

A cock and bull story

The business of bullshit has now reached epidemic proportions, infiltrating every facet of our lives. Broadcaster, futurologist and author **James Bellini** comments on the phenomenon of this insidious disease and advises arming ourselves with a verbal pooper-scooper before it's too late

GROUCHO MARX AND MEL BROOKS WERE FANS. A Princeton Professor has now put it on the academic map. This year sees a new dictionary devoted to nothing but. If you Google the word you are offered 1,700,000 pages. Given the amount of it gracing the boulevards and bars of smart west London I am surprised it's taken so long to spread it on the tips of our tongues. I'm talking, of course, about bullshit. For beware, BS is taking over our lives, and will continue to do so, unless we take to the verbal pooper-scoopers pronto.

This Marxist heritage is not the reason for my concern. Good BS is harmless fun and as an investor in the original Groucho Club and a founder member of Electric (not to mention Chelsea Arts) I have heard my fair share. I even tell people the cocktail that bears my name was invented to mark my genius as a listener. But boulevardiers like me have a duty to restrict the practice to unimportant corners of the day, when the wine speaks. Alas, it seems, the BS factor has taken a more insidious turn in recent years, invading where it ought not to go and causing mayhem. Serious bullshit is bad for you.

Before reaching for the censor's pen, consider the term, for it has eminent roots. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary the word 'bull', meaning 'nonsense', dates from the 17th century. It may have derived from the Old French word 'boul', meaning 'mistake'. The modern version, with its malodorous addition, first appeared in American slang around 1915 and entered popular usage during world war two.

BS has always been a part of social discourse. Politicians swing votes with it. Barflies turn pretty heads with it. Dinner party chatter would be mundane without a generous helping or two. Courtship would surely founder if suitors stuck only to the facts. BS has made the world go around and we've turned a blind ear to the petty fictions and exaggerations that are the distinguishing stripes of the bullshit merchant.

But no longer. One vital part of our daily life now faces greater scrutiny by the BS police – the part that creates wealth, jobs and the material happiness that drenches the shoppers on Westbourne Grove. I'm talking about business and the promises it makes through advertising and marketing campaigns. For over 150 years the business community has enjoyed uninterrupted freedom to hoodwink, bamboozle or mislead its customers using every persuasive weapon to trap the



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epitomized by Enron, Andersen, Parmalat, WorldCom and a host of other billion-dollar scams and rip-offs that made earlier robber barons like Robert Maxwell look like amateurs. In every case they covered their tracks with thick layers of bullshit. Hardly surprising, then, to see the burgeoning interest in the subject among exalted commentators, led by the respected moral philosopher Harry G Frankfurt. In *On Bullshit* Frankfurt observes BS is a product of modern public life 'where people are impelled... to speak about matters of which they are ignorant'. He argues bullshit is worse than lying because liars can at

subconscious into splashing out on the latest, biggest, fastest, hippest, cheapest, must-have version of sliced bread. By and large we were happy to be fooled and to belong to the club of conspicuous consumption.

The honeymoon ended with the recent pandemic of corporate crime

least distinguish truth from fiction and deliberately choose the latter. Bullshitters know no such distinction. Laura Penny's *Your Call Is Important To Us: The Truth About Bullshit* is a must read for anyone braced off with our call centre culture. February 2006 saw Lois Beckwith's *Dictionary of Corporate Bullshit* hit the bookstands. There's even a web-game – Bullshit Bingo – ideal for those tedious business seminars.

The Bullshit Factor takes on the disguises, denials and lies that big corporations have deployed to mask their true personality and encourage the world to love them. From Exxon challenging the case for global climate change, to Big Tobacco telling Congress on oath that nicotine is not addictive to Body Shop founder Anita Roddick accused of less-than-green credentials, it explores the byways of boardroom bullshit since Henry J Heinz first seized on the magical properties of the number 7 to give his labels that extra bit of bite. Heinz never had '57 Varieties' but, as Henry once put it, if 7 was good enough for the Book of Revelation it would certainly work miracles for sales.

The Bullshit Factor: The Truth About Corporate Disguises, Denials and Lies by James Bellini and Kati St Clair. Artesian Publishing. March 2006. Available at amazon.com and all good bookshops.