

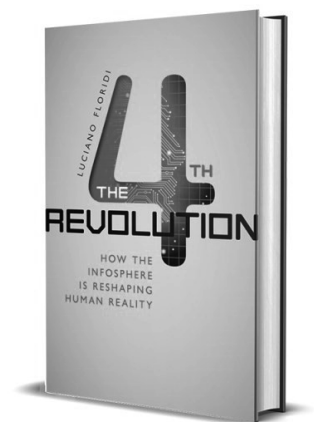
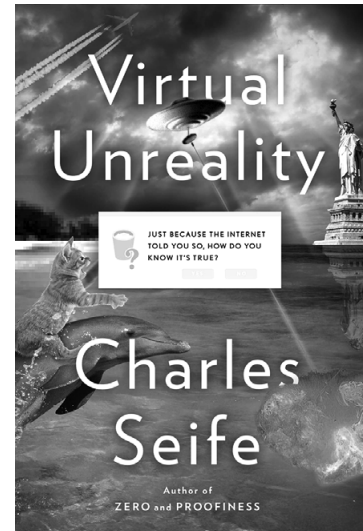
Rebooting the real

As the Internet remakes us all, no one yet knows which changes matter, finds **Douglas Heaven**

Virtual Unreality by Charles Seife, Viking, \$26.95

The Fourth Revolution by Luciano Floridi, Oxford University Press, £16.99

- 1 WE LIVE in revolutionary times. Information moves around the world at the speed of light and is duplicated endlessly, available to anyone with a connection. "For good and ill," writes Charles Seife in *Virtual Unreality*, "digital information is now the most contagious thing on the planet."
- 2 But the history of information is the history of misinformation too. Seife, a journalism professor at New York University, takes us on an entertaining tour of the many ways we are lied to online. It used to take a totalitarian state to create an alternative reality, 26. According to one estimate, a third of online reviews are fake. And fake images often pop up on news sites and social media, and even win prizes.
- 3 In practice, the democratic ideal of Wikipedia, in which we are all editors, is anarchy. As it becomes harder to sift fact from fiction, Seife observes that we "are at the beginning of an information famine." His book highlights the problems caused by internet identity: who are we online? The person we say we are, or the person typing? And if all contributions are valid, who is an authority?
- 4 In *The Fourth Revolution*, Luciano Floridi, a professor of philosophy and ethics at the University of Oxford, argues that online narratives change how we see ourselves. This is not bad per se; even offline, faking is part of life. What counts as 'genuine' – our 'true' selves, say – is already slippery. "What we consider natural is often the outcome of a merely less visible human manipulation," writes Floridi.
- 5 Online interaction just gives us more opportunity to pull the strings of a virtual puppet. But it is a complex arrangement. Who people think you are feeds back into who you think you are, which feeds into who we actually are.



6 Fascinating stuff. But, ultimately, both books suffer from being five years too late and five years too early: we already know the internet is changing us, but 30 to say what shifts are the most important. And all the while, the wheels of change keep on turning.

adapted from *New Scientist*, 2014