies and bullshit assumes a realist approach where it is at least potentially possible to make a distinction between true and false statements (Fuller, 2006). However, if one begins with anti-realist assumptions which regard reality as always in the process of becoming and any truth claim as involving an inherent degree of uncertainty, then it becomes much more difficult to make clear distinctions between truth, lies and bullshit. Indeed, the very act of bullshitting could be seen as a kind of experimentation with the truth.

Future research

My argument establishes a wider research agenda for the study of bullshit in organizations. There are four particularly promising questions which would repay future study. First, researchers might explore how bullshitting emerges. To do this, researchers might investigate exogenous factors such as the role of the various triggers conditions I have highlighted. Research also might explore endogenous factors within a field which lead to the spread of bullshitting such as social learning, incentives, status and power dynamics. Second, further research could explore in more depth the social practices involved in bullshitting. This would look at how bullshitters try to mislead, how they are accepted (or not) by the audience and the process through which any mutual adjustment takes place. To do this, researchers would have to look at the real-time processes involved in bullshitting. Third, researchers need to explore the consequences of bullshitting in more detail. This would involve weighing up the positive and negative consequences of bullshit over both the short and longer term. To do this, they would need to ask about the impact of bullshitting for individuals, and also for collective actors like organizations as a whole. This would allow us to begin to understand both the positive and the negative consequences of bullshitting and how this trade-off process works. Finally, future research could empirically investigate how bullshit gets scaled up or undermined in organizations. This could entail looking in more detail at how bullshit shifts from being an improvised local language game through a process of routinization and formalization and eventually becomes seen as sacred. It could also entail looking at how bullshit declines in an organizational setting. Doing this through longitudinal research would give us a sense of how bullshit can evolve and change over time.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Joep Cornelissen and Eva Boxenbaum for their helpful comments on this paper.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Abdallah, C., & Langley, A. (2014). The double edge of ambiguity in strategic planning. *Journal of Management Studies*, *51*, 235–264.

Alvesson, M. (2013). *The triumph of emptiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (2013). *Metaphors we lead by*. London: Routledge.

Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (2016). *The stupidity paradox*. London: Profile.

Archer, M. (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Astley, W. G., & Zammuto, R. F. (1992). Organization science, managers, and language games. *Organization Science*, *3*, 443–460.

Bainbridge, T. F., Quinlan, J. A., Mar, R. A., & Smillie, L. D. (2019). Openness/intellect and susceptibility to pseudo-profound bullshit: A replication and extension. *European Journal of Personality*, *33*, 72–88.

Baird, C., & Calvard, T. S. (2018). Epistemic vices in organizations: Knowledge, truth, and unethical conduct. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1–14.

Bechky, B. A. (2003). Object lessons: Workplace artifacts as representations of occupational jurisdiction. *American Journal of Sociology*, *109*, 720–752.

Belfiore, E. (2009). On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: Notes from the British case. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *15*, 343–359.

Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, M., & Sherry Jr, J. F. (1989). The sacred and the profane in consumer behavior: Theodicy on the odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *16*, 1–38.

Berger, P., & Pullberg, S. (1965). Reification and the sociological critique of consciousness. *History and Theory*, *4*, 196–211.

Bok, S. (1978/1999). *Lying: Moral choice in public and private life*. New York: Vintage.

Bond Jr, C. F., & DePaulo, B. M. (2006). Accuracy of deception judgments. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *10*, 214–234.

Brandolini, A. (2014). Bullshit Asymmetry Principle. Conference presentation, XP2014, Rome, 30 May.

Bresnen, M., Hyde, P., Hodgson, D., Bailey, S., & Hassard, J. (2015). Leadership talk: From managerialism to leaderism in health care after the crash. *Leadership*, *11*, 451–470.

Brown, A. D. (2015). Identities and identity work in organizations. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *17*(1), 20–40.

Brès, L., & Gond, J. P. (2014). The visible hand of consultants in the construction of the markets for virtue: Translating issues, negotiating boundaries and enacting responsive regulations. *Human Relations*, *67*, 1347–1382.

Cahill, D. G., Baur, D. G., Liu, Z. F., & Yang, J. W. (2020). I am a blockchain too: How does the market respond to companies' interest in blockchain? *Journal of Banking & Finance*, forthcoming.

Carson, T. L. (2010). *Lying and deception: Theory and practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carson, T. L. (2016). Frankfurt and Cohen on bullshit, bullshiting, deception, lying, and concern with the truth of what one says. *Pragmatics & Cognition*, *23*, 53–67.

Cassam, Q. (2016). Vice epistemology. *The Monist*, *99*, 159–180.

Cassam, Q. (2018). Epistemic insouciance. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, *48*, 1–20.

Cederström, C., & Spicer, A. (2014). Discourse of the real kind: A post-foundational approach to organizational discourse analysis. *Organization*, *21*, 178–205.

Chen, V. T. & Goldstein, J. (forthcoming). *Falling forward: Student entrepreneurship in an age of precarity*.

Christensen, L. T., Kärreman, D., & Rasche, A. (2019). Bullshit and organization studies. *Organization Studies*, *40*, 1587–1600.

Cohen, G. A. (2002). Deeper into bullshit. *Contours of agency: Essays on themes from Harry Frankfurt* (pp. 321–339).

Cooper, M. J., Dimitrov, O., & Rau, P. R. (2001). A rose.com by any other name. *Journal of Finance*, *56*, 2371–2388.

Costas, J., & Grey, C. (2014). Bringing secrecy into the open: Towards a theorization of the social processes of organizational secrecy. *Organization Studies*, *35*, 1423–1447.

Cothran, K. L. (1974). Talking trash in the Okefenokee Swamp Rim, Georgia. *Journal of American Folklore*, *87*(346), 340–356.

De Meza, D., & Southey, C. (1996). The borrower's curse: Optimism, finance and entrepreneurship. *Economic Journal*, *106*(435), 375–386.

Du Plessis, E. M, & Vandeskog, B. (2020). Other stories of resilient safety management in the Norwegian offshore sector: Resilience engineering, bullshit and the depoliticization of danger. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *36*.

Dur, R., & Van Lent, M. (2019). Socially useless jobs. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, *58*, 3–16.

Egan, D. (2018). Calling bullshit. *The Point Magazine*, October 31.

Eisenberg, E. M. (1984). Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs*, *51*, 227–242.

Fallis, D. (2015). Frankfurt wasn't bullshitting! *Southwest Philosophical Studies*, *37*, 11–20.

Fayard, A. L., & DeSanctis, G. (2010). Enacting language games: The development of a sense of 'we-ness' in online forums. *Information Systems Journal*, *20*, 383–416.

Feldman, R. (2008). Plain language patents. *Texas Intellectual Property Law Journal*, *17*, 289.

Ferraro, F., Pfeffer, J., & Sutton, R. I. (2005). Economics language and assumptions: How theories can become self-fulfilling. *Academy of Management Review*, *30*, 8–24.

Fleming, P. (2019). *The Death of Homo economicus*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Frankfurt, H. G. (1986). On bullshit. *Raritan Quarterly Review*, *6*(2), 81–100.

Frankfurt, H. G. (2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fleming, P., & Spicer, A. (2005). How objects believe for us: Applications in organizational analysis. *Culture and Organization*, *11*(3), 181–193.

Fuller, S. (2006). Just bullshit. In G. L. Hardcastle & G. L. Reisch (Eds.), *Bullshit and philosophy* (pp. 241–57). Chicago: Open Court.

Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2009). *The best of the best: Becoming elite at an American boarding school*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2011). Bullshit as resistance: Justifying unearned privilege among students at an elite boarding school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *24*, 581–586.

Gilbert, D. T. (1991). How mental systems believe. *American Psychologist*, *46*(2), 107.

Gligorić, V., & Vilotijević, A. (2019). "Who said it?" How contextual information influences perceived profundity of meaningful quotes and pseudo-profound bullshit. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *34*(2), 535–542.

Goffman, E (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin.

Gond, J. P., & Nyberg, D. (2017). Materializing power to recover corporate social responsibility. *Organization Studies*, *38*, 1127–1148.

Gouldner, A. W. (1954). *Patterns of industrial bureaucracy*. New York: Free Press.

Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Graves, L. (2016). *Deciding what's true: The rise of political fact-checking in American journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gumperz, J. J. (1968). The speech community. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (pp. 381–386). New York: Macmillan.

Hadida, A. L., Tarvainen, W., & Rose, J. (2015). Organizational improvisation: A consolidating review and framework. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *17*, 437–459.

Halliday, M. A. K (1976). Anti-languages. *American Anthropologist*, *78*, 570–584.

Harrison, S. H., Ashforth, B. E., & Corley, K. G. (2009). Organizational sacralization and sacrilege. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *29*, 225–254.

Hartmann, R., Dahl Krabbe, A., & Spicer, A. (2019). Veblenian entrepreneurs in the entrepreneurial economy. Paper presented at EGOS.

Hasson, U., Simmons, J. P., & Todorov, A. (2005). Believe it or not: On the possibility of suspending belief. *Psychological Science*, *16*, 566–571.

Henningsen, G., & Roberts, W. E. (1965). The art of perpendicular lying: Concerning a commercial collecting of Norwegian sailors' tall tales. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, *2*(2), 180–219.

Hunt, R. A., & Kiefer, K. (2017). The entrepreneurship industry: Influences of the goods and services marketed to entrepreneurs. *Journal of Small Business Management*, *55*, 231–255.

Jackall, R. (1986). *Moral mazes: The world of corporate managers*. Oxford: Oxford Universty Press.

Jalonen, K., Schildt, H., & Vaara, E. (2018). Strategic concepts as micro-level tools in strategic sensemaking. *Strategic Management Journal*, *39*, 2794–2826.

Janik, E., & Jensen, M. B. (2011). Giving them what they want: The Reinhardts and quack medicine in Wisconsin. *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, *94*(4), 28–41.

Jarzabkowski, P., Sillince, J. A., & Shaw, D. (2010). Strategic ambiguity as a rhetorical resource for enabling multiple interests. *Human Relations*, *63*, 219–248.

Jerrim, J., Parker, P., & Shure, D. (2019). Bullshitters. Who are they and what do we know about their lives? IZA Discussion paper.

Kewell, B. J. (2006). Language games and tragedy: The Bristol Royal Infirmary disaster revisited. *Health, Risk & Society*, *8*(4), 359–377.

King, A., & Crewe, I. (2014). *The blunders of our governments*. London: Oneworld Publications.

Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Labov, W. (2001). *Principles of linguistic change. Volume 2: Social factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Layton, M. (2010). *Street women and the art of bullshitting: The oral culture of female prostitutes and drug addicts in Vancouver*. Vancouver, CA: Webzines.

Littrell, S., Risko, E. F., & Fugelsang, J. A. (2020). The bullshitting frequency scale: Development and psychometric properties. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, forthcoming.

Maguire, S., Hardy, C., & Lawrence, T. B. (2004). Institutional entrepreneurship in emerging fields: HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy in Canada. *Academy of Management Journal*, *47*, 657–679.

Meibauer, J. (2016). Aspects of a theory of bullshit. *Pragmatics and Cognition*, *23*, 68–91.

Meibauer, J. (2018). The linguistics of lying. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, *4*, 357–375.

Malkiel, B. G. (1999). *A random walk down Wall Street: Including a life-cycle guide to personal investing*. New York: WW Norton & Company.

Mantere, S. (2013). What is organizational strategy? A language-based view. *Journal of Management Studies*, *50*, 1408–1426.

Martí, E., & Gond, J. P. (2018). When do theories become self-fulfilling? Exploring the boundary conditions of performativity. *Academy of Management Review*, *43*, 487–508.

Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*, *20*(3), 709–734.

McCarthy, I. P., Hannah, D., Pitt, L. F., & McCarthy, J. M. (2020). Confronting indifference toward truth: Dealing with workplace bullshit. *Business Horizons*, forthcoming.

McGoey, L. (2012). The logic of strategic ignorance. *British Journal of Sociology*, *63*, 533–576.

MMC Ventures (2019). *The state of AI: Divergence*. Report.

Milroy, L., & Milroy, J. (1992). Social network and social class: Toward an integrated sociolinguistic model. *Language in Society*, *21*(1), 1–26.

Morgan, M. (2004). Speech community. *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, 3–22.

Mukerji, C. (1978). Bullshitting: Road lore among hitchhikers. *Social Problems*, *25*, 241–252.

Nilsson, A., Erlandsson, A., & Västfjäll, D. (2019). The complex relation between receptivity to pseudo-profound bullshit and political ideology. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *45*, 1440–1454.

Partridge, E. (2006). *A dictionary of slang and unconventional English*. London: Routledge.

Paulsen, R. (2017). Slipping into functional stupidity: The bifocality of organizational compliance. *Human Relations*, *70*, 185–210.

Penny, L. (2010). *Your call is important to us: The truth about bullshit*. Toronto: Emblem Editions.

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2019). Who falls for fake news? The roles of bullshit receptivity, overclaiming, familiarity, and analytic thinking. *Journal of Personality*, *88*, 10.111/jopy.12476.

Pennycook, G., Cheyne, J. A., Barr, N., Koehler, D. J., & Fugelsang, J. A. (2015). On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit. *Judgment and Decision Making*, *10*, 549–563.

Perkmann, M., & Spicer, A. (2007). 'Healing the scars of history': Projects, skills and field strategies in institutional entrepreneurship. *Organization Studies*, *28*, 1101–1122.

Perkmann, M., & Spicer, A. (2014). How emerging organizations take form: The role of imprinting and values in organizational bricolage. *Organization Science*, *25*, 1785–1806.

Petrocelli, J. V. (2018). Antecedents of bullshitting. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *76*, 249–258.

Pfeffer, J. (2015). *Leadership BS: Fixing workplaces and careers one truth at a time*. New York: Harper Business.

Poole, S. (2013). *Who touched base in my thought shower*. London: Hachette.

Purser, R. (2019). *McMindfulness*. London: Repeater.

Raab, N., Fernbach, P. M., & Sloman, S. A. (2019). Individual representations in a community of knowledge. *Trends in Cognitive Science*, *23*(10), 891–902.

Rindova, V. P., Becerra, M., & Contardo, I. (2004). Enacting competitive wars: Competitive activity, language games, and market consequences. *Academy of Management Review*, *29*, 670–686.

Rittel, H. W., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, *4*, 155–169.

Rogers, T., & Norton, M. I. (2011). The artful dodger: Answering the wrong question the right way. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, *17*(2), 139.

Salvado, J., & Vermeulen, F. (2018). How does the stockmarket react to management speak? Working Paper, London Business School.

Sandberg, J., & Tsoukas, H. (2020). Sensemaking reconsidered: Towards a broader understanding

through phenomenology. *Organization Theory*, *1*, 1–34.

Sausdal, D. (2020). Police bullshit: Taking police brutality talk less seriously. *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*, *4*(1), 94–115.

Schwardmann, P., & Van der Weele, J. (2019). Deception and self-deception. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *3*, 1055–1061.

Smith, M. K., Trivers, R., & von Hippel, W. (2017). Self-deception facilitates interpersonal persuasion. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, *63*, 93–101.

Sokal, A., & Bricmont, J. (1998). *Fashionable nonsense: Postmodern intellectuals' abuse of science*. London: Macmillan.

Sperber, D., Clément, F., Heintz, C., Mascaro, O., Mercier, H., Origgi, G., & Wilson, D. (2010). Epistemic vigilance. *Mind & Language*, *25*, 359–393.

Spicer, A. (2013). Shooting the shit: the role of bullshit in organisations. *Management*, *16*, 653–666.

Spicer, A. (2017). *Business bullshit*. London: Routledge.

Sterling, J., Jost, J. T., & Pennycook, G. (2016). Are neoliberals more susceptible to bullshit? *Judgment & Decision Making*, *11*, 352–360.

Sturdy, A., Brocklehurst, M., Winstanley, D., & Littlejohns, M. (2006). Management as a (self) confidence trick: Management ideas, education and identity work. *Organization*, *13*, 841–860.

Sturdy, A., Heusinkveld, S., Reay, T., & Strang, D. (2018). *The Oxford handbook of management ideas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tavory, I., & Eliasoph, N. (2013). Coordinating futures: Toward a theory of anticipation. *American Journal of Sociology*, *118*, 908–942.

Tourish, D., & Hargie, O. (2012). Metaphors of failure and the failures of metaphor: A critical study of root metaphors used by bankers in explaining the banking crisis. *Organization Studies*, *33*, 1045–1069.

Turpin, M. H., Kara-Yakoubian, M., Walker, A., Gabert, N. N., Fugelsang, J., & Stolz, J. A. (2019). Bullshit makes the art grow profounder. *Judgment and Decision Making*, *14*, 658–670.

Verbruggen, M., & De Vos, A. (2019). When people don't realize their career desires: Toward a theory of career inaction. *Academy of Management Review*, forthcoming.

Vilhena, D. A., Foster, J. G., Rosvall, M., West, J. D., Evans, J., & Bergstrom, C. T. (2014). Finding cultural holes: How structure and culture diverge in networks of scholarly communication. *Sociological Science*, *1*, 221–238.

Von Hippel, W., & Trivers, R. (2011). The evolution and psychology of self-deception. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *34*(1), 1–16.

Wakeham, J. (2017). Bullshit as a problem of social epistemology. *Sociological Theory*, *35*, 15–38.

Walker, A., Turpin, M. H., Stolz, J. A., Fugelsang, J., & Koehler, D. (2019). Finding meaning in the clouds: Illusory pattern perception predicts receptivity to pseudo-profound bullshit. *Judgment and Decision Making*, *14*, 109–119.

Watson, D. (2015). *Worst words*. Sydney: Random House Australia.

Weiner, A. (2020). *Uncanny valley: A memoir*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Girioux.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Xu, Q. (1999). TQM as an arbitrary sign for play: Discourse and transformation. *Organization Studies*, *20*, 659–681.

Author biography

André Spicer is a professor of organisational behaviour at Cass Business School, University of London. He is currently working on a book about the role of doubt in organizations and social life.