



Everything Is Bullshit: The greatest scams on Earth revealed

Alex Mayyasi , Priceonomics

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Many of our society's most cherished traditions are actually based on historical accident, the profit motives of a few companies, or the agenda of someone who died long ago. A lot of what we believe and do is bullshit, yet we walk around thinking our way of doing things is inherently correct.

Why do we exchange diamond engagement rings? Why is wine so expensive? How does art become "art"? Why do so many non-profits want us to donate cars to them? Why does college cost so much? Why do so many pets die in animal shelters? Why is the world the way it is?

Everything is Bullshit, by Priceonomics, is an investigation to find the answers.

Everything Is Bullshit: The greatest scams on Earth revealed Details

Date : Published June 23rd 2014 by Priceonomics

ISBN :

Author : Alex Mayyasi , Priceonomics

Format : Kindle Edition 217 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Economics, History, Sociology, Psychology, Business

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Pete says

Everything is Bullshit (2014) by Alex Mayyasi and the Priceonomics team is a book that is expanded tales from the excellent Priceonomics website. It's narrative connected with data.

The Priceonomics blog is an often fascinating, well written and highly entertaining blog that does a great job of writing magazine length stories. This book extends a number of them and does a reasonable job.

Diamonds, wine, food, \$1000 phone applications, Taxis, evaluating college, pets, stolen bikes, San Francisco real estate, deodorant and what it's like to go from being very successful financially to homeless all have chapters in this book.

It's well written and if you haven't encountered the stories before they are mostly very interesting. The writing and hype can be a bit over the top, the title of the book is just one example. It's a pity the writers didn't cut back a bit on the hyperbole, the stories mostly stand on their own merit. The book also covers a lot of the same ground as the website so anyone who reads the blog regularly will know quite a lot of the material.

Still, the book is well worth a read for anyone who likes data driven stories.

Shyam says

This book would be 5 Stars if 50% of it wasn't already online as blog articles =(I feel cheated by paying the price of a full book for what was essentially just a few short articles.

Adrian S says

While I wouldn't make over-generalized claims like this, it is true that certain aspects of our culture are subtle scams dressed as accidents of history. Diamonds, for example, are neither intrinsically valuable nor rare, but the "De Beers" company owns the entire world production and dictates their price. By bribing Hollywood producers and the British Royal Family to use diamonds in their on-screen engagements, De Beers created the social expectation that 2 months' worth of a man's income should be spent on an engagement ring, and thus got to own 2 months' worth of every marriageable man's work, or 0.5% of their lifetime salary earnings. I think their marketing budget paid off ;-).

Balhau says

This is a very interesting book. This work is an approach to several scams that occur on a daily basis and that we don't notice or even ever listen about. The book is full of anecdote stories. For instance (spoiler alert)

"In 2011 during a debate over the nutritional guidelines for school lunches. Congress decided that pizza counted as a vegetable. And not for the first time."

The authors have a very pragmatic way of explaining the topics and are very straightforward on the economic analysis of the scams. Finally they also have a good sense of humor, like you can see in:

"If Goldman Sachs didn't have more profitable market inefficiencies to exploit, they might be out there arbitraging stolen bikes"

Sergey Ivanov says

I think the spirit of the book is a good one, but it needs work to become more of a full title.

There are a few core motifs that aren't really tied into the narrative of the book in a satisfactory way. Like, "here is example x ... in conclusion, this is just another example of materialism, which is bad. sad!", but it should connect that badness to a central idea of why people scam, what we can do about it, what our value systems have to adapt to. Many of the books' examples were well known and covered years before it was published so I was hoping for more novel examples.

Felt more like one large blog-post than a book.

Jimmy Longley says

Reviewed as part of my 100 books challenge: <http://jimmylongley.com/blog/books/>

Run-on Sentence Summary

A series of articles from Pricenomics, an economics blog, converted into a book about weird behaviors of our society, such as how nobody can tell the differences between cheap and expensive wine.

Impressions

This kind of book is pure candy to a natural skeptic like me. It is full of great conversation topics if you want to feel like you are smarter than everybody else. During lunch with your coworkers, you can just lay down, "Did you know that the diamond industry is really controlled by a giant global cartel that has been artificially inflating prices for decades, and the whole notion of diamond wedding rings was invented as a marketing ploy?" Or, "Did you know that baby seal clubbing isn't really that unethical or bad for the environment compared to things like factory farming, and its popularity was really just due to evil PETA exploiting seals' cuteness to gain publicity, all the while destroying the livelihood of Inuit societies?"

I have a boner just thinking about how smart and informed I'll be. Kidding aside, the information was interesting but as you can tell, I felt like at the end I didn't really care all that much.

Final Thoughts

Don't get too worked up about it, but this really is a fun and interesting bathroom-type book.

Favorite Quote

"In 2011, during a debate over the nutritional guidelines for school lunches, Congress decided that pizza counted as a vegetable. And not for the first time."

Tiff Miller says

I have to admit openly that what drew me to this book while I was staring at the new non-fiction shelf in the library was its irreverent title. I don't know why. I pulled it off the shelf, read the back, and decided it might be worth perusing. Contrary to what the title may tell you, there is almost zero profanity in the book. I can probably count on one hand the number of swear words actually used, and most are in context of the authors quoting someone else. Frankly, I found the benefits of what I might learn outweighed having to skim over a bad word or two.

The book is a collection of essays on various topics, from diamonds to fine art to evictions in San Francisco. Some chapters were more interesting than others. Some, I didn't care much about, but still found the information somewhat interesting.

The writing style is much more akin to what you might find in a blog post or an op/ed article, but it is well-edited and organized, in my opinion. Different writing styles are apparent, owing to the fact that there are multiple authors contributing. This also rounds out the topics. It is very cynical in tone, but not despairing. At the least, it assumes the intelligence of its readers, and doesn't resort to condescension, which is nice.

It covers a lot of "society's most cherished traditions," revealing the giant marketing scam/scheme behind each. That description I found misleading. Other than diamonds, I don't see how wine, evictions, or baby seals are actually "traditions." Perhaps I am just splitting hairs. Many of the topics are pets of the wealthy and elite, not necessarily down-to-earth Americans. Though, that is pure speculation on my part, as I related very little to most of the topics.

My favorite chapters were the following:

- Diamonds are Bullshit
- The Seal Clubbing Business
- The Tyranny of Taxi Medallions
- Why is Science Behind a Paywall?
- Is College Worth It? (Probably the one I learned the most from.)
- What Happens To Donated Cars?
- What It's Like to Fail. (This was my absolute favorite. Coincidentally, it is also the most optimistic in tone. Go figure.)

Neil Sharma says

I think like most people, I was drawn into this based on Priceonomics brilliant diamond industry piece published (for free) online.

This book is a series independent articles from their site (and some specific to the book) on topics ranging from the lobbying behind nutrition advice to why people pay for art. It does not take a scientific approach, which is fine for the casual reader looking to pick up some counter-culture conversation topics at a family

dinner.

However, if you have been reading blogs and articles by more progressive writers (aka, HN, anyone twitter recommends, etc), most of the information found in this book is redundant.

From the perspective of people new to questioning how the world functions, this is an excellent start to many of today's (and tomorrows) big topics in industry and culture. However, I'm not reviewing this book from that perspective, so I will not rate accordingly.

Griseo says

Hay tantas cosas que no nos cuestionamos en la vida que acabamos tragándonos timos por seguir consejos de generaciones pasadas o por meramente seguir con lo que, por pura creencia, creemos que es lo correcto porque es lo estipulado. Todo un caldo de cultivo para las grandes mentiras.

La gran mentira se repite a lo largo de este libro en sus diferentes manifestaciones: la gran mentira de los diamantes (su alta depreciación de su valor nada más ser comprados), la gran mentira de los catadores de vino y sus grandes fallos cuando se les engaña con la marca del vino, la gran mentira de la mejor investigación es la más prestigiosa en la ciencia, la gran mentira detrás de endeudarse para sacarse una carrera en EE.UU. para conseguir con tu carrera "mejor vida" gracias a un "mejor trabajo",... Como ellos resumen en su propia introducción:

In our view, the big lie of our society is the notion that our current beliefs and traditions are based on solid facts. When you start investigating some of our most hallowed values, you find that much of what we hold dear is actually based on historical accident, the profit motives of a few companies, or the agenda of someone who died long ago. A lot of what we believe and do is bullshit, yet we walk around thinking that it's objectively the right way of doing things.

En todos y en cada uno de los capítulos se demuestra su premisa (explicada en la introducción) que la gran defensa ante cada gran mentira es un estadio más que saber más cosas de ciencias, el antídoto es la curiosidad. Mil veces más efectivo que todo ese montón de libros contra la homeopatía de tantos y tan diferentes autores.

Cierto que todos (o, por lo menos, la gran mayoría de) sus capítulos están disponibles en la web de los autores (priceonomics.com) pero en el libro la gran parte de estos artículos se encuentran ampliados con más entrevistas y más montones de datos junto con su correspondiente explicación. Una web cuyo modelo de negocio trata de ser diferente al del resto para ser más independientes (sin anuncios, sin socios, sin un muro de pago, sin presiones de nadie ni siquiera de Google ni sus cookies rastreadoras ni sus anuncios) y se basa en vender libros y servicios de atrapar y analizar de datos de internet.

Adam Dunn says

Didn't much care for it.

I read the entire section on diamonds and then realized it didn't apply to me at all and I didn't care. Not wanting to make the same mistake again I skipped sections and found most of it I didn't care about.

The book is presented as exposing scams but it kind of doesn't. For example McDonald's Monopoly. It's not rigged. It was rigged once and they caught the guy and his conspirators. It's more of a news story. Same way the two homeless people stories evolve. What is the point of these? I supposed they're trying to argue it's bad to throw a 70 year old lesbian out onto the street, but really, she stopped paying rent, wrote "f you" on eviction notices, they gave her \$14,000 to relocate, what else does she deserve? I'm guessing less. Looking at the title, "The greatest scams revealed" I can't think of one scam revealed.

Chris says

Basically a bunch of blog posts

Overall, this book was engaging and a quick read. Topics were wide-ranging, though sometimes perplexing - who DOESN'T think that bike theft is a scam?

Martin Linkov says

Fresh, inspiring book.

The chapters about the diamonds and the wine were great (good positioning them in the front)

The touching story of the broken comedy writer was nice, but somehow not in place.

Overall: good, entertaining book.

Eric says

(This book included) should be the subtitle

Budd Margolis says

We live in a world that markets to us constantly and many things we are told to believe are just meant to enrich industry. Some good examples but I wish this had been extended to include Politics, automobiles, homes, insurance, medicine and opiates, crime and policing, terrorism, healthcare and other industries. Still, well worthwhile.

Ethan says

Taken light heartedly, this book is quite entertaining, where every chapter could be source material for a John Oliver's episode.
