



Time to Upgrade the Skeptical Operating System. Reboot.

SHARON HILL

Around 1992, I discovered a new sphere to explore—skeptical literature. Thus began my critical pursuit of topics I'd long been interested in: the paranormal, natural anomalies, and extraordinary claims. Application of the scientific skepticism approach reshaped and colored my personal identity and influenced my daily life. Skepticism became my operating system, an outlook and lens through which to view the world. It transformed who I am. I credit many sources for this change—my education in natural sciences, Stephen Jay Gould's verbose but elegant essays on evolution and the flaws of creationism, *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, and the Internet where I became "I Doubt It" to a worldwide network.

Ah, the Internet. It is both the source and the scourge of reliable knowledge; friend and foe of practical, everyday skepticism. It changed *everything*—for better and worse.

The skeptic community in the late 1990s consisted of brilliant, personable men, and only a few women, of academia and public celebrity. There was no shortage of gray hair, beards, neckties, and magic tricks at the first conference I attended in Burbank (CSICOP's Fourth

World Skeptics Conference in 2002). A few years later, in response to surging popularity of conservative Christian ideals that included the devaluing of science and reason in society, the skeptical community blossomed with an influx of science-appreciating people of younger years . . . and more interesting hair colors. We had an energized tribe.

We made best friends and then worst enemies. As with all communities, as novelty wore off we struggled for space, attention, and ways to advance our own personal priorities. Influenced by my immersive study of the relationship between science and the public, I promoted a critical thinking process to apply to everyday life, news stories, and strange ideas in society that sound promising and exciting. This resulted in projects such as my *Doubtful* blog (SharonAHill.com), the “Sounds Sciencey” column for CSI online (http://www.csicop.org/specialarticles/archive/category/sounds_sciencey), participation in the Virtual Skeptics web show, and the longest running, most popular skeptical-themed news site DoubtfulNews.com.

In cooperation with several other leaders in skeptical thinking, I developed the *Media Guide to Skepticism* (<http://doubtfulnews.com/media-guide-to-skepticism/>) in 2013 as outreach to the general public and journalists. It was designed to show what this “skeptical” thing was all about—that skeptics respect evidence, reason, and science, and we are aware of how we can be fooled or enticed by supernatural explanations. The word *skeptic* was associated with climate deniers, so it was necessary to point out the difference between those positions and emphasize that “skeptic” does not equate to “cynic” or “atheist” but

is a process and approach to get the best answer.

To speak out with passion means you certainly will be criticized by those with opposing views. Active participation in the discourse means experiencing petty and frustrating attacks, as well as satisfying enlightenment and greater understanding. This is a position where one is challenged every day by others and by one’s own self-doubt. It’s not sitting in front of the TV and being spoon-fed information; it is about seizing the claim and ex-

the twenty-first century so far, we’ve seen a terrifying international resurgence in deadly belief in witches, exorcism, and cultural superstitions that target children, women, and those with genetic differences. The world is destabilized by social, political, and environmental conspiracies that undermine valid legal and policy decisions. The lonely and grieving are taken advantage of by psychic scammers and fear mongers on TV, online, and even in the streets of their hometowns. Daily attacks are fired against

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amining the substance. It’s about facing assessments and decisions with a sharp instrument to excise the rotten parts and fluff that can clog up the works and see what’s really hidden underneath. Both inside and outside the skeptical community, I was on the receiving end of appreciation and a great many kindnesses, but I also became a target for rude and selfish actions by those who didn’t like that I challenged their deeply held beliefs and positions of social authority.

There is no neat and tidy guide for all that needs to be done, but that can’t mean we do nothing and resign our society to the barrage of nonsense. There has always been, and will forever be, a wide array of subject areas that deserve a solid skeptical platform. In the sixteen years of

scientific knowledge and science education. And it’s impossible to keep up with the endless parade of dangerous health claims, products, and “alternative” treatments pushed on the unsuspecting. Someone has to speak up and beat back the nonsense brigade, if only to hold the line.

Progress in any endeavor requires planning; investment of time, money, and effort; thoughtful objectives; and a cooperative attitude between colleagues of like mind. Unfortunately, these actions have not been successfully implemented in the last five years to advance critical thinking in popular culture. Foundation pillars of skeptical advocacy—organizations, networked groups, and individuals—have fractured and fallen away, resulting in a diminished

public presence. These foundations must be rebuilt through discussion, consensus building, planning, incorporation of technology, and new forms of outreach.

A strong skeptical presence, especially in the media, is not only acutely needed but noticeably desired. There is a guaranteed, albeit modest, portion of the audience that pauses to question the extraordinary claim. The skeptical view is expected to be expressed—it is sought out by journalists. We have to be ready to speak up! How can we craft that reasonable view and make it useful, palatable, and available to

a broad audience?

Reasonable skepticism must become part of the fabric of information consumption. This must be a primary goal. It is past time to seek new leaders with new ideas and experienced professionals to ditch the old ways of doing things, expand beyond the traditional academic settings, and actively work toward shattering the cynical curmudgeonly old guy stereotype.

It can be done, but it requires a reboot.

To succeed, internally and in the public view, means showing respect for humanity. We can't fight among ourselves if

we wish to move ahead as the much-needed voice of reason that people want to hear. Understanding, compassion, and focus are required to change the minds of those who have dangerous beliefs. I don't know how to go about gaining those qualities for a community, but I'm game to try. ■

Sharon Hill is a geologist in Pennsylvania, creator of DoubtfulNews.com, author of the "Sounds Sciencey" column on csicop.org, and codeveloper of the *Media Guide to Skepticism*. She is a CSI Scientific and Technical Consultant.