

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
mounts an attack
on misinformation.

Those who wield power have always been adept at manipulating information to their advantage. From Machiavelli's *The Prince* to Orwell's 1984, literary rulers have systematically misled their subjects when it was in their own interest to do so. More recently, commercial interests have added their own kind of deceit to political misinformation. Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* was an early attempt to expose the unseen manipulation of the consumer. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* sounded the alarm over the trivialisation of information by the mass media. There is also the perennially useful guide to trickery in *Straight and Crooked Thinking* by Robert Thouless. In recent years the flood of misinformation, facilitated by the exponential growth of the media, seems to have reached epic proportions, however, and the number of publications unmasking it has risen correspondingly.

Counter-Knowledge

In *Counter-Knowledge*, Damian Thompson focuses on 'misinformation packaged to look like fact' so that we are now facing 'a pandemic of credulous thinking', 'characterised by a casual approach to the truth'. He cites as examples Holocaust denial, Satanism,

9/11 conspiracy theories and the anti-vaccination movement. There are chapters on creationism (and its surrogate cousin intelligent design), pseudohistory and quack medicine. In demolishing the arguments for creationism, he notes the dangerous links it has with fundamentalist religion – both Christian and Muslim. 'In rejecting "Darwinism", the developing world thinks it is demonstrating moral superiority over degenerate Western values. In fact ... it is rejecting the scientific method itself, and thereby condemning future generations to material and intellectual poverty.' He then deals with the pseudohistorical myths of The Da Vinci Code, Mormonism, cult archaeology and Afrocentric history, all of which have wide followings despite their manifest lack of a basis in fact. The chapter on *Desperate Remedies* is a frontal attack on alternative medicine and quack nutritionists. These are dealt with in greater detail by Ben Goldacre (see below). The final chapter examines the causes and scale of the problem: in particular, the explosive growth in the variety and reach of the media, especially the internet; the effects of free market capitalism on the way information is selected, presented and interpreted (see Davis below), and the rise of fundamentalist beliefs. Plenty to think about.

Bad Science

Ben Goldacre is a medical doctor, and his book *Bad Science* is a one-man crusade against the morass of quackery, sloppy thinking and deception in the field of medicine and nutrition. The book includes carefully analysed critiques of the claims of a large number of cases, including homeopathy, nutritionists' miracle products, Omega 3 as a pill for enhancing intelligence, anti-oxidants, detox treatments, vitamin C as a cure for AIDS, health scares such as the MRSA hoax and the MMR vaccination hoax. Along the way, he completely discredits the work of bogus celebrity charlatans such as Gillian McKeith and Patrick Holford, as well as the more dangerous activities of Andrew Wakefield (the MMR scaremonger) and Matthias Rath, who has the dubious distinction of having persuaded Thabo Mbeki that AIDS should be treated with vitamin C not retroviral drugs. He also explains in careful detail how claims can be tested (plenty for applied linguistics researchers to note here, too!) and reveals how statistical and other trickery can distort the truth. He takes the big pharmaceutical companies to task for their systemic misleading of the public, and the media for their role in fostering public misunderstanding of science through their preference for the

sensational over the more pedestrian truth. One of his striking observations concerns the way in which commonsense has been commodified. Referring to 'Brain Gym', paid for by the British taxpayer, 'You can take a perfectly sensible intervention, like a glass of water and an exercise break, but add nonsense, make it sound more technical, and make yourself sound clever.' Likewise with the advice of quack nutritionists: most people already know what a healthy diet and lifestyle is but nutrition 'experts' need to complicate and mystify it in order to make a quick dollar. You have to pay for mumbo-jumbo: commonsense is free. Apart from its rigorous analyses, the book is deliciously irreverent. See also his website: www.badsience.net.

Flat Earth News

In both the above books, the media have been rightly accused of complicity in the dissemination of falsehoods, half-truths, manipulation and deception. *Flat Earth News* places the media themselves under direct scrutiny. Nick Davies, himself a journalist, offers a detailed account, rich in fully-described examples, of the way this has come about. The takeover of newspapers by media moguls, whose only interest is in making more money, has led to cutbacks in reporting staff. This, coupled with pressure to produce



Books like these offer a superb introduction to critical thinking



articles faster and in greater quantity, has led to the inability to check on the truth of stories and to an overwhelming reliance by journalists on the large agencies (Press Association, Associated Press and Reuters) and on press releases and other oven-ready copy provided by PR companies. PR companies do not operate in the public interest; they work for both commercial and political vested interests. The result has been a wholesale collapse of principled journalism substituted by 'churnalism'. 'The failure to provide context has multiplied, and divided into a preference for interest over issue; for the concrete over the abstract; for event rather than process; for the current over the historic; for simplicity rather than complexity; for certainty rather than doubt. This applies in both print and broadcast, generating patterns of distortion so consistent as to amount to a bias against truth.' Quoting Joseph Pulitzer: 'A cynical,

mercenary, demagogic, corrupt press will produce in time a people as base as itself.' See also www.flatearthnews.net.

The Rise of Political Lying

The Rise of Political Lying is a remorseless indictment of politics in Britain under New Labour. It is scrupulously researched, with all claims and accusations carefully documented from unimpeachable sources. This is presumably why the author, Peter Osborne, a seasoned journalist, has not been sued for libel, despite quotations like these:

'... Blair's special gift is in saying what he does not mean, and meaning what he does not say.'

'... Peter Mandelson lies on principle, or just for the sheer hell of it.'

'Estelle Morris, the Education Secretary ... claimed that Mr Byers' lie was not really a lie, because anyone could see that what he was saying was not true.' Right!

Part 1 documents the rise of lies and deception from Thatcher to Blair. The author asserts that having used lies to take power, Blair and his cronies then couldn't stop, so that a whole culture took hold where truth was downgraded in favour of political expediency. Henceforth, political life in Britain would be characterised by a litany of lies, deception, smear, spin, misinformation, partial information, fabrication, manipulation of statistics,

distortion, sleaze and sound-bites.

Part 2 sets out the rationale for this mendacious culture, with extensive examples of the deviousness and manipulation of facts by Campbell and Blair in the run-up to the Iraq war. The whole sorry episode of weapons of 'mass distraction' is exposed.

In Part 3 he examines the consequences: the corrosive effect on political life, the loss of public trust in politicians and the massive growth of public cynicism.

In conclusion, Osborne offers six possible remedies: setting up websites for the vetting of all public information; creating a National Statistical Service to take control of information out of the hands of government; making MPs more accountable; preventing unelected public servants from becoming political masters; and making political lying a crime punishable by law.

On Bullshit

As a fitting close to this catalogue, let me recommend a brief (67 pages) but dense view from a contemporary philosopher. Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* is a systematic attempt to define the true nature of this flood of verbal ordure we wade through daily. He concludes that 'bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about ... This discrepancy is common in public life ...'. He argues that the requirement to speak the truth has been replaced in recent times by the compulsion to represent oneself as sincere: 'a nice guy'. To this extent, 'sincerity itself is bullshit'. Spot on!



If we are to be more than mere purveyors of language packaged in textbooks, and would aspire to a broader educational vocation, books like these offer a superb introduction to critical thinking. They also include texts we can use directly both for the teaching of language and for raising awareness of the tricks it can play on us.

Davies, N *Flat Earth News* Vintage Press 2009

Frankfurt, H G *On Bullshit* Princeton University Press 2005

Goldacre, B *Bad Science* Harper Perennial 2008

Machiavelli, N *The Prince* Bantam Classics 1984

Osborne, P *The Rise of Political Lying* The Free Press 2005

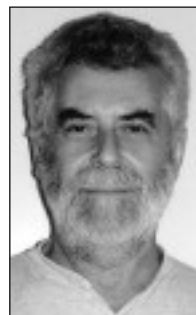
Orwell, G 1984 Penguin 1948

Packard, V *The Hidden Persuaders* Ig Publishing 1957/2007

Postman, N *Amusing Ourselves to Death* Penguin 1985

Thompson, D *Counter-Knowledge* Atlantic Books 2008

Thouless, R R *Straight and Crooked Thinking* Pan Books 1953



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