

COMMENTARY

'None of This Is True': Do Television Disclaimers about the Paranormal Really Work?

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The last few years have seen a substantial growth in the number of television programs claiming to contain paranormal phenomena. Viewers are now routinely offered the opportunity to accompany teams of “ghost-hunters” wandering through allegedly haunted buildings armed with little more than EMF meters, voice recorders, and high hopes of a second season. Alternatively, they can play the role of sick voyeur and watch mediums stand before groups of recently bereaved people and pretend to channel their deceased loved ones (“I am hearing the voice of a woman. She’s in her mid-thirties and couldn’t care less about any of you. Oh, I’m sorry, that’s the producer”).

It would be nice to think that viewers are canny enough to realize that such shows contain considerably more fiction than fact, and that they might use their precognitive powers to hit the “off” button on their TV controllers before the programs begin. Unfortunately, research suggests that a significant percentage of the public really do believe that such programming depicts genuine paranormal events and thus come away more convinced than ever about the existence of such phenomena). Perhaps because of this, various official bodies and pressure groups have urged those producing such shows to act responsibly. The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry’s Council for Media Integrity has suggested that certain paranormal programming should carry “entertainment” or “fiction” labels.

Likewise, the British media regulatory body Ofcom notes that any demonstrations of paranormal phenomena “. . . that purport to be real (as opposed to entertainment) must be treated with due objectivity” and that if a demonstration is for entertainment purposes, “this must be made clear to viewers.”

Program creators and broadcasters usually attempt to comply with such guidelines by presenting onscreen “disclaimers,” essentially informing viewers that such shows may not be exactly as they appear, and thus should only be taken seriously by the hard of thinking. However, such messages are often shown for a very short period of time and tend to contain long and rather tortuously worded messages displayed in a relatively small font. Although such disclaimers may satisfy legal and regulatory guidelines, we wondered whether they had any real psychological impact on viewers. We hypothesized that if people genuinely believed that a program containing seemingly impossible phenomena was developed to entertain rather than inform, then they should be less likely to believe that the phenomena shown constitutes evidence for the paranormal. But do the types of disclaimers typically used actually affect the way they view the evidential nature of the phenomena shown?

To help find out, we conducted an initial study. We recorded a ten-minute segment from a well-known television show in which an alleged medium gave readings to various audience members. The clip

ended with an eighty-word disclaimer explaining that the show should be seen as entertainment, that people varied in their opinions about the nature of alleged mediumistic abilities, and that the program content should not be construed as fact. This long paragraph was broadcast in relatively small type and remained on the screen for about ten seconds.

We showed the clip to a group of undergraduate psychology students and asked them to rate the degree to which they thought the program provided evidence of “paranormal” powers, using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Next, we created a second clip by editing out the disclaimer altogether, showed this clip to another group of students, and had them make the same ratings. There was no statistically significant difference between the two groups’ ratings, suggesting that the disclaimer had no effect on the way in which the students perceived the paranormal content of the program.

We wondered whether the lack of any effect was due to the disclaimer being shown at the end of the program. After all, participants had probably made up their minds about the alleged paranormal phenomena by then, and the near-subliminal presentation of the long paragraph was unlikely to influence them one way or another. To test this idea, we edited the clip yet again, this time placing the disclaimer at the start of the show. This new edit was shown to another group of students, who again went on to rate the degree to which it provided evidence of paranormal powers. The results? Once again, there was no significant difference between their ratings and the ratings of those who didn’t see the disclaimer.

Undaunted, we toyed with the notion that perhaps the disclaimer was simply too vague and so produced our own shorter, more strongly worded, version:

The alleged mediumistic abilities of the individuals featured in this program have not been subjected to controlled scientific investigations. In addition, some scientists have suggested that anecdotal evidence in support of such abilities could be due to several psychological techniques, such

as use of general statements and feedback from people’s verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

Once again, this was placed onscreen for ten seconds. We showed this version to two more groups of students, with one group seeing it before the show and another after. Did this have any effect? No. Once again, there was no statistical difference between the ratings of these groups and the ratings of those that saw no disclaimer at all.

At present, we don’t know why the type and position of the disclaimers tested have no significant effect on the way in which people view the evidential nature of the alleged paranormal phenomena in the program. It could be, for example, that our participants couldn’t be bothered to read the disclaimer or that any influence it had was outweighed by the much more dramatic material in the rest of the clip. Either way, the results suggest that there is a pressing need to develop a form of wording and presentation that really gets the message across. Until then, the situation remains grim. Next time you see a paranormal program briefly presenting one of those long “for entertainment only” disclaimers you might be tempted to think, “Oh well, I guess it’s better than nothing.” Our research suggests that you are wrong. □

[Please provide short author bios—JL]