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WEBWORTHY

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But the story doesn't end there. Our next serves to underscore the devilish difficulty of providing reliable access to library patrons. Enter, **Alan Sokal**.

Make no mistake about it, **Sokal** is no academic slouch out to make a name for himself. He had already made it. Professor of physics at **New York University**, **Sokal** had become troubled over the recent gibberish that had come from the academy *vis-a-vis* science, especially as it touched upon social matters. For example, much had been made about women and science, or rather the lack of the one at the expense of the other. This, it turns out, had been much overblown, owing mainly to the politics of the matter, *not* the science. As it turns out, men are much *less* represented in many of the Humanities; but that doesn't seem to bother many. So **Sokal** decided to test the waters of his theory that when it came to showdown between science, facts and politics, politics would win every time, regardless of how stupid or how unsubstantiated the "science" or the factoids. **Sokal** proved his point in spades.

Sokal's "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" is now legendary in certain circles. Unfortunately, it is not well-known in academic ones; and when it is, it's generally dismissed. That's more easily said than done. The response of the academy, and typically anyone for that matter when caught red-handed is simply: deny. The essay appeared as the featured article in the *peer-reviewed* journal *Social Text*. Moreover, it was not merely published, but published in a special issue of the magazine devoted to *rebutting criticisms leveled against postmodernism and social constructivism*. Is it too harsh to say that this hoax hoisted the politics of the academy on its own petard while giving peer-review a permanent black eye? Consider its description by the author:

[The article] is chock full of absurdities and non-sequiturs....[I]t asserts an extreme form of cognitive relativism: after mocking the old-fashioned "dogma" that "there exists an external world, whose properties are independent of any individual human being and indeed of humanity as a whole," it proclaims categorically that indeed "physical reality," no less than social "reality," is at bottom a social and linguistic construct." By a series of stunning leaps of logic, it arrives at the conclusion that "the *Pi* of Euclid and the *G* of Newton, formerly thought to be constant and universal, are now perceived in their ineluctable historicity; and the putative observer becomes fatally de-centered, disconnected from any epistemic link to a space-time point that can no longer be defined by geometry alone. (*Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* [Picador, 1998]) pp 1-2.

For those who may not quite get through all the mumbo-jumbo, gobbledygook, pseudo-scientific language with anything like meaning, **Sokal** claims that gravity and the eternal world are simply linguistic constructs and therefore not real. If you believe this for one minute, we'll go test it atop a large building by jumping head first over the side. Mind you, you first. It reminds one of the argument that **C.S. Lewis** once had with an opponent who cried, "Therefore this podium is not real, the world is not real and our life is phantasm," or words to that effect. When **Lewis** stood up to rebut, he replied, "I would counter my opponent's arguments, but it's so unfair to do so when he's not here to defend himself."

What makes this story important, even critical when discussing peer-review is the now palpable possibility that even in the world of peer-review — an academy staple — what ends at the final product may in fact be worthless gibberish, tainted not only by partisan politics (from the left and the right) but vouchsafed by those who must, should and are paid to know better. (For more, see not only **Sokal** and **Bricmont's Fashionable Nonsense** mentioned above, but also **Alan Charles Kors** and **Harvey A. Silvergate's The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's**



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Websites are chosen for uniqueness, depth of information, functionality and ease of access. Sites are organized by broad subject area and are visited just prior to publication. Please let the editor know of any broken links. Comments and suggestions welcome to Pamela M. Rose, Health Sciences Library, University at Buffalo, 3435 Main St., Buffalo, NY 14214-3002; 716-829-3900 x129; <pmrose@buffalo.edu>. Unless otherwise noted, Internet sites were also reviewed in Science's NetWatch column. — PR

Chemistry

The definition of entropy in thermodynamics was defined as "disorder" in 1895, and college chemistry textbooks since 1960 have continued to use that definition. **Frank Lambert**, Professor Emertius of Chemistry at **Occiden-**

Campuses [Free Press, 1998].) It means in effect that we have no real recourse to information that may not be jaundiced in some manner, and in ways that materially alter its intrinsic and extrinsic value.

For years I thought our only recourse was to rely on articles for which authors are paid, and by and large I still think that to be true. I find it hard to believe that a magazine would pay \$250 and up for pure nonsense. But even these sources can be tainted, not so much by politics (though there is that possibility) but by finances: it's now generally well-known that what was first to go in editorial departments when budget cuts came were the once famous fact checkers. Most magazines and publishers rely on authors policing themselves; and this reliance is hardly foolproof, as evidenced by **Bell Laboratories' Jan Hendrik Schon**, a physicist touted for a **Nobel Prize**, who, as it turns out, fabricated much of his research.

So where does this leave us? It leaves us wanting in many ways. Wanting for reliable resources of information. Wanting for avenues that are trustworthy and irreproachable. But there is also a silver lining: it leaves us knowing that librarians and libraries are without substitute in the quest for accurate, authentic and honorable information. 

tal College in Los Angeles believes that to be misleading and not based on modern science. More properly, entropy is a change in various terms/formats of the spreading or dispersing of energy as a function of temperature, a definition textbooks are slowly revising. Meanwhile, students can visit **Professor Lambert's** collection of information links and copyrighted articles, including a student primer and materials specifically for non-chemists. — <http://www.entropysite.com/>

Integrated Pest Management

The health and environmental consequences of the continuing glut of chemicals used in pesticide applications are well documented. Scientists have developed alternative strategies known as **Integrated Pest Management (IPM)**, which involves using natural enemies, altering harvest times, developing disease resistant crops, or interrupting the pest's life cycle in some way. For example, tiny wasps have been used to control alfalfa weevils. Now entomologists **Edward Radcliffe** and **William Hutchison** of the **University of Minnesota** offer an electronic textbook with over 60 chapters contributed by internationally known experts in **IPM**. It's a work in progress, with

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Oral History

Seminal events in the long history of the **Cold Spring Harbor Laboratories**, where many of biology's top thinkers have studied, worked, or attended symposia, are recounted in this collection of oral histories. The video interviews from 51 scientists, including 3 Nobel laureates — **Brenner**, **Horvitz**, and **Watson** — include reminiscences of their time at the lab and the effect on their careers, as well as advice for aspiring scientists. Look for added entries on the **Memory Board**, where current and past visiting researchers can share their experiences. — <http://library.cshl.edu/OH/mainMovie.html>

Reference

Crop circles, bigfoot, iridology, and **Amway** — full analysis and descriptions of each of these pseudoscientific frauds, fads, and superstitions can be found at *The Skeptic's Dictionary* compiled by philosophy professor **Robert Carroll**. A slightly different set of information can be purchased in print form by the same title. Begun in 1994, it has grown from 50 to over 400 entries, with many being translated into other languages. The site has several spin-offs, including **The Skeptic's Refuge** for comments and reviews. — <http://skeptdic.com/>

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