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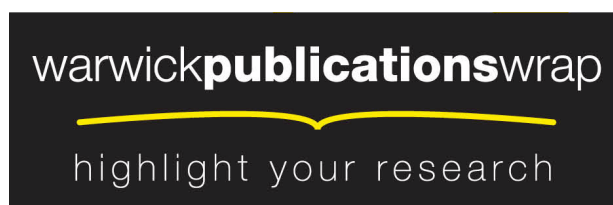
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### On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: notes from the British case

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## On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: notes from the British case

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In 2005, Harry G. Frankfurt, a retired professor of moral philosophy at Princeton University, made it into the best-sellers chart with his book *On Bullshit*. Taking his essay as its starting point, this article explores the analysis of bullshit and the prevalence of bullshitting in the contemporary public sphere. Frankfurt's short essay indeed provides 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, the article aims to show that many of the key actors in the cultural policy debate indeed display the 'indifference to how things really are' and the cultivation of vested interests which Frankfurt attributes to the activity of bullshitting. The final part of the text discusses the implications of the present *status quo* for 'critical' cultural policy research.

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

### Introduction

This article 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' (Black 1983, Bailey 1988), 'mumbo-jumbo' (Wheen 2004), 'hot air' (Frankfurt 2005, pp. 42–43), 'gobbledygook',<sup>1</sup> 'claptrap' (Arnold 1993, p. 116) and 'balderdash' (Rothbard 1989, p. 53), that have all been seen to dominate the modern public domain will be discussed in greater detail later. However, the article 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 article 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' (p. 34), as well as the cultivation of vested

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interests that Frankfurt attributes to the process of bullshitting. The last section of the article 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. Frankfurt's *On Bullshit*

The popular acclaim and commercial success that welcomed the publication, in 2005, of Harry G. Frankfurt's essay *On Bullshit* is, without doubt, an interesting publishing case (Younge 2005). It seems particularly significant that, whilst its record sales testify 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*. 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-publish the treatise almost 20 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.

### 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, p. 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: think, for instance, of the few insincerities and misleading statements which tact and every-day polite conversation rely on.

Adler (1997, p. 440) explains 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 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 suggestion 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 than that 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 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, emphasis in original). 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. 47–48).

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. 55–56).

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. 55–56)

Frankfurt makes it clear that bullshitting is not just intentional, and borne out of a careless attitude towards truth, but that it is motivated by the pursuit of the bullshitter's interests and personal advantage. Frankfurt argues that the bullshitter 'is also trying to get away with something' (p. 23), for there is always a goal behind his or her expediency. Therefore, Frankfurt's moral concern is that, in a society which tolerates bullshitting and considers it less morally reprehensible than lying, the resulting temptation to make whatever statement or declaration suits one's personal interests would, in time, have a damaging effect. Indeed, the tolerance of bullshitting might eventually erode people's regard for the way that things *really* are, thus compromising 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 article 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 and 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, p. 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 truthfulness in the midst of political struggles. Some commentators have gone as far as suggesting that mendacity might in fact be intrinsic to politics itself. So, for Barnes (1994, p. 30), ‘[t]hose who spend their lives in this context [politics] become skilled at lying; it is a requirement for occupational success’. 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 (Osborne 2005, p. 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, pp. 173–174), and a growing sense of unease has spread for the perceived prevalence of ‘spin’, bullshit and deception in political discourse. Commentators have highlighted the *systemic* and entrenched nature that political lying has assumed over the past quarter of a century, concluding that we now live in a ‘post-truth political environment’ (Osborne 2005, p. 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’ (p. 6). This seems confirmed by studies of public opinion which point to a crisis of trust and confidence in politicians, professionals and public institutions (Bok 1978, p. xvii, O’Hara 2004). This widespread perception has moved philosopher Onora O’Neill (2002, p. 8) to suggest that we seem to be facing a ‘crisis of public trust’.

These arguments are granted great poignancy by the recent case of the war on Iraq, and the extent to which the case 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. 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 article to enumerate and discuss.<sup>2</sup>

However, is bullshit really on the rise? Frankfurt himself (2005, p. 62) adopts a certain caution, and suggests that ‘it is impossible to be sure that there is 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, Osborne 2007).

In order to better understand contemporary political life and the role of the communication 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 in order to maximise the effect of political messages and minimise 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 delivers 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. As early as in 1946, in an essay entitled 'Politics and the English Language' George Orwell 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). 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 sound 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.<sup>3</sup>

### **Bullshit in cultural policy: the British case**

This study aims 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 – one of the defining themes of cultural policy in Britain and beyond over the past 10–15 years. 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.

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 the several Policy Action Teams set up by the government to ensure that each government department gave a full contribution to 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 to 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, p. 6). 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, p. 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, pp. 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, p. 135) cited extensively some (now discredited (Belfiore 2002, Merli 2002, Selwood 2002a)) statistics derived from Matarasso’s (1997) influential report *Use or 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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 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 readily admits 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 selectively and strategically to build a case for the arts, sidestepping the more complicated and potentially controversial matter of cultural value, thus making 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 allocation. 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 (on account of having built his case for the arts on what he knew to be, in reality, ‘not the whole story’). I am also suggesting that Smith’s shrewd and selective 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’.

Smith’s passages cited above seem also to endorse that acceptance of fibbing for the ‘public good’ that was discussed earlier, and an adoption of a ‘consequentialist’<sup>5</sup> 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, the bullshitter ‘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 'statisticulation' as that outlined by Smith in the speech cited 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, performance measurement and the resulting statistics are used as 'ammunition'<sup>6</sup> 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' (Jowell 2002). 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 a perceived 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 ills afflicting the disadvantaged young.

So, Jowell (p. 3) openly claims that one of the main tasks of government in today's society is to eliminate 'the poverty of aspiration which compromises all our attempts to lift people out of physical poverty. Engagement with culture can help alleviate this poverty of aspiration'. The centrality of this task of which culture is responsible for is clearly articulated: 'Addressing poverty of aspiration is also necessary to build a society of fairness and opportunities' (p. 15). This really seems just a different version of the instrumental arguments of old rather than the bold rejection of instrumentality it was taken to represent by commentators (see, for instance, Fenton 2004). I would suggest that this final statement contradicts Jowell's own opening statement for the need, in cultural policy, to 'celebrat[e] what culture actually does in and of itself' (p. 8). For, if the arts can and should address poverty of aspiration (as ostensibly Jowell is arguing), and addressing poverty of aspiration can bring about a just society, then the arts and culture are entrusted with the task of bringing about the conditions for such a 'society of fairness ad opportunities' (p. 15) to exist, and they appear to be valued precisely for their capacity to 'deliver' on this non-aesthetic, non-artistic level. Hence we are back to valuing the arts and culture for the beneficial impacts they allegedly have on society.

Furthermore, 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, for all the evaluation and performance measurement requirements imposed on the sector, such incontrovertible evidence of impact simply is *not* there (Selwood 2006).<sup>7</sup> 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.

More recently, James Purnell, during his brief six-month stint as Culture Secretary<sup>8</sup> 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, in fact, still strongly linked to educational levels and class status<sup>9</sup> – 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, p. 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'.

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, p. 9). The sector interpreted this as signalling 'a change in direction over Public Service Agreements targets (PSAs) for the arts'.<sup>10</sup> 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'.<sup>11</sup> 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 regulations 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, p. 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' (Purnell 2007, p. 9) (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 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). At the heart of the notion of ‘performance paradox’, indeed, 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 text 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 an article 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 which is ‘by nature *unclarifiable*’ (p. 322). 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).

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 post-colonial 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 article, 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 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 budgets (Belfiore and Bennett 2007a, 2008). Despite the current rhetorical emphasis on evidence-based policy, the set of assumptions outlined above, which has so far inspired cultural policy-making, find no firm 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, (Belfiore 2002, Merli 2002, Selwood 2002b) 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* these 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, p. 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 programmes for children living in poverty,

47% of respondents would have welcomed 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’ (p. 3). 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 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 researchers in this field, as part of their 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 article, 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’, ‘disinterestedness’ and ‘organized skepticism’ (in Kane 1998, p. 118). Whilst objectivity and neutrality from one’s values and (often unconscious) intellectual prejudices are an unattainable goal for the researcher, the notion of ‘disinterestedness’ 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 area of research.

Cultural policy studies is a relatively young field of enquiry (Kawashima 1999), yet in many respects, it has come a long way in a very short time. However, in order for the field to continue to develop in interesting and original ways, we need to reinforce the notion of a ‘critical research ethos’. ‘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 describe, explore and illuminate complex issues around the role and condition of culture, cultural production, consumption and administration in contemporary society.

According to policy theorist Diana Stone (2001, pp. 13–14), while disinterested research can be relevant to the policy process, its primary function of is to pursue knowledge for knowledge’s sake: ‘Most of [disinterested] researchers operate outside or on the margins of policy-making. They are likely to be unconcerned with the policy applications of their research, and to focus on scientific discovery, analysis or critique’ (p. 14). Disinterested research, thus, 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, p. 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'. 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 article. 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 uninterrupted 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 '10 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 regard 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* and the seeking of personal advantage are central in distinguishing simple incorrect information from mendacity.<sup>13</sup> 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 work. 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 universities 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 (Blunkett 2000). 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 projects as one of the criteria used to decide on the allocation of research funding (Research Councils UK 2006, 2007). The implications 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, p. 5) political communication relies in the 'new public'. Undesirable (or just not immediately policy-relevant) research agendas might therefore become more difficult to pursue.

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 article advocates, it seems certainly true that – paraphrasing what Ernest Hemingway noted about writers – 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, p. 1).

## Notes

1. Watson (2003) and Scruton (2004); on gobbledygook (or gobbledegook) in bureaucratic jargon, see Flesch (1945) and Vernon (1980).
2. See for instance: Chomsky (2002), Corn (2003), Fritz *et al.* (2004), Lloyd (2004), Miller (2004), Osborne (2005, 2007), Maltese (2006).
3. Policy analysts and academic researchers have been exploring the production of bullshit in other areas of policy too, especially those that have become heavily reliant on highly specialised technical and scientific advice. Douglas (2006), for instance, through her discussion of the highly politicised way in which recent climate records have been used in the debate over climate change, highlights the worrying impact of ‘pseudoscience’, ‘junk science’ and ‘politicised science’ on public and policy debates around controversial issues such as global warming and the effects of toxic substances on animals and humans. Similar concerns over the misleading representation, interpretation or the selective reporting of scientific findings have also been raised within the medical community, especially in areas that are controversial and politically charged, such as abortion and its psychological effects, or the side effects of vaccination (Major 2003, Batty and Boseley 2007).
4. Matarasso’s report and its statistics featured quite often in Smith’s speeches (see Merli 2002).
5. ‘Consequentialism’ is a broad term to refer to those ethical theories that posit that the consequences of an action are the legitimate basis for its moral assessment.
6. 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, p. 189).
7. The lack of robust evidence of impact has been acknowledged by the government itself. For example, in a policy document entitled *Culture at the Heart of Regeneration*, DCMS (2004) openly stated that: ‘There is a need to strengthen provision for planning and evaluation and to invest in the measurement of long-term impact’ (p. 34). Nevertheless – despite the recognition that extant evidence of impact is still not adequate – in 2008, James Purnell’s foreword to the influential policy review conducted by Sir Brian McMaster (2008) confidently declared that: ‘the very best art and culture ... has the power to change people’s lives, regardless of class, education or ethnicity’ (p. 4). Similarly, references to the (as of yet unsubstantiated) belief in the powers of the arts to transform people and their lives are dotted throughout the review.
8. Purnell became Secretary of State for Culture in June 2007, and was later appointed Work and Pensions Secretary in January 2008.
9. See Belfiore and Bennett 2007b, pp. 253–256 for a discussion of this data.
10. This is the opening line of the cover article of issue 150 of the publication *ArtsProfessional*, 16 July 2007.
11. [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about\\_the\\_cabinet\\_office/publicserviceagreements.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about_the_cabinet_office/publicserviceagreements.aspx)
12. Purnell was right in identifying the shortcomings of ‘targetolatry’, but his indictment of the over-reliance on measurement seemed to originate more from a desire to score political points with a frustrated arts community than from a clearly articulated alternative, which in fact was never put forward.
13. This account, therefore, does not explain the very common phenomenon of ‘bullshit’ which is produced in complete intellectual honesty and with no intention to mislead. I would direct the reader to Sigrid Røyseng’s (2008) elaboration of the notion of ‘ritual cultural policy’ for a very plausible explanation of the origin of this kind of ‘benign’ bullshit in the arena of cultural policy.

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