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Book Review (with ancillaries)

Carl T. Bergstrom's & Jevin D. West's, Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World. (Penguin's paperback edition, 2021)

According to authors Bergstrom and West (2021), "*Bullshit is language, statistical figures, data graphics, and other forms of presentation intended to persuade by impressing and overwhelming a reader or listener, with a blatant disregard for truth and logical coherence.*" The inclusive generality of their definition does emphasize four traceable activities associated with false information, namely, persuasion by impressing and overwhelming readers, and a blatant "*disregard for truth and logical coherence.*" The latter is an ethical concern when writing non-fiction at any level and a grave transgression if the writing becomes libel, slander, or defamation. In their view, and to paraphrase, the explosive and exponential growth of information and the societal conditions under which these changes occur make it quite easy, in fact, to dupe overwhelmed readers, interested only in bottom line "teaser tag lines" and pithy "blurbs." That a percentage of uninformed readers may actually come to believe that an indefatigable public servant such as Hillary Rodham-Clinton is an infant-eating lizard is non-thinking falling into the darkest abyss of medieval madness (Abad-Santos, 2015). Severely skewed credulity may be harmful only to the believer unless it degenerates into the vile actions witnessed during the January 6 insurrection. Sadly, the end of dialogue sets the stage for war.

In related publications, the authors (West and Bergstrom, 2021) cite the sobering statistics that "Nearly 40% of Americans viewed content from untrustworthy websites during the 2016 US election, but these articles only represented about 6% of all news articles consumed." They are blunt and correct, about the consequences of false information (West and Bergstrom, 2021):

Misinformation has reached crisis proportions. It poses a risk to international peace, interferes with democratic decision making, endangers the well-being of the planet, and threatens public health. Public support for policies to control the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is being undercut by misinformation, leading to the World Health Organization's "infodemic" declaration. Ultimately, misinformation undermines collective sense making and collective action. We cannot solve problems of public health, social inequity, or climate change without also addressing the growing problem of misinformation.

A focus on the co-opting of scientific data sharing tools to obscure findings and to misinform by unscrupulous writers is augmented with tools (recommendations) for recognizing and "calling bullshit." The implications of their report are far reaching, particularly in education. The same authors continue to teach a course (see <https://www.callingbullshit.org/syllabus.html>) along the same lines that could be described as information literacy, a much-needed area of pedagogy that it is not now universally embraced.

One is less sure about their recommendations (last chapter) for how to make *bullshitters* stop their misinformation tactics and strategies. In an era of divisive politics, openly expressed hate, cultural taunting and provocation, and ultimately, potential violence, it is less clear that those who have the time, the means or the incentives to continue these practices, particularly when it

comes from subsidized foreign propaganda (from antagonists to democracies), will be deterred by anything short of more serious and internationally organized punitive or financial disincentives. However, presently, well-orchestrated and unified international campaigns to combat misinformation are patchy at best (Funke and Flamini, 2018).

But their points (Bergstrom and West, 2021) are still very relevant: a well-read and skeptical population is more likely to “spot the fake.” According to Glaeser, Ponzetto, and Shleifer (2007), “*Education increases the society-wide support for democracy because democracy relies on people with high participation benefits for its support. We show that better educated nations are more likely both to preserve democracy and to protect it from coups.*”

This year’s paperback release of their successful publication makes it a valuable holiday gift for a college-bound student. *



“Comment is free, but facts are sacred”

Charles Prestwich Scott (1846 –1932)

Abad-Santos, A. (2015). Lizard people: the greatest political conspiracy ever created. *Vox*, February 20.

Funke, D, and Flamini, D. (2018). A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world. *Poynter*: <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/>

Glaeser, E. L., Ponzetto, G. A. M., and Shleifer, A. (2007). Why does democracy need education? *Journal of Economic Growth*, 12, 77-99. (p. 94)

West, J. D. & Bergstrom, C. T. (2021). Misinformation in and about science. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118 (15) e1912444117; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1912444117

**Conflict of Interest Statement:* Neither the authors nor the publishers requested the above review.