

THE EMPEROR'S NEW MEDIA

SCIENCE, PSI, AND SKEPTICS: BREAKING THE SILENCE

DEAN RADIN

There are two ways to be fooled. One

is to believe what isn't true; the other

is to refuse to believe what is true.

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD

The National Science Foundation (NSF) reports on the state of science and technology in the United States in its *Science and Engineering Indicators* report. In the 2002 issue, within the section on public understanding of science, the NSF reported that in surveys conducted since 1979, about 90% of adults consistently report being "very or moderately interested in new scientific discoveries and the use of new inventions and technologies." But despite the purported interest, science and technology news does not seem to attract much real attention. The NSF writes, "According to Pew Research Center surveys, only about 2 percent of the most closely followed news stories over the past 15 years were about scientific breakthroughs, research, and exploration."

In fact, a majority of the US population is not well-

informed about science and technology, and many do not understand basic scientific facts. For example, an NSF survey in 2001 found that only 50% of respondents knew that it takes the Earth one year to orbit the Sun, or that humans were not around when the dinosaurs ruled the Earth.

This sad state of affairs fuels the NSF's lament over the public's growing belief in what it regards as pseudoscience. This includes such things as "yogi [sic] flying, therapeutic touch, astrology, fire walking, voodoo magical thinking, Uri Gellar [sic], alternative medicine . . . near-death experiences, UFOs, the Bermuda Triangle, homeopathy, faith healing, and reincarnation."

This list is the standard skeptical axis of evil. The problem is that all of these topics *can* be carefully investigated using scientific methods; there is nothing intrinsically unscientific about them, nor in some cases is there a lack of solid evidence. To be sure, opinions differ about the quality and interpretation of evidence, but what the NSF really objects to is that such topics do not appear to be *plausible* (their term) given prevailing scientific assumptions.

One would hope that the authors of an NSF report on science and technology would pay attention to the history of science and technology, but apparently they didn't. History is saturated with tales of authorities pronouncing new ideas to be utterly impossible, usually just before a breakthrough falsifies the pronouncement. Dogma dies hard.

In short, scientific authorities and their hit-men, the professional skeptics, loudly bemoan the dimwitted public's knowledge of science, and yet they hold such a myopic view of what is plausible they don't even entertain the possibility that some of the public's beliefs, especially those based on repeated personal experience, might be sound.

For example, the NSF report indicated that 60% of its survey respondents believed that "some people possess psychic powers or ESP." This statistic was used to imply that only the uneducated masses believe in such nonsense, and yet the report avoids stating what the survey data actually reveal—that the more educated the respondent, the higher the level of belief. And further, the "attentive public," meaning those who regularly read daily newspapers or relevant national magazines, share this belief (59%).

Thus the majority of educated, informed Americans, including a substantial number of university professors—including physicists, statisticians, and psychologists—believe in topics that the leading scientific foundation in the US officially dismisses as pseudoscience, and conse-

quently ignores when making funding decisions. Editors of the "serious" media regularly echo these authoritative pronouncements, and so we find ourselves living inside the parable of the Emperor's New Clothes—a variant we may call the Emperor's New Media.

Occasionally, signs appear that this conspiracy of silence may be dissolving. On November 11, 2003, the "Science Times" section of *The New York Times* printed a short article entitled "Do Paranormal Phenomena Exist?" The article was interesting not just because it was refreshingly open-minded about the possibility of psychic phenomena ("psi" for short), but because the editors felt it was worthy of being published, even with nothing particularly new to report. It is especially surprising given the "serious" media's instinctive cynicism about heterodoxy.

Journalists are justified in being cautious when it comes to psi and the paranormal. These realms are associated with fantasy, entertainment, outrageous claims, fraud, and psychopathology—hardly topics that inspire wary editors. But careful analysis reveals an interesting residue after sifting through all the noise and nonsense—important hints about phenomena that challenge deeply held assumptions about who and what we are, and what we may be capable of becoming. Learning to discern the dregs from the gems takes more time and effort than most journalists are willing to expend; so as with most controversial topics, it is far easier to toe the party line than to strike out into uncertain ground. Still, the *Times* article was encouraging because it demonstrated that careless dismissal of unorthodox topics is not the *sine qua non* of serious journalism.

The following week, another heartening event occurred. A letter to the *The New York Times' "Science Desk"* was published, sent in by Ms Lucia Adams. Her reply to the question posed by the article was, "Of course paranormal phenomena exist; I have experienced them, and so have millions of others through the ages. There simply has to be a scientific explanation. I know of one reputable cosmologist who pointed out that a great deal of conventional physics is highly speculative, and that there is less evidence for superstrings than there is for ESP."

Ms Adams is correct, except for one minor point. There is *no* experimental evidence for superstring theories, or for the other increasingly exotic "theories of

“everything” posed in theoretical physics. By contrast, there is more than a century of increasingly sophisticated experimental evidence in favor of psi, some of which is now beginning to appear in mainstream psychology, physics, and medical journals.

So is the *Times* article a sign of increasing openness to the possibility that consciousness is more mysterious than previously imagined? In the long run, my guess is yes, and that historically the turn of the millennium will be viewed as a time when scientific and editorial opinions began to noticeably shift about the capacities of mind. However, in the short term, there are still many scientists and science writers who snort in derision at the mere suggestion that psi might exist. Incidentally, I used to think that “snort in derision” was simply a colorful phrase, until one day while chatting with a well-known science reporter, I found to my fiendish delight that I could cause her to snort repeatedly, like a Pavlovian response, simply by mentioning my interest in psychic phenomena.

A few days after the *Times* published its article on the paranormal, the *Washington Post* carried a similarly favorable article in its “Style” section on pet psychic Sonya Fitzpatrick. It opened with, “The science of telepathic communication with animals is murky, but it seems that it can be done without even meeting the animal in question.” The following week, the *Post’s* editors decided that they needed to reassert a more critical tone, so they published this comment by a Mr Justin Higgins, “The article on ‘pet psychic’ Sonya Fitzpatrick states that the ‘science of telepathic communication with animals is murky.’ In fact, it isn’t murky at all; it is nonexistent.”

While the scientific evidence for telepathy between humans and animals is sparse, it is not nonexistent. For example, the recent animal telepathy research by Rupert Sheldrake provides intriguing evidence for a form of psi communication between animals and their human companions. And science reporters, columnists, and magazine editors often tell me—in hushed tones, and only after the tape recorders are turned off—their amazing, personal psychic experiences, which they know aren’t mere coincidences or attributable to other conventional explanations. But then they insist on strict confidentiality because they are afraid that their credibility would suffer if it were known that they were experiencing the very same phenomena that their magazine and newspaper editors feel compelled to dismiss as nonsense.

What are the consequences of the Emperor’s New Media? The primary effect is irony, in that it perpetuates the very problem that the skeptics would like to eradicate. That is, the NSF’s labeling of alternative medicine (and beyond) as a pseudoscience causes the scientific elite to appear foolishly out of touch with the public’s interests. Another is that it encourages those who, for various ideological reasons, are enraged that unorthodox research is allowed to take place at all.

For example, a small but vocal group of staunch skeptics is actively trying to force the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to shut down its innovative National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)—the one center within the NIH that is charged with scientifically evaluating unorthodox medical therapies, including homeopathy, energy medicine, and distant healing. These skeptics are so blinded by prejudice that they’ve lost sight of the fact that the vast majority of the public is not only vitally interested in CAM therapies, but that some CAM treatments are almost certainly beneficial, others do nothing, and some undoubtedly cause harm. If NCCAM doesn’t investigate these claims, then who will? History shows that defenders of orthodoxy are always ready to throw the babies out with the bathwater, accomplishing nothing other than stalling progress in science and medicine.

In 1986, one of those defenders, British psychologist David Marks, wrote a scathing commentary about psi research in the widely read science journal *Nature*. Marks wrote, “Parascience has all the qualities of a magical system while wearing the mantle of science. Until any significant discoveries are made, science can justifiably ignore it, but it is important to say why: Parascience is a pseudo-scientific system of untested beliefs steeped in illusion, error, and fraud.”

Marks’ use of the invective *pseudoscientific*, like that in the NSF’s recent report, is pernicious, because significant discoveries do not occur without funding or sustained efforts by many qualified researchers. Given such op-eds in authoritative journals, many funding agencies have been reluctant to openly fund psi studies because they fear being ridiculed for countering the mainstream.

University administrators are also terrified of anything that may affect their school’s image, and so psi research has been successfully blacklisted from consid-

eration in academic institutions. Of the thousands of colleges and universities worldwide, less than a dozen have any faculty actively engaged in psi research. In the US, less than a handful of academics have openly expressed an interest in psi. (More activity is taking place under the radar, and under the rubric of alternative medicine.) And yet more than half of the world's population regularly reports such experiences. The power of the Emperor's New Media cannot be underestimated.

In a more recent example, in 1997 I published a popular book that reviewed the scientific evidence for psychic phenomena, entitled *The Conscious Universe*. Shortly

after its publication, I was pleased to learn that someone thought the book was of sufficient interest to the broader scientific community to be reviewed in *Nature*. The book was sent to a renowned statistician who quickly dismissed the principal scientific arguments in my book, and then proceeded to focus the bulk of his review not on the book itself, but on anecdotes about his brief encounter with parapsychology many decades earlier in his career. Unfortunately, he made two errors in his review, errors which if corrected would have led to a decidedly positive conclusion.

I immediately wrote a letter to *Nature*, asking for a correction to be printed, because the review as published undoubtedly left most readers with the impression that there was no need to take any of this silly psychic research seriously. It took nearly a year, repeated requests, and the intervention of a Nobel Laureate physicist on my behalf, before a tiny correction was finally published. But by then, of course, the damage had been done.

Editorial prejudices, and carelessness about the facts, are not restricted to authoritative science journals. They regularly appear in popular magazines as well, including *Scientific American*. Professional skeptic Michael Shermer, who writes a column in that magazine, recently complained that "serious psychic researchers have now had well over a century to put ESP to the test, and out of tens of thousands of experiments run there are only a couple significant ones, and even these fall apart under close scrutiny. By now it should be obvious if there were really something to psychic power. There isn't, and it isn't like-

ly that there will ever be with that failure rate."

This is standard skeptical fare, motivated by the Emperor's New Media. I know this because when I was on a book tour in 1997, and I was invited to be on a popular NPR radio talk show in Los Angeles. Unbeknownst to me, Shermer was also invited on the show to act the role of the skeptic. The host of the show politely asked questions about psi research for a few minutes, and then he gleefully unveiled his entrapment by bringing Shermer on

the line, expecting that this would provoke a brutal debate. But it didn't. Shermer and I agreed far more than the host expected. We both understood that reasonable,

informed scientists often disagree about how to interpret scientific evidence, and that in this case it is not unreasonable to conclude that the evidence for psi is indeed persuasive. This is why I believe that Shermer, like others who proudly wear the epithet *skeptic*, often write what they feel they are expected to write. Certainly it would be difficult to maintain the public image of a leading skeptic, or sell a popular skeptical magazine, if one admits that the party line may be less than rigidly absolute on certain taboo subjects.

I could mention dozens of similar examples, but there is no need to belabor the point. In the parable of the Emperor's New Clothes, all it took to break the paralysis of silence was one child to state the obvious. The Emperor's New Media is a more entrenched problem, and it is deeply entangled with the complex politics of "Big Science." But if more scientists and editors—and I've met plenty—had the courage to publicly express tolerance and humility when faced with heterodox claims and beliefs, and encourage rather than thwart attempts to explore those frontiers, then much of today's hyperskeptical foolishness will be revealed for the naked fiction it actually is.



DEAN RADIN earned a PhD in psychology and an MS in electrical engineering from the University of Illinois. He is author of *The Conscious Universe* and nearly 200 scientific and popular articles. Dr Radin was elected president of the AAAS-affiliated Parapsychological Association in 1988, 1993, and 1998, and is senior scientist at IONS. 