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Pseudoscience on TV: Weak Investigations

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Pseudoscience on TV: Weak Investigations

"Sci Fi Investigates" is a recent entry into the paranormal-themed TV lineup. Like others of its ilk such as "Ghost Hunters," it is a reality show (albeit notably lacking reality) that features investigations into mysterious phenomena.

The program, which airs on the Sci Fi (Science Fiction) Channel, tries to distinguish itself as an investigative series: "For the first time ever, a series that doesn't just ponder the questions, it hunts for the answers. From [cryptozoology](#) to government conspiracies, "Sci Fi Investigates" will launch a new expedition every episode to aggressively investigate the unexplained phenomena We will uncover new evidence and subject old evidence to the newest forensic investigative technology for fresh analysis. We will interview

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eyewitnesses for new insights and recruit the foremost scientists and historians, skeptics and believers to uncover new clues and reveal new perspectives of legendary mysteries."

Despite such breathless claims, the series provides little science and few answers.

The program's inability to find explanations is not so mysterious given the lack of scientists and investigators on the show. The "Sci Fi Investigates" team consists of four principal cast members who look into UFOs, [Bigfoot](#), [ghosts](#), voodoo, and other topics.

A young, attractive blonde named Debbie Dobrydney is identified as "a technician in the identification bureau (Crime Scene/Forensic Unit) of a municipal police department." The paranormal investigator of the bunch is a man named Richard Dolan, who holds degrees in history and writes UFO books. Archaeologist Bill Doleman comes closest to being a working scientist; he is director of New Mexico's statewide archaeological archive and database, and his research specialties include environmental analysis, prehistoric hunter-gatherers, geological methods in archaeology, computer database design, and statistical analysis.

The token "skeptic" of the group is a TV personality named Rob Mariano, a man with no apparent qualifications beyond having appeared on the reality TV shows "Survivor" and "The Amazing Race."

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Throughout the series, the team's actions bear little resemblance to any sort of real scientific investigation. According to the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, *investigate* means "to study by close examination and systematic inquiry." Judging by the episodes that have aired, the examination is not close, nor is the inquiry systematic. It is instead a hodgepodge of half-baked, unscientific experiments and studies with no clear purpose or protocol. It is, in short, pseudoscience.

The team desperately needed the assistance of an actual, working scientist or investigator. With all due respect to the team members, the show's producers can't just assemble a team with little or no investigative experience and expect them to come up with scientifically valid answers to such mysteries. With a few ad hoc exceptions, skeptical investigators are notably absent in "Sci Fi Investigates." To be fair, this is not really the team's fault. If the show's producers had wanted to actually "recruit the foremost scientists and...skeptics," they certainly could have done so. The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (www.csicop.org), a non-profit educational organization, has experienced, science-based investigators on staff who could have brought scientific validity to the program.

What's worse, the team members often seem to approach each mystery with a clean slate, apparently having done little background research on the subjects they are investigating. This may be done to enhance the appearance of objectivity, but the effect is that they often don't even know where to begin investigating.

In one episode, for no apparent reason, the team tries (and fails) to make a convincing fake Bigfoot film. Yet there is no investigational value whatsoever in creating a fake Bigfoot film; even if the team was successful in making a hoax that convinced some people (a difficult and expensive proposition), all it would prove is that that particular film was faked. It says nothing about the various extant films; it was a pointless exercise dreamed up by a TV producer instead of a real investigator.

Where's the investigation?

What is perhaps most remarkable about "Sci Fi Investigates" is how little scientific investigation is actually done. The team's "investigations" seem dictated not by scientific methodology or investigative acumen but instead the series producer's desire for interesting footage. As a scientific paranormal investigator with years of experience looking into just such mysteries, I was amused that the team didn't seem to know where to begin.

Many of their "investigations" consist of simply listening to second- or third-hand stories and anecdotes: Yvonne Brazel tells what her grandfather Mac told her about what crashed on his Roswell, New Mexico, ranch in 1947; Gabe Valdez, a former police officer, tells the team about what *he says* were animal mutilations many years earlier and a conspiracy to cover it up.

Incredibly, the team seems to think that simply listening to Valdez's story while looking at photographs of the alleged mutilations is "aggressively investigating the phenomenon," sufficient to come to a conclusion about the mystery. Instead of consulting a veterinarian or pathologist to understand how cattle may appear to be mutilated when they aren't, the team decides that the answers may lie in a secret military base which may or may not exist nearby. The team never checked for themselves Valdez's claim that there were no

tracks around the carcasses. Nor did they verify claims that there were no sign of natural predators.

As an investigator, I would want to see for myself whether or not there are tracks around the cattle, or any signs of predators. Taking someone else's word for it (or accepting their photographs as good evidence) is simply shifting the burden from an investigator to a layman. The team is satisfied to let others do their work for them, and accept whatever conclusions and interpretations they come to. It's like police detectives investigating a murder and not bothering to do any actual investigation beyond talking to the victim's family and looking at a few snapshots the family took of the crime scene.

Without doing any actual investigation, the team concluded that something unexplained was clearly afoot. Team member Rich Dolan states, "What I found most compelling were the photographs of the mutilated animals. No tracks around the carcasses, no signs of predators; they must have been dropped from the air. But who would do such a gruesome thing, and why? Could it be connected to a secret military base?"

Despite the show's premise and promise of professionals hunting for answers, this is amateur armchair investigation at its worst. The show's real danger is that it gives the impression that science and real investigation are being brought to bear on these topics--and failing to explain them.

Some parts of "Sci Fi Investigates" seem to be tongue-in-cheek satire, such as when Rich Dolan and Bill Doleman, searching for the secret military base in a mountain, fly overhead in a small plane looking for heat signatures. Why the pair would use a thermal imaging camera to detect a hidden installation is never explained. Dolan seems baffled by "quite a lot of hot thermal signal" readings, a genuine mystery except for the fact that he is flying over a hot, sunny desert. Of all the ways to find out whether a military base exists in a mountain, this must surely be the most contrived. And what does all this have to do with the cattle mutilations? Who knows? The "investigations" are guided not by any logic, science, or systematic strategy but instead by what the TV producers think might look interesting.

The program's Web site states that "Rob concludes the final group discussion by pointing out that the eyewitness testimony of Bigfoot sightings, something all the team members agree is sincere, can't be explained." The idea that eyewitness testimony regarding Bigfoot, Mothman, UFOs, or other topics can't be explained is patently false, as I or any number of other experts could have told the "Sci Fi Investigates" team. Ultimately, of course, the program is about entertainment instead of investigation or answers. Which is a shame, because these topics deserve real skeptical inquiry.

The Sci Fi Channel has greenlit yet another "paranormal reality series" called "Destination Truth" for its upcoming season; perhaps it will have more investigation and better science--but I'm skeptical.

Benjamin Radford is a writer and investigator with the [Committee for Skeptical Inquiry](#). He is author of hundreds of articles and [three books](#) on critical thinking, science and media literacy, and the paranormal.

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Benjamin Radford is the Bad Science columnist for Live Science. He covers pseudoscience, psychology, urban legends and the science behind "unexplained" or mysterious phenomenon. Ben has a master's degree in education and a bachelor's degree in psychology. He is deputy editor of Skeptical Inquirer science magazine and has written, edited or contributed to more than 20 books, including "Scientific Paranormal Investigation: How to Solve Unexplained Mysteries," "Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore" and "Investigating Ghosts: The Scientific Search for Spirits," out in fall 2017. His website is www.BenjaminRadford.com.



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