

“Many people are saying...”: Applying the lessons of naïve skepticism to the fight against fake news and other “total bullshit”¹

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Abstract: ‘Fake news’ has become an increasingly common refrain in public discourse. The term itself has several uses, at least one of which constitutes Frankfurtian bullshit. After examining what sorts of fake news appeals do and do not count as bullshit, I discuss strategies for overcoming our openness to such bullshit. I do so by drawing a parallel between openness to bullshit and naïve skepticism—one’s willingness to reject the concept of truth on unsupported or ill-considered grounds—and suggest that this parallel indicates three principles for how we ought to combat our openness to fake news and other bullshit. First, the root causes of bullshit openness are not monolithic; we should adopt anti-bullshit strategies in recognition of this fact. Second, our efforts to overcome bullshit openness should be collaborative efforts to create an environment that allows for sustained interrogation of our bullshit openness, rather than a confrontational provision of contrary evidence, despite the fact that such strategies are more time-intensive. Third, social media is unlikely to be a fertile ground on which we will make meaningful progress in the fight against bullshit because of the inherent nature of social media platforms as spaces for short, declarative, confrontational claims.

Keywords: fake news, bullshit, naïve skepticism, social media, epistemology of ignorance

I. Introduction

“One of the most salient features of our culture,” Harry Frankfurt declared over 30 years ago, “is that there is so much bullshit” (Frankfurt, 1986/2005, p. 1). Nothing since then seems to have disabused us of that claim. If anything, recent political events like Brexit and Donald Trump’s ascendancy have only served to call further attention to the bullshit we find ourselves surrounded by.

In the United Kingdom, Brexit, once famously compared to a plan to build a submarine out of cheese (Rifkind, 2018), has repeatedly been described by Brexiteers,

¹ Forthcoming in *Postdigital Science and Education*.

both before and after the referendum, as “easy” (BBC, 2016) and “one of the easiest [negotiations] in human history” (BBC, 2017)—so easy, in fact, that they could be sorted “over a cup of coffee” (Mance, 2017). The resulting negotiations both in Europe and in Parliament have proven anything but, to the point that Theresa May’s failure to deliver Brexit cost her the premiership.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Donald Trump—whose claims Frankfurt himself adjudged “farcically unalloyed bullshit” (2016)—has tweeted about “fake news” nearly 400 times since Election Day 2016.² Some such claims, like whether Trump called Apple CEO Tim Cook “Tim Apple” (Trump, 2019b) or his displeasure with approval polls (Trump, 2017a, 2018a, 2019d) are relatively inconsequential. Others, like those expressing his frustration with the Mueller investigation into Russian election interference (Trump, 2019c), are more serious. Indeed, a poll by Quinnipiac University found that 38% of Americans and 76% of self-identified Republicans believed that “the Mueller report cleared President Trump of any wrongdoing” (Quinnipiac University, 2019, p. 12) despite the report’s explicitly stating on three separate occasions that such clearance was not the report’s conclusion.³ It is not difficult to infer that these numbers are at least in part due to the deployment of weaponized bullshit like Trump’s cries of fake news.

² As of May 30, 2019, a search of Trump’s Twitter feed for the phrase “fake news” reveals 394 tweets containing the phrase.

³ The language in all three cases closely matches language used in the introduction to Volume II of the report, which states that “if we had confidence after a thorough investigation of the facts that the President clearly did not commit obstruction of justice, we would so state. Based on the facts and the applicable legal standards, however, we are unable to reach that judgment. The evidence we obtained about the President’s actions and intent presents difficult issues that prevent us from conclusively determining that no criminal conduct occurred. Accordingly, while this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him” (Mueller, 2019, p. 2)

While bullshit did not begin with Trump or Brexiteers, the increasing presence of social media has vastly expanded the reach of their bullshit. Trump, for example, is a gifted Twitter user with nearly 60 million followers for his main account, @realDonaldTrump. Botnets amplified hyperpartisan Brexit content not because it was accurate, but because it aligned with messaging mainly from the Leave campaign (Bastos & Mercea, 2017). Facebook fell victim to Russian election interference during the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign precisely because the platform is uniquely positioned to rapidly spread fake news (Shapiro, 2017).

The question that follows from this cascade of bullshit is what to do about it. Bullshit is only effective if people believe it, so a more precise question might be how we can undermine the conditions that lead members of the public to accept bullshit. I argue that such an effort should be informed by recent work on pedagogical efforts to undermine *naïve skepticism*—students' willingness to endorse unsupported skepticism. Specifically, I argue that the conditions that motivate naïve skepticism and the conditions that predispose us towards bullshit acceptance—what I term *bullshit openness*—are closely related. Thus, promising strategies for combatting naïve skepticism are likely to be closely related to fruitful strategies for overcoming bullshit openness. This leads, I think, to three lessons that should inform any strategy aimed at combatting bullshit. First, contrary to recent scholarship on fake news and other bullshit that seeks a single cause, we ought to recognize that multiple causes are responsible for our bullshit openness. Second, we are more likely to overcome our bullshit openness by employing collaborative strategies that allow for critical examination of one's beliefs and how they may facilitate such openness. Finally, I argue that the nature of social media platforms is such that, generally speaking, they

are not amenable to the sorts of sustained, collaborative efforts that are likely to be successful in combatting bullshit.

My discussion proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I present an overview of bullshit generally and fake news specifically, outlining why we ought to accept Trumpian fake news as a form of bullshit. In Section 3, I examine the root causes of bullshit openness. I discuss extant literature on naïve skepticism in Section 4, arguing that work on students' predisposition to advance such skeptical theories can be generalized to a wider audience and examining the close link between the conditions that promote such skepticism and bullshit openness. Finally, Section 5 presents the aforementioned lessons I believe we should draw from the preceding discussion, followed by concluding remarks in Section 6.

2. Fake news and other bullshit

Roughly speaking, *bullshit* is a claim disconnected from the demands of truth (Frankfurt, 1986/2005). It is distinct from a lie because, while both the liar and the bullshitter want to convince their interlocutor that what they say is true, the bullshitter has “no interest” (Frankfurt, 1986/2005, p. 33) in whether the underlying claim is actually true. This may be because the bullshitter doesn't know whether they are speaking truthfully, or it may be because the bullshitter simply doesn't care.

Discussions of bullshit and our willingness to accept it have become increasingly salient via discussions of so-called fake news (MacKenzie & Bhatt, 2018). Fake news, however, can have a number of meanings in a variety of contexts. Thus, it is useful to examine those contexts and discuss which contexts represent instances of bullshit. I suggest the term has at least four usages: satire, fraud, unintentionally false

reporting, and as a euphemism for unflattering coverage. Only this last sense, however, constitutes genuine bullshit.

As a form of satire, perhaps the exemplar of fake news is *The Onion*, a satirical newspaper that bills itself as “America’s finest news source” and has featured headlines including, “Washing Machine Loses Man’s Trust,” “Woman Nervous for Boyfriend to Meet Person She Becomes Around Parents,” “Baby Feels Foolish After Realizing Stranger Waving at Toddler Next Seat Over,” and “Congress Threatens to Leave D.C. Unless New Capitol Is Built.” The latter famously caused embarrassment for the state-run *Beijing Evening News*, which picked up the article and reported it as genuine (Chu, 2002).

This embarrassment nicely illustrates why satirical fake news does not constitute bullshit. While satire may get at deeper quote-unquote philosophical truths about how we change our behavior depending on who we are with, become embarrassed in certain situations, or view demands for public stadium financing, no one takes such reporting—if we may call it that—seriously or truthfully. In other words, the conditions for bullshit are not met; the speaker knows they speak falsely, the interlocutor does not believe the speaker, and the satirist’s success or failure does not depend on whether the interlocutor literally believes the speaker’s claims.

Regarding instances of journalistic fraud, one of the clearest examples is the 2003 plagiarism scandal at the *New York Times*, where reporter Jayson Blair fabricated interviews and other details in at least half of his stories for the paper, including reporting on two of the most highly covered events of 2002 and 2003—the Beltway Sniper case and the rescue of PFC Jessica Lynch and its aftermath (Barry, Barstow, Glater, Liptak, & Steinberg, 2003). Cases like the Blair scandal fail to meet the standard

for bullshit for the same reason they are problematic for journalistic organizations; they undermined readers' trust that the *Times* would tell the truth. All involved in the Blair scandal, with the exception of Blair, believed that what was being reported was, in fact, accurate. The *Times*' failure to recognize fraud reflected poorly on the paper's perceived ability to report truthfully.

Similar embarrassment can be caused to news organizations as a result of erroneous and retracted reporting. Reporters, like all of us, are fallible, which means false reporting is sometimes presented as genuine. While some retractions are humorous and pedantic, like the Louisville *Courier-Journal*'s detailed retraction of every time the paper referred to a hot dog as a sandwich ("Correction: A hot dog is not a sandwich," 2017), some retractions have serious consequences for those who report them and the organizations for which they report. For example, ABC's Brian Ross was suspended after the retraction of a report that then-National Security Advisor Michael Flynn had been directed by Donald Trump to make contact with Kremlin officials during the campaign (Wang, 2019). Similarly, three CNN journalists resigned following the retraction of a story linking Anthony Scaramucci—briefly Trump's communications director—to a Russian investment firm (Grynbaum, 2017). Similar to cases of journalistic fraud, such cases of fake news fail to meet the standards of bullshit because those involved genuinely believed they were reporting the truth, only to discover later that their reporting was faulty. Indeed, the main difference between retraction and fraud is that the reporters themselves believe their claims are true, which precludes such claims being instances of bullshit.

The final use of fake news, most notably employed by Donald Trump, is in response to unflattering coverage or coverage that fails to comport with a preconceived worldview. For example, Trump has tweeted:

The Fake News is working overtime. Just reported that, despite the tremendous success we are having with the economy & all things else, 91% of the Network News about me is negative (Fake). Why do we work so hard in working with the media when it is corrupt? Take away credentials? (Trump, 2018a)

Trump has often repeated such sentiments, for example when declaring that electoral setbacks following the 2018 midterms were fake news (Trump, 2018c) or that reports of people leaving his speeches early—including one he was in the process of giving—were fake news propagated by “the fake news” (i.e., the mainstream news media), despite the fact that such claims were being reported by Trump-friendly outlets like PJ Media (Dale, 2019; O’Neil, 2019). Such declarations count as instances of bullshit because the impetus for declaring them ‘fake’ lies not with the accuracy of the statements in question, but rather their failure to comport with a particular worldview.

Much of what Trump has castigated as fake news is accurate, including requests from Pittsburgh city leaders that Trump not visit the city in the aftermath of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting (Booker, 2018; Trump, 2018b), the fact that no wall is under construction on the U.S./Mexico border (Tackett, 2019; Trump, 2019a), and Trump’s reference to Apple CEO Tim Cook as “Tim Apple” (Kelly, 2019; Trump, 2019b). Polls indicating Trump is a historically unpopular president (Marcin, 2018) are “Fake Polls”(Trump, 2017f) or “Fake News Suppression Polls” (Trump, 2017c). Indeed, “Any negative polls are fake news” (Trump, 2017a).

Crucially, though, some reports derided as fake news are, in fact, inaccurate. Trump, for example, celebrated Brian Ross's suspension (Trump, 2017d), called for his firing, and intimated that Ross's actions were intentional fake news (Trump, 2017e). Similarly, following the retraction of the CNN story discussed earlier, Trump called the story and CNN itself fake news (Trump, 2017b).

Trump's willingness to attack reporting as fake regardless of its veracity reveals such appeals as bullshit. Essentially, a story's 'fakeness' is purely a function of its reflection on him. Perhaps no single appeal captures this better than Trump's repeated sparring over crowds at his rallies. Reports have underestimated crowd sizes at Trump rallies, sometimes significantly (Concha, 2018; Levine, 2019). But Trump and his surrogates have not restrained their cries of fake news to such events. As noted above, Trump has claimed reports of people leaving early were fake news *as people were leaving early*. Famously, Trump's first media feud as President concerned the size of his inaugural crowd, which was not "the largest crowd to ever witness an inauguration, period" (Abrams, 2018).

What matters most in Trump's eyes seems to be not whether reporting is accurate, but whether it comports with a preconceived notion of how the world is—in this case, Trump's view of his own excellence. To put the point bluntly, fake news is negative coverage, and negative coverage is fake news. This squares neatly with Frankfurt's conception of bullshit, where the distinction between the bullshitter and the liar—both dependent on their interlocutor believing their underlying claim—is that while the liar "hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality" (Frankfurt, 1986/2005, pp. 54–55), the bullshitter hides "that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him" (55). Essentially,

“the motive guiding and controlling [the bullshitter] is unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are” (55). Trump’s goal is neither to speak falsely nor truthfully, but to downplay negative coverage. As Frankfurt says, “[i]t is just this lack of connection with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as the essence of bullshit” (Frankfurt, 1986/2005, pp. 33–34).

3. Why we accept bullshit

Bullshitting, including Trumpian appeals to fake news, is only effective if the interlocutor believes the speaker’s bullshit. More colloquially, bullshit only works if you’re buying what they’re selling, and at present, sales are good. For example, in a recent study, 41% of Trump voters shown photos of Trump’s inauguration and Barack Obama’s 2009 inauguration misidentified Obama’s as Trump’s (and vice versa) based on the size of the crowd in the photo and Trump’s repeated claims about the size of his inaugural crowd. In the same study, 15% of Trump voters shown clearly labeled photos of the respective inaugurations claimed that the photo of Trump’s inauguration had more people in it despite clear visual evidence to the contrary (Schaffner & Luks, 2018).

The inaugural crowd controversy and the effects reported by Schaffner and Luks are particularly salient examples of our willingness to accept bullshit (what I shall call *bullshit openness*) because the claims involved are so easily adjudicated. Yet, a meaningful number of Trump supporters in the study either misidentified which photo went with which inauguration or which crowd was larger. Why? Research into this question has produced three potential answers: motivated reasoning (Nyhan &

Reifler, 2010; Wood & Porter, 2019), intellectual laziness (Pennycook & Rand, 2018), and expressive responding (Prior, Sood, & Khanna, 2015; Schaffner & Luks, 2018).

Motivated reasoning occurs when one's deeply-held beliefs contradict available evidence. Rather than change one's beliefs based on the available evidence, especially evidence that does not live up to "specific standards of evidence" (Berinsky, 2017, p. 242) contravening evidence is discounted or rejected. For example, my deeply-held belief in my spouse's fidelity may cause me to reject or overlook evidence that she is having an affair. Given that the goal of Trumpian fake news is to reinforce a particular worldview, such motivated reasoning seems a plausible explanation for bullshit openness (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Wood & Porter, 2019).

The intellectual laziness hypothesis posits that contravening evidence for bullshit is readily available. For example, there is video of Trump saying "Tim Apple," websites devoted to collating polls of Trump's approval rating, and clear photographs of the 2017 and 2009 inaugurals—all just a click away. So, the story goes, bullshit acceptance is the result of laziness, not malice. Bullshit accepters simply can't be bothered to check the relevant facts (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

Finally, the expressive responding hypothesis posits that, rather than genuinely believing bullshit, bullshit accepters respond in the way that they expect group members would respond. Essentially, expressive responding allows respondents to signal their core principles and group affiliations by viewing factual questions as opinion-soliciting questions (Prior et al., 2015). Trump supporters, therefore, would misidentify the inaugural photos not because they actually believe that the larger crowd is Trump's, but because that response is the sort of thing a Trump supporter ought to give (Schaffner & Luks, 2018). One might draw an analogy with sports fans. I

would say, for example, that the St. Louis Cardinals are the best baseball team not because of any evidence—they have failed to make the playoffs for three consecutive seasons—but because this is precisely what a Cardinals fan *ought* to say.

One of the most important questions facing the study of bullshit is how we ought to respond; efforts to understand the root causes of bullshit openness are, for example, efforts to determine how we ought to overcome such openness. I argue that how we respond should be informed by recent work on the academic phenomenon of naïve skepticism—students' uncritical rejection of truth for a variety of reasons that parallel bullshit openness. I thus turn to a discussion of naïve skepticism in the next section.

4. Naïve skepticism

Briefly defined, naïve skepticism is the uncritical, unsupported rejection of truth (Wright, 2019).⁴ Especially at the introductory level, students often reject their interlocutors' claims by asserting that, at bottom, truth is non-existent, relative, or unknowable. While such skepticism is not unreasonable when supported by evidence and argument, what distinguishes the naïve skeptic from the reasoned skeptic is that the naïve skeptic lacks justificatory evidence and argument. As I shall argue in this section, though much discussion of such skepticism has centered on the experiences of students, the conditions that give rise to such skepticism can be generalized to extend

⁴ The study of this phenomenon within an essentially academic context has led to some divergence in nomenclature. The most common alternatives to naïve skepticism are “student relativism” (Erion, 2005; Sarris, 1986), “reflective relativism” (Momeyer, 1995), and “naïve relativism” (Andre, 1983). None, however, seems to capture important features of the phenomenon in that relativism omits the possibility of a total rejection of truth. Further, framing the phenomenon in terms of students obscures the fact that it is the naiveté that is at issue, rather than the skeptic's status as a student.

well beyond students' experiences. To see why, it may be helpful to briefly examine naïve skepticism in an academic context.

4.1. Naïve skepticism in the classroom

Naïve skepticism represents “a cluster of phenomena” (Sattris, 1986, p. 193) that “fulfills a variety of different functions” (Erion, 2005, p. 129). Such skepticism presents itself as a defensive measure when students are confronted with information that challenges core understandings of themselves or the world (Boud & Walker, 1990; Erion, 2005; Land, Cousin, Meyer, & Davies, 2005; Momeyer, 1995; Sattris, 1986), as an expression of ethical commitments (Delaney, 2004; Erion, 2005; Irvine, 2000; Lewis, 2015; Momeyer, 1995), and as a result of students' current state of intellectual development (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010; Beebe & Sackris, 2016; Finster, 1989; Lochrie, 1989; Perry, 1970).

When deployed as a defensive measure, students are often responding to threshold concepts related to their self-identity (Booth, 2006; Land et al., 2005; Meyer, Land, & Rust, 2003). In such cases, students' seeming rejection of objective truth may not necessarily be genuine; while some naïve skeptics may brush off troubling alternative positions, others may present a naïvely skeptical front out of a desire to avoid engaging with troubling material. While one naïve skeptic may respond “that's true for you, but not for me” out of a genuine—though unsupported—belief in the expressed proposition, such phrases can easily be used as a signal that the speaker simply doesn't wish to engage in further debate and discussion of the issue (Sattris, 1986).

Students may also endorse naïve skepticism because they think their moral commitments entail such a view. For example, students often believe tolerance, a commitment to diversity, and the avoidance of unnecessary offense are morally praiseworthy (Erion, 2005). Despite the fact that a more robust understanding of these genuinely praiseworthy virtues reveals that one may embody them even while maintaining one's belief in objective truth, naïve skepticism is appealing because such commitments seem easier in a world without truth (Wright, 2019).

In both cases, students' intellectual development plays a crucial role in whether and why they adopt naïve skepticism. Students tend to fall into either the dualism or multiplicity stages of Perry's intellectual development framework (Finster, 1989). In the former, truth is viewed as a binary, us vs. them proposition, while in the latter, all claims are viewed as equally reasonable (Ambrose et al., 2010; Lochrie, 1989). The dualistic student, therefore, may be apt to appeal to naïve skepticism as a means of simply avoiding difficult views that challenge core features of their worldview. Alternatively, the multiplistic student may be untroubled by such difficult views because the equal reasonableness of multiplicity entails that the students' view is no less reasonable than their interlocutor's, whose view is definitionally no better. Further, if such views are equally reasonable, it seems *prima facie* obvious that not engaging with others' views as potentially false will fulfill the moral commitments listed above.

Finally, it is worthwhile to point out that psychological evidence suggests we are open to skepticism or relativism when there is widespread disagreement about a controversial underlying claim (Goodwin & Darley, 2008, 2010, 2012; Heiphertz & Young, 2017; Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Cole Wright, & Knobe, 2011). This is especially true

when the underlying claim is normative (Goodwin & Darley, 2012). Though such claims are more obvious in certain disciplines, they are regular features of essentially all academic disciplines at some level (Wright, 2019).

4.2. A generalized theory of naïve skepticism

Though discussion of naïve skepticism has focused on academic contexts, the root causes of such skepticism are not exclusive to such contexts. These root causes can be generalized to help us understand phenomena like bullshit openness.

For example, consider the motivated reasoning hypothesis discussed previously. The roots of such reasoning can be captured neatly by a generalized naïve skepticism. As noted above, naïve skeptics typically fall on either the dualistic or multiplistic stages of Perry's framework. These stages are naturally amenable to motivated reasoning. Those in multiplicity, for example, are predisposed to view all claims as equally reasonable and therefore have no reason to avoid favoring or discounting information, depending on how it comports with the skeptic's view. If all positions are equally reasonable, no alternative can be preferable to one's closely-held view based simply on the evidence.

Further, the motivated reasoning hypothesis seems especially promising for the dualist, whose tribal identity predisposes them towards bullshit acceptance because the bullshitter advances the tribal view, accurate or not. Thus, there is no distinction between Brian Ross's faulty reporting and accurate-but-unflattering coverage. Both are attacks on the tribe, and thus, both are fake news. Such tribalism seems especially salient in contemporary political culture, where one's political identification

increasingly serves as a point of ontological stability informing our core conception of who we are as individuals (Kinnvall, 2004; Mitzen, 2006).

A useful link may also be found between naïve skepticism and the intellectual laziness hypothesis. Recall that the skepticism under consideration is *naïve*, which is to say it is unsupported and adopted uncritically. Similarly, the intellectual laziness hypothesis supposes that bullshit openness is the result of a failure to engage appropriately and critically with available evidence. Thus, strategies for overcoming naïve skepticism by either directly providing students with evidence of their view's inappropriateness (e.g., confrontational strategies, discussed below) or creating an environment that allows for sustained critical engagement (e.g., cooperative strategies, discussed below) may be especially useful for those who accept bullshit not out of malice, but out of laziness.

Third, we may again draw a useful connection between the expressive responding hypothesis and naïve skepticism. For example, consider that some naïve skepticism is the result of students' commitment to diversity and tolerance. One way of cashing out such commitments is by adopting naïve skepticism; expressing such a position seems like what the respondent *ought* to say, rather than what they believe is true. Students' "commitment to good manners and tolerance" (Erion, 2005, p. 129) will naturally lead to naïvely skeptical expressions simply to adhere to social norms whether one believes the underlying claim or not.

We have all responded at one time or another with some version of "that may be true for you" despite our justified belief to the contrary simply to grease the skids of social cohesion. Similarly, when the bullshitter insists that the wall is being built, the inaugural crowd was record-breaking, or that Brexit is not the policy equivalent of

building a cheese submarine, the interlocutor—in an effort to avoid offense and be a team player—may voice agreement not out of genuine belief, but rather a desire to be polite, avoid offense, and signal membership in the wider group.

Such responses often reveal themselves after the fact when interlocutors are asked to share their views on the same subject at some later time. As Satris (1986) and Paden (1987, 1994) note in their discussions of naïve skepticism, students frequently and distressingly revert to naively skeptical views after being confronted with evidence that seemed to change their minds earlier, but in a way that did not stick, similar to results reported or hypothesized by Schaffner and Luks (2018) and Wood and Porter (2019).

Finally, we may draw a parallel between suggested strategies for combatting naïve skepticism and suggested strategies for combatting bullshit openness. Within the literature, two main strategies for combatting naïve skepticism have emerged. One, what I term the *confrontational strategy*, argues students' naïve skepticism is best overcome via direct confrontation.⁵ The second, what I term the *collaborative strategy*, argues that students are more likely to move past naïve skepticism when we create conditions that allow said students to genuinely interrogate their views and develop more robust views, skeptical or not.⁶ Both views echo strategies for combatting bullshit openness. For example, something like the confrontational stance is suggested by Pennycook and Rand (2018), while a roughly collaborative strategy has been offered as a response to fake news and alternative facts by Cooper (2019).

5. Applying generalized naïve skepticism to bullshit openness

⁵ See, e.g., (Hood, 2006; Paden, 1987, 1994; Satris, 1986; Talbot, 2012).

⁶ See, e.g., (Andre, 1983; Wright, 2019).

By broadening our account of naïve skepticism to draw out connections with bullshit openness, we can see that the root causes of such openness seem closely related to the conditions which give rise to naïve skepticism. Thus, when considering how we might respond to bullshitters and how we might combat bullshit openness, we may do well to consider whether and how strategies for overcoming naïve skepticism can inform the fight against bullshit.

In this section, I argue that the similarities discussed above point to three key takeaways that should inform our efforts to combat bullshit openness. First, we should recognize that bullshit openness is multiply realizable and therefore not a phenomenon with a monolithic cause. Second, we are more likely to find success in the fight against bullshit openness by employing a collaborative, rather than confrontational, strategy, despite the extra effort entailed by the collaborative strategy. Third, while there is some limited usefulness for social media in combatting bullshit openness, the short, declaratory nature of social media posts generally make them not amenable to fruitful anti-bullshit strategies.

5.1. Bullshit openness is multiply realizable and therefore not monolithic

One of the most important insights into naïve skepticism is the idea that such skepticism is multiply realizable. In other words, there are many ways and a variety of reasons to successfully engage in naïve skepticism. The idea that bullshit openness is multiply realizable is not always present in similar discussions of bullshit, though it ought to be.

Motivated reasoning, intellectual laziness, and expressive responding have each been suggested as either the primary or exclusive explanation for a willingness to

accept false claims, including via bullshit openness. Pennycook and Rand, for example, argue that “susceptibility to fake news is driven more by lazy thinking than partisan bias per se” (2018, p. 1) in an article simply titled, “Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning.” Nyhan and Reifler (2010) draw the opposite conclusion, arguing that their evidence shows that motivated reasoning, rather than intellectual laziness, is the primary explanation. Wood and Porter (2019) argue that motivated reasoning is an implausible explanation because they were unable to trigger the corresponding backfire effect, in which countervailing evidence causes one to believe more stridently in the original proposition. Schaffner and Luks argue that a primary benefit of their paper is the provision of a heretofore unavailable test for expressive responding—briefly, the failure to provide the obvious answer to a straightforwardly adjudicated question is evidence of expressive responding and not motivated reasoning or intellectual laziness⁷—which they argue explains the discrepancies in the Trump inaugural photo responses. Prior to such a test, they argue that it had “been difficult to adjudicate between these two contrasting explanations for misperceptions” (2018, p. 135).

Perhaps such claims are hyperbole intended to maximize snappiness in an era where even academia must worry about SEO;⁸ the above authors may ultimately hold

⁷ The respondents cannot be engaging in intellectually lazy behavior because the evidence is literally right in front of them. Schaffner and Luks argue that respondents are also not engaging in motivated reasoning because the facial unreasonableness of the corresponding belief (e.g., the belief that the Trump inaugural photo really has more people than the Obama inaugural) seems to rule out essentially anyone from genuinely holding the belief.

⁸ *Search engine optimization*, or SEO, is the practice of writing titles or headlines in order to maximize search engine-generated traffic. While academia does not contain the worst offenders (e.g., “Five stars who are huge jerks: You won’t believe number three!”), the increasing importance of scholarly search engines like Google Scholar, Academia.edu, and so forth prioritizes easily searchable and enticing titles.

more nuanced personal views. And perhaps further study really will reveal a primary or sole cause of bullshit acceptance. But at present, the evidence on offer does not suggest a singular cause. Rather, it seems consistent to accept that, like naïve skepticism, bullshit acceptance is multiply realizable with some accepting the bullshitter's claims out of laziness, some due to motivated reasoning, and some out of a desire to respond expressively.

Such a view makes a certain conceptual sense. People, both as individuals and as groups, form beliefs for a variety of reasons. For example, some believe in God because of seeming religious experiences, some as a result of cultural upbringing, and some as a result of logical argumentation. Some individuals believe via a combination of said reasons. Somewhat more poetically, if Whitman is large enough to contain multitudes, a population of Whitmans surely contains multitudes of multitudes, forming beliefs in similarly multitudinous ways. Thus, restricting ourselves to a singular explanation for a phenomenon like naïve skepticism or bullshit openness restricts our ability to combat these phenomena by restricting our understanding of the circumstances that lead to these phenomena. If we are to know what strategies are likely to be successful, we must first diagnose the underlying causes and not restrict ourselves narrowly and unnecessarily.

5.2. Collaborative strategies will generally be more fruitful than confrontational strategies, despite requiring extra effort

After arguing that bullshit openness is not a monolithic phenomenon, it would be inappropriate to suggest that confrontation can *never* bear fruit as a strategy.

Sometimes, the cold light of truth can compel a genuine change in views. However, if

we accept that the three theories discussed above are broadly correct, it seems that in most cases, confrontation is likely to either be unhelpful or actively undermine anti-bullshit efforts. When confronting naïve skepticism, confrontational strategies place us at a disadvantage because they recreate the conditions that make one amenable to such skepticism (Wright, 2019). The same may be said of bullshit acceptance.

If one is open to bullshit because one is engaging in motivated reasoning, simply being confronted with contrary evidence will not change the underlying motivations for one's reasoning. Similarly, contrary facts without any accompanying suggestion that interlocutors are, at some basic level, on the same team will not undermine the desire to express one's group membership via expressive responding. More generally, it is often the environment and one's basic commitments that lead to bullshit acceptance, rather than one's (lack of) command of the relevant facts (Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007). Only those open to direct provision of contravening evidence, such as some individuals captured by the intellectual laziness hypothesis (Pennycook & Rand, 2018) or willing to be corrected by members of their own in group (Berinsky, 2017), are likely to benefit from direct confrontation. Importantly, however, such individuals are already in a position that makes them open to collaboration.

Further, confrontational strategies rest on the idea that what is missing from the picture is merely a proper accounting of the facts. Research has shown that though factual beliefs are important, one's "interpretations of those beliefs count more" (Gaines et al., 2007, p. 981). Collaborative strategies like those discussed by Andre (1983) and Wright (2019) are able to move students past naïve skepticism because they create an environment where students are able to construct their own knowledge,

interpretations, and meaning, rather than having such meaning imposed on them. In such cases, the instructor is not an opponent so much as a facilitator and guide pointing students in helpful directions not because they are the expert entitled to the last word, but rather because they have been in a similar position and have come out on the other side with a more robust view.

Similarly, in the case of bullshit openness, a strategy that places the intervenor and the bullshit acceptor on the same side precludes having meaning imposed and instead allows for meaning to be constructed in an environment where fruitful avenues of exploration may be suggested but not insisted upon.⁹ Such a strategy may be especially useful in cases of expressive responding or when one wishes to be sensitive to the backfire effect, since both seem to be triggered by an inherently confrontational view of the discussion as it takes place. Motivated reasoning can break down when the motivations that lead to such reasoning are critically examined. Similarly, expressive responding can be mitigated when time is taken to show that an us-versus-them stance may be inappropriate in a particular context.

This preference for a collaborative, rather than confrontational, approach further suggests that any efforts to combat bullshit openness will not be quick fixes. The allure of confrontation is that bullshit may be overcome by swift, Tyson-like knockout. If Trump, for example, claims no one is leaving his rallies early, simply show footage of people leaving his rallies early. If the 2017 inaugural is claimed to be the largest ever, simply show photos of larger inaugurations. Creating and maintaining a collaborative environment, by contrast, requires significantly more time

⁹ For an example of this strategy in response to so-called “alternative facts,” see (Cooper, 2019).

and effort. We can make progress against bullshit, but such progress will not be instantaneous.

5.3. Fruitful approaches for combatting bullshit are not generally amenable to social media

Much of the fake news and bullshit discussed here has been propagated online. Trump, for example, is a Twitter user *par excellence* with nearly 60 million followers. Facebook served as a primary vector for fake news disseminated throughout the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, with at least 3,000 ads from Russian troll farms reaching over 126 million people (Shapiro, 2017). One might naturally ask whether, if social media is where so much bullshit is found, social media also ought to be the field on which the fight against bullshit is fought.

The answer, generally speaking, is no.

To add some nuance to this claim, social media is generally a poor front on which to fight against bullshit because of the nature of social media communication. While this claim may be applicable to varying degrees based on the medium itself—some evidence suggests that Twitter users are better informed and less susceptible to bullshit relative to Facebook users, for example (Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2017)—the general point holds. Setting aside evidence that suggests electronic devices negatively affect our cognitive capacities (Barr, Pennycook, Stolz, & Fugelsang, 2015; Ward, Duke, Gneezy, & Bos, 2017) or that the internet's basic structure generally promotes the spread of misinformation (Marsh & Rajaram, 2019), the inherent features of social media as a communication platform, especially its focus on short, declarative statements and the networks with which users engage, are features that make bullshit

easier to spread and harder to combat. There is a reason Russian intelligence targeted social media prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

As Borah (2012) sums up her research into social media interaction, where we get our information matters; on social media, uncivil interactions cause participants to become more certain and less open-minded while concurrently becoming more willing to participate in online interaction. Further, exposure to uncivil social media behavior lowers participant expectations that said platforms can be used to create a deliberative environment (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014). Put somewhat differently, incivility online tends to beget further incivility that lowers users' expectations that a particular medium can be a source of reasoned discourse, rather than a collaborative environment previously suggested as more effective at combatting bullshit openness.

Part of this negativity may be related to psychological motivations discussed earlier. However, it seems plausible that some blame lies with the nature of the medium itself. Twitter, for example, limits posts to 280 characters, which makes nuanced argument difficult. In the parlance of our times, it is much easier to dunk on¹⁰ or ratio¹¹ a problematic tweet than engage with it in an effort to create a collaborative environment enabling sustained interrogation. For example, the first ten replies to Trump's complaint that 92% of media coverage is negative (Trump, 2019d) include a

¹⁰ To "dunk on" a comment is to provide a forceful response that fundamentally undermines or defeats the purpose of the original comment. For example, in response to Denise McAllister's complaint about the American television show *The View* being a "roundtable of delusional mental midgets ricocheting ignorance and lack of emotional regulation" (McAllister, 2019), Meghan McCain, one of the show's cohosts, was widely viewed as dunking on McAllister by simply replying, "you were at my wedding, Denise.... [sic]" (McCain, 2019).

¹¹ A tweet is "ratioed" when the number of comments on said tweet drastically outnumbers both retweets and likes, suggesting that the tweet is far more disliked than liked, to the point where the relationship between comments and likes/retweets can be expressed in a ratio. Presumably, if the comments were positive, commenters would also like and/or retweet the original tweet. Some Twitter users will contribute to a Tweet's ratio by simply commenting to the effect of "I'm just here for the ratio" (see, e.g., [Gannon, 2019].)

declaration that that “100% of the crap you do is negative!” (Krassenstein, 2018),¹² a suggestion that Trump is illiterate (Feral, 2018), a picture of Jesus wearing a Make America Great Again hat with a caption suggesting that—to paraphrase—those who have not slept with adult film stars immediately following the birth of their fifth child by their third marriage should cast the first stone (Summers, 2018), and a simple “F*ck you” (Hartshorne, 2018). An environment for sustained collaborative interrogation of one’s underlying assumptions this is not.

To be sure, there are exceptions, like historian Kevin Kruse, who have used Twitter threads as vibrant documents with links to primary sources, additional threads providing further detail, and other citations. For example, consider Kruse’s response to the claim that a greater percentage of congressional Republicans than Democrats voted for the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts and thus were the true party of civil rights.¹³ The thread containing Kruse’s argument that such a claim was disingenuous included a link to a further thread discussing the ideological split on race among 1960s Democrats (Kruse, 2018a); videos of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson calling for the Civil Rights Act (Kruse, 2018c) and Voting Rights Act (Kruse, 2018d), respectively; and links to the official Republican platforms from the 1960, 1964, and 1968 elections illustrating the party’s deemphasis of civil rights as the Goldwater wing of the party

¹² As if to prove the point that Twitter is not a medium for sustained, good-faith discourse, Krassenstein (@EdKrassen) and his brother, Brian Krassenstein (@krassenstein), were permanently banned from Twitter for sockpuppeting (i.e., maintaining multiple accounts under the guise that they were operated by different individuals) and purchasing interactions in an effort to publicize their antagonism of Trump (Concha, 2019).

¹³ Briefly, both bills were called for and championed by Democratic administrations, though both pro- and anti-segregationist voices existed in both parties, largely along geographic lines. The 1960s saw such differences sorted via intra-party debates and ultimately concluded with Democrats generally in favor of civil rights legislation and Republicans generally opposed.

triumphed in the Republicans' ideological debate over race and civil rights (Kruse, 2018b).

Such efforts are undermined by one's ability to self-select one's social media circle by blocking, unfriending, muting, or simply not following off-putting voices in a way that is not always an option in face-to-face interactions. My students can block me on Twitter or not friend me on Facebook, for example, but they cannot avoid me in real life except by withdrawing from my class. Similarly, Kruse can make his points effectively and unavoidably for his students at Princeton, but there is little reason to suppose that his arguments will reach beyond a circle of Twitter users who largely already agree with him.

Indeed, 'blocked by x' is a frequent badge of honor on many Twitter profiles, as though actions that break down a community are worthy of praise. This is not to say, of course, that we should never block or mute anyone or that we should listen to all voices; some accounts are trolls, and some actors act in bad faith. Such actors, in many cases, ought not have a seat at the table other than as an example of how not to behave. But when it comes to creating a sustained environment of meaningful engagement that allows us to critically interrogate views in an effort to overcome our bullshit openness, such exclusion should not be celebrated. If I were blocked by Trump tomorrow, my celebrating this fact would signal either that I have proved so trollish that Trump simply grew tired of me or that I speak truths too hot for Trump to handle. Neither indicates the sort of community building the collaborative strategy suggests will be most successful in fighting bullshit.

Further, threads like Kruse's essentially involve becoming an expert at bending Twitter or Facebook as a platform to one's will and against their intended uses.

Kruse's thread on the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, for example, require stringing multiple tweets together to create a longer-form piece of writing than the platform is ideally designed to support—the ability to even add additional tweets as a thread instead of as a lengthy reply chain was only added in late 2017—and seems more obviously suited for other platforms not predicated on the concept of microblogging.

Ultimately, how we ought to precisely marshal our resources to combat bullshit openness is a question I shall leave open in the interest of space. But what I hope I have shown is that however those resources are marshalled, focusing on social media as an important and fruitful front in the fight against bullshit is misguided. Just as there may be some limited role for direct confrontation, there may be some limited role for social media. But also, just as direct confrontation is not preferable because of the challenges it inherently poses, the inherent nature of social medial platforms as networks inhospitable to sustained collaborative community building make them ill-suited fields on which to engage bullshitters.

6. Conclusion

Prevailing in the fight against bullshit and our openness to it is vital for a functioning liberal democracy. We cannot act collectively towards common goals and common goods without first having a broadly shared understanding of what the facts are.

Bullshit like fake news obscures these facts, often in the name of narrow self-interest.

Bullshit generally and fake news specifically are not new phenomena, but the speed at which social media has allowed their spread has made the fight against bullshit all the more urgent. I have argued that this fight ought to be informed by

academic strategies for overcoming naïve skepticism on the grounds that there are important parallels between both naïve skepticism and bullshit acceptance. Doing so allows us to draw vital lessons from the fight against naïve skepticism and apply them to our fight against bullshit, which I argue leads to three main takeaways. First, the root causes of bullshit acceptance are not monolithic. Second, collaborative strategies are more likely to be successful despite their prolonged nature precluding a quick fix for the problem of bullshit. Third, though social media has been the source of much bullshit and fake news, the nature of social media platforms makes them a particularly ill-suited place from which to combat bullshit openness.

If we are to dig ourselves out from under all of this bullshit, one of the first things we should figure out is how. By applying the takeaways I have suggested in this essay, we can start to see the direction in which we ought to dig.

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Trump, D. [@realdonaldtrump]. (2017f, December 24). The Fake News refuses to talk about how Big and how Strong our BASE is. They show Fake Polls just like they report Fake News. Despite only negative reporting, we are doing well - nobody is going to beat us. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN! [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/944927689638662145>

Trump, D. [@realdonaldtrump]. (2018a, May 9). The Fake News is working overtime. Just reported that, despite the tremendous success we are having with the economy & all things else, 91% of the Network News about me is negative (Fake). Why do we work so hard in working with the media when it is corrupt? Take away credentials? [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/994179864436596736>

Trump, D. [@realdonaldtrump]. (2018b, October 31). Melania and I were treated very nicely yesterday in Pittsburgh. The Office of the President was shown great

respect on a very sad & solemn day. We were treated so warmly. Small protest was not seen by us, staged far away. The Fake News stories were just the opposite-Disgraceful! [Tweet]. Retrieved from

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1057620518751428608>

Trump, D. [@realDonaldTrump]. (2018c, November 16). People are not being told that the Republican Party is on track to pick up two seats in the U.S. Senate, and epic victory: 53 to 47. The Fake News Media only wants to speak of the House, where the Midterm results were better than other sitting Presidents. [Tweet].

Retrieved from

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1063517548258447361>

Trump, D. [@realDonaldTrump]. (2019a, March 8). The Wall is being built and is well under construction. Big impact will be made. Many additional contracts are close to being signed. Far ahead of schedule despite all of the Democrat Obstruction and Fake News! [Tweet]. Retrieved from

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1103994805477085186>

Trump, D. [@realDonaldTrump]. (2019b, March 11). At a recent round table meeting of business executives, & long after formally introducing Tim Cook of Apple, I quickly referred to Tim + Apple as Tim/Apple as an easy way to save time & words. The Fake News was disparagingly all over this, & it became yet another bad Trump story! [Tweet]. Retrieved from

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1105109329290686464>

Trump, D. [@realDonaldTrump]. (2019c, April 9). The New York Times had no legitimate sources, which would be totally illegal, concerning the Mueller Report. In fact, they probably had no sources at all! They are a Fake News

- paper who have already been forced to apologize for their incorrect and very bad reporting on me! [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1113819627212169219>
- Trump, D. [@realDonaldTrump]. (2019d, October 10). Despite so many positive events and victories, Media Reseach Center reports that 92% of stories on Donald Trump are negative on ABC, CBS and ABC. It is FAKE NEWS! Don't worry, the Failing New York Times didn't even put the Brett Kavanaugh victory on the Front Page yesterday-A17! [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1050008315286171648>
- Wang, V. (2019, December 2). ABC Suspends Reporter Brian Ross Over Erroneous Report About Trump. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/02/us/brian-ross-suspended-abc.html>
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