

**The Information Age**  
**by**  
**Robert Rietschel, July 29, 2023**

It has never been easier to look stuff up. When you were young and couldn't spell something, did you ever hear, "Go look it up?" I got that a lot and it usually was about spelling a word. My retort was that I couldn't look it up because I didn't know what letter it started with. Now we have spell check. I needed that more than I needed a calculator to balance my checkbook. There is no longer a need for an encyclopedia, it's all online. And so is a wealth of misinformation. Information willfully placed prominently to persuade you to do something you otherwise would not. If it didn't work, they wouldn't put it out there. There's so much misinformation that it must work well. How do I know this? Well, you know that 2 plus 2 equals 5. Look it up on the Internet and it will explain that this is so. We were informed early in our youth that the answer is four not five. But the Internet says it can equal five. On the Internet *caveat emptor*.

Where do you get honest information? Were you taught honest information in school? For the most part, we didn't challenge our teachers until we got to college, and many didn't do it even then. We used to get our news from the major television networks. People like Huntley and Brinkley, Walter Cronkite, and others. We trusted the evening news reports from those sources. Then came the Internet. Everyone is now an expert and does their own research. Those major networks can't be trusted. If you agree with that statement, why? Who told you that? What was their motivation? After the results of the last presidential election came in and Biden was pronounced the victor, my sister who is very conservative said, "Who made those people the ones to say who won?" She was referring to the major news outlets. Her favorite had been Fox, but she decided that they weren't conservative enough. Who told her she couldn't trust the same people who'd been telling her the results of every other election she ever heard the results of for her entire life? And what was their agenda?

Well, it was the loser of the election of course. The guy who didn't like the results. He told her she couldn't believe her ears and the people who'd informed her of the result four years previously when he'd won. Maybe the loser was dreaming he'd wake up to a world like Harry Truman. We who are old enough remember Truman holding up a newspaper proclaiming Dewey the victor. Maybe the loser thought if he just said it enough, the media would retract their proclamation of a Biden victory. In this era of so much readily available information, a lot of people decided to play along. We live in an era where you can pick your information since we have alternative facts (they used to be called lies). Take your pick. Two plus two. Four or five? You can find Internet support for your position. If you wished on a star hard enough, did you wake up to a new reality when you were a kid? No. Why do you think you can do that now? Because some Internet troll has said that up is down? Maybe the troll even showed you video evidence that up is down. Ever heard of a deep fake?

You went to school to learn what things folks commonly agreed on and we called that being educated. Now you are being told to throw out your education, and your old sources, and believe the man behind the curtain. It can be very hard to run down the source of Internet information. All sorts of authoritative-looking videos exist that are just chock full of misinformation purposely designed to convince you of a new point of view. If the misinformation just reinforces your preconceived notions, it's an easy sell. If all that is required to sway you is to have you reject your existing beliefs, there is a simple slogan that will be employed. "I will tell you what they don't want you to know." When you hear that, a red flag should go up. You are about to be conned. You are about to join P.T. Barnum's sucker brigade.

Another red flag is the use of labels to refer to people. Instead of dealing with the content of a person's ideas, you can completely dismiss that person with a label. Let's put liberal and conservative aside for a moment. Think about soldiers in WWII. When fighting the Germans did, we kill the Germans, or did we kill the Kraut? Did we kill the Japanese or the Gooks. The dehumanizing terms made the killing more acceptable. It's the power of a label. It reduces the opposition to non-entity status. Instant dismissal. No examination of the other person's point of view or whether they have some valid point to make. Labels should be a red flag in our information age. They let you know that you are being misdirected away from any serious consideration of something other than the speaker's message. Hold on to your wallet and your thinking cap if you still have one.

Critical thinking is something most people would claim to do. They might even cite some Internet factoids to support their role as critical thinkers. The problem is there are also Internet sites that do fact-checking that often have ample evidence that popular Internet misinformation is bogus. A few more keystrokes and the critical thinker is shown to be a victim of a very selective Internet search. We are all prone to seek support for our beliefs. That is not critical thinking. Critical thinking is exploring the depth of counterarguments to your position and what facts can stand in the light of that information. Sometimes this is called doing your homework. It is more than that. It is doing opposition research to know what the strength of the contrary view is. Few of us make the effort. We stop when our point of view is confirmed. If you find yourself stopping when you've confirmed your worldview, think red flag. Remember two plus two equals five in some parts of the Internet.

You can come down on either side of an issue and that is fine with me. If that earns you a label, try to look past that to the content of the idea behind the label. Is it the work of a con man? Is it well reasoned? Something that can stand up in court? Can you take it to the bank? Is it one of those two plus two equals five things? Attractive until you find out the bank doesn't count that way. That only works when you wish on stars. Critical thinking is work. Con men know that and know you won't fact-check them. It's too much work.

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