

403

FORBIDDEN

The Internet is a place where world views

collide. Christianity meets atheism, conventional wisdom meets conspiracy theory, fringe belief meets orthodox science. While most Usenet newsgroups promote particular views and are populated mostly by their purveyors, the critics make up the majority on sci.skeptic. These critics who refer to themselves as "skeptics" have only a tenuous connection to the skepticism of the ancient Greeks, such as Pyrrho, who denied the possibility of knowledge of any kind. Instead, they tend to hold that while knowledge is quite possible, it must be grounded in scientific inquiry and rational investigation. Doubt is valued as a means to reliable knowledge rather than an end in itself.

Skeptics often share an interest in the unusual, bizarre, and the seemingly impossible with the denizens of newsgroups such as alt.paranormal, alt.astrology, alt.alien.visitors and alt.fortean.misc. There are plenty of fans of *The X-Files* to be found among skeptics. Where skeptics differ from "believers" is with regard to what are acceptable standards of evidence and what constitutes reasonable methods of investigation. A commonly touted skeptical aphorism

SKEPTICS SEEK THE

COLD HARD TRUTH

is "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," and testimonials, feelings and handwaving are not considered extraordinary enough to carry the weight.

Yet skeptics are not necessarily dogmatic disbelievers. Skeptics may be knee-jerk naysayers who reject anything supernatural or paranormal, open-minded doubters, or even those who shelter a few fringe beliefs of their own. The most outspoken critics of one paranormal theory are frequently advocates of other fringe theories, and such criticisms are often accepted and promoted by the skeptics. (In a similar vein, it has been pointed out that Christians agree with atheists about the nonexistence of all gods save one.)

Organized skepticism has largely centered around the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), <http://www.csicop.org/>, since its founding in 1976. But the growth of local, regional and national skeptical groups, and their interaction via the Internet has led to a diversification of approaches and emphases. The Los Angeles-based Skeptics Society, <http://www.skeptic.com/>, has published a thick magazine, *Skeptic*, since 1992 which emphasizes thorough

and open investigation of claims, allows detailed responses from those who are criticized, is willing to examine claims within conventional science as well as on the fringes and encourages self-criticism of the skeptical movement. Likewise, the sci.skeptic newsgroup and the SKEPTIC mailing list (skeptic@listproc.hcf.jhu.edu) are places where well-reasoned arguments by promoters of paranormal claims and skeptical detractors can find an attentive audience (amongst the obligatory flames and ridicule, of course—but flammers may find themselves skewered by their fellow skeptics if they aren't careful).

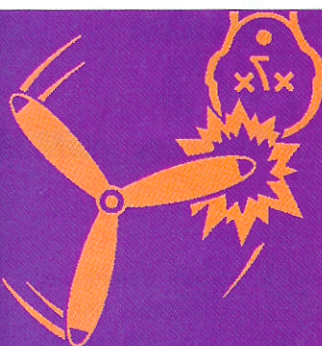
Within the broad class of skeptics are those who focus on more specific issues, like the Internet Infidels (<http://freethought.tamu.edu/>), whose Secular Web expresses skepticism about the existence of gods and value of religion. The National Center for Science Education (<http://www.natcensci.org/>) engages in religiously neutral criticism of creationist pseudoscience. Trancenet (<http://www.trancenet.org/>) criticizes Transcendental Meditation. Each has related newsgroups (alt.atheism, talk.origins, alt.meditation.transcendental) and mailing lists, traffic from which tends to overflow into sci.skeptic, the catch-all newsgroup for skeptics.

The Internet has served as a means for skeptics worldwide to coordinate and expand their efforts; the skeptical organizations and publications have shown considerable growth in the last few years despite the fact that major media tends to give skeptical viewpoints short shrift. ●

Jim Lippard (lippard@skeptic.com), a skeptic, Web administrator and philosopher, is the Internet representative for *Skeptic* magazine.

Skeptics Society Web
<http://www.skeptic.com>

Other Skeptical Resources
<http://www.primenet.com/~lippard/skeptical.html>



Asking the
Toughest
Questions