

Trends That Will Affect Your Future . . .

A Soldier in the Sensoid Wars

| By Stephan A. Schwartz |

The SchwartzReport tracks emerging trends that will affect the world, particularly the United States. For EXPLORE, it focuses on matters of health in the broadest sense of that term, including medical issues, changes in the biosphere, technology, and policy considerations, all of which will shape our culture and our lives.

In February 2005, my good friend, English biologist Rupert Sheldrake, was asked to take part in a National Geographic Channel show on psychic animals. The show would begin airing in August that year as, *Is It Real? Psychic Animals*. Sheldrake's participation from the beginning had been contingent on one condition: Because the subject of psychic animals was vulnerable to excess and hyperbole either for or against beyond what the research actually showed, he agreed to participate on the understanding that the program would be fair, unbiased, and must not be structured in the standard debunking "Gotcha" format. This is one of the most powerful trends developing in media today, and you have probably seen it a hundred times on television.

In this format, a scientist speaking on the basis of his research presents his data, and some critic, often with no expertise in the area of science involved, makes denigrating comments about the first scientist, who is given no opportunity to respond. It is currently particularly in vogue on channels that support the antiglobal warming position. Sheldrake was assured that the show would not follow that format and would be fair and unbiased.

In the event, the program followed the Gotcha format exactly. Sheldrake had been asked to talk about the examples of animal-human linkage, during cata-

strophic events like tsunamis. In discussing this, he mentioned his work involving a gray parrot named N'kisi, which demonstrated an extraordinary example of interspecies linkage. There began a critique of a paper he had written describing it.¹ It became clear to him that this was the real point of the interview.

[In the interest of full disclosure, I need to say that I have seen the video record of some of these sessions, read the paper, and examined the protocol and have come away impressed and convinced that this seems to be a genuine demonstration of nonlocal awareness.]

The parrot's human caretaker, Aimée Morgana, is a woman in her 30s with whom the bird has an extraordinary bond. When she is in one room and is shown a randomly selected photograph drawn from a pool about which she has no knowledge, the bird, in another room on a different floor, will concurrently talk about the image while the woman is staring at it. N'kisi is very verbal, with a vocabulary of 1,000 words—itself unparalleled—and a demonstrated ability to express thoughts, so these descriptions are quite unequivocal and cannot be mistaken for typical parrot chatter, about crackers and the like. A photo of a beautiful woman walking on the beach wearing a bikini, for instance, evokes, "Look at my pretty naked body" (Sheldrake videotaped experiment session).

National Geographic contacted a skeptic, Tony Youens, and asked him to attempt to replicate the experiment with another gray parrot named Spaulding. These results were equivocal, and Youens contended that Sheldrake's analysis of the data from his experiment was flawed. Sheldrake was given no chance to respond to the attack.²

In the United States, there is no official mechanism for ensuring fairness and hon-

esty in the media, as anyone who watches cable news knows to be the flagrant reality. The Federal Communications Commission is empowered only to deal with obscenity. But in Britain the government media regulator, called the Office of Communications (Ofcom), is explicitly responsible for maintaining standards of fairness, honesty, and informed consent. After Sheldrake saw the program on his television, he filed a complaint against National Geographic with Ofcom, and, in March 2006, Ofcom issued a preliminary assessment in Sheldrake's favor³ on two of his three complaints. National Geographic appealed this assessment. This appeal was rejected in its entirety, and, in June 2006, Ofcom issued what is called a "Final Adjudication" noting, "that if a programme alleges wrongdoing or incompetence or makes other significant allegations, those concerned should normally be given an appropriate and timely opportunity to respond."²

"It is Ofcom's opinion that in order for the programme makers to meet the guarantee of unbiased and fair reporting . . . it was necessary for the programme makers to offer an alternative view to the critique given by Mr. Youens. Ofcom concluded that the lack of such an opposing view in the programme as broadcast led to the breaking of the guarantee given to Dr. Sheldrake regarding the content of the programme. This resulted in unfairness to Dr. Sheldrake. Ofcom has upheld this part of the complaint."² They went on to say: "This failure to give Dr. Sheldrake an opportunity to respond to what would amount to a damaging critique of his research resulted in unfairness to Dr. Sheldrake. Ofcom has upheld this part of the complaint."²

In the United Kingdom, the show can no longer be broadcast, and National Geographic was required to broadcast a sum-

mary of Ofcom's Final Adjudication during prime time. Ofcom's ruling will affect more than Sheldrake; it provides a precedent that may help future scientists in the U.K. However, in the United States, no such restriction applies and, indeed, one of the concerns expressed by the National Geographic lawyers was that, should Ofcom rule against them, it would impede their ability to say what they wanted.

I go into all this because Sheldrake's experience is quite common as anyone who has ever done anything outside of the conservative mainstream, whether in medicine or physics, has probably learned to their peril. Each time a researcher with something new to say encounters media, there is always the chance they will be the victim of Gotcha media. Yet without media how does public awareness grow so that science can be understood and supported?

When the space community wants to develop a new program, or the international high-energy physics field seeks grants to build a new accelerator, or the AIDS medical world wants funding for a new research vector, those scientists, I can assure you, consciously factor in the media as part of their strategy to obtain the money they need. Consider this remarkably candid comment by climatologist Dr. Stephen Schneider, an advisor to then Vice President Gore, about how it was done by those concerned with global warming during the Clinton Administration: "To get some broader based support, to capture the public's imagination . . . that, of course, entails getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified dramatic statements, and make little mention of doubts we may have . . ."4 Please be clear. I am not saying this is good science; I am saying this is the *realpolitik* of science for the foreseeable future. Anyone who doubts this has not been watching television or reading the papers.

Ironically, our field of study has the ability to capture media attention at a level matched only by disasters and sex. Media love accounts of healing or nonlocal awareness in any of its manifold forms. That is why this fall there may be as many as seven shows with psychic themes. It is why the documentary I made about the experiment involving a submarine we carried out in 1977, which demonstrated

nonlocal awareness could not be part of the electromagnetic spectrum, is still paying me royalties 30 years later. It is also why the ratings of shows like *The X-Files*, *Sightings*, or *Medium* get them picked up year after year, and their syndication seems to run for literally decades. That is why, even television magazine shows that pride themselves on being prestige productions, above the ratings fray of lesser shows, run nonlocal material during "sweeps" week on television. Even the hardest of hard news shows, *Nightline*, could not resist the remote viewing program funded by the intelligence community and the military at the independent research corporations SRI and, subsequently, Science Applications International Corporation. It gave them one of their highest ratings ever.

However, using the media, as opposed to being used by the media, takes a strategic vision, strong community cohesiveness, and a clear sense of appropriate tactics. To date, with a few notable exceptions, researchers interested in complementary medicine or any area of consciousness research seem all too often to be maligned by Gotcha journalism. In an era of decreased funding, and increased scrutiny, when disciplines as cohorts must struggle to keep their research moving forward, even as religious ideologues and special interest groups seek to maneuver even committed funds out from under them, those who fail to master the media-funding nexus, I believe, face increasingly marginalization. We need to face up to the fact that, with one of the most interesting fields of science, we have not been able to make that interest translate into appropriate funding support, and we need to ask ourselves why this has happened. It is not enough to say that other fields of science do not like research that seeks to address nonlocal consciousness issues.

For more than 40 years, I have been variously, and sometimes concurrently, a scientist, a lab director, and a journalist in every form from daily newspapers to Web publications, as well as a television producer. Having sat on both sides of the media table has given me an unusual perspective on the dynamic that goes on between scientists and the media people who seek to use them for a program, article, or report. That said, here are 14 points that, it seems to me, are critical if you, as a work-

ing researcher or clinician, are about to have an interaction with the media. This is not an easy transaction, although it may just look like a public conversation. If someone as intelligent and sophisticated about media as Rupert Sheldrake had to fight to clear his name, you had better be prepared. These points may help you. They have certainly helped me.

Point number one: If you are going to be the focus of media attention, accept that you are a commodity. What is about to happen is only secondarily about science and the information you want to get across—the news you think you have. Mostly, it is about the reporter's agenda. Media, today, are multibillion dollar businesses dealing in a commodity that might be called Sensoids. A sensoid is a unit of attention-grabbing data, attention grabbing whether pictures, sounds, or words. It is different than a datum; a datum is a self-contained unit of information. Data drive science. Sensoids drive media. A sensoid is designed to produce an emotional reaction in the person who sees it or reads it, and it is the reaction that gives it its value. Every editor of every publication, and every producer of every television show, knows that, first and foremost, he or she must capture the attention of a consumer who is constantly being bombarded with sensoids or lose out to the competition. Don't have any illusions about what is taking place in your interaction with the media. You are a commodity to be used in the sensoid wars.

Point number two: The media come to every story with attitude. Every reporter, sadly, develops the intellectual callous of institutionalized cynicism. The healthy side of this is probing skepticism. The dark side is the reporter's fear that he or she is going to be made to seem a fool *in the eyes of colleagues*. This is particularly true of things having to do with nonlocal consciousness or complementary therapies, where there is such a miasma of claims and counterclaims, such a rabid, albeit tiny, group of professional skeptics whose careers are really a function of their skepticism, and there is such a poor understanding by the media of the difference between science and pop-claims. I once assigned a reporter to cover a story on Ambrose and Olga Worrall—husband and wife healers working in the Baltimore area—and healing. He came back incredibly energized by

what he had seen; healing had occurred, although nothing miraculous had happened, which he thought made what he had seen all the more real. The next day, I walked by a luncheon table where this same reporter was being teased by three other reporters for being so gullible. The story he subsequently filed was filled with sneering little digs. No one was going to say he had been fooled. Just as bureaucrats rarely get into trouble saying, “No,” reporters rarely get criticized for excessive skepticism.

Point number three: All interactions with media are transactions in power. The person who is interviewing you is not your friend, however friendly they may seem. It is in their interest to make “contact” with you. But your meeting is occurring because they are doing their job. Never forget that. Unless you do something to change the equation, you are in a subordinate position of power. The reporter, and other people such as editors, whom you will never meet, not you, in the end, are going to control how you and your lab or clinic look and sound. Even in on-air interview shows like *Nightline*, the “house” has an advantage because it gets to pick the other guests, and the moderator asks the questions and times who and when will answer them. So infrequently does the interviewer lose control that Ted Koppel, in his book, a few years ago, made a point of noting how exceptional it is. He cites Mandy Gruenwald, a Democratic advisor to President Clinton in the 1992 elections, as one of the very few people to have bested him. You are not without resources, however—if you know how to use them. Otherwise, depending on how it suits the reporter, you can be made either a hero or roadkill.

Point number four: Your media personae and your academic life are two different worlds. Don’t confuse them. Have you ever wondered how people like Carl Sagan become media celebrities and yet continue to enjoy powerful reputations in science? Shouldn’t the one debase the other? The fact is that Sagan, Stephen J. Gould, Jonas Salk, and Margaret Mead, to name but a few, all mastered one critical skill. They made sure they did not confuse their academic writings and presentations with their media interactions. They understood that how they talked to the media was very different from the way they presented

their research at a professional conference. This extends to their tone of voice, their choice of words, their facial expressions, and their body language. You do not have to convince the world you are academically qualified or that your research is “science.” Do not be defensive on that issue. What the reporter wants from you is a pre-digested encapsulation of the subject matter. They want good copy, good images. They want personality—strange quirks like Einstein not wearing socks and using large uncashed checks as bookmarks are just fine; they make good copy and good images. Most of all, reporters personally want to have the sense that they’ve come to the right place. In academic presentations, modifiers and caveats are appropriate and the norm. In print, they can be used very judiciously; in electronic media, far less. Reporters think of our normal caveats as “weasel” words, and, to the viewer or reader, they make the speaker seem either shifty or incompetent. It is okay to say, “We don’t know.” That makes you human. It is not okay to say, “Under certain circumstances, when the variables have been properly controlled we can expect to see a marginally significant effect on the order of $P \leq .05$.”

Point number five: Never condescend. Sometimes, when we are pressed or feel threatened, we retreat into our researcher personae, and this can come across as condescending. Don’t do this. Years ago, when I was just a beginning reporter, I went to a conference to interview a sociologist who had been doing longitudinal studies. I had taken the trouble to read his papers and was seriously interested in getting some data from him for my piece. My questions made him defensive, increasingly academic, and increasingly condescending. Finally, in answer to one question, he said, “Look, there’s no point in my answering that because you aren’t competent to understand my answer.” I used that quote describing the way and tone in which he said it. It crucified him.

Point number six: Avoid all jargon, acronyms, insider references, and words bigger than those you would find in the newspaper. This is an extension of the previous point but an independent consideration as well. Never, never, never use anything other than simple standard English that a high school student could comprehend. All verbal shorthand and terms-of-art are

recipes for disaster. Things like RNG, regression analysis, or multivariate anything make the reporter feel stupid—which has the effect of creating covert hostility—and make you sound like a smartass to the reader or viewer. If you must use a term, explain it in the same sentence first. For instance, “We use a computer program, which we call a random number generator, you might hear it referred to as an RNG, to make sure that. . . .”

Point number seven: Be clear why you have agreed to the interview. Why are you doing this interview? If you are doing it solely because you were asked to do it, and your ego is flattered, you are making a mistake and potentially hurting yourself and the field. All interviews hold potential for disaster, and their impact, negative or positive, will almost invariably extend like the ripples produced by a stone thrown into a pool beyond you and your clinic or lab. You are a representative for us all. Media rely on the power of ego. Reporters and editors operate on the hypothesis that everyone wants his or her 15 minutes of fame. The media interaction should never be an end product for you. It should be part of a process, a tactical tool to focus attention on you and your institution, or the field, for some clearly defined purpose. Be honest with yourself about why you want that attention. Also try to find out something about your interviewer. Do your own research. Don’t walk into the headlights like a deer. Always have a goal, and never lose focus.

Point number eight: Work out, in advance, the two or three points you want to make. This is probably the most important point I will make. A media interaction is not a classroom lecture or a conference presentation. If you are doing the interview for the right reasons, and you have planned correctly, you should want to get just a few straightforward points across. Your greatest strength is your ability, as politicians and their handlers say, to “stay on message.” *Get your two or three points each down to a single simple declarative sentence.* Practice those sentences until you don’t stumble or say “ah.” Look at yourself in the mirror. Look at your body language. Is it wooden? Is your expression pleasant? Put energy in your eyes and in your voice. If you can get your two or three points sympathetically and compellingly across, you win.

Point number nine: There is a difference between a media interaction with a print outcome and one that will be broadcast. Don't confuse the two. The interactions have different dynamics and only a few similarities. Ask immediately how your information will be used. Newspapers and news shows have the tightest space/time requirements, and, thus, you must be particularly sensitive to staying concise and on focus. You need to structure your presentation very differently depending on its final use.

Point number 10: Don't forget set and setting. Print is literary. A print reporter has to paint a picture that his electronic counterpart mostly has as a gift of her technology. But, in both instances, set and setting are important. A print reporter, particularly, wants local color. What are you wearing? What do your surroundings look like? What books do you have on your shelves? Did you shave carefully? Is your perfume offensive? Your dress provocative? There is much more editorial observation in print. Set and setting are places where you have control. Use it. Plan the interaction with the same care you would use to structure a session with a patient or experiment participant. With a print reporter, don't assume anything is off-the-record unless it has been explicitly agreed on between you and the reporter, and, even then, don't assume that the flavor of your response will not be used. Print reporters wait for the "official" interview to be over, to catch their interviewee in a more relaxed "human" response. With a print reporter who may be hostile, or who has a reputation for making up or altering quotes (you've done your homework, remember), you might consider taping the interview yourself. This is a provocative act, so it has a certain downside, but it is perfectly permissible. I always say that challenging questions (which I am implying the reporter is going to ask) stimulate me to think, and I find the answers useful in other contexts. If you are going to tape, do so at the beginning. It is a real show stopper to start in the middle of the interview. It implies you don't trust the interviewer. With television or radio, the nature of the medium gives the record. Here, your task is to get in the visual things you want (to the degree that you can) during the taping. If it is television, think visually.

Television loves gadgets, labs, clinics, or people in "uniforms" of authority.

Point number 11: Television is about sound bites. If it is a television interview, realize that most of what you will say will end up on the editing room floor. Television is broken into segments that are usually no more than four minutes in length. Hard news shows like the evening news cut to 30 seconds or less. News magazine shows rarely go longer than two segments. That means your deathless words will probably be on the order of eight to 10 seconds in a clip. Television, by its nature, is about sound bites. Don't fight this; use it to your advantage. One way you can have power in an interview is to make everything else but your two or three key point sentences unusable. President Eisenhower was a master at this. Except for the point he was trying to make, his sentences were so long and convoluted that they could not be used as sound bites. He made the editors pick the things he wanted people to hear. You can do the same thing.

Point number 12: Anticipate criticism and answer it. All media people are trained to find a "balance" person—read skeptic—to give their interviews or stories "objectivity." Like my previous recommendation about sound bites, don't fight this, use it. Think moves ahead, like a chess player. Say something like, "Some skeptics sound knowledgeable but have not actually ever done an experiment or read the scientific literature on this subject. When someone says there are no data, ask them 'how many experiments have you personally done?' 'What specifically about Dr. Smith's research do you find lacking?' I'll bet they tell you that we did not control for . . . In fact we . . ." Reporters and tape editors—the people who assemble a segment and who are as important as reporters in television—love this stuff. The reporter may well ask the question you've suggested, when she interviews the skeptic "balance" person, usually without revealing that you have raised the point, and the editor will juxtapose the answers. It makes for controversy, which is good television. I have seen some wonderful foot-in-mouth results.

Point number 13: Illustrate concepts by examples people can understand. Whenever possible tie your data to something people know in their everyday lives. To illustrate the variance from chance you

might say, "You may hear that the data do not support this conclusion, but you should realize that the chances of this occurring by chance are 30 million to one; that's about 30 times less likely than being hit by lightning." Also remember, everyone likes to laugh. Psychologist Charley Tart, a leading figure in states-of-consciousness research is a master of the self-deprecating aside. If you aren't funny, reveal a humorous incident about yourself in which you were a little klutzy. Humor, though, is a grace note. It should never be used in place of a serious answer to a serious question. Doing that makes you seem like you are avoiding something, and reporters are trained to sniff out avoidance like pigs sniff truffles.

Point number 14: If you go to an academic conference to deliver a paper and the media may be present or the situation, results, or implications are likely to draw attention, develop a strategy for dealing with that attention before you present.

In 1980, I came back from Egypt and presented the work we had done in the Eastern Harbor at the annual conference of the Association for Underwater Archaeology. Two reporters had seen the reference in the program and came to my talk and, by the time I got out of the hall, had set in motion a chain of events for which I was naively unprepared. The day after I got back, I awoke and went out to get the morning paper and found seven news crews standing at the edge of my driveway. I did not have a strategy to deal with the media because I hadn't anticipated their interest. In the days that followed, even though I had once been a reporter, I had not really thought about things from the other side, and I made a lot of mistakes and learned a lot. If you are reporting something new or there is an angle that might catch the media's attention, like the Boy Scouts, "Be Prepared." It may only happen once in your career but, when the spotlight is on and the great sensoid digester begins its work, it is too late to develop a plan, and you may be defined by what you do in those few days for the rest of your life.

I hope these points help you. Like all of us, I want the several areas of consciousness research and clinical experience to prosper. The media are a fact of life like the wind and tides. And, like wind and tide, they can either overwhelm us or work

for us. The choice is ours, and the decisions we make may determine the future of our field.

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Stephan A. Schwartz is the editor of the daily Web publication *The SchwartzReport* ([http://](http://www.schwartzreport.net)

www.schwartzreport.net), which concentrates on trends that will shape the future, an area of research he has been working in since the mid-1960s. For over 35 years, he has also been an active experimentalist doing research on the nature of consciousness, particularly remote viewing, healing, creativity, religious ecstasy, and meditation. He is the author of several books and numerous papers, technical reports, and general audience articles on these topics. He can be reached via email as sasschwartz@schwartzreport.net.