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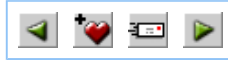
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Skeptical Digest 20.3 (Autumn 2007)

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>>>SKEPTICAL STATS>>>

1. Total increase, per minute, of personal debt in Britain: 115 million
2. Increase in sale of "No. 7 Preserve and Protect" serum in the 24 hours after a Horizon episode reported that research from Manchester University supported its claims to reduce wrinkles in aging skin: 2,000 percent
3. Days a cat survived without food or water, trapped in a crate of motorcycle helmets travelling by sea from China to America: 35
4. Percentage of websites a May, 2007, Google study showed can infect visitors' computers with malicious software: .01
5. Proportion of malicious websites press reports said that the Google study found: 1 in 10
6. Number of children, many with no criminal record, whose DNA has been stored without permission on the police DNA database: 521,901
7. Highest bid for 'Jon Malipiemán', an imaginary friend for sale on eBay, before the service deleted the listing: \$3,062
8. Number of years of no-claims bonus recently lost by Britain's oldest driver, 105-year-old Sheila Thompsons: 71
9. Number of counts the Advertising Standards Authority upheld against the Reverend Peter Popoff over ads for "Miracle Spring Water" and "Miracle Olive Oil" on the shopping channel Soap on Deal TV: 11
10. Percentage by which teens in a New York state study who watched more than three hours of TV per day were less likely to graduate high school: 82
11. Number of previous driving licence suspensions or revocations Michael Wiley, a one-legged, armless man, had prior to evading Florida police in a 100 mph car chase in the spring of 2007: 18
12. Height of the location of the world's highest swing, a viewing platform on a 1,100 foot TV broadcast tower in China: 700 feet

15. Number of copies sold as of February 2007 of the Left Behind book series, which imagines a contemporary Rapture: more than 43 million

16. Number of litres of water Americans use per day: 400 to 600

17. Number of litres of water most Europeans use per day, compared to Americans: less than half

18. Proportion of the world's people who do not have the level of clean water and sanitation services available 2,000 years ago in ancient Rome: nearly half

19. Amount by which world primary energy consumption increased in 2005: 2.7 percent

20. Amount for which entrepreneur Gary Kremen sold the domain name "sex.com" in 2006, after a 10-year legal battle to win it back after it was stolen from him: \$12 million

21. Amount the court ordered the conman who stole sex.com, Stephen Michael Cohen, to pay Kremen: \$65 million

22. Amount Cohen has actually paid: approximately \$3 million in seized real estate

23. Proportion of drugs sold in developing countries that is fake: 25% to 50%

24. Potency of the frequently abused prescription drug Fentanyl compared to heroin: 80:1

25. Number of countries in which governments block access to Internet sites for political, social, or security reasons: at least 25

>>>DUBIOUS NEWS>>>

>>>Uri Geller recently offered to save Carlisle from an ancient curse which causes floods, pestilence, and sporting humiliation (according to Reuters, he offered to repurpose the city's "cursing stone" as a garden ornament), but it seems he still had time for legal action against a sceptical video posted to YouTube. Recently acquired by the Web search engine company Google, YouTube is a site where anyone may post video clips of up to ten minutes long, and millions do, anything from highlights of 1970s tennis matches to self-filmed personal thoughts on life. As you might expect, much of the material uploaded to the site is copyright to someone other than the uploader, and since the Google acquisition the pace of legal complaints has stepped up. Most of these complaints come from large media companies like Viacom, which not long ago followed up a failed licensing deal with a demand that all its copyrighted material be removed from the site. However, according to The Times, the latest workout of Geller's toned legal biceps focuses on a short video featuring James Randi bending metal using sleight of hand techniques. Geller is claiming he owns the copyright in ten seconds of this video excerpt, taken from the 1993 TV programme Secrets of the Psychics. Geller may have bitten off more than he realised. Suing individual sceptics is one thing, but in straying into the field of copyright claims he's taking on much bigger opponents. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a lobbying group focused on defending civil liberties online and a staunch opponent of over-reaching copyright claims, retaliated by filing suit against Geller for using "baseless copyright claims" to stifle free speech. The crux of the issue is the

YouTube removed the video rather than risk prosecution under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998). However, the EFF has posted all the relevant documents in the case, on its website (<http://www.eff.org>).

>>>It sounded like a glorified tour of Edinburgh's most 'paranormally active' (and media-friendly) areas, but the third annual Mary King's Ghost Fest (held 11-20 May, 2007) featured the world's first infrasound experiments in an allegedly haunted location. The research, led by Ciaran O'Keeffe of Most Haunted fame, complemented what the Ghost Fest website described as the "hugely popular overnight vigils in the shadowy Blair Street Vaults" and "Electronic Voice Phenomenon (EVP) Workshops". Aside from the curiosity with which one might approach an EVP workshop — perhaps they teach you how to create the phenomenon after you die? — this experiment appears to be the most interesting event. O'Keeffe and Steve Parsons, an investigator from the research group Para.Science, were to play Pied Pipers, guiding the public through the notorious underground network beneath Edinburgh's Royal Mile. Along the way, Parsons would expose some of the visiting groups to an infrasound stimulus created by his custom-built generator. Because the generator operates at frequencies below 20Hz, the sound should be below the range the human ear can perceive. The idea is to establish whether, as O'Keeffe and Parsons' press release put it, "infrasound could be the cause of feelings associated with paranormal experiences or if such feelings truly are an inexplicable phenomena." The release also claimed that this research is the first of its kind to examine this question. The basis comes from the late Engineering and Design graduate and 'ghost hunter' Vic Tandy, who in "Ghost in the Machine", a 1998 paper published in the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research, hypothesised that infra-sound of the order of 19Hz might be responsible for many ghost sightings, as it closely matches the natural resonant frequency of the human eye. Infrasound emitters such as traffic, trains, thunder, and wind are now common in everyday life, and infrasonic waves can carry over long distances with less susceptibility to interference or disturbance than higher frequencies. Testing Tandy's theory could, therefore, yield important and interesting results. We'll keep you posted.

>>>Geeks everywhere were groaning at the BBC's Panorama programme in May, when it ran "Wi-fi: a warning signal". In that story, Panorama claimed that wi-fi — also known as wireless networking — was potentially more dangerous than mobile phone masts. And it's in our schools! And children have skulls that are immature and unformed! A decade after people started worrying about mobile phone masts — during which time all those same worried people bought themselves and their children mobile phones — it's clearly time for the next Great Technology Scare. The programme obliged with all the necessary elements: a few scientists to say "We just don't know — so we're worried"; an MP to accuse the government of complicity with industry in ignoring the issue; a guy with a measuring device; and a miserable victim (because apparently no one has told the producers of Panorama that the plural of anecdote is not data). The victim in the case was a woman who claims to be so sensitive to electromagnetic radiation that she must shield her house with metal foil (helpfully supplied by one of the programme's worry-mongers). We would point out that at heart what wi-fi and mobile phones are is radios. The radiation they broadcast is radio waves. Yes, the right frequencies and intensities of radiation

basis of a few vaguely ill people and rip out a technology being embraced by millions because it's useful and functional? No. If we are so concerned about children, shouldn't we be banning automobiles (which kill 170 and seriously injure 4,000 every year), pollution (the WHO found in 2004 that exposure to pollution or unsafe living conditions kills 100,000 European children every year), or poverty (another 1,000 a year in Britain alone)? The BBC's own technology writers were disgusted enough to publish their own critique of the programme on the BBC website. We can only be grateful no one told the Panorama team that wi-fi broadcasts in the same frequency band as microwave ovens.

>>>If there's one thing that's more galling than another, it's seeing the limited public resources for health care spent on things like homoeopathy rather than treatments with a sound basis of evidence. The good news is that homoeopathy on the NHS is under increasing pressure. According to The Times, more than half of English Primary Care Trusts are now refusing to pay for homoeopathy or severely restricting access to it, in part due to last year's letter from 13 scientists that opposed NHS support of unproven or disproved treatments. Two homoeopathic hospitals – Tunbridge Wells and the Royal London – are being threatened with closure. An NHS report published at the end of May concluded that what evidence there is to support homoeopathy is "very weak" and "the evidence of cost-effectiveness is lacking". (Clearly the evidence needs further dilution.) The report suggested that PCTs should reduce their coverage or eliminate it entirely. The biggest difficulty now may be convincing the public that this is a question of ensuring that funding goes to treatments that work, not of suppressing "consumer choice" or serving the interests of Big Pharma.

>>>IN THIS ISSUE OF THE SKEPTIC (20.3, Autumn 2007)

Features:

Psychics on eBay (Emma-Louise Rhodes)
 Haunting the Bereaved (Mark Williams)
 R. E. Ality Check: An Alternative Approach to Religious Education
 (Damien Morris)

Columns:

Editorial (Victoria Hamilton and Chris French)
 Hilary Evans's Paranormal Picture Gallery
 Hits and Misses (Wendy M. Grossman)
 Rhyme and Reason (Steve Donnelly)
 Philosopher's Corner (Julian Baggini)
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 Letters

Reviews:

Richard Dawkins: How a Scientist Changed the Way we Think edited by
 Alan Grafen and Mark Ridley
 The Occult Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present Day by David
 S. Katz
 Fakers, Forger & Phoneys: Famous Scams and Scamps by Magnus Magnusson
 Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of
 Beliefs by Lewis Wolpert

>>>SOURCES FOR SKEPTICAL STATS>>>

>>>ADMINISTRIVIA>>>

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: Mark Williams, Sid Rodrigues, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News. A special thank-you to Sid Rodrigues, who persistently and indefatigably keeps filling The Skeptic's blog (<http://ukskeptic.livejournal.com>) with news stories and pointers.

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>>>ENDS>>>

>>>SKEPTICS IN THE PUB>>>

Skeptics in the Pub meets (usually) on the third Tuesday of every month at 7:00pm at the The Penderel's Oak, 283-288 High Holborn, London WC1V 7HP (Nearest tube: Holborn and Chancery Lane). A £2 donation is requested to cover the guest speaker's travelling expenses and sundries. Non-skeptics welcome. Turn up at any time during the night. Detailed directions, a list of upcoming speakers and a map of how to get to the pub can be found at www.skeptic.org.uk/pub.

Tuesday 11th December 2007

Dr. Mark Vernon "How to be an Agnostic and Why it Matters"

Tuesday 15th January 2008

Nick Pope "The British X-Files"

Tuesday 19th February 2008

Paul Taylor "Why don't creationists just shut up?"

civilizations, etc. Further information and mailing list announcements available from pub.skeptic.org.uk. Suggestions for speakers or offers to speak are gladly welcomed.

>>>END ANNOUNCEMENTS>>>

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