

Committee for Skeptical Inquiry

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The **Committee for Skeptical Inquiry** (**CSI**), formerly known as the **Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal** (**CSICOP**), is a program within the U.S. non-profit organization Center for Inquiry (CFI), whose stated purpose is to "encourage the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminate factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public."^[1] CSI was founded in 1976 by Paul Kurtz to counter what he regarded as an uncritical acceptance of, and support for, paranormal claims by both the media and society in general. Its philosophical position is one of scientific skepticism. CSI's fellows have included notable scientists, Nobel laureates, philosophers, psychologists, educators and authors.^[2] It is headquartered in Amherst, New York.

Committee for Skeptical Inquiry



Abbreviation	CSI
Formation	1976
Type	Nonprofit organization
Purpose	Skeptical inquiry of paranormal claims
Headquarters	Amherst, New York
Region served	Worldwide
Chair	Ron Lindsay
Website	csicop.org (http://www.csicop.org/)

Contents

- 1 History
 - 1.1 Name
- 2 Position on pseudoscience
- 3 Activities
 - 3.1 Media response
 - 3.2 Following pseudoscientific and paranormal belief trends
 - 3.3 Health and safety
 - 3.4 Humor
- 4 Independent Investigation Group
- 5 Humanism
- 6 Awards to fellows
- 7 Publications
- 8 Standards of evidence
- 9 Umbrella organization
- 10 List of CSI fellows (past and present)
- 11 List of Scientific and Technical Consultants (past and present)
- 12 Controversy and criticism
 - 12.1 Mars effect
 - 12.2 Attempt by Church of Scientology to

discredit

- 12.3 Natasha Demkina
- 12.4 General criticism and reply
- 13 See also
- 14 References
- 15 Further reading
- 16 External links

History

In the early 1970s, there was a significant upsurge of interest in the paranormal in the United States. This generated concern in some quarters, where it was seen as part of a growing tide of irrationalism.^[3] In 1975 secular humanist philosopher and professor Paul Kurtz had previously initiated a statement, "Objections to Astrology," which was co-written with Bart Bok (lead author) and Lawrence E. Jerome, and endorsed by 186 scientists including 19 Nobel laureates and published in the AHA's newsletter *The Humanist*,^[3] of which Kurtz was then editor. In addition, according to Kurtz, the statement was sent to every newspaper in the United States and Canada. The positive reaction to this statement encouraged Kurtz to invite "as many skeptical researchers as [he] could locate" to the 1976 conference with the aim of establishing a new organization dedicated to examining critically a wide range of paranormal claims.^[4] Amongst those invited were Martin Gardner, Ray Hyman, James Randi, and Marcello Truzzi, all members of the Resources for the Scientific Evaluation of the Paranormal (RSEP), a fledgling group with objectives similar to those CSI would subsequently adopt.^[3]

RSEP disbanded and its members, along with others such as Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, B.F. Skinner, and Philip J. Klass joined Kurtz, Randi, Gardner and Hyman to form the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or CSICOP.^[5] Kurtz, Randi, Gardner and Hyman took seats on the executive board.^[6] The organization was officially launched at a specially convened conference of the American Humanist Association (AHA) at the Amherst campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo on April 30 and May 1, 1976.^[4] The organization would be funded with donations and sales of their magazine, *Skeptical Inquirer*.^[6]

Name

Paul Kurtz was inspired by the Belgian Comité Para (founded in 1949), which full name was *Comité Belge pour l'Investigation Scientifique des Phénomènes Réputés Paranormaux* ("Belgian Committee for Scientific Investigation of Purported Paranormal Phenomena").^[7] When the organization was formed in 1976, the original name proposed was "Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and Other Phenomena" which was shortened to "Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the



The Banquet at the 1983 CSICOP Conference in Buffalo, NY

Paranormal." The initial acronym, "CSICP" was difficult to pronounce and so was changed to "CSICOP." According to James Alcock, it was never intended to be "Psi Cop", a nickname that some of the group's detractors adopted.^[8]

On 30 November 2006, the organization further shortened its name to "Committee for Skeptical Inquiry" ("CSI", pronounced C-S-I.)^[9] The reasons for the change were to create a name that is shorter and more "media-friendly", to remove "paranormal" from the name, and to reflect more accurately the actual scope of the organization with its broader focus on critical thinking, science, and rationality in general, and because "it includes the root words of our magazine's title, the *Skeptical Inquirer*".^[10]

Position on pseudoscience

CSI considers pseudoscience topics to include yogic flying, therapeutic touch, astrology, fire walking, voodoo, magical thinking, Uri Geller, alternative medicine, channeling, psychic hotlines and detectives, near-death experiences, unidentified flying objects (UFOs), the Bermuda Triangle, homeopathy, faith healing, and reincarnation. Its position on pseudoscience has been quoted favorably by the National Science Foundation.^[11]

Activities

According to CSI's charter, in order to carry out its major objectives the Committee:

1. maintains a network of people interested in critically examining paranormal, fringe science, and other claims, and in contributing to consumer education;
2. prepares bibliographies of published materials that carefully examine such claims;
3. encourages research by objective and impartial inquiry in areas where it is needed;
4. convenes conferences and meetings;
5. publishes articles that examine claims of the paranormal;
6. does not reject claims on *a priori* grounds, antecedent to inquiry, but examines them objectively and carefully.

CSI conducts and publishes investigations into Bigfoot and UFO sightings, psychics, astrologers, alternative medicine, religious cults, and paranormal or pseudoscientific claims.

CSI has also helped to support local grassroot efforts, such as SkeptiCamp community-organized conferences.^[12]

Media response

Many of CSI's activities are oriented towards the media. As CSI's former executive director Lee Nisbet wrote in the 25th-anniversary issue of the group's journal, *Skeptical Inquirer*:

CSICOP originated in the spring of 1976 to fight mass-media exploitation of supposedly "occult" and "paranormal" phenomena. The strategy was twofold: First, to strengthen the hand of skeptics in the media by providing information that "debunked" paranormal wonders. Second, to serve as a "media-watchdog" group which would direct public and media attention

to egregious media exploitation of the supposed paranormal wonders. An underlying principle of action was to use the mainline media's thirst for public-attracting controversies to keep our activities in the media, hence public eye.^[13]

This involvement with mass media continues to the present day with, for example, CSI founding the Council for Media Integrity in 1996, as well as co-producing a TV documentary series *Critical Eye* hosted by William B. Davis (the actor who played the Smoking Man in *The X-Files*). CSI members can also be seen regularly in the mainstream media offering their perspective on a variety of paranormal claims, and in 1999 Joe Nickell was appointed special consultant on a number of investigative documentaries for the BBC. In its capacity as a media-watchdog, CSI has “mobilized thousands of scientists, academics and responsible communicators” to criticize what it regards as “media's most blatant excesses.” While much of this criticism has focused on factual TV programming or newspaper articles offering support for paranormal claims, CSI has also been critical of programs such as *The X-Files* and *Buffly the Vampire Slayer*, which its members believe portray skeptics and science in a bad light and help to promote belief in the paranormal. CSI's website currently lists the email addresses of over ninety U.S. media organizations and encourages visitors to “directly influence” the media by contacting “the networks, the TV shows and the editors responsible for the way [they portray] the world.”

Following pseudoscientific and paranormal belief trends

CSI changes its focus with the changing popularity and prominence of various aspects of what it considers to be pseudoscientific and paranormal belief. For example, as promoters of intelligent design have increased their efforts to have this teaching included in school curricula in recent years, CSI has stepped up its own attention to the subject, creating an "Intelligent Design Watch" website^[14] and publishing numerous articles on evolution and intelligent design in *Skeptical Inquirer* and on the Internet.

Health and safety

An issue of particular concern to CSI are paranormal or pseudoscientific claims that may endanger people's health or safety, such as the use of alternative medicine in place of science-based healthcare. Investigations by CSI and others, including consumer watchdog groups, law enforcement and government regulatory agencies,^[15] have shown that the sale of alternative medicines, paranormal paraphernalia, or pseudoscience-based products can be enormously profitable. CSI says this profitability has provided various pro-paranormal groups large resources for advertising, lobbying efforts, and other forms of advocacy, to the detriment of public health and safety. Other organizations concerned with health care claims include Quackwatch and the National Council Against Health Fraud.

Humor

As referenced by CSI member Martin Gardner, a maxim regularly put into practice by the organization is H. L. Mencken's "one horse-laugh is worth a thousand syllogisms."^[16] *Skeptical Inquirer* has carried such articles as reports on the success rate of past years' tabloid "psychic predictions" and coverage of the Australian Skeptics' "Bent Spoon Awards" (winners are notified by telepathy and must pick up their trophies by paranormal means).

Independent Investigation Group

Main article: Independent Investigations Group

The Independent Investigations Group (IIG) is a volunteer-based organization founded by James Underdown in January 2000 at the Center for Inquiry-*West* (now Center for Inquiry-*Los Angeles*) in Hollywood, California. The IIG investigates fringe science, paranormal and extraordinary claims from a rational, scientific viewpoint, and disseminates factual information about such inquiries to the public.

IIG offers a \$50,000 prize to anyone who can show, under proper observing conditions, evidence of any paranormal, supernatural, or occult power or event.^[17] The IIG is involved in designing the test protocol, approving the conditions under which a test will take place, and in administering the actual test. All tests are designed with the participation and approval of the applicant. In most cases, the applicant is asked to perform a simple preliminary demonstration of the claimed ability, which if successful is followed by the formal test. Associates of the IIG usually conduct both tests and preliminary demonstrations at their location in Hollywood.

In 2011 the IIG announced an affiliate program, allowing other skeptic groups to form across the world which would have access to the \$50,000 and the ability to test claimants. Affiliates are in Washington DC (IIG DC), Atlanta, GA (IIG Atlanta), Denver, CO (IIG Denver), San Francisco Bay Area (IIG SFBA) and Alberta, Canada (IIG Alberta).

Humanism

CSI is a member organization of the International Humanist and Ethical Union and endorses the Amsterdam Declaration on the principles of modern secular humanism.

Awards to fellows

CSI awards the Robert P. Balles Annual Prize in Critical Thinking. Andrew Skolnick and CSI fellows Ray Hyman and Joe Nickell shared the first award for their 2005 reports on CSICOP's testing of Natasha Demkina, a girl who claimed to have X-ray eyes.^[18]

Publications

Main article: Skeptical Inquirer

CSI publishes the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*, containing articles on skepticism, pseudo-science and the paranormal, as well as reports on experiments conducted to test alleged paranormal phenomena. *Skeptical Inquirer* was founded by Marcello Truzzi, under the name *The Zetetic* and retitled after a few months under the editorship of Kendrick Frazier, former editor of *Science News*. Cecil Adams of The Straight Dope calls *Skeptical Inquirer* "one of the nation's leading antifruitcake journals".^[19] In addition, it publishes *Skeptical Briefs*, a quarterly newsletter published for associate members.^[20]

Standards of evidence

An axiom often repeated among CSI members is the famous quote from Carl Sagan: "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."^[21] (This was based on an earlier quote by Marcello Truzzi "An extraordinary claim requires extraordinary proof",^[22] who traced the idea back through the Principle of Laplace to the philosopher David Hume.)^[23] CSI members argue that none of the paranormal claims have met even the most minimal standards of scientific scrutiny.

Umbrella organization

A transnational non-profit umbrella organization called the Center for Inquiry encompasses both CSI and the Council for Secular Humanism, as well as other organizations such as the Center for Inquiry - On Campus national youth group and the Commission for Scientific Medicine and Mental Health. While these organizations share headquarters and some staff, they each have their own list of fellows and their own distinct mandates. CSI generally addresses questions of religion only in cases in which testable scientific assertions have been made (such as weeping statues or faith healing). The Council for Secular Humanism explicitly fosters humanism and secularism.

List of CSI fellows (past and present)

The inside front cover of each issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer* lists the CSI fellows.^[24] (* denotes the Fellow is a member of the Executive Council)

- George O. Abell
- James Alcock*
- Marcia Angell
- Isaac Asimov
- Kimball Atwood IV
- Robert A. Baker
- Stephen Barrett
- Irving Biederman
- Susan Blackmore
- Bart Bok
- Mark Boslough
- Henri Brach
- Jan Harold Brunvand
- Mario Bunge
- Robert Todd Carroll
- Sean B. Carroll
- Milbourne Christopher
- Frederick Crews
- John R. Cole
- K.C. Cole
- John Cook^[25]
- Francis Crick
- Andrew Fraknoi
- Kendrick Frazier*
- Christopher C. French
- Julia Galef^[25]
- Yves Galifret
- Martin Gardner
- Luigi Garlaschelli
- Maryanne Garry
- Murray Gell-Mann
- Thomas Gilovich
- David Gorski
- Stephen Jay Gould
- Wendy M. Grossman
- Susan Haack
- Harriet Hall*
- C. E. M. Hansel
- David Helfand
- Terence Hines
- Douglas Hofstadter
- Gerald Holton
- Ray Hyman*
- Leon Jaroff
- Stuart D. Jordan
- Scott O. Lilienfeld*
- Lin Zixin
- Elizabeth Loftus
- Daniel Loxton^[25]
- John Maddox
- David Marks
- Paul MacCready
- Mario Mendez-Acosta
- Kenneth R. Miller
- Marvin Minsky
- David Morrison (astrophysicist)
- Richard A. Muller
- Hosur Narasimhaiah
- Joe Nickell
- Jan Willem Nienhuys
- Steven Novella*
- Bill Nye
- James Oberg
- Irmgard Oepen
- Paul Offit^[25]
- Naomi Oreskes^[25]
- Benjamin Radford
- James Randi
- Milton Rosenberg
- Carl Sagan
- Wallace Sampson
- Amardeo Sarma*
- Richard Saunders
- Évry Schatzman
- Joe Schwarcz
- Eugenie Scott*
- Glenn T. Seaborg
- Thomas Sebeok
- Elie A. Shneour
- Seth Shostak
- Simon Singh
- B. F. Skinner
- Robert Sheaffer
- Dick Smith
- Robert Steiner
- Victor J. Stenger
- Karen Stollznow
- Jill Tarter
- Carol Tavris
- Dave Thomas*
- Stephen Toulmin

- Richard Dawkins
- L. Sprague de Camp
- Geoffrey Dean
- Cornelis de Jager
- Daniel Dennett
- Ann Druyan
- Paul Edwards
- Sanal Edamaruku
- Kenneth Feder
- Krista Federspiel^[25]
- Barbara Forrest
- Antony Flew
- Barry Karr
- Sergei Kapitsa
- Philip J. Klass
- Lawrence M. Krauss
- Harry Kroto
- Ed Krupp
- Paul Kurtz
- Larry Kusche
- Leon Lederman
- Stephan Lewandowsky^[25]
- Jere H. Lipps
- Loren Pankratz
- Robert L. Park
- Jay Pasachoff
- John Allen Paulos
- Clifford Pickner
- Massimo Pigliucci
- Steven Pinker
- Phil Plait
- Massimo Polidoro
- James L. Powell^[25]
- Anthony Pratkanis
- Donald Prothero^[25]
- W. V. Quine
- Neil deGrasse Tyson
- Marilyn vos Savant
- Indre Viskontas
- Stuart Vyse^[25]
- Steven Weinberg
- E. O. Wilson
- Richard Wiseman
- Benjamin Wolozin*
- Marvin Zelen

List of Scientific and Technical Consultants (past and present)

The inside front cover of each issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer* lists the CSI consultants.

- Gary Bauslaugh
- Richard E. Berendzen
- Martin Bridgstock
- Richard Busch
- Shawn Carlson
- Roger Culver
- Felix Ares de Blas
- J. Dommanget
- Nahum Duker
- Taner Edis
- Barbara Elsenstadt
- William Evans
- Bryan Farha
- John F. Fischer
- Eileen Gambrill
- Luis Alfonso Gamez
- Sylvio Garattini
- Susan Gerbic^[25]
- Laurie Godfrey
- Gerald Goldin
- Donald Goldsmith
- Alan Hale
- Clyde Herreid
- Sharon A. Hill
- Gabor Hrasko^[25]
- Michael Hutchinson
- Philip A. Ianna
- William Jarvis
- I.W. Kelly
- Richard H. Lange
- William M. London
- Rebecca Long
- John Mashey^[25]
- Thomas R. McDonough
- James E. McGaha
- Joel A. Moskowitz
- Matthew C. Nisbet
- Julia Offe^[25]
- John W. Patterson
- James R. Pomerantz
- Gary P. Posner
- Tim Printy
- Daisie Radner
- Robert H. Romer
- Karl Sabbagh
- Robert J. Samp
- Steven D. Schafersman
- Chris Scott
- Stuart D. Scott Jr.
- Erwin M. Segal
- Carla Selby
- Steven N. Shore
- Waclaw Szybalski
- Sarah G. Thomason
- Tim Trachet
- David Willey

Controversy and criticism

CSI's activities have garnered criticism, in particular from individuals or groups that have been the focus of the organization's attention.^[26] TV celebrity and claimed psychic Uri Geller, for example, was until recently in open dispute with the organization, filing a number of unsuccessful lawsuits against them.^[27] Some criticism has also come from within the scientific community and at times from within CSI itself. Marcello Truzzi, one of CSICOP's co-founders, left the organization after only a short time, arguing that many of those involved “tend to block honest inquiry, in my opinion. Most of them are not agnostic toward claims

of the paranormal; they are out to knock them. [...] When an experiment of the paranormal meets their requirements, then they move the goal posts.”^[28] Truzzi coined the term *pseudoskeptic* to describe critics in whom he detected such an attitude.^[29]

Mars effect

An early controversy concerned the so-called Mars effect: French statistician Michel Gauquelin’s claim that champion athletes are more likely to be born when the planet Mars is in certain positions in the sky. In late 1975, prior to the formal launch of CSICOP, astronomer Dennis Rawlins, along with Paul Kurtz, George Abel and Marvin Zelen (all subsequent members of CSICOP) began investigating the claim. Rawlins, a founding member of CSICOP at its launch in May 1976, resigned in early 1980 claiming that other CSICOP researchers had used incorrect statistics, faulty science, and outright falsification in an attempt to debunk Gauquelin’s claims. In an article for the pro-paranormal magazine *Fate*, he wrote: "I am still skeptical of the occult beliefs CSICOP was created to debunk. But I have changed my mind about the integrity of some of those who make a career of opposing occultism."^[30] CSICOP's Philip J. Klass responded by circulating an article to CSICOP members critical of Rawlins' arguments and motives;^[31] Klass's unpublished response, refused publication by *Fate*, itself became the target for further criticism.



Uri Geller filed a number of unsuccessful lawsuits against CSICOP

Attempt by Church of Scientology to discredit

In 1977, an FBI raid on the offices of the Church of Scientology uncovered a project to discredit CSICOP (as it was then called) so that it and its publications would cease criticism of Dianetics and Scientology. This included forging a CIA memo and sending it to media sources, including *The New York Times*, to spread rumors that CSICOP was actually a front group for the CIA. A letter from CSICOP founder Paul Kurtz was forged to discredit him in the eyes of parapsychology researchers.^[32]

Natasha Demkina

In 2004, CSICOP was accused of scientific misconduct over its involvement in the Discovery Channel's test of the "girl with X-ray eyes," Natasha Demkina. In a self-published commentary, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Brian Josephson criticized the test and evaluation methods and argued that the results should have been deemed "inconclusive" rather than judged in the negative. Josephson, the director of the University of Cambridge's Mind–Matter Unification Project, questioned the researchers' motives saying, "On the face of it, it looks as if there was some kind of plot to discredit the teenage claimed psychic by setting up the conditions to make it likely that they could pass her off as a failure."^[33] Ray Hyman, one of the three researchers who designed and conducted the test, published a response to this and other criticisms,^[34] ^[35] and CSI's Commission for Scientific Medicine and Mental Health^[36] also published a detailed response to these and other objections, saying that the choice of critical level was appropriate because her claims were unlikely to be true: "I decided against setting the critical level at seven because this would require Natasha to be 100% accurate in our test. We wanted to give her some leeway. More important, setting the critical

value at seven would make it difficult to detect a true effect. On the other hand, I did not want to set the critical value at four because this would be treating the hypothesis that she could see into people's bodies as if it were highly plausible. The compromise was to set the value at five."^[35]^[37]

General criticism and reply

On a more general level, proponents of parapsychology have accused CSI of pseudoskepticism and an overly dogmatic and arrogant approach based on *a priori* convictions. A 1992 article in *The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, an organ for the Parapsychological Association, suggests that CSI's aggressive style of skepticism could discourage scientific research into the paranormal.^[38] Astronomer Carl Sagan wrote on this in 1995:

Have I ever heard a skeptic wax superior and contemptuous? Certainly. I've even sometimes heard, to my retrospective dismay, that unpleasant tone in my own voice. There are human imperfections on both sides of this issue. Even when it's applied sensitively, scientific skepticism may come across as arrogant, dogmatic, heartless, and dismissive of the feelings and deeply held beliefs of others ... CSICOP *is* imperfect. In certain cases [criticism of CSICOP] is to some degree justified. But from my point of view CSICOP serves an important social function – as a well-known organization to which media can apply when they wish to hear the other side of the story, especially when some amazing claim of pseudoscience is judged newsworthy ... CSICOP represents a counterbalance, although not yet nearly a loud enough voice, to the pseudoscience gullibility that seems second nature to so much of the media.^[39]

See also

- Australian Skeptics
- New Zealand Skeptics
- Indian CSICOP
- Irish Skeptics Society
- James Randi Educational Foundation
- SkeptiCamp
- The Skeptics Society
- Föreningen Vetenskap och Folkbildning
- Watchdog journalism
- Investigative journalism
- IIG

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Further reading

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- Randi, James (1995). *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural*. Prometheus Books. ISBN 0-312-13066-X.

External links

- Official website (<http://www.csicop.org/>)
- Official websites for Skeptical Inquirer (<http://www.csicop.org/si>)
- "About CSICOP Conference". Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. Retrieved March 22, 2013.
- "CSICOP and the Skeptics: An Overview" (<http://www.tricksterbook.com/ArticlesOnline/CSICOPoverview.htm>) - An essay on the organization by the American Society for Psychical Research, a pro-paranormal organization.
- Point Of Inquiry (<http://www.pointofinquiry.org/>) - Radio show and podcast for CSICOP's Center for Inquiry.
- True Disbelievers (<http://www.discord.org/~lippard/kammann.html>) - Former CSICOP member Richard Kammann's account of the Mars effect controversy.
- The New Skepticism (http://www.cicap.org/en_artic/at101002.htm)
- The Creation of CSICOP (http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2843/is_4_25/ai_76881171)
- Name change to Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (<http://www.csicop.org/specialarticles/csicop.html>)
- James Randi comments on Mars Effect controversy (<http://www.randi.org/jr/041103.html>)

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Categories: Non-profit organizations based in New York | Skeptic organisations
 | Organizations established in 1976 | Scientology-related controversies | Inquiry
 | 1976 establishments in the United States

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