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On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research

Notes from the British case

(WORK IN PROGRESS)

Abstract

In 2005, Harry G. Frankfurt, a retired professor of moral philosophy at Princeton University, made it into the best-sellers chart with a slim book entitled, quite simply, *On Bullshit*. Taking his essay as its starting point, this paper explores the analysis of bullshit and the prevalence of bullshitting in the contemporary public sphere as developed within the philosophical arena. The discussion suggests that Frankfurt's short essay might prove useful in providing an intellectual framework to interpret and understand contemporary rhetoric and practice in the cultural policy field, as well as recent trends in cultural policy research. Through a discussion of selected New Labour's cultural policy documents in Britain (1997 to present), the paper aims to show that many of the key actors in the cultural policy debate indeed display that lack of concern with truth, the "indifference to how things really are" as well as the cultivation of vested interests which Frankfurt attributes to the activity of bullshitting. The paper also puts forward a tentative explanation for the origins and causes of contemporary trends towards progressive increases in bullshitting in public life and cultural policy-making, which are identified as the side effect evidence-based policy, and the resulting 'performance paradox'. The final part of the paper discusses the implications of the present *status quo* for 'critical' cultural policy research. Paraphrasing what Ernest Hemingway noted about writers, the paper advocates that the single most crucial quality that any critical cultural policy researcher ought to possess is "a built-in, shock-proof crap detector".

Keywords: bullshit; social impacts of the arts; evidence-based policy; performance paradox; cultural policy research;

Introduction

This paper draws upon a number of writings, mainly produced within the field of philosophical research, that deal with the prevalence of 'bullshit' in contemporary public life. The main intellectual inspiration for the analysis presented here is the best-selling essay by the American philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt (2005) entitled *On Bullshit*. According to Frankfurt's conceptual analysis, there are two central aspects to the notion of bullshit, namely, 'mindlessness', or a complete lack of concern with the truth on the part of the bullshitter (p. 30), and the fact that behind any production of bullshit lies a bullshitter who is intentionally misleading his or her interlocutors so as to pursue his or her own interests and purposes (p. 56). The concept of 'bullshit', and related notions of 'humbug'[1], 'mumbo-jumbo'[2], 'hot air'[3], 'gobbledygook'[4], 'claptrap'[5] and 'balderdash'[6], that have all been seen to dominate the modern public domain will be discussed in greater detail later. However, the paper will focus, in particular, on the prevalence of justifications for public subsidy of the arts and the cultural sector which rely on the rhetoric that has developed around the alleged transformative powers of the arts and their consequent (presumed) positive social impacts. Through a number of examples from the British experience, the paper aims to show that many of the key actors in the cultural policy debate indeed display that lack of concern with truth, the 'indifference to how things really are' (*Ibid.*, 34), as well as the cultivation of vested interests that Frankfurt attributes to the process of bullshitting.

The paper is divided into three parts: the first provides a discussion of philosophical works that have dealt with bullshit and other forms of deception that nowadays can be seen to have gained progressively more prominence in the public sphere. This section aims at the investigation of what we are to understand, philosophically speaking, for 'bullshit', and what differentiates bullshit from outright lying and other forms of deception. The second part of the paper looks at the issue of the central role of bullshit in contemporary public life and politics and presents the case study of policy debates

[1] Black 1983.
[2] Wheen 2004.
[3] Frankfurt 2005, 42-3.
[4] Watson 2003 and Scruton 2004; on gobbledygook (or gobbledegook) in bureaucratic jargon, see Flesch 1945 and Vernon 1980.
[5] Arnold 1993, 116.
[6] Rothbard 1989, 53.

around the social impacts of the arts in Britain. The last section of the paper explores the implications, ethical and epistemological, of the present *status quo* for cultural policy researchers, and particularly for those working within academia.

Not your usual best-seller: Harry G. Franfurt's *On Bullshit*

It is probably safe to state that not many books published by Princeton University Press normally make it into the best-selling book charts. Academic publishing does not, usually, attract the reading masses. Even more unusual is for the bestselling book in question to be a tome (albeit, admittedly, a slim one) written by a moral philosopher. The popular acclaim that welcomed the publication, in 2005, of Harry G. Franfurt's essay *On Bullshit*, is therefore, without doubt, an interesting publishing case. The first thing that catches the reader's attention – no point in denying it – is the book's title. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the *New York Times* refused to publish it in its entirety in its bestsellers list, referring to it as "On Bull——" (Fallis 2005). And yet, attributing the book's popularity to its potentially controversial title would be undoubtedly simplistic and would not suffice to explain or justify the 175,000 copies of the book sold in the US alone, and the fact that in just a few months, the book had already reached its tenth reprint (Younge 2005)[7].

I find it particularly significant that, whilst its commercial success testifies to the capacity of the book to respond to an intellectual curiosity much alive amongst today's reading public, the essay was not in fact written in response to the 'spin' and 'mumbo-jumbo' that are seen to be paramount in contemporary public life. As a matter of fact, Harry G. Frankfurt's "On Bullshit" first appeared in 1986 in the *Raritan Review*, and was eventually included in a collection of essays entitled *The Importance of What We Care About* (1988), which brings together some of Frankfurt's most influential writings on free will, moral responsibility and ethical action (Fallis 2005). Whilst it would be unfair to say that the essay went completely unnoticed when first published, it certainly did not generate the level of interest that the 2005 reprint has. The very fact that Princeton University Press has decided to re-

[7] The book was equally successful in the UK, where it came out in February 2005 and was selling, by mid-May, at a rate of 50 copies per day. Prof. Frankfurt himself was not expecting such a huge success and declared: "I can't say I'm surprised by the response it has got… I'm amazed" (Younge 2005).

publish the treatise almost twenty years after it was first penned testifies to its editors' belief in the saliency of Frankfurt's conceptual investigation to contemporary culture and society. Indeed, as the essay's opening lines explain, our society seems to have developed an increasing acceptance of bullshit:

> One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. […] But we tend to take the situation for granted. […] In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves.

Yet – as Frankfurt's argument goes – bullshitting is more dangerous to society than outright lying; hence the importance to engage in a conceptual exploration of the nature of this phenomenon and its increasing dominance in our culture. Indeed, as we will see, an important element in Frankfurt's conceptual analysis of bullshit is its distinction, in ontological and ethical terms, between lying and bullshitting.

Before turning to a more specific discussion of Frankfurt's essay, it is worth pointing out that the history of Western thinking and writing about various forms of deception and lying (and the difference amongst them) is long and complex, and its ramifications go as far back as Classical Greece. Plato (V century BC), for instance, in his *Euthydemus* deals with the question of whether it is technically possible to lie (by stating falsehoods) and is credited with conclusively demonstrating that it is indeed possible to make false statements and hold false beliefs (Denyer 1991). Since then, the challenge of defining what truth is (or, conversely, debunking the very concept of truth and the possibility of its definition) and articulating what its content and structure might be has long kept philosophers occupied[8].

The moral repercussions of such distinctions between truths and falsehoods have also been at the centre of Western philosophical speculation, as the case of the Sophists clearly exemplifies. The Sophists, belonging to a pre-Socratic philosophical school based in Athens, offered rhetorical tuition to the ambitious and wealthy youth of Athens (for a hefty fee), thus popularising the view – condemned by Plato in his

[8] See, for instance, Davidson 1990 and 1996.

Phaedrus – that "rhetoric should be judged by its effects on the audience, as opposed to its fidelity to the facts" (O'Hara 2004, 76)[9]. In other words, at the heart of the Sophists' teaching was the honing of the skills required to convincingly argue in favour of a position independently of its inherent truth or falsehood. The apparent nihilism of such a view of the powers of rhetoric and its often unscrupulous applications to political life mean that the Sophists were effectively early prototypes of today's spin doctors, and equally vituperated (Gibson 1993, 284). Such a negative view of the power and abuses of rhetoric is certainly not limited to ancient Greece, for traces of it are scattered throughout history. John Locke, for instance, writing in the late XVII century, expressed his disapproval of the place that rhetoric had assumed in the curriculum concluding that this clearly showed that "men find pleasure to be deceived" (in Barnes 1994, 3).

This necessarily short digression aims to show how Frankfurt's little essay is in fact embedded in a long-standing tradition within Western culture of philosophical and political writing and thinking around truth, lying, deception and the public sphere, and aims to counteract the perceived relative intellectual and scholarly neglect for theoretical studies of various forms of deception in comparison to the privileged exploration of truth and its nature (Arendt 1972, 4-5).

Frankfurt's theoretical understanding of 'bullshit'

Frankfurt concurs with most writers on matters of lying and deception that intentionality is central to any definition of lying, as well as bullshitting. As Sissela Bok explains in her influential book *Lying: Moral choice in public and private life* (1978, 7), a false person is not merely one that happens to make statements that are found to be wrong, mistaken or incorrect; rather, the label of 'false' is deserved whenever somebody is *intentionally* deceitful. However, as Chisholm and Feehan (1977) show, the intention to deceive and a lie are not identical, and should not be confused. They also argue that different types of deception carry different types of moral weight. In other words, not all types of intentional and voluntary deception constitute a violation of a moral rule as grave as that represented by an outright lie.

[9] Plato's concerns have been echoed, in contemporary times, by Richard J. Burke (1982, 46) whose position is that "morality cannot be reduced to persuasion".

This concept is clarified by Adler (1997, 435), through his reference to the little insincerities and misleading statements that make up every-day polite conversation:

> Intentional deception is a constituent of many acceptable forms of everyday social life, such as tact, politeness, excuses, reticence, avoidance, or evasion, which are ways to protect privacy, promote social harmony, and encourage interest.

Adler (*Ibid*., 440) goes on to explain that a lie is "a blunt instrument, easily found, promising an easy success", whereas, "the deceiver takes a more circuitous route to his success, where lying is an easier and more certain way to mislead". This view seems to be shared by Frankfurt[10] who, reiterating an observation that recurs often in the essay, remarks that our society seems to be prepared to treat the bullshitter with much more leniency than it does the liar (p. 51).

It appears to me, thus, that the originality of Frankfurt's thought might rest precisely in his reversal of this commonly accepted position, and in his suggestions that, from a moral perspective, bullshitting is actually *more* morally execrable and pernicious than outright lying, in that it reveals a disregard for truth and accuracy much more profound that than displayed by the liar. Frankfurt repeatedly maintains that, in his view, bullshit is "unconnected to a concern with the truth" and "not germane to the enterprise of describing reality"; the bullshitter therefore acts "without any regard for how things really are" and is characterised by "mindlessness" (p. 30). He speaks "without conscientious attention to the relevant facts", and makes a statement "without bothering to take into account at all the question of its accuracy" (p. 31). Hence Frankfurt's conclusion: "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" (pp. 33-34).

As a moral philosopher, Frankfurt is naturally preoccupied with the ethical consequences that such indifference for accuracy and the resulting 'mindlessness' might have on the quality of public life and contemporary culture. His line of

[10] Admittedly, Frankfurt's discussion of the differences between bullshit and lies is not always clear or conceptually solid, a fact remarked upon by reviewers of *On Bullshit* (Fallis 2005; Harrison 2005; Mears 2002).

reasoning starts from the observation that bullshit is closer to bluffing than it is to lying, "[f]or the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*" (p. 47). Falsity is not a prerequisite for bullshit, which "although it is produced without concern with the truth, need not be false. The bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean that he necessarily gets them wrong" (pp. 47-8).

It is precisely in the extreme carelessness for whether things are in fact true or false from which bullshit blossoms that Frankfurt identifies the moral danger. He explains that, contrary to the bullshitter, the outright liar "is inescapably concerned with truth-values" (p. 51). In order to be able to lie, one needs to see and acknowledge the difference between what is true and what is false: "A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it" (pp. 55-6).

However, no such consideration for what is true can be found in the bullshitter, who has no concern at all for questions of truth, or even for the difference between true and false. In Frankfurt's own words:

> The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides [...] is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it. This does not mean that his speech is anarchically impulsive, but that the motive guiding and controlling it is unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are. [...] [The bullshitter] is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest with getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose (pp. 55-6).

Frankfurt's moral concern is that, in a society which tolerates bullshitting and considers it less morally reprehensible than lying, the tendency to make whatever statement or declaration suits one's personal interests might slowly but progressively erode people's regard for the way that things *really* are and, therefore, that ethics of accuracy and conscientiousness on which a healthy public sphere thrives. It is no surprise then, that Frankfurt should come to the conclusion that the bullshitter "pays

no attention to [the truth] at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are" (p. 61).

It is precisely this disrespect for things as they are that this paper focuses on, with the view of exploring to what extent this 'laxity' (p. 23), the 'indifference to how things really are', as well as the cultivation of vested interests which Frankfurt is concerned with might be detected in the fields of politics, cultural policy-making and cultural policy research.

Lying & bullshitting in politics

The sphere of politics, and public life more broadly, are usually considered as a privileged domain for both bullshitting and lying. As Frankfurt (2005, 22) puts it, "[t]he realms of advertising and public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the process".

Politicians themselves have, on occasion, candidly acknowledged the need to forgo of truthfulness in the midst of political struggles. Before his time as British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in an interview with the *Times* of 1987, declared in no uncertain terms that "[t]he truth becomes almost impossible to communicate because total frankness, relayed in the shorthand of the mass media becomes simply a weapon in the hands of opponents" (in Oborne 2005, 13). Indeed, some have gone as far as suggesting that mendacity might in fact be intrinsic to politics itself. So, for Barnes (1994, 30), "[t]hose who spend their lives in this context [politics] become skilled at lying; it is a requirement for occupational success". Bailey (1988, ix) agrees, and comes to the conclusion that 'humbuggery and manipulation' are central to the very notion of leadership, and therefore an integral part of political life, for "no leader can survive as a leader without deceiving others (followers no less than opponents)".

Not only is the notion that lies and politics are coterminous quite accepted, but it has even been argued that those in power have a *right* to lie. The tradition in political philosophy which endorses lying and deceit for the sake of the public good is indeed very long and illustrious. Plato, in his *Republic*, coined the expression 'noble lies' to

refer to the kind of stories that the governing philosophers might need to tell people in order to preserve the wellbeing of the polis and promote social harmony (Oborne 2005, 114). Needless to say, the rulers' 'right' to lie and to recur to 'the public good' as a justification for their lack of sincerity has been strongly questioned (Bok 1978, 173-4), and a growing sense of unease has spread for the perceived prevalence of 'spin', bullshit and deception in political discourse. Commentators have suggested that we now live in a "post-truth political environment" (Oborne 2005, 6) in which "[p]ublic statements are no longer fact based, but operational. Realities and political narratives are constructed to serve a purpose, dismantled, and the show moves on" (Ibid.). This seems confirmed by studies of public opinion which indicate progressively decreasing levels of trust and confidence in politicians, professionals and public institutions (Bok 1978, xvii; O'Hara 2004). This widespread perception has moved philosopher Onora O'Neill (2002, 8) to suggest that we seem to be facing a "crisis of public trust".

If – as we have seen – lies and various forms of deception have always been integral to political life, what is new about our contemporary condition to have prompted Frankfurt and others to draw attention to a perceived shift towards increased bullshitting in the public realm? Oborne (2005, 6) explains the difference between the old and the present state of things by highlighting the *systemic* and entrenched nature that political lying has assumed over the past quarter of a century. The recent case of the war on Iraq, and the extent to which the argument of those in favour of a military invasion was built around, at best, incorrect information on Saddam Hussein's presumed access to weapons of mass destruction - if not, as it has been alleged, outright lies on the part of the most powerful political leaders of the West – gives these argument great poignancy. Journalists, academics and political commentators have indeed extensively documented and analysed several instances of the alleged 'politics of deception' (Corn 2003) around the Iraq campaign and beyond, which are simply outside the scope of this paper to enumerate and discuss[11].

However, is bullshit and political lying really on the rise? Frankfurt himself (2005, 62) adopts a certain caution, and suggests that "it is impossible to be sure that there is

[11] See for instance: Chomsky 2002; Corn 2003; Fritz, Keefer & Nyhan 2004; Lloyd 2004; Maltese 2006; Miller 2004; Oborne 2005 and 2007; Tulis 1987;

relatively more of it nowadays than at other times. There is more communication of all kinds in our time than ever before, but the proportion that is bullshit may not have increased". The mass media are indeed usually considered responsible for the presumed rising levels of deception in the public sphere, if not for altogether muddling the public political debate, and for promoting the creation of bullshit and lies (Lloyd 2004; Jempson 2005; Oborne 2007).

In order to better understand contemporary political life, and the role of the communications professionals within it, it might be useful to refer to the concept of the 'new public' elaborated by Mayhew (1997). The idea of the 'new public' is predicated on the observation that communication in the public sphere has become dominated by professional specialists (as well as professional politicians) who utilise techniques borrowed from advertising, market research and public relations so as to maximise the effect of political messages and minimize the possibility of their scrutiny:

> Rhetoric employs adumbrated, sketchy arguments that amount to symbolic *tokens* of more extended arguments that the speaker purports to be able to expound if necessary. […] Tokens allow for strategic rhetoric that deliver suggestive cues but avoids confrontations that would require redeeming these tokens with more extensive arguments (p. 48).

The 'new public' paradigm (like Frankfurt's concept of bullshit) therefore relies heavily on a corrupted form of language that Lutz (1988) refers to as *doublespeak*:

> What is doublespeak? Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language which makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids or shifts responsibility, language which is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought. Doublespeak is language which does not extend thought but limits it (p. 40).

This alleged corruption of the language of public discourse is not necessarily a recent phenomenon. In 1946, in an essay entitled "Politics and the English Language" George Orwell had already commented on what he saw as a "special connection between politics and the debasement of language" (p. 113). According to Orwell, who was writing in the aftermath of WW2, politics had become predicated upon the "defence of the indefensible" (such as for instance the persistence of British colonialism in India, or the deployment of nuclear weapons in Japan). This required a political language that "has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness", the kind of language, in other words, necessary "if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them" (p. 5). Like Frankfurt and the other writers discussed here, Orwell too saw the language of political communication as characterised by "sheer humbug" (p.112), and his damning conclusion prefigures the arguments of numerous contemporary political commentators: "Political language ... is designed to make lies sounds truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (p. 120).

Having ascertained that lying and mendacity have always been closely connected to the sphere of politics, it remains to be seen if the particular type of deception that Frankfurt is trying to describe through his conceptual understanding of 'bullshit' and Mayhew's notion of the 'new public' can offer any further insight to the study of contemporary political discourse. In order to do this, we will now look at the specific area of cultural policy.

Bullshit in cultural policy: the British case

One of the main aims of this paper is to ascertain whether there might be any evidence to support the hypothesis that a 'lack of connection to a concern with the truth' and 'indifference to how things really are', which Prof. Frankfurt sees as the essence of bullshit, might be prevalent in present-day official cultural policy rhetoric in Britain. In order to achieve this, the analysis that will follow will centre around public declarations on the social impacts of the arts as a basis for policy-making in the cultural sector, and the importance of their measurement. Due to reasons of space, the examples will all be selected from Ministerial speeches and government policy documents, but this should not be taken to mean that this is the only area where

‘mindlessness’ may be found. The reason for a focus on the arts impact debate is twofold: firstly, this is the theme of cultural policy research with which I have most familiarity, and intuitively, in the years spent researching in this area, I have had the opportunity to pick out what appeared as ‘instances of bullshitting’, leading me to the desire to subject this personal impression to a more rigorous intellectual analysis. Secondly, I would argue that the one around the socio-economic impacts of the arts has been one of the defining debates in Western cultural policy over the past 10-15 years and thus makes a worthy case study for the cultural policy researcher.

Since the very beginning of politicians’ renewed interest for the social impacts of the arts, the question of evidence has been a delicate one. In 1999, PAT 10 (one of several Policy Action Teams set up by the government to ensure that each government department gave a full contribution to the New Labour’s social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal agenda) commissioned a well respected cultural consultant to produce a literature review in the area of the social impacts of the arts, with a view of assessing the quality of the research evidence available. The report concluded that “it remains a fact that relative to the volume of arts activity taking place in the country’s poorest neighbourhoods, the evidence of the contribution it makes to neighbourhood renewal is paltry” (DCMS, 1999a, 6). Considering that this report was commissioned by PAT10 itself as a guide to its activities, and in view of the government’s explicit and firm commitment to evidence-based policy-making, one would have thought that the admission of lack of evidence would have dampened any early enthusiasm for the arts as a tool for social renewal. Yet, the year 1999 also saw the publication of another report by PAT10, one that actually celebrated the beneficial impacts of the arts on disadvantaged people and neighbourhoods. In the foreword to this second report, Chris Smith, at the time Secretary of State for Culture, stated with great confidence:

> "This report shows that art and sport can not only make a valuable contribution to delivering key outcomes of lower long-term unemployment, less crime, better health and better qualifications, but can also help to deliver the individual pride, community spirit and capacity for responsibility that enable communities to run regeneration programmes themselves." (DCMS 1999b, 2).

That the evidence to support this was, as we have seen, 'paltry' as well as anecdotal and methodologically dubious, did not seem, in this instance, to cause much concern. In fact, Chris Smith, in his capacity of Secretary of State, became the champion of the socio-economic impacts of the arts, to which he referred numerous times in enthusiastic terms in his book *Creative Britain* (1998, 24, 129-140). The use and citation of statistics was always an important ingredient in the developments briefly charted above. In occasion of a public lecture delivered in 1998, Smith (1998, 135) cited extensively some (now discredited[12]) statistics derived from Matarasso's influential report *Use and Ornament?*, which he defined as "compelling". The reference to the impressive-sounding numbers offered by Matarasso's study offered the diligent Secretary of State what must have appeared a precious means to bypass the obstacle represented by what he presumably knew to be 'paltry' evidence of impact[13]. Whether those figures *actually* reflected reality was obviously not a primary concern here.

Interestingly, this is confirmed to be the case (as opposed to my own cynical suspicion) by Chris Smith himself, who spoke with uncustomary candour, for a politician, at the 2003 conference *Valuing Culture*. He was at that time no longer Secretary of State, which explains the frankness of his speech, and this was one of the first public engagements he attended since being divested of his cabinet position. I believe Smith's words offer a precious insight into the type of bullshit that, in my view, has become orthodox in much of contemporary public and policy discourse around the social impacts of the arts, and they are therefore worth quoting extensively. Looking back at his time as Culture Secretary, Smith comments:

> Spare a thought, however, for the poor old Minister, faced with the daunting task of getting the increased funding out of the Treasury to start with. The Treasury won't be interested in the intrinsic merits of nurturing beauty or fostering poetry or even "enhancing the quality of life". So I acknowledge unashamedly that when I was Secretary of State, going into what always seemed like a battle with the Treasury, I would try and touch the buttons that would work. I would talk about the educational value of what was being done. I would be passionate about artists working in schools. I would refer to the economic value that can be

[12] Belfiore 2002; Merli 2002.

[13] Matarasso's report and its statistics featured quite often in Smith's speeches (see Merli 2002).

> generated from creative and cultural activity. I would count the added numbers who would flock into a free museum. If it helped to get more funds flowing into the arts, the argument was worth deploying. And I still believe, passionately, that it was the right approach to take. If it hadn't been taken, the outcome would have left the arts in much poorer condition" (pp. 1-2).

Smith also readily admitted that this method of promoting the interests of the arts sector also poses some difficulties, such as the fact that "any measurement of numbers, quantity, or added value by figures is necessarily going to be inadequate". Hence his advice to his audience of cultural administrators:

> So, use the measurements and figures and labels that you can, when you need to, in order to convince the rest of the governmental system of the value and importance of what you're seeking to do. But recognise at the same time that this is not the whole story, that it is not enough as an understanding of cultural value (p. 2).

There are some interesting observations to be made on the basis of this speech. Smith is making a clear admission to have used the available data cunningly, so as to make his case for increased funding appear stronger than it might have otherwise been. So, to this end, measurements and statistics that Smith here admits are "necessarily going to be inadequate" were presented as "compelling" in his 1998 book, and accepted as valid 'evidence' of impact in policy making and in the process of funding allocations. Chris Smith has indeed gone down in history as a highly successful Culture Secretary, for under his tenure, funding for the arts increased significantly after years of shrinking budgets under the Tory leadership of the country. Am I suggesting that, during his time as Secretary of State Smith lied? Not necessarily; I am suggesting, however, on the basis of his own reconstruction of events, that he might have been, on occasion, bullshitting. I am also suggesting that Smith's shrewd use of dubious statistics might be a case of the phenomenon that Darrell Huff, in his still popular humorous essay *How to Lie with Statistics* first published in 1954, refers to as *statisticulation* (p. 94), or in other words, that form of statistical manipulation that aims at "misinforming people by the use of statistical material".

The several references to the socio-economic impacts of the arts that are scattered throughout *Creative Britain* are probably rooted in a genuine belief in the arts as a positive force in society (with the additional benefit of an advantageous, if vague, influence on the local and national economy). After all, in his previous life, Smith was an English literature scholar, specialising in the study of the English Romantic poets, so one could presume that he might have shared at least some of the cultural values propounded by the objects of his own research. Yet, to my mind, it is equally obvious that when it came to turning those very common, largely orthodox, yet vague notions of the positive 'value' of the arts into a political 'case' for increased funding - in the light of what was very limited and poor-quality evidence - the seasoned politician that Smith is must have seen very clearly that the 'concern with the truth' and the attention for 'how things really are' that so exercise Frankfurt might have to be put, at least temporarily, aside.

Smith's passages above seems also to endorse that acceptance of fibbing for the 'public good' that was discussed earlier, and an adoption of a 'consequentialist'[14] ethical position whereby any bullshit that might have had to be produced and communicated is justified by its desirable outcome in terms of a favourable financial settlement for the arts from the Treasury. Questions of the truth-value of the arguments used are clearly of secondary importance to the main objective, which is, plainly, to score points with the Treasury. To quote Frankfurt again, "[h]e does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose" (p. 56). Furthermore, the very fact of Smith's own frankness about his creative approach to making the case for the arts confirms Frankfurt's contention that bullshitting is widely tolerated in our society, and that the moral censure that accompanies it is relatively minimal (had it not been so, Smith might have been altogether more reticent about it).

It seems to me that Mayhew's notion of a public sphere dominated by a type of political communication that avoids scrutiny and genuine debate is also of relevance here, especially when it comes to the central place of measurement and statistics in public policy discourse. For how can one respond to such a lucid strategy of

[14] 'Consequentialism' is a broad term to refer to those ethical theories that posit that the consequences of an action are the legitimate basis for the moral assessment of that action.

'statisticulation' as that described by Smith in the passage above? When value-based (and therefore value-laden) arguments are couched in the apparently politically neutral language of 'evidence-based policy', and when impact evaluation and performance measurement and the resulting statistics are used as 'ammunition'[15] in the political debate with little preoccupation for their origins and the rigour (or potential lack thereof) of the methods used to acquire them, what chances are there for a genuinely open political debate around matters of policy and funding?

It would be of course highly unfair to suggest that Chris Smith was the only Culture Secretary of State or Minister to have displayed that lack of concern with truth, the "indifference to how things really are" as well as the cultivation of vested interests (albeit, the public interest, in this case) which Frankfurt attributes to the activity of bullshitting. What makes Smith's case interesting is that his frank post-ministerial speech makes it possible to ascertain the question of intentionality, which as we have seen, is a necessary condition for the legitimate attribution of the label of 'bullshit'.

The personal essay written, in 2004, by Smith's successor as Culture Secretary of State, Tessa Jowell, and entitled *Government and the Value of Culture* (2004) offers another interesting case study. Jowell had always been a stalwart supporter of the contribution of the arts and the cultural industries to the governmental socio-economic agenda. In a speech delivered at the 2002 Labour Party conference she had stated unambiguously that "[i]nvestment in the arts is not only an end in itself, it is also a means of achieving our promises, our policies and our values". But by the time her personal essay was conceived, the shortcomings of the available evidence of socio-economic impact had become harder to ignore and the sector had been progressively lamenting an excess of instrumentality in the government's attitude to the arts. *Government and the Value of Culture* is an interesting essay because its stated aim is to reject a narrow instrumental view of the arts, yet throughout the essay a number of exquisitely instrumental considerations are made on the importance, for the government, to support artistic engagement as an antidote to the 'poverty of aspiration' afflicting the disadvantaged young.

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[15] This term was indeed used with reference to performance measurement in the cultural sector in a report by the now extinct QUEST, a watchdog body instituted in 1999 by Chris Smith with the task of improving efficiency in the public cultural sector (Belfiore 2004, 189).

Interestingly, in the concluding section of the essay, Jowell maintains that "we will need to keep proving that engagement with culture can improve educational attainment, and can help reduce crime" (p. 17), and yet, if it had been possible to demonstrate incontrovertibly a causal link between arts participation and educational attainment or crime reduction, then surely, there would be no pressing need to *keep proving* it. The problem is that – as Jowell most probably knows - for all the evaluation and performance measurement requirements imposed on the sector, such incontrovertible evidence of impact simply is not there. This in turn means that many of the claims contained in the essay are in fact based on very little concrete evidence. The circularity of reasoning and the numerous internal contradictions in Jowell's essay make it, I would suggest, a prime example of the 'doublespeak' lamented by Lutz[16].

More recently, James Purnell, during his brief six-month stint as Culture Secretary[17] has provided an interesting example of the type of corrupted political language reprimanded by Orwell in his 1946 essay. In his first speech entitled "World class from the grassroots up: Culture in the next ten years", delivered in the summer of 2007, Purnell declared that "access is now in the bloodstream of British culture" (p. 3). I take this to mean that Purnell - despite current attendance data confirming that participation is still strongly linked to educational levels and class status[18] – is convinced that broadening access is now very firmly rooted in the work of cultural organisations in receipt of public subsidies. Why the bizarre metaphor? I am reminded of Orwell's (1946, 105) reproach for the "staleness of imagery" and the "lack of precision" that in his opinion are the principal symptoms of that corruption of the English language and of political communication that his essay addressed. This corruption he saw as the result of the attitude of a writer who "is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not" (p. 112): "By using stale metaphors, similes and idioms, you save much mental effort, at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself".

[16] I discuss Jowell's essay in more detail in Belfiore 2006, 239.
[17] Purnell became Secretary of State for Culture in June 2007, and was later appointed Work and Pensions Secretary in January 2008.
[18] See Belfiore and Bennett 2007, 253-6 for a discussion of this data.

Yet it was not this rather 'stale image' that was responsible for the great interest generated by Purnell's speech. The cause of the stir was a little phrase towards the end of it, and the promise of a sea-change in public cultural administration that it seemed to bring: "I want to keep the passion and throw away the packaging of targetolatry" (Purnell 2007, 9). The sector interpreted this as signalling "a change in direction over Public Service Agreements targets for the arts"[19]. Public Service Agreements (PSAs) are official documents which set out the aims and objectives of the various government departments over a three-year period; they describe "how targets will be achieved and how performance against these targets will be measured"[20]. Performance indicators and targets are at the core of the *modus operandi* of PSAs, and it is not at all clear how they could be 'thrown away', to borrow Purnell's expression, without compromising the entire current functioning of government departments and the monitoring of their activities. How it could be possible to justify subtracting the cultural sector from the set of rules and regulation that are in force for the rest of the public sector is also a mystery, which Purnell's sensationalist speech does not clarify.

It seems possible to suggest that Purnell's speech exemplifies Brandenburg's (2006, 4) contention that political bullshit is "a proactive strategic communication, meant not to hide a truth or reality, or to divert from a particular responsibility, but to create or manage an impression". In this case, the impression that needed to be created and managed was that of a Culture Secretary sympathetic to the frustrations seething among cultural professionals resulting from the perceived excesses of performance measurement requirements. Purnell's move to the Work and Pension department just a few months after the delivery of this speech obviously means that we will never know how he would have endeavoured to implement his vision of "setting culture free to do what it does best"[21] (whatever this may be). Yet this does appear like the media-friendly, populist, yet unredeemable token of a fully developed argument that Mayhew suggests dominates in the 'new public'.

There is a broader conclusion to be drawn from this necessarily selective and incomplete examination of instances of bullshit, doublespeak and 'statisticulation' in

[19] This is the opening line of the cover article of issue 150 of the publication *ArtsProfessional*, 16th July 2007.
[20] http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about_the_cabinet_office/publicserviceagreements.aspx
[21] Purnell 2007, 9.

official cultural policy rhetoric. I would argue that what we have been looking at are, in fact, powerful examples of what policy theory refers to as the 'performance paradox'. With this label policy theorists refer to the unintended and often undesirable consequences that can result from the introduction of performance measurement as a means to enhance public sector's efficiency and the quality of its financial management (van Thiel and Leeuw 2002). The paradoxical element here lays in the fact that these unintended consequences might actually result in a situation that compounds the very problems that performance measurement was introduced to address. At the heart of the notion of 'performance paradox', thus, is the baffling observation that measures such as the imposition of targets, performance management, evidence-based policy-making, pressures to evaluate the extent to which arts project have the socio-economic impact that policy makers presume they do - or in other words a whole range of measures introduced with the aim to improve *transparency* and *accountability* in the public sector - might have resulted, in reality, in more bullshit being produced and injected in public discourses around policies for the cultural sector, and in opaque political messages amounting to little more than doublespeak.

If politics and public policy are a privileged arena for the production and circulation of significant amounts of bullshit, it would be however naïve to think that they are the only realms affected. The next section of the paper will therefore look at bullshitting taking place beyond the sphere of politics, particularly in the field of research. For reasons of practicality, I will refer to this phenomenon as 'academic bullshit' because many of the examples considered were produced within universities, but research more generally is the true scope of the analysis.

Beyond the realm of politics: Bullshit of the academic variety

It could be argued that there are two main varieties of academic bullshit relevant to the field of cultural policy. The first is represented by the intentional obscurity and impenetrability of a certain portion of academic writing, and the second is represented by instances of the very same 'lack of connection to a concern with the truth' and 'indifference to how things really are' that we have just discussed in the field of

politics. To illustrate this latter form of bullshit I will again refer to research in the social impact of the arts as a representative case study.

The first variety of academic bullshit is the topic of a paper by Cohen (2002) entitled "Deeper into bullshit", which represents one of the earliest responses to the first publication of Frankfurt's essay. The target of Cohen's attack is that strand of writing that, in a bid for profundity, indulges in obscure and impenetrable language:

> ... what particularly interests me is a certain variety of nonsense, namely, that which is found in discourse that is by nature *unclarifiable*, discourse, that is, that is not only obscure but which cannot be rendered unobscure, where any apparent success in rendering it unobscure creates something that isn't recognizable as a version of what was said (p. 332).

As for Frankfurt, for Cohen too the issue of intentionality is paramount. What he finds problematic is the fact that "there is quite a lot of *aiming* at obscurity in the production of philosophical bullshit, and a lot, to boot, in this region, of lack of concern with the truth" (p. 335; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, this kind of esoteric theory "comes close to being celebrated for its very unclarity by some of its producers and consumers" (p. 335).

To exemplify his concerns over the 'unclarifiable unclarity' of this type of highly theoretical discourse, Cohen refers to a passage from the leading French Marxist philosopher Etienne Balibar's *The Philosophy of Marx*: "This is precisely the first meaning we can give to the idea of dialectic: a logic or form of explanation specifically adapted to the determinant intervention of class struggle in the very fabric of history". On this, Cohen comments: "If you read that sentence quickly, it can sound pretty good. The remedy is to read it more slowly, and you will then recognize it to be a wonderful paradigm of bullshit: yet I know Balibar to be an honest thinker" (p. 339).

Whilst he might be the only one to refer to this kind of opaque specialist language as 'bullshit', Cohen is certainly not alone in expressing frustration and criticism of a clear trend in the field of critical theory towards a language that – to echo Lutz's

definition of doublespeak cited earlier – hinders rather than encourages thought. Roger Scruton (2004), commenting on a rather obscure passage by influential postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to this mode of theorising as 'intellectual gobbledygook'. Terry Eagleton (1999), in a review of one of Spivak's books for the *London Review of Book*, finds himself in agreement on what he refers to as Spivak's "pretentiously opaque" prose, suggesting that "[p]ost-colonial theory makes heavy weather of a respect for the Other, but its most immediate Other, the reader, is apparently dispensed from this sensitivity".

Innumerable examples could be provided to support an indictment of unclarifiable arguments and a language that, as Orwell would say, is used without apparent concern for whether it has meaning or not. An extensive inventory is beyond the scope of this paper, yet what has been discussed so far seems to confirm the hypothesis that bullshit is plentiful beyond the world of politics, and certainly to be found in the rarefied realm of contemporary academic philosophy and theory. However, as the discussion of the second variety of academic bullshit will show, this can also be found in other areas of research, and it is my endeavour to show that cultural policy research might be a field where a certain degree of 'mindlessness' and 'lack of concern for how things really are' might also be detected.

My previous work on the social impacts of the arts and the question of their measurement, which I have carried out with Prof. Oliver Bennett, has brought to light the numerous underlying, unquestioned assumptions about the arts, the effect they have on people (which are presumed to be reliably positive), the possibility of their empirical measurement, and the advantages that such measurement can provide in the subsidised cultural sector's struggle for ever-shrinking public resources (Belfiore and Bennett 2007). Despite the current rhetorical emphasis on evidence-based policy, the set of assumptions outlined above, which has so far inspired cultural policy making, finds no support in actual evidence.

It is my contention that similar assumptions have also dominated the arts impact assessment research agenda. A good example would be the highly influential report *Use or Ornament?* (1997) prepared by Matarasso for the cultural consultancy firm

Comedia, which, despite having been criticised for methodological flaws,[22] can be identified as one of the key texts in this area, and as the first attempt to produce an analysis of the social impact of the arts with the aim to develop a replicable methodology for its evaluation. This is stated quite clearly in the preface to the report, which defines the aims of the project as the attempt "[t]o identify evidence of the social impact of participation in the arts at amateur or community level", and to do so in a way that could provide means "of assessing social impact which are helpful and workable for policymakers and those working in the arts or social fields" (p. v). The unquestioned assumption underlying Matarasso's research is revealed by his intention to "identify evidence" of impact: this presumes that the impacts are indeed there, and so is the evidence, it is just a question of *identifying* it. Yet, I would argue that the existence of the type of wide-ranging social impact claimed by policy-makers is all but self-evident, and far from having been indisputably established.

I have argued elsewhere (Belfiore and Bennett forthcoming) that one of the problems with large portions of research that has so far been carried out into the social impacts of the arts is its being marred by a profound confusion between genuine research and research for the sake of advocacy. The temptation to articulate research questions in policy- or advocacy-friendly terms is evident in this field, so that research has often focused on asking *how* the presumed positive social impacts of the arts might be measured or enhanced, rather than in asking *whether* the arts have social impacts of the sort claimed for them, *if* this impacts can be expected to be positive and, more generally, *whether* it is possible to generalise people's experiences of the arts within art forms, across art forms, and across the very diverse population represented by those who engage with the arts.

This might appear little more than an academic disquisition over what adverb one ought to use at the beginning of one's research questions, yet I would suggest that a concern for how research questions are phrased goes beyond mere pedantry. Policy scholar Deborah Stone (2002, 3) offers a clear example of this. She reports that, upon being asked for their opinion on public spending on welfare, 48% of the Americans interviewed responded that it ought to be cut; however, when asked about spending on

[22] Belfiore 2002; Merli 2002; Selwood 2002.

programmes for children living in poverty, 47% of respondents auspicated increased funding, and only 9% still felt they wanted the funding to be cut. As Stone herself remarks: “Do Americans want to enlarge or curtail welfare spending? It all depends on how the question is framed” (Ibid.). In matters of cultural policy too, how questions are framed will largely shape the answers reached. Until we accept the need for carefully thought-through, open-ended research questions and for a genuinely exploratory approach to the study of something of such extraordinary complexity as people’s experiences of and responses to the arts, the production of bullshit might not be avoidable.

Conclusions: An antidote for bullshit?

It is my belief that, not only are bullshit and mindlessness not an inevitable feature of cultural policy research (or, for that matter, any other type of research), but that it is a duty of the researcher in this field, as part of his professional practice, to commit to a way of working inspired by the principle of rigour and precision advocated by Frankfurt in his essay. This concluding section of the paper, then, will attempt to outline an anti-bullshit research ethos for cultural policy research, in the hope to start a healthy debate among researchers, scholars and professionals about what optimal research in this area might look like, and how to achieve it. The discussion that follows does not therefore aspire to be a normative template to be imposed on the sector, but rather the result of my own personal reflection on my professional practice as a young researcher in this field.

A useful starting point in this quest is offered by Robert Merton, who in the early seventies identified the four principal values of science as ‘universalism’, ‘communalism’, ‘disinteredness’, and ‘organized skepticism’ (in Kane 1998, 118). Whilst objectivity and neutrality from one’s values and (often unconscious) intellectual prejudices might be an unattainable goal for the researcher, the notion of ‘disinterested’ seems to offer a useful pointer towards a research ethos that strives to avoid ‘mindlessness’ in one’s professional practice. This, coupled with a healthy resistance (or scepticism, in Merton’s words) for any assumption or conclusion that does not withstand close intellectual scrutiny, seems to amount to the first steps towards the development of an antidote to bullshit in the field of research.

Cultural policy studies is a relatively young discipline (Kawashima 1999), yet in many respects, it has come a long way in a very short time. The scope and size of the ICCPR conferences is a testament to this. Yet, in order for the discipline to continue to develop in interesting and original ways, we need to reinforce the notion of a 'critical research ethos' in this field. 'Critical' is today a very loaded adjective, and it thus requires some qualification. I use it to refer to research that is *disinterested*, that is indifferent to the requirements of advocacy - advocacy being a fully legitimate enterprise, but one completely distinct and, ideally, separate from genuinely explorative research. By 'explorative' research, I refer to a type of research that aims to explore and illuminate complex questions about the role and condition of culture, cultural production, consumption and administration in contemporary society.

This is an enterprise that ought to be conducted on the basis of a research ethos based on accuracy, precision, and rigour: a research ethos, that, to borrow Frankfurt's words, does not intentionally elude "the demands of a disinterested and austere discipline" (p. 23). The model of research I am advocating echoes what McGuigan 2004, 19) defines as 'critical and reflexive cultural policy analysis' which, he explains, "is permitted to ask awkward questions about the conditions of culture and society in the world at large that go beyond the self-imposed limitations of management consultancy and policy-wonking" (p. 19). To this I would add that this bullshit-free zone for cultural policy research would also ideally be dominated by intellectual *humility*. By this I refer to the acceptance that when exploring complex questions (and cultural and political questions are inescapably complex), the researcher needs to accept that it might not be possible to find easy answers that can tidily fit into a journal paper. Coming back to the impact of the arts debate, philosophers and scholars have struggled to describe and understand the way that people respond to the arts uninterruptedly since the times of Plato. Any simple, straightforward solution to this riddle, or any impact evaluation toolkit that promises to evaluate the transformative power of any form of aesthetic experience in 'ten easy replicable steps', thus bypassing or refusing to address such complexity, is likely to be – let us be honest – bullshit.

There is one last observation to be made with regards to the possible reasons for the presence of bullshit in cultural policy research and ways to counteract it. As we have seen in our initial discussion of bullshit and other forms of deception, *intentionality* is key in distinguishing simple incorrect information from mendacity. In this sense, the researcher will only be a bullshitter when he *intentionally* takes intellectual shortcuts or when, moved by a voluntary carelessness for accuracy and regard for how things really are, indulges in mindless intellectual behaviour. This presumes, of course, that researchers operate in relative freedom. And yet, researchers do not operate in splendid isolation from society. Universities are no longer the detached ivory towers they might have once been, and the conditions in which academic researchers operates also need to be taken into consideration. Particularly in policy-sensitive areas like cultural policy (or, in fact, any other policy-related field of enquiry) there are pressures on researchers to produce the kind of work that might have a direct influence on policy.

Already in 2000, the then Secretary of State for Education of Employment David Blunkett clearly expressed a commitment to include policy influence among the criteria used for assessing research excellence in the government-run 'Research Assessment Exercise' (RAE), a formal process all UK university must undergo so that the quality of the research they produce can be assessed, and this information used as one of the elements on the basis of which public resources are allocated to them. The UK Research Councils have indeed picked up on this political commitment to enhance the policy influence of publicly funded research, and have recently announced their intention to include impact on policy, and the projected socio-economic impact of the proposed research project as one of the criteria used to decide on the allocation of research funding (Councils UK 2006 and 2007). The implication of these developments with respect to my call for an explorative and disinterested research ethos are clear: in a climate where policy influence is considered a relevant, or even a privileged, criterion for the allocation of research funds, the type of research that is more likely to be supported is that which can provide the 'evidence' that politicians and decision-makers need. This might be the kind of research, for example, that can provide appealing statistics and other data required for the 'statisticulation' that so much political discourse is based on. Researchers working within academia might face increased pressures to provide that official "certification

of facts” on which, according to Mayhew (1997, 5) political communication relies in the ‘new public’. Undesirable (or just not immediately policy-relevant) research agendas might therefore become more difficult to pursue, irrespective of their intellectual merit or methodological rigour.

If the general climate in which the academic cultural policy researcher operates is – if not openly hostile – at the very least less than friendly to the ideal of open-ended, disinterested and rigorous research that this paper advocates, it seems certainly true that the quality most needed in the cultural policy researcher should be a firm commitment to what Frankfurt calls the “demands of a disinterested and austere discipline” (p. 23). Paraphrasing what Ernest Hemingway noted about writers, I would therefore suggest that the single most crucial quality that any critical cultural policy researcher ought to possess is “a built-in, shock-proof crap detector” (cited in Postman 1969, 1).

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