

Skepticism 2.0

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When Carl Sagan, James Randi, Paul Kurtz, Martin Gardner, Ray Hyman, and others came together in the mid-1970s to form the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP, now CSI), did they plan on starting a worldwide grassroots critical-thinking movement? Did they craft a plan to deputize everyday people to speak out in their communities about the prevailing nonsensical ideas of the day? Did they envision young people meeting up regularly to be skeptical together, as in the growing Skeptics in the Pub events in cities across North America and around the world?

CSICOP

THE COMMITTEE FOR THE SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION
OF CLAIMS OF THE PARANORMAL

I doubt it. These men had the laudable ambition to organize leading thinkers and social critics to respond authoritatively to growing trends of credulity in society: increased belief in the power of psychics, the phenomenon of Uri Geller, UFO beliefs, ancient astronaut theories, popular belief in ghost hauntings and channeling, faith healers and religious charlatans, and the like.

The founders of CSICOP succeeded admirably by many measures: they published magazines and books, spoke out in the entertainment and news media (including on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, which repeatedly featured CSICOP founders), and convened national and regional conferences for subscribers.

But I submit that they didn't plan a movement from the start. The movement grew organically around the ideas that CSICOP and the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, and later other skeptical organizations and magazines, promoted.

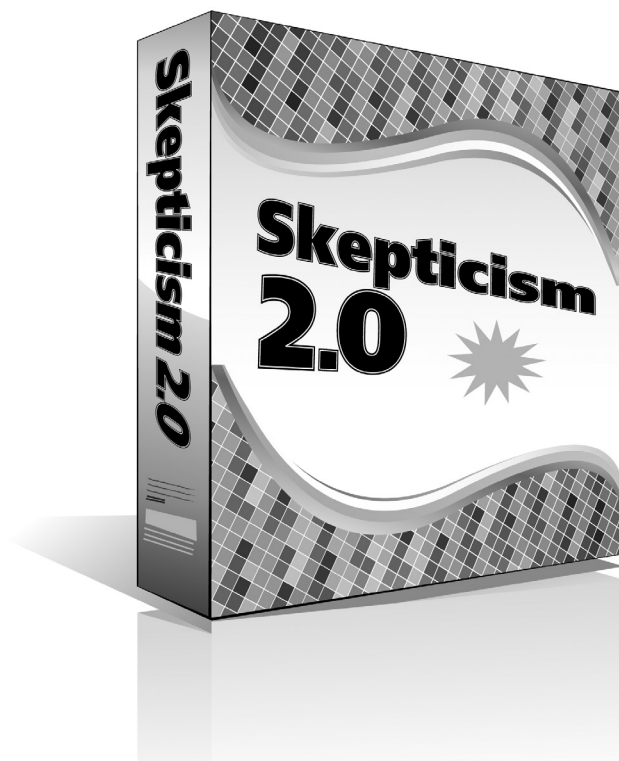
Within about a decade of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*'s launch, the members of the educated public who subscribed found that it wasn't enough for them to get a magazine about skepticism in the mail four or six times per year. So CSICOP helped found local skeptical organizations, often at the behest of subscribers in a given area, initially drawing

from CSICOP's own magazine subscriber lists. Groups were formed in the Washington, DC, and Los Angeles regions and in a number of other cities around the U.S. and abroad. A movement, not merely a magazine, was beginning to form.

In recent years, new developments in technology and society have allowed this skeptical movement to reach out in new directions, sometimes departing from tested ways of advancing the skeptical outlook that have worked in the past. This is the next generation of skepticism. This is Skepticism 2.0.

New Media for New Audiences

Often citing inspiration from the founders of CSI, an "average Joe" skeptical citizen, possibly without special training or background in skepticism and with the help of only a computer connected to the Internet, can reach out to an audience that the skeptical magazines and organizations never would have reached



Skepticism 2.0 What's Next?

just a few years ago. Blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook allow anyone—including skeptics and believers—to advance a point of view to the wider public.

Promise and Problems of Skepticism 2.0

Podcasts such as the New England Skeptical Society's *Skeptics Guide to the Universe*, online communities such as the one found at the James Randi Educational Foundation's Web site, and blogs such as Rebecca Watson's Skepchick.org shine as examples of Skepticism 2.0, as do amateur skeptical projects

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such as Tim Farley's WhatstheHarm.net and the growing SkeptiCamp events started by Reed Esau. But local individuals and groups using the Internet to reach out to and inform the public about skepticism can do only so much.

The national organizations, such as CSI, offer an opportunity for inspired local activists and groups to avoid “reinventing the wheel” and may provide valuable promotional and underwriting support of important new local projects, as well as offer expertise on various skeptical topics (Joe Nickell's work comes to mind). Even more important is the professionalizing of the movement, which the national organizations

allow for and encourage. A case in point is skeptical campus outreach: a national organization, with the support of donors and a paid staff, can impact campuses in joint effort with local activists in ways that neither can do alone.

Skepticism's cultural competitors (purveyors of “woo woo,” as James Randi would call them)—the New Age movement, alternative medicine hucksters, UFOlogists, etc.—often draw on the resources and organizational power of national groups devoted to pushing those agendas. The same should be true of the next generation of the skeptical movement, Skepticism 2.0.

Skeptics in the Pub and the Future of Skepticism

Over the last few years, fueled primarily by Internet outreach through social networking Web sites, Skeptics in the Pub and similar activities (skeptical meet-ups and Facebook groups, etc.) have cropped up in dozens of cities, often independent of preexisting local or national skeptical organizations.

What happens when these groups grow and their members want to “take it to the next level”? New local groups are formed with structure, leadership, and programs. Money is raised, membership programs are created, and if all goes well staff is hired and buildings are bought. In other words, new national organizations may grow out of the local and independent projects of Skepticism 2.0. But is that the best path to plot if the movement is to be plotted and planned?

I think a better model is for independent local projects—the successful examples of Skepticism 2.0—to find organizational homes. When they need resources, they should look to the long-standing local and national organizations for support. They should be part of the *organized* skeptical movement, not outside of and apart from it. □

You can make a lasting impact on the future of skepticism... when you provide for the Skeptical Inquirer in your will.

CSI and the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER changed the terms of discussion in fields ranging from pseudoscience and the paranormal to science and educational policy. You can take an enduring step to preserve their vitality when you provide for the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER in your will.

Your bequest to CSI, Inc., will help to provide for the future of skepticism as it helps to keep the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER financially secure. Depending on your tax situation, a charitable bequest to CSI may have little impact on the net size of your estate—or may even result in a greater amount being available to your beneficiaries.

We would be happy to work with you and your attorney in the development of a will or estate plan that meets your wishes. A variety of arrangements is possible, including: gifts of a fixed amount or a percentage of your estate; living trusts or gift annuities, which provide you with a lifetime income; or a contingent bequest that provides for the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER only if your primary beneficiaries do not survive you.

For more information, contact Barry Karr, Executive Director of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, at 716-636-1425. All inquiries are held in the strictest confidence.