



Surviving the Age of Bad Information: A Skeptic's Reflections

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What do you call someone who believes that from the simplest molecules of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen there arose by pure random chance, four billion years ago, a replicating entity that could be plausibly defined as alive? What do you call a person who believes that this creature or creatures like it eventually evolved into the amazing diversity of organisms that we see on our planet today? What do you call a person who marvels that this process of biological change has allowed the emergence of a creature that is sentient, that can study the universe in stunning detail, that can create models of the distant past and distant future, that can inject into the world images and sounds and ideas of surpassing beauty? You call such a person a skeptic. A skeptic, in today's society, is someone who accepts the scientific theory of our origins and of nature—even though there are innumerable competing ideas involving spirits, demons, UFO aliens, exploded planets, the Face on Mars, untapped psychic powers, shadow governments, time travelers and various kinds of "new physics". For a journalist who ventures forth into modern society it is a challenge to sort what is real from what is merely reassuring. There is a profusion of what can be called Bad Information. But there are things that can be done to combat Bad Information and make the scientific version of reality more palatable to a society starved for deeper truths.

Joel Achenbach has been a staff writer for *The Washington Post* since 1990, started the newsroom's first online column (Rough Draft) in 1999 and the paper's first blog, Achenblog, in 2005. He was a regular contributor to *National Geographic*, writing stories on such topics as dinosaurs, particle physics, earthquakes, extraterrestrial life, megafauna extinction and the electrical grid. Now assigned to

the *Post's* national desk, he writes on science and politics, and helped lead the coverage of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Achenbach is also the author of seven books, including *Captured by Aliens: The Search for Life and Truth in a Very Large Universe*, three volumes of *Why Things Are* (compilations of his 1988-1996 syndicated column that appeared in fifty newspapers), and his just-released *A Hole at the Bottom of the Sea: The Race to Kill the BP Oil Gusher*.

NCAS will be honoring Achenbach with the 2011 Philip J. Klass Award for outstanding contributions in promoting critical thinking and scientific understanding.

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