The media's eerie fascination. By: Yam, Philip, Scientific American, 00368733, Jan97, Vol. 276, Issue 1

**THE MEDIA'S EERIE FASCINATION**

**Section:** TRENDS IN SOCIETY  
**Science versus Antiscience?**

Chris Carter is in the hot seat. The creator of The X-Files, a hit television show about two federal agents who investigate paranormal mysteries, is giving a luncheon address at the first World Skeptics Congress, held last June on the Amherst campus of the University of Buffalo. The Fox network program, which focuses on extraterrestrials, witchcraft, precognition, telekinesis and other artifacts of popular culture, has become a lightning rod for many bemoaning the rise of paranormal beliefs and the decline of rational, critical thinking. "I'm anticipating some very tough questions, but I feel I should face my accusers," Carter said by way of introduction.

He turns out to have an easier time than anticipated: the majority of the audience at the luncheon seem to enjoy his program. And in a sense, it's hard to see what the fuss is about. Dramatists have long relied on spooks and spirits to propel a story, and some observers find it silly to demand that television be more hardheaded. "No one gets history from Shakespeare," remarks Wayne R. Anderson, a physics and astronomy professor at Sacramento City College.

Still, skeptics grumble because The X-Files belongs to a larger spate of new programs emphasizing the paranormal, some of which cloak themselves as documentaries. Alien Autopsy, also shown on Fox, presented footage allegedly showing a dissection of an extraterrestrial that crash-landed in Roswell, N.M., in 1947; the NBC network aired The Mysterious Origins of Man, which asserted that humans lived on the earth with dinosaurs. Besides relying on questionable evidence, these programs are also conspiracy-minded, arguing that governments and mainstream scientists have been covering up the information.

"People understand science through the media, largely. They should get it in school, but it's not required" in many cases, comments Paul Kurtz, head of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), which organized the skeptics congress, "Science in the Age of (Mis)information." One third of Americans watch four or more hours of television daily, and studies show that most people get their
science information from TV.

Yet in that medium, real science and critical thinking continue to suffer image problems. According to William Evans, a communications professor at Georgia State University, who has surveyed the content of film and television programming, in most shows scientists produce something dangerous, and skeptical thinking hinders problem solving.

The skeptics community has attempted to combat these prejudices. Organized efforts began in 1976, when a group of academics and magicians formed CSICOP. In its battle, CSICOP chastises the networks, complaining about "balance"--the tendency of producers, for example, to book more believers than skeptics on talk shows and to allot little time for rebuttals of extraordinary assertions. Along with a younger, second organization called the Skeptics Society, based in Altadena, Calif., CSICOP also investigates astonishing claims, issues press releases and publishes magazines.

Distressingly, the rise in paranormal programming suggests those approaches have failed. "We thought that if you just provide information, people would reject [paranormal claims]," Kurtz laments. "The problem is more massive and complicated than we imagined."

More disturbing than the increase in supernatural claims are the changing demographics of the believers. Hard numbers are not available, but observers agree that interest in the paranormal has begun to seep more deeply into well-educated and higher-income households. Such an audience is attractive to advertisers, Evans notes: "Finally, they can market conspiracy theories to people with disposable incomes."

That new marketability suggests that pseudoscience in the mass media will become even more prevalent. Pressure to fatten the coffers with more salable products has increased as media companies continue to merge. All the traditional major networks are owned by larger corporations: ABC by Disney/Capital Cities, CBS by Westinghouse, NBC by General Electric. And cable giants Time-Warner and Turner Broadcasting System have combined forces.

The tendency to merge was blessed with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which, in addition to reworking long-distance telephone rules, removes many antitrust provisions. "In effect, it unleashes global
monopolies," argues George Gerbner, a communications expert formerly at the University of Pennsylvania. In their competitive drive for profits, he says, the conglomerates have "a lot to sell but little to tell."

The broad appeal of the paranormal therefore makes it an alluring addition to the usual staples, violence and titillation. Cross-promotional opportunities resulting from the mergers are also likely to exacerbate matters; for instance, ABC aired a program about extraterrestrial encounters that urged viewers to visit Tomorrowland at Disney World as preparation for alien meetings.

"Publishing used to be based on a 6 percent profit," but now, notes Mark Crispin Miller, a media expert at Johns Hopkins University, the firms are pressured to clear 12 to 16 percent. "As huge companies become more competitive with one another, they resort more to retrograde superstitious pap," he insists. "Take a guy like Rupert Murdoch," he says of the international media magnate. "He made his fortune by degrading newspapers with, among other things, pseudoscience, superstition, horoscopes, stories of wonders and marvels. Murdoch always includes a hefty dose of this kind of weird baloney. So when the guy moved to television"--Murdoch created the Fox network in 1986--"he used the same kind of formula."

The drive for ratings and profits has blurred the line between entertainment and information, Miller argues: "It's no longer possible to say with confidence where the dividing line is."

Notwithstanding its apparent failures in the past, CSICOP plans to be more aggressive by preparing specific counter measures to pseudoscience. Last year it founded the Council for Media Integrity, which consists of members from the world of science and academia (including the editor-in-chief Scientific American). The council will respond quickly to irresponsible stories. Popular advocacy coalitions, such as Gerbner's Philadelphia-based Cultural Environment Movement, will call for a more responsible and independent media. Finally, researchers have proposed television programs that present science in a more positive way--Nobel laureate Leon Lederman has been lobbying for a science drama series, and Carl Sagan has urged the development of a nonfiction series that shows how skepticism can debunk paranormal claims, for instance.

Although noble, these efforts are unlikely to work anytime soon. "It's just
so hard to imagine mass appeal for shows that are skeptical," Evans remarks. Indeed, Isaac Asimov's series Probe, which featured scientifically plausible solutions to purportedly supernatural phenomena, died after a few episodes in 1988. And network executives have thus far given Lederman the cold shoulder.

The crux of the matter is that people need faith as they seek comfort or try to make sense out of a complex world. "You need to understand why they believe in this nonsense," Evans points out.

Hope for a more critical audience is not all lost. Studies reveal that a disclaimer before a pseudoscience-based program--saying that it is for entertainment--affects viewers' perception: they become more discriminating about what they see (viewers were most amenable to a show's premise when there was no notice of any kind). In addition, a study released last November by the Department of Education reports that science and math scores among high school students reached highs not seen in 25 years.

If critical thinking is taught more effectively, then perhaps dramatists such as Chris Carter can accomplish without controversy what they do best. As he put it, "What I wanted to do in a very smart way was to scare the pants off people every Friday night."

PHOTO (COLOR): PARANORMAL MYSTERIES are investigated by actors Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny on the popular television series The X-Files.

~~~~~~~~

By Philip Yam