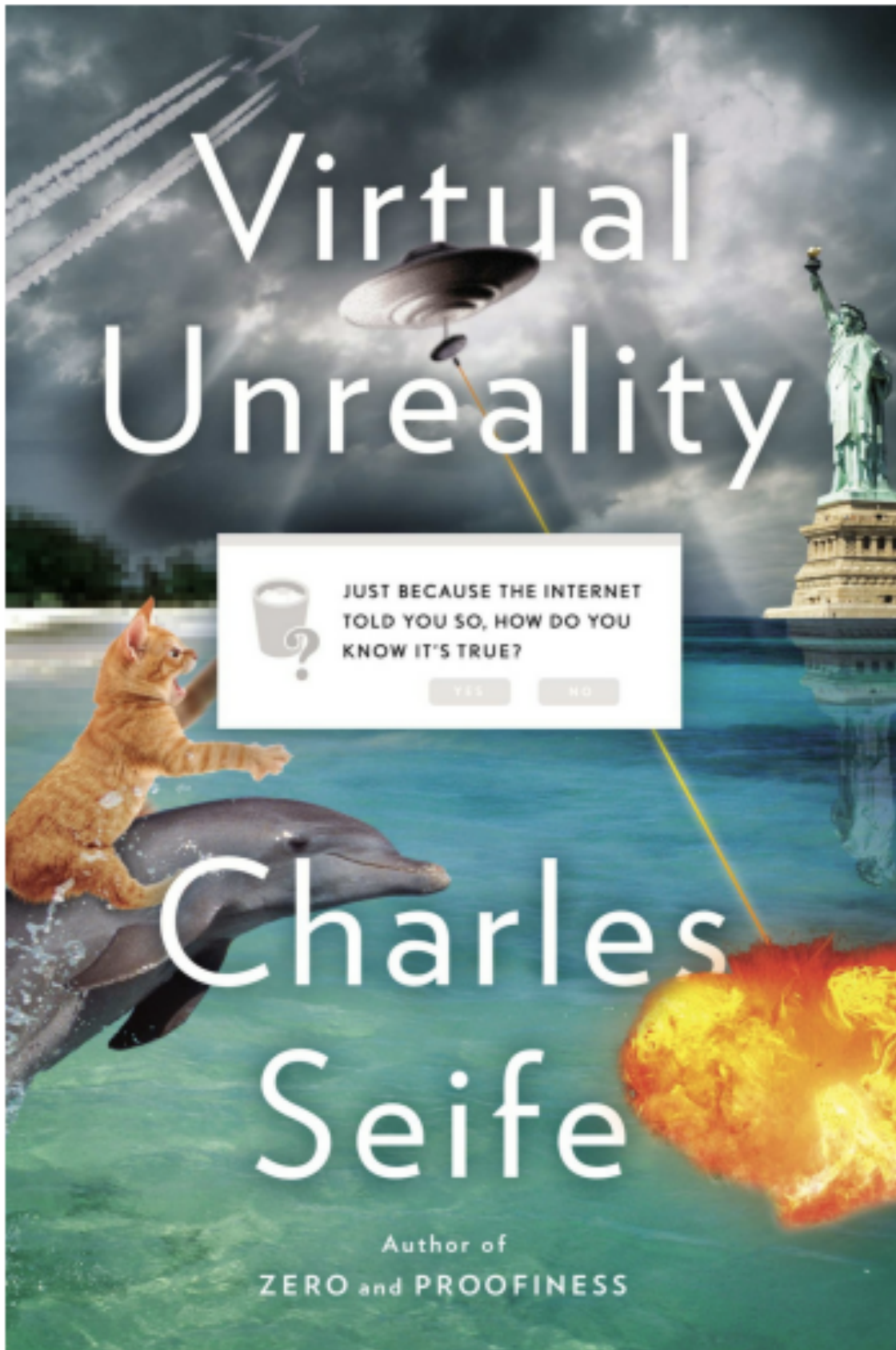


VIRTUAL UNREALITY



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Just Because the Internet Told You,
How Do You Know It's True?

CHARLES SEIFE

VIKING

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THE TOP TEN DICTA OF THE INTERNET SKEPTIC

1) WIKIPEDIA IS LIKE AN OLD AND ECCENTRIC UNCLE.

He can be a lot of fun—over the years he’s seen a lot, and he can tell a great story. He’s also no dummy; he’s accumulated a lot of information and has some strong opinions about what he’s gathered. You can learn quite a bit from him. But take everything he says with a grain of salt. A lot of the things he thinks he knows for sure aren’t quite right, or are taken out of context. And when it comes down to it, sometimes he believes things that are a little bit, well, nuts.



If it ever matters to you whether something he said is real or fictional, it's crucial to check it out with a more reliable source.

2) EVERYBODY'S A FAKE. AT LEAST THAT'S WHAT YOU SHOULD ASSUME.

Nowadays, it's easy for people to create multiple personae online and just as easy to discard them at will. Unless someone's known to you personally, assume that an online personality isn't telling the truth about himself. If someone's true identity is important to you in some manner, you should be on your guard.

It's not easy to figure out whether someone online is real or fake. The best way is to search the person's online footprints for any scraps of personal information that might give a small clue about his real identity. The region in which a person lives, a telephone number, a school where he got a degree—all of these can be used to piece together a mosaic of who the person really is. Photographs are a great way of figuring out whether someone's real or fake; pop a photo into a reverse image search, like Google Images or TinEye, and you might be surprised at what comes up.

Just as valuable is an electronic signature known as an IP address, which can be found in every e-mail exchange (and in some online postings). An IP address is an electronic address that tells you where the message is being sent from. For example, when someone claiming to be in England sent me an e-mail not so long ago, his IP address, 41.66.6.175, revealed that he was really in the Ivory Coast. No, I wouldn't be sending him any money.

3) YOU DON'T HAVE TO FOOL ALL OF THE PEOPLE SOME OF THE TIME OR SOME OF THE PEOPLE ALL OF THE TIME. . . . ALL YOU NEED IS TO FOOL JUST A TINY FRACTION OF THE PEOPLE ONCE IN A WHILE.

Life as a scammer has never been easier. Because the internet allows you to contact tens or hundreds of thousands of people with the click of a button, you don't have to have a sophisticated scam to make money. Come up with something just barely good enough to fool one out of ten thousand or fifty thousand people and you'll still be able to make scads of money if you reach enough potential suckers. There are plenty of them out there.

4) THE EARLY BIRD GETS THE WORM. THE LATE BIRD GETS THE EARLY BIRD.

It used to be that there was a premium on finding information first. A newspaper journalist who got a scoop, for example, would be guaranteed exclusivity for a news cycle—that he'd be the only one with the story, at least until the news broadcasts came on early that evening. He was the only game in town, so if you wanted to learn about the story, you went to him. Nowadays, a juicy scoop will last only minutes before other outlets begin repackaging it in order to steal readers away. And some of those other outlets, like *The Huffington Post*, are wildly successful at stealing those readers.

There's now little advantage to being first to the story—just the opposite. If you're first out of the gate, there's a chance that nobody will follow you, that nobody will care about what you're offering. If you wait to see where the crowd is headed, then you're guaranteed to find a story that people are interested in. And if you're smart about it, despite being a latecomer you can steal the lion's share of the audience away from the ones who were there first.

If you're interested in getting the most accurate, most direct version of the story, you're going to have to fight against the crowd. Often, the most popular links aren't the most informative.

5) IN THE MEDIA WORLD, LAZINESS IS INCREASINGLY A VIRTUE.

A corollary to dictum number 4 is that it pays to be lazy. Let the others fight to break news; let your

competitors spend their time, effort, and money finding stories, interviewing sources, and doing the reporting. That's the expensive part of the media equation. The less you do on that front, the more resources you'll have for optimizing your website to grab big audiences. Cut, paste, add a bit of snark, and link out—that's all you really need to do.

This sets up an echo chamber; the same tiny bits of information get repeated, amplified, and distorted. The best way to fight this as a media consumer is to expend extra effort to figure out the original, primary source of any piece of information.

6) NOT EVERYTHING IS ONLINE.

As the digital world expands, it's increasingly difficult to remember that there are broad segments of human knowledge that haven't been digitized. This means that you're unable to use them if you don't get off your duff and actively seek them out. For example, no government agency is going to put the bulk of its internal documents on the web, as a matter of course—so if you're trying to figure out, say, whether your local school board is accounting for funds properly, you'll never find out by Google alone.

There's the old story of the drunk crawling around under a lamppost, late one evening. "I'm looking for my keys," he tells a passerby. "I dropped them in the alley over there."

"If you dropped your keys over there, why are you searching for them over here?"

"Because the light's so much better near the lamp."

The internet is a powerful lamp. But for lots of things worth finding, you'll have to venture out of its glare.

7) A SOCIAL MEDIA SITE'S PURPOSE IS TO SERVE ITS USERS—IN THE SAME



SENSE AS A ZOO'S PURPOSE IS TO SERVE ITS ANIMALS.

No zoo can succeed without a large and varied collection of animals. So any decent zookeeper will try to keep a zoo's animals happy and healthy—that way, the animals will stick around a long time without causing any problems. If keepers do their job well, the animals might even convince themselves that the whole point of the zoo is to give exotic animals great food, a pleasant living space, and plenty of leisure time. All those people wandering around and gawking, well, they must just be part of the scenery.

With a typical social media company, you don't have to delve too deeply to see the real aim of the company. Facebook, for example, tells you that its purpose is to enable you “to express yourself and connect with the world around you instantly and freely.” How does it do that? “We build products that support our mission by creating utility for users, developers, and marketers.” Funny . . . one wouldn't think that marketers play a big role in helping you express yourself. But they—and the developers (such as *FarmVille* creator Zynga)—certainly help Facebook: “We generate substantially all of our revenue from advertising and from fees associated with our Payments infrastructure that enables users to purchase virtual and digital goods from our Platform developers.” That's some \$1.6 billion in revenue in 2012 alone. And that number tells you whom Facebook really serves. Which is going to cause more concern in the corporate ranks of Facebook: an angry user or an angry advertiser?

Here's a hint: to figure out whom a zoo is really meant to serve, just look at who's paying for admission.

It's not just social media companies that are putting us in cages and displaying us like zoo animals. Google makes its money by collecting as much of your behavior online as possible and using that data to target advertising to you more effectively. LinkedIn makes money by collecting information about you and your network and selling it to talent scouts and marketing firms. This isn't

inherently a bad thing; if you feel that you get more from these companies than you lose in privacy, then everybody wins. But you should at least be aware of what you're giving up to use these "free" services.

8) THE INTERNET DOESN'T REPRESENT A REVOLUTION FOR FREE SPEECH AS MUCH AS A REVOLUTION IN FREE AUDIENCES.

If you're living in the United States, chances are you've never encountered any real threat to your right of free speech—before the internet or after it. In other countries, digital information has made it harder for governments to control communication between its citizens, though if you've ever used a search engine in China, you'll know that the internet is no panacea for freedom of expression.

On the other hand, digital information has completely transformed our ability to reach a sizable audience without a lot of money. It used to be a struggle to reach an audience of a decent size. Unless you had the advantage of great wealth or power, you had to be very eloquent or incredibly lucky if you were to get more than a handful of people to listen to what you had to say or read a tract that you wrote. Unless you had a pulpit from which you could make people pay attention to you, all the free speech in the world didn't make a whit's worth of difference, because your speech wouldn't be heard by a great enough number of people to matter.

No longer. Everybody connected to the internet can instantly reach everyone else. Your random mumblings, posted on your own little blog in a forgotten corner of cyberspace, can theoretically be read by billions of people on every continent. Your tiniest whisper can be heard halfway around the world, by an audience vaster than ever before.

For the price of your internet connection, you've now got an audience of billions. They can all hear you. You just have to say something that they want to listen to.

9) PEOPLE ARE USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE YOU ACT AGAINST YOUR OWN SELF-INTEREST—AND YOU'RE MORE THAN HAPPY TO GO ALONG.

Digital technology has allowed marketers to combine two very powerful behavior-modification techniques and use them to exert subtle control over what you do. You don't have to click hundreds of cows on *FarmVille* or report your location to Foursquare every thirty minutes to have had your behavior altered in mildly self-destructive ways. Do you have a badge that says you're a valuable contributor to an online forum? Have you ever played a video game just a bit longer so you could unlock that final achievement? Ever felt compelled to take a photograph of your dinner at a nice restaurant so you'll have something to upload to a website? Congratulations. Your brain has been rewired.

10) TOP TEN LISTS ARE JUST MARKETING GIMMICKS INTENDED FOR SUCKERS.

People seem drawn to anything that says "Top 10" or "Top 20" or "33 Best" or whatever. Women's magazines figured this out long ago; it's nigh impossible to find one that doesn't have a list of the hundred best sex positions, fat-burning foods, or must-have accessories for the coming season. Online media have caught the bug. Even the most serious news outlets now seem set on matching *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan*, top-ten list for top-ten list.* These lists are like catnip to readers, and they're everywhere. As an added bonus, anything that ranks things in an order will automatically be contentious, generating lots of online discussion by people who have a different idea of what should be number one.

In truth, most of these lists are cobbled together with no real method behind them—or, at best, with a very flawed method that breaks down under closer scrutiny. And readers tend not to notice that they're a way of writing about a subject without having to do any in-depth reporting or analysis.



They're meant to draw an audience as cheaply and as easily as possible.

So all these "Top 10" and "Top 20" lists that have proliferated on the web are a by-product of the media's increasing reflex to grab audiences with as little effort, expenditure, and reporting as possible. Either that or you can believe Ben Smith, the editor in chief of *BuzzFeed*, who told *The New York Times*, "'Thirty-three Animals Who Are Disappointed in You' is a work of literature. . . . I'm totally not joking."