



# How Do TV's Pseudoscience Specials Rate? And the Case of the Quadro Tracker

How popular are pseudoscience specials on television? Not particularly. A check of the Nielsen ratings for eight such programs that aired during the winter and spring of 1996 reveals that such shows never win their time slot and often come out near the bottom of the heap in the ratings race.

Yet the impact of a poorly rated show can still be enormous, with millions of people exposed to warped facts in a world where good science is often swamped by bogus blather.

Consider the lowest-rated show of the eight: "Psychic Detectives," which aired on the fledgling United Paramount Network (UPN) on February 6. It drew only 3 percent of the people watching television. It was the lowest-rated show for the network, the lowest-rated show of the evening, and the lowest-rated special to be aired that week. Yet 2.5 million people saw the program, in which psychics seemed to be giving new clues to unsolved mysteries and no reliable tests were done with *solved* crimes to see if the psychics had any talent in the first place.

The highest-rated pseudoscience shows all appeared on NBC. "Prophecies III" (February 28) got 14 percent of the viewers—nearly 13 million individuals. "Prophecies IV" (June 8) pulled in 13 percent of the audience, or 8.8 million viewers. Both were two-hour programs that used dramatic music and selectively presented information to give an uncritical look at forecasts about the

fate of the world. A February 4 special on Atlantis was on 12 percent of the television sets turned on during that time slot (an estimated 11.3 million viewers), and a June 8 repeat of "The Mysterious Origins of Man" special, which said that dinosaurs and humans lived at the same time, also got a 12 percent share, or 6.9 million viewers.

The other three shows in this sample were "Put to the Test" (April 29, ABC), which garnered 8 percent of the audience; "Miracles and Visions" (March 31, Fox), which got 7 percent; and "Real Ghosts 3" (February 13, UPN) with 4 percent. To put these numbers in perspective, the top-rated comedy series *Seinfeld* typically is on about 32 percent of the television sets in use on Thursday evenings and has about 32 million viewers. *The X-Files* has gotten nearly 11 million viewers and a share of 19 percent.

Clearly the networks aren't airing these shows because they draw huge ratings. Although the "Origins of Man" rerun and "Prophecies IV" won second place in their timeslots for NBC, those two programs still ranked as the two lowest-rated shows that the network aired that week. The UPN, Fox, and ABC programs also ended up at the bottom of the ratings barrel for each respective network.

So why do the networks keep airing pseudoscience specials?

First, they're cheaper to produce than entertainment programs and specials. In

addition, producers hoping to score big ratings and, ultimately, get a commitment for a weekly series may be willing to sell a show to a network for a bargain-basement price.

Such programs may also be used for "counter-programming," in which a network offers a radical alternative on a night when it can't get respectable ratings anyway. "Prophecies III," for example, did very well (with a 14 percent share) even though it was pitted against the Grammy Awards on CBS, which drew 23 percent of the viewing audience.

Finally, the networks sometimes have a financial interest in such specials, according to my colleague John Martin, the television writer at the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*. Broadcasting them may be part of a push to sell the programs to other countries or promote sales if the show is going to be available on videocassette.

Pseudoscience specials may not be the most popular fare on the tube, but the willingness of the networks to broadcast them in the face of mediocre ratings demonstrates that the programs are giving the networks a return on their investments.

And with the pseudoscience theme more popular than ever, things show no signs of changing.

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One of the few bright lights in the media's coverage of the paranormal in

1996 came from *Dateline NBC* when it aired its exposé of the Quadro Tracker, also known as the Positive Molecular Locator.

The Quadro Corporation in Harleyville, South Carolina, which made the Tracker, claimed the device could be used to find drugs, weapons, explosives, currency, drug users, and missing people from one hundred miles away or more.

Ranging in cost from \$400 to \$8,000 and consisting of a retractable portable radio antenna mounted on a handle, it was essentially a dowsing rod, sensitive to the subconscious hand movements of the operator. The customer slipped a large plastic "programming chip" (also known as a "locator card," "tuned frequency chip," or "signature card") labeled "gunpowder," "marijuana," "cocaine," or whatever the operator was looking for into the device, and the antenna was supposed to point the way. The device was also sold as the Golfball Gopher to help golfers find lost balls, and Quadro had suggested that it could be used to pinpoint both people and donated blood infected with the AIDS virus.

More than a thousand units were sold to police departments, school systems, and correction facilities based on testimonials and "tests" in which Quadro personnel were present or the unsuspecting operator knew the direction of the object he was searching for and unconsciously let the antenna point to it.

"I was probably as skeptical as they come, but I've seen it work," said the security director for one Kansas school system, demonstrating how skepticism is useless when people don't understand science, especially human psychology.

Quadro, in its product literature, said the Tracker "consists of an inductor, conductor, and an oscillator." When researchers at Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, New Mexico, examined the device at the request of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ),

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X-ray photos showed no such thing. "There are no electronics, motors, or any other electrical devices inside the handle," according to the Sandia report, released through the NIJ. When the researchers opened the gunpowder chip, they uncovered a piece of plastic-coated paper that couldn't conduct electricity and had no trace of gunpowder.

One chip, according to an Associated Press report, "contained dead ants that had been frozen and put on paper with epoxy glue."

Based on all the test results, the Beaumont, Texas, office of the FBI issued a statement calling the device "a fraud."

If such a device really worked, it would be relatively simple to test it under conditions that would reduce the likelihood of luck or fraud. But the school officials and police officers who purchased Trackers, in a living testament to the sorry state of critical thinking skills among supposedly educated people, obviously had no idea how to perform such a test. *Dateline NBC*, after consulting magician James Randi, did.

First they collected testimonials from believers, including the assertion by Quadro vice president Raymond L. Fisk that the Tracker had a 90 percent success rate. Then the *Dateline* staff conducted some on-camera experiments to see if the device could live up to the claims. In one, the security consultant for the fifty-

one schools in Seminole County, Florida, was unable to identify the locker that contained a pouch of marijuana. Using the Tracker, he later walked right past the pouch when it was resting in the pocket of NBC reporter Lea Thompson. In another test, a man trained by Quadro failed to select a film canister with marijuana in four out of five trials, a result expected by chance.

Two months later, on April 22, United States District Court Judge Thad Heartfield granted a permanent injunction against Quadro, saying the company, Fisk, and two other top officials were "engaged in a scheme to defraud" because "the defendants *knew* that there was no reasonable scientific basis" for Quadro's claims.

The case of the Quadro Tracker was more than the case of a device that did not live up to its claims. In his decision, Heartfield noted that the lives of innocent people can be ruined if they're falsely accused of possessing drugs, law enforcement officials risk having legitimate cases thrown out of court if they are tainted by the use of questionable techniques, and a reliance on a Quadro Tracker "poses a danger to anyone relying on the device" to keep weapons or explosives out of schools, airports, or office buildings.

The case was yet another example of how belief in pseudoscience isn't as harmless as many people think. □

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