

They See Dead People— Or Do They?

An Investigation of Television Mediums

*The hosts' charm and style, a pliable audience conditioned to readily overlook misses, and some judicious editing of the videotape are all that's really necessary to explain the seemingly impressive results of TV shows like John Edward's *Crossing Over* and James Van Praagh's *Beyond*.*

JAMES UNDERDOWN

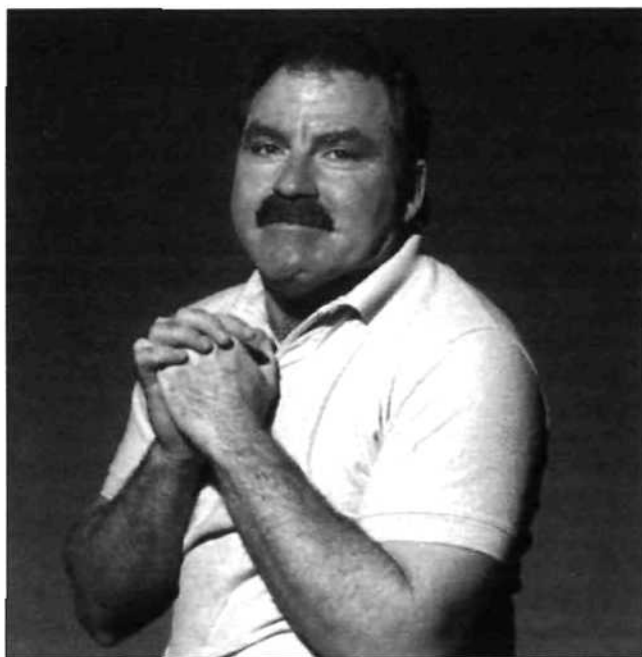
John Edward MaGee Jr. (known as John Edward) and James Van Praagh are probably the two most famous mediums in the United States today. Their shows *Crossing Over* and *Beyond*, respectively, were both running in the fall and winter of 2002–2003. Both syndicated shows had their host speaking with (or “reading”) audiences (or “sitters”) and claiming to make connections with the deceased friends and/or family of the audience members. Some of the shows featured readings of celebrities or individuals with special stories to tell.

Both mediums enjoy considerable success. Van Praagh sells lots of books and has a number of celebrities as clients.

Edward, also, hawks books, and has been on the air since June of 2000. Both men continue to play to large audiences around the country. Even SKEPTICAL INQUIRER has included articles about them.¹

Last August, when Van Praagh started taping *Beyond* a few blocks from the Center for Inquiry–West in Hollywood, our homegrown Independent Investigations Group (IIG) sprang into action. (The IIG consists of a dedicated group of inquirers who participate with CFI–West staff in hands-on investigations.)

Even some skeptics seemed to be impressed with the mediums' on-camera abilities, and speculated about why they seemed so successful. Were they getting "hot reads" (using information gotten prior to the taping) through audience microphones, audience plants, or through production research? Was there some trick we weren't aware of helping these two look so accurate? Would the tapings we witnessed differ from the fully edited, aired shows? We attempted to find out.



James Van Praagh

Hot Reading

James Van Praagh

Several IIG members attended two separate *Beyond* tapings, descending in groups of seven or eight to the studio after a briefing at CFI–West. We split up into smaller groups with our well-hidden recording gear, and went to work.

Before the actual tape date, a number of us who had requested tickets received phone calls from Van Praagh's production people asking who we wanted to contact and what our story was. These calls seemed to be searching for candidates for the more intense, one-on-one readings Van Praagh included in each show.

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On the day of the tapings, we split up in order to have a better chance of spotting plants in line as the audience waited outside the studio. We all signed fake names on the voluminous release form (see below), and engaged in conversations about fictitious friends and relatives. If any of these stories made their way into a reading, we'd know the information had been obtained somewhere in or near the studio.

Upon entering the studio, we noticed standard audience microphones hanging from the ceiling, and speakers placed along the floors. We also monitored both Van Praagh's and his warm-up woman's pre-show conversations. That proved to be interesting.

While phone-interviewing audience members might be a conduit of information to Van Praagh, it's also consistent with the best interest of the producer trying to find compelling content. Indeed, Van Praagh's in-studio readings were so unimpressive that our suspicions of hot reading were lowered. If he had his researchers gleaning spicy tidbits for his readings, they weren't doing a very good job, for he often struggled in his efforts.

Some of the remote one-on-one segments were more impressive, but those generally took place in the sitter's homes where many clues to his or her life might be noticeable. We don't know if producers leaked information to Van Praagh or not, and we never saw raw footage of what went on at the remote tapings. Editing, as I will discuss later, could have played a crucial role.

We saw no evidence of spies in line trying to draw information from people. We gave no information beyond the contact data on the release form. None of our fake names or stories turned up in readings. Before Van Praagh's taping began, loud music was played which would have made it extremely difficult to hear a conversation from the audience microphones.

Van Praagh was guilty of at least one cheat that could be considered a hot read. Before tape was rolling, he signed some books and was chatting with members of the audience. He learned during one conversation that a woman in the audience was from Italy. When the cameras were rolling, he asked who in that section was from another country. If one hadn't seen the earlier conversation, the woman raising her hand in the affirmative would have been impressive, when in fact he knew quite well what the response would be.

John Edward

I attended a taping of John Edward's *Crossing Over* in Queens, New York, alone in November of 2002. *Crossing Over* looked like a production that had a few years under its belt. There was a waiting room instead of a long line outside, the security was a little better (I had to show a real I.D.), and they seemed to run a much tighter ship, though I did get my pocket-sized digital recorder inside with no problem.

Again, there were no indications of anyone I saw collecting information. Edward, too, played music fairly loudly, making it tough to hear normal conversation. And again, none of his readings contained the kind of specific information that would raise an eyebrow of suspicion. In fact, during most of the show I witnessed, John Edward was a bad cold reader. He, too,

struggled to get hits, and in one attempt shot off nearly forty guesses before finding any significant targets.

Both Edward and Van Praagh potentially have a big advantage when they shoot special segments with celebrities. Many famous people have reams of biographical information available on the Internet that would at least aid in a session with a medium. We saw no direct evidence that such information was being used, but it's certainly out there for the taking.

Cold Reading

Cold reading, in a nutshell, is an interactive technique where one fishes for information while giving the appearance of receiving that information from supernatural sources. Both of these men rattle off gobs of guesses until they find a vein of hits with one of their audience members. They are very adept at steering out of dead ends and helping the crowd forgive and forget their mistakes.

In the context of a studio audience full of people, cold reading is not very impressive. Consider that the audience at each of the tapings we witnessed consisted of about 200 people, in three sections of sixty-to-seventy each. If the average person's address book holds about 150 people² (mine has well over 300), we can probably be safe in presuming that we actually *know* many more people than those whose numbers we have. But let's use the 150 figure as a very conservative estimate of an active database from which most people have to draw.

This means that when John Edward or James Van Praagh asks a section of his audience, "Who's Margaret?" he is hoping there is a Margaret in the 10,000 people in the database of that section. If there is no answer, they open the question up to the whole audience's database of over 30,000 people! Would it be surprising for there to be a dozen Margarets in such a large sample?

I submit that these databases are so large that they explain the occasional amazing-sounding home run of a hit. I saw John Edward swinging for the fence by asking who died from getting hit by lightning. When no one answered even after he amended the guess to mere electrocution, he remarked that you'd think you'd remember if you knew someone who passed from something like that.

Let's not forget that when a medium initiates a conversation with an audience member or group of members, he enjoys the benefit of visually appraising whomever he's speaking with. When conversing with a group of ladies over sixty, Edward guessed the names Helen and Margaret as the peers and parents of the women, not Tiffany or Courtney, names more likely to be given to younger people. Any good cold reader uses visual clues to refine his guessing.

Audience Preparation

Both shows went through a lot of effort to get their audiences in the right frame of mind before taping. People came to the tapings to contact a dead loved one. The *Crossing Over* instructions put it bluntly. "If you feel you will be too embarrassed, too frazzled, or just not interested, we ask that you give up your seat to someone who is anxious for a reading."

The audience was admonished not to expect to be read, and that some things the host would say would make sense, others wouldn't. Much of the pre-show rhetoric seemed to be aimed at keeping our expectations low. Both men were very self-effacing, charming, and good-humored, endearing themselves to the audience.

The eight-page letter Edward sent out to his audience included sections entitled "Information For A Positive Session"



John Edward in the studio of his show *Crossing Over* on the Sci-Fi channel on July 7, 2000. Edward chats with recently and not so recently departed people during the course of the show. (© Frances M. Roberts)

and "Recommended Things To Think About." The latter began with the subsection "Know your entire family tree." He reminds us to remember dates, to visualize spouse's families, estranged family, and stepfamilies—even pets. Your personal database, after all, is only as good as your ability to recall it.

After a rather New Agey, meditative preface, Van Praagh's warm-up person was emphatic about reacting openly to what James was saying. How's he supposed to know if he's on the right track? she might as well have said.

Please Release Me . . .

Anyone attending either *Crossing Over* or *Beyond* had to sign a four-page appearance release. (Standard releases are one page.) Edward's release had the feel of a document written by someone just accused of cheating. It seemed to focus on representing that attendees had no outside contact with Edward or his staff, or in documenting that fact if they had. This tone was

reinforced vigorously in the studio where we were reminded constantly not to talk about ourselves or those who we were trying to contact. It was as if the specter of Harry Houdini were floating above the stage pointing a finger.

Van Praagh's release—also four pages—included a non-disclosure section that reads in part: "Neither anyone acting on my behalf, nor I . . . shall speak to any newspaper reporter, print or television journalist or other media representative or source about any aspect of my participation in the Series. . . ."

Cut, Cut, Cut and Print

We decided that the best way to see if any editing wizardry was taking place on these shows was to record segments of the live taping and compare those to the edited versions America saw on the air. What we found was one of the keys to the TV psychic kingdom.

I have some experience sitting in an editing room trying to turn large amounts of raw videotape into small amounts of polished gold. So I know that virtually everything you see on TV has been precisely edited for both time and content. We cannot indict these programs for editing the footage recorded in the studios, but it should be understood that the aired tape does not represent how the readings went in the studio. The aired versions of these programs show a much more successful account of the readings. Here are two examples.

This is what aired . . .

Van Praagh: You were saved by someone. A car thing, or something where you were . . .

Woman: We actually had a car accident four months after my husband died. And we were in a very bad collision.

Van Praagh: You almost died, honey. Because I'm being told by your husband that you were saved, Ok?

This is what happened . . .

Van Praagh: You almost died, honey. Because I'm being told by your husband that you were spared, you were saved, Ok? You were saved, all right? And I know . . . something about Jesus here, Ok? Saved with Jesus, or something about Jesus, and if you believe in Jesus, or a religious element. And I don't know, maybe a church with the name Jesus in it? Or there is something about Jesus. Or there's . . .

Woman (interrupting): Well, we're Jewish! (Big laugh from the audience.)

John Edward's editor fine-tuned many of the dead-ends out of a reading riddled with misses. Here, the italicized parts never made it to air.

Edward: Ok, just so you know in my reference, how I got it was a funny thing. So whatever race you went to go see, that you had taped, something funny happened at it, because I would have thought you went to a comedy show. Ok. *Just so you know that you viewed it, he viewed it as a funny thing. Ok.*

Now the twenty-sixth is significant your grounding birthday anniversary but there's a twenty-sixth connection. I also feel like I don't know if . . . I think there's a Michael that's passed as well. I know your Michael's [to the woman] here, but I've got a Michael who's passed who's connected here as well. And I think he either had cerebral palsy, or he had like a neural muscular disease.

It's a name like Michael or Mark, Mick, an "M" name I feel like he like cerebral palsy, he had something like spina bifida—there's like that kind of a feeling. Are you sure it's not for you? That's not for you? . . .

Man: No

Edward: Positive?

Man: Positive.

Edward: He's with you or behind you, but he's right here.

Who would have like a penny or a like coin that's like laminated or saved?

Woman: I would.

Edward: Then this is for you guys. So somehow you guys are connected to this kid. Or to this—it might not have been a kid, but he feels like he's a kid to me. There's an "M."

We saw James Van Praagh stop tape during a one-on-one, prearranged reading after missing all but one of his first six or seven guesses. He then restarted the tape and used the one correct guess at the beginning of the new session. I think most people would call that cheating. Skeptics and television viewers everywhere should be mindful that a good editor can make a pitcher bat a thousand, magician David Blaine levitate above a sidewalk, and a former-dance instructor sound like he's conversing with dead people.

Television psychics generally have a pretty good recipe for appearing to possess paranormal ability. Large audiences gobble up these unreality shows like popcorn.

Skeptics have been served these hot and cold reading techniques for ages, and we saw nothing new or surprising in their methods. The "hit" rate we witnessed for both John Edward and James Van Praagh was disappointing at best. But the fat got "cleaned up in post" (production), as they say in Hollywood.

The mixture of a well-prepared and uncritical audience made it easy to create an atmosphere of cooperation and success in the studio. Strict appearance releases and competent editing made it easy to keep the lid on mistakes and make the medium seem impressive.

Postscript

Apparently, Hollywood wasn't big enough for both men; mega-distributor Tribune Media Services dropped James Van Praagh in January 2003. Trade magazine *Daily Variety* said it best with their headline, "*Beyond Sees White Light.*"

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. See Joe Nickell's *Speaking to the Dead?* In the November/December 2001 SI. Also, Ray Hyman's "How Not to Test Mediums" (SI January/February 2003) strongly critiqued the so-called 'Afterlife' experiments that made use of mediums including John Edward.
2. According to Matt Ridley, author of *The Origins of Virtue* (Penguin Viking 1996).
3. Here, Van Praagh is saying, "I know" to some unseen voice or spirit. □