Journal of Parapsychology
2022, Vol. 86, No. 1, 168-171

http://doi.org/10.30891/jopar.2022.01.09

The Battle For the Internet

Claire Murphy-Morgan

Northumbria University, Newcastle upon-Tyne, UK

Reviews of PSI WARS: TED, WIKIPEDIA, AND THE BATTLE FOR THE INTERNET, by Craig Weiler. (Second edition). White Crow Books. 2020. Pp. 270 $18.99 (paperback). $10.70 (ebook). IBSN: 978-1-78677-117-9

TED, which stands for Technology, Entertainment, and Design was launched in 1984, and has showcased talks on a wide range of topics bringing the TED website over a million views by 2009. It is an internationally recognised brand with the tagline: *ideas worth spreading* (www.ted.com). It is arguably impossible to consider the spread of new ideas in science and psychology to new audiences without considering TED, since it is currently the most visited conference and events website in the world and widely used as an accessible resource (Ditta et al., 2002; Romanelli et.al., 2014). However, the apparent openness of TED as a platform to spread new ideas does not make it immune to the ongoing controversy between parapsychology and he *wider scientific community*. This book presents a thoroughly documented case study of this ongoing dilemma, specifically the controversy surrounding the January 2013 TEDx Whitechapel event *Visions for Transition. Challenging existing paradigms and redefining values (for a more beautiful world).* This event featured two talks: *The Science Delusion* by biologist, author, and scientist Rupert Sheldrake and *The War on Consciousness* by author Graham Hancock, both of which became the focus of a furious online debate on the nature of science, pseudoscience, and censorship. The subsequent removal of both talks from the TED platform by an anonymous team of editors, prompted by some not-so-anonymous skeptics, led to an outcry from both academics and members of the public. What resulted was a fierce online discussion about science and the nature of reality, and this debate is the stimulus for this book.

Weiler describes himself as a parapsychology journalist, and using investigative flair, he methodologically charts the unfolding controversy of how parapsychology is discussed online, from the TEDx talk fiasco to the enigmatic Guerrilla Skeptics on Wikipedia, and ultimately to the wider cultural shift taking place in how post-materialist science is discussed online. He says: "The controversy *(TED)* cannot be understood by itself; it has to be seen within the context of a larger cultural picture, so this book is about both." (p.2).

Weiler begins the book with a whistle-stop tour of parapsychology and the history of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). He argues that, despite the internet allowing for almost instantaneous worldwide discussion, the debate resulting from the 'banned Whitechapel TEDx Talks fiasco' might have

happened a hundred years ago and attitudes towards the nature of consciousness since the SPR's inception in 1882 have changed very little. This is an interesting tension at the heart of this book: the newness of the internet combined with entrenched ideas of science struggling to keep up with the ever-changing digital landscape.

Weiler argues that the seeds of the TED controversy were sown on the discussion platform reddit. This discussion thread generated a directive from TED to all TEDx organisers outlining what TED would consider to be unacceptable programming. They pointed to *The Pseudoscience Wars* (Gordin, 2012) to emphasise that there is no 'bright and shining line' between pseudoscience and 'real science' but refer to 'purveyors of false wisdom' as being just as sincere in sharing their theories as legitimate researchers. They cited a list of 'red flag topics' that 'tend to attract pseudo-scientists' including topics like crystal healing and food being used as medicine. For Weiler, TED's guidelines for pseudoscience were 'not very scientific', based on subjective values from a materialist perspective and that the topic of research should not be the issue. He is asking for the definition of a 'purveyor of false wisdom', and questioning exactly how many researchers are needed before research work is taken seriously. He argues that peer-reviewed research should be the determining factor and goes on to say, "Perhaps the most difficult part of this is that TED's motto is 'Ideas Worth Spreading.' But if the ideas that are allowed are already mainstream, what exactly is the point of spreading them?" (p.13)

Hot on the heels of the Whitechapel TEDx event, PZ Myers, Jerry Coyne, and several other critics of parapsychology set about discrediting Sheldrake's talk, accusing TED of incorporating 'substandard speakers, including woomeisters.' The resulting knee-jerk reaction from TED to remove Sheldrake and Hancock's talks resulted in a back-and-forth exchange in an online thread which included insults, accusations of strawman arguments, challenges about what constitutes science, and disgust at the attempt to censor new ideas. Although Weiler argues that this is nothing new when it comes to parapsychology, it may have been news to *TED.* To TED's credit, they set up a space for all parties to share their perspectives, but this thread quickly degenerated into commentators entrenching their already existing views. The lack of a meaningful exchange was not helped by TED's ever more defensive position, which Weiler plots out in detail.

Weiler dedicates a full chapter to key developments in the history of parapsychology over the last hundred years, such as Ganzfeld research, effects on random number generators, and staring studies, partly in defence of parapsychology, but also as an introduction to readers new to the discipline. A later chapter focuses on theories of nonlocal consciousness as the common denominator of both Sheldrake's and Hancock's talks. He also argues why this position of post-materialist science must be taken seriously by exploring the measurement problem in quantum mechanics and through the principles of *Biocentrism* (Lanza, 2009).

Weiler considers the nature of dogmatic skepticism, making the disclaimer that skeptics who are moderate, reasonable, and able to consider new or conflicting evidence in a critical and dispassionate fashion are not the focus of this book. Rather his focus is on those he describes as holding 'pathological disbelief': a position that underpins the modus operandi for many individuals and groups who seek to edit and control the information about post-materialist science and parapsychology that gets online. This is discussed in the wider context of individual differences paradigms, such as the Myer Briggs Personality test with skeptics tending to be sensing, thinking and decisive types, as opposed to being open to new ideas.

In the same chapter he outlines evidence for sexism and misogyny experienced by women in the world of dogmatic skepticism, comparing the culture of ideologue skeptics with 'the boy's club culture in the hard sciences' and argues that, as a group, skeptics 'have a behaviour problem.' (Grams, 2021; Truzzi, 1987).

Weiler goes on to describe, in detail, a number of organisations with well visited online profiles that he argues essentially house dogmatic skepticism, most notably *The James Randi Educational Foundation* and *The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry* (CSI, formerly CSICOP). He describes the former as focus-ing on 'publicity stunts' including the famous Randi's Prize (the offer of a million dollars to anyone who can 'prove' their psychic ability), to the latter as 'creating confusion about parapsychology by creating controversy.' Weiler cites examples of their bad research into the paranormal which includes Richard Wiseman's (n.d.) critique of Sheldrake's paper *Dogs that know when their owners are coming home* (2000) where Weiler alleges CSI researchers attained the same results as Sheldrake, but that arbitrary criteria for judging removed the positive results.

Weiler digs deeper into the realm of online dogmatic skepticism on Wikipedia, the go-to platform for lay persons. Dogmatic skepticism arguably presents a particular problem for parapsychology because the Wikipedia page refers to it as a pseudoscience. This is not surprising, given that Wikipedia has, in recent years, been the home for Guerrilla Skeptics on Wikipedia (GSoW). Founded by Susan Gerbic, the group comprises over 100 volunteers dedicated to 'scientific skepticism.' They see their job as Wikipedia editors to 'improve skeptical content' on Wikipedia by writing or 'improving science related articles' (Palmer, 2018). Their view of improving science related content on the parapsychology page is to present an overwhelmingly dismissive view. An examination of the page's references shows the first 15 referring to parapsychology as a pseudoscience or lacking any sufficient evidence, with sparse mention of any recent research conducted by parapsychologists themselves (Wikipedia, 2021).

Weiler finds himself at the center of his own investigation when he offers to edit and update Rupert Sheldrake's page. He quickly finds himself of being accused by Wikipedia of stealing his own identity and behaving in a way that could be 'construed as an attempt to make the real Craig Weiler look bad.' He describes the experience as a 'welcome from the Wikipedia mafia' resulting in a war between commentators making suggested amendments and anonymous editors and pseudo-skeptics who prevent them. This is an experience shared by others, including Tumbleman, who describes the editing experience as 'cyber bullying' complete with threats of being banned. The conclusion Weiler comes to regarding Wikipedia is that 'the only way to win is not to play.'

The controversy spills out into the real world when the ongoing debate about 'sciencey sounding woo', a term used by Jerry Coyne to describe parapsychological concerns, leads to TED revoking the license for the TEDx West Hollywood event *Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm?* Despite the tremendous personal and financial burdens faced by the event organiser Suzanne Taylor, she manages to run it as an 'Ex TEDx' event despite a 'messy divorce.'

TED found itself 'trip wiring' into the debate between materialist science and proponents of theory of non-local consciousness. Weiler plots the unfolding controversy with considerable skill and with an engaging style. He is also able to insert the TED controversy into the wider context of how psychical research is discussed elsewhere online, most notably how it is misrepresented, on the Wikipedia pages

for *parapsychology*, of notable parapsychologists, or of post-materialist scientists such as Rupert Sheldrake and Deepak Chopra.

Weiler presents a unique journalistic approach to the issue of how parapsychology is presented on the internet – such as TED and Wikipedia – including his own direct experience 'from the frontline.' His experience, makes this a rare contribution to the literature regarding the conflict between parapsychology and dogmatic skepticism.

The book is a highly accessible read, both for those with an interest and knowledge of parapsychology and to readers new to the subject area. This second edition (2020) is just as important as the original edition (2013), given that the 'battle still rages', and the continuing problem faced by parapsychologists, scientists, and authors when attempting to challenge the 'dogmatically skeptical' presentation of the field of parapsychology on Wikipedia.

The 2013 edition of the book would have benefitted from gathering the views of scientists and skeptics with *less* entrenched and more balanced views of parapsychology. Although Weiler makes it clear that it is *dogmatic* skeptics and 'ideologues' were the key characters on his trip through the internet, this 2020 edition includes the balanced viewpoints of psychologists Chris French and Caroline Watt that Cal Cooper outlines in this edition's foreword. The path is not only to hope for a 'tipping point' in the scientific paradigm, but to create an arena whereby both proponents and skeptics can consider parapsychology and post-materialist science without prejudice. A hard task indeed, but for reasons outlined in this thought-provoking book, essential.

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