

# The REALL News

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## The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land Volume 2, Number 11 -- November 1994

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### Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe- science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

*The REALL News* is its official newsletter.

Membership information is provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

**Board of Directors:** Chairman, David Bloomberg; Assistant Chairman, Prof. Ron Larkin; Secretary-Treasurer, Kevin Brown; Newsletter Editor, Bob Ladendorf; At-Large Members, Prof. Steve Egger, Wally Hartshorn, and Frank Mazo.

**Editorial Board:** Bob Ladendorf (Newsletter Editor), David Bloomberg (electronic version editor), (one vacancy).

### REALL

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**Springfield, IL 62708**

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## From the Editor

-- Bob Ladendorf

In many minds, "tabloid journalism" is an oxymoron. Tabloids provide gossip, often erroneous, while journalism provides facts and analysis. This is obviously too simplistic -- tabloids, no matter how sensational, print correct information sometimes while journalistic writing can be false (e.g., the *Washington Post* article years ago about a poor kid on drugs that proved to be fictional).

To overcome monolithic thinking that all tabloids are alike, I studied them and will be reporting the results in a three-part series [a first for *The REALL News*] beginning this month. Part 1 concentrates on an analysis of their contents, and you will see some significant differences regarding the use of paranormal and pseudoscientific information.

As always, David monitors the media and provides lively comments about issues of interest to you in his *REALLity Check* column.

If you have any further comments or suggestions, please send them to me at REALL's address listed elsewhere on this page, or send us e-mail at the following addresses:

Bob Ladendorf -- [robertcl49@aol.com](mailto:robertcl49@aol.com)

David Bloomberg -- [david.bloomberg@f2112.n2430.z1.fidonet.org](mailto:david.bloomberg@f2112.n2430.z1.fidonet.org)

We always like to hear from you!

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

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## From the Chairman

-- David Bloomberg

I don't know about anybody else, but this has seemed like a long month for me. Must have been all the political ads.

Last month's meeting, for lunch and discussion at Shakey's, went pretty well. We got to see a few people who can't make it to our regular night meetings, as well as a couple new people. Conversations ranged from local "psychic" Greta Alexander (see *REALLity Check*) to conspiracies involving the Wright Brothers.

This month, we'll be back in the library again, Carnegie North room, to watch and discuss a Skeptics Society video about the psychology of the psychic and the believer.

On an exciting note, some of you may have read in the *State Journal-Register* about a dinner several of us had with comedy-magicians/skeptics Penn & Teller. When I started talking to the proper people and trying to set up something when they came to do a show at Sangamon State, I had hoped to get a general meeting out of it. However, we only got the final arrangements made less than a week before they got here, and they wanted to hold it to a small informal dinner, with about five people.

In addition, I was asked to co-host the PDQ (pre-show discussion and questions) with Don Murphy, formerly of WYMG. There we discussed psychics and trickery and other skeptic-related, and Penn & Teller-related, items of interest I thought it went pretty well, and we were able to talk to a relatively large number of people who might not have otherwise found out about us. Besides that, it was just plain fun! The show was great, of course (I'd seen them before, in Champaign-Urbana, but I had been waaaaay up at the top), and they always include a short speech about astrologers, psychics, and other similar "nonsense," as they put it.

On a completely unrelated note, when you come to the meeting, don't forget to bring your book orders. We are only 2-3 books away from a full order. Remember that members get 20 percent off all orders, and pay only a buck for shipping. Order now, because once we get this one out, I have no way of knowing when the next one will go.

/s/ David Bloomberg

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# **A Look into the *Sun* -- and Other Tabloids**

**by Bob Ladendorf**

## **Part 1 -- Difference in Content**

Walk through any supermarket checkout counter and you'll pass by a host of tabloids, those magazine-style publications printed on newspaper stock. At first glance, they all seem to feature the same lurid headlines -- endless variations of the O.J. Simpson case currently -- about celebrities or alien abductions. On second glance, though, they are quite different from each other.

Cheap reading and impulse buying -- two reasons for tabloid purchasing by shoppers. Millions do pick them up. For instance, the *National Enquirer* had an average paid circulation of 3,401,263, making it 16th on the highest magazine circulation list just behind *Playboy* and slightly ahead of *Newsweek*. The 22nd-ranked *Star* had a circulation of 2,931,305, while the *Globe* was 66th with 1,102,335. (Audit Bureau of Circulation figures for last six months of 1992 in the *World Almanac 1994*.)

Why are these tabloids so popular? What articles do they actually print, and how accurate are they? What social impact do they have on American life?

These are just a few of the questions to be addressed in this three-part series about tabloids. If they do influence the thinking of its readers, what can we discover in particular about their impact on critical thinking?

To understand tabloids, it is necessary first to evaluate their content, to assess what topics they actually cover. Although "tabloid" can be broadly defined to include certain daily newspapers, I am confining this study to the more popular culture recognition of "tabloid" as being the weekly publications readily identified at supermarket counters. The second part will feature a closer look at tabloid articles on paranormal and pseudoscientific issues, and the third part will cover a short history of tabloids and assess their current impact.

## **A Look into the Contents**

To determine what articles are featured in these weekly publications, I selected five tabloids featured at supermarket checkouts and a book store on these different dates: August 1994, late December 1993, and November 1993.

The August 1994 and November 1993 dates were sufficiently spread apart in time to determine if the contents were similar, or changing. The December date was used for looking at some of the psychic predictions, as well as comparing those articles with the recent issues preceding them. All these will be used in the content analyses that follow.

The tabloids studied are the *National Enquirer*, the *Star*, the *Globe*, the *Sun* and the *Weekly World News*. There are others, but these were the most prominently displayed ones in Springfield, Illinois.

In studying the range of articles in these tabloids, I was able to determine similar categories -- five main ones and a miscellaneous one. Those categories are:

- Celebrities
- Real stories about odd persons or events
- Paranormal/pseudoscientific
- Health
- Governmental or other scientific studies
- Miscellaneous

The following is a table with my categorization of the articles:

### Tabloid Contents

Publication	Celebs.	Odd/Real	Paranormal	Hlth.	Studies	Misc.	Date
Nat'l Enq.	16	7	0	7	3	3	8/16/94
Star	25	1	1	2	1	4	8/16/94
Globe	16	6	1	4	0	1	8/16/94
Sun	2	33	8	2	0	5	8/16/94
Weekly W. News	2	38	10	6	2	2	8/16/94
Nat'l Enq.	18	18	0	9	2	7	12/28/93
Star	37	1	1	2	1	2	12/28/93
Globe	27	3	2	3	0	8	12/28/93
Sun	2	40	15	6	1	6	12/28/93
Weekly W. News	0	18	16	3	2	9	1/4-11/94
Nat'l Enq.	21	12	2	6	5	4	11/9/93
Star	29	2	1	7	1	4	11/9/93
Globe	23	4	1	5	0	3	11/9/93
Sun	2	38	10	1	2	5	11/9/93
Weekly W. News	1	22	19	6	3	1	11/9/93

The analysis of the table clearly demonstrates the differences among the tabloids. The *National Enquirer*, the *Star* and the *Globe* concentrate primarily on celebrity gossip stories while the *Sun* and the *Weekly World News* primarily feature articles about odd people or events and paranormal/pseudoscientific assertions.

The significance of these differences is the fact that the audiences for these publications have clearly different reading intentions. While critical thinkers and skeptics may tend to lump together the tabloids as all the same -- gossip and aliens -- this study clearly shows that any criticism of tabloids on paranormal/pseudoscientific grounds needs to be more narrowly focused. A closer look into the *Sun*, as well as the *World Weekly News*, will be the focus of Part 2.

[Bob Ladendorf is a co-founder of REALL and its newsletter editor. He is a state government executive and former free-lance magazine writer.]

{The published version of this newsletter featured a graphic showing the front cover of one of the *Sun* issues studied. The headlines were: "Space aliens warned JFK SHAPE UP OR WE'LL INVADE THE EARTH", "WHY THIS GIRL WED BLOW-UP LOVER", "50 murdered in house of horror", and "GOSSIPY WOMAN GROWS GIANT EARS" with appropriate "photos". If you don't want to miss future graphics, subscribe to The REALL News, using the membership form at the end of this file!}

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## Skeptical Thoughts

*"There is no belief, however foolish, that will not gather its faithful adherents who will defend it to the death."*

-- Isaac Asimov

*"It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."*

-- [Sherlock Holmes] Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,  
*A Scandal in Bohemia*

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# REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

## The Future of Politics, Part II

Update from last month: Ellen Schanzle-Haskins lost her bid for the Illinois State Senate.

You may (should) recall that Schanzle-Haskins sent out an invitation to a fund-raiser featuring local "psychic" (or, as it more impressively said in the invitation, "Noted Parapsychologist") Greta Alexander. Well, it appears that, even though it's implied on the front of the invitation (shown last month), Alexander did not predict a Schanzle- Haskins win.

I had the opportunity to talk to Schanzle-Haskins approximately a week before the election. I asked her flat out if Alexander had actually predicted her to win (I didn't identify myself, in order to avoid an immediate negative reaction). She said no, that Alexander didn't work that way, but instead made more general predictions. According to Schanzle-Haskins, Alexander said she "saw" Schanzle-Haskins on a stage with lots of people applauding and shaking her hand. Well, I think it's pretty obvious to most of us that this is a trivial prediction, at best. Generally, even the loser ends up giving some sort of concession speech at which people applaud and shake her hand. Also, candidates often speak to groups during the race, at which time this also occurs. So, essentially Alexander predicted that Schanzle- Haskins would run, which was already a given.

What did happen? Schanzle-Haskins lost by a large margin. Some might say she got pounded. Yet "Noted Parapsychologist" Greta Alexander couldn't even see such a disturbing result? Heck, all she had to do was read the polls!

Any bets as to whether this little misprediction will be mentioned when Alexander is on *Sightings* and a network TV psychic detective special?

## The New Fall Season, Part II

Speaking of such wonderful TV shows, I wasn't the only one who noticed a sudden surge of paranormal-related broadcasts.

*TV Guide* (10/22) had a long article on them shortly after the beginning of the season. They call it "TV's hottest trend: reality-based programming targeting unreality." The article discusses many of the new shows and talked to some of those involved. I've discussed many of these shows in past articles, so I won't go through them all again. However, I'd like to point out a few flaws in some statements within the article.

The executive producer of *Sightings* calls his show "20/20 meets *The Twilight Zone*." Unfortunately, the part that they took from 20/20 is apparently not good investigative reporting, from what I've seen. For one thing, like I said earlier, I'm sure they won't mention the failed predictions of Greta Alexander (including a recent book containing a chapter about her). Also, this show recently featured supposed abduction expert Dr. Richard Boylan. I know Boylan from the computer bulletin boards, and the man thinks the US government has sent out armed hit teams after him to keep him quiet about the aliens. He thinks they have used psychic warfare against him. Funny how these beliefs, which many of us would consider a bit more than even "fringe," weren't discussed in the story. I mean, if they are like 20/20, it seems that they would just love to break open a huge government conspiracy like this one must be if Boylan is correct.

John Marshall, the host of *Encounters*, claims that they have people working for them "who attack this with the same standards...as the conventional newsroom or newsmagazine staff. We don't want to do anything to hurt our credibility." That's great, but considering that their premiere episode was universally panned, including by pro-UFO groups and individuals, as being a waste of air time (see *Close Encounters of the FOX Kind*, Vol. 2, #3), I'd say they didn't have much credibility to lose.

The end of the article loosely addresses skeptics, including a quote from well-known skeptic Ray Hyman. But, as is usual with this type of article, any skeptical views are quickly knocked down: "Just because there is no hard evidence, [the producers of such shows] argue, the fact that there are so many people claiming to have experiences makes it a legitimate area of inquiry." I agree completely! Heck, that's what REALL is here for.

Unfortunately, these shows are not using legitimate inquiry, as I have pointed out over and over again. A producer of *Unsolved Mysteries* adds, "The audience is intelligent enough to weigh both sides of the story." This is also true. The problem is that these shows don't give both sides of the story. They give one side and do their best to get ratings. As I've said before, many more people will probably watch a show with a "mystery" than a show which debunks that mystery.

### **Mary, Mary, Everywhere, and Not a Drop of Proof**

Virgin Mary sightings seem to be a big thing these days. The *Chicago Tribune* (10/25), AP via the *State Journal-Register* (10/16), and Channel 20 News (11/13) all had features of varying lengths about these sightings.

All three dealt with the same "sightings," actually, which supposedly occur on the 13th of every month at Rosa Lopez's home in Hollywood, Florida. The AP article also mentions a number of other occurrences, and also that even the Roman Catholic Church, among others, is not convinced that there are any miracles going on. That, however, doesn't stop the faithful from trekking long distances in hopes of witnessing a miracle.

REALL has explained numerous times that we take no position on religious beliefs. A quote by well-known skeptic Joe Nickell, in the AP article, sums this viewpoint up well: "If people feel the Virgin Mary in their heart, that's a matter of personal religious choice, and people are entitled to their beliefs. I just see no evidence that there is anything of a supernatural or miraculous nature at these places, other than a kind of emotional contagion, ranging from spiritual revival all the way to mass hysteria."

Some of the supposedly miraculous occurrences have simple, down-to-earth explanations, according to Nickell. If you stare at the sun long enough, it appears to move due to an optical illusion; claims of silver rosaries turning gold seem much less miraculous when you realize that these rosaries are generally silver-coated, and that coating can rub off to reveal its golden brass base. Additionally, there have been claims of a "golden door to heaven" at some sightings, including photos taken. However, a Georgia Skeptics investigation showed that these pictures showed nothing more than the lens aperture of the camera.

How do the believers respond to such investigations? One at the Lopez home was quoted in the AP article as saying, "What one person sees, another may not. If you believe, you'll see it." While this may be religiously satisfying, it leaves a large scientific and physical explanation gap.

### **Problems in the Office of Alternative Medicine**

The director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM) has quit.

As you may know, this office was set up to study alternative treatments, in hopes of validating those (if any) that work and disproving those that do not. Unfortunately, the mere existence of the OAM has, for some, validated alternative medicine ("They wouldn't make an office for it if there was nothing to it."), and many aren't waiting for the results, if any.

Now the director, Joseph Jacobs, has left "with a bang" according to *Science* (9/30). Jacobs blasted politicians, especially Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, and some alternative medicine advocates for putting undue pressure on his office, promoting specific therapies over others, and trying to avoid objective science.

A specific example of this is when Harkin, at a Congressional hearing, began by saying he'd been cured of allergies by his friend, Berkeley Bedell (former Iowa congressman and fishing-tackle manufacturer), who gave him capsules of bee pollen. (An interesting side note is that the owner of the bee pollen "remedy" recently paid a \$200,000 fine to the Federal Trade Commission for false advertising.) Bedell later appeared as a witness to plug this method and said the OAM should find people who claim to have therapies that work, and "just simply find out whether what he claims is correct." The problem with this, according to Jacobs and *Science*, is that "while many alternative therapists may be eager to have the imprimatur of an NIH review, they may not want the rigor. Yet without well-controlled data-collection, Jacobs warns, field studies could degenerate into mere anecdote-gathering."

In an interview with *Science*, Bedell "brushed aside questions about how his field studies could be designed to avoid bias." He said that those are technical details, and he's not a scientist. However, he still maintains that such studies can be done quickly, easily, without fancy statistics, and without double-blind tests. He said that most patients don't care how a given remedy works, only that it does. He seems to miss the point that without such tests, we won't even know if it does work!

The basic problem seems to be that non-scientists, without (apparently) the slightest idea of how the process of scientific investigation works, are trying to tell scientists how to conduct experiments. The higher-level problem is that these people control the purse-strings.

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## Calendar of Events

November 21

REALL meeting, 7 p.m., Lincoln Library, Carnegie Room North. Video, *The Psychology of the Psychic and the Believer*, by Mark Edward.

December 20

REALL meeting, 7 p.m., Lincoln Library, Carnegie Room South. Subject to be announced.

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## A Nod to Our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. Patron members are those giving \$50 or more. To become a patron of REALL, please see the membership form below. Patron members are:

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Bob Ladendorf, Springfield	

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## Letters to the Editor

We at REALL encourage letters to the editor about any article or topic covered in The REALL News. We want to make this a forum for *all* our members. (Letters may be edited if too long. Name, address and phone number must be included with the letter.)

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## Predictions for Future Issues

- A Look into the *Sun* -- and Other Tabloids -- Part 2
- Cancer Clusters
- Hormones in your milk?
- Anti-Oxidants

## Skeptics Online

If you have a computer and a modem, you owe it to yourself to participate in the skeptic message areas on the computer BBS networks. Here in Springfield, call The Temples of Syrinx at (217) 787-9101. David Bloomberg operates this BBS, which carries the FidoNet SKEPTIC, EVOLUTION, UFO, and FMS conferences, internationally distributed message areas for discussing topics of interest to skeptics. He is also carrying ParaNet conferences, all dedicated to UFO and paranormal topics. You can also find a wide variety of skeptic, scientific, UFO, FMS, evolution/creation, and urban legend text files.

The Temples of Syrinx -- (217) 787-9101

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Regular membership includes *The REALL News* and all of the benefits of membership. A subscription to *The REALL News*, without membership, is available. Full-time students can join at the discounted rate. A patron membership includes all of the benefits of a regular membership, plus a listing in *The REALL News* and our eternal gratitude (where "eternal" is defined as "one year").

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Last modified 17 Aug 1996. Comments to [whartsho@mail.fgi.net](mailto:whartsho@mail.fgi.net)