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The Things that You're Liable to See on the Box that Ain't Necessarily So

The plain facts about Australian Skeptics' testing of Dennis Puffet on A Current Affair

TV viewers who saw a story on A Current Affair (ACA) on Tuesday, June 17 might have been left with the impression that Australian Skeptics (AS) had "backed-down" from testing a "healer", one Dennis Puffet. That impression, fostered by ACA both in its advertising and on air, is wrong. At no stage has Australian Skeptics ever had an agreement with Dennis Puffet, nor with anyone else, to conduct a formal test of his alleged paranormal abilities. Any charge of our backing down is blatantly untrue and neither Mr Puffet nor A Current Affair has any reason to suppose otherwise.

Trying to be scrupulously fair to ACA, they might have initially convinced themselves (mistakenly) that they had the rights to run a test for the Skeptics \$100,000 challenge under their own rules (but using AS money) while ignoring any sort of controlled conditions. However, long before this segment went to air, ACA was left with no legitimate excuse for continuing to so believe.

Since the first story was shown, and before the offending segment, AS engaged in voluminous correspondence (telephone and email) with ACA in which we explained the rules, in great detail, under which such a test could take place. The first such rule is that a claimant must make a written submission to AS, clearly defining in detail precisely what it is that s/he believes s/he can do. We must know this before we can even begin to decide whether the claims are testable and, if so, how they can be tested. It hardly needs stating that waving one's hands around on TV and apocryphal testimonials do not constitute such a claim.

At no time have we received any such claim from Mr Puffet, however we did relax the rule sufficiently to allow ACA to present some claims on his behalf. This came to us just two days before the interview with Richard Saunders and Barry Williams which were shown in the June 17 story. What the ACA story did not say was that when the written claims from Mr Puffet were received, one of Puffet's stipulations was that he would regard anything he wanted to as a success, whether or not the subject of the healing knew it! He would also recognise nothing as a failure. The "Pure Healing Energy and Cosmic Harmonic Resonance" (his terms) were only using him as a conduit and he was not responsible for anything (though he did have them on tap just by thinking of them). There were other equally vague and barely coherent claims and quite obviously there was no way we could design any sort of objective test of them.

We informed ACA of this, but they constantly strove to push us into putting up the money to test Puffet and to break our own rules. It soon became clear that they were working to a story deadline and were not at all interested in whether or not the test would be valid. When we didn't agree to that, they charged ahead with the story regardless. Several emails were sent to them spelling out that at no stage would we be backing out, rather that we intended to follow the correct procedure, just as we would for anyone else. We even offered to provide ACA with advice on how to conduct their own test for their own money if the deadline was of such importance (and to save them from throwing away their money in a flawed test) but these offers were ignored. Furthermore, they informed us that they had come to an agreement with Bond University to conduct a test on Puffet, while still seeming to believe that we should offer our prize for a test in which we had no input whatsoever. Naturally we declined this kind offer.

At this point the issue entered the realm of pure farce. ACA told us that as Puffet would not agree to being tested by a scientist (who would be biased), they had approached Bond's English Literature department. Seldom have our ghosts been more flabbered.

It appears that not only is the claimant allowed to nominate his own (very open ended) criteria for success or failure, he is also allowed to dictate who can supervise the testing and the right to veto anyone who might be expected to be capable of designing a scientific test. Not for our money he isn't.

During the on-camera interviews, during which Richard was recorded for 15-20 minutes and Barry for around 5, we constantly reiterated that we had NOT agreed to test Puffet under these conditions, but we were still perfectly willing to test him IF he ever made a testable claim that could be objectively validated. None of this went to air. In fact, of all the things Richard said on-camera, the only thing he was shown saying was that we did not want to be seen to be hounding a deluded individual. While this made perfect sense within the context of what else Richard had been saying, it made none at all when it was shown as a naked statement and was totally irrelevant to everything else in the piece as shown.

At times when we were not being taped, the interviewer agreed with our stand but intimated that it would not make a good story. The only story that interested her, and the one to which she directed every question, was that "the Skeptics are backing down". Clearly this approach had been decided long before the interviews and no inconvenient facts were going to be allowed to interfere with the story.

To say we are more than a little disappointed at this treatment, by A Current Affair would be a mild understatement. By supplying them with good stories and expert speakers on skeptical topics, we have maintained a friendly relationship with ACA over those years when they could be regarded as a serious investigative current affairs programme. But now we have learnt a valuable lesson about dealing with them in this new era of tabloid media. On the positive side, we are heartened by the amount of messages of support we have received from thoughtful viewers who expressed their disgust at what they saw as a blatant set-up.

Briefly the rules for a Skeptics Challenge are as follows:

1. A challenger must make a specific and testable claim directly to AS.
2. The challenge testing must always remain under the control of AS (it's our challenge, our money, our rules).
3. Before a test goes ahead, the protocol for any challenge test must be mutually agreed to as a fair test by both the Skeptics and the challenger. All that is required of claimants is that they can demonstrate their claimed abilities under these conditions. For this they can earn \$100,000 at minimal cost to themselves.

The Skeptics Challenge is NOT a game of chance, a bet that someone can put one over the Skeptics, nor one that can be decided on purely subjective criteria. The Challenge is a serious attempt to investigate whether or not popular paranormal beliefs have any substance. It something that requires testing, objectively, by rigorously using the tools of science, not because it makes an entertaining story.

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