Bald-Faced Bullshit and Authoritarian Political Speech: Making Sense of Johnson and Trump[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are notoriously uninterested in truth-telling. They also often appear uninterested even in constructing plausible falsehoods. What stands out above all is the brazenness and frequency with which they declare their falsehoods. In spite of this, they are not always met with disbelief. Indeed, Republicans continue to trust Donald Trump in remarkable numbers. Taking all this into account, it is not so straightforward to characterize what they are up to, using the standard tools of the philosophical literature. Is it bald-faced lying? Well, Trump is believed by a great many people and he surely knows this, so it seems wrong to insist that his lies are not intended to deceive. Is it bullshitting? Harry Frankfurt insisted that a bullshitter must conceal what they are up to, and these two make no great effort at concealment.

The only way to properly make sense of what Trump and Johnson are doing, we argue, is to give a greater role to audience relativity in notions like bullshitting and bald-faced lying. In this paper, we develop a new understanding of bullshitting, one that includes bald-faced lying, and allows for different communicative acts to be directed at different audiences with a single utterance. In addition, we argue for the importance of recognizing bald-faced bullshitting, a particular speciality of both Trump and Johnson, and one especially useful to authoritarian leaders. Our definition helps us to understand what Trump and Johnson are doing, but it also, we argue, serves well to accommodate the concerns that motivated Harry Frankfurt's concept of bullshitting.

We argue that Frankfurt’s notion of bullshit is not sufficiently clear as it stands, which probably accounts for the many very different understandings in the literature, most of which are presented as interpretations of Frankfurt. We suggest understanding bullshit utterances as characterized by a lack of concern for one’s audience as truth seeker. We show that our understanding includes all cases that meet Frankfurt’s original definition, but that it offers more precision and that there are great benefits to explicitly discussing the audience *– or audiences* – as a part of the definition. Crucially, this enables us to make sense of the multiple ways that utterances by leaders like Trump and Johnson function, and to better understand the dangers that they pose. This will also help us to draw out some differences between what Trump and Johnson are doing.

# 1. Boris Johnson and Donald Trump's Bullshit

We will start with some of the clearest examples of bullshit from Trump and Johnson, before later discussing more complex cases.

## 1.1 Boris Johnson on the Brexit Referendum

Although he rose to Prime Ministerial power as a Brexiter[[2]](#footnote-2), and although he is the Prime Minister who took the United Kingdom out of the European Union, it is widely believed that Johnson in fact had no view about whether Brexit was a good or bad idea for the United Kingdom when the referendum was held.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the time of the referendum campaign, Johnson had a newspaper column.[[4]](#footnote-4) He wrote one column in favour of Brexit and one column opposed, and then decided at the last minute which one to publish and which side to back. It is generally accepted that this decision was based entirely on what he thought would serve his career best. This is not the action of a person with true convictions, determined to argue for what he believes to be true. Nor, however, is it the action of a deceptive character, determined to conceal the truth and lead his readers into falsehood. Instead, it seems to be naturally characterised as the action of a bullshitter, someone who simply had no interest in truth or falsehood. Instead, all indications are that his focus was on nothing but political, or possibly personal, expediency.

## 1.2 Boris Johnson on his bus-making hobby

In June 2019, while campaigning to become the next Prime Minister, Boris Johnson gave a truly remarkable interview. Asked by the interviewer what he did in his free time, Johnson began to ramble[[5]](#footnote-5):

I like to paint. Or I make things. I have a thing where I make models of buses. What I make is, I get old, I don’t know, wooden crates, and I paint them. It’s a box that’s been used to contain two wine bottles, right, and it will have a dividing thing. And I turn it into a bus.

So I put passengers – I paint the passengers enjoying themselves on a wonderful bus – low carbon, of the kind that we brought to the streets of London, reducing C02, reducing nitrous oxide, reducing pollution.

## Johnson's delivery was that of a man making things up – he took a few halting passes at the idea of making “things,” before settling on “busses” – and the hobby was strange and implausible. Among other things, wine tends to come in crates of larger than two bottles. It also seems likely that Johnson had a pre-existing desire to mention busses whenever he could in the interview. Busses had played a very important role in his political career: both the busses that he brought in as mayor of London and the famous Brexit bus. Nobody seem to find it at all believable that Johnson had genuinely been recounting a hobby. Here are two representative comments.[[6]](#footnote-6)

* Matt Bevan: “I have thought about this a lot and realised that this is exactly how my 3yo son would answer this question.”
* Simon Blackwell: “Only just caught up with the Boris Johnson model bus interview.” Feels like a screw-you status thing - “I can literally say any old unbelievable shit and still become PM.” Like Trump’s “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters.”

In short, Johnson appeared to be inventing a ridiculously implausible story, with no concern whatsoever for whether anyone would take it seriously. It is hard to imagine that Johnson had any real interest in the truth or falsehood of the story,[[7]](#footnote-7) or in whether anyone believed him. This was all the more puzzling because there was no real need for this invention. It was in response to an easy question about how he relaxes, the sort of query that traditionally helps politicians to seem friendly and relatable – rather than a tendentious topic where he might feel the need to cover up an inconvenient truth.

## 1.3 Donald Trump on COVID-19 Miracle Cures

When Trump became a sudden and ardent advocate for hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19, there was no clear evidence one way or the other about its efficacy (although it is now clear that it is ineffective and dangerous as a remedy for COVID-19). Trump was very unlikely to have any belief about its efficacy at the time when he said that hydroxychloroquine was a miracle cure. He was not, then, lying.[[8]](#footnote-8) Nor was he saying something that he genuinely believed – it is hard to see how he would have come by this belief. However, support for hydroxycholoquine had quickly become a useful culture war issue for Trump. (He did have a small financial stake in the product, though not in disinfectants.[[9]](#footnote-9)) Trump was, intuitively, bullshitting: pushing a controversial unproven drug in such a way as to provoke his opponents and please his supporters, with no concern for the actual efficacy of the drug.

Or, take Trump’s advocacy of bleach or light as treatments, documented by William J. Broad and Dan Levin in the New York Times (Broad and Levin 2020):

After the administrator, William N. Bryan, the head of science at the Department of Homeland Security, told the briefing that the agency had tested how sunlight and disinfectants — including bleach and alcohol — can kill the coronavirus on surfaces in as little as 30 seconds, an excited Mr. Trump returned to the lectern.

“Supposing we hit the body with a tremendous — whether it’s ultraviolet or just very powerful light,” Mr. Trump said. “And I think you said that hasn’t been checked, but we’re going to test it?” he added, turning to Mr. Bryan, who had returned to his seat. “And then I said, supposing you brought the light inside the body, either through the skin or some other way…”

“And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute — one minute — and is there a way we can do something like that by injection inside, or almost a cleaning?” he asked. “Because you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it would be interesting to check that”.

Trump did not manage to have a financial stake in light, even a small one. But he did have a stake in depicting himself as an all-around genius – someone who could weigh in as an outsider on practically any matter, surprising the resident experts with his insights. A month earlier, in March 2020, Trump had visited the Centre for Disease Control and described his knowledge and understanding in terms of his uncle, “a great super genius” who had been a university professor. “Every one of these doctors said, ‘How do you know so much about this?’” Trump said. “Maybe I have a natural ability. Maybe I should have done that instead of running for President.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Even had he just been brainstorming, and not fostering an image of himself as having serious Coronavirus treatment insights, it is quite obviously an enormous mistake for an untrained, ignorant person in a position of authority to brainstorm in public about potentially deadly things that one might try in order to fight COVID-19. (And it does look like some of them followed his suggestions.[[11]](#footnote-11)) This, then, seems like a particularly dangerous instance of bullshitting.

## 1.4 Donald Trump on Canadian Trade Deficit

In this incident, discussed by Quassim Cassam (2021), Donald Trump told Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that the US had a trade deficit with Canada. Afterwards, in a speech with reporters present, Trump explained that he had no idea whether that was true or not.[[12]](#footnote-12) This is a rare case in which a speaker admits to having no concern whatsoever with the truth of what he says. So it is an exceptionally clear case of bullshitting.

# 2. Frankfurt’s Account, and Ours

According to Frankfurt, truth-tellers and liars alike care about the truth; the one to achieve it, the other to avoid it. Bullshitters—a paradigm case here is the used car salesman who will say anything to make the sale—don’t care about the truth. They are simply saying things to make other things happen. Liars and bullshitters are therefore distinguished by their motives in speaking:

[The bullshitter's] statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with the truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit. (Frankfurt 2005: 33-34)

This is a provocative idea, and has struck many people as deep, insightful, and diagnostic of trends in public and political discourse in recent decades. But for all the attention the idea has received there are at least two significant complications regarding it. First, most discussions stray quite far from Frankfurt’s definition. And second, the distinction as Frankfurt sketches it is not very clear.

## 2.1 Divergent understandings in the literature

We’ll take the first concern first. There has been enormous enthusiasm for the idea that bullshit is something of a defining trait of the last several decades, and these discussions always take Frankfurt as their starting point. But they tend to stray quite far from Frankfurt’s idea of the bullshitter as one who lacks interest in truth, whether to achieve it or to avoid it. Some assimilate bullshit to various kinds of lying. For example, Reisch and Hardcastle (2006: xi) cite the prevalence of fraud as evidence for the rise in bullshit; but fraud normally involves carefully engineered deceptions[[13]](#footnote-13) by people and corporate bodies determined to make sure that the truth is not learned. Reisch and Hardcastle also cite Descartes and Hume (2006: xv-xvi) as being on a mission to root out bullshit, focusing on their efforts to eliminate unjustified beliefs. But many people who are very interested in the truth of their beliefs sadly have unjustified ones—indeed most do, according to Descartes and Hume! Finally, Douglas (2006) describes much climate scepticism as bullshit; in fact the cases she describes look much more like straightforward lies or motivated reasoning, in which people (roughly speaking) manage to construct justifications for the beliefs that they want to maintain.[[14]](#footnote-14) An interest in concealing the truth is not the attitude of a bullshitter, according to Frankfurt’s definition.

Others treat bullshit as an issue of semantic content, an approach that misses (or, in some cases, rejects) the role of the speaker’s attitudes or intentions on Frankfurt’s account. (Cohen (2006) describes this as focusing on *bullshit* rather than *bullshitting*.) Hardcastle (2006) argues that the Vienna Circle, with their concern for eliminating meaningless statements, were at heart concerned with bullshit. The sort of meaninglessness they were concerned with, however, was for the most part not apparent to the ordinary thinker, and the meaningless statements they singled out were certainly endorsed by many seekers after truth. G. A. Cohen (2006, previously 2002), in one of the best-known papers on bullshit, defines bullshit as unclarifiable unclarity, taking continental philosophy as his prime example. Again, though, it’s clear that many truth-seekers believe such claims. Cohen’s underlying suggestion that bullshit is essentially a kind of semantic *bafflegab* is seen also in Pennycook et al’s psychological studies of “bullshit detection,” using examples like “Hidden meaning transforms unparalleled abstract beauty” (2015: 549). In fact it is not difficult to think of theoretical or argumentative framing that would make this sentence informative and useful, or anyhow no worse than a bit overwrought. But even if we grant that a speaker utters it on the basis of somewhat muddled ideas, still nothing precludes that the muddled speaker asserts it with the intention of expressing and encouraging the uptake of a truth. In that case it still would not satisfy core aspects of Frankfurt’s definition, bafflegab or not. Even those discussing Trump have offered some content-focused characterizations. For example, Jacquemet (2020: 127) writes that "we can characterize [bullshit] as ego-centered discourse frequently (even if not always) marked by the use of repetitions, intensifiers, superlatives, and ellipsis".

While it's very common for scholars to offer divergent interpretations of an idea, this is an unusually wide range of interpretations.[[15]](#footnote-15) A key reason for this, we think, is a certain lack of clarity in the original text. Recall Frankfurt's truly striking characterisation of the concept of bullshit.

[The bullshitter's] statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with the truth-- this indifference to how things really are-- that I regard as of the essence of bullshit. (2005: 33-34)

Just before and after this, Frankfurt himself gives some examples that don’t really fit with it at all, including a semantic content case. One of his oft-cited examples is the Fourth of July orator (originally Black’s example of humbug) who refers to “our great and blessed country whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind” (2005: 16). As we’ve seen, this kind of utterance is often described as bullshit. But it’s also true that very large numbers of Americans actually believe that this is an accurate description of the country. Just based on its content, Frankfurt says that it is “surely humbug”, and goes on to make clear that he thinks it is bullshit. Interestingly, Frankfurt argues that it is bullshit by noting that "the orator does not really care what his audience thinks about the Founding Fathers, or about the role of the deity in our country's history, or the like" (17). This focus on indifference to what the audience thinks, rather than indifference with respect to truth or falsehood, does *not* actually fit Frankfurt's official definition. We will see, however, that it does fit well with ours.

To find examples that fit the definition, Frankfurt has to turn to a strange story (2005: 24-34) about Wittgenstein taking a speaker’s hyperbole literally and thinking that she is asserting something for which she has no evidence. Although Frankfurt himself expresses doubts about the accuracy of this way of understanding the story, he notes that if it did happen that way, Wittgenstein would have thought (falsely) that the speaker was bullshitting. And that is the closest Frankfurt comes to a real-life example of bullshit. This does not amount to a great case for Frankfurt’s claim that “one of the most salient features of bullshit is that there is so much of it” (2005: 1).

So why does Frankfurt think that there is so much bullshit? The reason is that it’s almost irresistible, even for Frankfurt, to use the term ‘bullshit’ much more widely than the official definition allows. The ordinary usage of ‘bullshit’ is much broader—easily encompassing not just the Fourth of July orator, but all the various meanings that appear in the literature.

We also think that it’s easy to suppose nobody could really live the life of a Frankfurtian bullshitter, if we take as our paradigm the used car salesman who would say anything to make a sale. It’s no stretch to imagine someone who would bullshit *about that* in particular, but a person genuinely and quite generally unconcerned with the truth or falsity of what they say would—we might think—surely not make it very far in life. According to this line of thought, their falsehoods and heedlessness would be found out, and surely people would cease to trust them. Their lack of concern with truth and falsehood would mean that people would find it very strange and difficult to interact with them. If they didn’t mend their ways, surely they’d end up as some sort of exiles from the human community. This makes the slide to the non-technical uses of ‘bullshit’ all the more tempting, to round out an otherwise lean set of cases. Real examples fitting the official definition could be expected to be hard to come by, but real examples of the *broader* phenomena are everywhere.

In fact we are sceptical of this kind of reasoning, which leans so heavily on what would *surely* happen to thoroughgoing bullshitters. It rests on a highly idealized sense of the practical consequences of bullshitting and lying—one that is to some extent dangerous. It invites complacency to believe that the social, political, or legal contexts of speech will automatically exert pressure against outright bullshit when it is detected.

This also highlights a curious tension between two of Frankfurt’s convictions: that there is very obviously a lot of bullshit around, and that bullshitters by definition must attempt to conceal their art.[[16]](#footnote-16) If the penalties for bullshitting, in lost credibility or other social sanctions, were as severe and certain as the idealized story suggests, the need for concealment would be very clear. But then perhaps the phenomenon shouldn’t be quite so *obviously* prevalent. We will argue that there are in fact pretty ordinary contexts in which being seen to bullshit does not incur many or any negative consequences, as well as contexts in which being seen to bullshit has benefits that outweigh being seen as a bullshitter, and still others in which it is actually a key means of achieving the intended outcomes.

## 2.2 Bullshit, Lies, and Attitudes towards Truth

As Cohen (2006) notes, there is a fair bit of slippage in the literature between discussions focused on the *bullshitter* and their state of mind on the one hand and those focused on the sort of *content* that counts as bullshit on the other. Our focus here, like Frankfurt’s, is on the bullshitter and their state of mind. We will start with the question of whether liars really care about avoiding truth, as Frankfurt suggests, and whether this really distinguishes them from bullshitters.

If we think about truth as a universal or abstract notion, the answer must pretty clearly be that people don’t care about avoiding it when they lie. That is, virtually no people tell lies out of a kind of ideological opposition to truth in the abstract.

Things are at first not much clearer if we think in terms of avoiding particular truths instead. Arguably, when people lie, they do so not from an antipathy to some specific truth in itself. They lie for more prosaic and less hifalutin reasons – because, for example, they don’t want to get caught. It’s fair to respond to Frankfurt that a criminal lying on the witness stand doesn’t fundamentally care about the truth; they care about not going to jail. Frankfurt writes that the bullshitter in the earlier scenario, unlike the liar, “is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history. What he cares about is what people think of *him*” (2005: 18). But the liar too is often concerned to deceive an audience in order to affect what the audience thinks of them.

If most lies (and other deceptions) arise from the overriding wish to bring about or to avoid various specific outcomes, then the distinction between lies and bullshit that initially seemed so bracing in Frankfurt’s characterization of bullshit might seem threatened. Liars too say things to make other things happen. But most of the consequences the liar wants to fend off are due to other people’s knowing some truth or other. Even if a speaker ultimately lies because they want to avoid the consequences of their audience’s knowing the truth, the audience’s knowledge will be a shared cause of a range of those consequences. For someone lying on a witness stand about having evaded corporate taxes, the jury’s knowledge of what they did is an immediate outcome that could lead to a heavy fine, or to house arrest, or to jail time. Aiming to avoid any of those unwelcome consequences means aiming to avoid the jury’s coming to know some awkward truths. So we can at least say that liars often attend closely to how their speech affects the truth or falsity of the beliefs their audience forms on its basis.

## 2.3 Our proposal

To recap: when someone lies, for the most part what they care about isn’t The Truth, nor is it strictly this truth or that truth. They care about their audience’s state of mind with respect to this truth or that truth, and what will result from their audience’s having that state of mind. What distinguishes lying from bullshitting isn’t how one treats the truth, then, but how one treats one’s audience. To see this more clearly, it is helpful to divide the phenomena a bit more precisely than Frankfurt does.

Frankfurt makes the idea of bullshit vivid by contrasting it with things we wouldn’t normally expect to be placed together in a single virtuous group: truth-telling and lying.

Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game. Each responds to the facts as he understands them, although the response of the one is guided by the authority of the truth, while the response of the other defies that authority and refuses to meet its demands. The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are (60-61).

This way of carving things up has a striking rhetorical effect, but it can steer us wide of the underlying insight. This is because neither truth-telling nor lying captures the point Frankfurt goes on to make about the distinctiveness of bullshitting.

Truth-telling is not itself a speech-act, after all. It’s an achievement, one that asserters represent themselves as aiming at. But even a good-faith asserter may fail at this, depending on the accuracy of their beliefs, without either lying or bullshitting. Someone who earnestly asserts a sincerely believed falsehood is not truth-telling; but they are trying to tell the truth, to facilitate their audience’s believing the truth, and that’s really what matters for Frankfurt’s purposes.

Moreover, the cases of lying that contrast with bullshit, for Frankfurt, are above all cases of intended deception. The liar in these cases is concerned to inculcate a false belief, or at least to prevent a true one, in their audience; this is the respect in which even a liar pays respect to the truth. But some lies, such as bald-faced lies, do not have this aim, while some strict truth-telling does. Deceptive assertion includes both deceptive lying and the assertion of carefully phrased truths that are intended to mislead the audience, a particularly common move among lawyers, politicians, and others for whom strict truth-telling might be an effective way of avoiding sanctions for dishonesty. Speakers employing this strategy are often extremely careful and calculating truth-tellers, yet they are not good-faith asserters.[[17]](#footnote-17) They join deceptive liars in Frankfurt’s schema of speakers who respect the truth to at least the extent that they are concerned to direct their audience away from it.

So truth-telling and lying aren’t quite the right categories to bundle together to effect Frankfurt’s surprising contrast. A better contrast is between *good-faith assertions* and *deceptive assertions* on one hand, and bullshit on the other. Good-faith asserters and deceptive speakers alike are concerned with whether their speech will lead their audience to believe some contextually relevant truth (or perhaps to believe it with conviction, as someone might lie or palter simply to cause their audience enough doubt that they will not act in some unwelcome way). Frankfurt’s insight is that a distinct type of communicative pathology is displayed when someone makes an assertion without attempting either to facilitate or to obstruct the audience’s uptake of a true belief by means of the utterance. This is bullshitting.

This contrast, as we’ve seen, is a matter of the speaker’s actions and attitude towards their audience. Without attempting to characterize this precisely, we note that the contrast clearly concerns the presence or absence of a concern with whether one’s audience forms a true belief on the basis of one's assertions. Here, then, is our proposal about Frankfurtian bullshit: it is characterized by a speaker’s indifference as to whether their speech provides the basis for an audience to uptake or recover truths.[[18]](#footnote-18) So there *is* a sense in which bullshitters don’t care about the truth, but it comes via their treatment of an audience. The bullshitter’s aims, with respect to the effects of their speech on an audience, don’t principally concern the truth or falsity of this audience’s beliefs. It is crucial for us that this be formulated in terms of *an* audience rather than *the* audience. As we will argue, a speaker may have different attitudes toward different audiences, and thereby bullshit with respect to one audience but not another.

## 2.4 Implications of our proposal

Our proposal captures one of Frankfurt’s most crucial illustrative cases, the used car salesman who answers every question with what he imagines the customer wants to hear, neither knowing nor caring whether it’s true or false. It also fits extremely well with Frankfurt's Fourth of July orator, who may well care about saying only true things. All Frankfurt tells us is that the orator doesn't really care what his audience thinks—and this fits our version of his definition, rather than the official one.

Our account leaves us in need of more detail about Cohen’s jargon-loving impenetrable philosopher. If they are merely trying to sound deep, without any concern for getting closer to the truth, then they are bullshitting. But if they are genuinely engaged in the project of trying to understand and arrive at philosophical truths, then they are not bullshitting.

Importantly, our account includes bald-faced lying as bullshitting. Bald-faced liars deliberately assert falsehoods, but they *manifestly* have no intention of deceiving their audience.[[19]](#footnote-19) Here is a classic example from the literature, discussed by Carson (2006), Stokke (2018a) and Harris (2020) among others: A student lies bald-facedly to the Dean regarding a plagiarism accusation, knowing that the Dean has a policy of punishing only those who confess. In this case, says Harris (emphasis ours),

[t]he student… is not motivated by the aim of changing anyone’s mind. Rather, the student’s aim is to do whatever it takes to avoid punishment. The dean has a policy of not punishing anyone who doesn’t confess. Knowing this, the student utters the magic words, *with little concern for any other effects that their action might have* (Harris 2020: 15).

Harris doesn’t link the example to bullshit, but it captures much of what makes bald-faced lying in general a practice that counts also as a clear and characteristic case of bullshit.

Speakers like the plagiarizing student count as bullshitters not because they are heedless as to the truth-value of their assertion, but because they make no effort to facilitate the uptake of a truth or a falsehood in their audience. Here too we will see that the existence of multiple audiences for an utterance means that the very same utterance can be both a deceptive lie and a bald-faced lie relative to different audiences – perhaps both a deception and an instance of bullshitting.

The relationship between bullshit and lies has been much discussed (see for example Carson 2010, Stokke 2018b), and Harry Frankfurt (2002) later[[20]](#footnote-20) admitted that the categories are not mutually exclusive. Don Fallis and Andreas Stokke (2017: 279) also take this view, reframing Frankfurt’s definition in terms of the speaker’s indifference toward inquiry: "the cooperative project of incremental accumulation of true information with the aim of discovering how things are, or what the actual world is like." Some lies will count as bullshit on this view as well, but not ones in which the speaker is "concerned with her assertion being a true or a false answer to a QUD [question under discussion]" (2017: 279), which they take to be the majority of lies. Stokke and Fallis aim to accommodate cases of bullshitting offered as counterexamples to Frankfurt, in which a speaker who ought to count as a bullshitter could still be said to care about the truth, provided they deeply wished that their utterance was correct. These cases do count as bullshit on Stokke and Fallis’s account, because caring about whether an inquiry gets closer to the truth means shaping your assertions to the evidence, not simply asserting and wishing it were so.

Our account too will accommodate such counterexamples by capturing them as cases of bullshit. This is a matter of some importance, too, because such examples are not limited to exotic thought experiments. There is a Trumpian case, in fact: a remarkable moment that took place when Trump tweeted claims about the projected course of a hurricane, which contradicted statements from meteorological authorities (Oprysko 2019). When the contradiction was pointed out, Trump responded by showing a map blazoned with the logo of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which had a projected course for the storm consistent with Trump’s tweet, but which had obviously been altered with a Sharpie to make it so. Of course one cannot facilitate true or false beliefs on the basis of one’s assertions by faking evidence after the fact; it’s supposed to work by fitting one’s assertions to the evidence in the first place. So on our account too these cases straightforwardly count as bullshit. If caring about *how an inquiry goes* means caring about how the other inquirers are served by one’s utterances, our proposal and that of Stokke and Fallis might be of a piece. But we think there is something more basic and straightforward in the thought that bullshitting is linked to speakers’ attitudes towards audiences, rather than their attitudes about the courses of inquiry. It also allows us to distinguish attitudes toward different audiences, which is crucial to our project of understanding the kinds of falsehoods that have recently assumed so much prominence in our politics.

We think our account can moreover make progress on Frankfurt’s “exercise for the reader,” following his important observation that bullshit can sometimes be benign:

In fact, people do tend to be more tolerant of bullshit than of lies, perhaps because we are less inclined to take the former as a personal affront. We may seek to distance ourselves from bullshit, but we are more likely to turn away from it with an impatient or irritated shrug than with the sense of violation or outrage that lies often inspire. The problem of understanding why our attitude toward bullshit is generally more benign than our attitude toward lying is an important one, which I shall leave as an exercise for the reader (2005: 50).

Specifically, we note that failing to offer one’s audience the grounds for a presumptively true belief is consistent with offering them something else in place of it. Sometimes what’s offered is welcomed by the audience as amusing or diverting. Poorly concealed or even unconcealed bullshit can be genial, agreeable bullshit. People might enjoy it for its entertainment value or for the sheer nerve of the bullshit artist.

This can also help to explain the sort of tolerance for falsehood that has enabled the rise of figures like Trump and Johnson. Both of them were at one point commonly viewed as entertainment figures, not to be taken too seriously. Boris Johnson’s fame was in part due to his time on *Have I Got News For You,* a comedy quiz show, and Donald Trump was gossip column fodder before becoming a reality TV star. In this capacity, he discussed his loose attitude toward the truth:“I play to people's fantasies. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion” (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 57-58). The Huffington Post infamously featured Trump’s candidacy on its entertainment rather than politics pages. Treating Trump and Johnson as entertainers meant not worrying too much about the truth value implications of what they said. This enabled their rise, and also habituated the public both to a high level of falsehood in their speech and to their bald-faced bullshitting, as simply part of their personal brands.

On the other hand, one might wonder whether the audience-relativity of our definition opens up the prospect that an audience could turn an otherwise good-faith asserter into a bullshitter simply by telegraphing a complete unwillingness to believe them. By undermining any expectation or hope of facilitating the uptake of true beliefs, could an audience in turn undermine the speaker’s ability even to form a good-faith intention to do so? The speaker would speak the truth as they perceive it, but would do it so hopelessly as to be utterly indifferent to the effects of its uptake.

Of course weird results can follow from weird thought-experiment situations; but in practice no such complete failure of hope could be warranted. The full effects of uptake are never exhausted in the instant of utterance, after all. Assertions are often greeted with transparent disbelief at the point of utterance, yet are subsequently accepted, at least to a degree, anywhere from hours to decades later. This prospect in itself enables a speaker’s expectations to support good-faith assertion, irrespective of an audience’s advertised imperviousness to acceptance.

Of these and other implications of our account, we focus on two in particular. The first we’ve already noted: with a single instance of speech, a speaker may be bullshitting with respect to one audience but not with respect to another.[[21]](#footnote-21) The second is that, contrary to what Frankfurt says, whether speech counts as bullshit does not depend on whether the underlying attitudes are concealed from the audience. A bullshitter may do anything from concealing their effort to advertising it in pursuit of various outcomes, and yet be a bullshitter all the same. As we will see, these features and their interactions are important to making sense of a range of cases, and especially important to making sense of Trump’s and Johnson’s use of bullshitting as a political tactic.

# 3. Different Audiences and Different Bullshit

## 3.1 Audience Relativity

Politicians typically address very large audiences. Thus, it is not surprising if some of these people are quite credulous. Mathiesen and Fallis (2017) have drawn our attention to a wonderful quote from Jonathan Swift: “as the vilest writer has his readers, so the greatest liar has his believers” (Swift 2004 [1710], p. 195). As they note in their important discussion, “even if a politician says something that is extremely implausible, or that can easily be shown to be false, some people will believe” (2017: 11).

Yet implausibility, extreme or otherwise, is itself relative to an audience. Our definition of ‘bullshit’ makes crucial reference to the audience, which allows us to better understand some complexities of real-life cases. In particular, it allows us to understand cases in which an utterance is bullshit aimed at one audience and a deception aimed at another audience, or different kinds of lies or bullshit for different audiences[[22]](#footnote-22).

The Canadian Trade Deficit case seems at first like simple undifferentiated bullshitting: Trump was neither attempting to tell Trudeau true things nor to convince Trudeau of false things. Although Cassam (2021: 52) writes that “Trump’s primary objective was presumably to induce in Trudeau the belief that the America had a trade deficit”, we don’t think this is plausible. Any international leader meeting with Trump would obviously be advised in advance as to whether their country had a trade deficit with the US, and could not be expected to need or take Trump’s word for it. Surely even Trump would be aware of this, and not think that he could make Trudeau believe in a trade deficit.

Still, there are important distinctions to be drawn between different audiences in a case like the Canadian Trade Deficit. Trump had no hope of convincing Justin Trudeau that Canada had a trade deficit with the United States. However, he might well have intended to convince some of his supporters of this. Many Trump supporters take him to be extremely knowledgeable, and would simply assume that he was right in what he said to Trudeau. The confrontation would also impress them as one in which Trump spoke the truth to a problematic ally. For this audience, Trump’s utterance was meant to be believed. If that’s right, then what was a bald-faced lie for one audience (Trudeau, and Trump’s critical domestic opposition) was a deceptive lie with some chance of success for another (Trump’s supporters). It was bullshit relative to one audience, but not relative to another. We will see this theme repeated in subsequent examples.

Considering multiple audiences is also important to understanding what Boris Johnson is up to, at least in some of his utterances. Although a significant portion of the UK public take Johnson to be a bullshitter or a bald-faced liar, others find him credible, at least on some subjects. Despite the fact that Johnson's vacillation over Brexit was well known, Brexit supporters took what he said very seriously, and believed it. Indeed, despite two years of high-profile debunking, 42% of the British public still believed the claims of the infamous Brexit Bus to be true in 2018.[[23]](#footnote-23) As we write this in 2021, a clear majority of the British public now takes Johnson to be untrustworthy, but 35% still trust him[[24]](#footnote-24). Utterances directed at this group may not be simply bald-faced lies. However, it is important to note also that some of Johnson's utterances clearly are not meant to be believed. His claims of a bus-making hobby are a case in point: these are much more likely to fall into the category of quirky or entertaining bullshit that we discussed earlier.

## 3.2 Types of Lies and Types of Bullshit

Some remarkable cases of bald-faced lies emerged from the Trump administration and their supporters. Importantly, these were often not *just* bald-faced lies. Instead, many of these utterances are to be classified differently with respect to different audiences. Such lies and bullshit are useful tools for authoritarian leaders, functioning differently with respect to different audiences. Our analysis helps us to bring out this point.

Trump’s claims about the 2020 election are frequently described as bald-faced lies. And they clearly are, with respect to much of the country, who he has no hope of convincing. However, they are deceptive lies with respect to those among his base who fervently believe him.[[25]](#footnote-25) But with respect to other Republican politicians they are authoritarian lies—bald-faced lies designed to extract humiliating displays of loyalty from subordinates, who know that they are false.

These Republican officials are Trump's enablers. They repeat his lies, even if they know them to be false. These lies are what we call "compliance lies"—lies told to show loyalty to an authoritarian leader. Authoritarian rulers have a well-documented pattern of demanding lies from their subordinates, as a kind of loyalty test or commitment to shared consequences.[[26]](#footnote-26) Tyler Cowen writes[[27]](#footnote-27):

By requiring subordinates to speak untruths, a leader can undercut their independent standing, including their standing with the public, with the media and with other members of the administration. That makes those individuals grow more dependent on the leader and less likely to mount independent rebellions against the structure of command. Promoting such chains of lies is a classic tactic when a leader distrusts his subordinates and expects to continue to distrust them in the future.

We take the 2020 election lies of many Republican officials to be compliance lies. But these are also are deceptive lies for some audiences, and bullshit or even bald-faced bullshit for others.

Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum discuss this point in their book on recent conspiracist thinking, *A Lot of People Are Saying* (2019: 68-69):

…it is not clear that Trump cares whether his falsehoods are believed; he seems to care only that they are affirmed. He wants the power to make others assent to his version of reality. When Sean Spicer, Trump’s first press secretary, said that Trump’s inauguration had “the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration,” he may not have intended for people to believe him, only to describe the world Trump wished for, and us to enact Trump’s own power.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Another compliance lie is Sean Spicer’s insistence (described above), that Trump had had a larger inauguration crowd than Barack Obama did, despite very clear photographic evidence to the contrary. Spicer’s initial utterance of this lie may have been quite generally (and optimistically) deceptive in intent. But his assertions standing by the lie when confronted about the photographic record are probably more complicated. These would be a continued attempt at deception, as directed at the portion of the public inclined to believe any spokesperson for the Trump White House. Many of Trump’s supporters did believe that his inauguration crowd was bigger than Obama’s, or at least were willing to say that they did (Schaffner and Luks 2017).[[29]](#footnote-29) At the same time, the continued insistence on the lie looks like open, undisguised bullshitting and bald-faced lying as directed at the questioning reporters and that portion of the audience who understood or trusted the photographic record. This sort of lie, clearly uttered to show loyalty to Trump, is a compliance lie. Spicer's utterance, then, is simultaneously a deceptive lie and a bald-faced lie (which is a species of bald-faced bullshit). It is a particular kind of bald-faced lie: a compliance lie to show fealty to a lying leader. In another example of simultaneously deceptive and bald-faced lying, Trump lawyer Sidney Powell made manifestly false claims about Dominion Voting Systems voting machines as a part of her argument that Trump had actually won the 2020 election. In responding to a subsequent defamation lawsuit, she defended herself by insisting that no reasonable person would have believed her claims, due to their obvious falsity.

Indeed, Plaintiffs themselves characterize the statements at issue as “wild accusations” and “outlandish claims… They are repeatedly labelled “inherently improbable” and even “impossible.” … Such characterizations of the allegedly defamatory statements further support Defendants’ position that reasonable people would not accept such statements as fact (Porterfield 2021).

Powell’s defence, in essence, was to declare that she was bullshitting, telling bald-faced lies. Yet this declaration does not undo the bullshitting project, which is affirmed elsewhere in her response:

The Complaint… alleges no facts which, if proven by clear and convincing evidence, would show that Sidney Powell knew her statements were false (assuming that they were indeed false, which Defendants dispute). Nor have Plaintiffs alleged any facts showing that Powell “in fact entertained serious doubts as to the truth of h[er] publication.” In fact, she believed the allegations then and she believes them now.

The claims made by Powell and others about fraudulent vote counts in the 2020 election are believed or assented to by a disturbingly high number of Americans; no doubt she made those assertions intending to secure acceptance for them where possible. For anyone bothering to read the legal response, as the excerpts indicate, the key claims are depicted fairly openly as bullshit. But then, those who make the effort to read the legal filing are only one of the audiences exposed to Powell’s claims about the election, and very far from the largest. Powell too is both a deceptive liar and a bald-faced liar. In addition, her fervent persistence in telling these lies serves as a compliance lie: in her case, this seems to have been her path into Trump's inner circle, rather than something demanded of her once she was there.

The bald-faced liar does not care to hide that they are lying, and might even parade the fact. What these examples indicate is that the same is true of *bald-faced bullshitting*. A bald-faced bullshitter is one who not only does not intend to induce in an audience a belief in what they have said; they moreover make no effort to hide that they are bullshitting, and in fact might advertise or revel in it.

This is something that Frankfurt would not himself have allowed. He writes (2005: 54),

The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to.

On this point, we simply disagree with Frankfurt. We suspect that he did not consider cases of bald-faced bullshitting, much as writers on lying for quite a long time did not consider cases of bald-faced lying. And it is vital to recognise bald-faced bullshitting in order to understand how some political speech pushes the boundaries of bullshit and adapts it for political ends. The existence of multiple audiences to so much political speech already means that the respects in which bullshit is bald-faced can be quite hard to perceive, and lost to analysis.

In short, some Republican politicians and followers of Trump do believe his falsehoods. For these followers, Trump's lies are deceptive lies. Others recognise them as lies. For these followers, they are bald-faced authoritarian lies and bullshit. Many of these people repeat them or act as though they believe them to demonstrate loyalty. Their lies are compliance lies, told to show loyalty to Trump. These lies, told by Trumpist politicians, have two audiences. They are deceptive lies for credulous Trump followers who hear them. But they are bald-faced lies for their most important audience: Trump. Trump wants them to assert these bald-faced lies to show their loyalty. Neglecting the way that these utterances work for multiple audiences would lead us to miss out on much of what they do.

Examining the role of authoritarian and compliance lies for Trump helps us to draw an important contrast between him and Johnson. Johnson does not seem particularly concerned to extract this kind of demonstration of loyalty from his followers. Although some joked that armies of interns would be up all night manufacturing buses from wine boxes to support Johnson's claims, nothing of the sort happened. As various high officials have broken with Johnson, he seems relatively uninterested in and impervious to their disagreements. Johnson's unique selling point has remained his use of entertaining bald-faced lies and bullshit.[[30]](#footnote-30) Although his regime is deeply authoritarian in other ways[[31]](#footnote-31), he has not followed Donald Trump down this path.

## 3.3 Power Bullshit

Despite the fact that it can sometimes seem playful or benign, bald-faced bullshit can play a special role for an authoritarian leader. As Jason Stanley writes, discussing Trump, “authoritarian propagandists are attempting to convey power by defining reality” (Stanley 2016). Stanley argues that while this may be accurately described as bullshit—since Trump is unconcerned with what is actually true or false—that is a misleading description. Stanley takes this to be misleading because it places our focus on truth and falsehood rather than on power. But we have argued that bullshit is not directly about truth and falsehood; it is about how a speaker treats an audience. And when there are multiple audiences, as there so often are with political speech, it can be about how one audience is treated in front of another audience. Stanley’s view misses the respects in which Trump’s authoritarian speech asserts power precisely because it is bullshit, and bald-faced bullshit in particular.

Consider again Trump’s altered hurricane map: here we have a lie so obvious, a drawing so amateurish, that Trump could not possibly have intended it to be believed. In telling this bald-faced lie, he certainly made no effort to provide the basis for a true belief or a false belief for his audience. But this was not an indifference to the audience’s *stake* in believing the truth; it was a display of what he could do in the face of that stake. It’s the sort of move made by someone who really has nothing to fear from what their audience might come to know or believe, or who at least wants to convey such impunity. It displays the attitude: not only do I not need to tell you the truth; I don’t even need to bother deceiving you. We call this a *power move*.

Authoritarian political bullshitting is very often a power move: bullshitting in a way that is obvious, with no attempt at concealment. These bullshitting power moves are particularly flagrant floutings of communicative norms, openly displaying disrespect or contempt for the immediate audience. They might display dominance directly to the audience being disrespected, or for the sake of a secondary or onlooker audience. With power moves, a speaker does not just happen to reveal contempt for an audience; they can *deploy* contempt as a political tool. This may be intended to cow opponents or to excite and energize supporters. They are also often used, as we have seen, to extract humiliating compliance lies from top subordinates. All of these can flow from the ostentatious use of bullshit.

Stanley worried that describing Trump as a bullshitter meant comparing him to a salesperson, saying anything to make a sale. But a salesperson would not dare to declare themself a bullshitter as a power move, clearly communicating to their audience that they had no concern with truth, nor with the consequences of the audience’s perception of their bad faith. Trump’s openness about his bullshitting is in this sense similar to his declaration that he could shoot somebody on Fifth Avenue and get away with it.[[32]](#footnote-32) In our view, calling attention to Trump's use of power bullshit is a crucial part of understanding the dangers of Trump's authoritarian speech, rather than a means of trivialising it.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Freed from the assumption that the bullshitter aims at concealment, our account accommodates cases in which the bullshitter does not merely fail to hide their enterprise, but to some degree, to some audiences, actually advertises it. Some bald-faced bullshit has just this purpose: it advertises contempt for the audience, by advertising contempt for the audience’s interest in receiving truths.

# 4. Power Moves and Politics

4.1 How Do Power Moves Succeed Politically?

It is hard to avoid being struck, quite frankly over and over, by a feeling of amazement that politicians who make a habit of bullshitting, indeed bald-faced bullshitting, could have any success at all, let alone success on the scale of a Donald Trump or a Boris Johnson. We can understand this better by looking more closely at the dynamics of bald-faced political bullshit as a power move used with multiple audiences.

As we have noted, bald-faced bullshit involves making assertions that openly demonstrate an indifference to the quality of the beliefs an audience could base on the assertions. Even though this may be tolerated or laughed off as part of a shtick, it is hard to see how it could inspire trust. And yet Donald Trump has retained an enormously high level of trust from his base: Even in April 2021, 66% of Republicans said they trusted Trump *for medical advice* about the COVID19 pandemic, literally a life-or-death matter.[[34]](#footnote-34) So how does he maintain the trust of his followers?

A large part of the answer, we believe, is that trust isn’t just about believing that someone says true things. Trust can also be about feeling that someone is on your side, which can often mean feeling that they share your enemies. This is where use of the power move in political speech comes in. In those cases, authoritarian bald-faced bullshit that openly and disrespectfully treats one audience as not even worth deceiving may be an effective way of consolidating trust with another audience that witnesses it – a more effective means than a less overt sort of bullshit would be.

The fact that there are multiple audiences for political speech is, we suggest, fairly clear to the audiences themselves. An authoritarian speaker’s bullshitting power moves in this context can be an important means of communicating contempt for their opponents, consolidating support among those who perceive that the speaker’s cultural and political enemies are also their cultural and political enemies. This fits remarkably well with Timothy Snyder's discussion of the use Vladimir Putin makes of obvious lies (both authoritarian and compliance lies), which confer what Snyder calls "implausible deniability" (2018: 163). He quotes Charles Clover:

Putin has correctly surmised that lies unite rather than divide Russia's political class. The greater and more obvious the lie, the more his subjects demonstrate their loyalty by accepting it, and the more they participate in the great sacral mystery of Kremlin power.

When a speaker lies directly to one audience, but is overheard and recognized as lying by a second audience, the second audience has not necessarily been – and need not feel – lied to. They might even feel solidarity and recognize a shared purpose instead. By the same token, an awareness of multiple political audiences enables one audience to recognize bald-faced bullshit without feeling that it is directed at them. For Trump’s supporters, his bald-faced bullshitting can be seen as directed at others among the total audience – specifically, those who have it coming. This is done on behalf of his supporters; they are in on the joke.

As Clover’s observations suggest, they may even perceive themselves as needed participants: it is at rallies where they are the primary audiences that much of the communication aimed at secondary audiences via media coverage will take place. Some elements of Trump’s rally audiences are genuinely deceived by his lies. But other elements of the audience may well recognize that his utterances will be received as bald-faced lies by onlookers – the mainstream media, intellectuals, liberals, leftists, other enemies. By bullshitting *at* his base in such rallies, and having that bullshit received so warmly, he is *fucking with* those secondary audiences. Anyone perceiving this among his supporters can feel that they are participating in the theatre that empowers him to fuck with people who deserve it, who have it coming. Being a bullshitter in this sense—being seen as a bullshitter, being seen as *intending* to be seen as bullshitter—is consistent with being perceived as trustworthy in a broader sense.

In short: being perceived as a bald-faced bullshitter is not a liability in those circumstances, but an advantage. Many of his supporters, we suggest, admire Trump for his ability to upset or “own the libs.” As a result, when the targets of his contempt or disinterested analysts complain about his speech, and spotlight his power move bullshit, his supporters are not moved to abandon him because he’s a bullshitter. They already knew he was a bullshitter – toward those who they think deserve it. That he uses bullshit to get under his opponents’ skin is not a mark against him, but a sign of his superiority over the shared enemy. *They just can’t handle him; they freak out; he makes them melt down*. Bald-faced bullshit of this kind does not work in spite of its overtness, then, but because of it. It may even benefit from the indignation it generates, which to a partisan onlooker audience functions as evidence of its value and efficacy.

## 4.2 How Power Moves Might Fail Politically

More recent speeches from Trump following his electoral defeat and removal from the presidency suggest both the accuracy of this characterization, and an important vulnerability of the underlying strategy. As political commentator Amanda Marcotte observes[[35]](#footnote-35),

In his speech at the second "annual" [Conservative Political Action Conference](https://www.salon.com/topic/cpac) of the year, [Trump bragged about how he lies about polls and elections when he doesn't win them](https://www.salon.com/2021/07/12/trump-openly-admits-during-cpac-speech-to-lying-about-poll-numbers-he-doesnt-like_partner/). "You know, they do that straw poll, right?" Trump asked, referring to the 2024 GOP nominee straw poll CPAC conducted of attendees. "If it's bad, I say it's fake. If it's good, I say, that's the most accurate poll perhaps ever."

…Trump got a huge laugh from the CPAC crowd… As the clip went viral, there was no outraged reaction from GOP voters, no anger that he lies to them in order to enlist their support for an authoritarian coup. Trump supporters aren't mad about Trump admitting he lied for one simple reason: They don't think they're the ones being lied to.

These are not just lies, moreover. With no attempt to deceive, the lies are bald-faced, hence bullshit. And the core audience, or a significant element of it, also isn’t angry about the bullshitting, because here too they don’t think they’re the ones being bullshitted.

On the other hand, if reduced media coverage and analysis leaves this primary audience feeling like the secondary audience of enemies is no longer bearing witness, our account suggests that this kind of authoritarian speech should become much less appealing to them. The content of the speech and its bald-facedness (both as lies and as bullshit) can largely stay the same; but without the theatre of dominance or contempt that it is intended to enact for onlookers, this will just seem tedious or disrespectful to the primary audience.

As journalist Benjamin Fearnow reported of a post-loss Trump speech to his previously most dedicated extremist base, which met with little real-time media attention,[[36]](#footnote-36)

…a majority of the top QAnon user comments simply expressed their outright boredom with Trump's post-election stump speech… "Judging by the Trump-supporting normies I live with, they were bored with his speech," wrote another QAnon user. "I support Trump but this is getting ridiculous."

"Love President Trump. But, if I'm being honest, it's a lot of the 'same old-same old,' we've all heard a thousand times before," wrote Annmarie Calabro.

Why not suppose that this boredom and frustration really does arise solely from the repetition of a tired message? In short, because Trump gave highly repetitive speeches for years, to audiences whose enthusiasm rarely waned as long as major media coverage and outraged reactions were the norm. When the secondary audience was visible just offstage, the bullshit excited the audience and kept them engaged.

# 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have developed an understanding of bullshit which allows us to acknowledge and explore differences between audience subgroups for the same utterance. We have shown the utility of this by demonstrating the way that it allows us to make sense of an otherwise baffling fact: the continuing trust placed in bald-faced bullshitters like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, despite the apparent obviousness of what they are doing. (This trust is especially startling due to its life-or-death consequences in the COVID19 pandemic.)

While little in the political speech of Trump, Johnson, and others cut from their cloth is entirely novel, we suggest that an understanding of authoritarian political bullshit helps to diagnose elements of its recent rise. These include the increasing overlap between mass entertainment media and mass political media, enabling the incubation of bullshitters who hone their craft in seemingly benign form before their move into the political sphere; and the unprecedented magnitude and ubiquity of secondary audiences, through news media and social media reportage and analysis, for bald-faced bullshit to be leveraged in the ways we have suggested. Although some have suggested that classifying authoritarian political speech as bullshit under-rates its significance or danger, we have argued that bald-faced bullshit is characterized by a contempt for the audience and a naked assertion of power. Understood in this way, classifying a leader's utterances as bald-faced bullshit illuminates some alarming features of their communicative style, and its dependence on and exploitation of divisions and enmities within a polity.

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1. We are very grateful to Larry Horn for insightful and enjoyable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We have chosen to use the word 'Brexiter' rather than 'Brexiteer' though both are in popular usage. Interestingly, 'Brexiteer' is the one favoured by Johnson and other supporters of Brexit. Although the swashbuckling connotations suggest recklessness, this is thoroughly embraced by top supporters of Brexit, who consider the term a marketing triumph. We think there may be an interesting parallel here to the embrace of obvious falsehood. For more on the term see https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/victory-of-the-swashbucklers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-eu-johnson-views-factbox-idUKKCN1TC1YD, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/07/did-boris-johnson-want-to-remain-all-along [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/16/secret-boris-johnson-column-favoured-uk-remaining-in-eu [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/26/mesmerising-boris-johnsons-bizarre-model-buses-claim-raises-eyebrows [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/26/mesmerising-boris-johnsons-bizarre-model-buses-claim-raises-eyebrows [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interestingly, this is despite the fact that he surely knew whether the story was true or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We assume in what follows that lying requires asserting what one believes is false or not true. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Journalists have concluded that Trump's financial stake in hyrdoxychloroquine was likely too small to have been the reason for his endorsement. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/07/trumps-promotion-hydroxychloroquine-is-almost-certainly-about-politics-not-profits/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-51761880 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2020-06-05/cdc-some-people-did-take-bleach-to-protect-from-coronavirus [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2018/03/14/in-fundraising-speech-trump-says-he-made-up-facts-in-meeting-with-justin-trudeau/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Which may or may not be *lies.* (See Saul 2012 for an extensive discussion of the difference between lying and merely misleading.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, for example, Kunda 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. And we have by no means attempted a comprehensive survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. We will take up the concealment claim in more detail when we discuss bald-faced bullshitting later in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For an extended study of this sort of speech, see Saul (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is distinct from Stokke and Fallis's view that bullshitting is indifference to the process of inquiry (2017). First, the indifference is broader, not just focused on a process of inquiry. And second, our view is particularly about attitudes toward audiences, which allows for different attitudes toward different audiences. This second feature is crucial, we insist, to modern political uses of bullshit. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Philosophical discussion of bald-faced lies stems from Kenyon (2003), Carson (2006), and Sorensen (2007), although Kenyon calls these 'cynical assertions'. For an overview of the literature on bald-faced lies see Meibauer (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A word about this 'later': Our citations for "On Bullshit" are to Frankfurt (2005), but the text was initially published in 1986. So (2002) is later, with respect to the writing of the original text. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. To be clear, this is not a version of the view Hermann Cappelen (2005) calls *speech act pluralism*, which is focused on *locutionary pluralism*. Cappelen's view is pluralist about the different propositional contents asserted via an utterance, where this is distinguished sharply from the semantic content. Our view is instead pluralist about the types of sociolinguistic acts (misleading, deceiving, bullshitting) that a single assertion can be used to perform, depending on the audiences exposed to it. Because these are not all illocutionary acts—some depend, for example, on perlocutionary matters—our view is also not quite an illocutionary pluralist one like those of Sbisà (2013) and Lewiński (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This has a certain structural similarity to dogwhistling (Lopez 2015, 2019; Saul 2018) and Connolly's theory of trolling (2021). It is also structurally related to the sort of view that Marina Sbisà (2013) and Marcin Lewiński (2021) call "illocutionary pluralism", which Lewinski argues is important for making sense of dogwhistles. Importantly, however, our view does not involve different *contents* being communicated to different groups (the primary focus for Cappelen 2005), but rather different expectations and intentions about how the utterance will be received by different groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/brexit-news/kings-college-research-finds-leave-voters-still-believe-lie-about-34688 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/boris-johnson-untrustworthy-poll-keir-starmer-ipsos-mori-poll-b931903.html?fbclid=IwAR2PFZAvmLrcesbAkigu7ON4oVrrRTg5FlJKrhQfihCp8aaXtXmcNyUA3mo [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/24/republicans-2020-election-poll-trump-biden [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Grimaltos and Rosell (2017) draw a distinction within the category of deceptive lies, between doxogenic lies and falsifying lies. Doxogenic lies are told in order to get the audience to believe some particular claim, an intention which would still be satisfied if the claim turned out to be true. Falsifying lies are told in order to get the audience to believe a falsehood, where the falsity of the belief is the primary goal. We think it may be worth drawing a similar distinction within bald-faced lies, between cases where the proposition asserted is of primary purpose and cases where the obvious falseness is of primary importance. The bald-faced lies of an authoritarian leader will often be of this latter sort: for loyalty tests, the obvious falseness is vital. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2017-01-23/why-trump-s-staff-is-lying [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For Muirhead and Rosenblum, this makes the utterance not a lie. But that is because they require an intention to deceive, thus ruling out bald-faced lies. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. We recognize that there are open questions as to the psychological or doxastic attitudes underlying the politicized answers people give to surveys and polls, their voting behaviour, and other forms of assent or acceptance. Some evidence indicates that partisans endorse politicized propositions out of solidarity, or as a declaration of identity, and not as an unqualified reflection of the credence they assign to those propositions (Bullock et al. 2015, Berinsky 2018, Peterson and Iyengar 2021). (On the other hand, the high rates of vaccine and masking refusal, which have extremely high-stakes consequences, suggest that many of these beliefs may be genuine.) This sort of partisan performance of belief, to the extent it occurs, is also an outcome at which a political bullshitter may aim. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. It has been suggested that some of Johnson’s more overtly incredible utterances may have been more carefully planned than they seemed, perhaps intended to interfere with otherwise politically unwelcome Internet search engine results. So, for example, his bus-building hobby remarks could have diluted the results of searches for information about the infamous “Brexit bus,” a campaign bus for the Vote Leave organization, supported by Johnson, that displayed deceptive or misleading claims. Similarly, Johnson’s strangely describing himself as a "model of restraint" could have buried search engines results about his alleged affair with a model. We take no position on the plausibility of this theory. Yet the possibility alone suggests an interesting new trope of bald-faced bullshit: aiming to be recognized as bullshitting, in some comment-worthy way, in order to game search engine results. We thank Neri Marsili for bringing this to our attention. (For more on this theory, see https://www.wired.co.uk/article/boris-johnson-model-google-news?fbclid=IwAR1wtdsipGgBcTG2yHAHCDRi-o7\_ye0bZu4Jku5AIaEjnHe6mlUlSvKoFAQ, consulted 28 August 2021.) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-stop-search-police-b1891317.html; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/28/policing-bill-will-have-chilling-effect-on-right-to-protest-mps-told [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/23/464129029/donald-trump-i-could-shoot-somebody-and-i-wouldnt-lose-any-voters [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. That said, we also agree with Quassim Cassam (2021) that it is not enough to simply categorise Trump's speech as bullshit. Where it is hate speech, it must be understood as hate speech, and so on. All of these categories are important to understanding the harms done. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-covid-medical-advice-republicans-b1829784.html. As we note in footnote 27, there are worries about whether utterances like these always express the actual beliefs of those who make them. Nonetheless, it seems as though there is much more trust placed in Trump than one would expect of a bald-faced bullshitter. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. <https://www.salon.com/2021/07/12/trump-supporters-think-theyre-players--but-theyre-still-just-pawns/> [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-supporters-express-boredom-same-old-trump-speech-this-getting-ridiculous-1604489> [↑](#footnote-ref-36)