

In Search of Delusion: Television Pseudodocumentaries

William Sims Bainbridge

The prevalence of pseudodocumentary television programs about the occult and pseudoscience has become a serious social issue. Such shows may spread false and dangerous notions among the viewing public, both encouraging faith in costly frauds and diminishing popular acceptance of real scientific findings. We need to understand this important phenomenon in contemporary public opinion, but social scientists have given it scant attention. This article helps begin research on occult and pseudoscientific TV propaganda with a questionnaire study of two archetypal programs (now canceled but available in reruns): "In Search of" and "Project UFO." The first is an omnibus of parapsychology, ancient mysteries, magic quests, and radical speculation presented as authentic knowledge. The second is a dramatized documentary of alleged flying-saucer sightings investigated by two Air Force officers assigned to the legendary Project Blue Book.

The Questionnaire

The data used in this study come from one of three lengthy questionnaires that form the heart of a study of science-fiction and fantasy literature. The questionnaire was filled out by 379 persons attending the 1978 World Science Fiction Convention in Phoenix, Arizona. There are two groups of respondents who could provide valuable data: a random sample of citizens and a group of experts in the relevant culture. A random sample would allow us to generalize our findings to the society as a whole with great

William Sims Bainbridge is professor of sociology at the University of Washington, Seattle.

precision, but would be extremely expensive to obtain, especially so because the sample would have to be *very* large to include any significant number of people who were sufficiently familiar with the issues to give salient opinions. A panel of experts allows us to explore complex and subtle questions with the greatest efficiency, detecting even very weak effects and those that operate indirectly. The annual World Science Fiction Convention attracts people who are ideal respondents for a study of the occult and pseudoscience, as well as of fantasy literature itself, because the science-fiction subculture is a bastion of these deviant ideologies.

The questionnaire collected information mainly about preferences, and most sections gave the respondent lists of things, such as TV shows, and asked him to indicate on a seven-point scale (from 0 to 6) how much he liked each one. In my analysis, I looked primarily at correlations between pairs of items. For example, if a person liked “In Search of” more than the average person did, would he also tend to prefer “Project UFO” as well? The answer to this question, as we shall see, is yes. The questionnaire contained five sections, exploring respondents’ attitudes toward different forms or aspects of fiction, as follows:

1. Eighteen miscellaneous items
2. Twenty-nine fiction authors
3. Twenty-five types of literature and other media
4. Sixty-seven science-fiction or fantasy movies

TABLE 1
Popularity Ratings of the Television Programs

Program or Type	Average Popularity Rating	Percent of 379 Responding
“In Search of”	3.32	68.1
“Project UFO”	2.73	81.8
Average of 24 other TV shows	3.02	84.9
“The average science- fiction TV show”	2.45	97.1
“The average TV show that is <i>not</i> science fiction”	1.74	98.2
Occult literature	1.99	93.1

Average popularity ratings are scored on a seven-point scale from “0” (do not like) to “6” (like very much).

5. Twenty-six TV shows, including “In Search of” and “Project UFO”

Table 1 gives the popularity ratings of the two pseudodocumentary programs, along with the average of the 24 other television shows on my list. This table also includes three items from part 3 of the questionnaire: “the average science fiction television show,” “the average television show that is *not* science fiction,” and “occult literature.” In popularity, the two pseudodocumentaries bracket the average for the other twenty-four. With this table providing baselines, we can examine the qualities of the two programs.

The Character of the Pseudodocumentaries

Table 2 allows us to verify that the two programs really are saturated with occult or pseudoscientific notions. It tabulates popularity of the two shows, and the item on occult literature, against belief in ESP. The exact question was: “Do you think that ESP (extrasensory perception) exists, or not?” Of the 376 who responded, 39.1 percent said ESP “definitely exists,” 27.9 percent said it “probably exists,” 30.1 percent said it “possibly exists,” and only 2.9 percent were willing to assert confidently that ESP “does not exist.” The table gives the average popularity ratings expressed by people who hold each of the three common opinions about ESP. The differences are quite striking. The more firmly a person believes in ESP, the more highly he rates the two programs and occult literature.

TABLE 2
Belief in ESP and Program Preferences

Question: “Do you think that ESP (extrasensory perception) exists, or not?”

Average rating of program
for those respondents who feel:

	ESP definitely exists	ESP probably exists	ESP possibly exists	Summary correlation (tau)
“In Search of”	3.97	3.28	2.48	0.27
“Project UFO”	3.20	2.80	2.15	0.21
Occult literature	2.53	2.25	1.15	0.25

Average popularity ratings are scored on a seven-point scale from “0” (do not like) to “6” (like very much).

Other results from the study support these findings. The correlation between preference for “In Search of” and for “occult literature” is significant ($r = 0.26$). The figure linking “Project UFO” with “occult literature” is much less ($r = 0.13$), probably indicating that this show has little supernatural flavor and draws more heavily on technological hokum.

Of the 29 science-fiction and fantasy authors, only two were connected to the two programs: L. Ron Hubbard and Richard S. Shaver. Hubbard, of course, is the man who left science fiction in 1950 to found Scientology, one of the most successful pseudoscientific cults. Significant correlations link Hubbard with “In Search of” ($r = 0.26$) and with “Project UFO” ($r = 0.20$). Only 50 viewers were familiar with Shaver and either show, so his correlations were statistically unstable, if highly suggestive. Shaver was only weakly linked with “Project UFO” ($r = 0.17$) but quite strongly with “In Search of” ($r = 0.31$). In the mid-1940s, Ray Palmer’s science-fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, promulgated the “Great Shaver Hoax,” in which Shaver contended through letters, articles, and stories that *deros*, a race of sinister, subterranean humanoids, was gnawing steadily at the roots of our civilization. In caves deep under the earth, Shaver said, he had run into these monsters, and the whole allegedly true story was an extreme version of the kind of thing presented on “In Search of.”

The most interesting results came from analysis of relationships linking individual television programs into groups according to their basic similarities. Detailed examination of associations among all 26 programs might take a long time. I have a large table showing correlations linking each pair, a total of $(26 \times 25)/2 = 325$ coefficients. Rather than plod through this morass of figures, I will use a mode of analysis that deals with many relationships simultaneously, summarizing the main patterns buried in the table. A commonly used form of *factor analysis*, this technique will reveal the true category of television presentation to which “In Search of” and “Project UFO” belong.

A Factor Analysis

Factor analysis is a mechanical procedure that hunts for commonalities in the correlations linking a number of variables. (For the record, the technical specifications of the particular computer run are: pairwise deletion of missing data, principle factoring with 50 iterations, calling for all factors with eigenvalues greater than one, varimax rotation.) Seven “factors” emerged. In the printout, each factor is represented by a column of figures giving the “factor loading” of each of the 26 shows for that factor. The loadings are coefficients that indicate how closely each show is associated

with a given factor. In this analysis they range from 0.78 to - 0.16. To decide which shows are in which groups, I arbitrarily chose 0.45 as the cut-off point, below which I would ignore the loadings. Any show with a loading of 0.45 or greater would be considered a member of the factor. Following are the results, counting down so we will reach the most interesting factor last:

No factor: Three shows were so nondescript or multifaceted that they failed to load highly on any factor: "Quark," "Tarzan," and "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea."

Factor seven: A surrealistic political allegory occupies this factor all alone: "The Prisoner."

Factor six: Two Saturday-morning "kid-vid" children's programs share this factor: "Land of the Lost" and "Space Academy."

Factor five: Here we find a pair of sophisticated black-and-white anthologies from the sixties: "The Twilight Zone" and "The Outer Limits."

Factor four: Three science and nature documentaries cluster together: "National Geographic," "Wild Kingdom," and "Nova."

Factor three: Situation comedies, some complete with laugh tracks, make up this group: "The Munsters," "My Favorite Martian," "Bewitched," and "Lost in Space."

Factor two: Five shows are distinguished by the superhuman characters named in their titles: "The Bionic Woman," "The Six-Million-Dollar Man," "Wonder Woman," "The Incredible Hulk," and "The Man from Atlantis."

Factor one: This is the group of programs that concerns us: "In Search of," "Project UFO," "Fantasy Island," "The Man from Atlantis" (again), "Space: 1999," "Logan's Run," and "Star Trek."

Although Factor one is headed by our two pseudocumentaries, it also groups together five fantasy and science-fiction programs. Table 3 lists the seven in order, along with their loadings on the factor and other data. Despite the fact that "In Search of" and "Project UFO" have the highest loadings, "Fantasy Island" is not far behind, and I am tempted to call this the Fantasy Factor, rather than the Occult Factor. The common element shared by the shows is that they are generalized wish-fulfillment fantasies. Most of them, including the pseudocumentaries, are fantasy travelogues in which the camera and heroes visit various marvelous places in search of wonder. "Fantasy Island" is a mythical resort where two vacationers each week live out their life's supreme wish.

The factor analysis indicates that the most prominent characteristic of the pseudocumentaries is simple *fantasy wish-fulfillment*. Had the two programs been meaningless and lacking in character, they might not have appeared in any factor, like "Quark," a short-lived show about the captain

TABLE 3
Factor one—General Television Fantasy

Program	Factor Loading	Correlation in Ratings (<i>r</i>)		
		“In Search of”	“Project UFO”	“The average science fiction TV show”
“In Search of”	0.70	—	0.45	0.32
“Project UFO”	0.61	0.45	—	0.35
“Fantasy Island”	0.54	0.42	0.44	0.38
“The Man from Atlantis”	0.52	0.43	0.40	0.46
“Space: 1999”	0.52	0.44	0.34	0.45
“Logan’s Run”	0.52	0.36	0.44	0.55
“Star Trek”	0.45	0.33	0.30	0.37
Average of 19 others	0.17	0.21	0.19	0.21

of an interplanetary garbage scow. Had they been truly special in nature, distinctively supernatural in their appeal, they could easily have defined their own factor, like “Land of the Lost” and “Space Academy.” Had they been perceived by viewers as real, factual documentaries, they could have joined the factor with “National Geographic,” “Wild Kingdom,” and “Nova.” But “In Search of” and “Project UFO” did none of these things. Instead, they joined in a grab-bag factor of fantasy.

Table 3 demonstrates the powerful bonds uniting Factor one and further indicates its meaning. The first column of figures, the factor loadings, are roughly equivalent to correlation coefficients showing how each item is related to the basic idea of the cluster. The second and third columns give the correlations (Pearson’s *r*) linking each program with “In Search of” and “Project UFO.” The association between them is quite strong ($r = 0.45$), but each of them is tied almost as strongly to other shows. In fact, within the limits of statistical certainty, they are connected as closely to “Fantasy Island” and “The Man from Atlantis” as they are to each other.

The fourth column indicates the correlations with one of the items from part 3 of the questionnaire: “the average science-fiction television show.” Here, also, we see some large coefficients. A huge correlation ($r = 0.55$) identifies “Logan’s Run” as a run-of-the-mill program par excellence. Indeed, the entire factor seems to be preferred by viewers who have an

exceptional tolerance for sci-fi on TV. Perhaps the factor indicates poor taste as well as fantasy. Factor analysis of data of this kind often produces a factor with these qualities; it did so in my study of the 67 movies included in the questionnaire. To a great extent Factor one is a *general factor*, clustering seven items that lacked the distinctive qualities expressed by smaller factors. The important point is not that such a factor exists but that the two pseudodocumentaries were swallowed up by it.

The bottom row of Table 3 provides a comparison with the 19 programs not highly loaded on Factor one. The four coefficients are small, but statistically significant, and reflect the fact that there tended to be some correlation linking every show with every other one. This resulted from the tendency of some respondents to like television, in general, better than other people do. But the numbers in the bottom row are much smaller than any others in the table, underscoring the separation between Factor one and the majority of the programs.

Conclusion

We have seen that “In Search of” and “Project UFO” do represent important aspects of the occult and of pseudoscience, for example, through their association with ESP. But we also have seen that viewers do not put this pair of programs into a class by themselves. Rather, the defining characteristic of the pseudodocumentaries seems to be wish-fulfillment fantasy, a brand of entertainment in which fact and fiction are not clearly distinguished. Therefore, the pseudodocumentaries are lumped together with other shows that make no pretense of scientific accuracy, and which form a category only in their very general satisfaction of human desires through vicarious experience.

If we are concerned about the impact of “In Search of” and “Project UFO,” if we suspect these pseudodocumentaries encourage many false ideas among the viewing public, then we should be equally concerned about fiction programs. People know that the plots of fiction stories are not entirely true, however plausible, but they may often assume that the backgrounds of the stories are factual. They know that Mr. Spock of “Star Trek” is not a real person, but they may be encouraged to believe in ESP when they see him perform the Vulcan mind-meld. The effect may be identical to that of hearing the same actor narrate an episode of “In Search of.” Fiction, as well as pseudodocumentaries, can convince. Belief may often come from the willing suspension of disbelief. •