

The Project Alpha Papers

Dedicated to the memory of Michael Thalbourne

1955 - 2010

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1 Prologue

by Lance Storm

Dr. Michael Thalbourne, scholar and parapsychologist, died May 4, 2010, at the age of 55. At the time of his death he left unfinished a book project that was to be based on a collection of papers concerning an episode in the early 1980's called Project Alpha, involving Michael, Professor Peter Phillips of Washington University, St. Louis, and the magician James Randi (a.k.a. The Amazing Randi). Briefly, Project Alpha was a hoax suggested to Randi by two young magicians, Mike Edwards and Steve Shaw; Randi chose as his main target (though not the only one) the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research (a.k.a. the 'MacLab'), set up by Peter Phillips at Washington University in 1979 for a five year term. Michael joined the laboratory as principal researcher in late 1981.

In the 1970's, the world-famous psychic, Uri Geller, had attracted the attention of some parapsychologists, especially for his apparent paranormal metal-bending. Professor Phillips was interested in this effect, and Randi saw his chance. He sent Edwards and Shaw to the MacLab, with instructions to pose as genuine metal-benders, but actually to produce all their effects by trickery (simple misdirection was often enough). Of course, neither Edwards nor Shaw told the MacLab staff they were working with Randi, who suspected they would not be able to detect the fraud on their own. Randi also doubted that the MacLab staff would accept his advice, which he freely offered. The researchers were, indeed, deceived at the beginning, but took Randi's advice in the summer of 1981. Under Michael's direction MacLab staff then conducted experiments free of fraud, saw no psychic effects, and ceased research with these subjects in 1982. Randi revealed his project as a major media event in January, 1983, claiming that it was a scientific experiment to test the MacLab's ability to cope with magicians.

Out of affection for Michael, and respect for his commitment to parapsychology, Professor Phillips has assembled Michael's papers and produced an archive for the AIPR website. This archive, "The Project Alpha Papers", is dedicated to Michael, who was disturbed by the fact that many people seemed to have a very exaggerated view of what Project Alpha actually achieved. The archive presents all points of view, from the most critical to the most supportive, so that a thoughtful reader can make up his/her mind about the significance of Randi's hoax.

2 Introduction

by Peter R. Phillips

Welcome to *The Project Alpha Papers*, an archive of articles from the 1980's, all having to do with the hoax called Project Alpha, carried out by the magician James Randi and others. Many readers coming to this website will already be familiar with Project Alpha, but those who are not will find abundant information in the archive. The most comprehensive single article is that by Marcello Truzzi.

As I write, in the year 2012, I am very conscious of the fact that Project Alpha was developed more than 25 years ago, when some of my readers were not yet born. So some background is needed. Michael was a professional parapsychologist, meaning that he devoted his working life to the scientific study of phenomena often called “psychic”, such as telepathy and clairvoyance. A native of Australia, he obtained a PhD in parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh under the guidance of the late John Beloff. Michael was warned by his mentor that a parapsychologist would not have an easy life, because such studies have always been regarded with the greatest hostility by mainstream science; but he persisted in spite of difficulties, and remained an active parapsychologist until his death.

As Lance Storm describes in his Prologue, the main target of Randi's hoax (though not the only one) was the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychological Research, which had been set up at Washington University in St. Louis in 1979 for a five year term. I agreed to be director, and Michael Thalbourne joined the laboratory as its principal researcher in late 1981. Randi revealed his project as a major media event in January, 1983.

Toward the end of his life, Michael was troubled by the fact that many people still regarded Project Alpha as a significant milestone in the history of psychological research. For example, a recent documentary film about Randi's life, “An Honest Liar”, devotes fifteen minutes to the hoax, to the exclusion of some of Randi's other forays into parapsychology in which he does not come off so well. Michael, who was never deceived during Project Alpha, felt that his reputation as a scientist had been unjustly damaged, and that the best way to restore it would be to publish a collection of some of the most relevant papers from the time. These would present all points of view, from the most critical of the project to the most supportive, so that a thoughtful reader could make up his own mind about the significance of Randi's hoax.

After Michael's death, his colleague, Lance Storm, collected Michael's papers and sent them to me. We thought that an electronic archive was more suitable than a book. I do not know what kind of an introduction Michael had planned, so I am providing just a brief one here, but a more extended version in the form of an ebook, "A Companion to the Project Alpha Papers" [1].

The papers follow; I hope they inform and entertain you.

3 Abbreviations

M.E. and S.S. are the initials of Michael Edwards and Steve Shaw, the two young magicians sent by Randi to simulate psychic effects.

AIPR: Australian Institute for Parapsychological Research.

ASPR: American Society for Psychical Research.

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency.

CSICOP: Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (now CSI, the Committee for Scientific Inquiry). This is the group of sceptics with which Randi has been associated since its founding in 1976.

ESP: Extrasensory perception.

MLPR: McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research, the main target of Project Alpha.

PA: Parapsychological Association.

PK: Psychokinesis.

4 The Papers

in chronological order

Note from Peter R. Phillips:

In making my selection of papers, I started from Michael's list, and removed all items that were not published. I did not think it appropriate to include "informal reports" or "advisory notices", that were sent to members of the PA but had no wider circulation. I have, however, added one article that I heard about only after Michael's death, the CIA internal report about Project Alpha (paper 4.14). This, presumably, was not originally intended for circulation outside government circles, but it has been obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, and given wide distribution over the internet.

All the articles were written in the 1980's. They were also published in that decade, with the one exception of the article by Michael Thalbourne, which was delayed until 1995. For more recent developments you may consult the ebook, "Companion to the Project Alpha Papers" [1]. Each article is preceded by a short note by me, labelled Context. These comments are written in my voice, i.e. the pronouns "I" and "me" refer to me. Lance Storm is referred to at one point, in connection with the CIA article. Since this article is to be hosted by Lance at his AIPR website, I have used British spelling throughout.

4.1 P. R. Phillips and M. Shafer (1982)

Exploratory research with two new psychic metal-benders (research brief). In W. G. Roll, R. Morris and R. A. White (Eds.), *Research in Parapsychology*, 1981, pp. 144-146. Metuchen, NJ, Scarecrow Press.

Context: this is the paper in which we reported apparent PK, when in fact the effects were brought about by trickery. Note the qualifiers, such as "apparently" throughout the text; these were added after we had discussed our results with Randi (and had heard the rumour that M.E. and S.S. were tricksters). The publication date is given as 1982, when the conference proceedings were published; the paper was part of the convention of August, 1981.

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4.2 M. A. Thalbourne and M. G. Shafer (1983)

An ESP drawing experiment with two ostensible psychokinetes (research brief). In W. G. Roll, J. Beloff and R. A. White (Eds.), *Research in Parapsychology*, 1982, pp. 62-64. Metuchen, NJ, Scarecrow Press.

Context: this is the first of two papers reporting on experiments in which strict controls were imposed on M.E. and S.S. No fraud occurred in this work. The publication date is given as 1983, when the conference proceedings were published; the paper was part of the convention of August, 1982.

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4.3 M. G. Shafer, M. K. McBeath, M. A. Thalbourne and P. R. Phillips (1983)

PK experiments with two special subjects (research brief). In W. G. Roll, J. Beloff and R. A. White (Eds.), *Research in Parapsychology* 1982, pp. 66-68. Metuchen, NJ, Scarecrow Press.

Context: this is the second of two papers reporting on experiments in which strict controls were imposed on M.E. and S.S. No fraud occurred in this work. The publication date is given as 1983, when the conference proceedings were published; the paper was part of the convention of August, 1982.

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4.4 W. J. Broad (1983)

Magician's efforts to foil scientists raises questions. *The New York Times*, February 15, pp. 19, 21.

Context: Marcello Truzzi, before Randi's press conference in January, 1983, contacted his friend William Broad at the New York Times, and urged him to write this article. Truzzi was afraid that Randi intended to exaggerate the achievements of Project Alpha and was intent on damaging the field of parapsychology. Later in this archive (paper [4.17](#)) Truzzi makes the same point at greater length.

Broad states that Stanley Krippner, the president of the Parapsychological Association at the time, wrote to Randi, calling Project Alpha a “magnificent experiment which was much needed”. Krippner denies that he wrote any such letter, and submitted a Letter to the Editor of the New York Times to emphasise that he had been misquoted. This letter was published on August 16, 1983; it is included here as part of the archive. Krippner has expressed his views on Project Alpha in an article called “The Randi caper” (paper [4.15](#) in this archive). The phrase Broad attributes to Krippner was supplied to him (Broad) by Randi; after a lapse of thirty years, its true origin may well remain a mystery.

Open the file [here](#). For the Krippner letter, open the file [here](#).

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4.5 Anonymous (1983)

Psychic Abscam. (Unsigned editorial) *Discover*, March, pp. 10, 11.

Context: Randi’s original press conference in 1983 was coordinated by *Discover* magazine, whose editor at the time was Leon Jaroff, a member of CSICOP. So it is no surprise that the editorial is strongly biased in favor of Randi and his two confederates. There is no mention of the fact that we ever took Randi’s advice or did any experiments that were free of fraud. Nor is there any recognition of the sceptical response from seasoned parapsychologists to our first reports. Instead, parapsychologists in general are characterized as doing experiments that are “poorly controlled”, and as publishing reports that are “naive, if not deceitful” (a curious assessment if applied to Project Alpha, where the only deceit was practised by Randi and his assistants). The editorial ends with a suggestion that the PA should be expelled from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS); this has not yet occurred.

The tactic used here, of emphasising your opponent’s mistakes and ignoring his best work, is familiar in politics, but is unacceptable in serious argument [2].

In response to this editorial I wrote a letter to the magazine. This letter was published in *Discover*, volume 4, page 100 (May, 1983).

Open the file [here](#). For Peter Phillips’ response: open the file [here](#).

Back to [citation](#). Go to [Table of Contents](#).

4.6 J. Cherfas (1983)

The Amazing Randi hoodwinks the spoonbenders. *New Scientist*, 3 February, p. 287.

Context: New Scientist has been very open to the possibility of psi. In 1969, for example, it published the first account by Helmut Schmidt [3] of his experiments with electronic random number generators, which have since become standard in parapsychology laboratories. More recently it has published appreciative articles about the important work of Bem [4]. The article by Cherfas is well balanced, in that it gives both Randi's point of view and that of the MLPR, and takes care to mention that after our initial mistakes we did experiments that were free of fraud (and of apparent PK, of course). The title is strange; it was not the spoonbenders who were hoodwinked, it was the experimenters.

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4.7 L. M. Auerbach (1983),

Project Alpha: Showmanship versus Science. *ASPR Newsletter*, IX, #2, 1-2.

This brief paper is very friendly, in my opinion too much so, toward the MLPR. In the Companion to this archive I contrast it to an interview Auerbach conducted with Randi in 1998, in which the emphasis is very different.

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4.8 J. Randi (1983)

The Project Alpha experiment, part 1. *Skeptical Inquirer*, 7:24-33.

Context: this is first of two articles Randi published in the *Skeptical Inquirer* about Project Alpha. In this first article he covers the period through the PA convention of 1981, while the second article covers the subsequent period, where our experiments were free of fraud. The first article was included in the book *Science Confronts the Paranormal* [5], while the second was not. This is in line with CSICOP practice of emphasising the weaknesses of parapsychology and downplaying its good work.

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4.9 J. Randi (1983)

The Project Alpha experiment, part 2. *Skeptical Inquirer*, 8:36-45.

Context: this is the second of two articles published by Randi in the *Skeptical Inquirer* about Project Alpha. It covers the period following the PA convention of 1981 up to the revealing of the hoax in 1983.

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4.10 P. J. Hiltz (1983)

Magicians score a hit on scientific researchers. *The Washington Post*, March 1, pp. A1, A7.

Context: this paper is available as part of the CIA document, paper [4.14](#). It is interesting because it appeared in what was widely considered to be a newspaper to rival the New York Times. But in contrast to the Broad article (paper [4.4](#)), the title of this paper ignores ethical issues and emphasises what for most readers is the interesting story, the deception of university researchers by a couple of young magicians. This pattern would be followed by most reporters subsequently, as Randi surely anticipated.

The article is available as part of the CIA document (paper [4.14](#)); to view it, follow the link below and scroll down until you see it.

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4.11 M. Gardner (1983)

Lessons of a Landmark PK Hoax. *Skeptical Inquirer*, Summer, 7:16-19.

Context: Martin Gardner, widely known in the scientific community for his articles on mathematical puzzles, was a founding member of CSICOP and a firm disbeliever in psychic phenomena. It is characteristic of him, therefore, to praise Project Alpha as a “landmark hoax”. He has no patience for our strategy of allowing M.E. and S.S. initial freedom to demonstrate what they could do. In Gardner’s opinion, the experimenter should from the beginning suspect that any person who comes to him claiming psychic ability is out to deceive him, and should treat that person with suspicion. Gardner recommends using hidden cameras, of which, presumably, the subjects must be unaware; treating subjects with such lack of respect would certainly have gotten us into trouble with the university committee concerned with the rights of human subjects.

One can fault Gardner's article for occasional errors. Randi certainly sent us a number of recommendations, but only once did he tell us explicitly that our two subjects were frauds. He sent us that letter after we had sought his advice, and on that basis we changed our approach.

I would have expected a more careful discussion of the ethical issues, as we are promised at the beginning. When lies and deception are used, outside a stage setting, to deceive honest people, subject them to public ridicule and damage their reputations, one might think there was some explaining to do. Gardner apparently felt that a simple recitation of our mistakes was sufficient justification, and for most of his readers, sceptics like himself, that may well have been true.

But the most surprising aspect of the article to me, when I first read it, was that Gardner, a long time observer of science, uses so many words to describe our errors, and so few to cover our final experiments, in which no fraud occurred at all. It would be simple to cite episodes in any branch of science in which the experimenters were initially wrong, and corrected their mistakes later. This self-correcting mechanism is at the heart of science. Perhaps I should not have been surprised. Gardner, after all, never considered parapsychology to be worth serious debate. It was he who coined the phrase, "One belly laugh is worth a thousand syllogisms", adapted from a quote by H. L. Mencken.

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4.12 H. Collins (1983)

Magicians in the laboratory. *New Scientist*, 30 June, pp. 929-931.

Context: an informed article about the proper role that magicians can play in parapsychological experiments. Collins sees no need for a magician to actually be present when the experiments are performed, arguing that such a requirement would unduly hinder research. He suggests that experimenters issue challenges to magicians to produce ostensibly paranormal effects under strict protocol.

Martin Gardner promptly responded to this article in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, [6]. He mentions Project Alpha in passing, but his main purpose is to describe more generally what he, a determined sceptic, considers to be the proper role for magicians in the laboratory.

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4.13 K. McDonald (1983)

Research on psychic phenomena: science or pseudoscience? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 9, p. 14.

Context: McDonald is reporting on a conference on “Science, Skepticism and the Paranormal”, held at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The article is well balanced, with believers and sceptics both being represented. Project Alpha gets, in my opinion, more than its fair share of attention, because of Randi’s revealing of the hoax earlier in the year. Since the original article was in newsprint format, I have reset it in a form more suitable for this archive. Any errors in transcription are my responsibility.

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4.14 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) document (1983)

Recent adverse publicity on parapsychological research, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) document, CIA-RDP96-00788R001100360001-1 (1983)

Context: this document was prepared in 1983, intended for internal circulation among government agencies. Michael’s colleague, Lance Storm, told me after Michael’s death that the article had been released under the Freedom of Information Act, and was freely available on the internet. I have therefore decided to include it here.

The article describes Project Alpha as a publicity stunt designed to further Randi’s career, and considers that Randi has given the general public a “highly biased perspective” of parapsychology. The document was approved by Dr. Jack Vorona, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency’s Directorate of Technical and Scientific Intelligence. The author’s name has been blacked out; he/she is concerned to defend the secret government program called GRILL FLAME.

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4.15 S. Krippner (1984)

The Randi caper. *The Association for Humanistic Psychology Newsletter*, July 1984, pp. 20-21.

Context: at the time of Project Alpha, Stanley Krippner was the president of the Parapsychological Association. He wrote this short account for the benefit of the membership, and also the wider psychological community. Krippner recommends treating Project Alpha as an elaborate joke—a caper—, though a joke with serious implications. While both sides in this affair can share a laugh, we should remember the hostility evident from CSICOP. The editorial in *Discover* magazine is a good example (paper 4.5). And I possess a letter from Randi himself in which he tells me he does not feel any obligation to mention that the MLPR conducted experiments that were free of fraud.

This article has been transcribed from a draft I found among Michael’s papers. Any errors of transcription are my responsibility. I am grateful to Dr. Krippner for telling me where the article was finally published.

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4.16 L. Lasagna (1984)

Let magic cast its spell. *The Sciences*, May/June, 24:10, 12.

Context: the main purpose of this article is to oppose the unthinking scepticism displayed by a number of contributors to the *Skeptical Inquirer*. Project Alpha is discussed, but occupies only a small space in the piece. Lasagna sides with the MLPR in saying, “I’d rather err occasionally than miss a real live miracle”.

A subsequent issue of the journal (*The Sciences*, September/October 1984, volume 24, number 5) printed a number of letters in response to Lasagna’s article, including one from Martin Gardner and one from me. My letter, naturally, discusses Project Alpha, but Gardner’s never mentions it. The relevant letters are reproduced here. For the sake of clarity, I have rearranged them on the page; the actual text is unaltered.

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4.17 M. Truzzi (1987)

Reflections on “Project Alpha”: scientific experiment or conjuror’s illusion? *Zetetic Scholar*, 12/13:73-98.

Context: this thoughtful article shows how conflicted Truzzi was about his relationship with CSICOP, Project Alpha and the field of parapsychology. He counted among his friends not only CSICOP members such as Randi and Martin Gardner but also leading parapsychologists such as Charles Honorton. Truzzi found himself in a tricky position when he overheard a conversation about Project Alpha, and concluded that Randi was planning a publicity coup that could damage (indeed, Truzzi felt, was intended to damage) the field of parapsychology. After some soul searching, he conveyed this news to Honorton and Robert Morris, leaving it up to them whether to tell us. Honorton decided to do so, but did not mention how he came by the information, which we therefore had to treat as hearsay.

Truzzi was still apprehensive, and contacted a friend of his, William Broad, who was a science writer for the New York Times. This early warning from Truzzi probably has much to do with the measured tone of Broad’s article (paper 4.4), so different from the stridency of many subsequent newspaper reports.

Though one can sympathise with Truzzi and admire his scrupulousness, the fact that he revealed the existence of the hoax to Honorton, and thus, indirectly and ambiguously, to us, was not, in the end, of great significance. Randi had shown us there was a real possibility that we were dealing with a couple of tricksters, and that alone was enough for us to take suitable precautions in subsequent work.

In discussing Project Alpha, Truzzi refers, disparagingly, to the tape that we showed at the PA convention in 1981. What he never mentions is the first sequence, in which I state clearly that we do not claim the tape shows genuine PK. It simply shows some events that are suggestive and interesting, and we are asking for advice on how to do better. This point seems to have been generally forgotten, though one can find reference to it in the article by McDonald (paper 4.13), who mentions the handout that we submitted to the conference on “Science, Skepticism and the Paranormal”. The documentary film about Randi’s life, “An Honest Liar”, also shows this segment of our tape; the film makers used the copy we sent to Randi in 1981 for his evaluation.

I have transcribed this article from the small page format of *Zetetic Scholar* to the letter size format of this article. In the process I have corrected a few inconsequential errors. Any remaining errors are my responsibility.

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4.18 M. A. Thalbourne (1995)

Science versus showmanship: a history of the Randi hoax. *Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research* 89:344-366.

Context: this is a revised version of the paper originally written in 1984, when it elicited an angry reaction from Randi. I do not know why the final version did not appear until eleven years later.

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Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all those individuals who gave permission for the various articles to be included here.

5 References

- [1] This ebook is to be published by Pari Publishing, <http://www.paripublishing.com>.
Back to first [citation](#). Back to second [citation](#).
- [2] D. Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
On page 165, Kahneman writes: “The focus on weakness is also normal in political debates. I do not believe it is appropriate in scientific controversies, but I have come to accept as a fact of life that the norms of debate in the social sciences do not prohibit the political style of argument, especially when large issues are at stake ...”.
Back to [citation](#).
- [3] H. Schmidt, *New Scientist*, 44:114, 1969.
Back to [citation](#).
- [4] D. Bem, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100:407–425, 2011.
For some of the criticisms, and Bem’s rebuttal, see subsequent issues of the same journal. For less formal accounts of this work, see:
Unsigned editorial, *New Scientist*, 208:5, 2010, and the article by Peter Aldhous on page 11 in the same issue.
Back to [citation](#).
- [5] K. Frazier, editor, *Science Confronts the Paranormal*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1986.
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- [6] M. Gardner, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Winter, 8:111-116, 1983.
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