

BEST OF THE WEB

Cicada 3301: The internet mystery puzzling the world



By Robert Cottrell 29th November 2013

Our pick of the week from the web, including the game leaving hackers baffled, how to interpret scientific claims and the man Bill Gates wants you to read.

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he fall (and rise?) of Yahoo

Derrick Harris | GigaOm | 27 November 2013

Four former Yahoo technology executives talk about why the company has missed opportunities so consistently, and the great things it almost did.

“Google brought Yahoo’s business to its knees. The company isn’t dead, but its body has been prematurely autopsied countless times by technology journalists and analysts trying to diagnose what went wrong. Yahoo is the best-known company that people don’t like.”

A letter to the FDA in favour of gene-testing

Scott Alexander | Slate Star Codex | 26 November 2013

Doctor explains why the US FDA is wrong to curtail personal gene-testing. The science is sound. The product is good. The data is useful. “23andMe has raised awareness of genetics among the general population and given them questions and concerns which they can discuss with their doctor. Banning the entire field of personal genomics would eliminate a useful diagnostic tool from everyone except a few very wealthy patients.”

Decoding the summer of Snowden

Julian Sanchez | Cato | 26 November 2013

Overview of what we should have learned about US surveillance from the Snowden leaks. US Government gets a record of the time, date, and duration of nearly every call an American makes, which it stores for at least five years. A bulk location-tracking programme has been tested. Legal restraints on the NSA don’t work, and might have been designed not to work. There is no evidence that surveillance has foiled terrorism.

Internet mystery has world baffled

Chris Bell | Telegraph | 25 November 2013

Online mystery-solving game, Cicada 3301, has hackers hooked. Nobody admits to knowing who’s behind it, or what it’s for, but it’s crazily difficult and skews all over the place.

“Analysis of a 130Mb file containing thousands of prime numbers led to a Twitter account pumping out random numbers, which in turn produced a an ancient Hebrew code table, but this time based on Anglo-Saxon runes.” (Metered paywall)

Bill Gates thinks you should read this man

Clive Thompson | Wired | 25 November 2013

Interview with Vaclav Smil, geographer and polymath with a gift for plain talk. Main theme: innovation. It comes from manufacturing, so countries with strong manufacturing bases, such as China and Germany, are pulling ahead, while America falls behind. Bonus tips: If you want to save energy, add more insulation to your house and drive a Honda Civic. If you eat meat, eat it as Asians do — chopped up with rice. It goes much further.

How Google sold its engineers on management

David Garvin | Harvard Business Review | 24 November 2013

Google’s technocratic culture breeds scepticism about managers. “A company built by engineers for engineers”. But when the founders tried a flat structure, a few years in, it didn’t work. Trivial questions came straight to the top. The compromise: to have managers, but not very many, and to accept that good ideas count for more than formal seniority. “Seldom do employees accept top-down directives without question.”

Head-to-Head: PS4 vs. Xbox One

Kyle Orland | Ars Technica | 21 November 2013

Which should you buy? “It’s a tougher call than it has been for a while. From a purely hardware-focused perspective, the PS4 provides similar-to-slightly-better power for \$100 less. Why you still might want to consider the Xbox One is the games. The Xbox One’s lineup of exclusives is better at the moment, and the forecast for big-name only-on-Xbox experiences looks better in the medium term as well.”

The social/communication map

Ben Thompson | Stratechery | 20 November 2013

Situating social media on a matrix along axes of symmetric/asymmetric and permanent/ephemeral. Facebook in one corner – symmetric and permanent; Twitter diagonally opposite – asymmetric and ephemeral. “Facebook is a triumph. It completely dominates text, photo, and video sharing for the majority of the population.” Slava looks

Twenty tips for interpreting scientific claims
William Sutherland et al | Nature | 20th November 2013

Intended for policymakers evaluating scientific advice. “Dependencies change the risks. It is possible to calculate the consequences of individual events, such as an extreme tide, heavy rainfall and key workers being absent. However, if the events are interrelated, (for example a storm causes a high tide, or heavy rain prevents workers from accessing the site) then the probability of their co-occurrence is much higher than might be expected.”

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How Google search could decide the 2016 US election

(Image credit: Getty Images)