

**ON BULLSHIT, by Harry G. Frankfurt.  
Princeton University Press, 2005.**

**reviewed by John Buschman**

On the theory that, with the possible exception of people who routinely deal with used car sales managers, librarians might be the audience most in need a volume dedicated to the topic of b.s., I decided to review Frankfurt's book. This slim volume (67 short pages) is not a prank or a gag-gift book (it is also priced accordingly at \$9.95). Frankfurt is a Professor Emeritus of moral philosophy at Princeton University, and while the tongue may occasionally be in the cheek, the discussion and the distinctions made about what bullshit is, and is not, is serious and informative. The book begins with the observation that "one of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this." However, the topic per se has received little formal attention – "a conscientiously developed appreciation" as he calls it – and therefore "we have no theory" of bullshit.

Frankfurt goes on to explore the links among and distinctions between common terms and understandings of them like humbug, bull, bull sessions, bluff, falsehoods, and outright lies in order to arrive at a tentative definition of what bullshit is. It is the distinction between bullshitting and telling a lie that is a key to his conclusions: the teller of truth and the liar respect the importance of the truth, they're just sitting on opposite sides of the same table. The honest person "says only what [is] believe[d] to be true [and] for the liar it is correspondingly indispensable that [the] statements be false" to deceive and/or achieve a certain end. Lying, he notes, takes a certain ascetic discipline to do it well. Hence to the core of the issue: "It is impossible for someone to lie unless he [or she, of course] thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction." It is this tenuous, careless connection with fact, truth (inadvertent or not), and falsehood that is the hallmark of bullshit.

To illustrate, Frankfurt discusses the typical bombast of a 4th of July political speech: the intoning of reverence for the Founding Fathers, the rule of law, the sacrifice of patriots, and the role of a divine in guiding the nation to its present exalted state. It is not

the case that the speaker wants to convince the audience of his true feelings about the Constitution, nor necessarily to deceive the audience about them either – the speaker may in fact make more than a few true statements along the way. Rather, the speaker’s purpose is to convey to the audience an impression of him through such vagaries whether true or false. The bullshitter “does not reject the authority of truth,” it is just that she/he “pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is the greater enemy of the truth than lies are.” Hence we arrive at the corrosiveness of bullshitting in the form of the fine craftsmanship of market research and focus groups and image-meistering that are the stock-in-trade of our politics and consumer culture.

If you’re thinking that this has a tenuous bearing on librarianship by now, just pick up some “analysis” of the field, the future, or the past by a library administrator. The various pronouncements about Google’s digitization project will do fine: “This is the day the world changed. [T]his is something we have to do to revitalize the profession and make it more meaningful” (from an associate director at the University of Michigan Library in the 12-20-04 *Information Today* News Release). Or: “*The Matrix* has started already...Next we’ll need to install...Web cams on our public access computers [which is] not only recording your image, it will be able to tell whether you are angry or sad, reading or watching the screen, and more or less what you are doing...I know this has tremendous surveillance implications, but it’s not all bad” (in the January 2001 *Computers in Libraries*). These kinds of pronouncements from our “leading lights” are commonplace – not the exception, and they are the essence of bullshit. This leads us to Frankfurt’s final point of particular salience for librarians: “Rather than seeking primarily to arrive at accurate representations of a common world,” the bullshitter goes for sincerity. Since, in a postmodern understanding of the world there is no way to know truth or facts, “it makes no sense to try to be true to the facts [and the bullshitter] must therefore try instead to be true” to him or herself. Touché. Our leadership doesn’t lie – they’re just making it up as they go along in a series of rolling expediencies, being true to themselves.

This is an excellent and thoughtful little book on an overlooked subject. Take up a collection, read it and pass it around, and then give it to your local library administrator – soon.