

Broadcasting Standards Commission

Complaint about unjust or unfair treatment by Mr Uri Geller submitted on 31st October 1997 about *Equinox: Secrets of the Psychics* on Channel Four, broadcast on 24th August 1997.

Adjudication

Introduction

On 24th August 1997, Channel Four broadcast a programme in its science documentary series Equinox entitled Secrets of the Psychics. The programme set out to investigate whether there was any scientific basis for the claims of paranormal and supernatural powers by spiritualists and psychics. The programme questioned whether the psychic powers claimed by Mr Uri Geller were genuine. Mr Geller complained to the Broadcasting Standards Commission that he had been treated unjustly or unfairly in the programme.

The Complaint

Mr Geller complained that several contributors to the programme had been wrongly put forward as being unbiased and the programme had used unrepresentative extracts from interviews; no positive views had been put forward of Mr Geller's work; doubt had been cast on the value of scientific testing of Mr Geller; the programme had used selective and distorted extracts from previous programmes featuring him; and the voice-over in the programme had been generally derogatory.

Contributors

Mr Geller said he did not object to a sceptical viewpoint being expressed about his abilities, provided he was treated in a fair and balanced manner. A number of contributors to the programme had been presented as experts in the field of psychic research. Mr Geller complained that it had be to been made clear that they had long-established and pre-determined sceptical viewpoints. The viewer had not been told of the history of dealings between these people and himself, which would have suggested that they were hostile to or biased against Mr Geller.

He said that Mr James Randi and Mr Michael Hutchinson, both of whom had cast doubt on his powers, had been involved in litigation with him. Channel Four had been aware, prior to the broadcast, of Mr Geller's successful libel proceedings against Mr Randi in Japan. In view of the description in the programme of Mr Randi as a 'magician and arch sceptic' and as Mr Geller's 'most persistent critic,' it had been unfair to disregard the disputes between Mr Geller and Mr Randi and, in particular, the court finding in Mr Geller's favour. Internet messages from Mr Randi prior to his interview for the programme had made it clear that he was hostile to Mr Geller.

Mr Hutchinson had also been involved in litigation with Mr Geller, in relation to the distribution of a book entitled Physics and Psychics. Mr Hutchinson, sole proprietor of Prometheus Books UK, had given an unreserved apology in respect of published material regarding Mr Geller. It had been unfair not to refer to this background in the programme.

Mr Geller said that Mr Hutchinson was a member of the Committee for the scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), which published a periodical entitled Skeptical Enquirer, which looked into claims of psychic power. Other contributors to the programme, such as Ray Hyman, David Marks, Richard Dawkins, Susan Blackmore and Richard Wiseman, had been unfairly presented as independent scientific experts, when they were in fact Fellows of, or associated with, CSICOP. He complained that their membership of CSICOP should have been revealed. None of them had attended experiments but had either observed demonstrations or simply expressed opinions about experiments at which they had not been present.

Mr Russell Targ, a scientist who had been involved in the testing of Mr Geller's powers at Stanford Research Institute (SRI) and had been interviewed for the programme, had been interviewed primarily about remote viewing and had been given the impression that questions about Mr Geller had been an afterthought.

The programme makers had included Mr Sebastian Cody, executive producer of the programme, and Mr David Britland, producer, both of whom had a significant history of involvement in programmes which had approached psychic matters from a sceptical viewpoint. Mr Britland had worked for Mr Randi for a period.

Channel Four said that Equinox was their flagship science programme, which aimed to combine a high standard of investigation with popular appeal. Secrets of the Psychics had been a historical and scientific perspective on the psychic phenomenon. It had revealed that the study of the paranormal was a controversial fringe area of science which had failed to convince the wider scientific community that psychic powers exist and had looked at other possible explanations of the claims of psychics. The programme had presented a sceptical view of Mr Geller's claims to possess paranormal powers. In Channel Four's view, the programme had treated Mr Geller fairly in its sceptical investigation of his claims.

Several of the interviewees who appeared had been openly sceptical of the claims being made on behalf of the paranormal and no attempt had been made to hide this in the programme.

The proceedings which involved Mr Randi and Mr Hutchinson had preceded the programme by many years. Channel Four said that Mr Randi's criticisms of Mr Geller were unrelated to the legal proceedings in Japan and pointed out that the programme had openly acknowledged Mr Randi's sceptical opinion of Mr Geller. As far as the proceedings involving Mr Hutchinson were concerned, these were also unrelated to the criticism made in the programme, since they involved an error of fact in a book of which Mr Hutchinson was a distributor rather than a writer or publisher. There had been no need to mention the legal proceedings, since they had no bearing on the question of whether or not Mr Geller had psychic powers.

Channel Four said that many scientists and others interested in the paranormal were members of CSICOP. While none of the contributors had been speaking on behalf of CSICOP, membership of the organisation would indicate a knowledge and expertise in the area and therefore it had been fair to interview those people. Professor Hyman had been interviewed because of his meeting with Mr Geller at SRI and the fact that he was an acknowledged expert in the field of parapsychology; Professor Marks had investigated Mr Geller's claims and his work at SRI and published his views in a book entitled The Psychology of the Psychic, which was considered by parapsychologists and scientific researchers to be one of the most authoritative texts of its kind; Professor Richard Dawkin had publicly criticised media portrayals of the paranormal and was an important contributor in view of his position as Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University; Dr Susan Blackmore was an acknowledged expert in the field of parapsychology. James Randi was no longer a member of CSICOP and Dr Wiseman was one of the few scientists in this country publicly funded to carry out research into the paranormal. Channel Four said that all of these contributors were qualified to comment and that their sceptical standpoint had been clear in the programme. It had not been suggested in the programme that they had been involved in testing Mr Geller.

They said that Mr Targ had not complained about his treatment in the programme. While he had also been asked about remote viewing, questions about Mr Geller had formed a substantial part of the interview with Mr Targ, who had been aware that he was being interviewed because of his scientific investigation into the paranormal and his work with Mr Geller.

Channel Four confirmed that Mr Britland and Mr Cody had been involved in many programmes relating to the paranormal. Mr Britland had been involved not only in scientific programmes, but had also made programmes in which the paranormal had been treated purely as entertainment.

Positive Views

Mr Geller said that he had declined to take part in the programme himself since he felt that the programme-makers had had a pre-set agenda against him. He felt that this had been confirmed by the fact that the programme-makers' first contact with him had been by way of a recorded delivery letter, when a personal approach would have been preferable. He said that he would be unable to work with people who he considered to be hostile to him. He said, moreover, that there was a large, respected and well-known body of experts available, some of whom had direct experience of his power, but that the programme had failed to seek balance by including such positive views of his powers. Mr Geller said that his website included a number of extracts from scientists and magicians who expressed positive opinions of his work, none of which had been included in the programme.

No reference had been made to demonstrations of Mr Geller's powers which had been widely publicised and of which the programme-makers should have been aware.

The programme had featured only a derogatory interview about Mr Geller's use of his powers for industry, when there was evidence on his website that his powers had been relied on by Peter Sterling, former chairman of Zanex for industrial purposes.

Channel Four said that, despite repeated requests from the programme-makers, Mr Geller had refused to take part in the programme or to co-operate in any way. There had been nothing sinister about the approach by letter, which had been a purely practical measure. They had clearly stated the issue and criticisms about which they sought Mr Geller's comments and had explained how they wished to conduct experiments. They denied a pre-set agenda and said that it was not the role of a scientific investigation to seek to achieve balance by the presentation of positive views.

Ms Sara Ramsden, commissioning editor, told the Commission at the hearing held to consider the complaint, that the programme-makers' had been unable to find any person of standing in the field to include in the programme who would support Mr Geller's claims. They had looked at Mr Geller's website, but none of the people referred to had succeeded in convincing the wider scientific community that his powers were real. In any event, the programme had included extracts from several of Mr Geller's performances and positive remarks by Mr Mike Molloy, former editor of the Daily Mail, about a demonstration of spoon-bending he had witnessed in his office.

They said that they had been unable to locate Mr Sterling of Zanex, but that they had been advised by the current chairman of the company that there had been incredulity at the hiring of a psychic and that the venture had been far from successful.

Scientific Testing

Mr Geller said that he had not wishes to submit himself to testing arranged by the programme-makers as he felt that they were hostile to him. He had felt that he might not be able to demonstrate his powers in such conditions. He complained, however, that positive scientific papers and research relating to his work had not been presented in a fair manner. The programme had suggested that many of the reports set out on his website were not formal scientific tests and that only one paper had been published for peer review. It had not indicated which reports were considered by the programme-makers to relate to formal scientific tests, nor had any indication been given as to what was meant by the term 'formal scientific tests'. Mr Geller submitted to the Commission a number of positive reports from his website by scientists whom he considered the programme-makers could have approached.

He said that the programme had unfairly indicated that there had been only one series of meaningful scientific tests, namely those carried out at SRI, and that doubt had been cast on the value of those tests. Criticisms had been made by people who had not been involved in or present at the tests, which had been presented as being chaotic and unreliable. It had been stated in the programme that Professor Hyman and Dr Lawrence had been present for a day during the tests. Mr Geller said that a book entitled Mind Reach - Scientists Look at Psychic Ability, by Mr Targ, who had been involved in the tests, and Mr Harold E Puthoff, had but that they had observed an informal demonstration by Mr Geller. There was a short film available of the work carried out at SRI. He said that the programme-makers must have been aware of this but had failed to use or mention the film. He had not offered to provide the film himself because of his view that the programme would, in any event, be hostile to him.

Channel Four said it had been made clear to Mr Geller that the programme was scientific and the programme-makers had spelt out clearly how they wished to test him. They had tried to obtain a copy of the SRI film but had been unable to do so. They had looked at the website referred to by Mr Geller, which showed that the longest period of testing had been that undertaken at SRI, which was a government institute, not connected to Stanford University. The resulting paper had been unique in that it was the only one mentioned on the website to have been peer reviewed according to standard procedure. They said that none of the other tests listed on the website had been included in a major mainstream scientific publication or published in such a way as to be recognised as having passed the peer review process, long established by the scientific community as the only scientifically acceptable form of publication. The paper resulting from the testing at SRI, which had appeared in Nature, had caused great controversy and had been criticised in various scientific quarters. These criticisms had been fairly presented in the programme.

Mr Geller had referred to the SRI tests in his autobiography as the most 'exhaustive' scientific tests carried out. Professor Hyman and Dr Lawrence had, however, recalled an 'informal demonstration' in which Mr Geller had claimed to use psychic powers to bend a metal nail clipper. Professor Hyman had concluded that trickery was responsible for the feat and Dr Lawrence had also been unimpressed. The report from SRI had stated that no metal bending under scientifically controlled conditions had been witnessed during the tests. This had been reiterated by Mr Targ in the programme, although he had confirmed that he believed Mr Geller had succeeded in divining the nature of sealed drawings. Channel Four said that the reference to the tests having been conducted in controlled chaos had been fair, since that had been Mr Targ's description and Mr Geller's authorised biography had also referred to the need for chaos.

Previous programmes

Mr Geller said that Mr Randi had suggested in the programme that, in an extract from Noel's House Party, Mr Geller had been using a conjuring method known as the 'peek' (i.e. looking through the fingers which appeared to be covering the eyes). He complained that, had the full extract been shown, it would have been clear that this was not the case. In relation to an extract from the Andrew Neil Show, the voice-over had unfairly suppressed Mr Geller's account of the conditions under which he had been tested at SRI.

Channel Four said that the extract from Noel's House Party had suggested that Mr Geller may have been using the technique described by Mr Randi as the 'peek'. They said that the extract had clearly shown Mr Geller turning towards the person making the drawing before the drawing had been completed and hidden from view. They denied that the full recording of the item contradicted Mr Randi's assertion. As regards Mr Geller's appearance on the Andrew Neil Show, his account of the testing at SRI had not been relevant to that part of the programme, which had been looking at Mr Geller's eagerness to continue to cite the Nature paper, despite long-established criticisms of it.

Voice-Over

Mr Geller also complained that the tone of the voice-over of the programme had been generally derogatory and had sought to influence the viewer against Mr Geller by making reference to his lifestyle and livelihood, despite its declared intention to be a scientific programme.

Channel Four denied that the voice-over had been derogatory and said that it had been the same as that throughout the rest of the programme and been properly questioning of the matters under consideration. Mr Geller had himself first raised the question of whether his psychic powers had made him wealthy and was the author of a book entitled Uri Geller's Fortune Secrets.

Evidence considered by the Commission

The Commission had before it a complaint from Mr Geller, with supporting documents, a written statement from Channel Four, also with supporting documents, the complainant's written comments and a response to those comments by Channel Four. The Commission viewed a recording of the programme as broadcast and read a transcript. It also viewed recordings of the extracts from Noel's House Party and the Andrew Neil Show. The commission held a hearing attended by Mr Geller and his representatives and representatives of Channel Four, accompanied by Mr Cody and Mr Britland of Open Media and Dr Blackmore.

The Commission's findings

The Commission accepts that it is part of the role of a flagship science programme such as Equinox to question claims, such as those made by Mr Geller, from a scientific point of view. It notes that the programme was not entirely devoted to Mr Geller, but also looked at the history of the paranormal and included a number of other people who claimed to have psychic powers.

The programme made it clear that the contributors featured were sceptical and had not conducted first hand scientific tests on Mr Geller's claims themselves. The Commission considers that the sceptical approach adopted by the contributors complained of did not prevent them from examining the evidence impartially. Nor does it consider that either they or the programme-makers, whose approach to the subject was consistent throughout the programme, were personally prejudiced against Mr Geller. The Commission does not consider that the use made of Mr Targ's interview about his testing of Mr Geller was unfair to Mr Geller.

While the Commission considers that it is important for a scientific programme to seek balancing arguments, it accepts that Open Media did its best to find scientists who were prepared to support Mr Geller's position and who met the criteria required by the programme-makers but were unable to do so. The Commission also accepts that it was appropriate to include contributions from others knowledgeable about the subject. It notes that Mr Geller said he could have suggested names but, because he had decided not to co-operate, did not do so. In the circumstances, the Commission considers that the programme gave a fair reflection of the weight of opinion of Mr Geller's claims.

The legitimate questions that both the criticisms and the partial success of the SRI tests were considered in the programme. It finds that legitimate questions were raised about the SRI testing and on the availability of other tests which fell within the programme's criteria.

The Commission does not consider that the full extract from the edition of Noel's House Party which was used in the programme made it clear that Mr Geller was not using the 'peek'. Nor does it consider that the Equinox voice-over obliterated any significant dialogue in the extract from the Andrew Neil Show.

While there was an element of scepticism in the voice-over throughout the programme, the Commission considers that the programme was clearly signalled as sceptical and in its view the commentary was straightforward. It does not find that it was unfair to Mr Geller. Although the Commission does not consider that a scientific programme would necessarily be expected to look at the lifestyle of its subject, it finds that in view of Mr Geller's success, it was reasonable in the circumstances for Channel Four to refer to Mr Geller's lifestyle.

The Commission does not, therefore, find that the programme was unfair to Mr Geller.

Accordingly, the complaint is not upheld.

17th June 1998