

A Skeptic's Guide to Podcasts

D. J. GROTHE

As most of the readers of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER probably know, podcasts are audio shows that are made available as downloadable digital files, often through free subscription services such as Apple's iTunes. Over the last few years, the podcast has become an exciting medium for skeptics to reach out to new audiences while continuing to educate their existing members. Magazines, books, and television shows are no longer the only ways that people can get their regular fix of critical thinking and skeptical inquiry.

While there are so many great new podcasts promoting skepticism, here is

a survey of some of the best and most popular. They vary in length and format: some are very short and feature just one person; others are long-format interview programs. While almost all are free, some require a paid subscription or a fee to listen to its archives. Some of the skeptical podcasts are humorous and involve a lot of banter, and some have specific themes, such as cryptozoology or conspiracy theories. The thing they all have in common is that they reach out to new people with a critical, rational, and scientific point of view toward pseudoscientific and paranormal claims.

The Conspiracy Skeptic

Started in late 2007, *The Conspiracy Skeptic* (www.yrad.com/cs/) is hosted by Canadian Karl Mamer, an expert in conspiracy theories. The show focuses on various conspiracy theories, such as those promulgated by Alex Jones about the New World Order, those on the Moon landing hoax, and HIV/AIDS denialists' theories that HIV/AIDS is a government plot. He also has had shows about The Illuminati, the Bilderberg Group, vaccine conspiracy theories, and many more. Most shows are about a half hour and feature Mamer speaking on various topics rather than featuring expert guests on a regular basis.

The Geologic Podcast

Hosted by musician and comedian George Hrab, *The Geologic Podcast* (www.geologicpodcast.com) features a monologue by Hrab, comedy sketches, and news about general developments in science and skepticism.



D.J. Grothe is vice president and director of outreach programs for the Center for Inquiry, associate editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine, and a professional magician and

"mindreader."

ticism. Hrab doesn't apply his skepticism merely to the paranormal or the pseudoscientific; he often turns a skeptical eye on religion with his regular humorous feature "Religious Moron of the Week." This podcast is very funny, often containing adult humor. With episodes running about an hour in length on a weekly basis, this show is a favorite among skeptical podcast lovers.

The Infidel Guy Show

Started by trailblazer Reginald Finley in 1999, *The Infidel Guy Show* (www.infidelguy.com) paved the way for Internet audio outreach about skepticism and related subjects. Most shows feature a listener call-in interview with an authority in a given field. While the majority of episodes focus on skepticism of religion and on atheism, many episodes have explored topics more central to the organized skeptical movement's interests: psychics, ghosts, cryptozoology, and the like. Although listening to recent episodes is free, one must become a gold member (\$8.50 monthly or \$75 annually) to hear most of the episodes from over the last decade.

Logically Critical

Logically Critical (www.logicallycritical.net) was "intended to encourage critical thinking in everyday situations without the hassle of checking facts at the library." The podcast ceased production in late 2007, but all previous shows are still archived online and available for free. The show often focused on one theme per episode and featured the host speaking on the topic at hand. Skeptically themed episodes included shows on ghosts, ancient monsters, the power of suggestion, the Law of Attraction, and the best-selling New Age book *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne. Each episode is about a half hour and still worth a listen.

Point of Inquiry

As the host of *Point of Inquiry* (www.pointofinquiry.org), the weekly podcast of the Center for Inquiry (of which the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry is a vital part), I often assume the role of "devil's advocate" with my guests. The podcast was founded in late 2006, and almost two hundred episodes are available for free online as well as through iTunes and other podcatchers. While the program frequently focuses on topics in religion, ethics, philosophy, and public policy, it

also concentrates on traditionally skeptical topics such as Bigfoot, ghosts, UFOs and alien abduction, pseudoarchaeology, psychic investigation, and alternative medicine in addition to a number of shows on conjuring and its relationship to skepticism. Each episode features a long-form interview with a leading thinker in science, skepticism, or philosophy, and most of the biggest names in the skeptical movement have appeared on the show, including Michael Shermer, James Randi, Joe Nickell, Ray Hyman, and Kendrick Frazer, as well as a number of Nobel Prize-winning scientists and other leading public intellectuals.

Pseudo Scientists

The podcast of the Young Australian Skeptics, *Pseudo Scientists* (www.youngausskeptics.com), has a pronounced fun and youthful vibe. The show begins with an often humorous short audio clip of some purveyor of pseudoscientific nonsense followed by a shout of "That's Impossible!" It is hosted by Alastair Tait and features Jason Ball (a Center for Inquiry campus leader who recently spoke at CFI's World Congress), Jack Scanlan, Jacqui Williams, Elliot Birch, and others. The podcast airs a couple times a month; each episode is over an hour in length and includes interviews, book reviews, and other segments, including witty banter among the hosts about skepticism and irrational trends in Australia and around the world.

Quackcast

Quackcast's Web site (www.quackcast.com) declares it "A podcast review of Quacks, Frauds and Charlatans. Oops. That's not right. That should be Supplements, Complementary and Alternative Medicine i.e. SCAM." Generally running over an hour, each episode features a critical and skeptical exploration of alternative medicine topics, such as herbal remedies, chiropractic, homeopathy, traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, Reiki, therapeutic touch, the medical efficacy of prayer, and even questions like "can high doses of Vitamin C shorten the duration of the common cold?"

Reality Check Podcast

Considered a Canadian version of the *Skeptic's Guide to the Universe* (see below), *Reality Check Podcast* is produced by the Ottawa Skeptics and features skeptical banter from some of the group's members, including Jonathan Abrams and Xander Miller. The show focuses on various skeptical topics, such as the Moon landing hoax conspiracy theory, Bigfoot, various alternative medicine claims, pyramidology, and feng shui, and also features regular interviews of some of the leaders in the skeptical movement. *Reality Check*, like many of the other podcasts listed here, is a great example of what independent skeptical groups can accomplish even if they lack the resources of a national skeptical organization.

The Skeptic Zone

Sponsored by the organization Australia for Science and Reason, *The Skeptic Zone* (<http://skepticzone.tv/>) is hosted by Richard Saunders. Each episode generally runs over an hour with multiple segments. Saunders frequently interviews luminaries of the skeptical movement, such as Joe Nickell, and engages in news reports and panel discussions with co-hosts Rachael Dunlop, Joanne Benhamu, and Eran Segev, among others. *The Skeptic Zone* shows how the new medium of podcasting allows for worldwide skeptical outreach with minimal investment relative to print publishing.

Skepticality

The skeptical movement owes a lot to "Derek and Swoopy," hosts of the first skepticism podcast, which started in April 2005. *Skepticality* is now the official podcast of Michael Shermer's Skeptical Society. In September 2005, Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer, mentioned *Skepticality* during his keynote address about the iTunes music store. On that same day, co-host Derek Colanduno suffered a brain aneurysm. As a result, no new shows were produced until August 2006, after he had recovered, and now episodes appear about twice a month. The shows average an hour and feature inter-

views with famous skeptics, such as James Randi, Ben Radford, and Joe Nickell, in addition to skeptical and science news and extemporaneous chitchat between the co-hosts.

The Skeptic's Guide to the Universe

One of the top skeptical podcasts on iTunes, *The Skeptic's Guide to the Universe* (www.theskepticsguide.org), is a one-hour weekly talk show produced by the New England Skeptical Society, in association with the James Randi Educational Foundation. It is hosted by Dr. Steven Novella, professor of neurology at Yale University, along with his two brothers, Bob and Jay Novella, Rebecca Watson (founder of skepchick.org), and Evan Bernstein. Each episode features many segments, including a guest interview and a segment called "Science or Fiction," in addition to a lot of light and witty conversation. The show covers a broad range of skeptical topics but generally avoids applying skepticism to religious faith claims except during some of the satire and jokes, which are a popular component of the banter among the co-hosts.

Skeptoid

Started in October 2006, *Skeptoid* (www.skeptoid.com) is a "weekly pro-science, anti-pseudoscience podcast" hosted by Brian Dunning. Episodes average about ten minutes in length, and each features Dunning expounding on a topic of interest to skeptics, such as pseudoscientific products and consumer frauds, urban legends, alternative medicine, and conspiracy theories. His short episodes are well-researched, and when taken collectively, very comprehensive. Dunning's podcast is a shining example of what one skeptical activist with a computer, a microphone, and an entrepreneurial spirit can accomplish for the skeptical movement.

Though hardly comprehensive, this list shows the array of skeptical audio that is available for your enjoyment on the Web and on your iPod or other MP3 player. Now more than ever, it is easier for you to share skepticism with those around you by turning them on to these podcasts. □