
News and Comment

Clues In "remote viewing"

Two New Zealand psychologists have examined transcripts from the much-heralded remote-viewing experiments conducted at the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International) and concluded that multiple clues contained in them can account for the successes reported.

The original experiments, by Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, have been described in their book *Mind-Reach* (Delacorte, 1977) and in reports by them in the *Proceedings of the IEEE* (64:329, 1976) and in *Nature* (252:602, 1974). From the results, they concluded that extrasensory remote-viewing ability had been demonstrated and may be widespread in the general population.

David Marks and Richard Kammann of the Department of Psychology at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, now report in *Nature* (274:680, August 17, 1978) that their examination of the original unedited transcripts and their own duplicate experiments have failed to confirm that conclusion. In fact, they say their work indicates that the originally reported results may be entirely due to extraneous clues contained in the transcripts used by judges to evaluate the accuracy of the remote viewings.

In the SRI experiments, a subject would remain with an experimenter at the SRI laboratory and at a prear-

ranged time attempt to describe an undisclosed, remote site being visited at that moment by a team of two to four co-experimenters. Nine such sites were used. Independent judges were then given the subject's descriptions and a list of the nine sites. The judges visited each target location in turn, then chose, from the set of nine, the best description at each location. Then they ranked the accuracy of the descriptions.

In a visit to SRI, psychologist Marks attempted to duplicate the ranking procedure used by the judges. Although it was not so stated in the original reports, he found that the judges had been provided with a list of targets in the correct original sequence and that, in addition, "a large number of cues were available indicating the position of a transcript in the series." In one, for instance, Targ mentions the nature reserve visited the day before and says, "Nothing like having three successes behind you." Other typical references were to the "second place of the day" and "yesterday's two targets."

Using these and other cues, Marks was able to exactly match the five transcripts he examined to the five correct targets. "In this procedure it should be noted that I had never visited any of the five locations but completed the task solely on the basis of cues contained in the transcripts."

A further experiment attempted to

determine whether target sites could be correctly identified from the transcripts without using the extraneous cues. The cues were removed from the transcripts, and two judges, both research psychologists, visited five targets in a random sequence and independently ranked the five transcripts at each location. Each judge made a detailed content analysis of the descriptive information in the transcripts and ranked them on the basis of the descriptive accuracy of the information available. The results did not differ significantly from chance.

“These results,” say Marks and Kammann, “provide a striking contrast to the correct matchings obtained when the cues from the unedited transcripts were used in making the judgments. The null result also contrasts with the significant matching obtained with unedited transcripts by the original SRI judges.”

It would be difficult, they suggest, for the judges to ignore the clues contained in the transcripts. They suggest that the judges, who considered themselves to be operating “blind,” used the extraneous cues to form hypotheses that were then subjectively validated by the transcript as a whole. Marks and Kammann report that in their work with remote viewing they have often observed “the occurrence of strong subjective validations, a selective awareness of similarities between the subject’s description and the target location, once the correct match was revealed, even though the same transcripts produced random matches when judged blind.” They also point out that in published reports the illusion of a good match can be magnified by use of post hoc photographs of the location and by selecting particular ex-

cerpts from the transcripts.

“Our investigation of the SRI remote-viewing experiments,” conclude Marks and Kammann, “forces the conclusion that the successful identification of target sites by judges is impossible unless multiple extraneous cues, which were available in the original unedited transcripts, are used.” They caution future investigators to ensure that such cues are not available and that judges not be given the location of targets in the same sequence that occurred in the experiments.

“Until remote viewing can be confirmed in conditions that prevent sensory cuing, the conclusions of Targ and Puthoff remain an unsubstantiated hypothesis. Our own experiments on remote viewing under cue-free conditions have consistently failed to replicate the effect.”

Puthoff has lately been insisting that the sort of cues Kammann and Marks discuss in their paper were edited out of the transcripts before giving them to the judges. This, however, is directly contrary to what he and Targ have previously published and what they previously told Marks.

—Kendrick Frazier

A science reporter protests

When George Alexander, veteran *Los Angeles Times* science writer and current president of the National Association of Science Writers, came across a wire-service story on the extra-planet theories of Zecharia Sitchin that he considered naive and credulous, he didn’t just sit back and stew about it. He fired off a critical letter to the president of United Press International, then submitted the exchange for publication in the *NASW Newsletter* (Sept.

1978), which in its new format is striving to become a review of science journalism.

The dispatch, by Marcia Stepanek, a general reporter, not a science writer, moved on the UPI wires on July 28, 1978, from a world conference of the Ancient Astronauts Society, in Chicago. It reported statements made by Sitchin, a New York businessman and author of *The 12th Planet* (see James Oberg's review in our Spring/Summer 1978 issue), to the effect that mankind may have come from a giant planet, *Marduk*, "which orbits the sun far beyond the last known planet." It quoted Sitchin as saying: "There is mounting astronomical evidence that there exists one more planet within our solar system. It is a planet many times the size of Earth and the discovery of this planet will confirm ancient beliefs in its existence." The story passed along his claim that inhabitants of *Marduk* may have "genetically created mankind." It even had Sitchin twisting the U.S. Naval Observatory's discovery earlier that month of a probable moon around Pluto into evidence for the planet, saying that "Naval Observatory astronomers are beginning to share his view."

Alexander wrote: "In its naiveté and imbalance, this story is precisely the sort of journalism which makes professional scientists grimace in disgust, and science writers, in despair. Ms. Stepanek, having obviously accepted Zecharia Sitchin's bizarre—to say the least—theory as credible and consistent with reality, can only encourage similar erroneous beliefs among the impressionable readers in our society. . . . Nowhere . . . is there a quote or a statement from a responsible scientist which would throw a pail

of cold logic on Mr. Sitchin's highly speculative ideas, or at a bare minimum suggest that the silly claims of this individual be taken with a large shaker of salt.

"I don't quarrel with UPI's decision to cover the Ancient Astronauts Society's meeting. But I do quarrel with Ms. Stepanek's uncritical handling of such a patently preposterous claim and her apparent ignorance of the old '10th planet' theory so long favored by the nuttier fringes of the UFO crowd. . . . This kind of story does no one any good. . . ."

UPI Vice-President H. L. Stevenson responded that the story did contain several references warning the reader to take Sitchin's theory "with a grain of salt" but said Alexander's point was well taken. "United Press International shares your zeal for accuracy and balance in all science copy. . . ."

Alexander says he considers the story poor and the UPI defense "mealy-mouthed." At any rate, a major news organization has been put on guard that stories on fringe science and pseudoscience need to be handled with more sophistication and that a credulously written story by a general reporter is not going to be merely ignored by the science-writing community.

—K.F.

The Gallup UFO polls

Usually it is difficult to check the accuracy of public-opinion surveys because of the "transient" nature of the subject-matter. For example, a poll of a president's popularity today when compared with the figures for six months earlier can only be used to note

an apparent change, not to check the accuracy of the survey.

But three different surveys of American adults on the subject of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion, headed by Dr. George Gallup, in 1966, 1973, and 1978, do provide a benchmark for comparison. The results of an analysis of these three surveys suggest that one ought to be cautious in accepting poll results as fact.

In the 1966 poll, 5 percent of the adults surveyed, when asked "Have you yourself ever seen anything you thought was a flying saucer?" responded that they had. Based on the U.S. adult population at the time, this indicated that approximately 5 million American adults had at some time seen a UFO.

The 1973 poll, taken at a time when the nation was in the midst of a major "UFO flap," indicated that 11 percent of the nation's adults had themselves seen a UFO. Based on the U.S. adult population at the time, this corresponded to 15 million persons who claimed to have seen a UFO—or an increase of 10 million!

If these figures are even grossly representative, they reveal that during the 7-year interval between the two polls there were twice as many UFO sightings in this country as had occurred during the 19 years between the first report of a UFO, in mid-1947, and the first Gallup UFO poll.

Assuming that there were an average of two observers per UFO sighting, this works out to an average of *nearly 2,000 UFO sightings in the United States for each and every day between 1966 and 1973.*

Yet according to J. Allen Hynek,

director of the Center for UFO Studies, "there are about 100 sightings worldwide in any given [24-hour] period." If these are prorated on the basis of population, this would imply an average of only 5 UFO sightings per day in the United States, compared to the nearly 2,000 a day implied by the 1966 and 1973 Gallup polls.

It is interesting to compare the Gallup figure with the results of a survey of 2,611 members of the American Astronomical Society (AAS) conducted by Dr. Peter A. Sturrock of Stanford University in 1976. (See *The Zetetic*, Fall/Winter 1977.)

Because many astronomers spend much more of their time in sky-gazing than does the general layman, one might expect that a much higher percentage of AAS members would report having seen a UFO. Yet the Sturrock survey showed that barely 2 percent of the astronomers had ever seen what might be termed a UFO, compared to 11 percent for the public at large, according to the Gallup poll.

On June 15, 1978, Gallup released the results of another UFO survey, which indicated that only 9 percent of those polled had ever seen a UFO, corresponding to 13 million U.S. adults. This seems to indicate that UFOs had been seen by 2 million fewer Americans in 1978 than in 1973.

If the Gallup polls on UFOs seem to be flawed in this respect, they certainly are flawed in another. In each of the surveys, persons were asked: "In your opinion, are UFOs something real or just people's imagination?"

Experienced UFO investigators, whether they be "skeptics" or "believers," know that most UFO reports involve something that is very "real." The trigger mechanism may be Venus

or another bright celestial body, a weather balloon, a meteor-fireball, or a hot-air balloon built by ingenious teenagers, to cite but a few of many possibilities.

For persons surveyed to have opted for "just people's imagination" would indicate that they believed that *all* persons, including President Jimmy Carter, who have reported seeing something they could not identify were either hallucinating or outright hoaxers, which clearly is not true.

Thus the American Institute of Public Opinion's survey question was very badly phrased if its intent was to determine what segment of the American public believes UFOs are extraterrestrial visitors or other even more exotic phenomena. Yet the results of the survey are often cited as "proof" that the majority of U.S. adults "believe in UFOs."

On June 3, 1978, as chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal's UFO Subcommittee, I wrote to Dr. Gallup pointing out the ambiguity of the wording of this question and suggested that it be rephrased in any future UFO surveys. As of this date, no reply has been received from Gallup or from the American Institute of Public Opinion. But I await the results of the next Gallup poll on UFOs.

—Philip J. Klass

The lessons of an "IFO"

Some investigators of UFO reports have argued that once a particular UFO is identified—thus becoming an Identified Flying Object (IFO)—it is of no further interest or value. But that is not true, for a comparison of the later discovered actual facts with the earlier

reported eyewitness observations is frequently both fascinating and instructive.

Just such a case occurred earlier this year in the western Chicago suburb of Aurora. On the night of April 29, 1978, ten different persons called the Aurora police department to report a UFO overhead. The reported observations all were between 10:30 PM and midnight.

Allen Hendry, editor of *International UFO Reporter*, investigated the incident, interviewing the eyewitnesses. In his publication's June issue he presented an interesting and valuable report on the case, which, he points out, was "rich in the elements that are traditionally supposed to underwrite the value of a genuine sighting."

One couple claimed to have had a "close encounter" with the object, which they said appeared to be a saucer. The couple—he calls them Mr. and Mrs. S.—stopped their car to watch the saucer. Other people around them were also pointing to it. The couple drove home to get their neighbors, the saucer following them. Both Mr. and Mrs. S. agreed that the saucer flew over their car at treetop level. It even had to angle upward to avoid hitting the trees. The sketches they prepared showed a round object they said was intended to represent a saucer body with a dome on top and lights surrounding it. All the witnesses said the lights rotated around the object. Size estimates varied from 25 feet to the size of a football field, which led to the speculation that some people were seeing the "mother ship," and the others, smaller versions.

The object hovered motionlessly, something, said Mrs. S., that "no airplane can do." After some time, the

object suddenly shot off eastward "in the blink of an eye," all in silence. The S.'s neighbors noted that their TV set blanked out at about this time.

Hendry found the witnesses still in a turbulent emotional state when he talked to them. Mr. and Mrs. S. said they couldn't sleep that night. Mrs. S. said she believes in UFOs now and didn't want to see another one. Their neighbor told Hendry he still "gets chills" thinking about it. An 11-year-old child in another family hid behind the carseat at the time.

The case had some familiar elements in it for Hendry, however. The description of rotating lights was one clue. He had received many such calls reporting exactly the same thing over the past two years.

Hendry called an advertising company in Chicago that operates light planes that have a frame carrying a series of 315 light bulbs that go on and off in sequence to write out advertising messages. Three hundred calls of UFO reports to Hendry's office have later been confirmed to be due to flights of these planes at night; and in 90 percent of them, says Hendry, the witnesses described not what was perceptually available to them but rather a disc-shaped form that is itself rotating with fixed lights. Many of them say they see a dome on top. Some insist they can *make out the dome clearly*.

In this particular case, yes, indeed, the advertising company did have an illuminated plane circling the town at the time of the UFO reports. The reports were clearly due to these aircraft. As for the family's TV that went off during the incident, Hendry found that the TV station had had technical difficulties at their end and had later broadcast an apology.

The point is not that another UFO case has been solved, but that the solution illustrates so vividly the difficulties with much eyewitness testimony on the subject, even from well-meaning persons—which goes to the heart of the entire UFO problem.

This case, notes Hendry, is a prime example of "the pervasive emotional climate that appears to be surrounding the entire UFO subject, one that succeeds in distorting even the most commonplace sightings into exaggerated 'miracles.'"

Some of the reported descriptions that night are understandable. When such an illuminated aircraft is seen from an angle, an observer on the ground sees not the message but only a row of lights flashing from one side to the other. The absence of sound is due to the very slow speeds at which the pilots fly, and that also accounts for reports of "hovering." But the other discrepancies between fact and perception are so wide that they carry a lesson for everyone who tries to form conclusions about dramatic reports of UFOs in the night sky.

As Hendry concludes: "None of this rationale begins to 'explain' the distorted observations regarding 'domed discs,' 'treetop height,' gigantic-size estimates, claims of being deliberately followed in cars, false assumptions that the plane's sign turning off was equal to the UFO rushing away faster than the eye could follow, the causality attempted between the UFO and the TV interference, and, most of all, the wholly unwarranted emotional reactions exhibited by the eyewitnesses and the immediate, nearly universal conclusion that the advertising plane was from outer space. The key issue here is *not* that the sighting

was 'only an ad plane,' because such a 'solution' cannot in itself account for the independent witnesses' behavior and inaccuracies. I do not see this IFO as the 'garbage' to be weeded out while the 'real' UFOs are retained as 'data,' when there is a wealth of evidence present here about UFOlogy's old bugaboo: the reliability of human testimony."

—K.F.

Soviet research in "Triangle"

Several Soviet oceanographic research vessels have recently been combing the waters of what some writers call the Bermuda Triangle, and cosmonauts on board Salyut 6 have been photographing the region extensively. Lest anyone suspect something mysterious (outside of the possibility of Soviet military-intelligence interests in submarine operations in these waters), *Pravda* mentioned the purposes of these activities last August. One should be reminded that just because something appears in *Pravda* it is not necessarily propaganda, a fabrication, or similar drivel (their weather reports are usually pretty good).

"The crew carries on photography of the planet," begins the relevant paragraph (translated by J. Oberg), discussing the value of space-based photoreconnaissance of earth resources and earth sciences, such as oceanography and meteorology. "For example, photography of the Bermuda Triangle. No, it is not those mythical 'mysterious' events—disappearances of ships and planes, or 'flying saucers,' of which so much has been written by the fantasizers but which have never been seen by our cosmonauts or by the Americans—that interest scientists in

this region. It's just that here processes form that influence the climate of the whole planet. . . ."

There's nothing surprising in this brief paragraph, but it is worth noting because of a favorite trick of those "fantasizers" referred to. When far-out Russian gossip is reported as "inside information" in UFO books and magazines, it is frequently claimed that "Moscow has never denied the truth of this story," thus somehow insinuating that Moscow has *tacitly admitted* the truth of such stories. Well, they can't do that in this case, at least not anyone who believes what they read in *Pravda*.

—James Oberg

Soviet "jellyfish UFO": Part Two

Readers may recall that a year ago (Fall/Winter 1977) we published the explanation of the strange and spectacular "jellyfish UFO" seen over the northwestern Soviet Union in the early morning hours of September 20, 1977. The display, which had received worldwide press attention, turned out to have been caused by the launch of the Soviet spy satellite Cosmos 955 from the base at Plesetsk, when conditions were just right to produce the stunning atmospheric effects noted. James Oberg's detailed analysis, making use of his knowledge of Soviet space activities and of U.S. information about the launch, was one of the most clear-cut identifications of a formerly unidentified flying object ever made. The location, time, and direction of the secret launch and of the observed reports corresponded exactly.

The explanation was disseminated widely in news stories by United Press International, *Science News*, *Sky and*

Telescope, and *International UFO Reporter*. An optimist might have thought that would be the end of it. One case, at least, solved.

But don't expect the *National Enquirer* to think that way. To it, apparently, a mystery solved is a solution ignored. It sent two reporters off on a 16-day investigative trip to the Soviet Union, who returned with tales that the reported beam of light had drilled holes in windows and cobblestones. As might be expected, all samples of this damage had already been shipped away to some secret location, so they were not able to inspect any actual physical evidence. There were also reports of panic, of people chasing after the UFO, and of vehicles stalling or going out of control.

Feliks Zigel, regarded by many in the West as Russia's leading UFO expert, told the reporters that "without a doubt" the jellyfish UFO was authentic. "It had all the features." Another

often-quoted Soviet UFO specialist, Aleksey Zolotov, said: "In my opinion, the object was a typical flying saucer. The available reports left no doubt whatsoever in my mind. I myself know it was a UFO." (The satellite-launch explanation had not been published in the Soviet Union; the existence of the Plesetsk base is supposed to be a secret.)

The situation is interesting because, in this case, as Oberg says: "We are utterly certain what the so-called UFO really was. This gives us a rare standard against which we can calibrate the reliability of 'car stalling' stories, 'hysterics,' 'car chase' stories, and other 'physical evidence' which often reportedly accompany UFO incidents elsewhere. We can conclude that the apparently corroborative evidence is actually totally worthless." This, he adds, is indeed a prominent feature of UFO reports in general.

—K.F.