

PARAPSYCHOLOGY'S BATTLE FOR THE INTERNET: A CRITICAL INSIGHT INTO THE WIKI PROBLEM

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Parapsychology is the study of experiences and abilities – which, if they are as they seem to be – are currently unrecognised by orthodox science (Irwin & Watt, 2007). Key areas include psychic (psi) experiences such as ESP (telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition), psychokinesis, and phenomena suggestive of postmortem survival (Parapsychological Association, 2021; Society for Psychical Research, 2021). It is a highly sophisticated statistical science carried out by trained professionals, including psychologists and physicists, who are committed to scientific rigour. But it remains controversial, as its phenomena potentially challenge the materialist paradigm (Sheldrake, 2013; Vernon 2021).

Wikipedia is a particular problem for parapsychology. As the most widely used internet encyclopaedia (Medelyen et al., 2009) it often ranks top in Google searches. This means its pages on parapsychology topics are more visible than any other source. Since 2010, articles that were originally created by experts in the subject have been rewritten by anonymous individuals who are hostile to parapsychology (Skeptical-About-Skeptics, 2021).

Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia is a group founded by Susan Gerbic with a self-described mission to promote 'scientific skepticism'. In 2019, she reported that it had 144 editors who had worked on nearly 900 Wikipedia pages (Hitt, 2019). These and other unaffiliated editors patrol the pages, including entries on parapsychology topics, to ensure they reflect a sceptic (arguably cynical) viewpoint (Weiler, 2020).

Professional Sceptics provide almost all the citations in Wikipedia articles (compared with few by parapsychologists). Some of the most prominent are Martin Gardner, Ray Hyman, James Alcock, Michael Shermer, Richard Wiseman and Susan Blackmore. Many are or were affiliated with the *Committee for Skeptical Inquiry*, an advocacy group that campaigns against parapsychology and other 'fringe' beliefs.

Bias is Rampant in these Wikipedia entries. Exaggerated emphasis is given to unproven allegations of fraud and specious claims of methodological failings. The 'Parapsychology' page begins with the claim that it's 'considered to be a pseudoscience' (often on the basis of a single opinion) and rejected by 'a vast majority of mainstream scientists', despite its methodological rigour and published expressions of interest by scores of well-known scientists, including Nobel prize-winners (Cardeña, 2015). And, without reference to surveyed views on the matter (McClenon, 1982; Padgett, Benassi & Singer, 1980). The first reference is to a recent paper that dismisses the entirety of the field's experimental findings on the grounds that 'the data are irrelevant' since psi phenomena 'cannot be true' (Reber & Alcock, 2019).

Resistance is Impossible! Parapsychologists are given no opportunity on Wikipedia to present facts or counter-arguments. Any attempt by a sympathetic editor to create balance will be reverted, most likely within 24 hours. Persistence can often be denounced as 'trolling' and can lead to a ban. Administrators, who are supposedly impartial referees in disputes, in practice often side with these editors, who as bystanders to parapsychology share mutual feelings towards it that are reflected in their cyber-behaviour (Weiler, 2020).

Why does this Matter?

Wikipedia's global reach ensures that individuals seeking information about parapsychology are being poorly informed. It not only provides them with partial, inaccurate and biased information, it arguably discourages them from seeking out alternative sources. It also impacts on new generations of learners who often trust in such sources without awareness of reasons to be sceptical of online sources.

What Can Be Done? People who are sympathetic to parapsychology as a scientific endeavour can help to promote a more accurate understanding of its findings:

- Teachers, students and others are encouraged to refer to the *Psi Encyclopedia*, an online resource that contains detailed, balanced and up-to-date information on a wide range of parapsychology topics.
- For their part, parapsychologists will continue to present evidence of parapsychology as a discipline of empirical rigour (e.g. Cardeña, 2018; Roe, 2018; Vernon, 2021).
- In online forums and elsewhere, supporters can push back at outspoken critics, pressing them to show that they have familiarised themselves with recent studies in the field.
- Wherever possible, they should challenge the anonymity of Wikipedia editors and urge them to permit the creation of more balanced views (Weiler, 2020).

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