

Media Council Named at 1st World Skeptics Congress

by Bob Ladendorf

More than 1,000 critical thinkers from around the world gathered for the first World Skeptics Congress in Buffalo, New York, last month to listen to speakers ranging from Stephen Jay Gould to Chris Carter, producer of The X-Files, attend panel discussions on various topics, and be updated on the status of paranormal/pseudoscientific activities worldwide.

Sponsored by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and held at the University of New York at Buffalo and the Center for Inquiry, the Congress was held over a four-day period, June 20-23, with the theme of "Science in the Age of (Mis) Information." The Congress, held during the 20th anniversary of the formation of CSICOP, was highlighted by a special awards ceremony on the 22nd featuring humanist/humorist Steve Allen, who also played the piano.

At the awards ceremony, it was announced that an asteroid was being named for CSICOP to honor its efforts to encourage rational, scientific inquiry. Because the astronomical group responsible for the naming of astronomical bodies indicated that "CSICOP" was not pronounceable, the asteroid would be named "Skeptic" on July 1.

It also was announced that another asteroid would be named for Paul Kurtz, CSICOP's founder and chairman. That announcement prompted banter between Kurtz and James Randi, conjurer and author who also has an asteroid named after him, as to who had the larger asteroid!

At the start of the Congress, CSICOP announced the formation of a new "Council for Media Integrity" to monitor and respond to media stories and programs promoting paranormal and pseudoscientific phenomena. In announcing the formation of the Council, Kurtz said, "The media have now virtually replaced the schools, colleges, and universities as the main source of information for the general public the irresponsibility of the media in the area of science and the paranormal is a worldwide problem. But it especially applies to the United States, where the media have been distorting science, and in particular presenting pseudoscience as genuine science. Indeed, we are appalled by the number of 'documentaries,' which are really entertainment programs, presenting fringe science as real science.

"The major networks have been running two or three such specials almost every month. Recently there have been programs on prophecies, astrology, psychic powers, creationism, Noah's Ark, angels, alien abductions, etc. This is in addition to the popular 'Unsolved Mysteries,' 'X-Files,' and 'Sightings,' as well as new programs such as 'Paranormal Borderlands,' and 'Poltergeist.' "

Members of the Coordinating Committee for the council include Kurtz, who also is the professor emeritus of philosophy, SUNY at Buffalo; Joe Nickell, author, University of Kentucky, and senior research fellow, CSICOP; Barry Karr, executive director, CSICOP; and William Evans, assistant professor of communications, Georgia State University. (See list of other members in box.)

The council complained about the lack of skeptical dissent on talk shows. A statement endorsed by council members maintained that, "If the United States is to continue to provide leadership and compete in the global economy, then we need to raise the level of scientific literacy and understanding of the general public.

"We are not, of course, asking that TV producers not run these shows or make a profit. We surely do not wish to censor the media. We only ask that they provide some balance and provide some appreciation of the scientific approach. The new Council will monitor such programs, and attempt to persuade producers, directors, writers and the general public to leave room for the appreciation of scientific methods of inquiry.

“We realize that the media are being attacked from all sides, but we think that a plea for raising the level of understanding of science should be heard.”

The council plans to respond to misinformation in the media through various media, including videos, e-mail and faxes.

While the Congress covered a range of subjects, from alien abductions to The X-Files, there were at least two recurring themes: encouragement of diplomacy in criticism of paranormal/pseudoscientific topics, and a criticism of post modernism beliefs that there is no objective knowledge.

In his keynote speech, paleontologist and CSICOP board member Stephen Jay Gould cautioned the audience to avoid dismissal of a scientist’s entire body of work if only a part of it is wrong. Through slides and engrossing discussions of errors in scientists’ work, such as Thayer’s wrong-headed animal camouflage in nature assertions, Gould pointed out that, nonetheless, various scientists provided either valuable observations or developed other confirmed ideas that may not have surfaced if ignored because of other errors. Gould seemed to be saying, don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.

In reviewing the well-known CIA “remote viewing” experiments, CSICOP board member Ray Hyman countered Prof. Jessica Utts’ view that there is statistical significance to the existence of paranormal activity. (For a detailed discussion of the two reviewers conclusions, see the March/April 1996 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*.) However, Hyman indicated that Utts is a serious researcher who should be heard and her work evaluated. This urging of fully reviewing the other’s position is another example of the avoidance of complete dismissal of ideas prevalent at the Congress.

In criticizing the post modernist assertions of a lack of objective knowledge, Kurtz told Congress participants in the opening ceremony that, “We hear from all sides that the Enlightenment, which was committed to science, reason, and education as a key to human progress, is at an end. Some of the patron saints of post modernism, from Feyerabend to Derrida, even maintain that science is only one mythic narrative among others. Yet these critics fail to explain how and why science has succeeded in examining our understanding of the universe and how and why its technical applications work. Although they rail against science, would they willingly forego the use of antibiotics, stereophonic systems, or the computer screen, which they use to compose their writings attacking science? Speaking as a philosopher, I fear that the liberal arts curriculum and the kind of science education that we offer at the universities and colleges needs to be reformed.”

Giving the conference address on the opening night of the Congress was Leon Lederman, emeritus director of Fermilab and Nobel Laureate in Physics. He indicated that an anti-science movement is in a waxing phase and that, quoting Winston Churchill, skeptics need to fight [against irrationalism] and never give up. Lederman emphasized the need for more scientific knowledge, that “Scientific authority is there to be overthrown by young revolutionaries throwing logical bombs.”

Among the range of subjects covered in his speech, Lederman was emphatic about the need for changes in science education. He said that the biology, chemistry, physics sequence in high school should be reversed, perhaps even integrated each year so that students would be taking Science 1, 2 and 3 instead of the current sequence.

The soft-spoken physicist, also known for his book *The God Particle*, was presented CSICOP’s “In Praise of Reason” award for his work in science at the start of the speech.

Others honored for their work at the Awards Banquet on Saturday night included:

Isaac Asimov Award — Stephen Jay Gould, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University

Public Education in Science Award — Dean Edell, national radio medical commentator

Distinguished Skeptic Lifetime Achievement Award — Steve Allen, author and entertainer

Distinguished Skeptic Award — James Randi, conjuror, author

Responsibility in Journalism Award

Phillip Adams, columnist, radio moderator — Australia

Piero Angela, journalist, television moderator, author — Italy

Pierre Berton, historian, author, broadcaster — Canada

Earlier that day at the luncheon held in a large tent outside the Center for Inquiry headquarters, John Maddox, editor emeritus of Nature magazine, cautioned the audience of several hundred that the growth of antiscience thinking could adversely affect funding for science work. In addition, he commented that following the end of the cold war, activists do not have a cause to advance. He also encouraged the participants to talk more about religion and its impact, and to discuss it and other topics with “rationality and civility.”

Numerous sessions were held during the Congress, many of them concurrently. including UFOlogy, astrology, homeopathy, therapeutic touch, chiropractic, creation/evolution, mechanisms of self-deception, alternative health cures, philosophy and pseudoscience, psychoanalytical theory, critical thinking in education, spiritualism and the University of Buffalo expose, and the paranormal in China. (Editor’s Note: Additional articles about some of these sessions will appear in a future newsletter, and detailed discussions will be forthcoming in a future issue of Skeptical Inquirer.)

At the last session of the Congress featuring updates by world skeptics groups, Kurtz announced that the 2nd World Skeptics Congress would be in June 1998 in Heidelberg, Germany.

Council Members

Glenn T. Seaborg, Nobel Prize winner, and Steve Allen, Honorary CoChairmen.

Others include: Phillip Adams; Prof. Susan J. Blackmore; Jim Bohannon; Kendrick Frazier, editor, Skeptical Inquirer; Martin Gardner; Prof. George Gerbner; Stephen Jay Gould; Prof. Paul R. Gross; Prof. Gerald Holton; Edwin C. Krupp; Prof. Norman Levitt; Lee Loevinger; Sir John Maddox, editor emeritus, Nature; John Allen Paulos, mathematician and author; Gerald Piel; Wallace Sampson, MD; Amardeo Sarma; and Prof. Eugenie Scott. Other names being added.

Health Professionals Form Therapeutic Touch Study Group

REALL received the following letter earlier this month:

Dear Fellow Skeptics,

As critics of pseudoscience, you may be familiar with an alternative nursing “healing modality” called Therapeutic Touch (TT). [See The REALL News, Vol. 3, #1, Letter to the Editor] Not long ago, only a few were critical of this practice. Now many across the country have begun to speak out. I would like to invite your members to join a new group dedicated to confronting this nonsense in nursing.

Some people are concerned about TT’s religious and even cultish aspects. They fear that it is a way to persuade people to accept a metaphysical viewpoint through the guise of medical intervention. Alas, it does appear that TT is being promoted principally to have people tacitly accept the premises of an occult religion known as Theosophy.

My own particular concerns, however, lie more in the scientific area. TT is being pushed as a scientifically validated nursing intervention—and it is not. The research has been frightful, yet it is used repeatedly by TT’s proponents to dupe the public (and sometimes even the government) into believing that the practice has a sound scientific basis.

It is not a coincidence that nursing has been the field where this practice has been insinuated into medicine. Nurses are trusted health professionals. And nursing does not have established watchdog groups, like physicians and dentists each have in their “Councils of Scientific Affairs.” So TT, like a virus, has taken hold in a vulnerable population.

When health professionals contacted us about some scientific misconduct in a TT study at a University in Alabama, we jumped at the chance to expose the wrongdoing. That activity is proceeding. But in gathering with others from around the country on this matter, we all discovered the scope of the problem and resolved to do more about confronting TT on a scientific and philosophical basis.

TT has its own trade group, Nurse Healers and Professional Associates Cooperative, which boasts over 1,200 members. Until now, there has been no countervailing force for truth and scientific integrity. So those of us who gathered recently in Alabama — nurses, doctors, medical ethicists, etc. — decided to form the National Therapeutic Touch Study Group (NTTSG).

Right now, we're just getting NTTSG off the ground. Our first project, exposing the scientific misconduct in Alabama, is already underway and the funding for that has been provided by concerned health professionals there. Several other projects have begun, as well.

Our immediate need is not funding, and this is not a fund-raising letter. Rather, we need to establish a network of people concerned with the unscientific practice of TT. We need people to join us, keep us informed of anything they may hear about TT, are willing to speak out, and are able to lend us advice and counsel from time to time. In return, we plan on keeping everyone posted on what is going on and give national and local news organizations a resource for scientific skepticism about TT.

So, I am writing to invite any of your interested members to join the NTTSG. Please drop me a line and let me know if you're interested and/or able to help. Thanks for your time. I hope to hear from you soon.

My very best regards,

Linda Rosa, R.N.
Corresponding Secretary

The address for NTTSG is: P.O. Box 7117, Loveland, CO 80537. The phone number is: 970-669-7194.

REALL encourages anybody who is interested to contact the NTTSG.

Additional Sources - Tornadoes

(See May/June issue for article.)

Howard B Bluestein, "Riders on the Storm," *The Sciences*, March/April 1995.

Jim Reed, "Cumulonimbus Commandoes: On the Road with Project Vortex," *Weatherwise*, April/May 1995.

Robert Davies-Jones, "Tornadoes," *Scientific American*, August 1995.

From the Editor

Bob Ladendorf

Having returned from a wonderful trip to the 1st World Skeptics Congress, I want to let our readers know that there are many skeptics from around the world seriously concerned about the growth of antiscience activities today. Being able to hear many excellent speakers and share experiences with like-minded individuals was an invigorating experience.

In this issue, I highlight the results of the Congress. In future issues, I'll discuss different aspects of the conference.

Last month, we unveiled a new, more graphic design. There was a glitch. When our printer adjusted for a dark photo of the tornado, the rest of the copy was printed light. I will try to avoid that in future issues.

As always, stay in touch. We value your comments.

From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

For the first time in several months, it actually feels like a month between newsletters. I've had some time to think and write without deadlines looming over me. Not that I have enough time for everything I'd like to do, of course, but does anybody?

If you can answer that question, "Yes," then you definitely need to give me a call! REALL is always looking for volunteers to help out in various aspects. We need authors, speakers, and anybody else with a little spare time. Don't be afraid to call!

Speaking of speakers, I'd like to thank Bob "Editor Bob" Ladendorf for giving us a good summary of his trip to the first World Skeptics Conference last meeting. Oh, sure, you can read about it here, but it's just not the same if you didn't attend the meeting.

Well, I don't have much more to say this month. Hopefully, I'll see you at the next meeting, on August 6th at the Lincoln Library.

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

Editor Bob said to me, "David, we haven't had a REALLity Check in a little while, so this one had better be pretty long." Bob, being an editor, didn't want to hear any excuses. Luckily for me, two events occurred and made certain that this column would be long enough to make him happy: Independence Day exploded into movie theaters and made aliens the "big thing" again, and Hillary Clinton talked to dead people. It figures – when in doubt, rely on movies and politics.

Slow News Day?

Actually, to me the big news wasn't that Hillary Clinton talked to dead people – they're probably more interesting than most of the politicians in Washington, D.C. Instead, what I found interesting was the way it was covered in the media.

Most of the media ran stories about the claims that Hillary held "seances" and Hillary's counter-claims that it was just part of a psychological exercise and she didn't really think she was talking to the dead. Some talked about how her generation was into that "New Age" thing, so it wouldn't hurt her husband's chance of re-election. But Channel 20, WICS, ever at the forefront of newscasting, took a different angle. They opened their news on that June day with the Hillary story, and then went to an interview with Springfield "psychic" Marla. Marla, shown in full regalia with tarot cards placed carefully in front of her, told us about how it had been her experience that one cannot talk to the dead immediately, but must go through several sessions of seances to get to the point at which Hillary was said to be.

Come on! Certainly the station that calls itself "NewsChannel 20" could have found some actual news to broadcast that day! There was, of course, no skeptical viewpoint given – no hint that perhaps this Marla might not be basing her little discussion on facts and evidence. Her bit was aired as if they had been talking to a legal expert at the O.J. trial or an aerospace expert after a plane crash. Did anybody really care what this "psychic" thought about Hillary's doings? Next, I suppose we'll be seeing an astrologer giving the weather forecast.

Media Blitz

As I mentioned earlier, Independence Day caused a media blitz not just about the movie itself, but about extraterrestrials and the paranormal in general. I can't address everything here, but let's look at how some of the major media outlets responded.

Newsweek's July 8 issue featured "America is Hooked on the Paranormal" as the cover story. I feared the worst (in other words, a story worthy of the Chicago Tribune Tempo section). I was happy to find out that I was wrong. There were actually two articles plus sidebars together covering various aspects of the paranormal and what Americans think about it. The first, "Alien Invasion!" mostly talks about some of the current crop of claims without really taking a point of view – until the end of the article, that is, when the author finally inserts his opinions on the matter. I'm happy to say

they seem to coincide nicely with mine:

“There is a psychic toll. Listen to the young woman who told the International UFO Conference and Film Festival in Mesquite, Nev., that she was abducted by aliens and sexually ‘probed,’ that the little men ‘took eggs out of me’ and gave her a ‘very detailed sponge bath.’ You think, this poor woman is crying and could use some serious couch time. Then it turns out it’s taken six regression-therapy sessions to recover these so-called memories. Scary.”

He goes on to say:

“John Horigian, a Boston software salesman who moonlights as paranormal investigator and debunker, says, ‘There are definitely lunatics out there, but if all these claims are hoaxing and lying, we’ve got a serious pathology affecting this country.’ He’s right. We do.”

The second article, “Is There Anything to It? Evidence, Please.” looked good from the title alone, and it holds up pretty well on further scrutiny. It opens by noting, “At least a scenario like that of Independence Day would not violate any of the laws of nature [apparently, the author forgot about the law of gravity, which the alien spacecraft seem to be breaking as they hover over major cities in the movie]. In contrast, claims in other fringe realms, such as telepathy and psychokinesis, are credible only if you ignore a couple or three centuries of established science.” She goes on to quote Carl Sagan explaining how “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” The article looks at the best evidence for telepathy, psychokinesis, and UFOs, and what problems there are with each set of that evidence. She did a very good job of looking at both the pro-paranormal and the skeptical sides, talking to James “The Amazing” Randi, Ray Hyman, Susan Blackmore, and Joe Nickell. Suffice it to say that even the “best” evidence for each of these phenomena have serious methodological and scientific errors – something that is all too often not mentioned in media reports about the paranormal.

USA Today (July 5-7) took a slightly more humorous approach, searching for a plan of action in case aliens do come and invade us. The answer: Call 9-1-1. Neither the U.S. Government nor the United Nations has any plan on what to do if aliens come calling. As Air Force Lt. Col. Mack McLaurin, who is in charge of handling UFO inquiries for the Pentagon, says, “How can we develop a plan to guard against something we can’t even prove exists?”

Of course, many UFO believers insist that the government does know They exist, and the article touches on that a little by using a bit of sarcasm about the military continuing to deny that they have captured aliens. As a side note, I must admit that I got a little perverse pleasure when the UFO-lovers were among the first to get incinerated by the aliens in Independence Day.

Scientists at the Planetary Society noted that it is highly unlikely that aliens will be dropping in to visit us. “It’s so much easier to send information than schlep around the galaxy in a ship that uses more energy than our entire civilization,” one said. Another scientist noted, “The odds are pretty slim of somebody building a starship simply for the purpose of coming here and blowing up the White House.” That’s right. They’re much too busy making patterns in corn fields to go around blowing things up!

Forget-Me-Not

George Franklin was convicted of murder in 1990, based solely on the “recovered memory” testimony of his daughter. Briefly, his daughter said she suddenly recalled witnessing him kill a friend of hers when she was a young girl (the girl’s body was found, bludgeoned to death, but the case was never solved). It was a fairly famous case, and the first one to put recovered memories in the spotlight. Last year, his conviction was overturned (“REALLity Check” Vol. 3, #4), but Franklin remained in jail while prosecutors decided whether to retry him or not. The problem for them was that evidence built up that therapy, and possibly hypnosis, were the cause of the memories. Finally, this month, they decided not to retry him and let him go after taking away six years of his life.

Recently, more scientists have been studying ways to differentiate real memories from false ones (Newsweek, 7/15). One experiment showed that different areas of the brain are active when a subject is remembering something correctly than when they are falsely remembering something. However, these are just one-time word tests, while the false memories generated by poor therapy often gets thought about over and over, thereby implanting sensory data about it in

the mind and probably making it appear more “real” in such a test.

So, we’re back at the beginning. Is there a way to differentiate real memories from false ones? Not now. Which means the court system needs to recognize this problem and use actual evidence instead of relying solely on “recovered memories” to convict people.

One Final Note

On a non-paranormal note, I am sending in a letter to Newsweek and ending my subscription to that magazine. I have been a subscriber for many years now and was happy to see the way they covered the Independence Day paranormal blitz (see above). However, no sooner did they do this than they turned around and slapped the public in the face.

As many of you have probably heard by now, “Anonymous,” the author of the loosely fictional book Primary Colors, turned out to be a Newsweek writer. When it had been suggested that he was Anonymous in past weeks, he lied and denied any involvement. Furthermore, it has been revealed that the editor of Newsweek knew that he was Anonymous and allowed him to use the pages of his magazine to lie about it. When they were questioned about the ethics of the situation, they came up with all sorts of excuses, including one about it only being “entertainment,” as if this made it okay. As you may recall, the networks frequently use this excuse as they air pseudo-documentaries about “psychics” or “mysterious origins” or whatever nonsense is on that month’s agenda. I don’t accept it from them and I won’t accept it from Newsweek. I certainly won’t send them my money to support such behavior.

Journalists should be expected to report the facts. The last person in the world I want to ever see lie is a journalist. Knowing full well that an author was lying, the editor allowed him to do so. How can we trust that editor, let alone the author?

I cannot. And that is sad, sad news.

Masthead Information

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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.

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P.O. Box 20302

Springfield, IL 62708

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REALL Contacts

David Bloomberg, Chairman: david.bloomberg@f2112.n2430.z1.fidonet.org

Bob Ladendorf, Editor: robertcl49@aol.com (Note: 1st 8 are letters)

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