CSICOP and the Skeptics: An Overview

GEORGE P. HANSEN

ABSTRACT. The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) has become the most publicly visible institution engaged in the debate on the paranormal. Initially CSICOP was primarily a scholarly body, but soon after its beginning it adopted a popular approach that fostered a more broadly based social movement. It actively promoted the formation of local societies with similar aims. Both CSICOP and the local groups have some distinguishing features. Prestigious scholars are affiliated with these organizations, a disproportionate number of magicians are involved, the groups are dominated by men, and many members hold religious views that are antagonistic to the paranormal. Despite the name of the organization, actual research is a very low priority of the Committee. In fact, CSICOP instituted a policy against doing research itself. CSICOP’s highest priority has been to influence the media. Its rhetoric and activities are designed to appeal to a broad audience rather than to scientists who investigate unusual or controversial phenomena. Recently, the Committee broadened its focus to include areas outside the paranormal.

In the last 15 years, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) has become a major force in the debate on the paranormal. It has generated considerable attention, not only in the popular media but also in scientific forums. The readership of its magazine, the Skeptical Inquirer (SI), has grown to over 35,000 subscribers in 62 countries. CSICOP is now the most well-recognized institution commenting on the paranormal; it claims to receive scores of inquiries daily. A number of local groups have formed. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the dramatic growth. The data suggest a social movement of considerable influence.

There are several reasons CSICOP has flourished. Much of the organizational success can be attributed to the dynamic leadership of philosopher Paul Kurtz, the publicity skills of magician James Randi, and the wide influence of writer Martin Gardner. Although none of these three are scientists, CSICOP has attracted prestigious scientists who serve as fig-

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 30th Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association, Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, Scotland, August 5–8, 1987.

2 I would like to thank Michaeleen Maher, Keith Harary, Robert Durant, and Marcello Truzzi for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Marcello Truzzi, William Rauscher, Jerome Clark, Diane Morton, and Tom McIver for providing materials.

3 Pronounced "sigh cop."

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Skeptical Inquirer
FREE INQUIRY
JOURNAL OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY
JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

YE A R

Fig. 1. Total Paid Circulation for Skeptical Inquirer, Free Inquiry, Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, and Journal of Parapsychology

ureheads and increase the organization’s visibility. A high priority has been given to the media, and CSICOP’s style is geared for a broad audience rather than for practicing scientists who study the paranormal. In fact, after the first five years, CSICOP abandoned its own scientific research (‘‘Policy on Sponsoring,’’ 1982).

Because of its rapid growth and the nature of its subject matter, the organization has received considerable attention—some positive (e.g., Cornell, 1984; Hofstadter, 1982; Meyer, 1986; Otten, 1985; Schultz, 1986; Weisburd, 1991) and some neutral (Walls, 1985; see also Kurtz, 1985a). But it is not surprising that the Committee has been involved in a number of heated controversies. These produced internal schisms and pro-

After an historical overview, I discuss factors that characterize CSICOP and its local affiliates, and I examine their rhetorical strategies and review

Fig. 2. Growth of Local Groups in the U.S. as Listed in the Skeptical Inquirer as Having Aims Similar to CSICOP
the major activities of the various groups. Coverage is limited to the rise of skepticism in the U.S., although CSICOP has established official sections of the Committee in foreign countries.

**Historical Overview**

CSICOP can be regarded as the first case of ongoing, organized debunking of the paranormal, but there are some precursors. Prior to the organization of CSICOP, attacks on the paranormal have come largely from three groups: magicians, academic psychologists, and rationalists/atheists. Magicians have been involved with controversies on the paranormal for over 400 years, and they have written numerous books on the topic (for an overview, see Hansen, in press). Academic psychologists critiqued early psychic research and parapsychology (for discussions, see Coon, in press; Mauskopf & McVaugh, 1980; Murchison, 1927; Pratt, Rhine, Smith, Stuart, & Greenwood, 1940; Prince, 1930). Rationalists and atheists have long been antagonistic to claims of miracles (see Keller & Keller, 1968/1969). They actively combated spiritualistic phenomena and psychical research, but little has been written about their involvement with these controversies. Even the section on the paranormal in *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (Hyman, 1985) ignores this connection.

One of the most prolific detractors of early psychic research was Joseph McCabe, a Catholic priest who became an atheist (Stein, 1985). McCabe authored a number of attacks (e.g., Chesterton et al., 1914; McCabe, 1914, 1920a, 1920b; "Verbatim Report," 1920). Rationalists Clodd (1917), Mann (1919), and Whyte (1920) wrote similar books. Many of these were produced for the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) under the imprint of Watts & Co. Mercier’s (1917) *Spiritualism and Sir Oliver Lodge* was also published under that imprint. The rationalists' attacks diminished somewhat after the second decade of this century, but their influence continued. In the 1930s, Corliss Lamont (1932, 1935) and rationalist J. B. S. Haldane wrote on miracles and psychic phenomena (Lunn & Haldane, 1935). These two individuals took a more moderate position

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4 There are groups that have scientifically investigated psychic claims, notably the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, and the American Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1885. The Parapsychological Association, established in 1957, is an association of professional researchers and is affiliated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

5 A fourth group, conservative Christians, have also attacked the paranormal (e.g., North, 1988; for an overview of some recent works, see Lewis, 1989). Though their literature is sizeable, it has had little impact on secular academic debates, but it should not be overlooked when considering the paranormal in larger social contexts.

6 Lamont was made Honorary President of the American Humanist Association in 1974, shortly before it sponsored the formation of CSICOP.

7 Haldane, Lamont, and McCabe were all promoters of the Stalinist U.S.S.R.

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than the earlier writers and seemed to accept the reality of some psi events. The 1950s again produced sharper attacks. Joseph Rinn (1950), president of the Brooklyn Philosophical Association (a "free thought" group), wrote his scathing *Sixty Years of Psychical Research*, which was published by the Truth Seeker Company, a major "free thought" publisher. In 1953, Watts & Co. produced Antony Flew's *A New Approach to Psychical Research*. Two decades later, in 1975, the annual convention of the RPA was devoted to parapsychology ("Contents," 1975; "Science and the Paranormal," 1975), and their program listed C. E. M. Hansel, Antony Flew, Eric Dingwall, and Christopher Evans—all of whom soon became members of CSICOP. Today the tradition continues, and the American Rationalist frequently carries commentary critical of the paranormal.

In the early 1970s, there was a tremendous upsurge of interest in the occult in the U.S. (see Dutch, 1986; Melton, Clark, & Kelly, 1990). This occult explosion was not viewed favorably by many, and some academics perceived it to signal a rise of irrationality. One group that shared an interest in the matter was Resources for the Scientific Evaluation of the Paranormal (RSEP). The members included Martin Gardner, Ray Hyman, James Randi, and Marcello Truzzi, all of whom were magicians ("New Association," 1975). At that time, Truzzi, also a sociologist, was publishing a privately circulated newsletter called the *Zetetic*. RSEP was barely organized and achieved little public notice but can be considered the immediate predecessor to CSICOP.

Shortly after the formation of RSEP, Paul Kurtz, independently of that group, orchestrated a campaign against astrology. Signatures from 186 scientists were collected for a manifesto titled "Objections to Astrology" (1975). It was published in the *Humanist*, an obscure religious and philosophical magazine of the American Humanist Association (AHA) edited by Kurtz. According to an article by Kurtz (1977b), this manifesto "was sent to every newspaper in the United States and Canada" (p. 42). It was widely noticed and was discussed on the front page of the *New York Times* (Rensberger, 1975). The AHA held its 1976 annual convention on April 30 to May 2 with the theme "The Old and New Irrationalisms: Attacks on Science," and during that meeting CSICOP was formed ("American Humanist Association," 1976; Kurtz, 1976a, 1978a). It was initially sponsored by the *Humanist*. RSEP disbanded, and Truzzi, Gardner, Randi, and Hyman joined CSICOP, with Truzzi becoming cochair and editor of the *Zetetic*, it then being made the official organ of the Committee.

Truzzi was probably the most moderate of the original members of CSICOP, and under his editorship (two issues) the magazine contained

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8 The reader should not be left with the impression that only skeptics are associated with rationalist positions. Several psychical researchers have been allied with rationalism, atheism, and humanism.

9 A couple years earlier, Kurtz garnered media attention by promoting his *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973; Martin, 1973).
diverse viewpoints. He desired a scholarly publication devoted to debate and dialogue, whereas others wanted a more aggressive, popular approach. The two sides readily admitted their differences (Wade, 1977b), and while Truzzi was editing the Zetetic, Kurtz was still running the Humanist and publishing vitriolic attacks on the paranormal by CSICOP members. In August 1977 Truzzi resigned as editor, and shortly thereafter he left the Committee and started a new publication called Zetetic Scholar; it was published irregularly for 11 issues, the last one appearing in 1987 (see Clark & Melton, 1979a, 1979b; Rensberger, 1978; Wade, 1977b). Kendrick Frazier was appointed editor of CSICOP’s magazine; the name was changed to the Skeptical Inquirer; and it took on a more aggressive, debunking tone. Cartoons and illustrations were later added, some of which poked fun at persons discussed in the articles. Lee Nisbet, CSICOP’s Executive Director, articulated the Committee’s position for Nicholas Wade (1977a) of Science, saying: “It’s [belief in the paranormal] a very dangerous phenomenon, dangerous to science, dangerous to the basic fabric of our society. . . . We feel it is the duty of the scientific community to show that these beliefs are utterly screwball” (p. 646).

One controversy, the Mars Effect debate, was perhaps especially instrumental in consolidating CSICOP’s approach to the paranormal and the abandonment of its own scientific research. During the early days of the Committee, Kurtz and several others were engaged in a scientific study of astrology. 10 Dennis Rawlins, an astronomer and member of the Executive Council of CSICOP, conducted the detailed calculations and data analysis for the project. He began noticing severe problems: The results were supporting the case for an astrological influence of Mars on sports ability, much to the consternation of the investigators. Rawlins tried to bring this to the attention of other Committee members. This lead to a bitter dispute, with Rawlins charging that serious mistakes had been made and that Kurtz had undertaken a Watergate-style cover-up. Rawlins (1981) was forced out of CSICOP, and he published an expose in Fate. There was no real answer to the charge of a cover-up, and much was published about it in Zetetic Scholar. The upshot was that several of the more moderate people resigned from the Committee. Rawlins’s article appeared in the October 1981 issue of Fate, and that same month CSICOP instituted a policy of not conducting research itself (“Policy on Sponsoring,” 1982).

After the moderate members left, little dissent or criticism of the Committee has been seen in the pages of SI. The magazine nearly always presents only one side of a controversy in its articles. Although SI sometimes publishes letters of complaint, full papers from CSICOP’s critics almost never appear. This is in remarkable contrast to refereed parapsychology journals and even some of the pro-paranormal magazines. For instance, the popularly written magazine Fate has carried full articles by CSICOP members Susan Blackmore, L. Sprague de Camp, Kendrick Frazier, Martin Gardner, Philip Kliss, Larry Kusche, Lawrence Jerome, David Marks, Joe Nickell, James Oberg, Dennis Rawlins, Robert Sheaffer, Gordon Stein, and Marcello Truzzi. In keeping with CSICOP’s one-sided approach, SI has given scant attention to papers in well-known, orthodox scientific journals that present evidence for psi (e.g., Child, 1985; Jahn, 1982; Radin & Nelson, 1989; Rao & Palmer, 1987; Winkelman, 1982).

Another major development in the skeptics’ movement occurred in the early 1980s with the formation of local groups. The first was founded in Austin, Texas in the fall of 1981 by several persons affiliated with the University of Texas (McFadden, 1981). The first approved local chapter was the Bay Area Skeptics, which was organized in June 1982 (Frazier, 1982). Groups in other parts of the country soon followed, and in the last nine years the growth has been dramatic (see Figure 2). Some of these organizations have hundreds of members.

Characteristics of CSICOP’s Membership

There are four major features that characterize CSICOP, affect its choice of goals, and determine its spheres of influence. Perhaps the single most important factor is the high educational level of the membership; many hold prominent positions within academia. Another aspect is that a disproportionate number of members are magicians, and many of them were involved with parapsychological controversies long before the establishment of the Committee. A third distinguishing feature is that the vast majority in CSICOP are male, and this has affected the tone and demeanor of the group. A final characteristic is the influence of religious convictions; a substantial portion of the members share similar views and are active in promoting them.

Education

The most salient feature of the Committee is the academic status of many of its members. Their scholarly prestige gives the organization its visibility, power, and legitimacy in the eyes of important segments of society. CSICOP has actively recruited people such as Murray Gell-Mann (Nobel laureate in physics), F. H. C. Crick (Nobel prize for physiology and medicine), Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, and the late B. F. Skinner. A large percentage of the membership is involved in scholarly pursuits. The inside front cover of the Summer 1990 issue of SI shows that 28 of the 56 Fellows list college or university affiliations; the remainder are mostly

10 Before the study, Kurtz (1975) had expressed strong opposition to astrology. In a lengthy editorial, he urged newspapers to label their astrology columns as follows: “Warning: If taken seriously, this column may be dangerous to your health!” (emphasis in original, p. 20). This suggests a strong bias in anticipated outcome of the research, a charge CSICOP members have made regarding proponents of the paranormal.
writers and scientists. Of the 56 Scientific and Technical Consultants, 32
give college or university affiliations.

Leaders of the local groups frequently come from the academic com-
community. The lists of affiliates in back issues of *SI* show that a number of the
chairpersons have been based in university departments (often in psychol-
gy). These groups have sought support and thus prestige from academic.
ics. According to their letterhead, the Southern California Skeptics (SCS)
had 13 of 18 board members and technical advisors who held Ph.D. de-
grees. In fact, the SCS was granted affiliation with the Pacific Division of
the American Association for the Advancement of Science ("Corrections
to Last Laser," 1986; SCS Becomes Affiliated," 1986). Four of five
members of the core committee of the Sacramento Skeptics Society held
doctoral degrees (Sandbeck, 1987). The May 1985 issue of the *Northwest
Skeptic* listed 27 consultants for that group, 18 of whom gave academic
affiliations. Thirteen of 19 advisors of the Bay Area Skeptics held doctoral
degrees ("Advisors," 1986), as did 5 of 6 Advisors and Supporters of
Hawaii Skeptics, according to their press release of June 11, 1985.

The highly educated provide a large source of CSICOP’s constituency.
In the last 30 years, higher education has been a major growth industry; the
number of Ph.D. ’s awarded in 1975 was more than three times that of 1960
(A Century of Doctorates, 1978). In the process of pursuing advanced
degrees, graduate students become familiar with the world views of those
prominent in academia. When such prestigious people lend their names to
an antiparanormal crusade, a student might automatically presume that
those persons are scientific authorities on the topic. The result is a sizeable
number who look to the Committee for expert opinion on the paranormal.
In fact, CSICOP conducted a survey of its readership and found that 83%
have some type of college degree, 54% have some type of advanced
degree, and 27% hold a doctoral degree (personal communication from
Barry Karr, August 19, 1991). These are impressive figures, and the
relatively recent rapid growth of academe may help explain why organized
debunking has been able to flourish now rather than in earlier times.

The prominence of the membership gives the Committee a number of
benefits. It allows CSICOP’s voice to be heard in academic debates on the
paranormal. The National Research Council report on parapsychology is
an example (for a discussion, see Palmer, Honorton, & Uts, 1989). Non-
member academics are likely to consider CSICOP’s views when refereeing
papers, evaluating grant proposals, and counseling students. It seems vir-
tually certain that CSICOP will have a long-term impact on all in the
academic world who become involved with parapsychology. CSICOP’s
views are likely to be influential when it comes to deciding how, and to
what extent, the paranormal will be scientifically investigated within aca-
demia.

Magicians

The proportion of magicians in CSICOP is much higher than in the
general population, and the magic fraternity has provided another constit-


ty for the Committee. Kendrick Frazier (1984) noted that the first
international CSICOP conference was attended by scores of amateur
and professional magicians. The publishing house Prometheus Books, which
produces skeptical works, is one of the few nonmagic vendors to advertise
in conjuring magazines.

As can be seen in Table 1, 13 official members of CSICOP are or have
been magicians. A number of these people have achieved some eminence
within the conjuring fraternity. Martin Gardner began contributing to
magic magazines more than 50 years ago (Matrix, 1979) and is an author-
ity on impromptu close-up magic (Waters, 1988). Randi has been profes-
sionally involved with magic since he was 18 and seems to be the person
most publicly identified with CSICOP. Ray Hyman was featured on the
cover of the October 1986 issue of *Linking Ring*, the largest circulation
magic magazine in the world. All three of these serve on the Executive
Council of the Committee. Some of those who are no longer members
of CSICOP are also well known within magic societies. Truzzi served as
vice-president of Psychic Entertainers Association. Persi Diaconis is con-
considered one of the top six card manipulators today (Waters, 1988). The late
Milbourne Christopher was one of the most eminent historians of magic,
and the late Eric Dingwall was the oldest living member of the Magic
Circle. All of the above mentioned conjurors were involved with psychic
topics long before the beginning of CSICOP, and the established social
contacts within magic circles were very important in the formation of the
Committee.

Social networks within conjuring also facilitated the founding of the
local groups, and these organizations too have a substantial number of
magicians. Robert Steiner, former chair of the Bay Area Skeptics (BAS),
has been president of the Society of American Magicians (SAM) as well as
chair of the SAM occult investigations committee. Robertson (1984) noted


Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Magicians Who Are or Have Been Official Members of CSICOP</th>
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<tr>
<td>Richard Bush</td>
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<td>Shawn Carlson</td>
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<td>Milbourne Christopher*†</td>
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<td>Persi Diaconis*‡</td>
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<td>Eric Dingwall*</td>
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<td>Martin Gardner*†</td>
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<td>Henry Gordon*</td>
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<td>Ray Hyman*</td>
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<td>Joe Nickell</td>
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<td>Mark Plummer</td>
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<td>James Randi*†</td>
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<td>Robert Steiner*</td>
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<td>Marcello Truzzi*</td>
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* Indicates sufficiently known to be included in *Who's Who in Magic* (Whaley, 1990).
† Indicates sufficient prominence to be included in *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Magicians* (Waters, 1988).
that magic tricks were displayed by a number of people at the founding party of BAS. David Alexander was a board member of Southern California Skeptics (SCS) as well as a professional magician; he is now editor of the Humanist. Richard Busch, chair of the Paranormal Investigating Committee of Pittsburgh, is a magician, as is Jamy Ian Swiss, a cofounder of the National Capital Area Skeptics. All five members of the core committee of Sacramento Skeptics Society have performed magic (Sandbeck, 1987; "Magic, Mysteries, and Mirth," 1987).

The high visibility of conjurors in CSICOP has given many people the idea that most magicians hold skeptical views regarding psychic phenomena. Surprisingly, this impression is not correct. Birdsell (1989) polled a group of magicians in California and found that 82% had a belief in ESP, and Tuzzi (1983) cited a German poll of conjurors that revealed that 72.3% believed psi was probably real. Many prominent magicians have, in fact, endorsed psychic phenomena (Hansen, 1990a, 1990b).

The Predominance of Men and Its Effects

CSICOP is heavily dominated by men, and until 1991 there were no women at all on the Executive Council. A reporter for New Scientist described CSICOP as "white," "male," and "slightly geriatric" (Anderson, 1987, p. 51). The inside covers of recent issues of SI display the gender imbalance; the results are summarized in Table 2. The predominance of men characterizes the local affiliates as well. Of the 40 listed local leaders, only two are women.

Certainly academia is predominantly male, and so it is not surprising that a majority of CSICOP’s members are men. However, the percentage does seem disproportionate.

Not all the local groups are totally dominated by men, and a CSICOP manual prepared for local groups encouraged the involvement of women. The East Bay Skeptics in California reported that 27% of its members were women ("Members Elect First Board," 1988), and in a 1990 election of the National Capital Area Skeptics, 3 of 11 listed candidates were women. Despite these efforts, the debunking movement is overwhelmingly run by men.

The perceived demeanor. Some have perceived the gender imbalance as

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<td>DISTRIBUTION OF MEN AND WOMEN IN SKEPTICS’ GROUPS</td>
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<td>Women</td>
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Figures based on pages 447–448 and the inside covers of the Summer 1990 issue of the Skeptical Inquirer.

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influencing the demeanor of CSICOP, the Skeptical Inquirer, and the local affiliates. A few have even suggested that some debunkers project an insecure and macho attitude. Commenting on the 1985 CSICOP convention in California, Auerbach (1985) wrote:

I felt an air of insecurity in the audience, and some of the presenters. It was very strange to be in an audience that laughed at the mere mention of the names of a few of the better-known parapsychologists, listening to presenters who seemed to enjoy that reaction, and even encourage it. (p. 10)


Such perceptions are not limited to outsiders. This has been an issue within CSICOP as well. In the March 1985 newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics, Mary Coulman (1985) wrote a piece titled "Where Are the Women?" She reported that sometimes she was the only woman who attended meetings of the Bay Area Skeptics and that often there were only 2 or 3 women present with 60 to 70 men. Coulman wrote another column in the June issue asking the same question, noting that no women had yet replied. Finally, months later, Elissa Pratt-Lowe (1985) responded:

I think another aspect of organized skepticism that may deter women is the aggressive, “macho” attitudes held by some of the (male) participants. It seems to me that some “skeptics” are more interested in ridicule than in exploring and challenging pseudoscientific beliefs. [This was followed by “Very true, I think —MC.”]. (p. 7)

The Bay Area Skeptics are not the only ones to confront the problem. In response to an article by physicist George Lawrence in Rocky Mountain Skeptic, John Wilder (1988) wrote: "For all of the author’s [Lawrence’s] scientific, academic and intellectual credentials, he displays a level of disrespect for others that, in my opinion, is completely inappropriate. . . . The author succeeded only in subjecting a group of sincere . . . people to outright ridicule" (p. 8).

One of the most extreme cases was that of Drew Endacott. He undertook to form a local affiliate in the Philadelphia area and sent out letters saying, "I am forming such an organization with CSICOP’s backing, and I want people who are willing to get dirty. . . . What we will do is employ a very thorough, proven technique for getting the point across to people who have no demonstrated facility to reason" (copy of letter in possession of author). Once Kurtz was alerted to this, he disavowed affiliation with Endacott and forbade him to use CSICOP’s name. Endacott was not a lone crackpot however, but a charter member of the Austin Society to Oppose Pseudoscience (ASTOP), and before trying to start his own chapter in Philadelphia, he consulted with ASTOP as well as with Richard Busch, chair of the Paranormal Investigating Committee of Pittsburgh ("Elsewhere in Philly," 1985). Certainly the vast majority of members of local affiliates are not this radical. However, these groups do attract persons with extreme views, and a number are active within the local societies.
A few individuals in the national organization have expressed concern about the image projected by the local affiliates. Ray Hyman has been quoted as speaking of a "frightening" "fundamentalism" and "witch-hunting" when discussing the rise of the popular debunking movement (Clark, 1987). Hyman has also been quoted as saying: "As a whole, parapsychologists are nice, honest people, while the critics are cynical, nasty people" (McBeath & Thalbourne, 1985, p. 3). Hyman (1987) wrote an article advising the local groups how to be effective critics; this was published in Skeptical Briefs and reprinted in a number of newsletters. He suggested using "the principle of charity," saying "I know that many of my fellow critics will find this principle to be unpalatable" (p. 5, italics added).

The problems caused by cynicism and hostility have been recognized by the organization, and steps are being taken to diminish them. The severity of the problem cannot be attributed entirely to male dominance; after all, a number of other predominantly male organizations do not have such a reputation. It is likely that there are a number of other factors that contribute to the perceived demeanor.

Religious and Philosophical Factors

Several organized and informal religious channels (primarily atheistic) link many CSICOP Fellows, consultants, and members of local groups. Although CSICOP members cannot be said to hold a unified religious view, considerable religious influence is visible. This is apparent in the writings of leading spokespersons such as James Alcock, Martin Gardner, and Paul Kurtz—all members of the Executive Council. See Table 3 for a list of members who have publicly identified themselves as holding atheistic or at least nontheistic views.

Paul Kurtz, Chairman of CSICOP and a philosopher at the State University of New York at Buffalo, is active in promulgating atheism. He is president of Prometheus Books (Berkley, 1987), which publishes such titles as The Atheist Debater's Handbook and Atheism: The Case Against God. Kurtz was formerly editor of the Humanist, is now editor of the magazine Free Inquiry (FI), and has been positioning himself as a leading spokesperson for secular humanism (Bartlett, 1987). Kurtz's views on the paranormal are firmly linked to his views on religion. The title of his

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11) Atheism may or may not be considered a religion. However, atheism is clearly a religious position or religious view.


13) Kurtz's definition of religion seems rather broad. For instance, he denounced the movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind, calling it a "sequel to The Ten Commandments, Ben Hur, and other religious extravaganzas" (Kurtz, 1978c, p. 4), and he went on to decry the religious symbolism in it.

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Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSICOP Member</th>
<th>Source of Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George Abell</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Isaac Asimov</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Spring 1982, p. 9</td>
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<td>Brand Blanshard</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Vern Bullough</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Mario Bunge</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Bette Chambers</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Francis Crick</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Jean Dommanget</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Paul Edwards</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Antony Flew</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Yves Galifret</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Murray Gell-Mann</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Stephen Jay Gould</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Sidney Hook</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Marvin Kohl</td>
<td>Humanist, November/December 1973, p. 5*</td>
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<td>Paul Kurtz</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Gerald A. Larue</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Paul MacCready</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ernest Nagel</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>John W. Patterson</td>
<td>American Atheist, May 1983, p. 12–14</td>
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<td>Mark Plummer</td>
<td>American Atheist, June 1983, p. 29–33</td>
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<td>W. V. Quine</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>James Randi</td>
<td>Who's Who In America (1990, p. 2683)</td>
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<td>Carl Sagan</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 59†</td>
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<td>Al Seckel</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Summer 1986, p. 54</td>
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<td>B. F. Skinner</td>
<td>Humanist, September/October 1973, p. 9*</td>
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<td>Gordon Stein</td>
<td>Free Inquiry, Fall 1988, p. 48–50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marvin Zimmerman</td>
<td>Humanist, September/October 1973, p. 9*</td>
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† See "The Academy of Humanism" (1983) for statement on nontheistic beliefs.
* See "Humanist Manifesto II" (1973), p. 5, for statement on nontheistic beliefs.


James Alcock has made several attempts to associate parapsychology with religion in order to discredit it as a science. One of his concerted attempts was published in Free Inquiry and was entitled “Parapsychology: The ‘Spiritual’ Science” (Alcock, 1985). Alcock’s feelings toward religion were candidly revealed in his 1981 book, Parapsychology: Science or Magic?, where he asserted:

In the name of religion human beings have committed genocide, toppled thrones, built gargantuan shrines, practiced ritual murder, forced others to conform to their way of life, eschewed the pleasures of the flesh, flagellated themselves, or given away all their possessions and become martyrs. (p. 7)
Positive attributes of religion were not acknowledged, and these feelings may help explain Alcock’s frequent criticisms of psi research. For on the same page he wrote: ‘‘An examination of the origins and functions of religion . . . is a useful starting-point for the study of modern parapsychology.’’

A former member of the Executive Council wrote on religion in SI as follows:

One is continually encountering priests who express dismay and perplexity at their flock’s attraction for the other, competing superstitions. . . . Give a fellow the tools for destroying his common sense, and occasionally he’ll finish the job. . . . Religion is the optimist’s paranoia. (Rawlins, 1977, p. 65)

Martin Gardner also acknowledged the influence of his religious beliefs, and he revealed that he once was a Protestant fundamentalist (Barcellos, 1979; Morris, 1982). Apparently his opposition to parapsychology is based in part on religious factors, for he has written:

It is possible that paranormal forces not yet established may allow prayers to influence the material world, and I certainly am not saying this possibility should be ruled out . . . As for empirical tests of the power of God to answer prayer, I am among those theists who, in the spirit of Jesus’ remark that only the faithless look for signs, consider such tests both futile and blasphemous. . . . Let us not tempt God. (Gardner, 1983b, p. 239)

Such attitudes help explain why Gardner has derided the religious views of professional researchers in parapsychology in order to besmirch their reputations as scientists (e.g., Gardner, 1981, pp. 320–321). Recently, Gardner (1991) argued that electronics writer Forrest Mims was rightfully denied a position as a columnist for Scientific American because Mims was an evangelical Christian creationist, even though Scientific American admitted that Mims was otherwise well qualified and that his writings would have had nothing to do with evolution (see ‘‘Science’s Litmus Test,’’ 1991).14 Gardner asserted that Mims’ personal beliefs would have embarrassed the magazine, and that alone was sufficient reason to reject Mims. One can only conclude that issues of religious belief are important in the life of Martin Gardner.

Organizational links. Kurtz’s magazine Free Inquiry provides connections between humanists and skeptics’ groups. But Kurtz is not the only one in CSICOP who is involved with Free Inquiry; there is actually considerable overlap. Four of the five associate editors of Free Inquiry are listed in Skeptical Inquirer as having some affiliation with CSICOP. The

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14 Gerald Piel, former president of the AAAS and editor of Scientific American, made the decision against Mims. Shortly thereafter, Piel gave the keynote address at CSICOP’s 1990 convention and received the Committee’s ‘‘In Praise of Reason Award’’ (Shore, 1990).
ally Retarded God’’ [Harwood, 1986]; ‘‘Is Religiosity Pathological?’’ [Ellis, 1988]). The articles are in striking contrast to the scholarly papers in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Review of Religious Research; both have been in existence for more than 30 years. Some of the classified advertisements give a flavor of FL (e.g., ‘‘Devastating Bible Critique,’’ ‘‘Jesus Never Existed,’’ ‘‘Jehovah’s Witnesses Hilariously Exposed’’). Personal ads have been accepted, as well as those for an apparently untested AIDS remedy and for cryogenic immortality (see FL, Winter 1986/87, p. 63). Seven of 20 CSER members are affiliated with CSICOP, and Randi is the principal investigator of one of the subcommittees (see back cover of Winter 1986/87 issue of FL).

Local groups. As in the parent organization, members of local affiliates have mixed views on religion. However, it is clear that religious assumptions and previously held but now-rejected beliefs are strong influences. As with CSICOP, religious networks link members of the local groups.

The local organizations not infrequently promote secular humanism and mention it in their literature. The Sacramento Skeptics even rescheduled their meetings to avoid a conflict with the Sacramento Humanists (‘‘Special Note,’’ 1988). The newsletter of the National Capital Area Skeptics reported on the Tenth Humanist World Congress in Buffalo in 1988. That congress held a special lunch for SI subscribers, and a tour was offered of CSICOP’s headquarters (Inglis, 1988a).

Both Al Seckel, executive director of the Southern California Skeptics, and Robert Steiner, former chair of the Bay Area Skeptics, have been involved with a subcommittee of CSER. Steiner describes himself as a ‘‘militant atheist’’ (Robertson, 1984) and even published an article denouncing Santa Claus in American Atheist (Steiner, 1982). Seckel has contributed to publications of Atheists United and to the American Atheist. Rick Rickards (1986) of the Cleveland skeptics’ group described religion as being ‘‘only a variation on the same theme [as pseudoscience]’’ (p. [3]).

A number of members apparently once held strong religious or paranormal beliefs but later became disillusioned. Béla Scheiber (1986), president of an affiliate in Colorado, described his views on flying saucers: ‘‘In fact you could say I was a believer’’ and went on to refer to his ‘‘youthful longing for something to believe in’’ (p. 2). Robert Sheaffer, a former chairperson of the Bay Area Skeptics, admitted to previously believing in flying saucers (Robertson, 1984). John Hill (1986), editor of Rocky Mountain Skeptic, wrote of his attendance at a scientific creationism seminar: ‘‘It was fun in a way, but too much like being thrust back into my adolescence’’ (p. 4). Richard Brenneman, former editor of the newsletter of the Sacramento group, admitted to having been an astrologer (Sandebeck, 1987).

Psychological and social consequences. Skeptics sometimes speak defensively of an emotional ‘‘need to believe.’’ If this need is a typical part of the human condition, skeptics are unlikely to escape its influence, even if they deny it. In fact, in a work published by Prometheus Books, skeptic

John Schumaker (1990) explores the detrimental psychological consequences of being skeptical of religion and the paranormal. He frankly acknowledges that skeptics can have difficulty adjusting to society and are susceptible to certain mental disorders.

There are striking parallels in the advertisements for membership for both skeptics’ groups and atheist-secular humanist organizations. Both appeal to the feeling of isolation in an ‘‘irrational’’ culture. The first issue of the National Capital Area Skeptics’ newsletter asked: ‘‘Do you sometimes feel that, as a skeptic, you are all but isolated in a sea of credulity? . . . we are eager to have you join us’’ (p. 3).

The feelings of loneliness and isolation are quite real, and there seem to be reasons for them. Individuals in both groups sometimes display disdain for others. This is exemplified in the widely publicized comment made at a humanist convention by Ted Turner, who called Christianity ‘‘a religion for losers’’ (‘‘Turner Sorry,’’ 1990). I have encountered these attitudes among atheists and secular humanists. Some describe religious believers as ‘‘weak’’ or ‘‘unwilling to face reality.’’ Similar opinions are expressed by debunkers. Given such beliefs, it is no surprise that some skeptics feel alone and isolated. Certainly not all of them hold such attitudes, and some have even expressed dismay at the behavior of fellow debunkers.

Although religious issues seem to be quite salient in the lives of many skeptics, not all are so involved. Yet as shown in Table 3, 29 official members of CSICOP have publicly identified themselves as holding nontheistic or atheist beliefs. This is a remarkable number, and it has clearly influenced the organization. Much of the energy driving the controversy over the paranormal may derive from deeply held religious beliefs, and any attempt to understand the psychological factors underlying the psi controversy should consider religious issues.

FORMAL ORGANIZATION OF THE MOVEMENT

The structure of CSICOP influences its goals and activities. Here I briefly outline the formal organization of the Committee and its changing relationship with the local groups. It is crucial to understand the backgrounds of a few key personalities because they largely determine priorities. As will be described, the power in CSICOP is concentrated in a very small number of individuals, the vast majority have no vote, and few policy makers are scientists.

Official Structure of CSICOP

The ‘‘By Laws of CSICOP, Inc.’’ (undated) state that ‘‘the Executive Council of the Committee shall have voting power with respect to formu-
lating the policies of the Committee” (p. 2). The even smaller Board of Directors is vested with the financial and administrative power, with the Chair (Kurtz) given primary authority. The “Fellows” of the Committee and the “Scientific and Technical Consultants” (who are the only other official members of CSICOP) are without vote. Thus, all of the most eminent members play virtually no role in decisions; their names simply lend status to the organization. The precise number of members of the Committee is unclear because the membership rosters in Si are preceded with the words “partial list,” but Paul Kurtz told me that there were few if any additional members (personal communication from Paul Kurtz, August 14, 1991).

Although many Fellows and Consultants are scientists, few of the policy makers are. In fact, only one member of the Board of Directors is a scientist (Alcock); the others are philosophers and editors. Thus, non-scientific leadership controls CSICOP, and as I explain, this is reflected in the activities of the organization.

CSICOP employs approximately six full-time and six part-time people (personal communication from Barry Karr, August 14, 1991). These personnel produce and edit the newsletter and magazine, respond to inquiries, raise funds, and organize conferences. Some of the employees are also associated with the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism.

**Key Personalities**

The dynamism and vitality of the group can be attributed to a small number of key individuals committed to similar goals. The three most influential have been Paul Kurtz, James Randi, and Martin Gardner. Although I have mentioned them before, some additional background information may help explain their roles.

**Paul Kurtz.** Paul Kurtz is chairman and cofounder of the Committee and widely regarded as its driving force (Gordon, 1987, p. 213). It was he who arranged financial support to begin the organization. Although Kurtz taught philosophy, he might be described more accurately as a “business-person—missionary.” Kurtz is president of Prometheus Books, which he founded in 1970 (Berkley, 1978). This publishing house is the primary purveyor of antiparanoormal books in this country, and its financial success has been aided by the growth of the debunking movement. The press has a reported average annual growth of 25% (Berkley, 1987). Kurtz is also a copresident of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (a coalition of humanist and atheist organizations). Although Kurtz has shown exceptional dynamism and success as a businessperson and as a missionary for secular humanism, his position as a philosopher seems a bit less impressive. His *Exuberance: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life* (1977/1985b) is something of a “positive thinking” book for humanists, and a recent review compared the level of his writing with that of Shirley MacLaine (Stillings, 1989).

**James Randi.** Randi has been professionally involved with magic since he was 18, and he has received moderate acclaim within that fraternity. He was featured on the cover of *Hocus Pocus* (April/June, 1980) and *Tannen’s Magic Manuscript* (January/February, 1986). Randi has long been involved with the paranormal; in fact, his entry in *Current Biography* (Moritz, 1988) tells how he publicly confronted phoney spiritualists when he was a teenager. He has since enjoyed a colorful career; at one time, Randi published a phony astrology column (Moritz, 1988); had a radio show of his own (Moseley, 1965a); was an escape artist (Nicolson, 1974); toured with rock star Alice Cooper, playing the role of executioner on stage (Greene, 1986); and took part in “archaeological exploits” in South America with UFO buff James Moseley (1965b), who has admitted to grave-robbing (Pattison, 1991). Randi is now the individual probably most widely identified with the skeptics’ movement. His magic experience helped generate considerable publicity; he has appeared on Johnny Carson’s *Tonight* show at least 32 times (Jaroff, 1988). Randi’s association with CSICOP resulted in his receiving several major honors. The MacArthur Foundation gave him a “genius” award, which carried a tax-free grant of $272,000 (Holden, 1986). In 1989, the American Physical Society presented him with its Forum Award for “Promoting Public Understanding of the Relation of Physics to Society” (“We Hear That,” 1989).

Like many others in CSICOP, Randi has described himself as an atheist. He associates with like-minded groups and has made appearances at conventions of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. In 1990, he received a Humanist Distinguished Service Award, and the American Humanist Association sells both audio and video tapes titled “Honoring the Amazing Randi.”

**Martin Gardner.** Martin Gardner has been aptly described as the “godfather of the movement” (Clark, 1990, p. 420); his influence is pervasive. As mentioned previously, he is highly regarded in conjuring circles and has contributed important works to magic (Booth, 1988). In 1952, he published *In the Name of Science*, which has turned out to be a landmark skeptical work. The volume established Gardner as an early prominent
debunker. The book took a popular rather than scholarly approach, and it contained no footnotes or list of references. It displayed a snide and sarcastic demeanor, setting the tone for many future debunkers. Gardner's book was later revised and is still in print under the title *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (Gardner, 1957). The temper of his writing attracted the attention of a *Newsweek* writer who noted: "Gentle as he is, he is driven almost beyond satire . . . he wields Ockham's razor like a switchblade" (Adler with Carey, 1981, p. 101). Despite his style, Gardner is no intellectual lightweight; for example, his *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* (1983b) is much more sophisticated than a number of Kurtz's recent books.

Gardner is primarily a writer and shuns public appearances; he has never made a presentation at a CSICOP convention. His entry in *Contemporary Authors* (Locher, 1978) lists 41 authored and edited works; many more have been published since. His skeptical influence has been felt in the publishing world beyond his own writings. Hansel (1966, p. v) specifically thanked Gardner for helping to assure publication of his *ESP: A Scientific Evaluation*. Gardner also makes a point of talking with editors and publishers and informing them as to what can be considered as "acceptable" science (e.g., Gardner, 1981, p. 346).

Gardner probably received his greatest fame through his mathematical games column in *Scientific American*. This series ran from 1957 to 1982. I grew up reading his column, and I suspect that a substantial portion of today's physical scientists and engineers did too. Near the end of his retirement, a number of magazines carried articles on his career (e.g., Adler with Carey, 1981; Morris, 1982; Rucker, 1981), and Volume 22 of the *Journal of Recreational Mathematics* was dedicated to him (Madachy, 1990). These tributes attest to his wide influence.

All three of these key individuals have a financial stake in the debunking movement. Prometheus Books publishes numerous skeptical titles, and Kurtz is president—a fact rarely acknowledged in the pages of *SI*. Randi obtains speaking and performing engagements through local skeptics' groups. Gardner has published a number of books via Kurtz's publishing house and is one of its most prolific authors. Writers in *SI* sometimes complain about the financial self-interest of those promoting the paranormal; however, such comments are seldom directed at those within their own ranks.

**Local Groups**

The relationship of CSICOP and the local groups has varied over the years, but the first officially "approved local chapter" was the Bay Area Skeptics, which began in 1982 (Frazier, 1982). Other chapters soon followed, and their growth has been impressive. The Committee has taken an active role in fostering these societies; CSICOP has loaned money for such purposes, and in one undertaking, the Executive Director was sent on a two-month world tour to help establish debunking organizations (Anderson, 1987). CSICOP published the newsletter *Skeptical Briefs* (SB) in order to facilitate communication with the groups as well as a handbook describing how to organize and manage them. At CSICOP conferences, there have been sessions devoted to representatives from the local affiliates, and at one time CSICOP employed a "Group Coordinator."

The local affiliates have posed some difficulties for the Committee. A few members have been extremely aggressive, and some of their attacks have provoked lawsuits. With the rising legal problems, CSICOP became concerned about the groups, and in their listing in the Spring 1987 *SI*, they began to describe them as "independent and autonomous." Executive Director Mark Plummer (1989) claimed that CSICOP had designated the groups as "autonomous" and "not officially or unofficially affiliated with CSICOP" in 1982. However, publications of the Committee were referring to the groups as "affiliates" at least as late as July 1986 (in *Skeptical Briefs*). With the lawsuits, the concerns grew, and in May 1987, CSICOP published an article in *Skeptical Briefs* titled "Dealing with a Libel Suit." It suggested that the organizations consider purchasing libel insurance and that if they were sued to contact the Committee. Incidents involving Al Seckel have also proved embarrassing for CSICOP. Seckel was an official and active member[18] of the Committee and a founder of the Southern California Skeptics. After years of high profile activity, it was discovered that he did not hold the academic credentials he claimed (Mosley, 1991a). Ironically, the Committee had previously prided itself on exposing hoaxers and con artists, but CSICOP has made no public comment on the Seckel affair.

**Rhetoric and Activities**

The primary focus of the Committee has been to influence the media and public opinion on the paranormal, and its rhetorical methods and activities are mainly directed to that goal. Thus, the group's language and projects have been fashioned for a popular approach rather than for disinterested scientific commentary.

**Choice of Targets**

When CSICOP first began, it focused on paranormal topics. This position has shifted slightly over the years, but the Committee primarily re-

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[18] Seckel wrote at least three articles for *SI*; he edited two volumes published by Prometheus Books. Seckel's picture appeared three times in *SI*. Two of these were taken by Executive Council member, Philip Klass; the third included Klass. Randi served on the board of directors of SCS. Seckel served on CSICOP's College and University Lecture Series Subcommittee along with Paul Kurtz and Ray Hyman. The leadership of CSICOP was well acquainted with Seckel.
stricts its commentary to areas considered marginal or "fringe" by the scientific establishment. Carl Sagan (1987) gave an extensive listing of topics covered by the Committee:

- the Bermuda Triangle; "Big Foot"; and the Loch Ness monster; "crashed" flying saucers; claims that you can levitate yourself by meditating; ESP; the view that the Earth is really flat; the Shroud of Turin; divining rods and water witching; Nostradamus; the notion that more crimes are committed when the moon is full; palmistry; numerology; "remote viewing"; cult archaeology; a Soviet elephant that talks fluent Russian and a Soviet "sensitive" who, blindfolded, reads books with her fingertips; Edgar Cayce and other "prophets," sleeping and awake; diet quackery; ancient maps of Antarctica; "dream telepathy"; faith-healer fraud; analysis of a poltergeist in Columbus, Ohio, and how the scam was discovered; fire walking; phrenology; the "hundredth monkey" confusion; biorhythms; creationism; the emotional lives of plants; the systematically inept predictions of Jeanne Dixon and others; dianetics; Carlos Castenada [sic] and "sorcery"; the search for Noah's Ark; the "Amityville Horror" hoax; miracles; mummies' curses; Atlantis and other "lost" continents; and innumerable cases of acute credulity by newspapers, magazines, and television specials and news programs. (p. 12)

Although this is not a complete list, it is representative. A quick scan of the above will reveal few topics that have any substantial scientific constituency that champions their investigation. The International Society of Cryptozoology, the Society for Scientific Exploration, and the Parapsychological Association (PA) are perhaps the only three professional scientific societies that could be said to investigate a few of these areas. Of these three, the PA has by far the highest professional-level publication standards.

CSICOP has a policy of not conducting research itself, and this has reduced its vulnerability to criticism. Sociologists of science Pinch and Collins (1984) examined the benefits of this policy. They noted that CSICOP's tactics:

- can only be used in complete safety by organizations that do not engage in controversial science themselves. Only by avoiding having to face up to the problems of doing controversial science, and by avoiding the changed consciousness concerning scientific method which accompanies such engagement, can an attack from the canonical model be sustained without difficulty. (p. 539)

In fact, they specifically suggested that the critics not engage in empirical research if they were to be effective in promoting their agenda. They pointed out that in controversial areas, qualified scientists are often engaged in disputes over research findings and interpretations and that a large component of establishing scientific knowledge involves human negotiation and not just "consulting the facts." If CSICOP had continued to undertake its own research, scientists might again point out errors in its procedures and ambiguities in its interpretations. That could threaten CSICOP's image of authority.

Rhetorical Stance

Statements by CSICOP stress the importance of its mission and urge that others become involved. CSICOP portrays itself as a tiny minority battling an overwhelming, irrational tide. In fact, there is almost an apocalyptic strain in some writing. An announcement of the founding of the Committee stated: "We ought not to assume that the scientific enlightenment will continue indefinitely . . . like the Hellenic civilization, it may be overwhelmed by irrationalism, subjectivism, and obscurantism" (Kurtz, 1976b). Members suggest that some beliefs are dangerous and must be combatted urgently.

Rhetoric to establish scientific legitimacy. The Committee emphasizes its claim of being "scientific," and the leadership seems very conscious of this task. The back cover of most issues of SI lists the stated objectives, all of which are scientific. The recruiting of prestigious scientists as figureheads also enhances its credibility. However, Dennis Rawlins, former Executive Council member (and still an extreme skeptic), reported that some fellow councillors privately admitted to him that the word "scientific" should not have appeared in the name of CSICOP (personal communication, April 20, 1987). He directly quoted one member as describing SI as "a propaganda sheet . . . essentially [a] rhetorical magazine that is to go to shapers of opinion like editors." Rawlins has considerable documentation for this and many other revealing statements.

In seeking to enhance its legitimacy, CSICOP largely ignores the refereed scientific journals that deal with the paranormal (e.g., Journal of Parapsychology, Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, Journal of Scientific Exploration, Journal of UFO Studies, Cryptozoology). The PA-affiliated Journal of Parapsychology has been published for more than 50 years, the Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research for more than 80. The existence of these journals is rarely acknowledged in the pages of SI, and when they are mentioned, it is usually only in passing. In fact, the Committee claims that "the Skeptical Inquirer is the only major periodical in the world that examines paranormal

19 Despite their self-portrayal as a small, struggling minority, the circulation of SI dwarfs that of the scientific parapsychology journals, as seen in Figure 1.
20 This can be compared with a published statement made by Gardner (Barcellos, 1979, p. 242).
21 Elsewhere I have described this strategy as "dissuading as debunking," as displayed in articles by Ray Hyman (Hansen, 1991). By implying that there is little or no scientific parapsychological research, readers are dissuaded from locating the refereed scientific journals and examining the reports themselves.
and occult claims from a scientific viewpoint” (CSICOP fund-raising letter of September 18, 1987).

Religious metaphor. CSICOP’s rhetoric sometimes invokes religious metaphors. The dust jacket of one of Randi’s (1990b) recent books describes him as having “missionary zeal.” In introducing an earlier book of Randi’s, Isaac Asimov wrote: “We may find salvation through the wise use of science” (1980, p. x). Lawrence Cranberg, a president of the Austin society, has described his group as “engaged in scientific missionary work” (Clarke, 1986). Even some behavior of skeptics can be seen as metaphorically religious. Members of local affiliates have worked as “missionaries,” passing out skeptical literature to heretical “believers” at psychic fairs and similar events (e.g., Leonhard & Butler, 1986; Mayhew, 1985–1986). A quasi-religious orientation was apparent to one reporter from a major science magazine when Susan Blackmore presented at the 1986 CSICOP conference in Colorado. Blackmore emotionally described her own failure to find evidence for ESP. Speaking to me, the reporter characterized Blackmore’s presentation as being “like a testimonial at an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] meeting.” Nicholas Wade (1977a), writing in Science, described CSICOP’s magazine as “the sword of its faith” (p. 646).

Decrying the “dangers” of the paranormal. Even at the beginning of CSICOP, the Committee decried the “dangers” of the paranormal. Boyce Rensberger (who was awarded CSICOP’s “Responsibility in Journalism Award” (“CSICOP Awards,” 1986)) reported that the Committee claimed that belief in “parapsychology may bring a society of ‘unreason.’” It was also asserted that “some 200 people were known to have killed themselves as a result of believing an unfavorable horoscope, palm reading or other alleged forecast of the future” (Rensberger, 1977). No support was given for this statement, and as far as I can tell, none has appeared since. CSICOP has continued to proclaim the “dangers.” A fund-raising letter signed by the Executive Council declared: “Belief in paranormal phenomena is still growing, and the dangers to our society are real” (dated March 23, 1985).

Gary Posner, an M.D. and leader of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, has claimed that believers in the paranormal may have a pathological medical condition, saying they may be “afflicted with a thought disorder that manifests in . . . a faulty sense of reality” and their “irrational behavior . . . may be more compatible with a diagnosis of ambulatory schizophrenia . . . than with mere naiveté” (1978, p. 79). Posner made this statement despite the fact that surveys show that over half the population in this country has had psychic experiences (Greeley, 1975; Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991).

James Alcock (1981) expresses fear in his anticipation of psi application:

But what chaos we would have. There would, of course, be no privacy, since by extrasensory perception one could see even into people’s minds.

CSICOP and the Skeptics

Dictators would no longer have to trust the words of their followers; they could “know” their feelings . . . . What would happen when two adversaries each try to harm the other via PK? The gunfights of the Old American West would probably pale by comparison. (p. 191)

Several scientists have suggested that emotional resistance and fear of psi are partly responsible for the opposition to parapsychology (e.g., Eisenbud, 1946; Irwin, 1989; LeShan, 1966; Tart, 1982a; Wren-Lewis, 1974). The comments of Wren-Lewis are noteworthy; even before CSICOP began, he wrote: “But the plain fact is that the clearest evidence of strong emotion nowadays comes from those who have antireligious feelings” (emphasis in the original; Wren-Lewis, 1974, p. 43). Alcock’s writings provide examples that support this contention.

Vilification of advocates of the paranormal. Several CSICOP members portray advocates of the paranormal as loathsome human beings. According to his book, Henry Gordon frequently proclaims: “Every psychic I know or have heard of is an absolute fraud.” (1987, p. ix). Medical doctor and writer Michael Crichton (1988)22 observed this tendency of the debunkers and wrote: “I was disturbed by the intemperate tone of many writers I admired; there was a tendency to attribute the basest motives to their opponents” (p. 356).

Use of ridicule. The use of ridicule is a pervasive element in the rhetoric of CSICOP and SI. Gardner encouraged it by popularizing H. L. Mencken’s now frequently quoted “one horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms” (Gardner, 1981, p. vii). Lest there be any remaining confusion, Gardner later made his position explicit:

The rest of us did not regard debunking as such a negative word. We felt that when pseudoscience is far enough out on the fringes of irrationalism, it is fair game for humor, and at times even ridicule. (1983a, p. 213)

Yet another example of belittling the opposition is the subtitle of the first edition of Randi’s (1980) book, Film-Flam!: The Truth About Unicorns, Parapsychology, and Other Delusions. The general use of ridicule by CSICOP can be seen in the pages of SI, where caricatures and cartoons are used to denigrate those discussed. Such illustrations are very rare in scientific journals but are common fare in religious magazines such as American Atheist and Free Inquiry.

Influencing the Media

The treatment of the paranormal in the media is a primary concern of CSICOP. This emphasis is obvious in its Manual for Local, Regional and

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22 Crichton had originally prepared a lecture after a promise from CSICOP Fellow Paul MacCreary to secure an invitation to speak to the Southern California Skeptics. The invitation never came, and Crichton included the prepared talk as a 23-page chapter in his book. The Public Relations Director of CSICOP reviewed Crichton’s book for SI but did not even allude to the chapter dealing with CSICOP and the skeptics (Karr, 1989).
National Groups (1987). Seventeen pages are devoted to "Handling the Media" and "Public Relations"; in contrast, only three pages are given to "Scientific Investigation." No scientific references were cited in the "Scientific Investigation" section, but the reader was referred to Kurtz's (1986) book, The Transcendental Temptation, for an explanation of the scientific method.23 The priority given to the media is also apparent in many articles in SI and in newsletters of the local groups.

Kurtz (1985c) recognizes that "the media are a dominant influence in the growth of belief in the paranormal" (p. 357), and at one time he was reported to appear on 5 to 10 TV or radio shows a week (Bartlett, 1987), which attests to the priority he gives to the media. In fact, the mass media may be the most effective way to communicate with the scientific community regarding the paranormal. McClenon (1984) found that most elite scientists form their opinions about parapsychology from newspaper reports.

Nationally aired television programs that treat psychic topics in a neutral or positive light are a CSICOP target. The Committee filed a complaint with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) under the Fairness Doctrine regarding the NBC series "Exploring the Unknown" (Kurtz, 1977a, 1978d). The FCC rejected the complaint, and CSICOP appealed the ruling in U.S. District Court (Kurtz, 1979b). The Committee also complained to NBC regarding its program "The Amazing World of Psychical Phenomena" (Kurtz, 1979a). CSICOP was especially disturbed by the NOVA program, "The Case of ESP," even though a number of Committee members were featured in it. CSICOP wrote an open letter of complaint to the executive producer, and the cover story of the Summer 1984 issue of SI was an attack on that NOVA segment.

One of the long-term projects of CSICOP has been to get every newspaper astrology column to carry a disclaimer. At the beginning of the project, the Committee issued a press release; two weeks later, it sent a letter to "all U.S. newspapers," calling on them to publish CSICOP's disclaimer (Frazier, 1985). The project has met with limited success. The Summer 1986 issue of SI noted that six papers then carried a statement, and the Spring 1990 magazine reported that 33 papers did (Frazier, 1990a).

The Committee has made a concerted effort to cultivate contacts within the media. For example, Leon Jaroff, an editor for Time, was made a Fellow of the Committee. He wrote an article for Time focusing on Randi's debunking work; the piece included a full-page picture of Randi (Jaroff, 1988). Needless to say, such publicity would be expensive, if purchased. CSICOP publicizes its "Responsibility in Journalism" awards, which are given at their conventions, and Committee members have presented material at a science workshop for journalists (Frazier, 1989a, p. 123).

23 Among other things, The Transcendental Temptation suggested that Jesus and Lazarus had a homosexual relationship.

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In the summer of 1990, SI carried an announcement of the formation of a new organization called the Center for Inquiry ("Center for Inquiry," 1990; Flynn, 1990) whose purpose was to promote the skeptical view in the electronic media. Tom Flynn, cofounder of Catholics Anonymous, was named director. One of the projects was to produce a news magazine format radio show with skeptics such as James Alcock, Susan Blackmore, and Ray Hyman. (For several months the term "Center for Inquiry" was used by CSICOP in more than one context; it now refers only to the headquarters complex [Karr, 1991].)

The local groups have been active with the media also. As might be expected, the affiliates concern themselves more with local radio and newspapers rather than with the national television networks. Some of the groups have been especially active. Even as early as its fourth meeting, the Austin group listed seven different media contacts or appearances for that month. One member volunteered to organize a "Psychic Alert" system to contact other members by phone when call-in radio shows covered the paranormal (McFadden, 1982). The Cleveland society states that they "try to serve as a media resource in Northeast Ohio" ("Membership," 1986). One of their members agreed to organize a speakers bureau, and others were reported to be developing a weekly radio program (O'Connor, 1985). Another issue of their newsletter carried an article on how to write effective letters to editors (Rickards, 1986). The Colorado organization is likewise involved; in a letter from Béla Scheiber dated June 8, 1986 requesting payment of dues, it noted that they have "assisted local TV stations in news projects. Provided speakers for radio talk shows. Responded to articles in the local press." The Northwest Skeptics have been active too. Some of the lead articles in their newsletters have such titles as "Media & Skeptics" (Dennett, 1985a) and "Skeptic on T.V." (Dennett, 1985b). The above are just a few examples. Contact with the media is one of the most common topics discussed in newsletters of the local groups.

Magicians' Activities

The conjurers in CSICOP have influence, and their involvement has proven beneficial for both the organization and the magicians. Magic performances are frequently included in CSICOP's conferences. Daryl Bem performed at the first international conference in 1983, and David Berglas performed at the London conference 1985. Three magicians performed at the banquet of the 1986 conference held in Colorado, and Penn and Teller presented a show at the 1987 convention.

Many of the local groups have also featured magic performances. Conjurer David Alexander performed at a banquet of the Southern California Skeptics (Mitchell, 1986); the Cleveland debunkers' group arranged for Randi to speak ("Professional Charlatan," 1985), and the Houston group presented Steve Shaw as a guest speaker ("HAST Dinner," 1987). Rory Coker performed and explained several mentalism effects for the Austin
society (McFadden, 1983). One of the founding members of the National Capital Area Skeptics (NCAS) is Jamy Ian Swiss, an active magician who appeared on the September 1987 cover of Genii. Swiss performed a number of times to promote the skeptics, and members of NCAS produced a seance show apparently based on Eugene Burger’s (1986) book Spirit Theater. One of the most aggressive groups in promoting magic has been the Sacramento Skeptics Society. They published a column describing fake psychic effects and methods in their newsletter, and their March 1987 meeting featured seven conjurors.

The educational efforts by magicians are effective in attracting publicity to the groups. The conjurors also benefit because professional magicians need publicity in order to obtain new bookings. Leadership roles in CSICOP and local groups can provide visibility and have thus enhanced the careers of several, notably James Randi and Robert Steiner.

**Research by magicians.** As mentioned earlier, CSICOP conducts no research itself, and even the three scientist members of the Executive Council have undertaken little research on their own. As far as I know, of the three (Alcock, Beyerstein, and Hyman, all psychologists), only Hyman has published even one scientific ESP experiment (McClenon & Hyman, 1987), and that study fell “short of scientific acceptability” under Hyman’s (1984–1985, p. 129) own criteria because it was not published in a refereed journal. In contrast, magician James Randi has engaged in much “research,” and this has been given frequent coverage in the pages of SI (e.g., Randi, 1983a, 1983b).

In 1983, sociologist Harry Collins warned against giving nonscientists control over scientific procedures. He spoke specifically of conjurors, noting that the magic community is “a group whose values include secretiveness and financial self-interest above the quest for truth” (Collins, 1983, p. 931). Collins’s words were to prove prescient, as illustrated by Randi’s involvement in the “high dilution” affair. In 1988, Jacques Benveniste and colleagues published a paper in Nature that gave support to some ideas of homeopathy (Davenas et al., 1988). After the publication of the Davenas et al. report, a small group was named to examine the procedures of the experiments, and Randi was appointed as one of the three members. The subsequent accounts depict Randi as capitalizing on the opportunity for showmanship and disrupting the business of the laboratory (Benveniste, 1988). Randi made public innuendoes of fraud and incompetence. Later he gave presentations about his involvement. During one of them, he mimicked the Gallic mannerisms of Benveniste and made highly derogatory comments about “French science”; many in the audience were offended (Inglis, 1988b).

SI eventually published an article critical of Randi (Shneour, 1989), though it was relegated to the back pages. Shneour wrote specifically of “careless” criticisms, “squer[n]ing” “credibility” (p. 95), and even noted that there was a “preconceived bias that Benveniste’s data was fraudulently generated” (p. 94). Both Collins (1988) and Shneour (1989) warned that such practices could be destructive to the conduct of science. Randi (1990a) had little to say in reply.

Although the magicians in CSICOP have attacked psychics, they have said very little about people such as Kreskin,26 David Hoy, or other similar entertainers who are well connected in the magic community.27 Many mentalists maintain that performers should claim genuine abilities even if they do not believe in them. Certainly Randi, Ray Hyman, and Martin Gardner28 are well aware of this situation, yet they rarely, if ever, criticize publicly such performers. Hyman holds membership in the Psychic Entertainers Association, which has a number of members who encourage performers to falsely claim psychic abilities. If Gardner, Hyman, or Randi undertook an exposé, they would likely antagonize the conjuring establishment.

**Protesting the Paranormal in Academia**

Another task of the local groups has been to protest courses favorable to the paranormal. CSICOP encouraged such opposition by publishing an article, “Pseudoscience in the Name of the University,” subtitled: “What

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25 Randi’s antics should have come as no surprise to members of CSICOP because he has engaged in similar behavior in relation to psi research. Krippner (1977), Rao (1984), Targ and Puthoff (1977, pp. 182–186), and Tart (1982b) have all documented glaring errors of Randi. Dennis Stellas has demonstrated that “Randi is capable of gross distortion of facts” (Truzzi, 1987, p. 89). Randi has been quoted as saying, “I always have an out” with regard to his $10,000 challenge (Rawlins, 1981, p. 89). Puthoff and Targ (1977) documented a number of mistakes. In a published, handwritten, signed letter, Randi replied offering $1,000 if any claimed error could be demonstrated (see Fuller, 1979). Fuller proved Randi wrong. In a rejoinder to Puthoff and Targ (1977), Randi reversed himself (for a clear example, see point number 15 in Randi, 1982, p. 223). Randi should have paid the $1,000, but he never did.

26 Kreskin appeared at the 1991 CSICOP convention as an authority on hypnosis, and a recent Prometheus catalog advertises one of his books. Surprisingly, Kreskin (1973) claims psychic ability (e.g., “in using ESP as a form of communication, I receive information in images rather than in symbols” [p. 8]. “Psychic telepathic suggestion alone, I ordered her to choose Albuquerque, which she did” [p. 40]). His more recent publicity material makes similar claims (e.g., “The Amazing Kreskin: Biography.” 1988).

27 A rare exception was a brief attack on Russ Burgess, a member of the Psychic Entertainers Association (Rawlins, 1977, pp. 74–75).

28 Earlier in his career, Gardner wrote an article under a pseudonym suggesting that magician Stanley Jaks had genuine psychic powers (Groth, 1952) (personal communication, June 7, 1989).
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Science Education, an anticreationist group, has lumped psi with creationism and health quackery in its literature (e.g., its brochure titled *What Can You Do About Anti-Evolutionism?*, undated).

CSICOP also involves itself in the medical arena and has a "Paranormal Health Claims Subcommittee." Recently, *SI* has included a few articles addressing fringe areas of medicine. Prometheus Books published a book by two philosophers attacking holistic medicine (Stalker & Glymour, 1985). (Stalker is a CSICOP member.) The National Council Against Health Fraud made CSICOP an affiliate. They too have joined the battle against the paranormal and published an article decrying Shirley MacLaine in their newsletter ("Is Shirley MacLaine," 1987).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the circulation of *SI* has stagnated after rapid growth. This must be of concern to the Committee. In a recent note, Frazier (1990b) indicated that more attention was being given to "science, critical inquiry, and science education" (p. 116). This further suggests that CSICOP is striving to define its role. Media interest in the paranormal can vary, and during some periods the paranormal is not always considered newsworthy. Alternative topics may attract attention when the paranormal fails to do so. However, there are some hazards in diversification. If the Committee becomes too broadly focused, it runs the risk of losing its identity. Whereas there are already a number of organizations engaged in the fights against creationism and quackery, CSICOP has yet to demonstrate that it has something new to offer in these arenas.

The New Age

Perhaps the most pertinent cultural change during CSICOP’s existence has been the rise of the New Age movement (Melton, Clark, & Kelly, 1990). The occult explosion of the 1970s resulted in an increased level of belief in the paranormal. A number of participants in the psychic boom were then in their early and mid-twenties. These people have moved into positions of some financial and political power and now form the base for what is called the New Age movement. In fact, several major publications have run stories on this movement (e.g., *New York Times* [Lindsey, 1986]; *U.S. News and World Report* [Levine, Kyle, & Dworkin, 1987]; *Wall Street Journal* [Hughes, 1987]). It is not possible to provide a crisp definition for the New Age, but typically it is associated with channeling, wholistic health, use of crystals, Eastern thought, and psychic abilities. It can be characterized as a network in flux rather than a rigid hierarchical structure (Ferguson, 1980), and there is no agreed upon institutional leadership that might provide inertia and clear identity. The New Age is partly a search for religious and spiritual values, and Hastings (1991, p. 195) suggested that it is a "revitalization movement," a term introduced by anthropologist A. F. C. Wallace (1956). From a sociological perspective, the growth of CSICOP might be seen as a reaction to this movement.

Many aspects of the New Age are opposed by CSICOP, and the Com-

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Footnotes:
29. Ironically, this article was coauthored by CSICOP member Barry Singer, who was charged with "inappropriate" teaching of his own course. He lost his academic position because he openly gave students credit for sexual experiences (Singer, 1982/83). CSICOP member Vern Bullough (1982/83) stated that "Singer’s account...raises serious questions of ethics" and "he quite obviously violated the rights of his students" (p. 10).
30. An article by Swords (1990) indirectly suggests that the use of *SI* might not be altogether effective.
mittee’s 1988 conference focused on them (Shore, 1989) as did the Summer 1989 issue of S1. S1 articles on the New Age are usually derogatory and rarely display the disinterested scientific analysis found in papers presented at scientific conferences such as those of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association.

Legal Concerns

One of the problems that will confront the Committee for some time to come is the issue of libel. This problem first emerged with the local affiliates. The cofounder of the Northwest Skeptics, John Merrell, sent press packages to news agencies claiming that psychic Noreen Renier was misleading the public with fraudulent claims. Renier sued and won a judgment of $25,000 (Auerbach, 1991; Guarino, 1986). In 1986, Gharith Pendragon began a battle with the Hawaii Skeptics. He alleged that he lost teaching positions because of pressure the Hawaii Skeptics brought to bear. This led to a publicized legal fight, and CSICOP was named in the suit. It was ultimately settled in CSICOP’s favor (Frazier, 1989b), but it undoubtedly cost the Committee considerable time and money. Shortly after the beginning of the Pendragon battle, CSICOP attempted to distance itself somewhat from the local groups and no longer referred to them as affiliates.

But it is not only statements by the local groups that have caused problems. Randi’s statements have drawn fire. In an interview for Twilight Zone Magazine (Wiater, 1988) and at a meeting of the New York Area Skeptics, Randi claimed that Eldon Byrd, a friend of Uri Geller, was a child molester and in prison. The New York Skeptic later admitted this was untrue (“Geller Files,” 1989), but Byrd sued, naming CSICOP as one of the defendants. Randi also claimed that Geller had launched a blackmail campaign against him (Wiater, 1988), and Geller also filed a number of suits against Randi and CSICOP (Moseley, 1991b). This led to Randi’s resignation from the Committee to avoid its being named in subsequent suits. Several newsletters published an appeal from Randi (1991) that said “I’m in trouble folks. I need help.” The battle attracted wide media attention, including the Wall Street Journal (Marcus, 1991) and Scientific American (Rennie, 1991). Whatever the outcomes, these legal battles will undoubtedly prove costly, and according to Mike Sullivan (1991) of the North Texas Skeptics, “Paul Kurtz warned at the 1991 convention in May that the Committee may not be around for the next annual convention” because of financial problems.

Conclusions

CSICOP has exerted enormous effort and mobilized considerable resources in its battle against the paranormal. Some of the leaders have devoted much of their professional careers to the cause. Their strenuous activity attests to the Committee’s belief in the importance of the truth or falsity of parapsychological claims and their significance for mankind.

Although recognizing the importance of the paranormal, CSICOP elected not to conduct scientific research, but rather it has undertaken an extended public relations campaign. The Committee actively attempts to influence the media, and it has complained to the FCC under the Fairness Doctrine. CSICOP seeks endorsements from scientific luminaries, despite the fact that few, if any, of these luminaries have ever published scientific research on the paranormal. CSICOP has also fostered a grassroots movement that assists it in influencing popular opinion. These activities display more parallels with political campaigns than with scientific endeavors.

CSICOP’s message has often been well received, particularly among scientific leaders. The growth of CSICOP, the circulation figures of S1, and the academic credentials of its readership prove that there is wide interest in the paranormal among the most highly educated members of our society. Many readers of S1 undoubtedly assume that CSICOP presents the best available scientific evidence. The readers are rarely told of the existence of refereed scientific journals that cover parapsychology. The effect of CSICOP’s activities is to create a climate of hostility toward the investigation of paranormal claims; indeed, at one CSICOP conference, the announcement of the closing of several parapsychology laboratories was greeted with cheers.

Surveys show that over half the adult population in the U.S. have had psychic experiences and believe in the reality of the phenomena (Gallup, 1982; Greetley, 1975, 1987; Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991). Those who have had the experiences but encounter the debunking attitudes of apparent “scientific authorities” are likely to conclude that science is a dogma and inapplicable to important aspects of their lives. Valle (1990) has suggested that debunkers “are among the primary contributors to the rejection of science by the public” and are “contributing to the growth of irrational movements in modern society” (p. 21). Ironically, CSICOP’s activities will likely inhibit scientific research on the paranormal and might potentially foster an increased rejection of science generally.

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