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"Bullshit and the Art of Crap -Detection"
by Neil Postman

With a title like this, I think I ought to dispense with the rhetorical amenities and come straight to the point. And I almost will. *Almost*, because I want to make two brief comments about the title. For those of you who do now know, it may be worth saying that the phrase, "crap-detecting," originated with Mr. Ernest Hemingway who when asked if there were one quality needed, above all others, to be a good writer, replied, "Yes, a built-in, shock-proof, crap detector." I am sure he was right; as I am also sure that his reply is equally applicable to at least two dozen other questions, among which is the question, "What is the one thing you need in order to survive a professional conference?" If any of you requires further information on the origins of the word "crap," may I refer you to the December 1st issue of *Newsweek Magazine*, p. 63, in which there is a full page story devoted to Thomas Crapper, the father of the modern toilet.

As for the word in the first part of my title, it has no such illustrious beginning. So far as I can find out it was spread, if not originated, by Gypsies about a hundred years ago, and may be having its most glorious moment at this convention--for, as you can well imagine, this is the first time it has appeared in print in an official program produced by and for the English teachers of our nation. I trust that lexicographers of all persuasions will take not of that fact, since in that way, I might, at long last, make some contribution to the subject of linguistics.

Now, to the point. As I see it, the best things schools can do for kids is to help them learn how to distinguish useful talk from bullshit. I think almost all serious people understand that about 90% of all that goes on in school is practically useless, so what I am saying would not require the displacement of anything that is especially worthwhile. Even if it did, I would still be able to argue that helping kids to activate their crap-detectors should take precedence over any other legitimate educational aim. I won't attempt such arguments here because of the lack of time. Instead, I will ask only that you agree that every day in almost every way people are exposed to more bullshit than it is healthy for them to endure, and that if we can help them to recognize this fact, they might turn away from it and *toward* language that might do them some earthly good.

Thus, my main purpose this afternoon is to introduce the subject of bullshit to the NCTE. It is a subject, one might say, that needs no introduction to the NCTE, but I want to do it in a way that would allow bullshit to take its place alongside our literary heritage, grammatical theory, the topic sentence, and correct usage as part of the content of English instruction. For this reason, I will have to use 15 minutes or so of your time to discuss the taxonomy of bullshit. It is important for you to pay close attention to this, since I am going to give a quiz at the conclusion.

Now, there are so many varieties of bullshit and, again time is so limited, that I couldn't hope to mention but a few, and elaborate on even fewer. I will, therefore, select those varieties that have some transcendent significance. Now, that last sentence is a perfectly good example of bullshit, since I have no idea what the words "transcendent significance" might mean and neither do you. I needed something to end that sentence with and since I did not have any clear criteria by which to select my examples, I figured this was the place for some big-time words. Thus, we have our first variety of bullshit--what some people call, pomposity. The title or theme of this conference--Dreams and Realities--is another good example of pomposity. In the first place, I find it very difficult to believe that any group of English teachers can be all that familiar with what most people call "reality." It is a fair guess that there are very few people living on this planet who regard as "real" the things most English teachers like to talk about and the fact that English teachers have not generally noticed this may be of transcendent significance.

In the second place, I don't know what "dreams and realities" is intended to mean. I do not deny that it is a classy phrase, but it does challenge one to task, whose dreams? And whose realities? Surely not those of the thousands of black kids who go to school in this city. Or for that matter, kids anyplace. Perhaps it refers to the dreams and realities of English teachers, in which case, we probably should translate the phrase to read, "Our aims and our failures." Not classy, but more to the point. In any event, the phase is not worth dwelling upon except to say that it is a good example of the triumph of style over substance, which is the essence of pomposity.

Now, pomposity is not an especially venal form of bullshit, although it is by no means harmless. There are plenty of people who are daily victimized by pomposity in that they are made to feel less worthy than they have a right to feel by people who use fancy titles, words, phrases, and sentences to obscure their own insufficiencies. Many people in our profession dwell almost exclusively in the realms of pomposity, and quite literally, would be unable to function, if not for the fact that our profession has made respectable this form of bullshit. With the possible exception of the field known as educational administration, English teaching probably includes more pompous language than (you ready for this?) any other "discipline." If you have some doubts about this, may I suggest that you review the NCTE Convention programs of the past ten years. I may be mistaken, but I am under the impression that some years ago someone gave a speech entitled, "The phoneme--Whither goest?"

A much more malignant form of bullshit than pomposity is what some people call fanaticism. Now, there is one type of fanaticism of which I will say very little, because it is so vulgar and obvious. I am referring to what is called bigotry. With a few exceptions, such as Spiro Agnew, most people know that statements like, "Niggers are lazy" or "Fat Japs are treacherous" are deadly and ignorant, and not to be taken seriously. I want only to remark here that some of us who should know better have been slow to recognize that at least as much bullshit is generated by H. Rap Brown as by, say, Agnew. Statements like "Cops are racist pigs" make no more sense than any other form of bigotry. And I would include in this the statement that "Black is beautiful." *That* is bigoted bullshit no matter who it comes from or how righteous his cause. I can assure you that the great proletarian revolution will be hastened, no retarded, by acknowledging that black men are as capable of generating bullshit as white men.

But there are other forms of fanaticism that are not so obvious, and therefore perhaps more dangerous than bigotry, and one of them is what I can Eichmannism. Now, Eichmannism is a relatively new form of fanaticism, and perhaps it should be given its own special place among the great and near-great varieties of bullshit. At this point, I would judge it to be a branch of fanaticism, because the essence

of fanaticism is that it has almost no tolerance for any data that do not confirm its own point of view. Here I want to provide an example of Eichmannism so that you will see why I think it is essentially fanatical. The example also points to, I think, some singular characteristics of Eichmannism.

Some months ago a young man presented himself to me requesting to be admitted to a Masters Degree program in communications offered by my university. He is the author of an intriguing book on the subject of media and cybernation. He has written a half-dozen articles on the subject, has lectured at major universities in this country and abroad, and was the principal investigator of an extensive research effort into the relationship of television and sensory bias. There was one difficulty. He does not have what is called a Bachelors Degree. I was not entirely sure why he wanted a Masters Degree, but it seemed perfectly clear that he was "intellectually capable" of pursuing such studies. I will not report on the various episodes that followed my request that he be accepted into the M.A. program. They are both boring and hideous. Here was the result: His application was denied because, and I quote, "by definition, one cannot be qualified for an M.A. program unless he holds a Bachelors degree." And there you have the essence of Eichmannism. Eichmannism is that form of bullshit which accepts as its starting and ending point official definitions, rules, and categories without regard for the realities of particular situations. It is also important to say that the language of Eichmannism, unlike other varieties of fanaticism, is almost always polite, subdued, and seemingly neutral. A friend of mine actually received a letter from a mini-Eichmann which began-- "We are pleased to inform you that your scholarship for the academic year 1968-69 has been cancelled."

In other words, Eichmannism is especially dangerous because, as Hannah Arendt has shown us, it is so utterly banal. That means, among other things, that some of the nicest people turn out to be mini-Eichmanns. When Eichmann was in the dock in Jerusalem, he actually said that some of his best friends were Jews. And the horror of it is that he was probably telling the truth, for there is nothing *personal* about Eichmannism. It is the language of regulations, and includes such logical sentences as, "If we do it for one, we have to do it for all." Can you imagine some wretched Jew pleading to have his children spared from the gas chamber? What could be more fair, more neutral, than for some administrator to reply, "If we do it for one, we have to do it for all."

One final point about Eichmannism, and I would like to state it as Postman's First Law--so perhaps you will want to write this down: "*Everyone* is potentially somebody else's Eichmann. So be careful." Postman's Second Law is: "Everyone is *already* somebody else's Eichmann. You weren't careful enough."

There are two other dreadful varieties of bullshit that require more than a word or two of explanation, and one of them is what may be called *inanity*. This is a form of talk which pays a large but, I would think, relatively harmless role in our *personal* lives. But with the development of the mass media, inanity has suddenly emerged as a major form of language in public matters. The invention of new and various kinds of communication has given a voice and an audience to many people whose opinions would otherwise not be solicited, and who, in fact, have little else but verbal excrement to contribute to public issues. Many of these people are entertainers, such as Johnny Carson, Hugh Downs, Joey Bishop, David Susskind, Ronald Regan, Barbara Walters, and Joe Garagiola. Before the communications' revolution, their public utterances would have been limited almost exclusively to sentences composed by more knowledgeable people or they would have had no opportunity to make public utterances at all. Things being what they are, the press and air waves are filled with the featured and prime-time sentences of people who are in no position to render informed judgments on what they are talking about and yet render them with élan and, above all, sincerity: like Joey Bishop on the sociological implications of drugs, Ronald Regan on educational innovation, Johnny Carson on campus unrest, David Susskind on anything, and Hugh Downs on menopause. "Menopause," he said once, "is a controversial subject." (This statement prompted a postcard from me on which I asked if he was for it or against it.) Inanity, then, is ignorance presented in the cloak of sincerity, and it differs from the last variety of bullshit that I want to mention, namely, *superstition*, in that superstition is ignorance presented in the cloak of authority. A superstition is a belief, usually expressed in authoritative terms for which there is no factual or scientific basis. Like, for instance, that the country in which you live is a finer place, all things considered, than other countries. Or that the religion into which you were born confers upon you some special standing with the cosmos that is denied other people.

Our own profession has generated, of course, dozens of superstitions, on which, incidentally, many professional conferences have been based. Among the more intriguing of these are the beliefs that people learn more efficiently when they are taught in an orderly, sequential and systematic manner; that one's knowledge of anything can be "objectively" measured; and even that the act of "teaching" facilitates what is known as "learning." By far, the most amusing of all our superstitions is the belief, expressed in a variety of ways, that the study of literature and other humanistic subjects will result in one's becoming a more decent, liberal, tolerant, and civilized human being. Whenever a professor of literature alludes to this bullshit in my presence, I invariably think of the Minister of Propaganda for the Third Reich and the ideological head of the Nazi Party, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, who at the age of 24 received his Ph.D. in Romantic Drama at the University of Heidelberg. Sometimes, I even think of the professor of literature himself, and wonder if he would dare offer his own life as an illustration of the benefits that will accrue from humanistic studies. In any case, I have not noticed that English teachers are any more humane than, say, garage mechanics or certified public accountants.

There are, as I said earlier, dozens of other forms of bullshit, including several varieties I have been using in this speech. Perhaps my most obvious is what might be called earthiness, which is based on the assumption that if one uses direct, off-color, four letter words like crap and shit, one somehow is making more sense than if he observed the proper language customs. Earthiness is the mirror image of pomposity, and like it, rarely advances human understanding although, naturally, there are times when it does, as in the present instance. In any event, I must now refrain from mentioning any other varieties because inevitably we must come to the question: What, if anything, can be done about all this bullshit? Well, the first thing to say is that we should not expect too much to be done in school, no matter what teachers do. As Carl Rogers has said, teaching is a vastly overrated activity; and any impression to the contrary is, in my opinion, mostly superstition.

In the second place, teachers--especially English teachers--have not shown up to now a serious interest in educating children in the rational, functional, or

human uses of language, which is probably why we know so little about how to do it. When teachers do take an interest in language at all, they are usually drawn to something like phonemics or tagmemics, which serves the purpose of providing them with a respectable exemption from dealing with what language is *about*. Such teachers usually say things like, "I am interested in studying language qua language." I will resist the temptation to comment on that, except to say that when I hear such talk by own crap-detector achieves unparalleled spasms of activity. In the third place, even if teachers were to take an enthusiastic interest in what language is about, each teacher would have fairly serious problems to resolve. For instance, you can't identify bullshit the way you identify phonemes. That is why I have called crap-detecting an art. Although subjects like semantics, rhetoric, or logic seem to provide techniques for crap-detecting, we are not dealing here, for the most part, with a technical problem. Each man's crap-detector is embedded in his value system; if you want to teach the art of crap-detecting, you must help students become aware of their values.

After all, Spiro Agnew, or his writers, know as much about semantics as anyone in this room. What he is lacking has very little to do with technique, and almost everything to do with values.

Now, I realize that what I just said sounds fairly pompous in itself, if not arrogant, but there is no escaping from saying what attitudes you value if you want to talk about crap-detecting. In other words, bullshit is what you call language that treats people in ways you do not approve of.

So any teacher who is interested in crap-detecting must acknowledge that one man's bullshit is another man's catechism. If you will keep in mind that I understand this perfectly well, I will ven-ture to say what are some of the attitudes that both teachers and students would have to learn if they are to help each other to recognize everyone's bullshit, including their own.

It seems to me one needs, first and foremost, to have a keen sense of the ridiculous. Maybe I mean to say, a sense of our impending death. About the only advantage that comes from our knowledge of the inevitability of death is that we know that whatever is happening is going to go away. Most of us try to put this thought out of our minds, but I am saying that it ought to be kept firmly there, so that we can fully appreciate how ridiculous most of our enthusiasms and even depressions are. I am not saying, of course, that nothing matters; but if the thought keeps crossing your mind that you will be dead soon, it is hard to work up any passion for such questions as: What are the implications of transformational grammar for the teaching of writing? Reflections on one's mortality curiously make one come alive to the incredible amounts of inanity and fanaticism that surround us, much of which is inflicted on us by ourselves. Which brings me to the next point, best stated as Postman's Third Law: "At any given time, the chief source of bullshit with which you have to contend is yourself." The reason for this is explained in Postman's Fourth Law, which is that almost nothing is about what you think it is about--including you. With the possible exception of those human encounters that Fritz Peris calls "intimacy," all human communications have deeply imbedded and profound hidden agendas. Most of the conversation at the top can be assumed to be bullshit of one variety or another. For instance, if you think that my main reason for giving this talk today is to make some contribution to the teaching of English profession, then your crap-detector needs to go back to the shop. If it doesn't get fixed, you may even get to believe that the main reason you came to this conference was to learn something that will be professionally valuable to you. You have to keep remembering that *that* is only what you told your boss in order to get a few dollars and/or permission to come. Now, there is no problem here as long as you recognize all that as bullshit, and yourself as its source. This is why, incidentally, it is almost always better to deal with a corrupt man than with an idealist. A corrupt man knows all about bullshit, especially his own; which is another way of saying, he has a sense of humor. An idealist usually cannot acknowledge his own bullshit, because it is in the nature of his "ism" that he must pretend it does not exist. In fact, I should say that anyone who is devoted to an "ism"--Fascism, Communism, Capital-ism--probably has a seriously defective crap-detector. This is especially true of those devoted to "patriotism." Santha Rama Rau has called patriotism a squalid emotion. I agree. Mainly because I find it hard to escape the conclusion that those most enmeshed in it hear no bullshit whatever in its rhetoric, and as a consequence are extremely dangerous to other people. If you doubt this, I want to remind you that murder for murder, General Westmoreland makes Vito Genovese book like a Flower Child. Another way of saying this is that all ideologies are saturated with bullshit, and a wise man will observe Herbert Read's advice: Never trust any group larger than a squad.

So you see, when it comes right down to it, crap-detection is something one does when he starts to become a certain type of person. Sensitivity to the phony uses of language requires, to some extent, knowledge of how to ask questions, how to validate answers, and certainly, how to assess meanings. But if that were all there was to it, S. I. Hayakawa wouldn't now be one of Ronald Regan's best friends. What crap-detecting mostly consists of is a set of attitudes toward the function of human communication: which is to say, the func-tion of human relationships.

Now, I said at the beginning that I thought there is nothing more important than for kids to learn how to identify fake communication. You, therefore, probably assume that I know something about now to achieve this. Well, I don't. At least not very much. I know that our present curricula do not even touch on the matter. Neither do our present methods of training teachers. I am not even sure that classrooms and schools can be reformed enough so that critical and lively people can be nurtured there. For all I know, there may be so few English teachers interested in the matter that it is hardly worth talking about. Nonetheless, I persist in believing that it is not beyond your profession to invent ways to educate youth along these lines. I'm not quite sure why I believe this except that one of my own cherished superstitions is that breast-fed babies grow up to be optimistic adults, and I was prodigiously breast-fed; in fact, until an age that most of you would consider unseemly. If you will keep in mind that my optimism is based on pure bullshit, then I will close by stating Postman's Fifth and final law: There is no more precious environment than our language environ-ment. And even if you know you will be dead soon, that's worth protecting.