

# CSICon New Orleans 2011

## Our New Science-Oriented SkepticFest

The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry held its CSICon New Orleans 2011 conference October 27–30 at the New Orleans Marriott. It was a welcome resumption, after an eight-year hiatus, of CSICOP conferences.

It featured a dozen symposia on everything from conspiracy theories and UFOs to evolution versus creationism and skepticism in the media; special talks by skeptical luminaries; an awards banquet; and a host of social and entertainment events. The latter included a “Smarti Gras” parade and New Orleans Halloween Party Saturday evening at a French Quarter bar after the special conference address by Bill Nye “The Science Guy.” Here we offer several reports and a photo gallery.



# Ideas and Analysis, Frauds and Fun: An Intellectual Treat

KENDRICK FRAZIER

Like its earlier CSICOP conference predecessors, CSICon New Orleans 2011 was rich with provocative ideas, good science, critical thinking, informed analysis, and penetrating criticism of claims poorly supported by scientific evidence. It was also filled with fun social events that allowed plenty of opportunity for interactions with fellow skeptics and to enjoy the camaraderie shared by those who defend good science and expose shams, frauds, and unsupported claims.

It began on a Thursday afternoon with opening remarks by Center for Inquiry President Ronald A. Lindsay, CSI Executive Director Barry Karr, and me, and ended on Sunday afternoon with a “Houdini Séance” conducted by Joe Nickell, Ray Hyman, and Massimo Polidoro. The sessions provided quite an intellectual feast for science-minded skeptics of every stripe.

Some of the many highlights for me included:

- Bill Nye “The Science Guy’s” special conference address, informative and inspiring. He provided a cosmic perspective on human curiosity and exploration and a sterling defense of the need for good science and math education for a science-literate citizenry. He ended with a backlit photo from the Cassini mission of a close-up Saturn seen from outside its orbit inward, the planet Earth a tiny dot barely visible through its rings.
- Chemistry Nobel laureate (and CSI Fellow) Sir Harry Kroto’s talk “Education as the New Dark Age Approaches.” It excoriated parents who allow their religions to teach hatred toward others religions, lamented the rise of ideologi-

cal-oriented nonsense (rather than common sense), and extolled natural philosophy (“the only philosophy we have devised to determine the truth with any degree of reality”). Kroto also called for more recognition of “true heroes” (those from the world of science, like Einstein, Darwin, Chandrasekhar, Maxwell, and Rosalind Franklin) and emphasized the importance of learning algebra and calculus (“the universe doesn’t speak any other language”).

- Chris Mooney’s talk (in a session on science and public policy) on the science of denial. He emphasized (as we have reported several other times recently) that corrections don’t change people’s false beliefs; in fact, they cause people to hold them all the more strongly, “doubling down” on them. Studies of “motivated reasoning,” the updated view of cognitive dissonance, show that we are not conscious of the vast majority of what our brains are doing and that our emotional reactions drive our memory retrieval. “By the time we are conscious of it we are defending ourselves—acting like lawyers. . . . This is how people work. We spin out all of the old rationalizations . . . and create new ones.” And then there’s what he called the “smart idiot” effect, in

Lawrence Krauss delivers a special luncheon address; Sandra Blakeslee talks about skepticism in the media; Phil Plait is dubious of *Armageddon*’s presentation of asteroids; Eugenie C. Scott addresses the banquet crowd before presenting Bill Nye with CSI’s In Praise of Reason Award.



photos: Brian D. Engler

which people who know more are more capable of showing bias and more skilled at coming up with arguments to defend their biased views. Thus things always polarize, a situation we now find endemic in political discourse.

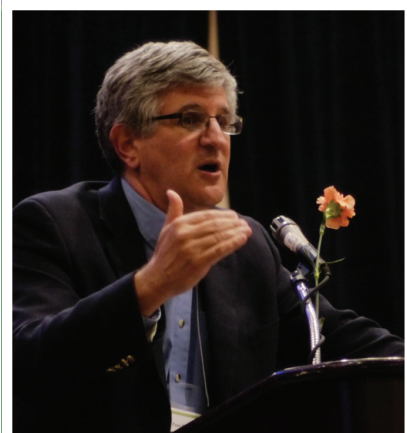
- Indre Viskontas (neuroscientist and TV’s *Miracle Detectives* scientist; see the interview with her in our November/December 2011 issue) on why we love stories and on using narratives to promote science. Why stories? Because we find them compelling. Stories or testimonials usually trump dry statistics because they are more easily remembered than facts. Likewise, stories become personal. Storytelling thus is a powerful tool for any message, including that of science and skepticism. In her role on the show, Viskontas says, “My job is to reframe the [claimed miracle] event in a way compatible with science. Some people might call me a skeptic.”

- Biologist and famed blogger PZ Myers’s passionate paean to the power of narrative storytelling (in stated strong agreement with Viskontas). Myers’s Myth Number One is that we “people of reason” are “soulless robots who don’t know how to communicate.” He rattled off a long list of scientist-atheists who are first-rate scientists and communicators. “This is a golden age of science writing,” he said. His Myth Number Two: “If you are credible or gullible you are so much better at stories.” The Bible, often extolled by even skeptics as at least full of good stories, got no praise from Myers. “Genesis is crap. It’s crazy town. . . . There was no global flood. This story makes no sense.” As for those who give it a pass by saying that Genesis is just a metaphor, he said, “Tell that to the people at Answers in Genesis.” Said Myers, “Our side has the good story,”

and it has both truth and beauty, two values often ignored. He provided a sample story, a fossil find showing a mammoth bone carefully (and lovingly?) placed in the mouth of a fossil dog, “the best present you could give a dog” and a strong clue that “dogs have been our partners for thousands of years.” Another compelling story is that around 50,000 to 70,000 years ago a catastrophe of some sort reduced the entire world’s population to only about 1,200 people, including only about 500 in Africa. “We were close to extinction. . . . *This* is the story that science can tell you. It is underappreciated.” As he said, “Our stories are not only beautiful, they are true.”

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- Investigator Massimo Polidoro’s “A Recipe for Testing Psychics” and his five rules: 1. Exactly define a claim (in writing). 2. Agree on a shared protocol. 3. Have the psychic perform a demonstration (which should be 100 percent successful, since there are no controls). 4. Add the control. 5. See what happens



photos: Brian D. Engler

The X-Files’s William B. Davis presents on skepticism in the media; CSI’s Barry Karr gives welcoming remarks; Margaret Downey and CFI–DC Executive Director Melody Hensley are all smiles at CSICon; Paul Offit talks about the importance of vaccination during a special luncheon address.



photo: Adam Issak



photo: Adam Issak



photo: Brian D. Engler



photo: Brian D. Engler

... “and wait for the excuses.” In his twenty years experience, “only once has a person admitted [they were] wrong.”

- Physician Paul Offit’s stirring advocacy of vaccinations and condemnation of anti-vaccination campaigns, which undermine public health and endanger others. Offit, author of *Deadly Choices: How the Anti-Vaccine Movement Threatens Us All*, said a lot of progress is being made, pointing out how the media came down hard on would-be presidential candidate Michele Bachmann when she made an outlandish claim about the HPV vaccine, which can prevent cervical cancer. At his hospital in Philadelphia, the flu vaccine is mandatory for all employees. He said the measles vaccine will get some public attention when unvaccinated people start dying of that disease.

- The symposium “Sleight of Mind” by neuroscientists Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde and science journalist Sandra Blakeslee (coauthors of a recent book of the same title), plus James Randi on the neuroscience of magic. Macknik and Martinez-Conde have been studying how the world’s great magicians employ ancient principles that can now be explained using the latest discoveries of cognitive neuroscience. Illusions dissociate perception from reality and reflect what the brain is actually doing. The scientists described numerous cognitive illusions, demonstrated the power of manipulated awareness, and showed that different effects are due to different circuits of the brain. Randi, the hero of his fellow skeptics, worked with the authors in their studies and followed their joint talk with his own personal views on the subject. “Magicians have to be aware of how they themselves think,” he said, lamenting that “some magicians don’t know at base how their tricks work.” As for why he and other magicians don’t tell you how

their tricks are done, he gave his stock answer: “I want you to leave here knowing that you can be deceived.” That is an invaluable lesson, he said. He called Macknik and Martinez-Conde pioneers in their field and “heroes” of his.

- The symposium on alternative medical claims featuring physician/skeptic luminaries Steven Novella, Harriet Hall, and Edzard Ernst. Hall punctured the acupuncture myth, including the widespread belief that acupuncture is an ancient practice (“current practices developed in the twentieth century”) and showing that sham acupuncture works just as well. Novella ardently advocated science-based medicine and described a litany of biases that contribute to self-deception among patients and practitioners as well. Physicians themselves are susceptible to such clinical pitfalls as pattern recognition, relying on personal experience, elevating experience over evidence, failing to consider alternatives, becoming confused by nonspecific symptoms, and falling prey to confirmation bias (“I’ve seen it work”). Throw in problems with research such as publication bias, research bias, the decline effect, and the fact that preliminary studies are not as rigorous, and it is no wonder that, as medical researcher John Ionnidis has written, the majority of medical studies are wrong. Ernst has published a thousand papers in peer-reviewed journals, including 300 systematic reviews. “Many of these publications have disappointed enthusiasts of alternative medicine,” he noted. “Some were outraged.” He and his colleagues have examined studies funded by NCCAM, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, and (as did authors of our January/February 2012 cover article on the topic) found many highly questionable. Regarding their studies of chiropractic, he found “questionable whether such re-

David Willey entertains awards banqueters; David Willey takes a sledgehammer to the chest (wielded by his assistant) in the name of skepticism; Vonnie Galligher and CFI Vice President of Outreach Lauren Becker enjoy the Smarti Gras party; Margaret Downey, founder of the Freethought Society, was a smash hit at the Smarti Gras party as the Tree of Life.

search is worthwhile.” Rigorous studies of “energy medicine” were negative, hardly surprising since they were testing “implausible treatments.” When Prince Charles, an advocate of alternative medicine, complained about Ernst to the chancellor of his university, Ernst lost most of his funding and team. Ernst defended himself successfully but at high cost. He said his work has “generated substantial bodies of evidence,” much of it undermining assertions of alternative medicine, and made him “some friends, lots of enemies.”

This is just a brief taste of the sessions that made CSICon New Orleans 2011 such a treat. There were also lively sessions on “The Investigators” (Joe Nickell, Massimo Polidoro, Karen Stollznow, and Ben Radford), “Death from the Skies” (Phil Plait, David Morrison, and Seth Shostak), “Science and Public Policy” (Chris Mooney and Ron Lindsay), “Feeling the Future” (Ray Hyman and James Alcock), “Evolution and Creationism” (Eugenie Scott and Barbara Forrest), “Skepticism and the Media” (Indre Viskontas, Sandra Blakeslee, and William B. Davis), “Superstitions and Hauntings” (Amardeo Sarma, Stuart Vyse, and Joe Nickell), “UFO Claims” (Robert Sheaffer and James McGaha), “Conspiracy Theories” (David Thomas, Robert Blaskiewicz, and Ted Goertzel), “Independent Investigation Groups,” “Grassroots Activism and Outreach,” “Educating the Next Generation,” and a characteristically mind-bending lunch talk about frontiers of modern physics by physicist Lawrence Krauss.

It was exhausting but exhilarating, and we can hope there will be many more CSICons to come.

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## Critical Thinking in the Crescent City

KAREN STOLLZNOW

A Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) conference has been long-awaited since the last event held in 2003. The inaugural CSICon, the conference dedicated to scientific inquiry and critical thinking, was held October 27–30, 2011.

For such an event there simply is no better location than the French Quarter in New Orleans and simply no better time than the Halloween weekend. As I demonstrated in my talk “Making History,” New Orleans is the most “haunted” city in the country (or at least one of the many “most haunted”).

NOLA is famous for its music, cuisine, and Cajun and Creole culture, but it’s also a city teeming with pseudo-science and the paranormal. Jackson Square has art galleries and museums but also resident psychics offering tarot, palm, and astrology readings. The French Quarter is infamous for the reputation of Bourbon Street, Mardi Gras, and Southern Decadence, but it’s also known for its underbelly of voodoo, hoodoo, and Santeria. The city has a remarkable and vibrant history but is often best remembered for its folklore of ghosts, vampires, and Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau. The conference was a haven of rationalism, inquiry, and skepticism amid the myths and legends of the Big Easy.

CSICon featured an exciting array of dynamic speakers. These are people we’ve seen on television, whose writings we’ve read in books and copies of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, and who we’ve listened to on podcasts and radio shows. There were fascinating and informative talks presented by James



photos: Brian D. Engler

CSI Executive Council Member Leonard Tramiel chats with student Troy T. Obrero; Indre Viskontas reminds us immediately dismissing someone’s story can be counterproductive to skepticism; PZ Myers sports a CSICon T-shirt during his talk on Sunday; Ken Frazier welcomes the crowd at CSICon’s introductory remarks.